Crash

by lancelittle

Summary

Everything’s meant to be fine now that Fisk is behind bars. So how come Foggy can't sleep at night, Karen's still haunted by her ghosts, and Matt feels more broken than ever?

When Frank Castle returns to Hell's Kitchen, it's the catalyst for them to start figuring out how all their broken pieces fit together.

(Giant, slow-build poly fic... and also slow-build recovery from the emotional fallout of season 3)

Notes

c/w: Suicidal ideation, panic attacks. also, while the narrative voice uses humour as a coping mechanism, this story is essentially all about trauma and trying to recover from it~

Spoilers for Daredevil Season 3 and The Punisher Season 1 (and have taken many creative liberties about Frank’s storyline after The Punisher~)
Everyone's Got Issues

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1. IN WHICH FRANK IS TOTALLY A WELL-ADJUSTED HUMAN BEING, NO, REALLY

Frank Castle returns to Hell’s Kitchen with a government-issued pardon, a new dog, and about ten times more trust issues than he had before.

Here’s the thing though, he’s actually doing relatively okay. Or at least, he’s been a lot worse. When your entire family gets murdered in front of you, the term ‘rock bottom’ gains a whole new meaning. Right now, he’s at, like… rock middle maybe. He’s holding on, he’s pulled himself together with enough staples and glue that he doesn’t wake up every morning feeling like there’s a bullet-hole where his heart used to be, like his head’s full of broken glass, like he can only breathe when there’s a gun in his hands and a target waiting to be cut down.

He’s got Curtis’ circle of vets, and Lieberman and his family have insistently pushed themselves into his life until now he only ignores about half their phone calls, and he’s back working construction again (minus the hipster beard this time), so. There’s enough noise in his life to drown out the silence after the gunshots, or what fucking ever.

So when Matt Murdock walks into the diner near his new apartment where he’s steadily becoming a regular, he’s feeling zen enough that he doesn’t get up and just walk right the fuck out immediately.

The guy’s clearly looking for him. He makes a bee-line for Frank’s booth and slides into the seat opposite him without so much as waiting for an invitation. Frank raises an appraising eyebrow.

He hasn’t given the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen much thought, if he’s honest. Been a bit wrapped up with his own personal crises. He was vaguely aware of the shitstorm that was Midland Circle, but he didn’t exactly keep up with the news. And then, of course, there was the fiasco last month with Wilson Fisk, which he’s frankly quite glad that he managed to miss if only because he’s not sure what he’d’ve done if he’d been here.

Murdock’s not wearing a suit.

That’s the first thing Frank notices. No stick, either. Pretending not to be blind then. And honestly, that’d been a bit of a shock, when Frank looked through the scope of his rifle at that rooftop and confirmed his suspicions that Daredevil was, indeed, his fucking lawyer. But also, there were ninjas all over the place, so all reasonable logic had flown out the window at that point.

He’s looking a bit worse for wear, if Frank’s honest. Cap pulled low over his eyes, wearing a rumpled coat that’s a size too big. There’s a half-congealed cut on his lower lip, a bruise around one eye, spreading out from the edges of his sunglasses like spilled ink. Not just that, there’s something about his face. Hollow. Drained, maybe.

“Frank,” Matt says, flatly and in Frank’s general direction.

Frank stares back at him, levelly, meeting his own eyes reflected in the other man’s dark glasses. He’s spent a lot of time staring pensively into mirrors lately, and now - now, he’s looking better. He’s looking like he’s cleaned up his act. For once not covered in bruises and cuts, with eyes that
aren’t like the windows to a haunted house.

“Red,” he replies.

Something twists in Matt’s face, like he hadn’t been sure Frank knew, and he has to bite back a mean sort of laugh.

“’m not stupid, Murdock. You think I can’t recognise the lower half of someone’s fucking face?”

“No one else seems to,” Matt grits out between clenched teeth.

“Saw your helmet come off, anyway, up on that roof,” Frank adds. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

He says it without really thinking. It was a long time ago. It was a long time ago - but Matt’s jaw still does this funny sort of clench, like he’s bracing himself against a hit, and Frank’s stomach twists as he abruptly remembers what else he saw up there.

The blood. The woman. He doesn't know who she was, didn't stick around to see what happened. That was over a year ago now. But he knows some things you don't get over. They lodge like glass and even a nudge, a word, a fleeting memory can set you bleeding again.

Matt swallows hard, ignores the comment, and makes a very unsubtle attempt to change the topic.

“ Heard you were back in town,” he says.

“Who the fuck is talking about me,” Frank growls immediately.

“Karen.”

Frank deflates just as fast as his hackles rose, something entirely too soft and warm already spreading in his chest.

There’s a slightly awkward silence. Matt seems uncharacteristically nervous. There’s something kinda… off about him, Frank’s noticing. In all their previous encounters he’s been guarded, but sure of himself. Sure of what he’s doing. Now there’s something almost careful to the way he’s holding himself. Like there’s loose pieces rattling around in there somewhere and he’s trying not to let anything fall out of place.

“I’ve… been away for a while,” Matt says. A bit hesitantly, like he doesn’t know how much Frank knows.

“Midland Circle, right?” Frank replies, taking pity on him. “Heard a bit about what went down - afterwards, of course.” He’d been a bit busy hunting down the last of the dogs of war. But he heard the whispers about some big superhero team-up, and the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen not being seen for a while afterwards. But he hadn’t been too worried - after all, he’d done the whole ‘I’m back bitches’ from the dead himself. Twice.

Then, of course, Russo and Agent Orange happened and he’d been a bit busy to spend much time thinking about it.

But Matt shifts again now. The fidgeting’s starting to set Frank on edge, make the hair on the back of his neck stand up. There’s no threat here, there shouldn’t be. And no way Red’s scared of him, not if Karen’s caught him up on how things played out.

“I’ve been… indisposed.” Picking his words carefully. “And I’ve only just had a chance to catch up
on everything I missed while I was away. It can be a bit - complicated. Finding out everything I missed when…”

He makes a vague gesture at his face.

_Can’t exactly scroll through news headlines_, Frank thinks - he’s still not quite sure exactly how Murdock’s schtick works; he starts to nod, catches himself - then nods anyway, and the other man must know _somehow_, because he lets out a little hum and continues.

“So this weekend I finally managed to get up to date on what’s been happening in Hell’s Kitchen. And how you were involved. The bomber, the Bulletin, all that.”

Oh, God, here it comes. Frank downs a few gulps of black coffee, hair prickling at the back of his neck. This sappy shit is really not his thing at all and he’s just come off some sort of two-week naval gazing retreat out in the wood’s with Curtis’ group; he’s had enough sentimental positivity to last him a fucking lifetime-

(He doesn’t mean that, not really, but he doesn’t need this from _Matt_ of all people, and he sure as fuck doesn’t want to think about how messy things got those few months, how close he came to losing Karen in that hotel-)

“I wanted to say thank you,” Matt continues. His angle’s a bit off, face fixed just to the left of Frank’s, but somehow he gets the impression Matt’s picking up a lot more than you’d expect. “For taking care of her when I wasn’t there.”

Frank gives a dismissive sort of grunt and flaps a hand.

“You don’t needa thank me, Red. I didn’t do it for you.”

“I know,” Matt replies, levelly. “Still.”

Another very uncomfortable pause.

“Gotta admit I was curious when you didn’t come to stick your nose in it,” Frank adds, and Matt turns his head away a little, says nothing.

There’s a rather strained silence in which Frank downs the rest of his coffee and really tries to figure out how the fuck everything that’s happened in the last year has led to Daredevil and the Punisher sitting in some shitty-ass diner with no fucking idea where they stand with one another.

Things are just - kinda _weird_ with people now.

He knows how to be Frank Castle - fugitive on the run, the missing piece of the puzzle, the guy half the city wants dead. And he knows how to be the Punisher, that grim reaper lurking in the shadows. But Pete Casteglione? He’s still figuring that out. He’s getting there, but it’s just… taking a while to realise who he is, how he fits into his own skin now that the drumming beat of revenge isn’t the only thing spurring him on.

And Matt - Matt, knowingly or not, is a reminder of the world he’s actually legitimately trying to leave behind. The war he wants to believe he stopped fighting. And as he stares across the table at the other man now, at his scarred knuckles where his hands are folded on the tabletop, the bruises, the split lip, he can’t help but wonder who he was fighting. What criminals he was trying to stop, whose skin was splitting under his fists.

He swallows, hard, mouth very dry. Needs to say something, suddenly. To let Matt know things are
different now. And if he’s honest, he’s not quite sure which of the two of them he’s trying to reassure.

“Thought you were coming in here to warn me off your turf,” he begins.

For the first time, a smile tugs at Matt’s lips - strained, a little tired.

“That too.”

“Well, you don’t gotta worry.” He leans back in his seat, something a bit too deliberate in the way he folds his arms across his chest. “I’m out of that business.”

Matt’s eyebrows rise.

“No more Punisher?”

Frank shakes his head. Matt must see it - sense it? - somehow, confirming his suspicions that this whole blind thing is not what it appears to be (hah!), because surprise flickers over his face. And then a little of something else, something that Frank can’t quite place. Not disappointment; a cousin of it, maybe.

He looks like he wants to press for more details, but after a second he bites at his lip instead and looks away. But Frank - Frank, for once, is in a sharing mood, and he leans forward on his elbows.

“Wondering what changed my tune, huh?”

“Forgive me for being curious,” Matt says, a little defensively, “You seemed pretty adamant the last time we met that there was no room in this city for half-measures.”

“I was only ever after the people who killed my family.” Saying the words still makes his heart clench. That - hasn’t gotten easier, even after all this time. But he’s learned, with Curtis, with the others, that even if it makes your throat swell and your eyes burn, as much as it fucking hurts, sharing is a release - a release same way it feels to bleed, same way it feels to fight, to have adrenaline pumping in your veins, to pull a trigger or let loose the sort of uppercuts that make someone’s jaw cave in under your knuckles.

“Once they were dead-” even then, even then you couldn’t sleep - “Once I figured out every single God damn last one of them that was involved and took them out-” or worse, Billy, you two-timing son of a bitch, I trusted you - “There’s a point you gotta let go.”

“Let go,” Matt parrots, hollowly.

“Don’t bring the war home with you.” He tries not to think about how it feels like he’s just regurgitating Curtis’ words. Like you say them enough it becomes true. “Learn to stop fighting. Or you’ll never escape. Or you’ll always be over there. Over there or back in the past or wherever the fuck the nightmares come from.”

Matt’s very, very still, his mouth open a little, clearly trained on his every word.

“I don’t…” he begins. “You’re the last person I expected to hear that from.”

Why? Cause I’m so fucked up you didn’t think I could ever get my head on straight? He can’t bring himself to be offended; he’d thought the same thing.
“A lot happened while you were indisposed,” he replies. “You’ll have heard some of it, but - people I thought I could trust turned out to be playing me. Couldn’t take them down on my own, so I had to - work with people.”

Matt mumbles something that sounds suspiciously like ‘the horror,’ and it’s so fucking unexpected that Frank has to bite back a snort.

“Wasn’t so bad,” he says. “And we won in the end, so turns out I learned all sorts of wholesome shit. Like trusting your friends and working together and that support groups can actually unfuck your head if you let ‘em.”

“Support groups?”

“Friend of mine runs one for vets. That’s where I’ve been the last few weeks. He dragged me to a lake for some sort of retreat. Some of it was bullshit - I refuse to ever unironically use the word mindfulness. But it was good to leave the city for a bit. Did some fishing. Talked about all sorts of meaningful stuff.”

He’s lucky he’s got such a good poker face because the look on Matt’s fucking face is enough to nearly make him burst out laughing. He looks - so shocked, and honestly, Frank can’t blame him; even just a few months ago he would not have expected this sort of shit to be coming out of his own mouth.

But you know, he’s a new man.

He’s a new man who has his shit together and occasionally even meditates and has all sorts of strategies for when he feels the darkness start to come creeping in.

He’s a new man, and the Punisher died back at that carousel, and he doesn’t need him anymore. He doesn’t.

“I really have no idea what to say,” Matt says finally, very tactfully, and Frank goes for another grunt.

“Point is, I’m out of it now. Karen wanted that. Took me a while to see she was right. Doing what I… what we… used to do - it fucks with your head. Like an anchor; you don’t let it go, it keeps dragging you down. And I don’t need that any more.”

He says it with far more confidence than he feels. Matt looks a bit pained. And it’s not like Frank was expecting a pat on the back or anything, but he kinda thought the guy who was trying to keep him out of jail would be, y’know, a bit happier that he’s given up literally going around murdering people. Like that’s a fucking step forward no matter how you look at it. A congratulations might be nice.

And yeah, Frank’s no idiot.

Something’s off here. About this - about Matt - he just hasn’t got enough of a read on the situation to figure out exactly what. Not like they ever knew each other that well, but the self-righteous superhero he ran into all those times suddenly seems a very, very far cry from the guy sitting across from him in the booth now, with his lips downturned, bruises standing out stark on his pale face, a hunch to his shoulders like he’s been carrying the weight of the world too long.

“I see,” Matt says finally, and Frank’s eyes narrow, trying to figure out what he’s thinking. What this is.
“Why’re you dressed like a hobo then?” he demands, and Matt glances indignantly down at himself - which has to be purely for dramatic effect because Frank’s pretty sure he can’t actually fucking see anything.

“Figured you’d appreciate me not drawing attention to us,” he points out.

“Ah, right. Fisk had you on hot coals for a bit back there, didn’t he?”

“It was a mess,” Matt admits, a hint of misery in it.

“Gotta be relieved. Put him away for good this time. No more loose ends.”

“Sure,” Matt says, but he doesn’t look happy, and doesn’t really sound like he means it.

“And Karen mentioned. You and Nelson are working together again. With her too. Gang’s all back together, huh?”

“Yeah,” Matt says, “Things are just peachy.”

Another smile, but it’s fake, almost mocking. Not at Frank, not really. More… self-deprecating, maybe. What the fuck is going on here?

“But you’re still out most nights. Seen it on the news.”

“Crime didn’t stop with Fisk.” There’s a defensive note in Matt’s voice now, like this is an argument he’s had more than once. “New gangs are already rising up trying to take his place. It never stops for long. Law enforcement’s still reeling from Fisk’s manipulation. The city needs me.”

“Right,” Frank says. He doesn’t even mean it sarcastically or anything. Honestly, you do you, Red. Not like anyone could’ve stopped Frank doing what he wanted before he got it all out of his system. But Matt frowns, like he wants a fight, and-

And he’s really, really on edge. Frank can’t stop noticing it now. His shoulders are so tense they’re practically up around his ears; he’s thrumming with pent up energy, fidgeting with his cuffs, thumb running over a scab on his knuckles.

Suddenly Frank wonders if this really was just about thanking him for Karen.

Well, whatever’s going on, he refuses to be dragged into it, and after a moment he gets up and digs in his back pocket for his wallet. Matt startles a little, then rises as well.

“If that’s all you gotta say to me,” Frank says, chucking a handful of notes on the table.

Matt nods. He gets up and fidgets, and Frank waits a moment to see if he’s gonna spit out whatever’s obviously on his mind - but when there’s nothing but silence, he turns and strides out of the diner, giving the waitress a nod and smile as he passes.

Matt trails along after him. When Frank pauses to collect his dog - lying patiently in the last weak strands of evening sunlight near the bike racks in the parking lot - Matt comes up behind him and makes a startled noise.

“You got a new dog?”

“Obviously.” He clucks and the German Shepherd stretches, lazily, with a yawn before trotting back to his side. “Here boy. Never did find out what happened to Max.”
It still sends a jolt through his chest. It’s a stupid, small thing. He had that dog, like, two weeks. But still, the thought that the Irish probably took him out back and shot him without a second thought makes thunderclouds crowd at the back of his skull.

“What’s his name?”

“Pi,” Frank grunts. He senses Matt bite back a laugh. “Not my fucking idea, okay? Let this kid I know name it. After some book.”

“Life of Pi. I’m familiar with it. It’s based on a famous court case, you know.”

Frank did not know, and quite frankly does not care, but Matt barrels on - a little more colour in his voice than there was before.

“R v Dudley and Stephens. About whether murder can be justified by necessity. It set the precedent that it cannot.”

“Sounds right up your alley,” Frank growls, a little put out.

Matt shifts. When Frank turns to look at him, he doesn’t look quite as smug as he might’ve expected. He thinks, suddenly, he didn’t kill Fisk. From what he’s heard about the shit that’s been going down in Hell’s Kitchen, he wonders if that was an easy choice. For the Daredevil he encountered that first time, he would’ve thought so. But the look on Matt’s face now makes him wonder.

“Maybe. The context of that case was survival cannibalism when trapped out at sea.”

“Yeah? Well, I haven’t sunk as fucking far as cannibalism, so don’t start preaching.”

“Wasn’t going to,” Matt replies, a bit defensively. The dog shifts, nudging up against Frank’s legs and whining, and he reaches down to scratch behind its ears. Matt opens his mouth and Frank can just tell he’s about to ask something about the name and why the fuck he was hanging out with a kid in the first place, and jumps in before he has to delve even further into his personal business.

“Surprised you ain’t got one yet.”

“What?”

“A dog.”

“Foggy’s been on my case about that for years.” A sudden, dark look passes over Matt’s face and he adds, rather sourly, “You know what will happen if I get a dog? The next person to come along with a grudge against me will kill it, same as everyone else I care about. And I’ll be worse off than I was before. The fewer attachments, the safer. It’s not fair. To put someone, something, in that position.”

It’s… uncomfortably close to a lot of the same things he felt a few months ago. David had practically dragged him kicking and screaming into a partnership. But even in his lowest moments, he’d still known there were people out there - friends he cared about. Like Curtis. Like Billy, at first.

You stayed away to try and protect him.

After his family he’d been so scared of getting hurt again. He stares at Matt now, trying to figure this out. There’s a bite in his voice that makes Frank think he’s not just saying this shit to be edgy. It’s not like him to be so bitter.
Better, better alone. Safer than people.

His stomach twists. But things are good now - they're all dead, anyone who would want to hurt them. You cleaned up. Fight's over.

Nothing to worry about.

Matt’s got this kicked puppy look and if Curtis was here, he’d have the right words to say. Frank can’t find them. Are you okay? It seems trite, it seems too much like caring. And part of him wishes Matt hadn’t come here tonight, part of him’s thinking don’t drag me into your hot mess, Murdock.

He’s doing fine. Rock-middle, head above water, he knows who and where and what he is.

“Need a ride anywhere?”

It’s the most he can muster; maybe he’s going soft, or maybe he’s just learned that not all of him has to be sharp edges anymore. But Matt stirs, shakes his head, straightens up a bit.

“No, thanks. I can make my own way from here.”

There’s an awkward pause. Goodbye seems a bit weird, nice to see you would be a lie. God knows how or when or why they might run into each other again. Matt turns to go and as he walks off, Frank calls out after him.

“So how’d you do it, Red?”

“What?”

Matt turns, confused, and Frank waves a hand at him.

“You’re walking just fine. I’ve seen you jump across rooftops like it’s nothing. I take it you’re not actually blind.”

“I am,” Matt explains - he glances back at the diner, but they’re quite alone; it’s late and this isn’t a busy part of town. He steps back towards Frank, lowers his voice a little.

“Enhanced senses. I can feel where the air is empty and where it isn’t. Can tell what’s in a space from how sounds echo in it. I can sense differences in temperature, air pressure, body heat. I can hear everything. A footstep. A breath. A heart beat.”

“Useful,” Frank says. It’s not hard to take superpowered senses in stride after everything else he’s seen.

“Very.” Matt fixes him with a look he can’t figure out. “Makes it easy to tell when people are lying to me.”

Frank’s heart jolts, unwillingly. Matt gives a tight, humourless smile - then he turns and walks off. Halfway down the street he leaps up a fire escape and vanishes up into the city roofs; Frank watches him, lips pressed close together.

Lying.

His phone buzzes in his pocket. He pulls it out, numbly - David’s texted him again, sent some picture of one of Leo’s science projects that got full marks. Frank had come around a few nights, helped her build it.
It’s nice.

It’s the sort of thing he never imagined he’d feel again. It’s nice, and he smiles, now, but it still hurts, as much he tries to tell himself it doesn’t. It’s still a fucking stab in the chest that he’s never gonna see his own little girl again, and he stares at the empty rooftops now, stares after Matt and thinks of pain, thinks of throwing punches, thinks of the feeling of teeth knocked loose from gums under his knuckles—

*Makes it easy to tell when people are lying to me.*

He thinks of the steady calm of the lake, and Curtis’ hand on his shoulder.

*I’m out of that business.*

*There’s a point you gotta let go.*

*Don’t bring the war home with you.*

*Like an anchor.*

*Let go-*

*Like an anchor-*

*I don’t need that anymore-*

*Who are you without a war to fight?*

He bites the inside of his cheek, feels the blood itch in his veins, a phantom ache in his shoulder where he misses the heavy, familiar kickback of a gun.

*Lying to me.*

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2. MATT AND THE SHIT THAT WON’T STOP STORMING

Okay, ready? So this is the giant fuckfest that is Matt’s life right now. Except it’s a fuckfest below the surface. Like the iceberg that sank the Titanic.

So they take down Fisk. For good this time (or so they keep saying but really it’s, like, until something happens to Vanessa because she is literally all the leverage they have so Matt is really just banking his cards on Fisk carking it first or else they’re screwed but that’s totally fine, nothing to worry about, they totally won, it’s not like it’s now a constant worry at all or anything—)

They take down Fisk, right, and root out all the corrupt FBI agents, and clear their own names, and they hang out at Foggy’s parents’ butcher-shop and Foggy draws on a napkin and Nelson-Murdock-Page is actually gonna happen, it’s not a joke or anything, they’re legitimately gonna get back together-

Everything is great. It’s fucking great, he never could’ve dreamed things would work out so well a month ago, or even a week ago, when it felt like they were absolutely certain to lose-
But they haven’t, they’ve won, and they’re safe, and they’re all back together, and Foggy folds the napkin up and presses it into Matt’s fingers and he can feel the lingering warmth from the other man’s hand, the indents of the pen in the thin surface, can smell the ink and a bit of spilled beer and that unfamiliar expensive cologne Foggy’s taken to wearing.

Matt heads back to his apartment.

He puts the napkin in a drawer next to the first one, and that stupid ice cream wrapper bracelet he gave Stick, and the shrivelled, deflated remains of that ridiculous balloon Karen got him one time.

He goes and stands in the shower.

And then he has a full on fucking break down.

It’s really not pretty. In fact it’s pretty fucking ugly. He’s on his knees on the tiles, water pelting down on his bare shoulders and back, heaving these horrible wrenching sobs like they’re being torn out of his throat by the fistful. Tears are streaming down his face, he can barely breathe, he can feel his chest heaving. He’s shaking all over, shaking so much he feels like he’s falling apart.

It feels like the world’s ending and he has no idea why.

No fucking idea, because tomorrow they’re gonna start getting their law firm back together, and right now Fisk is safely behind bars, but for some reason it feels like there’s this looming black creeping in around all the edges of his life and blotting out the sun.

It doesn’t feel like it’s over. It should, but it doesn’t, and suddenly it’s like the weight of it all hits him at once.

Elektra is dead.

She’s not coming back, not this time, and the entire way things played out just - fucked his head so fucking badly, and he still can’t stop thinking about it. That dead look in her eyes, the way it was her but not her, how the entire time his heart felt like it was wringing itself out.

And Stick, Stick’s dead and gone too, and even if they’d never been close, Matt still misses him. Maybe it’s fucked up, but as much as he’d hated his old mentor at times, it’d been reassuring to know he was out there somewhere. And it wasn’t all bad, was it? A hand on his shoulder. I’m proud of you, Matty.

And now-

Now Father Lantom’s gone too-

And Ray, who Matt barely knew but was one of the few people he’d actually found himself trusting without hesitation-

And his father, his father who is still a heavy weight on his shoulders, whose loss he feels ever more acutely now that he knows about Maggie. Now that he can’t stop thinking what might have been. There’s so much he wants to ask him, so much he wishes they could talk through.

So yeah.

At the time he’d been running on adrenaline, but now that the fight’s over - now, the grief hits him all at once, and it is black and consuming, and he bows his head and digs his fingers into his temples and just feels - broken, just feels this overwhelming sense of dread that if things go wrong again,
who’s left for him to lose? Foggy, and Karen, and Maggie, and he doesn’t think he could take that.

It hurts.

It hurts like his whole being is a raw nerve, and as he kneels there, chest tearing itself apart, all he can think is make it stop, make it stop, make it stop-

And, I can’t do this, I thought I could but I can’t-

And it’s never gonna end, even when you win it doesn’t end.

It terrifies him, sometimes, how fucking hopeless he feels. How easy it seems to just - give up. To just stop. How tempting it is, even now, because this, the absolute consuming panic, the way his heart feels like it’s beating out of his chest, this is just exhausting, and painful, and it’s no way to live.

Anyway, that feels like it lasts forever, and by the time he finally manages to calm himself down, the shower’s running cold and he’s shivering all over, and he turns the water off and stands there in silence thinking what the fuck was that all about.

You’re meant to be better now.

He’s not, that’s becoming very clear, but by now it’s past midnight and he has work tomorrow and he doesn’t really want to spend the night psychoanalysing himself and coming to less than pleasant conclusions about his current mental state, so he gets dressed and goes to the kitchen.

This is the point where he should probably meditate, or pray, or maybe begin to investigate the possibility of therapy, but, y’know. Self care, what even is that. Instead he makes himself two very stiff drinks and downs them while clenching his free fist until his nails cut crescents into his palms, and thinks, chill the fuck out, Murdock, pull yourself the fuck together, and then goes to bed and lets the screams, the sirens, the wails he can still hear out in Hell’s Kitchen drown out the echoing memory of Elektra’s empty voice, of Father Lantom’s last gurgling breath.

“You okay?” Karen keeps asking. Now and then, quietly. This is called checking in and it’s something good friends do.

Does he not look okay? Not like he’d know; at any given moment Matt generally has no idea what the fuck his face is doing. But he always smiles and nods and says “Everything’s fine,” and, you know, it technically is.

Work is great.

Fisk is still behind bars.

There are no major incidents, no one else has been hurt or killed and they have loads of clients and he’s physically better than he’s been in ages so yes, he’s fine.

Except behold! The iceberg! He’s fine like logically he knows he should be fine. He’s fine like trying not to think about everything is a good coping strategy fine.

Fine like he occasionally gets a phantom whiff of Elektra’s perfume and has to go stand in the bathroom for ten minutes to calm down.
Fine like sometimes loud noises make him jump and freak out, just a little bit, under the sudden paranoid conviction that the entire building’s gonna come down around them.

Fine like there’s this knot in his stomach constantly, and he doesn’t know where to even start unravelling it.

*It’s over, it’s over, it’s over.* So why does it still feel like he’s lost in the dark?

Anyway, that’s about where he is - mentally - sort of clinging with his head just above water, when the news reports start coming in.

It was inevitable, really. It’s not like Fisk was the only criminal in the city, and his incarceration has left a void that plenty of people are happy to try and fill. A couple of powerful meth dealers are the latest big thing, and for the last month they’ve been gaining a foothold in the city again, slowly claiming territory. In the worse parts of town civilians are getting caught in it, roped in by one gang in exchange for protection from another.

“This is getting out of control,” Foggy mutters under his breath, when they’re out at lunch one day - he’s watching the news on his phone, and even if Matt can’t see the screen, he can hear enough of what’s going on to know it’s the story about the three DEA agents who were killed last night trying to bust a meth lab, with two civilians caught in the crossfire and nothing to show for it.

He’s right.

It’s getting out of control.

It’s with a sort of dead, flat certainty that he knows tonight he will put on the mask for the first time since he took down Fisk. Something of it must show on his face, because when he’s leaving work that evening Foggy runs after him and catches his arm at the door.

“Matt!”

“What?”

He doesn’t mean it to come out snappy, except that he knows exactly what Foggy’s about to say. He can hear the nervous flutter of his heart that means they’re about to talk about something personal, can smell the faint, salty tang of sweat at his hairline.

“You’ve been quiet all day,” Foggy says, each word a careful step, like he’s walking on eggshells. “You okay?”

“Let’s not do this.” He’s filled with too much anxiety about tonight to beat around the bush; he’s never really been nervous about going out as Daredevil before, but suddenly it all means too much, too much. “Spit out whatever you want to say.”

“Oh, fine.” A shaky breath. Foggy’s hand’s still on his arm, a light, steadying grip. “You’re going out tonight. I can see it in your face.”

Matt swallows hard.

For a second, something like fear stabs through his chest. Foggy’s voice is carefully steady and he can’t quite figure out what the other man’s thinking. If he disapproves. If he’s gonna try fight this. But what he does know is that if Foggy pushes Matt away, if he doesn’t accept this, if he triggers another big fucking existential identity crisis, Matt just is fully not gonna cope with that. Not on top
of everything else.

“Don’t start, Fog.” It comes out a bit too pleading and he hears Foggy’s breath catch, feels his fingers tighten a little on his arm. “Please, just - don’t start. I have to do this. I can’t just stand by.”

“Matt…”

“I really don’t want to fight with you right now-”

“Seriously, Matt, chill. We’re not gonna fight.” Fog steps a little closer, shifts in front of him. Matt can feel his thrumming warmth. Imagines the furrowed crease of his brow. “I don’t want to start that shit all over again.”

“But you’re not happy.” He can tell, in Foggy’s heart and breath and the tension in his shoulders.

“I’m worried, that’s all. Do what you gotta do, just - promise you’ll keep me in the loop this time. No more secrets. I just want to know what’s going on.”

Matt swallows, hard. There’s a lot he regrets about how things went down back with Elektra and the Hand. The rift that it tore between the two of them is one of the biggest ones. That one’s on him. It was just - Foggy seemed to hate hearing about all the Daredevil stuff, and maybe some petty part of Matt was sick of getting lectured.

But he can tell, now, Foggy’s not lying. And keeping him out of things did fuck all to protect him, so maybe it’s better if he does know everything. He nods.

“That I can promise.”

“Good.” Foggy’s hand runs up his arm; the other comes up and he squeezes Matt’s shoulders - an intimate, comforting motion. “Stay safe out there, buddy.”

Matt’s breath catches in his throat; Foggy’s too close and too warm and this is all going too well; it feels like there must be a catch somewhere. You can’t have your cake and eat it too, life doesn’t work like that. That he can have the firm, and Daredevil, and Foggy being okay with it all-

That opens new doors, doors he doesn’t want to think about just yet.

So he starts going out at night again, starts cleaning up the streets the way he used to. On the one hand it’s good - it’s a distraction, and for a little while each night he doesn’t get bogged down remembering all the ways things fell apart, and just how precariously they’re holding back together.

But on the other-

There’s baggage, now, attached to all this.

He’s still just in the black mask. No more suit; even if he had Melvin to make another one (and there’s another stain on his conscience), Poindexter’s ruined that for him now. Matt can’t think about it without remembering how it was that devil that killed Father Lantom. That massacred all those civilians at the Bulletin. He couldn’t see it but he could sense it; the heaviness of the material, the shape of the horns.
And then there’s the fights. You don’t get a building dropped on you and just walk away; he’s too aware of his limitations now. How even though he’s still good, he used to be faster, stronger. Nothing used to take as much effort. Whenever he gets hit in the head he can’t help but flinch, paranoid that all it’ll take is a blow to the ear to fuck everything up again-

And at the same time, at the same time it scares him sometimes, how much he almost likes the pain - or not the pain so much as the distraction it provides him, the odd satisfaction that you are giving, giving.

Whether it’s the heat of blood welling against his skin, or the dull ache of a bruise, or overtaxed muscles. His body is a tool that part of him wants to wear out and wring dry for this city; it feels like the only way to atone for something he can’t name. Physical pain is an escape; physical pain is easy, all you have to do is bear it. It fades in time, not like grief.

And Matt’s not an idiot, he knows it’s dangerous, knows that it wasn’t so long ago he wanted to die - really, genuinely, wanted to die out there in the middle of a dark road - that it’s not a good thing that sometimes (not often, just now and then) he doesn’t put the effort in to duck fast enough or completely dodge a fist, or a swing from a baseball bat, just thinks it’ll heal anyway, or maybe it won’t, and either way at least it’s something to feel-

Like, that’s fucked up. He’s self-aware enough to realise that, and self-destructive enough not to care.

But at night when he drops into bed, bruises throbbing, sometimes if he’s exhausted enough the dark doesn’t cloud back in. Sometimes he doesn’t feel his chest tighten, he isn’t overwhelmed yet again by that terrible dread that something bad is going to happen, it always does, you’re just waiting for it, you’ll never actually make it out of here. Sometimes he can just pass out and escape, if only for a little while.

There’s a new parish priest at Saint Patrick’s.

Matt finds this out by the time he finally works up the courage to go back there for Mass. For weeks every time he tries, it feels like there’s a vice around his chest, crushing him slowly. He doesn’t know why - he was fine at the funeral - but the thought of going there for Mass and seeing a stranger standing up at the altar suddenly feels like it will make everything real.

Religion’s kinda weird lately.

He felt just - so futile before, he was practically spitting in God’s face. Why would you do this to me, fuck you for all of this, fuck you for taking them away from me. He probably owes the Big Guy a fair few apologies. And even now he feels - just sort of lost. Guilty for not being able to accept that any of this could be God’s will.

But anyway, he goes to church, and he sits at the back and tries to focus, but everything’s too distracting. The way the new guy’s voice echoes around the space, the healing scar itching across his shoulder blade, how he can still faintly smell blood from the shit that went down in this room. He closes his eyes, not that it matters, and tries to ignore the memory of Poindexter moving around this space, tries to pretend he doesn’t remember spilled candle wax and smashed pews and blood seeping into the stone floor.
If he can’t focus he can’t pray.

If he can’t pray he just feels - disconnected. Disconnected from God, from everyone around him, from his entire faith and purpose. And to his extreme dismay, the new guy is a bit of a social butterfly; he hangs around after Mass enthusiastically getting to know all the parishioners and Matt can just tell that if he keeps coming here then someone will eventually tell the priest who he is, and all about his father, and then the guy might look him up and realise he had a hand in taking down Fisk, and it’s just gonna invite questions he doesn’t want to answer.

Maybe he’s just resistant to change.

Maybe he just still misses Father Lantom, or is scared to get close to anyone new, but he stops going and he sure as fuck isn’t gonna go to confession, but that’s just another weight on his shoulders because he has a hell of a lot he needs to get off his chest, needs some sort of peace of mind-

Especially because, lately, the same regret is popping up more and more.

_I wish I’d killed Fisk._

He hates that he’s thinking it, because in the moment he’d been so relieved that he hadn’t. And he’s not even sure if he means it. He knows Karen’s glad he didn’t. He knows if he had, it’d be a line he wouldn’t be able to come back from. He knows it’s not him.

But the knowledge that Fisk is still out there, that he knows who Daredevil is, that he could come back - it hangs over his head like thunderclouds, it gives him nightmares, it’s the root source of half his anxiety about things falling to shit again, and sometimes it’s easier just to think fuck it, _I wish I’d snapped that bastard’s neck, I wish I’d sent him to rot in hell for all he did, he deserves it. He fucking deserves it._

And then hates himself for thinking it, and so it goes - there are things you can only tell a priest, forgiveness you have to earn, but he can’t do it, not right now. His head and heart aren’t in the right place. So he stops going to Mass, even if he feels like he’s slowly starving his soul.

So clearly his head is sort of not a hundred percent in the right place, but you know what’s one good thing? Foggy and Karen.

Yes, Foggy and Karen. They are just the icing on the cake. There is nothing stressful about working with them at all. _At all._

Remember those open doors?

It’s not like Matt’s had much time to think about it lately, on account of the series of traumatic events that went something along the lines of ‘ex-girlfriend returns,’ ‘ex-girlfriend dies,’ ‘ex-girlfriend returns from the dead and is trying to destroy your city,’ ‘proceed to fake own death and not tell friends.’

But before all that - running _through_ all that - here’s the kicker, he’s been in love with Foggy since nearly the day they met.

It was a silly crush at first. Just - he’d never really had a close _friend_ before, and certainly never met
anyone like Foggy - someone so genuinely kind, who can make him laugh so easily, who offers affection so freely, whether it’s an arm thrown around Matt’s shoulders or a late night cup of tea - a hand steadying him when they’re walking down a flight of stairs, or tucking a blanket around him when he falls asleep while studying.

“I’m really fucking glad we’re roommates,” Foggy says at the end of their first semester, tipsy and sappy after a few drinks to celebrate passing their exams. “I wouldn’t ask for anyone else, you know.”

Matt snorts, softly, where he’s sitting cross-legged on his own bed. Foggy’s extended family has been calling him all day to tell him how pleased they are for him and it’s only made him feel more acutely alone. But now Foggy’s words send a flush of pleasure through him, make his heart give a silly, happy flutter.

“Pretty sure having a blind roomie only made your life harder,” he begins, but Foggy interrupts him with a series of dramatic tuts. He feels the bed dip as the other man sits next to him, feels his warmth against his side and smells the beer on his breath and the familiar fragrance of his soap.

“Dude,” Foggy says - a little slurred, but with a lot of spirit - “Don’t you ever say that, alright? You’re amazing. I’m the lucky one. You think I’d’ve passed those exams without my number one study buddy? I’m serious!”

“Okay,” Matt says, and laughs when Foggy pulls him in against his shoulder, and lets himself have this, just for a moment - the warmth, the closeness, the feeling of being wanted, and tries to ignore how easy it’d be to tilt his head up a little and let their lips meet instead.

This is Matt’s curse, though, he can’t have what he wants. Even if he knows Foggy’s attracted to him, at least physically. He can pick it up in a thousand small tells. And even if sometimes he suspects Foggy might be interested, if Matt only opened up to him more.

But Foggy doesn’t know about his senses.

He doesn’t know about Stick and all the rest, and Matt’s not about to tell him. And while that secret is hanging between them, he knows he can’t pursue anything. It wouldn’t be fair. And as he misses chance after chance to come clean, he knows he’s in too deep, that he can’t back out now, that if Foggy were to find out, their entire dynamic would be founded on too many lies. Foggy would leave just like everyone else and he couldn’t bear it.

So nothing ever happens. Foggy has a string of college girlfriends, and a string of college boyfriends, and settles with Marci for a little while. Matt’s resigned to the fact that they have no chance, that nothing will ever happen.

As for his own love life - there’s Elektra, for a while, and he is madly, deeply, completely in love with her.

When that ends in tears, Foggy takes him out to get his mind off things. They go out to a club and get completely hammered and the music’s so loud it makes Matt’s head pound, but it drowns everything else out, and Foggy sticks by his side the whole time, an anchoring hand on his back.

“You can do way better than her,” Foggy says, when they sit in a booth for a while, exhausted. Usually places like this are overwhelming, the smell of too many bodies, too much cheap perfume and aftershave, too many sounds and smells and sensations sending Matt into sensory overload. Tonight he needs it. Needs to feel so much that it blocks everything else out.
He snorts a bit.

“Not really,” he mutters. Thing is, Elektra was perfect - up until she went batshit at the end, they understood each other like no one else. They were on the same wavelength, one Matt’s been surfing alone since he was nine years old. With her gone the silence is deafening.

“No, I’m serious.” Foggy’s leaning in so close to be heard over the music that Matt can feel his breath against his ear. It makes him shiver, makes long-buried desires rise to the surface. He wants to grab Foggy, pull him close, breathe him in. All he can do is clench his fists under the table. “She might be rich and beautiful and smart and, okay, I see where you were going with that, but… that shit’s not everything. It’s not worth it in the end. A good heart, that’s what you want.”

Matt swallows.

It wasn’t that. It wasn’t the money and he has no fucking idea what Elektra even looks like. It was that she knew his secret. That for once in his life he didn’t have to lie.

But he can’t exactly tell Foggy that.

“I know,” he says instead, miserably, “Right now I just want to forget.”

“More shots!” Foggy cries, and gets up from the table. Matt smiles a little, and even as Foggy heads back to the bar he tunes in on the steady, familiar thrum of the other man’s heart.

Things change. Matt becomes the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen, and Foggy can’t know, and even as the other man remains the most important person in the world to him, he knows nothing can ever come of it.

Then Foggy does know and everything sucks, everything hurts, because he’s disappointed and there’s a gap between them now that can’t be bridged and nothing will ever be the same again, he knows Foggy hasn’t ever totally forgiven him, that he will always resent this.

Karen comes along, and they try things out, and Matt does love her. All of that, that’s real. That’s the first real thing he’s felt in a long time. He can sense it in her, that they’re broken in the same ways. Thinks maybe they could fit together like he and Elektra did.

But then that falls to shit. Then Elektra is gone and Nelson and Murdock is no more and there’s no one, no one. Then Foggy feels so far out of reach that he might as well be on another planet and Matt misses him so much it hurts. Misses joking around with him, misses Foggy narrating things they pass on the streets, misses his voice and the funny texts they used to exchange and just - having him around. Misses his best fucking friend. That, more than any of the other horrible and deeply traumatic things that have happened in the shitshow of his life - that still sticks in his memory as one of his lowest points.

But here they are now. Nelson, Murdock and Page.

Now he can tell Foggy’s smiling when he deposits coffee on Matt’s desk in the morning.

Now they’ll even joke around about the Daredevil stuff - maybe there’s something vaguely fucked up about that, but honestly Matt’s just glad Foggy’s not angry about it, and it’s nice not having to bear the weight of worrying he’ll find out.

“What’s the other guy look like?” Foggy asks, when Matt comes in after a particularly bad night; it was raining hard and it messed with his senses a bit. He took more hits than usual.
“No fucking idea,” Matt fires back, and relishes Foggy’s laugh.

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“No fucking idea,” Matt fires back, and relishes Foggy’s laugh.
So he’s too aware of everything, all the tension and buried feelings - and so aware of the nothing. The space between them all, the fear that what he has now is a fragile balance, it’s so good, it’s too good, and it’s been ripped away before. It could be again. He’s already too broken - he just can’t risk it.

“Frank’s back in town,” Karen tells him one night - catching his wrist as he’s about to leave for the night, a funny, strained note in her voice, like she doesn’t know how Matt will react. “He’s living as a civilian, though. You don’t need to worry. There’s… a lot that happened while you were gone.”

Matt freezes.

He hasn’t thought about Frank in a while. The only time the other man popped into his head was right in the middle of the Fisk fiasco, when he had the vague, fleeting notion that if Castle was here he’d shoot the guy without a second thought. No half measures, right?

Anyway. He doesn’t freak out. He goes over to Karen’s and he listens, and then he goes home and reads up on everything he missed, and when he walks into that diner and sees Frank sitting there, the first thing he feels is, absurdly, jealous.

Frank looks remarkably peaceful.

He looks like the shadow he was dragging around with him everywhere before has been set free. And as they sit and talk Matt just feels more and more like screaming because Frank -

Frank’s doing good.

Frank’s not weighed down by all his shit anymore. Frank’s learned to let go. Frank’s eyes don’t look so haunted, Frank’s fucking healing and here Matt is having a panic attack every second night when he remembers how many people have been killed on his watch, here’s Matt unable to sleep because he didn’t kill the one guy in the city who definitely fucking deserved it, here’s Matt barely holding himself together, unable to say so much as a Hail Mary and mean it.

Frank’s got his shit together.

Matt’s has scattered to the four winds and there’s no way he’s ever gonna gather all the broken pieces, and the only thing that gives him a sliver of doubt is the fact that with every word Frank says - let go and leave the war behind and move on, his heart gives just the littlest of skips. Not like he’s lying, but like he’s unsure.

But that doesn’t matter.

 Doesn’t matter how you feel, right? Just what you do. And maybe Matt’s falling apart inside, more and more each day, but on the surface…

He’s holding it together enough to win cases during the day and save lives during the night. Just keep going, right?
So that’s where we are. And if Matt had to sum up his life in one sentence right now, it’d probably be something like ‘everything is awful and I don’t know why.’

Doesn’t know why he can’t stop looking over his shoulder expecting Fisk. Doesn’t know why the raw wounds of his losses aren’t even beginning to heal. Doesn’t know why it feels like his entire life is a chair tipped back on two legs, nearly about to fall - a lurch in his gut that just won’t go away. Doesn’t know why he can’t just move on.

And there’s - things, things he should talk about but is still keeping bottled up. How can he bring up Elektra with the others? How could they ever understand how it felt? He’s terrified they’ll be angry, for some reason. And that they’d be angry if he said something like sometimes I wonder if I should’ve killed Fisk and even more if he even begins to broach I wanted to die, hell, I tried to.

But every day he gets up and goes into work and pauses for a moment - takes in the smell of Karen’s sweet perfume and her laugh ringing like bells, and the warm solid presence that is Foggy and the way he knows his best friend is grinning when he turns at Matt’s entrance, and he clenches his fists and thinks, don’t fuck this up. Just don’t fuck this up.

Chapter End Notes

Broke this first chapter into two parts because it got too long - part 2 will be up very soon <3
3. FOGGY’S GOT 99 PROBLEMS BUT KAREN AIN’T ONE

So Matt’s being super fucking weird lately.

Things were meant to be better now.

They were meant to go relatively back to normal and Foggy was meant to be able to stop spending a disproportionate amount of his time worrying about his best friend. And you know, if he wasn't so in-tune with the other man he probably wouldn't even have noticed something was up.

But they lived together for years. He notices.

Matt's on top of all his cases, but there's shadows under his eyes like he's not sleeping.

He laughs and smiles with them at work, gives no sign anything's up - but the smiles don't reach his eyes, not completely.

When they do talk he's quieter than he used to be, seems a bit out of it. And he randomly walks out of the office sometimes without a word, but he's always back within twenty minutes. "Getting some air" is typically his excuse, whatever the fuck that means.

Thing is, as far as Foggy can figure, there's nothing wrong. There's no big threat they're up against, and Matt's not actively hiding anything - he's not taking weird calls and Foggy goes round to his place all the time like he used to, so there's no big personal crisis going on. Whenever he asks, Matt says he's fine.

And thing is, Foggy's scared to push too hard.

He can't lose Matt again. He's got this constant underlying fear that one day Matt's gonna disappear. Gonna just bolt like a scared horse if he feels like things are going wrong, if they get too overwhelming.

Foggy's grand solution is thus to just pretend everything is fine. Don't show any sign of weakness or discontent. If everything's fine, everything's stable, then Matt won't leave-

'Cause literally, if he had a mind to, he could just fuck off like he did after Midland. Like we're talking about the guy who faked his own death and then didn't head off to Siberia or Australia or anywhere else remote. He was hiding like three blocks down the road and Foggy had no fucking clue.

He can't go through that again.

At some point, he knows, shit will either settle down on its own, or it'll blow up in their faces, but either way all he can do is wait, and add Matt Murdock to the ever-growing 'shit that's stressing me the fuck out' list.

Number two on the 'shit that's stressing me the fuck out' list is the fact that he can't get a decent
night's sleep to save his life.

He's had nightmares for a while. You don't get shot and not get nightmares. For a long time he's been dreaming of diving to the floor as bullets whistle overhead, of dark silhouettes creeping up over hospital windows, of blaring alarms and emergency lights.

The last few months things have gotten even worse.

He'll wake up screaming Matt's name, after dreams of digging through rubble until his hands bleed. He'll dream of standing over his grave and feeling like someone's watching him from the trees. He'll dream of being back in college and knowing he's in danger somewhere and trying to find him. Never getting there in time. Even now Matt's back, even if he knows he's okay, those nightmares don't go away.

And then, of course, there's Poindexter. Foggy can't count the amount of times he's woken in a cold sweat with tears trailing down his cheeks and his mind echoing with the memory of that false Daredevil striding towards him, face slashed with a cold, sneering grin. He'll wake with a jolt, flinching back from some phantom object flying towards his head. He thinks of Ellison, falling back limply against the wall, and the smell of blood filling the room.

He doesn't think there's a single night where he doesn't wake up at least once from restless dreams. Sleeping pills help a bit, but leave him feeling groggy and dazed in the morning.

Sometimes he'll open his mouth in the middle of the office and just want to ask the others if they're going through the same thing. If any of them are getting any fucking sleep. They've been through as much as him, if not worse. Wants to cry, how do you do it, how do any of us do it?

But he doesn't, because Matt never talks about stuff like that and Karen looks fine and he doesn't want to be the first one to drag down the vibe they've got going in the office. Y'know, that 'everything is peachy, we won and we're fine now' vibe.

For a little longer, let them dream that everything is okay.

For a little longer, let them all have this. Let them at least pretend.

“Foggy? You okay?”

Foggy jerks awake with a startled yelp - his heart’s pounding and although he wasn’t dreaming, it takes him a second to register where he is.

This turns out to be face down on his desk, drooling onto a pile of important legal documents. Jesus fucking Christ.

"Karen?" he mumbles, squinting up at her. His mouth tastes like a rinsed turd and she's staring down at him with a smile, eyes glimmering in amusement. Her hair's hanging around her face and the late afternoon sunlight streaming in from the window behind her lights it up like a golden halo. Maybe it's his sleep-addled mind making him silly, but for a second she looks startlingly beautiful, and it's enough to nearly take his breath away.

"You were snoring so loudly I could hear you from the next room over!" she says.
Foggy huffs out a laugh, reaching up to scrub at his face. He honestly has no memory of falling asleep. He's just so exhausted that he must've passed out, into a slumber so deep he didn't even have a chance of dreaming.

"Literally unconscious," he replies, and her smile fades a little.

"You okay?" she repeats, setting a mug of coffee on the table and sliding it towards him as she sinks into the seat opposite. Foggy wraps his hands around it gratefully.

"Just exhausted," he replies, and when he looks up her eyes are soft and worried.

"Had bad dreams lately?"

She offers it tentatively, and Foggy freezes. He meets her eyes and sees something a little too vulnerable in her own face. Okay, he thinks, okay, so we are talking about this then. He's both relieved and terrified. Mostly relieved. Turns out he didn't have to make the first move, then.

"Yeah," he admits, and his shoulders slump. "I've had them for a while."

"It's understandable," she whispers. "After everything we've been through. Everything we've seen."

Foggy thinks of walking back out through the Bulletin's offices, of the bodies covered in white sheets, of the silence. He swallows hard and wonders if the haunted look in Karen's eyes is mirrored in his own.

"They'll go away eventually," he tries, but Karen's lips twist a little.

"Maybe," she replies. "Maybe not. Are you..."

"Am I what?"

"Talking to anyone? About this stuff."

Foggy bites his lip. Then takes a long drink just to hold off answering for a second or two. It really is pretty fucking terrible coffee. Like he didn’t think it was possible to mess up the instant stuff. Didn’t Karen once mention she used to work in a diner? If this is anything to go by, the place must’ve gotten some shit Yelp reviews.

And you know, Foggy’s a progressive sort. He’s all for a world where mental health is an open conversation. But it’s still - hard. Hard to talk about. Hard to admit to. Trauma is such a heavy word.

“I’ve been seeing a therapist since I got shot,” he admits - Karen’s eyes widen a little - “It helps, some, but… can’t exactly talk about Matt in there, can I? Or at least, not the whole story.”

Karen nods, lips pressed together tight. After a moment she reaches out and folds her hand over his on the table; Foggy goes very still, watches her thumb rub gentle circles against the back of his hand.

“T’was glad you’re getting help,” she murmurs. “You know if you want to talk about anything I’m always here too, right? No pressure, just - it can help. Having other people at least know what’s going on in your head.” She looks down, hair hanging across her face for a moment. “Being alone, keeping it all in, it doesn’t get you anywhere. I learned that the hard way.”

“Thanks,” Foggy whispers, and she looks up at him with a sympathetic smile.

“After Fisk tried to kill me the first time, I was terrified. You never really stop being scared. But you learn to cope with it.”
“You’re the bravest person I know,” Foggy blurts out, without really thinking about it - Karen laughs, her cheeks flushing.

“Not really.”

“Yes, really.” He clasps his hand in hers, squeezes tightly. “You’ve been through so much shit and you keep going.”

“Haven’t really got a choice,” she begins, but Foggy shakes his head adamantly.

“Yes you do. You could’ve run from this city a long time ago. But you’re still here. Trying to do some good in this shithole.”

“Yeah, well.” She shrugs, smiles a little. “Can’t leave the entire city on Matt’s shoulders.”

“Where is he, anyway?” Foggy asks, sitting up a bit and peering out his office door.

“Went to see a client.” Their eyes meet and in that moment Foggy knows he’s noticed it too; that things with him are just off-centre. Once again, relief rushes over him in a warm wave. Just to not be shouldering this all alone… it means more than he can say.

And Karen - he can’t think of anyone he’d rather be doing this with than her. And sitting here now - under her kind gaze, holding her warm hand - he feels suddenly very close to her.

When Matt was dead, they used to meet for drinks. She was the one person who understood his grief, the one person he could lean on in the whole thing. They’d spend long nights together, just talking - or sometimes just sitting in silent solidarity.

Suddenly, right now, he’s glad it’s just her here. And glad she’s the one to witness his moment of vulnerability.

He realises he’s sort of just - sitting there, gazing at her, and shakes himself with an awkward laugh.

“Anyway. How are you going on that case about the landlord?”

Karen stirs too, looking a bit flustered.

“Um - good, yeah, good. I’ve been doing a lot of research, just - there was a lot of reading, a lot of stuff to look through. I’m still not as familiar with all this as you two are, she admits, and he squeezes her hand.

“Hey, you’ll get there!”

“There was some stuff I wanted to run past you, actually - I just need to read up on it all a bit more first.”

“How about you come over to my place tonight?” The invitation’s out of his mouth before he even really thinks about it, and he instantly feels awkward - but when Karen smiles he gathers the courage to keep on. “We could talk about it over some takeaway?”

“I’d like that,” Karen murmurs, and the grin Foggy shoots her is probably way too wide and eager and embarrassing, but he doesn’t care - she smiles back, and looks over her shoulder at him when he leaves, and he tries to ignore the way his stomach’s suddenly alight with butterflies.
It’s good to distract themselves with work - good, for a little while, to focus on something *normal* for once. They order in Italian and drink probably a little too much wine, and after they’ve finished discussing the case they watch some truly awful reality TV and Foggy doesn’t think he’s laughed this much in a long time; it reminds him of the old days, back when the three of them used to go out for drinks and pool. He remembers how happy he used to be, seeing the other two let loose for once.

As the night winds down and they sober up with a little coffee, the conversation turns back to what they were discussing back at the office.

“I was telling Matt the other day I want to learn some self defence,” Foggy admits. “I know I’ll never be able to kick ass like he does, but I’d like to have something up my sleeve.”

“A gun,” Karen says instantly, “Have a gun up your sleeve.”

“I don’t think I could bring myself to shoot someone,” Foggy admits. Something flickers in her face and he reaches out and presses her wrist. “Not judging! I just genuinely think I’d freeze up and then the *baddie* would snatch the gun and I’ll be the one on the other end of it! No sir, give me a hockey stick any day. Something long range. Maybe a spear.”

Karen laughs a little. Some of the tension leaches from her shoulders.

“At the end of the day, there’s only so much any of us can do,” she admits. “You should see the state of the art security system back at my flat, though. I spent far too much money on it, but it’s worth it to at least be able to sleep a little easier.”

“That’s an idea. You know what I was thinking of getting? A really big dog.” He’s not even joking. Just not being alone at night would be something. Karen’s eyes light up and she’s cooing immediately. “Thought you’d like that idea.”

“You’ve made me want one now.” She takes another sip of her coffee. “Single woman living alone, I probably need one anyway, just for when I go out walking.”

“You’re still single then?” It comes out rather clumsily. In fact it’s a stupid comment, of *course* she’s still single. With just the three of them in the office all day long, they know everything about each other’s dating lives, i.e. the fact that they’re all *non-existent*.

Karen looks startled, and he backpedals.

“Sorry - sorry, that was *weird* and *personal* and-”

“It’s fine, Foggy.”

“I was just curious is all, since-”

“Foggy!” She laughs, reaches out and squeezes his leg. “It’s fine! Yes, I’m single. Everything’s just been such a whirlwind. I mean, I’d like to start dating again, but it’s… hard.”

“You and Matt,” Foggy can’t help saying - because he’s noticed how much closer they’ve been lately. Not like, together-close, not like they were once. But they sit together for lunch sometimes, talking quietly over their sandwiches, and it always seems Weirdly intimate in a way Foggy doesn’t
want to interrupt. And Matt seems - softer around her, less closed off.

But Karen shakes her head.

“I… we’re not back together. I still don’t know the whole story about what happened with Elektra,” she admits, “And I… I don’t think he’s ready to start anything. I don’t want to push too hard.”

“Fair enough.” His chest feels tight suddenly.

“I don’t want to be alone,” Karen admits, “But I can’t exactly just hop on Tinder. I need someone who understands all this.”

“That’s why me and Marci didn’t work out,” Foggy replies, “I couldn’t keep lying to her, even by omission. It wasn’t fair. And the second you tell someone about all this, they get dragged in. It’s not fair to do that, either.”

“Exactly!” she cries, and they swap a look of shared understanding, and the next thing he knows she’s shifting a little closer to him on the couch.

“What happened with us?” she asks suddenly, and it takes Foggy’s brain a second to catch up.

“What?”

“We were dating and then we weren’t,” she says, and Foggy swallows a lump in his throat at the thought of Elena, of that strange, confusing period of their lives right before everything changed forever.

“Things escalated so fast. We couldn’t keep up with it. It wasn’t a good time,” he replies, carefully.

Karen hums agreement. Foggy feels shy to look at her suddenly, but he forces himself to. She doesn’t look embarrassed or reserved. Just thoughtful.

“Karen?” he prompts quietly.

“I enjoyed tonight, Foggy,” she says - slowly. Testing the waters. His heart races. “I like being around you. I like having you on my team. I think… you’re the only person who really gets this. I mean, everyone else who knows… Claire’s never around any more, and Matt, it’s different with him. He’s in the middle of it all, we’re the ones who are forced to sit by the sidelines and watch.”

“It’s hard,” Foggy says.

“It is. But it’s worse alone. Maybe,” and now she seems shy, “Maybe now’s a better time? I don’t know, I-”

“You’re right,” he blurts out, maybe too eagerly, but it’s worth it when her shoulders slump in relief and she turns to him with a smile, “I mean, things didn’t work out then, but we’re all on the same page now. If you want, we could - pick up where we left off? Take it slow, maybe, just try and see what-”

“I’d like that,” she cuts in, and he gives another silly, wide grin, and she laughs and leans in and kisses him on the cheek. Her hand in his is small, warm, but calloused rough from writing, and the smell of her perfume washes over him, floral and familiar, and for a moment it wipes everything else from his mind - for a moment, for once, he truly feels peaceful.
Two days later he shows up at her door on a weekend morning with flowers and a bag of bagels.

“Foggy.” Her eyes are soft, face flushed with pleasure, “You didn’t need to-”

“We’ll take it slow,” he reassures her, “Is this okay?”

“More than okay.” She ushers him in and they spend the morning channel surfing and occasionally lazily making out and he has no idea, no idea how this will change things, how it might shift the fragile dynamic they’ve all built, but for once he’s not scared of change. For once he’s excited about something. It’s nice, after everything.

“At work,” he begins later that morning, “Are we-”

“Matt will know,” Karen says, “There’s no way we can hide this. Just don’t rub it in his face.”

“You think he’ll be okay?”

“Why wouldn’t he?” Karen replies, “We’re not together, I told you.”

This is true. This is true, just - Foggy has no idea what goes on in Matt’s head sometimes. But he swallows his uncertainty and tangles his hand in her hair and rests their foreheads together.

“Let’s not fuck this up,” he breathes, and Karen laughs and puts a hand on his chest.

“I’ll try my best,” she says, and closes her eyes and nuzzles into the crook of his shoulder. “This is good, though, right?”

“Yeah.” And he doesn’t know how to put it into words, how steady he feels here, how anchored. *I feel safe with you.* And he knows on Monday they’ll have to figure out how these new pieces all fit together, but if they can make it work-

They’re stronger together, all of them, always have been, if they can all just *stay* - everything might be okay.

*Together* means with Karen. Or at least he thinks it might. He just needs to try not to think about how Matt, too, must fit into things - scared that if he starts messing with that loose end this whole thing might unravel.

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4. KAREN AND HER WORLD-CLASS COPING MECHANISMS

So Karen will murder Frank if he ever tells anyone about this, but when he knocks at the door of her flat it’s very possible that - after a moment of stunned silence - she bursts into tears, throws her arms around him and bawls into his shirt for the better part of ten minutes.

Look. It’s been a very stressful couple of months, alright?
She doesn’t know why it’s the sight of him that makes her snap, makes it all come crashing down on her. Her brain is a muddle of I’ve been so scared and I wish you’d been here and I’m so fucking glad you’re okay and if I’d died I would never have seen you again. It’s not nice, delicate little tears either. It’s full on fucking sobbing, complete with red face and runny nose.

Frank, bless his weirdly chivalrous heart, manages to steer her inside and to the couch, and rubs his hand down her back and holds her close and murmurs all sorts of reassuring things like “It’s alright, sweetheart. You’re fine. We’re fine.” He very graciously does not mention the fact that she’s absolutely destroying his t-shirt.

Anyway, the really embarrassing part is when she calms down and sits up and realises she’s managed to get her foundation all over his clothes. Curse you, shitty drugstore setting spray!

“Oh my God,” she says - her nose is so blocked now that it comes out all tinny - “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“I don’t know why I freaked out like that.” And then, inanely, “At least you aren’t wearing white.”

“It’s fine, Karen. I’m already covered in dog fur. You okay?” he asks, and he sounds so tender that she could cry all over again, but she takes a deep breath and pulls herself together.

“Yeah. Yeah, sorry. It’s just…” She trails off, helplessly, and Frank’s eyes flash for a moment.

“Fisk.”

“You heard?”

“I’ve been out of town for a while. But I’m caught up now. I’m glad you’re okay.” His hand comes up, brushes her cheek for a second and sends that electric spark shivering across her skin, and she struggles not to lean into the touch.

There’s something about Frank - some sort of raw, magnetic energy that always pulls her in. She knows he’s dangerous; she couldn’t care less. He’s never laid a hand on her. She feels protected around him, drawn to him in a way she’s never felt with anyone else.

“We took him down. For good this time. How have you been?” she adds. “Can you stay for a coffee?”

He nods, and they end up sitting for hours.

She knew about his pardon, but he fills her in on the rest of it. David and Billy and everything that went down. How he’s been working the last few months, how he’s been out doing some soul-searching. How he’s doing okay now.

She drinks in every word and even as she’s sitting across from him, she can’t stop staring.

There’s always been something a bit feral about Frank, a wild-animal energy in his eyes, like he could snap at any moment. But that’s gone now - or at least, faded a little - and she can’t help but gaze at him in admiration. He seems settled in a way she envies, but is also so, so proud of. He looks, she thinks, far closer to how he must’ve looked when his wife was alive. There is some hurt, of course, that doesn’t go away, but he seems - calmer. All she can think of is how strong he is.

God, she is so, so glad he’s back. It feels like a missing piece has settled back into place, one she’d
been aching without but hadn’t been able to put her finger on.

“Tell me how you’re doing,” he says eventually, and she hesitates - there’s so much, and she doesn’t know if he knows about Matt - but then he adds, “Before you freak out, yes, I’m aware that Murdock runs around the city at night in the world’s stupidest fucking Halloween costume, so don’t feel the need to spare any details.”

She breaks down laughing, and relishes his crooked, almost mischievous grin, and it’s so easy to spill everything to him - so easy to rest on his strength for a bit.

“Hell of a time,” he says when she’s done, “Understatement of the fucking century, I know. Wilson Fisk is a cancer. With any luck someone’ll shank him in prison.”

“Matt could have killed him,” Karen says, “But I’m glad he didn’t.”

Frank nods, and she knows he gets it - knows after everything he told her about Billy that he’s not about to walk out of here and find some way to get at Fisk himself.

“It all hurt so much at the time, but I don’t blame Matt for any of it,” Karen continues - slowly, trying to sort out her thoughts as she goes. “I did at first, but now… it’s just messy. Messy and complicated. I was so angry, angry that he ran, that he shut us out. But I know he was hurting, too. Either way, we’re all doing okay, now. Doing better, at least.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Frank says, and does sound like he means it.

At the door she hugs him again, carefully this time. For a moment, with his arms folded around her and his heart beating steadily under her cheek, she wishes she could stay there forever. Then feels embarrassed for thinking something like that; they’re close, and she knows Frank cares about her, but it’s… it’s not like that. He was married, once, he’s still mourning his family.

“How about meeting another sometime?” she asks.

“Maybe.” He holds out his hand and after a moment she passes him her phone. “I’m here if you need me.”

She nods, and watches him go, and closes her eyes, relishing the lingering warmth of his body against hers - then shakes herself for being so silly.

Okay, so it’s possible that she has a crush on Frank.

Maybe most people would see the Punisher and realise the sensible thing to do is run screaming in the opposite direction. But Karen… Karen’s always felt herself able to see under the surface. Beneath all the violence and single-minded determination, she can see how damaged Frank is. How the mad quest for vengeance stemmed from raw pain, how he loves his family so fucking much that what happened to them tore him apart.

There’s something admirable about it - to feel so deeply. To be so driven. And for all his bad qualities, all the things she finds terrifying or dangerous or sad about him, she knows he’s passionate and loyal and fiercely protective of his friends. What’s not attractive about that?
Anyway. It’s not like anything’s gonna happen.

Then, of course, there’s Matt.

Things with him are different. They were a slow burn from that first night he took her into his apartment. She’s always felt safe around him, and always found herself unable to pull away from what at first had been the mystery of him - that funny, quiet confidence undercut by a darkness she’d wanted to figure out. She’d seen something of herself in him - the hurt, abrasive parts - and thought maybe they could smooth out each other’s edges.

It was the lies that pulled them away from each other, and she’d given up any hope of them fixing things. But when they were taking down Fisk, when she’d set aside her anger…

Maybe those old feelings haven’t quite gone away.

But now there’s Foggy.

And if there’s one thing she’s gotta be perfectly clear about, it’s that he’s not a second choice or a fallback plan. Foggy’s sweet, and kind, and funny, and stable. She never feels like she doesn’t know where she stands with him, not like she does with Matt, who keeps his feelings all locked up close to his chest. She gets why, she really does, but it doesn’t make it any easier trying to be with him.

But Foggy - dear, gentle Foggy, Foggy who loves so deeply and openly, Foggy who’s a hero in his own way, who’s so selfless it almost hurts at times…

There’s one night she’ll always remember.

It was the night after Midland Circle came down. The night they realised Matt wasn’t coming back and it felt like someone was punching her in the heart, again and again and again. The two of them went back to her place and neither of them could speak. She’ll never forget the look on Foggy’s face - sort of desperately shell-shocked.

They’d laid in bed together - bodies curled close, occasionally shaking with silent sobs, just holding onto each other. Everything laid bare, raw and vulnerable and real. She remembers how tightly she held him, and how he was trembling so hard that it made her body shake, too. It felt like the longest night in the world.

She’s eternally grateful that she wasn’t alone, then. And she thinks it must have been the morning after - that terrible, terrible morning after, when the sun rose and she realised that this was real, that Matt wasn’t coming back - that she realised how much she loved him. When he got up and made her a cup of tea and came back and stroked her hair, and his eyes were swollen from crying, hers too, but he looked so strong - so brave - and the words he said stuck with her all the rest of those long months before Matt walked back into their lives.

“Just keep breathing.”

Now they’re lying together again, her head on his chest. Moonlight’s spilling through the window and she can feel the panicked fluttering of his heart against her cheek. Another bad dream. They woke each other up with their screaming.

A soft snort makes her turn to look up at him.

“We make a fucking pair, don’t we?” Foggy says, something self-deprecating in it.

She has to laugh. It’s laugh or cry. She presses a hand to his bare chest and he wraps his arm around
her waist. His eyes, in the dark, look wide and haunted. She knows hers are the same.

“I’ve been held hostage so many times by now that you’d think I’d get used to the idea of dying,” she says. Even as the words come out of her mouth she realises, *hey, your life is really super fucked up, Karen.* “But I’m still not. I’m still scared.”

“I mean, it’s human instinct,” Foggy points out, but he leans down and kisses the top of her head. “I’d be more worried if you weren’t.”

“I know. Just. I’m sick of it. I’m sick of being scared all the time, I’m sick of being exhausted from constantly looking over my shoulder. I’m always worried that it’s only a matter of time until the next one.”

“I get that,” Foggy murmurs. “I just - try not to think about it. Take life as it comes. It’s that or fall apart.”

“Every time I think I’ve learned how to do that. And then the next idiot with a gun or a bomb or an army of undead ninjas comes along and I feel like we’re back to square one.”

“We’re not,” Foggy says, firmly, “Square one was the three of us alone with our secrets. We’re never gonna be like that again. We’re a team now. You and me and Matt. Things are different now. You don’t have to look over your shoulder twenty-four seven when we have each other’s backs.”

Her eyes widen. She… actually hadn’t thought about it like that before, and it makes a lot of sense, and hit with a sudden affection for him, she twists to press their lips together, relishes the little, pleased noise he makes, feels his heart grow steady under her palm.

“Your ex sounds like an asshole,” he tells her, on one of those nights; their deepest conversations seem to happen after midnight and usually after one or the other of them wakes them both up by accident. That’s less often, now. Sometimes they even get through the whole night without a bad dream. Just having another warm body in the bed seems to help.

Karen snorts a little. Her face is sticky with tears; the dreams tonight were about her brother, about the crash, and she’d spilled everything to Foggy when she woke up.

Part of her had been terrified, expecting judgement. But none came, and his hand is a steady grip around her wrist, thumb gently stroking the inside of her arm. She feels safe.

“That’s one way of putting it. But he didn’t kill my brother. That’s all on me.”

“No, it’s not,” Foggy says fiercely. “It was a messed up time and you made mistakes, sure. But you couldn’t have known what would happen. You were young and, and scared, and hurt, and maybe it’s not an excuse, but it’s not like you wanted any of it to play out like that.”

“You’re right,” she says, “It’s not an excuse.”

“Karen.” He grasps his face in her hands, thumbs smoothing across her cheekbones, wiping away damp tear tracks. “Your brother sounds like a good guy. He’d be proud of how you cleaned up your act, made something of yourself.”
“Foggy…”

“You can’t spend your whole life trying to pay back one mistake,” he insists. “That’s not how it works. How much is enough?”

She falls silent, unsure. Her heart feels sick inside, same way it always does. Her family is a wound that just keeps reopening, one she doesn’t think will ever heal. But she lets Foggy pull her close, lets herself bury her head in his chest, and tries to forget about it, at least for a little while.

“I know you and Foggy are dating again, you know,” Matt says one day. They’re eating lunch together because Foggy’s out visiting a client, and Karen goes very still. Stares at him carefully, trying to interpret his tone. “You don’t have to hide it.”

She lowers her sandwich, licks her lips nervously. She and Foggy’d had a hushed exchange outside the door right before he left about their plans for the evening. It’d been a bit awkward because she knew Matt could hear shit like that, but also it seemed rude to talk about plans in front of him that he wasn’t invited to.

“Sorry. We weren’t trying to hide it. We just felt - awkward. Making a big announcement seemed a bit weird.”

“Fair enough,” he replies. “Well, it’s fine. It’s good, actually. You two shouldn’t have to be alone.”

He picks a piece of lettuce out of his sandwich, pulls a horrible face at it for some reason, then puts it in his mouth anyway. Karen stares at him, a bit unsure what to do or say.

See, the thing is, if she and Foggy aren’t okay - because it’s not okay, it’s not normal to have so many nightmares, to flinch at every sound, to still be taken over some days by panic and grief - she’s pretty sure Matt must be, like, ten times worse. Even if they won, it’s not like that’s gonna magically take away the fact that right after he came back from the dead, it was glaringly obvious to anyone who so much as looked at him that he was super fucked up.

But he never talks about it, and she’s got this weird vibe like he’s trying to… not prove himself, not exactly, but - try not to upset them, maybe.

“You know,” she says, slowly, “It’s not the two of us together and then you off to the side, right?”

Matt goes still. He doesn’t even pretend to look up at her, eyes fixed sightlessly down at the table between them.

“Matt,” she prompts.

With his glasses on, it’s hard to read his face. He leans back, tugs at his collar a bit awkwardly. Karen catches a flash of a yellowing bruise on the side of his neck, mostly hidden by his clothes. She reaches out and presses his arm.

“Talk to me,” she says, insistently now.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” he replies.
“Come on. Don’t be like that. What is it?”

Matt swallows. She can see the effort it takes him to get all personal, but waits, patiently. It’s like pulling teeth with all of them sometimes. What matters is they get there in the end.

“I guess,” Matt says finally, “I still feel a bit - out of it. Occasionally. I was gone for a while, Karen, things… changed. And I’ve always been used to working alone, to keeping secrets. But this,” he adds, and gestures around the office, “This is good.”

“Oh,” she replies. He doesn’t sound too upset, just resigned. “Just - if you ever want to talk about anything, you know we’re here, right?”

“Of course.”

“And you know it’s good to, right? ‘cause there aren’t many other people out there who would really get it.”

“I know,” he says - and after a moment he lifts his head a bit, meets her smile, folds his hand over hers.

There’s things the two of them have talked about. Especially immediately after they took down Fisk, there were nights she’d stay over at his place. Crash on his couch after a lot of late drinking. It was nice just not to be alone. They talked about Wesley, about Fisk and Dex and Ray, about all the shit they’d done, all the things they regretted. It’d been… nice. She’d finally felt close to him again. It’d all been so raw, it felt like they could say anything and it wouldn’t matter.

“I mean,” she continues now, “There’s shit in my past I can’t get over. I’d’ve gone crazy if I hadn’t been able to get that off my chest. But not many people can relate.”

Except you, she thinks, suddenly - because he does get it, and she loves Foggy but it’s one thing to listen and another to understand.

Guilt. Atonement. The sort of devils that people like them carry around. Their fucked up pieces just - fit together.

Stop that, she thinks, and tries not to stare at him - the clenched line of his jaw, the corner of his dark eyes that she can only just see behind his glasses. You can't have him, you’re past all that, you have Foggy now, anyway. What are you even doing?

Matt swallows, throat bobbing sharply.

“I get it,” he says, quietly. “And I want to be there for you, too.”

“Oh, Matt,” she says, and squeezes his hand. “You are. I’m really glad you’re back. You know you can tell me anything, right?” she adds, and sees something flicker in his face. “I’m the last person who’d judge.”

Matt nods. He smiles a bit, but there’s something distant in it, and not for the first time Karen wonders exactly what sort of psychological beasts are eating at him.

“Can I hug you?” she asks instead, and Matt scoffs out a laugh. He nods, and she reaches out and pulls him in. His hands come up, slowly, pressing against her back; she tugs him close, cups the back of his head, fingers curling into his hair. Remembers, with a sharp pang of nostalgia, a time in this
very office - before all this, when they were falling, falling apart, remembers how his voice broke. *I can’t do this alone.* Remembers how her heart ached for him.

“We need you here,” she whispers in his ear, “We *want* you here. So don’t go anywhere, okay?”

“No intending to,” he replies, and she squeezes him tight and closes her eyes and-

*And she loves Foggy-*

And it’s kind of fucked up, how *easy* this feels. The two of them, together. How much it feels like if she could just let go of... of *something*, some last inhibition or insecurity, all the pieces would fall into place. She doesn’t know what that would even look like. What she does know is that Foggy and Matt, too, are close in a way she can’t even begin to touch. Even when she was with Matt, she was never his first port of call. Foggy was.

She might not know what’s going on. But here, now, she just needs him to understand that - even if it’s unspoken - what Foggy said-

*You-*

*And me-*

*And Matt.*

It feels weightier, now, than he probably meant it to at the time. But all she wants, one way or another, all she needs Matt to want too, is for all of them to *stay*.

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Sometimes she wakes with a start in the night, scrabbling for the gun in her bedside drawer, closes her hands around it, needing the touch of cold metal to ground her, just until she feels like she can breathe again.

Sometimes she stares into her own eyes in the mirror, doesn’t think she can see a soul behind them.

Sometimes she’ll catch a glimpse of someone passing - a blond boy, about his height - and for a second her heart will squeeze so painfully that she’s quite sure it will burst.

But, you know, that’s nothing new.

She was fucked up long before she arrived in Hell’s Kitchen. But the more things keep falling apart, the better she’s gotten at sweeping all her broken pieces under the rug. Just keep going. Just - keep going.

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So it’s some big, unspoken secret - she looks at the four of them, herself, and poor sleepless Foggy, and Matt who’s desperately holding himself together, and Frank who’s trying so hard - she looks at them and sees them all wavering along that dangerous tightrope trying frantically not to fall, and thinks, *we’re all not really fine, but we’ll just keep stumbling on.*
But this is where our story really starts; with Karen, and a single, snap decision that she has no idea will be the catalyst for all of their unsteady paths careening into one another.

It’s Father’s Day.

She’s been dreading it for weeks, as their fucked up consumerist society started up with the ads and the Hallmark Cards and the ‘For Him’ gift catalogues. Every year this is a sore spot. And every fucking year she can’t stop herself making the same mistakes.

Foggy invites her to his parents’ place. They’re having a big family lunch, but she knows she can’t go - knows it’ll only make her resentful, the sight of everything she can’t have. So after sleeping in until the afternoon, trying to waste as much of the day as possible, she finds herself sitting alone in her flat staring at her phone.

Every year she calls him.

Every year she can’t stop herself, and every year he either doesn’t pick up, or does and then hangs up on her, and it feels like it shatters her all over again. Even now, as she thinks about it, tears well in her eyes because can’t you see, can’t you see we’re all each other has left-

Can’t you ever forgive me-

And the worst part is, it’d be easy if she didn’t care. Easy to cut him off, think you asshole and forget about it.

But she does care. She wants to be close to her Dad again, she’s desperate for his affection, his forgiveness, and that makes it so much worse, and she gets halfway through dialling his number before she forces herself to throw her phone against the wall, get out of bed and go to make a pot of very strong coffee.

The afternoon wears on. She goes for a run, just to burn off some of her energy, but still feels like shit, and she’s sitting in a morose silence googling different mixed drinks trying to decide what will most efficiently get her fucked up when she suddenly thinks, Frank.

Today’s gotta suck for him as well.

Probably even more than it sucks for her, and the more she thinks about it, the more it’s enough to bring tears to her eyes - the thought of him wallowing somewhere, in so much pain, and probably alone - to be a father, then not, to have the most precious thing in the world ripped away from you-

She picks up her phone again.

His number’s still there, unused. A few times she’s been tempted to text him, but she always feels a bit silly. All the previous times they’ve talked it’s been when Frank was in some sort of trouble. It just feels weird to suddenly be like, ‘what’s up’ out of nowhere.

And even now - she doesn’t want to be alone, wants to at least offer for him not to have to be, either. But a phone call, even a message, seems too forward. Too much. Because Frank doesn’t know about her father, and their messed up relationship. He might think she’s just offering out of pity.

After going back and forth about it for about ten minutes, she finally puts the phone down. Can’t bring herself to do it; it seems too much. But instead - instead, just in case he is still watching her, she goes and puts the vase of flowers from Foggy in her window. If he does see it, he’ll know what it means.
It feels a bit weird. Using the flowers Foggy gave her to summon another man - especially because Foggy doesn’t know Frank’s back in town. Karen probably should’ve told him. Maybe it’s cowardly, but she just - knows Foggy doesn’t like him. Doesn’t wanna start that drama.

Anyway.

*He’ll come or he won’t*, she thinks, *either way, I tried.*

She sits back down, but a second later thinks, *Matt*, and feels another pang.

If today’s shit for her, it’s just as bad for him, because by her count that’s three father figures he’s lost now - his dad, and Stick, and Father Lantom - she’s suddenly quite concerned, because it’s been radio silence from him all day and she doesn’t like the thought of him sitting around somewhere wallowing.

With Matt, it’s easy. They see each other every day; it’s no big deal to shoot him a message - *hey, come over if you want* - and not twenty minutes later he’s knocking at her door.

She doesn’t know why she pauses, why she runs a hand over her hair to smooth the flyaways and straightens her shirt, because it’s not like Matt can see her anyway. She pulls open the door and it’s not until she actually lays eyes on him that she actually fully realises, *oh, he’s here, he came.* A big part of her hadn’t thought he actually would, but the sight of him now sends a rush of warm relief through her.

She really, really didn’t want to be alone today.

“Hey,” she says.

It’s probably really obvious she’s been upset. Even if Matt can’t see it, he can probably, like, smell that she was crying earlier. Or hear the strain in her voice. But he just lifts his head, and smiles at her.

“Hey,” he replies, sounding just as worn-down.

She reaches out and pulls him into a hug. Matt doesn’t resist; the hand that isn’t holding his cane comes up and wraps around her back. She closes her eyes, lets her head drop down against his shoulder for a moment.

They pull apart and she ushers him in. It’s always a bit weird seeing him out of a suit - in jeans and a hoodie he seems softer somehow. He takes off his glasses as he enters, setting them down on her coffee table, and Karen fights back a smile. She knows Matt trusts her, but it’s still nice to see those little signs that he’s willing to open up around her.

“You okay?” she asks, as she moves to grab glasses from the kitchenette.

“Surviving,” Matt replies, with a little huff. He rubs his knuckles with his opposite hand and she glances down; they’re red and scuffed, and it’s not hard to figure out that he’s probably been going hard at a punching bag. Maybe next year she should spend the day at the gun range; it’d certainly help her blow off steam.

She sits next to him and sets down two glasses and a bottle of whiskey.

“Today’s shit,” she says, flatly, and Matt barks out a laugh.

“You can say that again. Okay, but *Mother’s Day* - that’s going to be weird next year.”
“Oh my God. I didn’t even think of that.” She hasn’t seen Maggie since the shit that went down with Fisk and Matt never talks about her, but she assumes they’re still in contact. Hasn’t wanted to pry. “Good weird or bad weird?”

“Both.” His lips twist. “It’s complicated.”

She rubs his arm sympathetically and pours him a drink, sliding it across the table. He takes it and pauses a moment - hands wrapped around the glass, a thoughtful look on his face. She suddenly wonders what hundreds of little details he must be picking up around her apartment. The flowers, a few days old now, just starting to wilt. What she cooked for dinner this week. The fact that Foggy was here last night.

But all he says, after a moment, is “Thanks for inviting me over.” His voice is quiet and sincere, a little vulnerable, and she bumps her shoulder against his.

“It sucks, but it’s better when you’re not alone,” she whispers. His head lifts and they smile at each other, and maybe Matt can’t see hers, but she thinks suddenly he must be able to tell - if not that she’s smiling, then how she’s feeling. A sudden warmth, an intense closeness, that special connection that always seems to hang between them.

She opens her mouth, suddenly desperate to say something - not quite sure what, not yet, something about him, about how glad she is to have him, to know him, some sappy declaration of their friendship-

When there’s another knock at the door.

Matt nearly jumps out of his skin. It’s that which startles her; she nearly spills her drink.

“Shit,” she hisses. Then, “You okay? You didn’t hear them coming?”

“I heard someone coming upstairs but I thought it was your neighbour. I was distracted,” he admits, and Karen’s heart nearly skips a beat - by me? - but he’s frowning, now. “Okay, why is Frank Castle at your door?”

“You can tell it’s him?”

“Heartbeat, size, the smell of his clothes, it all adds up,” Matt says, “And his breathing is familiar.”

She’s not sure if that’s creepy or impressive.

“I invited him,” she admits, and Matt’s head snaps towards her.

“What?”

“Sort of,” she admits, flustered now. “Sorry, I didn’t think he’d actually show.”

She gets up and moves towards the door, only to pause and look back at him.

“Is this okay?”

God, she hadn’t been thinking. She’d literally had zero expectation that both of them would turn up, given their rather uncommunicative track records. Matt hesitates - but then his face softens, and he nods. He knows why Frank’s here. They both do. Karen heads to the door, and then pauses - scrubbing her hands over her face for a moment before she pulls it open.
Frank lifts his head. Shadowed eyes meet hers. He looks like shit - something a bit too defensive in the way he’s looming there, one arm resting against the doorframe. His clothes are rumpled and there’s already whiskey on his breath. His knuckles are bloodied, she notices. So he’s been punching things as well, but probably more in the vicinity of a wall.

“Hey,” she whispers, “I didn’t think you’d come.”

Frank’s eyes meet hers. There’s something a little helpless in them, under the burning anger and pain, and her heart nearly breaks for him - after the last time she saw him, she knows what it is. I thought I was doing better. But oh, Frank - it hasn’t been that long. How many Father’s Days without them? One, two? It doesn’t get easier. Not that soon, probably not ever.

“Not like I had much else to do,” he growls, but there’s something animal-scared, something so sad under it all, and before she really knows what she’s doing, she’s reaching out. Her hand cups his cheek, thumb stroking over rough stubble and the raised bump of an old scar. Frank leans into it, taking a deep, steadying breath. In the look that passes between them - a little too close, a little too intense - a lot is said. Their different flavours of pain.

She drops her hand and sees him shiver a little.

“Matt’s here,” she says, carefully. “Is that okay?”

Frank glances up. His face is unreadable, but after a moment he nods. He starts to step into the flat, and that’s when Karen notices the bigass German Shepherd he’s brought with him.

“Oh my God, you brought a dog. This day just got ten times better,” she exclaims - Frank’s lips twitch a little. “Is it friendly?”

“Yeah.”

“Fantastic. Come inside.”

She leads him into the living room. Matt’s standing up off the couch; he takes a step towards them and Karen watches, a little nervous, as the two of them pause for a second, taking each other in.

“Murdock,” Frank grunts finally.

“Castle,” Matt replies.

From where she’s standing Karen can see Frank’s face pretty well. There’s something a bit - surprised about it, a bit unsettled, his brows all screwed up. It takes her a second for her to realise why - he’s probably never seen Matt without either glasses or a mask covering half his face. It seems to have rattled him - Matt’s facing Frank, but his gaze is way off-mark, fixed just over his left shoulder. His face is stonily unreadable.

There’s something wary in it - but weary, too, she thinks. They all know why they’re here.

It’s the dog that breaks the tension, pushing its way past Frank’s legs and promptly trotting around the entire room sniffing everything. It picks up a shoe, throws it across the room - ignoring Frank’s indignant, “Behave yourself!” - and then scampers back over to them. When Karen crouches down, it happily shoves its head in her lap to be petted, and not gonna lie, for a second she’s pretty wrapped up in just giving the thing a cuddle.

“Who’s a good boy? You are! Yes! What a good - wait, is it a boy?” she adds, looking up at Frank.
He’s staring down at them with a fondly amused look, and he nods.

“What’s his name?” Karen asks.

“Pie.”

“That’s so cute,” she says, which are three words she did not expect to ever direct towards the fucking Punisher, “I love pets with food names.”

“No, Pi, no ‘E’.”

“Like the maths?”

“Like the book about the kid and the tiger!” Frank says. He sounds exasperated, but she can see some of the tension has leached from his shoulders. A second later he throws himself down onto the couch, watching the two of them. Matt’s still standing off to the side. Frank has rather inconsiderately monopolised the very middle of the couch and due to his man-spreading it is impossible to sit down without touching him. A weird tension fills the entire room.

“You saw the flowers then,” Karen says eventually, when the silence gets a bit too awkward. “Still keeping tabs on me?”

“Of course,” Frank says, his eyes flicking to the window. “Figured either way we should keep some sort of emergency signal set up. My friend set up the camera for me so I can keep an eye out. We’ve got the same system with his window.”

“Camera?” Matt cuts in with a frown.

“Long story,” Karen replies, and shoots him a sheepish glance. “We needed a way to stay in touch back when Frank was on the run.”

“Ever heard of a burner phone?” Matt says, and Frank shoots him a scowl, useless as the gesture may be.

“I’ve just spent months working with a hacker. Any phone can be tracked, so don’t get smart with me, Red.” He throws one boot aggressively up onto the coffee table and folds his arms. Then seems to remember it’s Karen’s coffee table, sheepishly lowers it again, and proceeds to help himself to some whiskey.

Matt doesn’t reply, but his shoulders are tense, and Karen swallows a lump that’s suddenly risen in her throat.

“Guys…” she starts, quietly, glancing between them, and Frank pauses, shoulders hunched.

“We talked a couple weeks back,” he offers, “We’re all caught up. He knows I’m done with the Punisher shit so - I just don’t need the preaching, alright? I’m not fucking stalking her, I’m just keeping tabs.”

“It’s fine, Matt,” Karen adds, “We have a system. I promise.”

“Okay,” Matt replies, stiffly.

Another silence falls. Matt’s still hovering to the side of the room, hands wrapped around his glass, fingers drumming anxiously. He’s so quiet that Karen feels a bit guilty for suddenly springing this on
him. Like, it’s not like he’s shy, but he’s also certainly not about to get personal now - not with Frank here. And Frank is not currently looking particularly disposed to conversation either.

But they’re not here to make conversation, she realises, and rises, heading over to her drinks cabinet and flinging it open.

“Let’s not fight,” she declares. “Today’s a shit day for all of us and arguing’s only gonna make it worse. We’re not here to discuss our various extracurricular activities, so…” She turns, and waves a bottle of vodka. “Let’s focus on forgetting.”

“No arguments there,” Frank grunts.

After a moment, Matt nods. He gingerly sits down next to Frank on the couch. Reaches for his glasses on the table in front of them - then hesitates and drops his hand, seeming to reconsider. Frank notices, and stares at him for a long moment, then shifts over a little bit so that Matt has more room. Two small offerings, but they seem to break the tension between them a bit.

“Excellent,” Karen says, and grabs the shot glasses. “Let’s get super fucking drunk.”
5. IN WHICH FRANK FREAKS THE FUCK OUT

“Somehow it was worse than if he’d just been angry-”

“I knew I wasn’t getting out of Midland-”

“You ain’t ever gonna be whole again, not after that, so no point pretending-”

It’s Pi who wakes Frank up - with a flailing start at four in the morning - when the dog gets up from where he was sleeping nestled behind Frank’s knees and decides the most direct route to the floor is right across his stomach.

“Shit!” he hisses - and then doubles over, clutching his head, because that is one hell of a God damn hangover.

It takes him a second to figure out where he is - the world slowly swimming back into consciousness around him as his head continues to pound like a blacksmith’s forge.

He’s on a couch. It’s dark, except for city lights spilling in from a window somewhere behind him. It’s not his couch. It’s Karen’s couch - in Karen’s apartment, and that’s right, they were all here, weren’t they? They were drinking - a lot - and he can’t quite remember where things went after that.

He swings his legs over the side of the couch and knocks over a bottle. It rolls across the floor and hits another with a glassy clink. As he squints, eyes adjusting to the darkness, he realises there is a mess of alcoholic paraphernalia scattered across the coffee table.

He rises. Turns. Pi’s standing, head tilted up, staring at the window.

The window which Matt’s standing at. Or more accurately, standing halfway out; his head and shoulders are stuck through the window, hands braced on the sill. Frank stares at him.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he growls.

“Shhh!” Matt hisses, and Frank’s mouth snaps shut. He stands for a moment, trying to get his bearings. A glance around the room reveals a pile of couch cushions in the corner - was Murdock sleeping on the fucking floor? - and no sign of Karen.

Call Frank paranoid, but a jolt of concern strikes him. He heads quickly to her bedroom, just to check, and sure enough, she’s lying on her side, out like a light. He lets out a breath he barely realised he was holding, and stands for a moment in the doorframe, watching her.

*She invited us over, that’s right*-
Because it was Father’s Day. Because it was Father’s Day and she knew how fucked up I’d be. And the memory comes swimming back to him, now - sitting in the corner of his apartment, nursing his bleeding knuckles, feeling like his chest was tearing itself apart, and happening to glance up and see that vase of bright yellow flowers on the grainy security cam footage of his computer monitor.

The warmth that’d flooded through him, just at the thought that she was thinking about him, that he wasn’t so alone…

He’s hit with a surge of affection for her, and he moves closer and pulls the blankets up over her shoulders before heading back out to the living room.

Matt’s just pulling his head back in through the window. Frank comes up by his side and looks out, but he can’t see anything except an empty road.

“Trouble?” he asks, carefully - trying to ignore the way his stomach jolts at the thought - he sees Matt hesitate. He hasn’t got his glasses on; it’s still fucking weird, seeing his whole bare face. The eyes had been unsettling at first, but the more Frank stares at him, the more the whole thing just gives him a sort of helpless vibe. It’s a far cry from the Daredevil he was up against a year ago - that guy had the sort of self-righteous confidence that used to actually piss Frank off, reminded him a bit of all those idiots who preach on street corners, who shove a Bible in your face and try to save you.

Not any more.

“Not the sort you’re thinking of,” Matt replies, finally.

“The fuck’s that mean?”

“We’re not in danger,” Matt clarifies - Frank’s shoulders relax a little - “I’ve been tracking that meth gang lately. You’ve probably seen them in the news. I’ve been trying to figure out who their main players are so I can take them down. I heard a commotion and I’m pretty sure it’s them, but from the intel I’ve gathered I wasn’t expecting anything to go down tonight.”

“What street?”

Matt tells him, and Frank lets out a low whistle. That’s not close by, how the fuck did he hear something like that from here?

“Jesus Christ,” he says. Then, as Matt starts for the door, “You’re going to check it out?”

“I have to. Can’t risk missing whatever this is. There’s no time to waste.” Matt pauses at the table. He starts feeling around and it takes Frank a second to realise he’s looking for his glasses. They’re right at the edge of the table; he grabs them and hands them to Matt and when their hands touch the other man freezes.

“Thanks,” Matt says, a bit uncertainly. He jams the glasses on his face and chews at his lip. There’s something very awkward in the way he’s holding himself, something a bit closed off.

And honestly? Frank should want no fucking part of this; he’s out of messing around in the various criminal underworlds of Hell’s Kitchen. He’s not sure what it is, maybe some sort of morbid curiosity, that makes him step towards Matt as he makes for the door.

“You don’t have your suit,” he says, a bit stupidly.

“My real superpower is the ability to make a mask out of anything,” Matt informs him. “Karen’s
gotta have a scarf around here, right? Maybe a teatowel?"

For a second Frank thinks he’s being fucked with. When he realises he isn’t, he rolls his eyes so hard they nearly roll right out of his God damn head.

“Jesus Christ. Jesus fucking Christ, you’re not leaving this apartment with a fucking tea towel around your head - what the fuck, Red. I know you’re blind but do you not care about how stupid that looks?”

“My flat’s in the opposite direction. It’ll take too long to walk back from here, even if I go by the roofs-”

“For fuck’s sake. I’ll drive you.” He heads for the door, muttering, “A God damn tea towel, are you fucking kidding me.”

“Frank.”

When he turns, Matt looks - uncomfortable, arms hanging by his sides like he doesn’t know what to do with them.

“What?” Frank demands. He doesn’t know why he feels almost nervous, suddenly. It’s not like he’s actively helping out Daredevil, it’s not like he’s sliding back towards getting involved in anything. He’s just driving Matt Murdock to his apartment so he can get changed. If you ignore the weird vigilante-costume part, that’s a relatively normal thing that people do for each other.

But Matt chews his lip and suddenly says, a bit defensively, “You don’t have to help me. It’s fine.”

“I’m not helping you, I’m helping the poor motherfuckers who actually have to see what your idiot ass looks like. I’m doing the world a favour here.”

“Just because last night we-”

“What happened last night?” Frank snaps, his blood suddenly running cold.

He’d thought they just got really fucking pissed and then fell asleep. Like if there was anyone he trusted himself to get blackout drunk around without having to worry something awkward would occur, it was Karen and stick-up-the-ass Choir Boy here. What the hell could’ve even happened?

The worst case scenarios flash through his mind. Did he make a move on Karen? Also, why is that the first thing that pops into his head? Did he and Matt get into a fight or did he start rambling about Billy or did-

Matt’s staring at him. Or at least, staring in his direction, head tilted and lips twisted into a little frown.

“You don’t remember,” he says.

“Obviously,” Frank snaps. He steps closer. “What happened, Murdock?”

Matt hesitates, and it’s enough to make Frank’s heart jolt. Whatever it is, Matt doesn’t want to talk about it, which isn’t a good sign.

“The last time I got this hammered with someone,” Frank adds, slowly, “He started telling me what a big dick he had.”
“What.”

“Like a moose, he called it. Then he whipped it out to show me. What, you do something like that?”

Matt’s mouth has dropped open. After a moment of very stunned silence, he holds up a hand and shakes his head.

“I am exiting this conversation,” he declares, and starts to push past Frank.

Whoops. Should not have brought up David’s dick. He’s too Catholic.

Still - Frank grabs his arm, tugs him to a halt.

“Seriously, though, Red,” he says, “What happened? Look, if I was an asshole to Karen or, or to you-”

“Frank.” Matt’s hand is on his suddenly and Frank isn’t sure if it’s meant to be reassuring or if he’s trying to pluck him off. “No, it - it wasn’t anything like that. We just got really personal, is all. Nothing happened, just - we all said some shit. It’s no big deal. I shouldn’t have brought it up, I just - I assumed you were just trying to help because you felt sorry for me. I don’t need anyone’s pity. And I don’t want you getting dragged back into this shit when I know you’re trying to leave it behind.”

Frank stares at him. He doesn’t need superpowers to tell that Matt’s not lying. No one could fake that sort of martyred sincerity.

Personal? If anything, that’s more horrifying than the prospect of one of them whipping out their junk. What the hell did I say to them? And what did they say to me?

Still - Matt’s heading for the door again, and Frank shakes himself.

“Well, it ain’t pity,” he grunts, “So I’m giving you that ride. Don’t make it weird by arguing.”

“What about Karen?” Matt asks.

“It’s a couple hours ‘til dawn. You usually wrap your vigilante shit up at night, right? We’ll be back before she wakes up. Pi,” he adds, turning - the dog’s watching the two of them, tail thumping where he’s sitting on the floor. “Stay.”

Pi whines, but after a moment hops back up onto the couch. Frank lets himself out of the flat, feels in his pocket for his car keys. His head’s still throbbing and he’s vividly aware that it’s fuck-o’clock in the morning and that this will probably end badly, but for some reason he can’t stop himself. Feels like he’s on a bike racing down a very steep hill, no fucking point hitting the brakes now.

Matt’s still hesitant, and Frank turns to look back at him.

“Well?” he barks, “You fucking coming or what?”

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There’s something very surreal about driving through the nearly-empty streets of Hell’s Kitchen this late at night - or this early in the morning, depending on how you look at it - with Matt Murdock in the passenger seat next to him, head leaning against the window. The shadowed alleyways, the red
wash of light from bars and casinos, the occasional babbling gather of nighttime revellers, all of them slip past like ghosts.

Frank drums his fingers against the steering wheel and tries to remember.

He remembers a feeling in his chest like a clenched fist and the burn of straight vodka down his throat. He was sprawled on the couch and Matt-

(Matt’s beside him, and now and then their knees bump together, and it would be awkward if they hadn’t both had a good few drinks already.

Karen’s sitting on the floor - yes, that part is clear as day. She’s sitting on a cushion on the floor because Pi’s next to her, head resting in her lap, and she’s scratching him behind the ears and gazing down at him and Frank can’t help but think she looks so fucking adorable like that, he’s probably staring way too hard at her but she’s not looking at him so it’s fine, it’s not like Matt’s gonna notice-

And who’s speaking? They’re all drunk by that point, all their tongues getting way too fucking loose. Someone’s talking and everyone else is listening in an intense silence. And they all feel very close - close like you get on a battlefield, like you’re clutching your mates’ hands sticky with blood, close like you can only get during war.

It’s Karen.

Karen’s talking, she’s telling them about her father - yes, he remembers. Her father.

“The way he looked at me - like he was looking right fucking through me. Like I didn’t even exist to him anymore. And somehow - somehow it was worse than if he’d just been angry. Angry I could’ve dealt with, because I was angry. I hated myself. But his eyes, they were just - dead. And I think that’s when I knew that we would never get past this. That something shattered in that crash, something more was killed than just Kevin. And even now when he speaks to me, it’s just - empty. Like I’m a stranger to him. Less than a stranger, a ghost.”

She’s crying.

She’s crying and Frank wants to get up and go to her, but he can’t. He’s sitting there frozen, feeling her pain in his own chest, an aching throb. But the couch shifts next to him, and Matt’s rising - going to the floor and kneeling next to her and folding his arms around her, and Karen rests her head in the crook of his neck, and he watches the two of them, fitting together like puzzle pieces, and something curls in his gut, something not quite like jealousy. Something more like longing-

“Frank! We’re here.”

Frank jolts. He pulls up by the side of the road and looks up and realises they’re outside Murdock’s apartment. He swallows hard, mouth suddenly very dry.

So we did get pretty personal last night. But okay, so Karen told us why she hates her Dad. That can’t be all that happened.

What the fuck did I say to them?

“Alright?” Matt asks, and Frank glances at him.

“Fine,” he snaps, a bit flustered - wondering what sort of things Matt can hear or sense that Frank would really rather hide. He’s not sure how he feels - anxious? Maybe a little. Scared - never. Just…
“Just real fucking hungover. How are you fine?”

“Paced myself and drank a lot of water,” Matt informs him.

“Wait, I actually remember that,” Frank says, “You spent half the night going to the bathroom.”

“Glad the important details are returning to you,” Matt says dryly. He unbuckles his seatbelt and starts to get out. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Wait.”

The word’s out of Frank’s mouth before he even really realizes what he’s doing. Matt hesitates, turning back towards him, and Frank takes a moment to gather himself.

Thing is.

Thing is, he keeps thinking about the news he’s seen lately. The assholes roaming the streets without a care how many civilians get caught in the crossfire. He thinks of what happened to his family, thinks of husbands losing wives, mothers losing children. Thinks of how someone needs to stop it.

And Matt will go out tonight. Crack a few skulls together. Bring these people down, best as he can. And probably without taking a life too, so he can still hold onto his soul. It makes something surge in his veins, makes his fingers twitch, wanting to grab a gun or a knife.

He wants to be out there.

There’s no point denying it. He wishes he could put a bullet in those fuckers, stop them hurting anyone else. And thing is, Matt ain’t ever gonna stop. He can see it in the other man’s face - Daredevil is part of him. He’ll never sit idly by as long as there’s crime in this city, will always be trying to do his part. It’s in his blood and bones.

And Frank…

His identity is full of bullet-holes.

He is no longer the Punisher. No longer a soldier.

No longer a father.

And it’s all left him more lost than he likes to admit, and the thought of this - of heading down there tonight, of beating some gang member senseless - it’s more appealing than he wants to admit. Which is fucking terrifying because no, leave all this behind.

You don’t need it anymore-

You’re out now, you fought your way out and it’s time to come home.

Except home doesn’t exist anymore, home has very little meaning. This, what Matt’s doing - that means something.

“I’ll drive you there,” he grunts, “It’ll be faster.”

“Frank.” Matt sounds very pained and okay, maybe Frank is being super fucking unsubtle about this, but he really doesn’t care.
“Don’t,” he says, holding up a hand. “I don’t need your pity either, Red. And I don’t need you up in
my business. I’m not getting involved. I’m just taking you there. I know what I’m doing.”

“Do you?” Matt asks, but Frank lets out an annoyed growl.

“You’re wasting time. Go put your stupid mask on.”

Matt bites his lip, but he gets out of the car and heads up to his apartment. Frank watches him leave. His heart’s hammering and he thinks of the gun in the glovebox and the other one in the trunk.

This is probably a very, very bad idea. He’s hungover and messed up from yesterday and is he really
about to throw away all his progress just because he’s having an identity crisis?

_You’re just giving him a lift, just helping out in your own little way. Don’t go any deeper than that. You
don’t gotta kill anyone. In fact, you shouldn’t._

He thinks of the look on Curtis’ face if he ever finds out about this. Thinks of how disappointed
Sarah and David will be. Thinks of Leo and Zach.

_No, you won’t kill anyone tonight._

Still. It’s left him rattled, left him with a funny, looming sort of dread. But he can’t back out now. He feels almost hypnotised, like he’s watching his body under someone else’s control.

Part of him expects Matt to ditch him and head out via the roofs instead. But he doesn’t - he comes
back to the car soon after, dressed in black now, and tugs a mask onto his face as he slides into the
passenger seat. Maybe they’ll both regret this. Or maybe he can sense that Frank _needs this._

In the corner of his eye, he sees Matt wrapping his hands with tight, practiced motions, his lips
downturned in a little frown, probably still listening out for whatever shit-storm they’re hurtling
towards.

Frank’s had three of these espresso lollies that he found in his glovebox and his head’s feeling a bit clearer. He stares at the side of Matt’s face, and wracks his brains-

_And remembers-

(They’re sitting on the couch and Karen’s on Frank’s other side now. She’s leaning right up against
him, and his arm is around her shoulders, pressed up all close and warm like.

_He can’t bring himself to push away. Finds he doesn’t want to._

_They’re both leaning forward to look at Matt. He’s perched on the edge of the couch, leaning
forward with his hands wrapped around his glass. Staring sightlessly into it and his voice is so low
they gotta lean in to hear it and he’s telling them all sorts of fucked up stuff about his life._

_He’s drunk._

_He’s pretending not to be but Frank knows he wouldn’t ever let them hear his voice shake like that
otherwise. Because it is shaking, hard, and his hands are shaking around the glass and he’s
describing finding his Dad’s dead body and it’s making Frank’s heart pound rabbit-fast, bringing
back too many memories of his own past horrors.

It’s funny, the way Matt describes things. It’s all in sounds and smells and sensations. Like the cold road under his knees, cold flesh under his fingers.

“People always tell me,” he says, “Always tell me he did it for me. Like it’s something fucking heartwarming. Just wanted to make his little boy proud. But it’s not. I... I would rather he have thrown a hundred fights just to still have him here with me.”

“Matt...” Karen whispers, and her hand’s gripping Frank’s arm. Matt doesn’t look up, but his voice is breaking with every word.

“Makes me think sometimes if I hadn’t... if I hadn’t made it seem like it was shameful to keep losing... maybe he wouldn’t have done it."

“It wasn’t your fault, Matt.”

“Didn’t matter if he kept going down. As long as he got back up after.” He reaches up, swipes at his face, and Frank’s sitting there frozen. After a second he reaches out, clumsily, gets a fumbling grip on Matt’s shoulder and squeezes-)

“Pull up here,” Matt says abruptly.

Frank swings the car to the side of the road. They’re in a quiet side lane in an industrial area down by the harbour. A number of abandoned warehouses stand by the roadside. From here Frank can’t see anything, just a quiet, dark lot behind an old chain-link fence. Matt winds down the window and listens intently.

Frank stares at him - the tight line of his clenched jaw, his whole body a live wire, coiled in concentration, ready to burst into action at a moment’s notice. Remembers when he used to be like that. Misses it suddenly, the adrenaline of a fight, like a drug he thought he’d stopped needing.

God, he thinks with a flash of sudden horror, he was falling the fuck apart last night-

Because he remembers, now. After that first story Matt just kept fucking going-

(“They nearly killed Stick once before, you know.”

Frank doesn’t know at what point they all sat on the floor, but for some reason they’re here, sitting cross-legged like primary school children. Pi’s head’s in his lap, a warm, reassuring weight-

And they’re all so drunk now, so drunk none of them care that they’re all way too close, shoulder-to-shoulder pressed up against each other. So drunk they don’t care that they’re close to tears.

“The Hand got him. I had to save him ’cause Elektra wanted to kill him - not for them, for her own reasons. I think part of me didn’t want to believe she’d ever go through with it. Stick figured me for the loyal one. He cared about both of us, in his own fucked up way. Always told myself I hated him, but I don’t think part of me ever did. Just always wanted to make him proud. Show him I was worth all the effort. At the end, it all happened so fast. Barely had time to grieve for him. But there was still Elektra and I-”

Here’s where he breaks. He darts a look at Karen, an almost guilty sort of look - she reaches towards him, her own eyes swimming with tears, but she’s the most hammered of all of them and Frank doesn’t know how much is sinking in and how much of her is just upset to see Matt upset.
“-it didn’t matter anyway.” And his voice is shaking hard now, like the words he’s giving voice to are too heavy to name. “Even before I went in, I knew I wasn’t getting out of Midland.”

“Shit,” Matt mutters, and Frank turns to him.

“What?”

It comes out sort of - numbly. That’s really all he can feel because it’s… weird, seeing Matt now. Holding together on the surface, but last night…

Frank’s not sure what he was trying to admit to last night. Because as hard as he tries to remember what else Matt said or did that evening, all he’s coming up with is that dead-eyed look on his face and how his whole body seemed to fold in on itself-

And yeah, maybe he’d been onto something before, because Frank had pitied him. He hadn’t known much about Daredevil’s personal life before all this, hadn’t wanted to, but it was clear that this was someone who had lost a hell of a lot, and whatever freaky ass ninja crisis Frank had waded into the end of last time had pushed him to his breaking point. And Wilson Fisk probably pushed him past it, if Frank’s understanding is anything to go by.

He doesn’t know what he’s meant to do with this.

“Thought I was just dealing with one of the gangs,” Matt explains. “But there’s a second group here. They’re trying to make a deal, but tensions are high.”

“How many men?”

“Altogether… twenty-five, thirty maybe.”

“You’re not fucking going in there alone,” Frank snaps. Matt’s head twists to look at him; the black cloth over his eyes is disconcerting, somehow even more than the devil mask was.

“I’ve faced worse odds,” he starts. Frank reaches out and slaps his chest; Matt hisses, rearing back a bit.

“Yeah, wearing a bulletproof fucking suit. What the fuck is that, cotton? You think that’s gonna stop a knife, let alone a bullet?”

“What the hell do you expect me to do? Leave them? I’m gonna have to take them out eventually.”

“Let them take each other out. Sounds like they’re about to. At least do this smart.” He’s unclipping his seatbelt, reaching for the gun in the glovebox. “We sneak up, see what they’re doing, how things play out. Didn’t you say you needed intel anyway? Their boss here or are these just grunts?”

“Grunts,” Matt admits.

“Great. So we do some recon. See what we’re actually up against.”

“We?” Matt points out, and Frank freezes.

Shit. Stay out of this, Castle. Don’t get dragged into the middle of a gang war. Don’t throw it all away like that.

But he wants to. God, he wants to.
Karen will kill me if I let you throw yourself into danger alone,” he points out.

Karen will kill me if she thinks I made you break your no-more-Punishing rule.”

“I’m not fucking “punishing” anyone,” Frank snaps, and gets out of the car just to escape the argument. Matt follows him out, crowds him up against the side of the vehicle, grabs his wrist.

“Then what’s with the gun?” he demands.

Frank shoves him hard in the chest with his free hand.

“Get the fuck off me. I won’t kill anyone, you happy now?” A gunshot rings out in the lot and they both whirl around. “Fuck, we wasted too much time- let’s see what’s happening.”

Matt’s already turning. He scrambles his way up the chain link fence and drops nimbly down on the other side. Frank clambers after him.

Matt seems to know where he’s going. He veers towards one of the warehouses, vaults his way up a dumpster, a pile of crates, a fire escape and a drain pipe before hauling himself up onto the roof. Frank follows him a little less gracefully, cursing under his breath. Construction work’s kept him fit enough and he boxes when he gets the chance, but it’s been a while since he had to do this sort of gymnastics shit.

They cross the roof of one of the warehouses, and peer into an old parking lot below. It’s so dark Frank can barely see a thing, the only light coming from the beams of the cars’ headlamps. He crouches next to Matt and squints down into the shadows.

It looks like two gangs are facing off against each other. One group is clearly outnumbered and there seems to have been some sort of struggle. Whatever it is, it’s over now. The leaders of the two gangs are having a heated discussion - standing in the centre of the group. One of them, a big, burly man with a bushy ginger beard, has a fistful of the other’s leather jacket. From here, Frank can’t hear what they’re saying, but from Matt’s tilted head and how intently he’s concentrating, he figures he can.

“That the guy you’re looking for?” Frank grunts. “The big boss?”

“No,” Matt whispers back, “He’s maybe the third in command, if that. Their big players haven’t come out of hiding.” There’s a frustrated note in his voice. “That’s what I need to find out. Especially since it sounds like they’re joining forces. Or rather, one group’s bullying the other into working for them.”

“Consolidating power.”

“More like absorbing all the other groups. Hey,” Matt adds, shifting, “Do me a favour.”

“What?”

“Left of the group. Far left. There should be two guys. One of them’s whispering in the other’s ear. Describe them to me.”

“I can barely see,” Frank grumbles, “It’s so dark.”

“Welcome to my life,” Matt mutters, and Frank scoffs out a surprised almost-laugh. Still - he squints. It’s hard; the two guys are standing right in front of one of the car headlights and they’re so backlit that they’re barely more than silhouettes. His eyes hurt from staring into the light.
“One’s part of the gang, if his jacket’s anything to go by. Big guy, shaved head, ratty looking beard. He’s holding some other guy - smaller, scrappy, middle aged, glasses.” He glances at Matt, not quite sure if that’s the sort of thing he’s after. Frank’s always been a man of few words, so he probably wasn’t the best person to ask if Murdock wants a fucking novel about what these guys look like.

Matt just hums.

“Thanks.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

Matt opens his mouth - then freezes, head whipping around. Frank is suddenly, absurdly reminded of Pi when he catches the scent of a raccoon outside, or hears someone approaching the door. His hand goes to his gun, instinctively.

“Well shit,” Matt whispers, “This’ll be interesting.”

“What?” Frank snaps, a bit sick of being left out of the loop.

“Someone’s sold them out. Police are just around the corner, about to raid them.” His fingers drum agitatedly against the tin roof under them. Frank can practically hear the cogs whirring around in his head.

“You got a plan, Red? How you wanna play this?”

“I…”

Matt trails off. He’d been… not calm before, not really, but focused. But suddenly he seems unsettled.

“I have a plan,” he says slowly. He starts to rise and Frank grabs his arm.

“Care to fill me in?”

Matt tries to shake him off, absently, but Frank yanks his wrist so hard that he drops back to the roof next to him.

“Ow! Jesus, Frank-”

“Let the cops take care of it,” Frank hisses, “That’s their fucking job, right?”

Look at him. Karen would be proud. Matt shakes him off irritably, but it’s too late now.

Yelling. Gunshots. The blare of sirens. They peer over the edge of the roof and see a swarm of uniforms descend on the gang. The few of them that have time to react barely get a shot off before they’re being taken down. Matt’s so tense he’s nearly shaking.

“The guy I asked you about before,” he hisses.

“Thought you could see this stuff. Sense this stuff - whatever.”

“It’s chaos down there. Hard to tell people apart from a distance when I barely know them. The little one with glasses, you said - he alive? Is he the one the cop just slammed against the car?”
It takes Frank a second to work it out. Matt’s right, it is chaos down there. But after a second, he picks out the guy - he seems to have surrendered easily and is now bent over the hood of the car, hands cuffed behind his back.

“Yeah. He’s alive. Just got arrested.”

“Good,” Matt says. He rises again and this time Frank lets him. He gets up too - Matt’s paced to the edge of the roof. He’s frowning, seems worked up.

“This whole thing good or bad for your plan?” Frank asks carefully.

“Good,” Matt replies. “I have a solid plan. Really solid, actually.”

“So why you pulling that face like you just got a mouthful of piss?”

For a second he thinks Matt’s gonna ignore him. Then he hesitates, turns towards Frank a little, and admits - the words coming out in a shaky, vulnerable rush - “Because Foggy is really, really not gonna be happy about it.”

Frank stares at him.

“Wait, what?”

“That guy didn’t want to be there,” Matt blurts out. “He was being threatened. Something about a girl. Clearly a civilian being pressured into working for the gang. So he’s our key in. And now he’s been arrested, which works out pretty perfectly because he’ll need a lawyer. Except,” and his fists clench, shoulders hunch, “That means dragging Nelson, Murdock and Page back into all my Daredevil shit. Which is something I’ve been trying not to do.”

“cause Nelson’s not a fan,” Frank grunts.

“Yeah.” Matt swallows, hard. “I’ve been… trying… trying to do this the right way, to balance everything - I just - it can’t all fall apart again-”

“Murdock.” He’s breathing too fast, he’s on the verge of freaking out, and it - scares Frank, almost, seeing him like this. Unsettles him. Last time he ran into the Devil, it hadn’t seemed anything could rattle him.

“-and I don’t want to get them involved. I can’t put them in danger, but I don’t see any other way-”

“Let the police handle it.” He’s clenching his own fists, if only to stop himself from grabbing Matt by the shoulders and shaking him. “They arrested the guy. Hell, they’re here now dealing with it! Look, there’s some pretty competent agents out there. Trust me, I met a hell of a-”

“Can’t trust the police.” There’s a frantic, panicked note in his voice now. “If you’d been in Hell’s Kitchen when Fisk was out you’d know. Police can be bought. And a gang with as much reach as this one is sure to have a few of them in their pocket. That sort of corruption, it spreads fast, and next thing you know…” He throws his hands up. “Yeah, there’s good men out there. I’ve met them too. You know what happens? They wind up dead. Just like everyone else. I can’t, Frank - I can’t trust anyone else, I have to do it myself, and if I don’t no one else will-”

Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, Red. There is just - so fucking much to unpack there, from the trust issues to the weird self-importance to the weight of the world on his shoulders. But before he has the chance to even gather his thoughts, Matt’s head snaps around again.
“Two of them are getting away,” he says, and next thing Frank knows he’s running to the edge of the roof and leaping off.

“The fuck, Matt,” he snaps, and when the shock wears off he staggers after him. It takes him a second to even realise where Matt went. It’s so fucking dark around the warehouse that he’s forced to fumble his phone from his pocket and use the flash as a torch to even figure out the path that Matt used to parkour down off the roof. Then shove it back in his pocket, lower himself over the edge and drop down, because not all of them have super-balance and the last thing he wants to do tonight is break an ankle.

“Idiot,” he mutters under his breath, as he jogs off in what he hopes is the direction Matt went, “Fucking idiot.”

The path they take winds around the parking lot, down a narrow path between two other warehouses and through another lot that’s become a dumping ground for broken machinery. He hears yells, thuds, the clatter of boots on metal - and veers around a pile of junk to see Matt in the thick of it with the two guys.

He skids to a halt and pauses a beat, watching them. Matt seems to have it under control - as Frank watches, he yanks one of them down, lifting a knee to drive it into the man’s gut before ducking a swipe from the other guy. He swings a leg around, kicking the man in the stomach before catching the first one in the face with a left hook that sends him to the ground. Smooth, fluid motions, seeming to react to his opponents’ movements a second before they even make them.

It’s admiration, Frank tells himself, that makes a sudden heat spread through his gut. Been a while since he’s seen a good fight. Matt’s not holding back; they’re sharp, brutal moments that make Frank’s blood surge in his veins, make his own fists ache.

Matt must hear footsteps, because his head whips around a second before a bunch of men run up from the other side of the lot. Reinforcements, or gang members who hung back - Frank’s running forward, lifting his gun before he even has a chance to think about it.

“Get down!” he yells.

There’s no way Matt doesn’t hear him. His head turns towards Frank - and then he just fucking stands there, still pummelling the one guy’s face into oblivion before turning as though he’s gonna launch himself at the half-dozen men with guns.

_Jesus fuck-_ 

_Are you fucking serious-_ 

“I said get down!” Frank screams. As they open fire his mind goes into overdrive. It’s a split-second in which he has to make a decision. Fire back, or-

Or-

He seizes Matt’s arm, yanks him back towards him. Caught off balance, Matt topples onto him; they both go down, falling back behind a sheet of metal junk. Bullets ring out; they tear into the man left standing where Matt was, and he falls with a scream.

Frank’s on the ground, the wind knocked out of him. Matt’s weight’s on top of him, elbow digging into his stomach, and the panic and adrenaline is racing through him-

And with gunfire ringing in his ears and his mouth and nose filled with dust and blood, he feels
instinct take over. Feels a sudden calm rush over him, a sense of everything falling back into place. Here he is, on the battlefield. Here he is, in a world he can understand. Where he belongs.

Matt starts to sit up and Frank snaps back to attention. They’re in a precarious position here. He grabs Matt’s arm, yanks him close. Their faces are barely an inch apart; he can feel Matt’s breath against his lips. Stares at the contours of the black cloth covering his eyes.

“I said to fucking get down,” he hisses. “What, you got a deathwish?”

“Maybe,” Matt snaps back - then freezes, like he hadn’t meant to say it.

Frank stares at him. Processing. Ain’t even sure where to start with all this. Thinks with a flash of last night, of all of them drunk and shaking, of those weird dark admissions, the things they’re not meant to actually say out loud.

Thinks of where they are now. They’re outnumbered and those guys have guns and stupid Red’s not wearing his suit, has nothing but his bare fucking fists and if he steps out there now - and he’s gonna step out there in about two seconds, Frank can feel it in his gut - he’s gonna get torn to shreds and apparently that’s something he’s cool with.

It doesn’t take long to make his decision.

He gets to his feet. Matt’s halfway up too but before he can so much as move, Frank grabs his shoulder and hauls him back, practically throwing him to the ground again. Pauses for a second, shoulder against the cover of the metal sheet, and takes a deep breath.

Then, with a soldier’s focus, he leans out and fires.

He’s aiming to kill. Of course he is - it’s instinct. No half measures here. You don’t put them down, they just get back up again. The pull of the trigger, the jolt that thrums up his arm, feels like a missing piece falling back into place. He watches the man’s head snap back, watches the spray of blood from the neat bullet-hole in his forehead-

And like a wave crashing against the shoreline, he remembers, in a sudden consuming rush-

(He’s standing, pacing around the room, bottle hanging from his fingertips, drunk as all fuck.

On the couch Matt and Karen are sitting, his arm around her almost protectively. Her mouth is open, eyes wide with sheer horror. Matt’s staring blankly at the opposite wall, but his lips are a grim slash cut across his face.

And Frank-

Frank, his voice thick, is describing in extraordinarily vivid detail the murdered bodies of his family. He remembers feeling oddly detached as he talks about his daughter’s ruined face. About skull-shards shattered like broken glass. About Maria’s flat, empty eyes.

“After that,” he remembers saying, “After that, I didn’t give a shit. Sometimes still feels like that. Like I don’t feel anything at all. World’s just nothing but grey. Only colour you get’s when you kill something. That’s why I did it. All of it. To fucking feel something. Maybe that makes me a monster. Maybe it ain’t right, maybe it’s no way to heal. But after you’ve seen your baby girl’s head blown to pieces right in front of you.”

He chokes, throat closing up. On the couch Karen makes a high, distressed noise, and he sees Matt’s arms tighten around her.
“You ain’t ever gonna be whole again, not after that, so no point pretending.”

And now-

His eyes are hard and cold, and his heart is steady as he fires again - and again, and again. One batch, two batch-

(“Not when every time I close my eyes I see that shit replay in the back of my head, over and over and over-”)

Bang! Bang!

Watches them fall one after another. Doesn’t think of David, or Sarah, or Leo and Zach. Doesn’t think about Billy and how he let him go. Doesn’t think about Curtis.

Just lets himself relish the satisfaction as each of them drops like a stone, as their blood spills dark across the concrete-

(“You know the worst part?” he demands, and turns towards them, and as drunk as he is, he remembers thinking how, of everyone, these two will understand. With all their own broken pieces, everything they’ve done - they’ll understand in a way none of the others can.

“You’d think I’d be glad to be out. To have something to live for again. But sometimes - sometimes I miss it. Miss the way it made me feel to be the Punisher. Worst part is, sometimes I almost resent everyone trying to save me. I know they mean well. Know it’s out of love. Know at the end of the day, they’re right. But I don’t want them to be.”

“Frank…” Karen whispers, and it’s almost hurt in her voice, and he turns towards her and gives a tight, bitter smile.

"Can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done for me, Karen. And I could never hate you, or any of them. It’s not all of you. It’s me. Sometimes things just get fucked up beyond repair. And sometimes people just deserve to die. Acting like I don’t believe that? It’s just acting. Just playing a part. Not really me.”

Matt shifts, and Frank glances at him. His teeth are worrying away at his bottom lip; he hasn’t chimed in, but he’s definitely listening. Definitely got some sort of thoughts about all this.

“Not really me,” he whispers again, and shakes himself. “Shit, ignore me, Karen, I’m drunk. We’re all so fucking drunk-”

The gunshots cease.

Silence.

A thick, heavy silence. No cop sirens wailing in the background, not so much as a rustle of the wind. Frank stands, gun hanging at his side, heavy and warm in his fingers. He’s breathing heavily, adrenaline rushing through his veins.

And then it hits him.

Shit. He drops the gun, clenches his fists, again and again. Shit, what have you done, what have you done-

You got one fucking chance, Castle, one chance for a new start-
“What have you done?”

He turns. Matt is standing there, shoulders heaving. He steps forward and Frank moves to meet him.

“What the hell was that before, Red?” he demands, ducking the question as easily as he’d dodge a punch.

Matt jerks a furious hand towards the bodies.

“You killed them!” he hisses, furious, “What the fuck was that, Frank? Do you have any fucking idea the shit you’ve just started-”

“What did you mean, maybe you got a deathwish-”

“Don’t you dare try and turn this around on me when you just killed half a dozen guys! What the fuck are the police gonna think when they see this mess? What’ll they do if they figure out it was you-”

“They’ll think they turned on each other. Plenty of people around want these guys dead.” He tries to ignore the way the blood’s rushing in his ears; jabs a finger dead-centre of Matt’s chest. Tries not to think about how he’s needling him to avoid having to face this, to let it hit him what he’s just thrown away here, “Your turn. The fuck was that back there?”

“I’m serious,” Matt tries, “You can’t just ignore this-”

“You tryin’ to get both of us killed-”

“You said you weren’t gonna kill anyone! What happened to ‘no more Punisher’. -”

“You wanna die, Murdock, is that it?” Frank growls, getting up in his face, “You think I ain’t seen that before, think I don’t know what it’s like to throw yourself into danger ‘cause you think it don’t matter either way? Is that right? You wanna-”

Matt grabs the front of his shirt and yanks him so close their noses nearly bump together. He’s breathing harshly through clenched teeth and when Frank reaches up and grips his wrists, he can feel him trembling.

“Yeah,” Matt barks out, his voice raw and hoarse, and Frank knows he’s hit a nerve, knows he’s snapped. “Yeah, maybe I do, Frank. What’s your fucking point?”

Frank slowly lets him go, raises his hands. Matt shoves him roughly back and turns away, shoulders shaking. He reaches up and, to Frank’s surprise, yanks his mask off. Runs his hands through his hair, over his face, again and again. Frank tenses, worried, but figures if anyone’s boutta sneak up on them, he’ll hear it coming a mile away.

“Maybe I fucking do,” Matt spits again, “God, you don’t know the half of it. Yeah, it doesn’t matter either way. Dead, alive, not like I’m actually really saving anyone. Not really. Not Elektra, not Stick, not Father Lantom or, or Ray Nadeem. I can pretend I’m a hero but that’s just it. Pretend.”

Frank stares at him, silently. The raw hurt in his voice. His own sentiment from last night, half-forgotten, thrown back in his face.

“I can’t sleep,” Matt admits, shakily, “And I feel like I’m drowning all the time, God, none of you know-” He pulls at his own hair and Frank starts forward, alarmed, thinking he’ll hurt himself -
“Feels like I’m going crazy, being able to - to hear every siren, every scream in the city. The… the sort of depravity that goes on out there, it’s endless. What can one man do? And when I do nothing, the guilt is overwhelming. And when I do go out, it’s never enough. There’s always something else. Something I wasn’t fast enough, smart enough, strong enough to stop. Fisk was just the start of it.”

“Murdock,” Frank starts, quietly - not sure what he’ll say, where he’s going with this-

Matt turns towards him then - mask clutched in his hands, a desperate look in his face. There’s blood running down the side of his head. His eyes are huge and dark and something about their flat, empty stare makes Frank’s stomach drop - but everything about his face is torn, vulnerable. A sort of animal desperation in it.

“So what am I gonna do, Castle?” It’s almost a plea. “Stop? Keep going? Start killing like you do? The only time - the only fucking time in the last few years I’ve ever felt sure of myself was… was at the bottom of that building, with Elektra, and knowing we’d stopped the Hand, and knowing she wouldn’t be alone. For once I felt at peace with my decision. Thought the war was finally over - that’s what you called it, right?”

Frank feels sick. He doesn’t know what to say.

Matt barks out a harsh laugh.

“But then I woke up. Couldn’t even have that. That one chance to escape this shit ripped away from me. And I was furious. And the real fucked up part is, sometimes I still wish it’d all just ended there. That what you want to hear? So no, I wasn’t trying to get killed back there. But yeah, maybe I wasn’t trying very hard to stop it, either.” A miserable shrug. “Can you blame me?”

And the worst part is-

The worst part is, Frank can’t. Can’t, ‘cause he knows that same feeling himself, all too well. Knows what it is to dread waking up in the morning, to feel like even just to go on breathing is a weight he doesn’t think he can carry any more.

But Matt has Karen and Foggy. He’s not alone, not like Frank was-

But, he thinks with a horrified jolt, you’re not alone now. You got friends like he does now, friends close enough to call family, a second chance-

And you still gone and killed these men. You still can’t stop yourself throwing away the one chance you have to move forward.

His heart’s beating faster now, faster-

Matt steps towards him. His eyes are red, his expression wrecked.

“But you know what, Frank?” he says. “I’m still gonna go ahead with my plan even though I know it’s gonna tear me and Foggy apart. Even though I know it’s gonna kill me to do it. Because I can’t stop doing this. Daredevil’s part of me, maybe one of the only things I’ve got left. But sometimes I wonder if it’s all worth it. That’s why,” and he flings a hand out towards the men, “You can’t do shit like that anymore. You got out. And you know what? I envy you, because I didn’t. I can’t. Don’t throw that away. Don’t. You have this chance. You need to take it.”

Frank’s heart’s nearly pounding out of his chest. He thinks suddenly that Matt must be able to sense it - that frantic hammering against his rib cage, the way it feels like his lungs have squeezed out every
last drop of air and he can’t seem to suck in any more.

*I fucked up,* he’s thinking, with a rising sort of panic, *I fucked up, I fucked up, I fucked up-*

And everything he’d repeated as a mantra before floods back in, everything he’d been clinging to—

*Let go-*

*Don’t bring the war home with you-*

What terrifies him the most is how easy it was to throw it all away. And what scares him even more is that he doesn’t regret doing it, not for himself, not for his own soul. He only regrets it for Curtis and how disappointed he’ll be. He regrets it for the potential it has to fuck things up for the Liebermans if this all goes sideways.

*This was a bad idea.*

*Oh, you fucking think? You knew that from the second you got in that car with him, hell, you practically dragged Murdock along for this fucked up ride. Wake the hell up, Frank.*

He needs to get out of here. He’s freaking out, he realises that distantly. Sure, he’s standing there, not giving it away, but one look at Matt and the soft, almost sympathetic twist of his mouth and he knows the other man must be able to somehow sense the way that inside everything is falling the fuck apart. The way his mind is writhing around as he tries to wrap his head around all this. He lifts a hand and watches the tremors run through it and thinks, dispassionately, *get to the car, you’re like fifteen seconds from having a fucking panic attack-*

*It’s five fucking am and you’re hungover. Get home. Just get the hell away from all this.*

Suddenly he can’t stand to be here. Not with the blood and the bodies, not with Matt and all his own issues, holding up a mirror to how fucked up both of them are.

*“Don’t tell me what I fucking need,”* he says, but his voice is shaking hard. *“This was a bad idea. I’m out.”*

He picks up the gun and shoves it back in his belt.

*“Castle!”* Matt starts to call after him, but Frank’s already turning to run.

The sun’s rising. He passes three police cars on the way home, their sirens wailing. His hands are shaking so hard that his wedding ring rattles against the steering wheel. He hasn’t felt this bad in a long, long time.

*It was last night,* he keeps telling himself, *shouldn’t ever have gone over there-*

*Shouldn’t have gotten so drunk-*
And maybe it wasn’t even just him but a combination of the date, of Father’s Day ripping the wound open again, and Karen and Matt telling him their stories. Of realising how much brute pain there is in this city, making him think why the fuck should any of us try to be good, we just end up broken anyway.

Still.

*You got out,* Matt’s voice keeps ringing in his head. Heavy and bitter. Jealous, he’d said. *You got out.* *You got out.* *You got out.*

And before. *Makes it easy to tell when people are lying to me.*

He doesn’t know what’s true any more.

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So here’s how the rest of Frank’s morning goes.

He arrives back at his flat. The sun’s casting a weak, vapid light over the city and he heads up to his apartment and kicks his boots off. He collapses to his knees in the middle of the carpet - avoids the broken glass that he threw across the room yesterday afternoon, before he went to Karen’s place - and yanks open the top three buttons of his shirt because it feels like he can’t breathe, and has a big ol’ fucking panic attack for about twenty minutes. Pretty fucking standard. Brings him right back to those early days after he got back from the war, and again after his family were killed, and again after he took down the people who did it. Ain’t that just how it goes.

When he finally stops feeling like his chest’s being crushed in a vice and his throat’s closing up, that’s when the guilt hits. With the guilt comes the anger.

He punches the wall three times and feels a knuckle fracture.

He pours a shot of vodka, thinks better of it, and then downs so much black coffee that he can tell himself his hands are shaking and his heart pounding for an entirely different reason.

Curtis calls him, and he throws his phone across the room and ends up shattering the screen.

It’s been two hours, two hours of trying to tell himself to pull it together, to figure out exactly how he wants to move forward after last night, when he’s like, *wait.*

*Where the fuck is my dog?*

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Chapter End Notes

I wanted to have two characters per chapter but they got too long <3
6. IN WHICH MATT’S TOO STRESSED TO BE BLESSED

Step one of even beginning to cope with everything that happened last night involves Matt making his way back to his apartment, getting dressed, and then standing on the roof and freaking the hell out for about fifteen minutes.

Said freak out involves kicking over a deck chair, throwing a stream of curses at the sky, and then biting down on his arm so he can scream as loud as he can and muffle it.

In the span of about two hours Frank Castle has managed to throw his entire world so wildly off balance that he kinda feels like he’s now clinging to an asteroid hurtling towards earth, destined for a fiery and apocalyptic impact.

Okay, he thinks, okay, let’s unpack this.

There’s the issue of last night, and how drunk they got, and Matt’s hoping to Christ that he’s the only one who remembers it. Karen was so drunk he’s sure that she won’t. Frank said he didn’t, and he wasn’t lying.

‘cause thing is.

Thing is, like ninety percent of him wants Karen and Foggy to never, never find out about the reason he stayed down there under Midland, and he sure as fuck never wants them to know about the night he begged a stranger to put him out of his misery like he was just some old, miserable dog needing to be put down.

For one, it’s humiliating. Maybe it shouldn’t be, but it is; he hates to feel weak, has spent too long alone and caged off to easily let people see his vulnerabilities.

For another, he knows how hurt they’ll be. How upset and scared and probably angry and he can’t cause them any more pain, not after everything he’s put them through.

But there’s that other ten percent - a treacherous ten percent of his brain that actually wants them to find out. To not be carrying the weight of this secret alone, to let them know that hey, I’m not okay, I’m not okay at all actually.

He’s pretty sure that ten percent took over last night.

Now that it’s morning and he’s sobered up, of course, he’s deeply regretting that entire conversation. And he’s regretting even more what just happened with Frank, because holy shit, why’d you have to go and say all that out loud?

He hadn’t been thinking.

It had all just been bottled up too long. The stars aligned in the worst possible way - yesterday brought everything to the fore. Had made him so acutely aware of everyone he’d lost, and how much he missed them all, and then realising that he was gonna have to drag Foggy and Karen back into all this had made him freak out, and-
And when he turned and all those guns were pointed at him, for a second-

For a treacherous second it’d almost seemed too easy. It’d felt like Midland all over again. *All you gotta do is just stay here, just stay, with her. And no more pain. No more problems.*

And sure, it’d only lasted about two seconds, but the truth is that it fucking terrifies him to think back on it, because there’s a whole lot of him that doesn’t want to be gunned down by a meth gang. Doesn’t want to leave Foggy and Karen - and Maggie, too, now - behind. And the fact that he’d nearly just stood there and let it happen, for reasons he can barely explain, scares him more than he can say.

*Thank God Frank was there,* he thinks, and means it-

But now Frank knows, and Matt can barely remember all the shit that spilled out of his mouth back there. He probably didn’t mean half of it, he can’t remember - he’d just needed to vent, and with the adrenaline shuddering through him it’d all come out in the heat of the moment. God knows what Frank thinks about all this.

And that’s its own set of problems, because he killed six guys-

Not only that-

*You made him kill six guys. You made him break his promise, you dragged him back into all this. If you hadn’t been in trouble he wouldn’t have done it. What he did, getting out, that’s your one fucking hope that maybe one day you can leave this behind too, and you pulled him back down into the shit with you.*

*You’re a disease, Murdock.*

*You’re fucking contagious. You break everything you touch. If he turns into the Punisher again it’s pretty much your fault.*

Just another thing that makes him want to break the fuck down, crawl away into the dark and not come back. He feels so - fragile, right now, like even the weak sunlight on his skin could be enough to break him. Everything just feels like it’s building up inside. He has this strange, recurring mental image of wanting to just split out of his skin like a cicada and float away into the sky and disappear. If only!

*You need help.*

He knows this - objectively - same way he knew, way back when they were representing him in court, that Frank Castle needed help.

Problem is, he doesn’t even begin to know where to start. He misses Claire, suddenly - fiercely, acutely - but she is long gone from his life, and it wouldn’t be fair to drag her back in.

*Lord,* he thinks, with sudden frantic desperation, *please, Lord, bless us, watch over us, grant us your protection, help me see what I need to do here-*

But the prayer feels hollow, feels like nothing but empty thoughts under a flat, silent sky. He can’t find the right words to break through.

So for now - for now all he can do is stand up on the roof and try to keep drawing in one deep breath after another, until it all feels a little bit more bearable, until he can bring himself to take a step without thinking that the slightest movement will make him crumble again.
Step two is to return to Karen’s place.

It’s maybe an hour past dawn - but that’s still pretty damn early given that it’s summer, and as it’s a Sunday morning, most of the city is still pretty much asleep. He ends up climbing back through her window, not very gracefully if he’s honest, because she’s got a bunch of potted plants on her windowsill.

“Good morning,” Karen says.

She’s sitting at her kitchen counter. Matt can sense the heat of the steam rising from the fresh coffee he smells in front of her. When she shifts on the stool he can tell she’s wearing a soft dressing gown, and from the tone of her voice - calm, slightly fond - imagines her smiling.

"Hi," he replies, a bit taken off-balance. "Sorry. Something came up last night."

"I figured," she says. "Where's Frank? Using the door like a civilised human being? I figured you guys were coming back since he left Pi here."

Matt freezes. He can hear - and smell - the dog panting in the next room over, where Karen seems to have put down a bowl of leftovers.

There is, he thinks grimly, an objective dark humour to the situation. Like, no biggie, we just left in the middle of the night to stop some drug dealers. Killed six guys. Now Frank's off somewhere having an existential crisis and apparently totally forgot about his dog. It doesn't help that the remnants of last night are still scattered all around them, a frankly embarrassing number of empty bottles.

Karen steps towards him, her steady heartbeat faltering a little.

"Matt?" she prompts, and gasps as she reaches his side. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"What?" Matt asks, turning towards her. Her hand comes up and cold fingers brush against his cheek; he flinches, and she reaches down and grabs his hand, leading him towards the sink.

"You've got blood all down your face," she says, "Did you hit your head?" And then, more urgently, "Where's Frank?"

"He's fine. He went home."

"Did you two fight?" She runs the tap and then takes his glasses off, setting them on the table next to them, and starts dabbing at the side of his head with something cold and wet. He leans against the sink, staring straight ahead, thinking again of Claire.

"Sort of. It's complicated." He swallows hard, a lump rising in his throat suddenly. Hates the way his heart flutters with sickening nerves.

He has to tell her what happened, at least the gist of it. If anyone can get through to Frank, it's Karen. He's just - scared.

Scared 'cause she'll be angry. Angry that he even let Frank come out with him, that he put him in a position where he felt like he had to kill. For just a second longer he remains silent and lets himself
relish this - her gentle touch against his face, a steadying hand on his shoulder. How close and warm she is.

But he can't put it off forever. He takes a shaky breath.

"What do you remember from last night?"

Karen hesitates, lowering the washcloth. Her hand's still resting on his shoulder, and he can feel her pulse - quick, nervous.

"Honestly, nothing at all. I was drinking before you guys even got here," she says, with a shaky laugh. "I was hammered. It's just a total black hole. Why? What happened?"

"Nothing important." He swallows his relief. "You were out like a light. I woke up because I heard something going down across the city to do with those gangs I've been after. I tried to stop Frank coming with me, but he insisted."

"Shit," Karen murmurs.

"You know him better than I do," Matt offers. "But I... I think it's been hard for him. Trying to stay on the right side of things."

"He's used to being the Punisher. It's what he knows. There's safety in familiarity."

_Safety, _Matt thinks, with a twisted irony.

"Yeah. Well, I couldn't convince him to stay back. And then he ended up in the thick of it with me because there were too many guys and he didn't think I could handle it. He said he wouldn't kill anyone," he says - Karen draws her hand back, her heart pounding frantically now, and Matt swallows hard, "He wasn't lying. I think at the time he really meant it. But he had a gun, Karen, and he-"

"Shit."

"It wasn't his fault," he adds. "It was mine. I was in trouble and he wanted to get us both out of there and... look, it was a gun and he's a soldier. Of course he shot to kill."

Her hands are pressed to her mouth now. He wants to move towards her, but he can't. They sit for a moment in a grim silence; in this quiet, his bruises start to throb. He took a few hits before Frank caught up to the fight and all the running around was not very kind to a few injuries lingering from the weeks before.

"This whole thing-"

"I think yesterday-"

They break off and Matt gestures for Karen to go first.

"I think yesterday was hard on him," she whispers. "It... it was complicated. The whole process of him becoming a civilian and starting to get help."

"I can't even imagine how that happened," Matt admits, and hears Karen pull a face, though he can't figure out what sort.

"He had good people around him. That helped. People who could help it get through to him that you don't... you don't overcome trauma by just bottling it away and pretending it's over."
Matt swallows, very hard, and turns his head away.

"But yesterday - things like that, you can backslide. It's never just an uphill journey." She looks away too, wraps her arms around herself. "Trust me on that."

"I don't doubt it," Matt says quietly, and there's a heavy pause. "Maybe you can talk to him. Make him see sense. The police don't know it was him."

"I'll try," Karen says. "What were you gonna say before?"

"This whole thing with the gangs I've been tracking... it's getting more complicated. I need to stop it at the root, and soon. I... the more time goes by, the more I worry that they're just gonna keep gaining power. That soon we might end up with another situation like Fisk on our hands. There are too many civilians getting involved, too many times they seem to have just slipped out between the cops' fingers."

*It scares me.* He doesn't say that part aloud, because it feels like it wouldn't do it justice. It's not just fear. It's a viscous, black panic bubbling just below the surface. It's the feeling that this is the next big threat, the thing he's been dreading. Things have been going too well since they put Fisk away.

"It's not all on you," Karen says. "The police are working on it too."

"That's what Frank said," Matt replies, "But the police can't help if they're corrupt."

There's a long silence. He was expecting Karen to reply, and when she doesn't, he looks up, confused. He can't tell what she's doing - she's just sort of standing there, and the one thing he can't sense is where she's looking, or what expression is on her face.

"Karen?" he prompts after a moment.

He can read her hesitation in the way she fidgets, in the shift in her breath. She raises a hand like she's gonna touch him, then lowers it again. He wonders what she can see in his face.

"I'm sorry about Frank," he blurs out. "If I'd stopped him coming... or if I hadn't-"

"Matt," she cuts in, something a little choked in it. "Don't - don't apologise. You're not responsible for the things other people do."

Matt privately, very strongly disagrees, but he keeps his mouth shut. A second later Karen's hand's on the side of his head; he flinches again as she presses against the swollen cut, still bleeding a little sluggishly. Her thumb swipes blood from his temple and he has to hold himself very still to avoid leaning into her touch.

"Are you okay?" she asks. Then - tentatively - "I don't mean just from the fight."

Matt opens his mouth, the word 'yes' on his tongue - but he can't say it, suddenly. It chokes up in his throat and all he can think of is standing in that lot, faced with the barrels of half a dozen guns, and feeling like time was frozen until Frank caught his arm in a bruising grip.

He wonders what it is that she saw in his face, or heard in his voice, that made her ask.

Before he can figure out what to say, he hears a car door slam shut out on the road, and then footsteps, caught in a familiar gait. His heart nearly freezes in his chest.

"Foggy's coming," he says. "He's just parked outside."
"Oh," Karen says, and turns back to the counter. He hears her pick up her phone. "Shit, I missed all his calls last night. Of course he’d come to check on me."

"He’s gonna see the dog," Matt points out. Said dog has just padded back into the room and is now nosing around all the couch cushions left on the floor. "And-"

"And the mess," Karen says, looking around. "Shit, that's embarrassing."

"Does he know Castle's back in town?" Matt asks, and he hears the nervous jump of Karen's heart.

“No,” she admits. “I haven’t told him yet.”

“Tell him it’s my dog,” Matt says immediately, “That I’m just trialling what it’s like to have one but I-"

“Jesus, Matt, I’m not gonna lie,” she replies, with a slightly awkward laugh. “Not to Foggy. Not over something like that.”

There’s a very awkward pause in which it steadily becomes clear that they are not on the same page here. Matt pushes off the counter, paces across the room, arms wrapped around himself.

So. Karen and Foggy. That’s a thing.

He’s cool with it. No, really, he is. The two people he’s closest to in all the world are dating each other. The man he’s been in love with for years and his ex-girlfriend are together. He’s not upset about it. He doesn’t feel left out. Not at all.

Okay, maybe he was a bit put out at first, but it just - blindsided him. He hadn’t expected it.

It makes sense, though. When he was dead, it was just the two of them. Of course they got close. Plus they dated before, so.

Not like he had a chance with either of them anyway. So it doesn’t matter. He’d probably have just fucked it up if he’d tried anything.

So what if there’s a stony ache in the pit of his stomach, if it makes his heart throb dully to think about how much time the two of them are spending together, if the lingering smell of Foggy’s aftershave here in Karen’s flat, or her perfume on his clothes, feels like a stab in the gut? He deserves it anyway, for pushing them both away for so long.

Still.

“He’s gonna be pissed off,” he says, flatly. “You know that, right?”

“He’ll be fine,” Karen assures him, “Frank’s a civilian now-”

“Not after last night he’s not.” And probably won’t ever be, not really, he thinks, but doesn’t say that part out loud, the things we do, the things that happened to him, you can’t ever come back from that, not completely. “Also, Foggy hates Castle.”

“He’ll be fine,” Karen says, “Trust me-”

“Trust me, I’ve known him for years.” It comes out too snappish and he hears her breath hitch. “He thinks Frank’s both a threat and a bad influence - to both of us - and that’s exactly the sort of thing
that sets him off.”

“Matt.” Her voice is very calm, but he can tell her body temperature’s risen, that she’s annoyed about his reaction. “Things are different now. He knows things are different. We’ll discuss this, calmly, like adults. Either way, I’m not lying to him.”

There’s a frozen, tense silence, and Matt hates this suddenly. Foggy’s his best friend, but he’s Karen’s boyfriend. He knew him for years, but she was closer to him recently. The reality of the situation hangs between them and he thinks, with a cold jolt of fear, this is it. It’s starting. We’re fracturing.

There’s a knock at the door. He hears Karen bite her lip, and imagine her casting a final, icy look at him before she whirls around and goes to answer it. Shoulders slumping, Matt moves over to the couch and sits down on the arm of it, wincing a little as an old ache in his ribs plays up. The dog pads over to him, breathing heavily, and he absently reaches down to scratch it behind the ears. It stinks the way most animals do to him, but there’s something weirdly calming about its warm fur and the wet nose that bumps against his palm.

“Hey,” he hears Foggy say, from the other room, “You okay? You didn’t get my messages?”

"I’m fine, Foggy, sorry-"

“I was worried-”

“I know. I’m sorry. Yesterday was... a bad day for me, it always is. Thanks for checking in.”

He hears them step forward. A rustle of clothes. A quick kiss. He bites his lip and looks away.

“Can you come in? We need to talk about something, actually,” Karen says. “Matt’s here. He came over for drinks last night.”

“Is everything okay?” Foggy asks, and as they start moving towards the living room Matt feels the shape of their body heat merging together. Arms looped together, he imagines, leaning into one another’s sides. Close, close, close.

“Yes, everything’s fine! We just need to discuss something. You want a coffee?”

They enter the room. Foggy’s heart rate spikes upon seeing him and Matt isn’t sure why.

“Hey Matty!” he says. Then, “Whoa, what happened in here? You guys have a party or something? Oh my God, why is there a dog? And what happened to your face?”

“You’ve got a black eye and there’s blood in your hair,” Foggy replies, flatly, “And maybe you don’t realise it, but it’s not normal for people to walk around with bruises. Like, in general, it’s not an everyday thing to have a black eye. At all.”

Matt reaches up to touch the bruise and grimaces as he realises his glasses are still off.

“Someone explain the dog,” Foggy adds. Pi has now trotted to the window. Probably wondering where Frank is.
“One moment.” Karen’s making coffee again and Foggy turns towards her. He hesitates - inhales a little, like he’s gonna speak, then exhales just as quickly - then sighs and sinks down into the couch next to Matt. He catches a swell of Foggy’s body heat, a whiff of the scented candles his parents always burn at their house. He was content when he walked in here - heart steady and calm - but Matt can feel him growing nervous now.

“You went out last night?” Foggy asks, abruptly.

Matt can’t tell if he’s angry or not.

“Only because I heard something going on with those gangs,” he replies. He hates having to feel defensive about this all over again. “But I didn’t go out patrolling. Probably would’ve, but Karen invited me over.” A sudden, sharp swell of grief. “It’s - it’s not a good day for me either, Fog.”

“I know.” Foggy reaches out suddenly, squeezes his knee. His voice is a bit softer, his hands warm. It’s nice. But Matt knows it won’t last. “Karen, seriously, did you impulse-buy a dog? Because I wouldn’t even be mad. What’s its name?”

Karen wanders back over. She passes one mug to Foggy, another to Matt. He takes one sip and feels sick; it’s not bad coffee, at least on the scale of terrible beverages that Karen has made for him across the years, but he knows they’re just putting off the inevitable drama. Also, it’s possible he hasn’t eaten since yesterday afternoon.

“Pi,” she says, “No ‘e’, like the book about the kid and the tiger. And no, it’s not my dog, sadly.” She pauses, and despite her earlier confidence, Matt can tell she’s nervous. “Frank Castle’s back in town.”

Matt looks away, but it doesn’t exactly help. He still feels Foggy stiffen next to him, feels him suck in the sort of deep, slow breath that means he’s stopping himself from just launching into full-on freak-out mode.

“Wait,” he says slowly, “What?”

Karen swallows hard.

“I know we didn’t ever really talk about him after he-”

“After he returned from the dead,” Foggy’s voice is steadily rising, “And was all over the news for being a wanted fugitive, after he supposedly-”

“Supposedly is the key word there,” Karen cuts in. “The people he was hunting down were corrupt. He’s got a government pardon, he’s been cleaning up his act - look, Foggy, calm down. Let’s talk about this.”

Foggy gets up. He paces across the room, the portrait of agitation - fidgeting, gnawing at his lip, every hair practically bristling.

“Okay, first off, this is not a calm-down sort of situation,” he snaps. After a moment he sets his coffee down and then doesn’t seem to know what to do with his hands. Matt hears Karen open her mouth and draw breath to speak, but Foggy jerks a hand up to stop her. “Give me a sec. I’m processing.”

“Let me just explain,” she begins, but Foggy’s already whirling around towards Matt.
“Did you know about this?” he demands.

“Which part?” Matt asks, hoping he’ll have the rather helpful excuse that during most of this Frank drama he was still supposedly dead.

“That he’s back in Hell’s Kitchen!”

“Oh. That part.” Damn it. “Yeah, I- Karen told me.”

Foggy turns back to her.

“You told him and not me?”

There’s a note in Foggy’s voice that feels like a punch to Matt’s gut; so betrayed, but also so weary and resigned and hurt. Karen steps forward. Her head turns to look at Matt and she must be giving him some sort of look, but he has no idea what it is, except some part of him is pretty sure she’s annoyed with him. He’s not sure what he said that pissed her off.

“It seemed like a Daredevil-relevant situation,” she says. “Look, okay, just slow down. Just - let me explain.”

“Yes!” Foggy cries, “Please do! My brain is exploding here!” His hand lands suddenly on Matt’s shoulder and he tries not to jump. “Did he do that to your face?”

“What? No!”

“Foggy.” Karen moves forward. Touches Foggy’s back, then his shoulder, pulls at his arm. Matt feels them both moving away from him, cold air rushing in to take the place where their bodies were. “Look, Frank’s making a clean go of it. He stopped by to see me when he first came back, but that was it. Then yesterday, I figured it was a tough day for him too. So he came around for drinks.”

“A lot of drinks,” Foggy comments.

“It was fine. We were fine.” A pause. “So that’s his dog.”

“He called his dog Pi?” Foggy asks.

“What’s wrong with Pi?” Matt says, flatly.

“I don’t know,” Foggy splutters, “I was expecting a name like… like Killhappy Murderlord, or something.” They both scoff and he adds, defensively, “Look. The guy goes around calling himself the Punisher for God’s sake.”

“No, the news called him that,” Matt pipes up, “We don’t pick the stupid names they give us.”

“Oh, sorry, Daredevil.” Foggy takes a deep breath. “So where is he now?”

Karen gestures to Matt to continue. He sighs, bracing himself for a second for just how fucking downhill this is about to go.

“I’ve been tracking those meth gangs. The situation escalated last night. I went to check it out and Castle came with me because he was worried.”

“Worried about you?” Foggy scoffs. “More like he wanted to get back into it and kill people!”
“Foggy!” Karen scolds.

“What? You know it’s true!” He turns to Matt; must see the look on his face. “He knows it’s true.”

Matt bites his lip, doesn’t comment on that.

“One gang,” he continues, “The one the press has been calling the Hellhounds, are gaining too much power. They’ve got so much territory by now that they’re making small fry of other groups. The police took some of them down last night, but they have more men. I have a plan to deal with them, but - things got a bit sticky last night. Castle helped me out. But then he got upset and went home.”

“Why’d he get upset?” Foggy demands instantly.

Matt hesitates.

“Matt,” Foggy says, insistent now, “Why’d he get upset?”

The problem is, Matt thinks a bit miserably, Foggy is now an expert at detecting half-truths and worming his way towards finding out everything. Matt hates that it’s because of him that his best friend had to develop that particular niche skill-set.

“He’s been trying hard not to get dragged back into this,” he says, a bit weakly. Doesn’t want to lie, but he just knows Foggy will be angry, knows this is gonna end in a fight. Maybe that makes him a coward, but he just - doesn’t know how much he can deal with right now, not when what happened last night still has him feeling like he’s all raw-nerves.

“So why’d he go with you?” Foggy points out. “Seems like a recipe for disaster.”

Matt flounders. He doesn’t have an answer, or at least not one they’ll understand. Because it’s true, it seems like an objectively stupid decision, but Matt knows why Castle did it. He knows better than anyone. You can’t stay away, not for long, not from what they do. He tried to give up being Daredevil, but he couldn’t. The night kept calling him back. But he had his own reasons for that. He doesn’t know what Frank’s might be.

“Look,” he says instead, “It’s lucky he was there. Turned out to be a bit more than I could handle. We had an argument, he got pissed, he went home and forgot his dog here.”

Foggy stands there looking at him for a long moment.

“Right,” he says flatly, and turns to face Karen. “So what’s he not telling me?”

“Foggy,” she pleads, and Matt feels something snap; the sharp rise in Foggy’s body temperature, the hitch in his breath.

“No!” Foggy explodes, “No, you don’t get to do this. The two of you - I thought we were done with this! The secrets, the lies-”

There’s a sort of anger in his voice that Matt hasn’t heard since that first night when Foggy learned he was Daredevil. It’s something he never wanted to hear again, something he’s been dreading ever since they found his fragile balance. Because no matter how many times Foggy comes back, Matt still can’t stop thinking you don’t deserve this, Fog, hell, you deserve so much better than this-

He wouldn’t blame him if he just turned around and left.
Maybe the Matt of a year ago would’ve known how to deal with this. Known how to be calm, or reassuring, or how to tell himself it didn’t matter, that whatever choices they made were all for the best in the end. But today’s Matt… today’s Matt can already feel himself shutting down, closing off, wanting to curl away and hide from all this.

“I said I was fine with this,” Foggy continues, “Jesus Christ, the amount I’m fucking putting up with - but it can’t be like this, you two can’t leave me in the dark. Especially not you, Karen, for fuck’s sake.”

Karen’s heart’s pounding, even though she’s standing still and frozen as ice.

“Frank killed some of the gang members,” she admits, voice tight, and Foggy’s breath leaves him all in a rush.

“I knew it,” he whispers.

“Fog,” Matt hears himself begin.

“No, Matt, don’t-” Foggy’s voice wavers, he holds up a hand, “Don’t even fucking start.”

Matt snaps his mouth shut, looks away. There’s a slightly awkward silence.

“Don’t tell me you’re okay with this,” Foggy adds, a bit softer now.

“I’m not,” Matt replies, shortly.

Foggy sinks back down on the couch and runs his hands through his hair. Karen’s clenching her fists, like she wants to reach out but doesn’t know if she should.

“I can’t believe this,” Foggy says finally. “The fucking Punisher is back in town and you guys are hanging out with him like-”

“Don’t tell me you’re okay with this,” Foggy adds, a bit softer now.

“I’m not,” Matt replies, shortly.

Foggy sinks back down on the couch and runs his hands through his hair. Karen’s clenching her fists, like she wants to reach out but doesn’t know if she should.

“I can’t believe this,” Foggy says finally. “The fucking Punisher is back in town and you guys are hanging out with him like-”

“It’s not like that,” Karen begins.

“So what is it like, Karen?” Foggy shouts, and Matt gets up and walks across the room to lean against the wall, facing away from them. He can feel something sick and anxious rising up in his chest. There’s too much yelling, this all escalated too fast. He can hardly blame Foggy for being upset. Can tell that Karen’s startled by his reaction, but I told you so is probably not the most helpful thing he could say right now.

Karen takes a deep breath.

“Frank’s trying,” she insists again, “but this is complicated. After everything he’s been through, I… Look, he’s trying and I want to help him. He saved my life, Foggy. More than once.”

“If he was trying he wouldn’t have joined Matt out there in the first place,” Foggy says, and he’s right, logically, he’s right, but there’s nothing logical about any of this. “One vigilante, sure, I can deal with that. But one who goes around killing people? Don’t tell me you’re on board with this!”

Matt takes a deep, shaky breath.

“You’re right,” he says, without turning to face them, “I should have stopped him. I should have tried harder. I’m sorry. This is on me.”

There’s a very upset pause. Matt closes his eyes, focuses on the dull ache of his bruises, the scraped
skin across his knuckles. He can practically feel the tension simmering between Karen and Foggy. Another vague mental fantasy pops into his head, one that involves just full on jumping out the window and running away. Goodbye friends, I am gone!

“When were you gonna tell me he was back?” Foggy asks finally, his voice quiet and exhausted now.

“Probably today anyway,” Karen admits, voice tight, “After he came over last night. It… it wasn’t a secret, Foggy. I just - couldn’t find the right time.”

“Right,” Foggy mutters, and Matt bites his lip.

*That was me, too, he thinks, I’m the reason he’s got so many trust issues.*

A wave of emotion passes over him; rancid guilt, sympathy, a horrible helplessness. *Poor Foggy.* Because the other man’s right; he puts up with a fucking lot, between Matt’s nighttime activities and all the things Karen’s done, too. He’s the only one of them who can really say he’s got a relatively clean conscience in all of this. And Matt hates, *hates* when the other man is pissed at him, even though he knows he deserves it - but he might as well bite the bullet here. The longer he leaves it, the worse it’ll be.

“There’s one more thing,” he manages to force out.

He feels the shift of air displacing as Foggy throws his hands up.

“Oh, here we fucking go!”

Matt feels himself clam up a bit. Bites his lip, folds his arms. Karen steps towards him.

“What is it?” she prompts.

She’s cross with him too, he can tell. She’s trying to sound like she isn’t, but she is. He isn’t sure if it’s because her ‘calm discussion’ with Foggy went so off the rails, just like he said it would, or if she thinks he should’ve tried harder to stop Frank. Or maybe a mix of both. *Just keep fucking up everything you touch. You knew this was coming. Knew it couldn’t last. And now you’ve made Foggy and Karen pissed at each other. Should’ve stayed far away from them, let them be happy together.*

“No one’s having much luck figuring out who the leader of this meth gang is, but last night I think I found an in. One of the men captured during the police raid seemed to be a civilian who’d been coerced into helping the gang with something. I’m not sure what yet, but if we can get him to talk…”

“We?” Foggy demands.

It feels like Matt’s stomach is full of stones.

“I can’t exactly break into the police station as Daredevil and get him out. But if Nelson, Murdock and Page act as his lawyers…”

Foggy is very, very quiet for a long moment. After a while Matt can’t bear the silence any longer.

“It’s not my first choice of plan,” he admits, “I don’t want to drag you guys into this stuff.”

“Yeah,” Foggy says, and his voice is tight and furious, “cause that’s how we end up with targets on
Matt turns away and slips into the kitchen, snatching up his glasses and jamming them on his face. The argument’s gotten personal, he can tell. This isn’t just about the Nelson and Page parts of the firm disagreeing on something. This is Foggy and Karen, a couple, having a fight about how to approach the situation, and his presence here is a definite third wheel.

He shouldn’t have brought up his plan.

Not right now, not when Foggy was angry about Castle. He’d thought it would be better to get it all out of the way at once; now, he can see, was the worst possible time, with Foggy already feeling hurt and left out, with all of them already defensive and on-edge.

Now he feels like all he’s done is tear his two friends apart; if it wasn’t for his Daredevil shit none of them would even be in this mess, and he knows it’s only a matter of time before they realise it. That they’re not the problem, that it’s nothing to do with each other. It’s all him.

I can’t deal with this, he thinks - he can feel the panic rising up like bile, making his chest feel tight. Thinks if he stays here any longer listening to them fight he’s just gonna break down, so. At this point, might as well make a hasty and discrete escape, right?
He pauses for a moment, taking a deep breath. They’re still going at it; he can leave now, they probably won’t notice until the door shuts behind him. The dog’s in the other room, drinking from a bowl of water Karen left out for it. Matt can smell the leash that Frank left on the table near the door; he clips it to Pi’s collar and tugs.

“C’mon,” he murmurs, “Let’s get you home.”

He pauses outside Saint Patrick’s on the way there and sits down heavily on the bench - closes his eyes, tries to figure out why it’s so hard to breathe.

He misses Father Lantom like an anchor tied around his neck, dragging him down. There was a time when sitting here - close enough to hear the church bells sway slightly in the wind, to smell candle wax and incense - helped him to clear his mind. Now he just feels even more anxious, his thoughts racing in circles.

They might break up-

You could’ve died last night-

Then Nelson, Murdock and Page will break up too-

You knew this couldn’t last-

You could’ve died last night-

It’s only a matter of time-

These gangs might get you first-

Everything’s slipping out of control-

A loud whine and a warm head bumping against his knees jerks him out of his reverie; he jolts, realises Pi is nudging at his legs. He fumbles a hand down and pats the dog’s head. A rough tongue laves over his fingers before Pi rests his chin on Matt’s knee. There’s something soothing about the weight, the warmth. The dog’s steady, thumping heart, the swish of air where its tail is wagging, all of it’s oddly reassuring, makes some of the uneasiness in his own heart settle. He doesn’t usually like to be around animals - he can smell everywhere the damn thing’s been, not to mention everything it’s eaten - but for some reason, now, when he’s so drained he can barely muster the energy to filter out all the input from the city around him that he doesn’t need, that crowds in threatening to overwhelm him, it’s nice to have something nearby to focus on.

“Good boy,” he murmurs, and the dog snuffles happily at him. Some things, he thinks ruefully, are still simple, at least.

He heaves himself up and keeps walking. He’s known where Frank’s staying since Karen told him he was back in town, and the dog must know where they’re going, too, pulling at the leash, eager to get home.

Still. This all seemed like a much better idea until he’s actually standing at the door, hand raised to knock. A lump rises in his throat as he remembers what happened last night.
The gunfire. The blood. How Frank saved him, dragging them both to the ground. *You got a deathwish?*

Messy. This is all so fucking messy and he doesn’t know how Castle fits into it all. But the thought of being around him is way more bearable at the moment than being around Karen or Foggy. At least Castle’s as fucked up as he is, so he’s really in no place to comment on Matt’s issues.

He knocks at the door. It’s only a few minutes later when it swings open just a little - with a rattle that he knows means it’s on a chain - and he hears Frank’s steady, relentless heartbeat and gets a whiff of the familiar smell of gunpowder, booze, petrol, some sort of cheap aftershave.


Matt waves the leash.

“I brought your dog,” he says.

Frank slams the door shut, then opens it properly. There’s a moment of awkward silence as Matt passes the leash over and their fingers fumble together. It doesn’t take long to read everything about him.

Trembling hands, unsteady breath. Panic attack, and a long one, probably. He’s been drinking coffee - Irish coffee, from the smell of it - and from all the tiny physical tells it is, oddly, not anger or annoyance he’s feeling at the sight of Matt. Something like guilt, and something a lot like awkwardness, and from the way he pauses and looks Matt up and down, something disconcertingly like *concern*.

Fuck that. The last thing he wants is Castle’s *pity* - but still, Matt finds himself standing there, not sure why he doesn’t just turn and leave. Job done, after all.

But despite himself, he can’t leave it all unsaid; he takes a breath, a bit nervously, and says, “About last night…”

“We don’t gotta talk about it,” Frank offers - something a little too soft and uncertain in his own voice.

Matt swallows hard.

This is a bad idea, he thinks, but he’s plunged headlong into a lot of bad ideas lately, so might as well add one more to the list, right?

“I get why you did it,” he says, letting the words spill out without thinking too hard about them. “Why you came with me last night. Why you killed those guys. After you… after you vanished, that first time, after the Hand, I tried to quit being Daredevil. Karen talked me into it. But nothing ever felt right. Foggy called it an addiction. And worst part was, it wasn’t even about saving people - it was about getting into fights. That’s what they thought, at least. About beating up the bad guys. Having the chance to *hurt* something.”

Frank’s quiet, and Matt can practically feel his heavy, steady gaze on him.

“Someone else once told me I had the Devil in me. Guess I had to let him out somehow.” He gives a soft snort. “Either way, I - I couldn’t stop. Don’t think I could now if I tried. And as much as they try, as much as they *help*, I don’t think it’s something they’re ever gonna get. I can’t seem to find the words to explain to them. That it’s just… it’s in our blood. It’s what we *know*. It’s part of me like the city’s part of me. Maybe like the war’s part of you. No matter how much you try to fight, it always
Frank lets out a grunt that Matt can’t interpret. What he can tell is that a little of the tension has fallen away from the other man’s shoulders.

“Anyway,” he finishes, tiredly, “I guess this is my roundabout way of saying that… while I’m morally and spiritually obligated to ask you to please refrain from going around killing anyone in this city… you had my back last night. I… I don’t know how things would’ve played out without you there. So, thank you.”

Frank hums. He steps forward a little, and Matt’s the one who stiffens now. He feels Frank’s head move as he looks him up and down. Feels suddenly vulnerable without the mask, without the suit.

Frank clears his throat. His voice is thick and gruff when he speaks, but not unkind.

“You’re pretty fucked up, huh, Red?”

Matt freezes, taking this in. Then, to his surprise, it’s laughter that bubbles up in his throat - hesitant at first, then spilling out into uncontrollable, hysterical guffaws. He doubles over, leaning in the doorframe, wracked with it.

God, it’s stupid. It’s stupid but he’s…

He’s fucking exhausted, and everything’s gone to shit, and half the time he doesn’t want to wake up in the morning, and he’s standing here with fucking Frank Castle, and he could’ve died last night-

And it’s laugh or cry at this point. It’s really laugh or cry and fall to fucking pieces.

“You don’t know the half of it,” he manages to get out.

Frank’s staring at him. After a moment he snorts, too. Bends down to scratch behind Pi’s ears when the dog jumps up at him. Some sort of tension seems to break between them, both too exhausted to keep their walls up.

“Fisk?” Frank asks. There’s a world in that one word, and Matt nods.

“Among other things.”

There’s relief in here, somewhere. Relief that one fucking person knows that actually, yeah, he’s really not doing okay. The one person who could maybe understand. Who won’t make a huge fucking deal about it.

As it is, Frank opens the door a little wider.

“Need a drink?” he offers, gruffly, and Matt bites his lip.

He knows where this is going. They’ll end up talking about Karen and things will probably get way too fucking personal. They’ll talk about the gangs and there’s no way Frank won’t end up involved and the right thing to do would be to walk away now and leave him alone. To let him be.

He knows what Foggy would suggest.

But right now…

Right now, for some reason - for once in his life - he gives in to the fact that he really, really fucking
doesn’t want to be alone, and he nods and steps forward and lets Frank Castle usher him into the flat.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait on this chapter! Next up is a very long Foggy one >:)
7. IN WHICH FOGGY IS DETERMINED NOT TO CAVE

The sound of the front door shutting makes both Foggy and Karen fall silent, mid-sentence.

Frankly, Foggy is quite relieved at this development, because the argument had devolved into a lot of interrupting one another and, absurdly, literal finger-wagging on his part. Apparently when he’s angry he starts channeling his inner kindergarten teacher.

“Did Matt just leave?” Karen asks, whirling around and moving off down the hall.

“Yep,” Foggy says tiredly, not even bothering to check. “He just fucked right off. Sounds about right.”

“Matt!” Karen calls, opening the door and sticking her head out, but Foggy wouldn’t be surprised if he’s already out of the building. He throws himself down on the couch and puts his head in his hands.

“I think he stole Castle’s dog,” he says after a moment, when he realises how quiet the flat is.

Karen returns to the room and stands there in the doorway, staring at him. Foggy doesn’t look up. His head’s starting to ache. It’s not ‘cause he’s hungover. It’s because he’s been holding back tears for the last twenty minutes. God, he hates fighting with his friends. Like, do they realise that he doesn’t enjoy playing the role of the stick in the mud, the one who’s always gotta disagree with their big plans to save the world, the ever-interfering moral compass? ‘cause he doesn’t! It makes him feel like he’s the bad guy, like he’s just getting in their way.

It was one thing when it was just Matt.

Matt plus Karen plus Frank Castle? Look, Foggy’s only human, after all here!

“Why would he just leave?” Karen asks, voice soft and hurt. “We were in the middle of-”

“A giant fight, Karen,” Foggy finishes flatly. “You know Matt. For someone who’s made a career out of winning arguments, he sure hates talking things out with his friends. We’re lucky he used the front door and didn’t just jump out the damn window the second things got a bit heated in here.”

Karen doesn’t reply. Foggy still can’t bring himself to look at her. He heaves himself to his feet and motions towards the door.

“Bathroom,” he says flatly. “We’ll… we’ll finish this conversation in a minute.”
In the bathroom he spends fifteen minutes trying to calm the fuck down.

He turns the tap off and looks up at his face in the mirror. God, he looks exhausted. Things have been better lately, but it's still hard to sleep sometimes. He looks worn thin. He looks-

*Angry*, he realises. Eyes blazing, mouth set in a grim line. He looks pretty fucking done. And you know what the worst part is? The way the two of them keep being like, *oh, Foggy, just calm down, just listen.*

Like there's a rational explanation for all this.

Like they don't keep upping the stakes. Like it didn't start out as just stopping muggers in back-alleys at night and turned into global conspiracies full of supernatural ninjas. Like they haven't all nearly died about three times over (and that's excluding Matt, whose statistics read more like three times a *night*). So yes, guys, it's very fucking reassuring that Frank Castle's back in town. The same Frank Castle whose appearances tend to coincide with Hell's Kitchen's body count skyrocketing through the roof. Sorry, Karen, what was that, I couldn't hear you over all the *fucking police sirens!*

He grips the edge of the sink. Squeezes his eyes shut, inhales through his nose, exhales slowly. Thinks, *don't freak out, just - work this out. Like you always do.* 'cause in the end it does, always, seem to come down to him to be the calm one. He's just a bit sick of it. For once he'd sort of like to be the one that just - goes off the rails, that gets to do what he wants and fuck what anyone else thinks. Let them deal with it.

And the worst part is-

The worst part is that some stupid, naive part of him thought that it would actually stop with Fisk. That things would be different now, and an even stupider, more naive (dare he say romantic) part of him thought that with him and Karen being together, things would start to heal. Because they *were* healing. They were good together.

That's what hurts the most.

Call him old fashioned, but he's always thought when you're with someone - properly *with* them, when you love them, when you want things to be forever - you stand by their side. You turn into a team. That's one of the reasons he had to break things off with Marci - she deserved a relationship where there were no secrets, where both parties had each other's back one hundred percent. Towards the end she'd known something was up. Known things weren't fair.

So yeah, it hurts that Karen told Matt and not him about Castle. And it hurts that she took his side right away about taking the case. Like, thanks for the trust issues, guys, not like they weren't bad enough already.

That's the big problem.

It can't be just him-and-Karen against the world. Can't be just the two of them sorting their own shit out privately like a normal couple. Because they *aren't* a normal couple, *nothing* about this is normal-

Thanks, he realises grimly, to Matt. He's way too tangled up around the very bones of their relationship. To be fair, that isn't all Karen's fault, either. Even Foggy has to admit there's something kinda fucked about how, no matter how many times he keeps getting hurt, he still always gives in, comes running back to Matt's side, even if the other man tries to push him away.
What do you want, here? he thinks, and feels his heart hammer faster, feels the despair start to push in around the edges.

There's never gonna be total peace. You can try and convince Matt not to get involved in the big stuff. But as long as it affects Hell's Kitchen, he'll never listen.

Ultimatums didn't work. Trying to pull away didn't work. And he doesn't want that, anyway. He wants what they have now. Nelson, Murdock and Page. He wants honesty.

Frank Castle, he thinks, and his fingers clench around the edge of the sink. Should've fucking expected this. He hasn't thought about the man in ages and now, as he remembers back to their last encounters, his anxiety only intensifies.

Castle is dangerous, no matter how much Karen insists on his goodness at heart. Like do they not realise it's a bit hard to believe he's 'changed' when the first time Foggy hears about his return involves him killing half a dozen men? Also, what the fuck was Matt doing? Just standing there watching? Wasn't there a whole drama last time about Daredevil trying to stop him from doing shit like that?

But maybe... maybe, if he's honest, part of what's scaring him the most is that Karen and Frank are... God, he doesn't even know how to describe it. Just that he remembers how they connected during the lead up to the trial. How she was the only person he really opened up to. How she trusted him when no one else would. Not to mention that shit storm she got dragged into last time he was back in town.

The look in her eyes when he gets brought up...

He's not jealous. He's just - worried. And, in a turn of events he finds both embarrassing and upsetting, feels suddenly very, very alone.

It's stupid. He's got Karen, and Matt's his best friend, but - it feels suddenly like everyone's against him, like there isn't a damn person in his corner, and another lump rises in his throat. He swallows it down, takes a deep breath, and takes a final glance in the mirror. His hand comes up involuntarily to his shoulder; he reaches into his shirt and rubs it. Feels the rough, raised edges of the scar where the bullet passed through him. Another surge of anger, fear, resentment jolts through him. He swallows, hard, then whirls around and leaves the room.

Karen's waiting for him out in the living room. She's gotten changed out of her dressing gown into an old t-shirt and jeans, and she looks upset as she reaches out to him.

"Foggy," she starts, voice soft, and Foggy hesitates.

He’d been making a beeline for the front door. Now he turns, and bites his lip.

Karen looks so drained that for a moment all he wants to do is reach out and draw her into his arms. Her hair’s coming loose from its bun, hanging around her face, and her eyes are lined with the same dark shadows he’s seen on his own face. For a second she looks startlingly vulnerable. It’s hard to stay angry. He wants to tell her everything will be okay, that they’ll work this out together, that somehow things will be fine.
But he can’t.

He’s been burned too many times before; he can’t bring himself to just let this one slide. It feels like a strange, pivotal, sink-or-swim moment in their relationship. They’ll talk, eventually, but for now he can’t be here.

“I need some air,” he says, and hears how tight and strained his own voice is. “I just - need some space to think about this. About everything.”

Karen’s face crumples a little, but she draws herself up and nods.

“Okay,” she whispers. He turns to leave again and she moves forward and grasps his sleeve. “Foggy!”

“What?”

“I’m sorry.” She sounds like she means it. “For not telling you about Frank. I… I guess some part of me knew you wouldn’t be happy and I… I didn’t want to fight.”

The apology is real, but for some reason it still sends a spark of annoyance through him. He’s not about to feel guilty for being mad about Castle.

“You know why I’m pissed off, right?” he asks, and her face falls a little further.

“Yeah, I… I know. I really thought today we could just talk through it. Matt said you’d be angry.”

“He knows me too well,” Foggy says, and something flickers in Karen’s eyes at that - something strange, something almost annoyed. Not at Foggy, not really, but it’s enough to make him curious. Still. “Bet he didn’t want to tell me about it.”

“He wanted to lie,” Karen admits, “Say the dog was his. I told him no.”

“Figures.” God, he is so, so tired. Like at this point he’s past being disappointed because he just expects this. From Mr Compulsive Liar Murdock, from Karen, from everyone.

It sucks, and only reinforces his need to get the hell out of here, and when he turns away this time Karen doesn’t stop him. He leaves the apartment, feeling sick and drained and just pretty fucking depressed because this is it, the good times couldn’t last after all, they always end up back here. Again and again and again.

He wants to make this work.

He wants to find a way through it or over it or whatever, but it’s just - complicated. Too many old wounds.

He needs to figure out what his place is - in all this. In the four of them who suddenly seem so thoroughly entangled together. It’s not just Foggy and Karen, now, Foggy and Matt. It’s Foggy-and-Karen-and-Matt-and-Frank. But one thing’s for sure.

He will not be on the outside looking in. He refuses.

He would rather leave entirely.
INTERLUDE: IT’S CALLED BEING ‘HANGRY’

“You have a boxer’s fracture,” Matt says.

On the other side of the couch, Frank lifts his head. They’ve been sitting in a relatively companionable silence for the last twenty minutes. The plan had been to drink, initially, but somehow they ended up eating instant noodles instead. It is remarkable how much better Matt feels after literally just having food. Turns out going over a day consuming nothing but liquids can make you feel like shit! Who'd've thought!

"What?" Frank grunts.

"Your hand." Matt nods in the general direction of Frank’s arm. "It's swollen. Temperature's higher than the rest of your body. And I can hear the fractured bones."

"You can hear them?" Frank says incredulously.

"Am I wrong?"

"No," Frank admits. He flexes his hand and sighs. "Should probably tape that up. I punched a wall."

"Sloppy punch if you hit those knuckles," Matt can't help chiding.

"Fuck off." There's no genuine anger in it, though. "Like you've never had one."

"Not for years. Maybe wear gloves next time you want to go around hitting an immovable object."

"Wouldn't be as dramatic," Frank says. He gets up, leaves the room for a moment. Comes back with a box that rattles, sounds like a med kit. Matt reaches out.

"Let me."

"I can do it myself," Frank says, sounding a bit strained, but Matt shakes his head.

"You can, but it's a bitch trying to work with just one hand. I've been there."

He's surprised Frank gives in, sighing and holding out his hand. Matt rummages through the box, feels out the right supplies. He takes Frank's hand in his, gently. It's large, warm, rough with callouses. He presses gently over the last two knuckles. Imagines there must be a myriad of sunset colours blossoming over the skin.

Things should probably be awkward. In the light of day, and now that they're both sobered up, the events of last night seem a bit like a distant, embarrassing dream. But since sitting down and eating, Frank seems to have calmed down a great deal - for now at least - and something about that has steadied Matt too. As long as Frank's pretending nothing's wrong, it's easier for him to, as well.

He's just finishing taping the other man's fingers when Frank shifts and his heart rate spikes a little.

"Murdock," he says, and Matt lifts his head to show he's listening. "Lemme ask you something." Oh, God, where is this going? It seems like Frank's about to voluntarily turn the conversation personal, a thought so intensely disturbing Matt has to pause and actively stop himself from turning and fleeing out the front door. Is he about to bring up last night? 'cause Matt is nowhere near ready to discuss that in further detail. He'd thought they had a silent, manly understanding that they weren't
gonna bring that shit up. Like, you don't mention the suicidal outburst and I won't say anything about the multiple homicides you committed. Win-win.

With immense effort he keeps his voice steady and asks, "What?"

"Karen know about last night?"

The words come out in a rush, something a little too invested, too vulnerable in them. Matt lets go of Frank's hand and leans back in his seat.

"Yeah," he replies, "About what you did? I told her that part."

"What'd she say?"

Frank's heart is still steady, but there's something deliberate and stilted to how calmly he's breathing. In, out. In, out.

"She was upset, but she wasn't angry. With you, anyway." He shifts, unsure how far he can push with this, then adds, "She knows you've had a rough go of it. I think she was just sad, more than anything, that it came to that. I told her you did it to help me out."

"What, so she was angry with you instead?" Frank asks, frowning. "Doesn't sound like her."

Shit. He's said too much.

"You don't want to know all about my drama," Matt mutters, but to his surprise Frank scoffs out a laugh, lounges back on the couch and swings his feet up onto the coffee table.

"C'mon, Red, don't leave me hanging here feeling like the only one that fucked up. You came in here, you might as well air your sorrows while you're around. Who else you gonna tell?"

Matt grits his teeth. There is something sort of faintly pathetic about the fact that Frank's right, he doesn't exactly have anyone else to talk to. Well, there is his mother, but things with Maggie are... weird lately. He knows he should go and see her more often, but somehow it feels like a step he's not quite ready to take. Like to go back there will make everything real; yes, she's still alive, and his father is still dead, and Father Lantom too. It's stupid. He doesn't know how to explain it, just that he's afraid now that all the Fisk business is said and done that the two of them won't know how to engage with one another.

"I told her Foggy would freak out if he heard you were back in town. She thought it'd be fine. I was right. I think she's pissed off that I was."

"Karen ain't petty like that," Frank starts, and Matt shakes his head.

"No, you don't get it - things are weird between the three of us. We're pretending they aren't, but they are. Since Foggy and Karen got together.""

Frank sits up so abruptly that Matt has to fight the instinct to shoot to his feet and bring his fists up.

"Wait, she and Nelson are..."

"Yeah?" Matt replies, cautiously. "They're dating. Have been for weeks now."

Frank's very quiet. He's not giving off much that Matt can read. Honestly, he hadn't given much thought to what sort of contact there was between Karen and Frank. Now he wonders how much, exactly, she's told him. How much they've seen each other since he first returned to town.
"Things are - complicated. Really complicated." Matt looks down, hands twisting together in his lap. "Foggy and I knew each other the longest. We're - close. Really close. Then Foggy and Karen dated, but it didn't work out. Then she and I dated, and things got all fucked up - that was back when you first showed up in Hell's Kitchen. But back then, neither of them knew I was Daredevil. This is the first time since... since we all know everything. That two of us have been together."

"I see," Frank says, gruffly.

Matt swallows hard.

"I guess it was inevitable that things would get a bit messy. Not exactly normal, are we?"

"I mean, superpowers aside..." Frank drawls, and Matt huffs out a laugh. "That does sound complicated."

"Yeah."

There's a slightly awkward pause. Frank's facing him, but Matt's not sure where he's looking. He bites his lip, his earlier upset rising up again.

He hopes Foggy and Karen have made up by now, even if they're both pissed at him. That's the selfless thing to wish for, right? For his two closest friends to be happy, together? Even if he was (trying not to think too hard about the past-tense there) in love with Foggy, even if some days he still wakes up and misses... Misses Claire, and Elektra, and Karen, too. Misses having someone to be close to.

But hey, it's for the best! He's too fucked up to even take care of himself, let alone someone else. Wouldn't be fair to them.

Frank rises, and Matt stiffens, lifting his head. The other man crosses the room, and as he passes his hand comes down on Matt's shoulder and jostles him - a rough, masculine, aborted gesture that happens so fast Matt doesn't really even have time to wonder about it. Next thing he knows Castle's already walked off, towards the kitchen.

"I think," he calls back towards Matt, "Now would be an appropriate time for that drink we mentioned, huh?"

Again, Matt finds himself laughing - startled, relieved, something a bit hysterical in it.

“Sounds good to me.”

7. IN WHICH FOGGY CAVES

Okay, so here we are.

Foggy wanted air, so now he's pacing the streets of Hell’s Kitchen playing out all sorts of scenarios in his mind. On the plus side, he is getting so many steps on his fitbit. Unfortunately, none of said scenarios are at all feasible.
By 'scenarios' he really means fantasies. Fantasies that involve him marching back in there (in these imaginings, Matt has conveniently returned to Karen’s flat via the fire escape and the two of them are patiently waiting for him to return and will also patiently listen without interrupting) and really just giving them a piece of his mind!

Imaginary Foggy is a lot like Courtroom Foggy - in his element, and eloquent, and really fucking convincing. Imaginary Foggy lays out all the facts, tells them if Nelson, Murdock and Page is gonna work they gotta all stay on the same page which means if any one of them vetoes something, they gotta think up a compromise. Imaginary Foggy lays out all sorts of negotiations and manages to convince them to just pass on all Matt’s intel so far to Brett and then he conveniently deals with everything and they all learn a valuable lesson about not escalating the situation needlessly.

Yeah, right.

Like that’s gonna happen.

He knows, with a resigned inevitability, that there’s no way Matt’ll stay out of it. He might agree to, but then he’ll hear something happening halfway across the city and he won’t be able to stop himself rushing over there to make sure the baddies get beaten up and innocent citizens are whisked out of harm’s way.

Foggy knows this. Hell, he accepts this. And a small part of him loves Matt for it, just a bit, because as worried as he is - and as much as he hates that Matt thinks that should be on his shoulders - there’s something admirable about it, something that cuts through all the vigilante bullshit and makes him remember that, at heart, this all actually stems from Matt’s good intentions. From something very noble and heroic.

He falters to a stop and moves to the side of the foot path. Closes his eyes. Breathes in the smell of the city; the summer humidity, the exhaust of passing cars, the faint reek of garbage in a nearby alley. The sounds - blaring horns, distant sirens, the shuffle of passing shoes as pedestrians bustle by him, a street busker honking away on a sax around the corner. Hell's Kitchen seems to wrap itself around him like a blanket; familiar, almost comforting.

He thinks of Matt. Thinks of how much he loves this city. Can't deny that he feels the same thing - some sort of carnal loyalty to the place he grew up. It's the reason he's still practicing here, after all.

"God damn it," he whispers. He can feel his righteous resolve weakening.

It's just-

Just Matt and that fucking look he gets on his face. That stupid kicked-puppy look. Like he's trying his best even when everything's going wrong. No matter how pissed off Foggy gets at him, that face always makes him want to give him a hug, reassure him that you're doing great, bud.

He doesn't know what happened last night. Not really. He wasn't there, he barely trusts Matt's version of events, and sounds like the entire thing was a bit of a shit-storm either way - but what he does remember is how upset Matt looked this morning. He seemed worn-down in a way that went beyond just being hungover. It was...

It was the same sort of look he'd seen back when they were first taking down Fisk, when everything seemed hopeless, when they all seemed so alone. And again back when the Hand came along, when Stick got killed. It's a look that scares Foggy nearly more than seeing Matt get hurt.

The last two times he saw it, they'd been fighting. Hadn't been close. Hadn't had time to really talk
things out before everything went to shit.

And he gets the impression, sometimes, that Matt thinks Foggy hates him, or at least is angry with him. Even now that they've made up, even now that they're working together. Just - something in the way he talks sometimes, or more in the way he doesn't talk. And it's shitty and it sucks because Foggy isn't, not at all. They're best friends, or they were, and it makes Foggy feel like everything isn't back to normal after all. Like they're still trapped in all the chaos and trauma that he wants to leave behind.

God, he just-

He misses uni sometimes. Misses when things were simple. Misses when it felt like the two of them were actually close, when he thought Matt actually trusted him.

Another lump rises in his throat. Yet again he feels like he's drowning alone. Like they're all drifting further and further apart, even though he thought the storm was over now, that they'd found safe harbour.

"Damn it," he whispers. "Damn it, damn it..."

He knows what he's gonna do.

He doesn’t like it, but there’s a strange, heavy sense of inevitability to it. Fighting feels harder than giving in and like he’s gonna lose anyway. He’s already taking out his phone to make the call.

*Here we go,* he thinks grimly, *what could possibly go wrong?*

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At home Foggy throws his keys on the table, collapses onto the couch and puts his head in his hands. His apartment feels too empty, too lonely. He has a missed call from Karen, but she didn’t leave a message. He doesn’t want to talk to her right now, and hates that he feels that way. The thought of walking into work tomorrow feels him with the sort of dread he hasn’t felt in years, not since that one bad internship back at uni.

After a moment he heaves himself up off the couch, grabs his laptop, and just straight up starts googling Frank Castle because why fucking not, today’s already a shitshow, might as well add some light online stalking to the mix.

There are no records of him after the last time shit went down and he was on the run. Must have some sort of new, fake identity, Foggy figures, otherwise the press would’ve been all over him the second he popped back up here.

He reads back through the old news articles, way back when the Punisher first appeared. Looks at the coverage of the court case. It would be nostalgic except it’s more like reliving an old nightmare, *God,* he remembers how *fucking furious* he’d been at Matt around that time. How terribly alone he’d felt back then, too.

Then he sits for a while just staring at a picture of Castle. His dark eyes, tired and haunted. The rough, broad features of his face. The faint lines of old scars. Unease stirs in the pit of his stomach.
He was there. He was right there in Karen’s flat last night. Right there with her and… and Matt…

God, how the hell is he okay with this?

Then again, he doesn’t know what Matt’s thinking half the time these days, and he pushes the laptop away with a groan.

Truth is, he’s fucking terrified. Because it’d been a whole thing, hadn’t it, making sure Matt didn’t kill anyone? Making sure he didn’t spiral down that path, even with Fisk?

Castle, on the other hand, kills someone as easy as looking at them. That’s not normal, can’t the two of them see that’s not normal? How can anyone who murders so many people, who takes life so easily as though it’s nothing, possibly be safe for them to be around? Not only that, he’s a bad influence, because Matt’s life is just one big ongoing existential crisis and it barely takes a nudge to send him spiralling into yet another moral dilemma, so. Forgive Foggy if he is not reassured that spending any amount of time around Castle isn’t a monumentally bad idea.

Stay away, he thinks, no matter what else we do, I gotta make sure they stay away from him. Both of them.

He already knows how well that’ll go down with Karen, and his stomach twists, and he just - hates this. He could scream, he could throw something, he hates everything about this. Normal couples don’t have ‘convince partner to stay away from mass murderer’ as a fucking problem.

He curls up on the couch, pulls his phone out. Looks back through his photos and feels fresh tears well in his eyes as he flicks back through the album. Shots of the two of them together - lying in bed, or out for a drink, or down by the harbour. A few of Karen - asleep on his couch, or framed in the early morning sunlight by their office window, or with her head thrown back and eyes closed, laughing, in the neon lights of Josie’s.

His heart clenches. He loves her. He knows then that he doesn’t want this to tear them apart, that he can’t, won’t let it.

What he needs is to protect what they have - protect it from this, from Castle and all the rest of it, from everything it’s sure to bring back to her. She deserves better, they both do. They deserve to be able to move away from this, to escape being constantly dragged back down into the dark.

______________________________________________________________

INTERLUDE: PULL IT TOGETHER, FRANK

They’re two drinks in when Red’s phone starts blaring, monotonously: “Foggy, Foggy, Foggy.”

Frank stares at him from across the kitchen. Watches Matt’s lips tighten into a thin line, his throat bob as he knocks back the rest of his glass.

“You gonna get that,” he asks gruffly.

Matt shakes his head. They don’t say anything, just stand there for an entire excruciating sixty seconds not looking at each other while the phone goes “Foggy, Foggy, Foggy” and they both pretend he’s not completely fucking ignoring his best friend.
Not like Frank’s judging. After all, he smashed the shit out of his own phone this morning just to avoid Curtis’ call, so he ain’t one to talk.

“You have one new message,” the phone declares then, and Matt finally picks it up and puts it to his ear. Frank’s got no super senses, can’t hear the voicemail, but when Matt lowers the phone there’s a funny look on his face. Something all conflicted and guilty-like.

“Bad news?” Frank asks.

“Technically not,” Matt says, and reaches up to rub his face under his glasses. “He gave in. We’re taking the case like I asked.”

“So what’s the problem?”

Matt turns, grips the edge of the counter ’til his knuckles go white.

“I think,” he says abruptly, “I’m slowly making him hate me and I don’t know how to stop.”

Frank stares at him. He doesn’t really know how to respond to that. Matt heaves a shaky breath.

“We’re meant to be rebuilding,” he continues, “I… I’m trying, or I thought I was, but then shit like this comes along and I just - don’t know how to deal with it. Keep somehow messing up and he pays the price every time. But I can’t just leave him out of it. He doesn’t want that either.”

“I don’t think Nelson hates you,” is all Frank can really come up with, based purely on the various things Karen has told him about them, because he really knows fuck-all about the two of them. As far as he was aware they were just his lawyers. But Matt shakes his head.

“You don’t know the half of what I’ve done to him. I’d hate me,” he says, something which Frank - who is starting to realise he’s spent far too much time around Curtis - finds profoundly telling. But he can’t think of anything really comforting to say, and after a second Matt turns and grabs his jacket from the back of the couch.

“I think I should go now,” he says, and Frank nods and goes to open the door.

This has been a weird, weird day.

He can’t believe it’s only been, what - five hours since he came home and had a total breakdown? He’s feeling way calmer now, but every now and then it pops into his head and gives him this guilty little shock. You slipped. You gave in. You killed six guys. Can’t just ignore that. And the dread comes crowding back in.

If he’s honest, he’s glad Matt showed up. It was nice - having a distraction. Just having someone else there. Knowing he’s not the only miserable bastard falling apart around here. Solidarity, or what fucking ever.

Now he watches Matt slink out the door - shoulders all hunched, cane tucked under his arm, and feels a sudden wave of something - not affection, not quite, but something close to empathy. Thinks of how he looked last night. Not like a hero vigilante but like all the soldiers Frank’s known who’ve just got back from war; beaten down, shell-shocked, head stuck somewhere else.

He grabs Matt’s arm before he really thinks about it.

“Murdock,” he hears himself say - Matt freezes, doesn’t turn towards him - “Take care of yourself.”
Matt lowers his head for a moment. Frank can feel him shaking. But after a moment he nods.

“You too, Frank,” he says quietly, and then slips away.

The door shuts. The apartment feels real quiet, and he slowly goes and sits down. Pip hops up on the couch next to him and Frank lets him rest his head on his lap. He finally picks up his phone and assesses the damage; it’s pretty bad, he needs to invest in one of those wallet cases. Whose bright fucking idea was it to get him an iPhone?

Still. The food, the conversation, has cleared his head. It’s easier to think now. He turns the phone over and over in his hands and thinks, you have a choice. Get better or get worse.

He thinks of Karen - his relief that she’s not angry, his guilt that she’s probably being way too understanding for her own good. Thinks about how even Matt didn’t come here and yell at him for fucking up. In the light of day, it’s a bit easier to see the bigger picture, beyond just that heated moment on the battlefield.

*You have it in you not to kill, come on. You’re not an animal. Red’s right. Don’t throw this away.*

And Karen - his thoughts keep circling back around to her. How she’d looked last night - broken, but brave - as she was telling him about her father he thinks he would’ve done anything in the world for her.

Karen and Nelson. He hadn’t expected that, and the thought makes something uneasy and jealous stir up in his gut. He swallows it down. *Don’t be an idiot-

It’s not like you were even looking for anything, just-

There’d always been something special between them, he doesn’t know. He’d always vaguely had the idea that once he came back to Hell’s Kitchen they’d get close again. That it’d be different now that he wasn’t the Punisher. Maybe even something close to normal. They could just - hang out, get to know each other. See what happened. He’d never dared wish for anything, but it’d still been there - the hope for a clear sky on the horizon.

Looks like he blew that. And he knows he’s gotta be happy for her, because Karen deserves the best and Nelson is a good guy, and sure as hell a safer one than he is. But he thinks of the look on Matt’s face when he said it - *Foggy and Karen are dating* - something a bit hesitant, a bit hurt, and maybe the two of them are more similar than he thought. After all, Karen’s Matt’s ex, it’s gotta be weird. Although he seemed more worried about his relationship with Nelson right now, anyway.

Either way, Frank thinks grimly, people like the two of them are too broken for relationships anyway. They’re both as messed up as each other.

Still.

Matt and his Foggy crisis has done one thing at least - made Frank sure as hell appreciate his own best friend a bit more. Curtis ain’t ever made him scared he’d give up on him, and he bites his lip and starts dialing the other man’s number. Thinks, *talk this through, get back on track, don’t throw this all away for nothing.* And for once he actually feels something like resolve for it, and something like relief to think he knows what he wants.
7. IN WHICH FOGGY IMMEDIATELY REGRETS CAVING

The next morning, Foggy arrives at work to what can best be described as a situation of excruciating, unresolved awkwardness.

He rang Karen last night to tell her they were taking the case, but they didn't really talk things out. Better to do that in person. She asked to come over; he said no. He needs time - time to clear his head.

Time to figure out how to broach the Frank Castle topic. Because at the end of the day, he can't order her to do anything. Doesn't want to be that guy, to try and control her life. He just - needs to figure out how to articulate his concerns, how to make sure she understands exactly why he's so set against this.

Except now he's pretty sure she thinks he's really pissed at her, and when he walks in she looks up from the front desk and there's a very frozen pause.

"Hey," Foggy says, a bit helplessly.

"Hey." She rises, hesitantly, starts towards him, then stops. Foggy closes the distance between them, leans in and gives her a kiss on the cheek. It's a far cry from their usual warm greetings. She looks like she didn't sleep much last night; he didn't either.

"Is Matt in?" he asks.

She nods, looking over his shoulder. He turns to find Matt standing in the doorway to his office, and swallows hard. They haven't talked either, not since Matt's rather unceremonious departure yesterday. It’s hard to pretend he’s not hurt that Matt ignored his calls yesterday and didn’t bother messaging him back.

There is a very, very awkward silence. Neither Karen or Foggy are looking at each other. After a second, Karen grabs a file from her desk and walks over to Matt, nudging it against his hand.

"I called the police station this morning. His name's Lester Cunningham. Everything we know's in there."

"Thanks," Matt says. He tilts his head and Foggy gets the distinct impression that he's doing the equivalent of looking between the two of them, trying to figure out what's going on, except without actually moving his eyes.

Karen, it seems, has decided Matt is the lifeboat that will save her from drowning in the tension between her and her boyfriend; she's fussing with his suit jacket, tucking in a stray label and picking a bit of lint off his shoulder, avoiding having to turn back and look at Foggy.

"Have I not dressed myself properly?" Matt asks after a second, with a faint smile tugging at his lips.

Karen's cheeks turn red and she steps back.

"No, you look good," she says, sheepishly.

Foggy stare at the two of them, a funny, tight feeling in his chest. There was just something so - comfortable and familiar about it. He just hates fighting with both of them, tells himself it's frustration that makes him want to walk up and-

And pull Karen away, or maybe pull Matt away, he's not quite sure, just - no more being the odd one
out. He doesn't know how, given that he knew both Matt and Matt's secret first, he still keeps feeling like he's the one who's out of the loop when it comes to this shit.

_Castle_, he thinks grimly, _they're both in with Castle and I'm not, that's why they're so buddy-buddy about all this._

That's not fair. He knows it's not like that, not really. He's just pissy because he's nervous about today, and worked up over yesterday, and anxious about how they're gonna get through all this.

"Tie match the suit?" Matt asks then, when no one speaks for a long, painful minute.

"It's black. I think it'd match most things," Karen replies.

Having exhausted all commentary about Matt's outfit, there's another very strained pause before Foggy steps forward impatiently and takes the files, shoving them in his messenger bag.

"C'mon, Matt, let's go," he says.

Karen bites her lip. For a second he thinks she's gonna say something, but she doesn't. Something faintly guilty bites at his heart, but he figures they'll talk later on.

Matt takes his arm and they head downstairs, out onto the street and towards the police station. Foggy's stewing, trying to figure if maybe Karen's still angry at him. Matt keeps lifting his head like he's gonna say something, but seems to think better of it every time. Something about that pisses Foggy off, just a little; he wishes Matt would stop walking on eggshells around them. In a normal friendship, he figures, Matt'd just out and ask what was up with him and Karen. He has to be curious.

Eventually Foggy breaks the silence. He can't help himself; a bit cattily, he asks, "So how was Castle?"

He feels Matt shoulders stiffen where their arms are touching.

"What?"

"You brought his dog back yesterday, didn't you?" Foggy points out. "How was he?"

Matt’s quiet for a moment, and Foggy hopes he’s not cooking up a lie. Tries to ignore the pang of hurt that that’s the first thing his mind goes to.

"He was," Matt says finally, "Surprisingly hospitable."

What the fuck does that even mean? Foggy pulls a horrible face and something must give it away, because Matt comes to a stop on the side of the street, forcing Foggy to stop too.

"Fog." There’s something quiet, earnest in it. "Do you trust my judgement?"

"I trust your ability to detect a lie," Foggy informs him, "But I have some serious doubts about your decision making!"

At least Matt’s self aware, because that actually makes him huff out a little laugh. The sight of him smiling, no matter how small, makes something ease a little in Foggy’s chest.

"Fair enough. Well, from everything I can tell, I don’t think Castle killed those men last night for the
hell of it. He really is trying to turn over a new leaf.’’

“So why even go with you that night?” Foggy asks, a bit brokenly. Like legit, this entire situation is just breaking his brain slowly. And his heart, and his relationship with Karen.

“Because...” Matt hesitates. He’s got that look on his face like he knows what he wants to say but has to spend a minute working up the courage to get personal. Foggy softens a little; it’s... hard, sometimes, for all of them. To explain themselves, to be patient enough to listen and open enough to try and understand.

A crowd of tourists comes down the sidewalk; Foggy tugs Matt’s arm lightly to steer them both out of the way. The movement brings them closer together and he feels Matt’s chest heave as he sucks in a shaky breath.

“It’s hard sometimes. Getting out. Especially for someone like Castle who barely has anyone else. Back when I stopped being Daredevil, it... it wasn’t easy. There were some nights I just couldn’t stop myself going out there. I could tell, Foggy, he was nervous. He knew he shouldn’t be doing it. And in the end I’m glad he was there. He saved my life. Yeah, I wish he hadn’t killed them, but I could very well be dead if he wasn’t around.”

Well, shit. He hadn’t realised the situation got that dire, and it makes his heart skip another beat; he doesn’t like to think about it sometimes, how easily he could lose Matt. Especially because he knows already how much it hurts.

“Dude,” he manages, “You need body armour.”

Matt laughs again.

“Yeah, well you find me a guy who makes it and I’m happy to try.”

“At least a bulletproof vest. Even Castle was smart enough to have one of those.”

“Maybe.” They start walking again. Foggy wonders, if he asked Matt to help him keep Karen away from Castle, what would he say? Would he agree? Or would it be like yesterday all over again?

They’re nearing the police station when Matt, who’s been quiet and broody the last few blocks, pulls to a stop and says, so softly Foggy barely hears it, “Hey, also...”

“You okay? Also, maybe don’t stop right in the middle of the footpath.”

They move aside. Matt’s fiddling with the strap on his cane.

"I just," he says finally, "Wanted... wanted to say sorry. For how things played out. I know you put up with a lot, and I- I appreciate it. I know I don't say it often enough. I don't want to fight with you.”

Foggy stares at him. Damn it - where's this coming from? There's something about the look on Matt's face that makes him think there's something he's missing. Something still unspoken between them. At some point, he knows, they needa just sit down and have a big, open chat, but there is approximately zero chance of Matt ever doing that. Foggy just needs to try find a new angle. If things are really different between them now, if they really are fine - you'd think they'd be able to talk.
For now, all he can do is take a deep breath.

"I know I get annoyed sometimes," he replies, softly, "But I knew what I was getting into when I agreed to all this. Thank you, though. It's fine."

Matt looks pained.

"If there was any other way to do this, I'd take it," he insists. "But after Fisk, I just - I can't trust anyone else to do this. He bought out so many people. Even in-

He breaks off. There's a haunted note to his voice that Foggy doesn't like. Sometimes he wonders what all the other things Matt isn't telling him are - not the big secrets, the ones that affect all of them, but the little ones he's carrying around. The things he's seen on the streets, the things that've happened to him, the blood he's shed that no one else sees in the dark. Things he doesn't want to talk about and Foggy's scared to dredge up.

He reaches out and squeezes Matt's shoulder.

"We'll deal with it," he says firmly, "Together. C'mon."

Whatever Matt hears in his heartbeat must tell him Foggy means it; his lips twitch up a little. Foggy's just happy to see him smile again. Matt takes his arm again, and they head inside together.

Lester Cunningham is a small, weaselly little man with a big nose and huge, watery eyes. He's jittery, shifting in his chair like he's sitting on hot coals, with dark shadows under his eyes. His skin is waxy and pallid, his hair sticking to his forehead in greasy curls.

He's being charged with manufacturing and distributing drugs. It's his first offence - otherwise, he's a well-respected chemistry professor at a local community college.

Foggy doesn't need superpowers to tell he's shitting himself. For the last thirty minutes his gaze has been darting between the two of them, licking his lips nervously, flinching at every sudden movement or raised voice. They've been wearing him down slowly - gently - trying to coax out of him why he was with those guys in the first place, but he's been surprisingly close-lipped, insisting no one can help him, that he brought this on himself, that he doesn't want to take a deal, that whatever punishment society doles out, he'll accept.

He’s been getting steadily shakier since Matt started asking if there’s someone he’s trying to protect from the gang, someone they’re holding over him. A girl, Foggy remembers Matt telling him earlier. Lester’s near breaking point - staring down at the table, fists clenched.

“Whatever you say to us,” Matt says then, “It doesn’t leave this room. You don’t have to be afraid, not with the two of us. Attorney-client privilege. If we know the facts, we can help you. Whoever they are - we can work with you to protect them. We have connections. The Hellhounds won’t touch them–”

“You don’t understand!” Lester blurts out.

It’s the loudest he’s spoken all afternoon. He looks up, eyes wide and frantic now.
“You can’t help me,” he continues, hysterically, “No one can. You… you don’t know how big they are. What they’ll do to anyone who spills. I’m not safe, not even here. They have people everywhere, eyes everywhere. Not just in the streets. In the schools, the hospitals, the police. Every time they absorb another gang they get hold of all their contacts too. The second they started to gain ground, it was over. They don’t just wanna sell drugs here, they want to run Hell’s Kitchen. There’s nothing anyone can do to stop them because the second you end up on their radar, they find what you love most and get a hold of it—”

His voice breaks. He looks like he’s about to burst into tears.

Foggy can barely move. He thinks Matt must be able to hear his heart hammering too. It’s stressful - that’s a fucking understatement - but he forces himself to keep breathing calmly - in, out, in, out - because he’s thinking, there’s no way, there’s no fucking way that a gang of dealers who were barely on the police radar until two months ago have gained that much power in so little time.

Fisk was a slow burn. Fisk had a plan in place for years. He stacked all the dominos so he could send them tumbling down later on.

These guys… it’s more likely they’re giving the illusion of power. It doesn’t matter how tough you really are - just how tough people think you are. That’s part of why Matt wore the suit, right? A symbol. Something to scare people.

Or at least, that’s what Foggy would like to believe, because the alternative - that somehow this has been brewing for ages and now it’s too damn late to stop - it’s too much for him to handle at the moment.

He turns to Matt, hoping he’s got a way to play this, only to freeze. Matt’s staring straight ahead, mouth pulled into a tight line. He’s not even pretending to look in their client’s direction, and under the table his fingers are digging into his own leg. He doesn’t speak, and after a minute Foggy jumps in and takes over.

“Mr Cunningham, I know you’re scared, but it’s very clear you’re being threatened here. Give us something, anything, that can help you in court and—”

“You don’t get it,” Lester says brokenly, “I don’t want to go to court. I’m guilty. I want to go to jail. It’s marginally safer in there than out here.”

“If they have that many people held hostage,” Foggy tries to say, reasonably, “They must have somewhere they’re keeping them all. Hell’s Kitchen isn’t that big. There isn’t some big underground dungeon they could be using—”

Something flickers in Lester’s face. Even Foggy catches it. Then he takes a deep breath and seems to deliberately calm himself down.

“They’ve infested this city like rats,” Lester says miserably, “They have free run of the place. They have more ground than you think, people just don’t know they’re—”

He breaks off, looking horrified.

“I said too much. He’ll know somehow, he always does. Please, just - leave me alone. I don’t want lawyers, I don’t want to talk to anyone.”

He does start crying then - curled in on himself, little shuddering sobs. Matt stands abruptly and Foggy looks up at him.
“We’re done here,” he says abruptly, and power-walks so fast out of the room that he barely uses his cane. Foggy stares - then quickly starts packing up, shoving all their papers away and hurrying after him.

“Matt!” he calls. He gets out of the interrogation room, nearly crashing into two police officers. They exchange a rather stunned look before he turns just in time to see Matt vanishing down the hall and into the bathroom.

Foggy hurries in after him. He’s careful to shut the door behind him, then he turns and freezes.

Matt’s standing, hands braced against the sink, shoulders hunched and head hanging down low. He’s breathing so fast that even from here Foggy can see his shoulders rising, falling, rising, falling, faster and faster.

“Matt?” he says tentatively, stepping towards him.

Matt doesn’t look up. When Foggy reaches towards him, he flinches and one arm shoots up; their forearms knock together and Foggy pulls back.

“Sorry,” he blurts out, “Sorry-”

His heart’s pounding. He feels - sick, and helpless, doesn’t know what to do here. And thing is, for the last few years Matt’s default state of being ranges from ‘mildly stressed’ to ‘falling the fuck apart’, but he always pretends he’s fine. So it’s pretty terrifying, now, to see him so clearly freaking out.

Matt’s jaw clenches.

“It’s fine,” he chokes out, “It’s not you, sorry, I just can’t-”

“Can I touch you?” Foggy asks. He doesn’t know what to do with his hands. Matt doesn’t answer, and after a second Foggy inches a bit closer.

He’s had enough panic attacks himself to know what one looks like. Matt’s eyes are squeezed shut, and his scarred knuckles are clenched so tightly around the edge of the sink that they’ve turned white. After a second he reaches up and loosens his tie, then undoes the top button of his shirt.

“Matt?” Foggy forces his voice to remain firm and calm. “Gotta slow down, buddy. Focus on my breathing, yeah?”

He puts a hand on Matt’s shoulder - slowly, carefully - and isn’t knocked back this time. Closing his own eyes, he focuses on breathing in and out - slowly, exaggerated, really channeling his inner Darth Vader. He’s sure Matt must be able to tell that his heart’s beating out of control anyway, but hopes he can somehow tune that out.

“In,” he guides, slowly. He hides his own panic about the situation by aiming for a tone somewhere in the vicinity of ‘yoga instructor’. “Out. That’s right. In… hold it… and out, slowly now. That’s it, you’re doing amazing. In… hold it…”

He feels himself start to calm down as well. This is what he’s good at, after all. Holding it the fuck together while trying to stop everyone else around him just going totally ballistic. As he watches, Matt’s breathing slows. He stops trembling so much under Foggy’s touch. His head’s still lowered, and Foggy wishes he could see the other man’s face, but after a while he thinks the worst of it’s passed. He stops counting. Runs his hand soothingly over Matt’s back.
Finally, Matt clears his throat. The sound echoes around the small bathroom.

“Thanks, Foggy,” he whispers. Foggy has to lean in to hear. “I’m okay.”

Foggy raises his eyebrows. He knows that feeling - the crushing dread, the throat closing up - Matt’s never said anything about panic attacks before, but given what he knows about Karen, given what all of them have been through, he’d be surprised if that was the first time.

“Take a second,” he suggests.

Matt nods. He takes off his glasses and splashes his face with water. In the split second before he puts them back on, Foggy catches a glimpse of his eyes in the mirror - wide, haunted - for a second he looks so fucking young.

Finally he takes a step back, fumbling for his cane, which is leaning against the wall of the nearest stall. There’s a very awkward moment in which Foggy realises, upsettingly, that Matt’s clenched jaw is screaming that he’s embarrassed.

“The counting helps,” he supplies, “My therapist taught me that.”

That doesn’t seem to help. Matt turns his head away a little.

“It’s stupid,” he begins, and Foggy jumps in real quick to shut that down.

“No, it isn’t,” he says fiercely, “You know how many nights me and Karen wake each other up with some sort of freak out? We’re human, Matt, I’d be more worried if the shit we’ve been through didn’t affect us.”

Matt nods, but Foggy knows him well enough to tell it’s that particular ‘I hear ya but I’m not actually listening’ nod. He steps closer.

“What was it?” he prompts. “That guy…”

“The Hellhounds,” Matt blurts out. And shit, he must really be rattled, because Foggy was expecting him to refuse to talk about what caused him to freak out at all, “Lester wasn’t lying. He… he really is that scared of them. Everything he said… they’re the next Fisk. It’s happening all over again. They’ve got people everywhere and- and when we go after them…”

He trails off, but Foggy knows where he’s going with that.

*It’ll be like last time. Foiled at every turn. There’ll be casualties.*

And the thing is… the thing is, he knows Matt’s just as human as the rest of them, but Foggy’s rarely seen him in action as Daredevil. It’s mostly been grainy security cam footage on the news. The way Matt’s done things - so secretly, so Lone Wolf - it’s made it seem like Daredevil’s this other, dark entity, something consuming, something that wants to be out there in the dark-

So it’s unsettling to realise that Matt’s scared. That he’s fucking terrified about this new threat, that contrary to what Foggy’s sort of vaguely thought, he doesn’t actually want to be out there. Not now. Not against this.

Foggy takes a deep breath. Keeps his voice steady. Thinks, *if we both freak out, this isn’t gonna go well.*

And it kind of kills him to do it, because the last time he handed Matt the suit he didn’t sleep for
months afterwards, convinced he’d been the one who killed his best friend-

But he steps forward and puts his hands on Matt’s shoulders.

“Lester wasn’t lying, because he believed what he was saying,” he says firmly, “But that doesn’t mean it’s true. Look, Matt, there’s no way a gang of meth dealers got that big so quickly without you or anyone else noticing. You’ve been after them since they popped up! They’re talking a big talk, that’s all. I’m not saying underestimate them, not at all, but you’re not alone in this. And after all those corrupt agents got cleaned out after Fisk, there’s no way they’ve infiltrated all of law enforcement.”

Matt bites his lip; doesn’t answer.

“You’re not dealing with this alone,” Foggy continues. “We’ll sort this out. We’ll do it carefully, together. We’ll work everything out. Take it one step at a time.”

Matt finally nods. After a second - and to Foggy’s shock, quite honestly - he leans forward, and drops his head down to rest it against Foggy’s shoulder. Foggy freezes - then shifts a little, and wraps his arms around Matt instead, holds him close.

It’s rare that Matt will reach out like this. Foggy’s usually the tactile one, and even then they haven’t been as touchy recently as they were years ago, back when everything was normal. A wave of emotions passes through him, nearly sweeping him off his feet. Shock - relief - affection - all of them close to overwhelming.

“Thanks,” Matt whispers, and Foggy hugs him closer. When they pull apart, just a little, there’s a strange look on Matt’s face. He swallows hard, opens his mouth like he’s gonna say something-

The bathroom door swings open. Both of them jump hard, and a police officer sweeps in. He gives the two of them a very strange look, then a sort of macho nod, and then goes to the urinal and starts pissing.

Foggy glances at Matt and has to bite back a swell of hysterical laughter. Whatever Matt was about to say, the moment’s been ruined. He offers Matt his arm.

“C’mon.”
That whole Hand business was just as bad as everything that went on with Fisk. He doesn’t like the look on Matt’s face.

“Well,” he manages, “Don’t rush into anything. Let’s do more recon first. Confirm that’s where their bases are and Karen and I can start looking into the connections these guys actually have. We have the names of everyone the police brought in last night. We can start digging into which civilians they’ve been in touch with. Start mapping out how many of them there actually are.”

Matt nods. It’s a start, but he doesn’t look happy, and Foggy feels a growing unease.

“Let’s get back to the firm,” he says. “Tell Karen how it all went.”

Matt nods. He extends his cane and Foggy pats him on the shoulder.

“You go on ahead,” he says, “I gotta go tell Brett this guy doesn’t want us representing him.”

It’s not a lie - but it’s technically a half-truth, and he sees Matt hesitate and wonders if he’ll call him out on it. But after a second Matt nods and starts tapping his way down the footpath.

_Probably wants some alone time too_, Foggy thinks.

He waits until Matt is out of sight. Then he walks around the back of the police station, takes a deep breath-

And practically doubles over, the wind gone out of him, hands braced against his knees, trembling.


It was an effort to hold it all together. To stand there and calm Matt down and see how fucking freaked he was and not think, if Daredevil doesn’t think he can deal with this, we’re probably all completely fucked.

With every word Cunningham said Foggy was just - desperately compartmentalising. Telling himself _it’s not all true and we’re gonna deal with this_ and trying steadfastly _not_ to think about the fact that _it’s happening again, just like I thought, just like Matt thinks_

Another big threat to the city. Another mess they’re gonna get dragged into. Another chance that any of them, _all_ of them, could get seriously hurt and die.

Like, break’s over, guys. Back to fighting a war you never wanted to be a part of.

He’s fucking terrified. The scar on his shoulder throbs, a phantom ache, and his own breath starts coming hard and fast. He tries to count, but he can’t focus. It all comes spilling out, everything he swallowed down for the last forty minutes, telling himself furiously, _not in front of Matt. Not in front of Matt._

He’s terrified, and hates that Matt is scared too, that _all_ of them are clearly so very _not ready_ for this. Fisk has been put away for months and they’re still unprepared. They needed longer - to prepare, to heal, to ease back into this-

And the truth is, for all his fine words, he doesn’t know if they can do this. Not because he thinks the Hellhounds are that powerful, that’s not even it.
He just thinks none of them are ready. That they’ll shatter under the weight of this. He just doesn’t know who’ll give first - him, or Karen, or Matt - the fact that every one of them is a likely candidate is also not reassuring.

*We shouldn’t have gotten involved in this.*

But it’s too late now. He stands there and tries to calm down and fumbles into his pocket, pulls out his phone, pulls up Karen’s contact details-

And then hesitates.

She’s been his anchor lately, his first port of call. But suddenly it all feels very fragile. Suddenly he’s not *sure* what’s going through her head. Suddenly, he can’t bring himself to look *weak* in front of her.

They need to talk first. They need to sort all this out.

And maybe there’s something a little self-destructive in it - or maybe it’s some stupid, desperate need to prove that he doesn’t need help, that he’s strong too…

Or maybe it’s just petty. Maybe he just wants to pull a Matt and wall himself off and think *fine then, I’ll be on my own*.

He turns off his phone, and puts it back in his pocket, and slides down with his back to the wall until he’s sitting on the ground, breathing in, out, in, out, feeling desperately alone, trying not to drown.
8. LOOK KAREN IS TRYING HER BEST OKAY

Alone in the office, Karen sits, stares at her phone, and wonders exactly how bad an idea it would be to text Frank.

Look. Okay. She knows, objectively, that it’s just gonna add fuel to the fire. That the last thing she should be doing is stirring up shit. Just - there's a lot going on here, alright?

She stares down at the screen. There's only a single message in their history - 'Here's my number' - and she gnaws at her lip. Starts to type, then deletes it. Put the phone down. Puts her head in her hands.

She couldn't sleep last night. Her bed felt too cold and lonely, and she was worked up over her fight with Foggy. When she did manage to drop off she got about three hours, ridden with nightmares, before waking in a cold sweat. Her head's throbbing now; she's jittery and running on nothing but caffeine. Everyone gives her coffee making a bad rap but Matt brews it so dark it literally feels like drinking a heart attack. She supposes he must need it, given that between work and Daredevilling she's not actually sure where he finds time to sleep.

_Foggy._ Her heart aches. She flips her phone over. It feels like a betrayal. It shouldn't, because... things aren't like that, with her and Frank. He's not the other guy. Foggy would be just as pissed if Matt was hanging out with him.

_Except he's not dating Matt, is he? It's not the same thing at all._

She'd been annoyed yesterday. It's stupid, she doesn't know why, just - Matt was gone for so long and she'd really thought that Foggy would listen to reason. It had stung - to realise she didn't know him as well as she thought she did. Had made her for a second feel, absurdly, like the odd one out, like those early days when it was Nelson and Murdock and the two of them had shared jokes, shared history, and she was the new girl. The third wheel.

Joke was on all of them, in the end, when it turned out Matt had more skeletons in his closet than either of them could ever have guessed. When it turned out Karen did, too.

So maybe the joke's just on Foggy.

The guilt bites at her again. She picks up her phone. Stares at the numbers till they swim in front of her. The contact name reads 'Pete Casteglione.' Frank's always been one to take precautions.

Her stomach twists. She feels torn, and hates that she is. Hates they couldn't work things out yesterday. Everything was just - too easy, she should've known it'd all fall apart. But it'd been nice, for a little while, hadn't it? To pretend that she and Foggy could make things work, that it was enough to bond over their past trauma, that they could make each other feel better. A little bubble, just the two of them.

A bubble that Matt and Frank have proceeded to burst. It was inevitable, but she wishes they could've had it just a little while longer. Enough, maybe, to make things work. Their relationship still feels very new and fragile.

They have a history of letting Foggy down. He doesn’t deserve this. But still - she can’t stop herself, has this lingering feeling that Frank is part of this, _needs_ to be part of this - she can’t abandon him,
can’t leave him alone, out in the cold. Same way she knows Foggy will never leave Matt, no matter how many times he gets burned.

Maybe, she thinks grimly, this is what it feels like to be Matt. To know you’re making the world’s shittiest decision that will drive everyone else away and be unable to stop yourself anyway.

She pulls up Frank’s number. Starts typing. Pretends she knows what she’s doing here and isn’t just running headfirst and screaming into the first bad idea she sees.

‘Hope you’re okay after the other night. Remember, I’m always here if you want to talk about anything.’

She hits send before she can second-guess herself, then shoves the phone across her desk. Her heart’s pounding and she doesn’t know why. He probably doesn’t even have his phone on him, she thinks, and gets back to her laptop. Pretends she’s not glancing at the phone every two seconds waiting for a reply.

It’s maybe ten minutes before the screen lights up, but she forces herself to keep working, to finish what she’s doing before she lets herself pick it up to check.

‘Thanks Karen. And I’m sorry.’

She frowns a little.

‘For what?’

This time it’s five minutes before he replies, but she doesn’t go back to work, just sits and waits.

‘Disappointing you. I said I was out of all this. I thought I was.’

She’s still thinking about her reply a minute later when another message pops up.

‘Everything’s been strange since I got back to Hell’s Kitchen. I’m still figuring things out. Sometimes I don’t know what’s me and what’s just habit.’

She bites her lip, her heart aching for him. Wonders where he is now - in his car? At home? On his lunch break at work? Imagines him hunched over his phone, trying to figure out how to put into words the turmoil he must be feeling.

‘Frank… I know you. You have a good heart.’

‘Karen…’ Even across text, it sounds pained.

‘It’s true. Matt said you helped him that night. Thank you. I believe you thought you were doing the right thing.’

‘It’s not black and white.’ She can see him still typing, and waits as more messages flood in.

‘I do what’s effective.’

‘A lot of people wouldn’t say I’m right, Murdock included.’

‘How many second chances should one person get?’

She doesn’t know what to say to that. They could start some sort of philosophical debate about this, but she doesn’t particularly want to do it over text. They need to be face to face, so he can look into
her eyes and know she means everything she’s saying.

Finally, she takes a deep breath and writes, ‘I’m not giving up on you.’

There’s a long pause before the next message.

‘Thanks. That means a lot - really.’

She tucks her phone away and lets out a shaky sigh, leaning over and resting her head in her hands.

She wants to ask him to visit, but she can’t. Not until she talks to Foggy, at least. And once, she wouldn’t have had any qualms about just going off and doing whatever the fuck she wants, but - not now. She knows that’s crossing a line, and she loves Foggy enough not to do that. She wants to fix this.

But it’s so hard.

She doesn’t want to go into that conversation with her sole goal being to convince Foggy. That’s not fair to him.

At the same time, she knows she won’t stay away from Frank. She can’t. She just - needs Foggy to understand what she sees in him. How important he is to her. Because even now, after their little text conversation, she’s settled a little. She thinks, he’s somewhere out there too, and they’ve both got rough edges but they’re both still here. Both still okay.

If she believes in him, that he can do this, that he has a chance to come back from the edge and live-

She can believe in herself, too. That she’s not a scared girl anymore. That she’s not just an addict or a killer or the woman who drove all her own family away from her. She’s someone who deserves to live, to be loved, just like he is.

She feels upset suddenly, on the verge of tears, but takes a shaky breath and goes to make another coffee and gets back to work - slowly, a little distracted - trying not to think too hard about what she’ll do if this mess doesn’t somehow work out in her favour.

Matt returns to the office first, alone.

“How’d it go?” Karen asks, looking up at him. “Where’s Foggy?”

Matt gives a little smile. His face is hard to read with his glasses on.

“Fine,” he replies, “He just stopped to talk to Brett about something.”

Karen nods. She watches as he heads into his office and then stands there, fussing around with something on his desk. He seems distracted, and there’s something very tired about him - a slow lethargy to his movements. Then again, he always looks exhausted lately.

For a little while, after they put Fisk away again, it’d seemed like he was getting better. They all were. The cuts and bruises healed and he’d been on time to work every day and he’d lost that haggard, gaunt look that he’d had ever since coming back from the dead.
But it didn’t last. He’d plateaued, for a little while, then the slow backslide had begun again. She doesn’t know what’s happening, but she’s worried.

After a second she rises and goes to the door of his office, knocking gently even though he must know she’s there.

“Hey,” she says, “Have you eaten?”

Matt looks up. He shakes his head, hesitantly, and Karen holds out a hand.

“Come on. Me either. Let’s go.”

“I brought something.” It sounds a bit like an excuse, and she steps closer. He looks rattled. She wonders what happened at the meeting. A terrible part of her - a part she’s ashamed of - almost hopes Foggy won’t be back for a little while. She doesn’t want to face him just yet.

You need to stop running away from things.

“Me too. We can still eat together.”

She walks out before he has a chance to refuse. After a second he follows her into the kitchen.

“I’m really into meal prep lately,” she says, taking her lunch out of the fridge. Better to start things off with the world’s most banal conversation.

“You don’t get sick of eating the same thing every day?” Matt asks, which Karen thinks is a little rich coming from the person who makes the world’s most boring fucking sandwiches.

“Sometimes,” she admits, “But it’s just - being organised. It feels good. Everything… everything was just so chaotic, for so long. I like having some sense of order in my life now. A routine is good. Feeling like everything’s lined up and not just spiralling out of control…”

“Stability,” Matt says, his face softening a little, and she nods.

Well. That went from ordinary to deep way too fucking fast. They sit down and start eating in what Karen hopes is a companionable silence. It’s hard to tell with Matt sometimes. There is a thin line between thoughtful and broody when it comes to him.

After a while she notices that, while he’s not glancing at her, mostly because it would be pointless - he keeps hesitating between bites. Like he wants to say something but then keeps changing his mind.

“Spit it out,” she says - Matt raises his eyebrows, and then his sandwich, and she laughs. “Not your lunch, whatever you’re avoiding saying.”

Matt laughs a bit awkwardly. He pauses a moment, then says, quietly, “You and Foggy gonna be alright?”

Karen bites her lip.

“I hope so,” she admits, “But I… I don’t know how to explain things to him sometimes. It’s not his fault, it’s just - a lot of baggage that I don’t wanna load on his shoulders, but I can’t hide it from him either.”

“I feel that,” Matt murmurs - and thing is, he does. He understands more than probably anyone, and she feels suddenly very close to him.
“The problem is, I know exactly why he doesn’t like Frank. If I was Foggy I wouldn’t like him either. And he… he had a point the other day. That we seem to spend all our time convincing him to change his mind and he just has to go along with it. I don’t want our relationship to be like that. But this isn’t something I think I can compromise on. I just feel trapped.” Tears rise in her eyes again and she doesn’t bother trying to hide them. Matt will be able to tell either way. “It’s not his fault, none of it is, and I hate that I’m putting him in this position. So it just - sucks.”

“Foggy loves you,” Matt says softly.

“I know,” she replies, “I do, but he’s - he’s been through a lot. Everyone has a breaking point.”

She says it without really thinking about it, but a look flashes across Matt’s face. Something sad, guilty, something young and terrified. She doesn’t know how to interpret it.

“Sorry for prying,” he says after a moment, like he wants to end the conversation then and there, but Karen shakes her head.

“It’s hardly prying,” she points out. “Our relationship affects you too.”

“It shouldn’t,” he replies instantly, “I don’t want to be involved in it.”

Karen stares at him - startled, a little hurt. Something about the way he said it - curt and halting, like he was trying to shove her away with the words - but his head snaps up as he reads her reaction.

“No, Karen,” he adds, a bit desperately, “I didn’t mean it like that. You two are the closest people to me in all the world. But when it comes to you and Foggy… don’t do anything on my account. I just - I fuck up everything I touch. I don’t want to ruin what you two have as well.”

“You don’t,” she starts, but he holds up a hand.

“I appreciate it, but I do. Look objectively at the last couple of years, Karen, and so much of what went wrong goes back to me. I lied to Foggy for years, I got Fisk on his back by visiting him in prison, I didn’t tell either of you I was alive. Hell, look at us. I’m the reason we broke up. Everything that went wrong, it was all on me. I didn’t tell you I was Daredevil, or about Elektra or the Hand…”

He trails off. There’s a lump in Karen’s throat that’s making it hard to breathe.

She cares about Matt, probably too much. Hell, her insistence on keeping his flat for his inevitable return was objectively pretty unhealthy. And yeah, occasionally it crosses her mind, what if we hadn’t broken up? How would things have changed? How would Midland have changed?

Something niggles at her - something half-forgotten, something he might’ve said that night they got so drunk - but she can’t remember, just knows it’s something shadowy and uneasy. After a moment she swallows.

“I do too,” she whispers, “Honestly, Matt, bad luck and danger seem to follow me everywhere. I got my brother killed, and Ben, and nearly Ellison. But I have to believe that… that it doesn’t mean we don’t deserve to be happy.”

He gives a tight, unhappy smile.

“Yeah, well. You and Foggy is you and Foggy. You know what they say. Three’s a crowd.”

Again, there’s a note in his voice that’s strange, strained. She can’t figure it out. They’re sitting there, staring at each other in a slightly awkward silence, when the door opens and Foggy comes in.
Karen jumps a little. They both turn, almost guiltily, though Matt must’ve heard him coming - Foggy smiles when he sees them, but Karen knows him well enough that she can tell he’s stressed out about something.

“Hey,” he says.

Karen smiles back. She hates that she feels nervous, unsure where they stand with each other. Matt starts to rise, gesturing for Foggy to sit instead, but Foggy stops him with a raised hand.

‘We’ll talk later,’ he mouths to Karen. She wonders if Matt picked up on that at all, but gives a small nod in return.

“How’d it go?” she asks, now that both of them are back.

“Well, he doesn’t want a lawyer,” Foggy declares, as he grabs his own lunch and drags a chair to join them. “He’s too scared of the Hellhounds. Was very tight-lipped, so we didn’t get much out of him, but we think the Hellhounds are operating from somewhere underground.”

“He didn’t give anything away about how he got dragged into things with them?” Karen asks - Foggy shakes his head, and she sighs. “That’s a bit of a dead end, then. Well, he’s still the only civilian who we can directly tie to the Hounds, so I’ve set up a meeting with one of his close colleagues at the college. Hopefully we can figure out how he ended up on their radar.”

“We should look into the women in his life, too,” Foggy points out. “Surely someone else would’ve noticed by now if one of them was missing.”

“You don’t necessarily need to be holding someone hostage to threaten them,” Matt points out. “But yeah, that’s a good idea. If we can find out who the girl he’s worried about is, she might know something about who’s threatening them.”

They spend the rest of the afternoon drawing up plans, researching - finding as many names as possible that could be new avenues for information. It feels nice, this. The three of them. At least, a bit. Maybe that’s kind of fucked up considering what they’re dealing with here, but Karen can’t help but think that it feels like those early days - all of them working together to investigate something, like when they finally all came together to first take down Fisk, except a bit more low-stakes.

Matt and Foggy don’t seem to think so, though. They’re both a little quiet and subdued, and Karen wonders why they seem so much more worried about this than she is.

Evening falls slowly, the summer sun draining away into the sky, the city settling first with rush hour, and then the gentle quieting as the shops begin to close. They could work through the night, but they’re all exhausted, and Foggy’s the one to finally push his chair back.

“Let’s call it a night,” he declares. “We’ve got a lot to go on.”

Karen nods. Their eyes meet, and there’s an awkward moment in which they both stare at each other, the unspoken questions hanging between them. Are we going home together? Will we talk?

She turns to Matt.

“Are you going out tonight?”

She expects a quick answer, but there’s a very strange moment in which he seems to hesitate, a funny look passing over his face, before he says, “Yeah.”
Karen frowns. They start packing up, and it’s when Foggy’s gone to his office to grab his jacket that she catches Matt by the arm as he starts turning off all the lights.

“Hey,” she says quietly, “You okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he asks, and her frown deepens.

“Dodging the question’s really not reassuring, Matt,” she points out. There’s definitely something wrong. He’s not even bothering to turn his face towards her like he usually does, just staring straight ahead. “I’m serious, what’s wrong?”

It takes him a long moment, but when he answers she knows he’s not lying.

“I’m feeling a bit… out of it lately. I… maybe it’s not a good idea to go out tonight. But if I don’t I’ll feel guilty.”

“Oh, Matt.” She moves closer to him, wants to reach out and touch him - cup his cheek, or run a hand down his arm - but in the corner of her eye she sees Foggy emerging from his office, and suddenly, strangely, the motion seems too intimate. She doesn’t know why, it’s not like she doesn’t touch Matt. They both do. But something rings in her head, out of nowhere. *Three’s a crowd.* It makes her heart sink a little and she can’t explain why. “You don’t have to go out every single night.”

“I can hear it all happening, Karen. Robberies, assaults, not to mention everything the Hellhounds are doing out in the streets.”

“It’s no good if you burn yourself out,” she starts, but he’s already shaking his head.

“I’m okay.” She can tell he’s regretting saying anything. “I’ll just do a short patrol.”

“Hey,” Foggy calls out, coming up to them. “Don’t go underground, alright? Wait until we know more.”

“Of course.” Matt lingers for a moment, like he thinks someone’s gonna add more, then says an awkward goodnight and leaves in a rush, like a startled bird. They’re left standing there staring after him.

“He’s not okay,” Foggy says, abruptly, after an appropriate period of time to let Matt get out of earshot. “He freaked out back at the police station.”

“What?”

“He had a panic attack.” Foggy’s face is tight and drawn. “Cunningham wouldn’t stop going on about how powerful the Hounds are, how they have people everywhere just like Fisk does, and he just - freaked out.”

Karen doesn’t know what to say. She presses a hand over her mouth, trying not to let her worry rise up and consume her. Beside her, Foggy’s fists are clenching.

“This was a bad idea,” he says flatly, “I don’t know if we’re ready to tackle something big like this. Not after Fisk. We need more time.”

She looks over at him. His eyes are shadowed and haunted, the same look he gets at night when he wakes up screaming, rubbing the scar on his shoulder. The lump rises again in her throat.
“Are you okay?” she whispers. She wants to touch him, to hold him, but is suddenly scared.

Foggy shakes his head, his eyes hard.

“Let’s go home,” he says, abruptly. “We need to talk.”

After a very contemplative cab ride back to Foggy’s place, Karen comes to a decision. Something feels disconcertingly formal about the way they enter in silence, put all their stuff down and then sit at the table opposite each other like they’re about to have a business meeting, but she almost immediately reaches out and puts her hand over his on the table.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “About yesterday, and about how everything turned out. I mean it.”

Foggy seems taken aback. He looks up at her and must see in her eyes that she’s genuine. His face softens a little.

“Thanks,” he says. “I’m sorry too. I shouldn’t have stormed out like that.”

“You needed space. I get it.” A tension seems to melt off her shoulders, just a little. “I shouldn’t have sprung the news that Frank was back on you like that. You had a right to be mad.”

Foggy nods. They sit quietly for a moment, processing, his thumb stroking gently across the back of her hand. She gives him time to think, sits there studying his face. His hair is growing out a little, though nowhere near as long as it was before. A few loose strands hang over his forehead, and with his collar undone and tie loosened, he looks suddenly very young. There are dark shadows under his eyes and a tightness around his mouth, and suddenly she wishes she could pull him close, bury her face in his shoulder, hold him - warm, soft Foggy, who always feels like safety and home - wishes he’d tell her everything will be okay, wishes she could believe it.

“Today was bad,” Foggy says, finally, and runs his hand over his face tiredly. “I… I don’t like any of this, Karen, with the gangs and us looking into it… seeing Matt freak out today really got to me. We need to hold it together, all of us. And I… I need you, if we’re gonna make it through this. I need to know we’re here for each other, because I can’t do this alone. None of us can.”

“Of course I’m here,” she whispers, tears springing to her eyes.

“This thing with Castle,” he says, and he doesn’t sound angry now - just hesitant, and a little sad - “Can you leave it alone?”

“I can’t, Foggy.” She’s getting tearful now, and hates it. It makes her feel weak, and far too vulnerable. “I’m sorry. I know it’s not what you want to hear, but I just - can’t.”

“I just don’t understand why he’s so important to you.”

“I…”

She trails off. She can’t put it into words, can’t find a reason that doesn’t sound totally ridiculous. Frank’s a lifeline in the darkness, but she can’t say why being around him makes her feel safe. Makes her feel like she isn’t alone. And if she says only that, she knows what Foggy will think. What about
me? Aren’t I enough for you?

She’s left staring helplessly at him, and his face crumples a little.

“I want to understand,” he urges, “But you’re not giving me much to work with here.”

“I don’t know,” she says miserably, “We just - connected.”

“Connected.”

“I trust him, and he trusts me. After all we’ve been through, that’s hard to come by.” She squeezes his hand tightly; she knows this isn’t what he wants to hear. “Foggy, what are you so scared of? That he’ll hurt me? Because he wouldn’t. He’s never laid a hand on me.”

“No. Not that.”

“Then what? That he’ll corrupt me?” It stings, that he might think that of her, although she has to admit given her history, the idea that she could kill somebody (again) is not out of the question.

“No…”

“Then what?”

This time Foggy’s the one who can’t seem to find an answer.

“I just have a bad feeling,” he says finally, and she shakes her head helplessly. It’s not enough. They both know it.

“I don’t want to lose you,” she says. “Is Frank so important to you that this can tear us apart?”

“Of course not,” Foggy says, but they look at each other and in that second she can tell they are both very uncertain. That they don’t know what will happen if they keep fighting about this, that neither of them sees any sort of compromise on the horizon. And she feels the moment they both give up, just a little.

And she knows then, as usual, that Foggy will be the one to cave. That she’ll get her way. She hates herself for it. She knows suddenly why Matt seems to carry so much guilt around constantly.

“I can’t promise I’ll stay away from him,” she says. “I can’t, and I don’t want to lie to you.”

“Okay.” Foggy sounds very, very tired. “Just - keep me in the loop. That’s all I can ask. Don’t wait for me to have to come and ask questions. Is that fair?”

“That’s fair,” she says, and she moves to his side then and kisses him, and holds him close with her hand in his hair. He rests his face against the crook of her neck and she can feel the heaviness in his shoulders, the faint tremor. All the same - there’s something between them, an invisible wall that she doesn’t know how to knock down. And despite coming to an agreement, she knows suddenly that this isn’t over. That there’s something yet to happen.
So it turns out that it is, once again, Karen who is responsible for the way that the situation next escalates, moving them ever-closer to what is scientifically known as a ‘four-way clusterfuck.’

She’s sitting in her car. Thing is, right, she’s not a lawyer. Didn’t take the bar or whatever. And she’s not a reporter any more (rest in peace her journalistic career). She’s a researcher, she supposes, for Nelson, Murdock and Page. Pretty much a PI, except she doesn’t have a license.

Anyway. It turns out being a PI essentially boils down to being a professional stalker. She stalks people all day online and then she goes out and stalks them in person.

So she’s sitting in her car. She’s spent all afternoon watching one of Cunningham’s female colleagues only to conclude that they are not, in fact, together. Now she’s staking out his mother, hoping to catch some sort of indication that the Hellhounds are around or that she knows about them. She’s pretty sure the woman’s out at work; her car’s been gone all day. Either that or being held hostage in a basement somewhere.

So she’s sitting in her car, eating pringles and really fucking sucking at that Unblock Me phone game, keeping a close eye out for Mrs Cunningham’s car-

When someone raps on her back window and nearly makes her jump out of her skin.

“Je-sus f*ck-ing Christ,” she hisses. Her heart jolts; she goes for her gun. It’s like that, these days. A sudden noise, a shadow in the corner of her eye. Dex really fucked her up, sometimes she flinches thinking there’s something flying at her only for it to be nothing. Really sucks to live in a pigeon-infested city, to be honest.

“Karen!”

She twists around and does a double take. It’s Frank who’s peering in the window at her. She rolls it down.

“Frank? What are you doing here?”

“I saw your car.” He hefts a bag on his shoulder; he’s wearing a vibrant orange tradies’ vest. It is not a colour that would really look flattering on anyone, but somehow it still gives her a jolt to see him - a little unshaven, grinning lopsidedly, dusty from construction. “I’m working the site a block down. Was headed home.”

“Wow,” she says, inanely, still a bit lost for words. Her heart’s pounding. She just - hadn’t expected to run into him. Not so soon, not so suddenly. Not when she and Foggy still haven’t properly sorted things out.

There’s an awkward silence. Frank shifts.

“Can we talk?” he asks, and Karen nods. She reaches to open the car door. He climbs into the passenger seat and for a second-

For this stupid little traitorous second she feels schoolgirl-nervous, feels a blush rising on her cheeks. It’s stupid, it’s stupid. It’s just - Frank, Frank who smells like dust and sweat and cheap deodorant. Frank who she can feel the warmth radiating off, Frank who smiles at her now, reaches to steal some of her pringles, his large rough hand brushing against hers. She hopes her face isn’t as red as it feels.

Stop being an idiot. She stares at the stubbled line of his jaw, bites her lip hard, thinks how much Foggy would hate this entire situation and lets the guilt tamp down the butterflies in her stomach.
“How are you?” she asks quietly.

“Been better.” Frank shrugs. “Been worse, too. Hey,” he adds, too gently, eyes too intent. “Sorry for skipping out on you after Father’s Day.”

“It’s okay.”

“Red told you what happened.”

“The gist of it. It’s fine, Frank, really.”

“Been talking to my friend Curtis about it all. He thinks I’m an idiot,” he says, flatly, “But not an irredeemable one.”

She can’t help smiling; she’s glad when he smiles back, too. She’d been worried he’d look broken, after his little slip-up. But it seems, like her, he’s clawing his way back towards being a functional human being through the concrete things. Like a routine, like going back to work, like having a pet waiting for him back home. Those things matter more than any words and platitudes.

“I’m glad you’re doing okay,” she says, sincerely, and he nods.

“‘m trying. Better than nothing.” He shovels a fistful of pringles into his mouth and stares at the house. “Stake out?”

“Sort of. Waiting for someone to come back.”

“This about the Hellhounds?” he asks - she hesitates, then nods. A shadow flickers over his face. “You safe?”

“Yeah. It’s just an old lady.”

“I meant in general.”

“We’re being very, very cautious,” she says, and Frank nods slowly.

“Good.” There’s something on his mind, though, she can tell - his brows are all furrowed and he stares broodily out at the house. She nudges him with her elbow.

“What is it?” she asks softly. “You’re worried about these guys? You ran into them with Matt, right?”

“Not so much the Hounds I’m worried about,” Frank allows, and hesitates again for a second. When he speaks it’s halting, like an unfamiliar language. “You should keep an eye on him.”

“Who, Matt?” she demands.

Frank nods. Karen’s heart skips a sort of beat. There’s a funny sick feeling to all this. Like bad news she’d been expecting except she isn’t quite sure what it is.

“Why do you say that?” she asks, but before Frank can answer, headlights sweep down the road. They both sit up, watching as a car pulls into the driveway of the Cunningham house across the street. An elderly woman steps out, and Karen frowns.
One arm’s in a sling. There’s an upset look on her face. She hurries to her front door, glancing repeatedly over her shoulder, and lets herself in before slamming the door shut and locking it behind her.

“She’s spooked,” Frank comments.

“She must be the one the Hounds are after. Poor thing,” Karen says, “Probably worried sick about her son. I wonder if she knows he was arrested.”

“You gonna talk to her?” Frank asks, and Karen shakes her head.

“No. Not yet. We need to do this carefully, make a plan. I’ll talk to the others first.” She fires off a text and it’s barely a minute before Foggy replies. “The boys are in the area. They were just talking to a client who works around here. I’ll swing around and meet up with them.”

“I’ll get out of your hair,” Frank says, and starts to open the car door, but before she knows what she’s doing Karen reaches out and grabs his arm.

“You should come with me and say hi to them,” she says, and Frank raises his eyebrows so far they are in danger of flying right off his head.

“Somehow I don’t think Red’s raring to see me. Nelson even less so.”

Karen bites her lip. Wonders how much to share. But what she said to Foggy was true. She trusts Frank.

“Foggy and I… we’ve had a bit of a disagreement lately. I… I think it’d help a lot if he could see you in person. See that you’re back and that you’re - you’re a civilian now, or trying to be. It might put his mind at ease.”

Frank stares at her, and for a second she feels far too vulnerable under his scrutinising gaze. Then he nods.

“If you want,” he says, and she smiles a little.

She tries to pretend she isn’t scared as all hell to text Foggy - ‘Ran into Frank, bringing him along to say hi’ - and puts her phone away so she won’t have to see him reply. She does a rather aggressive U-turn that makes Frank grimace and starts off to meet them.

“So,” Frank says abruptly, “You and Nelson, huh.”

“Yeah?” Karen replies, and tries very hard not to read anything into his tone of voice. “We… tried to date once before. Then things got crazy with Fisk.”

“He treating you right?”

“He’s a good man,” she says, a little defensively.

“Oh, I know he is,” Frank says. “A really good man.” He shifts in his seat, mutters, “Guess I just - didn’t picture it.”

Oh, God. *Don’t read into it, don’t read into it.* She feels nervous, can’t explain why. She thinks of Frank, holding her close in that hotel after that young soldier took them hostage, after the explosion. Thinks of his breath against her face and his strong, warm arms holding her close. Then her mind
darts to Matt, abruptly - the two of them pressed together, curled up in a tomb, trying to breathe as quietly as possible. She remembers how she could feel him shaking, and the rabbit-fast beat of his heart.

“Matt doesn’t wear red any more,” she blurts out, not sure where that even came from.

Frank looks over.

“Yeah, I noticed the distinct lack of obnoxious horns,” he says, and Karen has to bite back a laugh. “Well I ain’t aboutta call him Black.”

“What did you mean? Before. About keeping an eye on him.”

Frank looks uncomfortable. After a moment he shakes his head.

“Nothin’,” he grunts. “Just - I had a shit time taking down the people who killed my family. I figure he had a pretty bad one with Fisk too. Even... even once the battle’s over, that stuff stays with you. I’m out of all that now, or trying to be. But he’s still in the thick of it.”

“I know,” Karen says, then adds, softly, “I’m worried about him.”

Frank casts her a look she can’t figure out, but before they can say any more, she’s arrived back at the bus stop close to the building where Foggy and Matt were just meeting a client. The two of them are sitting there, waiting, and Foggy’s head snaps up when she pulls the car up. The look on his face can best be described as ‘not a happy chappy.’

_I did not think this through_, Karen realises, grimly.

Frank reaches out and touches her arm. His hand is so warm she can feel it through her sleeve, and she suppresses a shiver.

“You okay?” he asks, and she swallows hard.

“I don’t like arguing with Foggy,” she admits.

“I’ll play nice.”

“Please,” she says, with a strained laugh. She parks and they get out of the car. The other two are rising to meet them.

When Foggy’s eyes land on Frank a series of intense, conflicted emotions cross his face. Matt reaches out and loops a hand around his elbow; to anyone who passes by it probably looks like he wants Foggy to guide him, but Karen sees him give Foggy’s arm a reassuring squeeze.

Frank leans against the car, settles his hands in his pockets, and jerks his chin at them.


“Castle,” Foggy replies, voice so tight it’s verging on strangled.

Matt... actually seems remarkably relaxed. He even offers Frank a small smile. This is... unexpected. Karen frowns a little.

“What’re you doing around here?” Matt asks, pleasantly.

“What a coincidence,” Foggy mutters. Frank’s eyes flicker over to him.

“How you been, Nelson?” he asks, conversationally.

Foggy’s eye narrow, like he thinks it’s a trick question.

“Great,” he snaps, “I’ve been fantastic, how about you?”

“Doing alright.”

“Yeah?”

Frank raises an eyebrow. “Yeah.”

Karen is just sort of. Dying internally. Why did she think this was a good idea again? She looks over at Matt, and he turns his head towards her and pulls such a horrible face that she has to bite back a laugh. It does brighten her spirits a little, and she steps forward, away from Frank and towards Foggy’s side.

“Hey,” she says, reaching out and touching his hand. “We just saw Mrs Cunningham. She’s definitely the one they’re after. She seemed pretty freaked out, and looked like she’d been roughed up. Should I go talk to her? See if she can tell us anything?”

“She’s not likely to talk to lawyers or PIs,” Foggy replies, thoughtfully. “If Lester’s reaction was anything to go by, she’ll be terrified - especially since he’s already been caught.”

“Sounds like a job for Daredevil,” Frank comments.

Matt nods.

“I can visit her tonight,” he says. “She’s more likely to believe that I can help her than some random law firm.”

“If she doesn’t have a heart attack at the sight of you first,” Foggy points out.

“Hey, I don’t have the suit anymore.”

“Yeah, no, the black mask is still pretty fucking intimidating.”

“So you really are all going after the Hellhounds,” Frank says. He’s looking right at Matt, a funny frown on his face.

“Yeah,” Foggy snaps, “Heard you’ve been after them already.”

“Foggy,” Karen pleads, “Don’t start.”

Frank doesn’t rise to the bait. He just shrugs, still leaning against the car. Still perfectly calm. Karen stares at him, pretty impressed; he usually has a short fuse, and she’d been worried after Father’s Day, but he seems to be keeping himself well in check.

“I’m pretty caught up on what happened since I escaped jail,” he says, “You got shot, right? Then
that fuckfest with Fisk. Let’s not pretend like all of us haven’t been through shit. Let’s not act like it doesn’t change us. Some people get jumpy, get a flight instinct; me, I fight. Someone sticks a gun in my face, yeah, I’m gonna shoot to kill. I didn’t survive the war by being shy about pulling the trigger. Sure, I wish it could’ve played out some other way. But it didn’t. That’s just how it is.”

It’s unlike him to be so open, but honestly, Karen could kiss him for at least trying to make Foggy understand. Especially when, a second later, Frank’s face softens a little.

“It’s good,” he says abruptly, “What you’re all doing. Take them down legally. Keep the wheels of justice turning.”

Foggy looks like he thinks Frank’s mocking him. To be fair, it’s such a deeply uncharacteristic thing to say that it’s very possible he is being disingenuous. Or at least just very polite.

Either way, after a second Frank pushes off the car.

“Anyway,” he says, “I’ll be on my way. Need to grab some groceries. See you around, Karen.”

He turns towards her and she steps towards him, and there’s a very awkward moment where she wants to hug him, and he kind of looks like he wants to hug her, but seems hesitant in front of the others. It’s what she’d do if the two of them were alone - especially since they know each other well enough to tell things have been rough lately - but she’s far too aware of Foggy’s eyes on them, and they just sort of stare at each other, too close to be normal, but too much space between them to be intimate.

Then Matt steps forward.

“I’ll come with you,” he says.

Frank shoots him a look Karen can’t work out, but she knows there’s something going on between them. It’s a definite secret-message sort of look, which makes no sense considering Matt can’t even see it, but she can read it all over Frank’s face.

Foggy turns to Matt with the most confused, horrified expression she’s ever seen. Matt just stands there staring placidly into the middle-distance.

“We’re done for the day, right?” he continues. “Foggy and I just finished up that other case and you guys mentioned you were going to grab dinner tonight, weren’t you? So I’ll be out of your hair. I’ll talk to Mrs Cunningham later tonight.”

“You should come to dinner with us,” Foggy says.

It is such a transparent attempt to keep him from going with Castle that Frank turns away, hiding a grin so poorly that Foggy catches it and scowls.

“I don’t want to impose,” Matt starts, which Karen knows is his very polite way of hinting that he wants to go with Castle. Foggy knows this. He definitely knows this. His ‘oblivious’ grin is more like a bared-teeth grimace.

“You’re not imposing!” he says brightly, and catches Matt’s wrist. “C’mon.”

“I need to do grocery shopping.”

“You don’t shop at supermarkets,” Foggy fires back.
Are we really gonna stand here lying to each other, Karen thinks, and wonders if she should intervene - but Frank laughs loudly, drawing all their attention.

“C’mon, Nelson,” he says, “Take your girl to dinner. Nice romantic evening, just the two of you.” He looks between the three of them and raises his eyebrows. “Don’t make it a business thing.”

He is definitely being mocking now, and Foggy scowls.

“It’s not a business thing,” he snaps, “And it’s certainly none of your business.”

Matt’s standing uncomfortably in the middle of the three of them. After a second he gently detaches Foggy’s hand from his arm.

“It’s fine, Fog,” he says, and squeezes his shoulder. “I’ll call you tonight.”

Foggy stares at him helplessly. After another moment of very strained silence, Frank turns, hands in his pockets, and strolls off. Matt turns to Karen, and for a second-

For a second, she knows he’s studying her. Trying to figure something out. She just can’t tell what it is.

Then he turns and walks off after Frank, jogging a little to catch up with him since there’s no one around to see. Karen turns back to Foggy. His fists are clenched.

“Foggy…” She reaches out and cups his cheek, turns his face towards her. “He’s trying. He really is. I just wanted you to see for yourself. No more lies, remember? He really did just run into me. Was it a terrible idea?”

Foggy deflates a little.

“No,” he admits. “Hanging around Matt has really honed my lie detecting skills. I actually do believe he’s trying. Problem is, trying doesn’t mean he’ll succeed. We couldn’t stop Matt being Daredevil. What makes you think Castle will be able to stop being the Punisher?”

Karen bites her lip.

“I believe in him,” she murmurs, and Foggy looks away.

“Let’s hope that’s enough,” he mutters. “The hell does Matt want to talk to him for? They’re not even friends.”

Karen shrugs. Foggy still doesn’t look happy. She loops her arm through his, tries to pull him close, but he’s distant, and she bites her lip.

“What is it?” she urges - he turns to her then. The same scrutinising look Matt had on his face. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Something else about Castle?” she asks - he hesitates, and looks like he’s gonna say something else, then shakes himself, seeming to think better of it.

“Nothing,” he repeats, and takes a deep breath. “Nothing, I hope. Come on. Let’s go to dinner.”
She frowns - but things are fragile, and she doesn’t want to push. She will take small blessings; let them, for now, pretend things are fine. And she shoves away any curiosity about the other two and what they’re doing, any regret. She’s glad Matt went off with Frank. She and Foggy need this alone time. Need it to be just the two of them.

Because that’s what it is, at the end of the day, what this is. Just the two of them.

9. IN WHICH FRANK CONSIDERS WHETHER VIGILANTISM SPARKS JOY

Frank’s not jealous. Shut up. We’re not talking about this, okay? It’s not his fault if Nelson’s all touchy about Karen. And it’s certainly not his fault if Foggy’s gonna get all weird and possessive over Murdock, like, chill the fuck out, just take your girlfriend to dinner. Frank’s not trying to steal anyone’s best friend.

That being said. Matt is kind of trailing along after him like a lost duckling. This development is… concerning.

“I assume you’re not actually shopping and just wanted to talk about something,” he says.

Matt nods. And thing is, usually Frank would be, like, get the fuck away from me. In-costume, Murdock’s a magnet for trouble, and out-of-costume he is apparently a magnet for depressing personal drama. But the other day? When they were hanging out and eating noodles and skirting around the fringes of getting all deep and meaningful?

It wasn’t terrible. And sue Frank, he hasn’t got many friends.

Murdock’s alright. He doesn’t ask too many stupid questions and he hasn’t been all preachy lately and-

And maybe Frank’s a little too invested. Maybe he’s seen too many broken soldiers, maybe Murdock’s high up enough on the list of people-he-doesn’t-totally-hate for him to want to make sure he’s okay.

“Your buddy’s pretty fucking protective,” he can’t help commenting, when Matt doesn’t spit out whatever he wants to say.

“Foggy?” Matt pulls a complicated sort of face. “I’ve… given him a lot of reasons to worry.”

Okay, that’s fair, considering the glaring reasons Frank knows about that even Foggy doesn’t. He feels himself soften a little.

“He worried I’ll corrupt you?”

“Something like that,” Matt says. “Right now I’m more worried about corrupting you.”

Frank glances at him quizzically.

“The fuck’s that mean?”

Matt bites his lip. He looks almost guilty.
“I wanted to ask you something about the Hellhounds,” he says slowly, “But if you would rather be left out of it entirely, I don’t blame you. I’ve already dragged Foggy and Karen into this. You’re the last person who needs to be pulled in as well. So feel free to tell me to fuck off if you want.”

Frank stares at him. He’s sure Matt must be able to tell that his heart’s squeezing painfully in his chest.

He’s been thinking about this.

Since the other day, he’s had a lot of time to reflect. He’s talked to Curtis. He’s talked to David, even. Usually he wouldn’t, would just let himself spiral in isolation, but he is actually trying, lately, and trying involves reaching out to his friends when need be. It took a while to get past that mental block. But he’s glad he did, now.

David had been surprisingly blase about it; then again, he’d had no qualms about teaming up with the Punisher and letting him run riot when it suited his own purposes, so probably not the best moral compass Frank could’ve found.

“It’s not like you went on a rampage,” he’d said, and Frank honestly has to admit, that’s true. It wasn’t a rampage. It was pretty clear cut self defence. It’s not like, when they were spying on the Hounds, he went and crashed their meeting with a semi-automatic. That would have been Punishing with a capital P.

Does he still feel bad about it? Sure. But he isn’t quite as panicked about the idea that he’s got no self control.

“Ask away,” he says.

“You sure?”

Frank casts him a dirty look.

“Wouldn’t say it if I wasn’t sure,” he says, and Matt nods.

“The Hellhounds are underground. We figure they’re using the subway tunnels. They supposedly have a lot of people in a lot of high up places, and are holding enough people hostage - or at least threatening them - to have a pretty solid civilian base under their control. Problem is, we don’t know what’s true and what’s rumour. How would you approach this?”

“Assuming no killing’s allowed,” Frank says, with something like amusement, “You sure I’m the best guy to ask about this?”

“You’re efficient,” Matt replies, “I need to take them down quick. Not give them time to recover. You wiped out three gangs in just a couple months, on your own.”

“Had machine guns on my side, though,” Frank says, “Ever heard of World War I?”

“Look, just give me something to work with, here,” Matt says, and Frank nods.

“Okay. First off, the actual Hellhounds aren’t that big. They’ve been absorbing other gangs and that means that a lot of their folk aren’t actually loyal to them. Probably a lot of dissent simmering in the ranks. Once you get some momentum going, they’ll crumple like a tower of cards. But your first move’s gotta be big. I’d set a trap.”
“A trap.”

“Yeah. Underground, right? Like rats? So run them out of their hole. Take out the tunnels.”

“You mean collapse them. Blow them up,” Matt says, and stops walking. He looks troubled. Frank turns to him.

“Exactly. There some moral problem with that I don’t know about?”

Matt swallows hard.

“Not a moral one,” he says. “Would I have to be underground to do that?”

“You’ll have to do recon underground, but the great thing about explosives is usually you don’t want to be near them when you pull the trigger,” Frank says drily. As if Murdock’s not smart enough to know that - what’s going on here? “What’s the issue? Claustrophobic?”

“Oh, a little,” Matt snaps, “It’s just this entire building fell on me one time.”

Frank freezes. Shit. He had not quite put two and two together when they were discussing that. And thing is, he gets it, like, he’s not ever going near a fairground again. It’s no joke, what those big moments of trauma can do to you. And the last thing he wants is for Matt to freeze up in a crucial moment.

“So we combine Plan A with Plan B,” he says, steadily - Matt relaxes a little when he realises Frank’s not about to dig deep on that last comment.

“You have a Plan B? What, you’ve been thinking about this?”

“It’s all over the news. I made some theoretical plans,” Frank says. “A monopoly on power’s not good for anyone. The enemy of my enemy is my friend and all that shit. Find the biggest gang around that the Hounds haven’t got under their thumb and get them to do the dirty work for you. Not what I’d personally do, but it might work for you. Would make it easier to get your hands on explosives as well.”

“How would I stop them killing?”

“You won’t need to. The Hounds outnumber them so they won’t want to get into a fight. Getting them arrested is actually the best way to deal with them right now.”

Matt hums thoughtfuly.

“Thanks,” he says after a moment, and Frank waves a hand.

“I’ll be as glad as anyone else when you get ‘em off the streets.”

They keep walking. He thought Matt would go once he got what he wanted, but he seems to be chewing something else over. Frank doesn’t comment.

His mind drifts back to that little gathering of the four of them. He wonders what Nelson would think of Matt coming to Frank for advice. God, that entire series of interactions had just been fucking weird. He glances at Matt, next to him

Usually he’d keep his mouth shut, but they’ve spent enough time together recently that he reckons he
can start this conversation.

“It ain’t weird for you?”

“What?”

“Karen and Nelson. Their thing.”

Matt stares at him. Then he frowns a little.

“Well, since you brought it up, I’m gonna take this somewhere personal,” he announces.

“Here we fucking go,” Frank grunts, “You don’t have to. Just don’t fucking answer if you don’t want. I was just curious. Because shit back there seemed kinda weird. He usually invite you on their dates?”

“He just doesn’t like you and you know it,” Matt fires back. “But speaking of which, you know I can tell you’re into Karen, right?

The world drops out from under Frank. This was not a direction he expected the conversation to take. His heart seizes up and he turns to Matt a bit frantically.

“What?” he demands, eloquently.

“Your heart rate rises when she goes near you. Your body temperature rises when you look at her. And I can smell—“

“I do not want to fucking know what you can smell.” God, his body temp must be through the roof right fucking now, like, what the fuck even is this. “That is some creepy ass shit Murdock.”

“I’m just saying.”

“I’m not into her.” He knows it’s a lie as soon as it comes out of his mouth. Matt knows too, and the look on his face says it. “I care deeply about her. We’re friends.”

“Frank.”

“What’s it fucking matter, anyway. I’m not about to try anything. You think I’m an idiot? I know she’s better off with Nelson. Safer. If she’s happy that’s all I care about.”

“That’s big of you.”

“I’m not an asshole,” Frank says sourly, “Not like that, anyway.”

Matt nods. He looks away and Frank can’t help needling him, embarrassed.

“You’re the one she dated, anyway.”

“You’re right,” Matt admits, to his surprise, “I told you already, things are weird between the three of us. You want to know the really fucked up part?”

As soon as he says it his face looks like he regrets it. Frank pounces.
“What?”

“Forget it, I shouldn’t have-“

“Don’t fucking blue ball me, Murdock, if you’re gonna come out with the fun fact that you can smell my... *whatever*, then you owe me some sort of embarrassing shit in return. Spill.”

He knows the look on Matt’s face. There’s a train crash coming and he’s the one driving it. Frank likes to call it being *morbidly self-destructive*.

“It’s Foggy. Not Karen. I liked him even before she came along.”

Frank stares at him. Processes this. Starts laughing.


“I’m not laughing at you,” Frank says, “Just the situation.”

“That’s reassuring.”

Frank claps him heavily on the shoulder.

“Your entire life is a *fucking mess.*”

“Thanks. That’s very insightful. I had no idea.”

“Wow. That’s just. But you and Karen?”

“It’s... complicated,” Matt says, and gives a very tired sigh. “But like you said. None of it matters. The two of them are together.”

“You ever tell him?” Frank asks, curiously.

“Who? Foggy? No, he has no idea. And I blew any chance of that when he found out I was Daredevil. Things never really stopped being rocky after that.”

He can tell from the look on Matt’s face that those feelings haven’t gone away. For a second he feels rather sorry for him. Like, that’s rough. In love with both of them. Jesus. He really likes to take it to the next level.

“Well, we’re in the same boat then,” Frank says, “And with my history relationships aren’t - aren’t smooth sailing.”

Matt looks down.

“After Elektra,” he says quietly, “I don’t know if I could even... but yeah. Same boat.”

Well this has been fun. They’ve reached the shopping district now and there are more people around. Matt moves to extend his cane and Frank proceeds to make things awkward by asking, “You needa hold my arm or somethin’?”
Matt casts him a startled look and Frank puts his hands up defensively.

“Just asking. Seen you do it with Nelson. I know you can see or... not-see, whatever. Figured it might be part of your cover.”

Matt is very quiet. Frank wishes he’d never offered. No, he doesn’t mean that. Just - the way Matt’s clearly studying him, picking up way more than Frank can even imagine...

“Thanks,” he says quietly, “Sure. It actually does make it easier; means I don’t have to focus so hard.”

“You know I wasn’t bullshitting back there. I actually do need groceries.”

“I need some space to think,” Matt says, “I’ll tag along. Carry your basket.”

“Using a blind guy as my pack horse won’t get me dirty looks at all,” Frank mutters. He’s surprised when Matt laughs and more surprised when the sight makes something pleased tug in his own chest.

“Don’t pull me,” Matt says, and then his hand is nudging its way around the crook of Frank’s elbow. “Just walk normally.”

Frank nods. It’s weird at first and he doesn’t really know why he hadn’t told Matt to fuck off by now, but these are the life choices he has made. They set off. Matt’s hand is light and warm on his arm and Frank’s way too aware of how close they are.

It’s a few minutes before he works out why this feels so strange. He doesn’t - touch people, not for so long, not like this. Not since he used to hold his wife’s hand.

He’ll hug David and the kids. Sarah will give him a kiss on the cheek. He shakes hands at group therapy and Curtis will give him a clap on the shoulder.

(Karen - Karen will hug him tight, stroke his cheek, rest a hand on his arm, but they always pull away a minute later-)

He discreetly side-eyes Murdock and hopes he won’t be able to, like, hear his eyes rolling in his direction or anything. Studies the sharp, stubbled line of his jaw, the little he can see of his dark eyes past the leg of his glasses.

He’s a good looking guy. It’s a weird, stupid thought but it strikes Frank like a punch to the stomach. Same sort of effortless good-looking that Billy used to be, especially when they were on tour. When they were covered in sweat and dust, when they were dead exhausted and running on fumes and he still looked like he’d stepped off an Abercrombie and Fitch photo shoot. The sort of bloke who lucked out in the gene pool.

Suddenly he wonders if Matt knows he’s attractive. Not like he can sense what’s in a mirror, right? People must’ve told him. People sure told Billy. But Billy-

When they came back home, Billy walked like he knew he was attractive. Billy had fancy hair gel and tailored suits and expensive cologne. Billy was pretty and he knew it, he used it.

The sudden tightness in his chest eases a little. Murdock’s not like that. He hides behind those glasses and the last thing he seems up to right now is laying on the charm. Frank shakes himself, tries to
shrug off that feeling he always gets when he thinks about Billy. That sinking stomach feeling, that lump in his throat. Anger warring with grief. Betrayal. Most fucked up of all, the way he misses him sometimes. Misses what he thought they used to have.

Billy, he thinks - and then, with a sudden resolve, you didn’t kill him. You aren’t out of control. You let justice claim him. You can do it, see - play the moral vigilante just like Red does. Take what is owed without giving up your soul.

Matt’s fingers flex around his arm and Frank fights not to jump - out of guilt more than anything. The silence was fine, thoughtful, and he knows Matt can’t actually read minds, but there’s something definitively awkward about the fact that he was lost in thought contemplating how hot the other man is. Like oops, hope you couldn’t smell that, or what fucking ever. Jesus Christ. What’s even happening.

For some unknown reason Matt waits until they’re in the middle of the supermarket pet food section before he decides to get all deep and meaningful.

“Frank,” he says, in such a hesitant voice that Frank can’t even bring himself to make some sort of snarky comment.

“Hm?”

There’s no one else around. The aisle is pretty empty; it’s that sweet spot between harried mums doing an after school shop and everyone else getting off work when the supermarket is relatively quiet. Matt still steps in close, anyway, leans in to murmur.

“I need to ask you one more thing. Sorry, it’s - it’s personal again, and I know you don’t want to hear it, but I don’t know who else will even remotely understand.”

This is officially the most surreal day of Frank’s life. The supermarket lights are bright and white, they’re surrounded by cans of vibrantly coloured dog food-

And thanks to his philosophical contemplations before about the respective brands of attractiveness of Matt Murdock and Billy Russo, suddenly what his senses decide to hone in on is how close Matt’s face is, leaning in to whisper in his ear. He swallows hard and tries not to think of the hundreds of small tells he must be giving off.

“Go ahead,” he replies.

Matt bites his lip. Frank tries not to stare at his mouth.

“Tell me honestly,” he says, “Do you think this - going after the Hellhounds - is a bad idea? After what happened the other night… after Fisk… I’m not exactly at the top of my game. I’m… I have this fear that I… that this might all be too much. That I might just - break down in the middle of all this and fuck everything up.”

“You really think you could stop being Daredevil?”

Matt shakes his head.

“I don’t know,” he says miserably, “I’ve tried before, and I couldn’t. But this… I could do what Foggy suggested. Let him pass this on to Brett. See what happens. I’m just - terrified that maybe the cops are in on it. I don’t know. I don’t want to do that. I just - I have no idea if I’m doing the right
thing or not.”

Well this is a hell of a conversation to have in the middle of the supermarket. After a second, Frank shakes his head.

“I don’t think you should give it all up,” he says, and means it. “The other night… you had a lapse in judgement. It happens. Who knows, you mighta snapped out of it. But if it’s breaking down you’re worried about, in my experience that’s more likely to happen once the fight’s over. When the adrenaline fades away and there’s nothing to keep you running.”

“Been there, done that,” Matt murmurs, and Frank looks up at him, meets his eyes behind his glasses even if he knows there isn’t much point.

“Look, you’re lucky. You got good friends, good people around you. Lean on them. I’ve tried the lone wolf thing, you don’t get far that way. Let them help you. They want to.”

Matt bites his lip. He doesn’t answer, and Frank turns back to the shelf, starts picking out Pi’s favourites. Something’s nagging at him, same feeling he had back at Karen’s place that night before he went out with Matt.

*You really think you can do this? A lifetime of sitting on the sidelines while the others take on these guys? While Karen takes on these guys?*

And the question that’s been plaguing him for months now, since the fairground, since Billy, since it was all meant to be over-

*Who are you?*

“Listen, Murdock…” He can’t look at Matt suddenly. Doesn’t matter anyway, not like Matt’s even looking back. “I talked to some friends of mine ‘bout… everything that happened the other night. Not about your issues,” he adds, when Matt stiffens, “About killing those guys. About how I wanted to do it. Remember what you said to me? About how this stuff’s just - in your blood.”

“Yeah,” Matt says, softly.

“You’re right. But it’s - it’s not necessarily a bad thing. My friend told me, the thing about trying to change is you can’t just throw *everything* away, or you’ll end up with nothing left. You gotta know what to keep and what to discard. What’s important to you.”

Matt’s quiet a moment. Frank finally glances over at him and finds him grimacing thoughtfully.

“So what are you keeping?” he asks finally, quietly.

“I can’t be a civilian,” Frank replies, and as soon as he says the words it’s like a weight off his shoulders - to finally admit it out loud. “I don’t have it in me. And I can’t exactly join the army again. But I won’t return to being the Punisher. I…”

And here he hesitates, properly, because hardly fucking anyone knows about this who wasn’t there-

But he’s seen Murdock at his worst now. Seen him at his most fucking broken. Somehow, that makes it easier.

“My best friend,” he says, and his voice manages to stay very steady, “Man I loved like a brother. Turned out to be playing me. Turned out to have a hand in what happened with my family. I was
gonna kill him. I wanted to. But at the last minute, I - I stopped. Let him live with it. Let them arrest him. Maybe some part of it was for my own sick satisfaction; I fucked him up pretty bad. Death seemed too easy. But I don’t regret it. I don’t regret not killing him.”

Matt takes this little shaky breath that Frank, who is intimately acquainted with everything to do with revenge, suspects has a lot to do with Fisk and how they ended up dealing with him.

“So what do you want to do?” he asks.

“I want,” Frank says, slowly, weighing the words, weighing what they could cost him - but he meant it before, what he said. I wouldn’t say it if I wasn’t sure. “I want to find a balance. I want to help you with this Hellhounds thing. Think it’s gonna drive me crazy to just sit back and let it happen.”

Matt looks extremely alarmed, and Frank has to laugh.

“Relax, I’m not saying I’ll go on a rampage. I’m just sayin’ - if you want backup tonight, or when you go in those tunnels… I wouldn’t mind tagging along. We can do it on your terms. No killing.”

There’s a long pause. Frank knows what he’s thinking; it’s an uncharacteristically generous offer. But honestly, setting out the rules like that is as much for Frank’s protection as Matt’s. Truth is, if he goes alone he’s not sure he won’t fuck up and end up doing something he regrets. As long as Daredevil’s there, he thinks things might stay on track.

“You don’t need to prove anything to us,” Matt says finally.

“Maybe I need to prove it to myself.”

Matt nods, slowly.

“I’ll think about it,” he offers, and Frank nods. He turns back to shopping, Matt trailing along after him. Today’s been weird, but honestly-

Honestly, just throwing the idea out there of getting back into it has helped him realise that yeah, actually, he thinks that might be what he wants. He’s been recovering for a while, after everything, but now it’s time to start rebuilding, and there are parts of himself that need to stay. The issue is figuring out how he can keep them, and there’s one thing he’s ready to admit: he probably can’t do it alone.
10. MATT TURNS FROM SAINT INTO THE SEA

Matt leaves Mrs Cunningham’s house via the back door, hops a fence, goes around the corner into an alley, and leans over the nearest dumpster trying not to throw up.

It’s a warm night and the black mask over his face suddenly feels stifling. Nothing comes up, and he spits out a mouthful of sour saliva before turning away. His heart’s pounding, and he braces his hands on his knees.

_In_ he remembers Foggy saying, his voice steady and calm. _Out. That’s right. In, hold it. Out._

This is so stupid.

It’s not like anything actually happened.

It was just - the way she grabbed him, right before he left, and pulled him into a tight hug. He could feel her frail body shaking, and for a second it had reminded him so much of Maggie that he’d frozen up.

“Thank you, Daredevil,” she’d whispered, fervently, almost as though it was a prayer. “I know you’ll save him. I know you’ll find a way to make this all right.”

_Jesus Christ._ He leans back against the wall of the alley, tilts his head back, swallows hard. She’d meant it to be reassuring, but it’d put the pressure on and freaked him out and now-

Now there’s a lot left to do tonight, and he’s all rattled. Talking to Mrs Cunningham was the easy part. He can’t lose his nerve. He takes another second to stop his hands shaking before he pulls out his phone.

_You don’t have to call him._

He doesn’t have to, but he _should_, and he swallows hard and tries to tell himself he’s not nervous, it’s just that he’s been generally shaky lately. He shouldn’t be nervous to talk to his best friend. That would be - pathetic and fucked up.

He dials before he can second-guess himself. When the phone picks up, Foggy’s voice is bleary with sleep, and Matt realises with a guilty pang that it’s, like, half past one in the morning.

“Matt? You okay?”

“Yeah.” He swallows, hard. “Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry to wake you.”

“S’okay. What is it?”

“I just spoke to Mrs Cunningham. They threatened her and Lester both. She gave me a lead that I’m about to go follow up. When they first grabbed them, they knocked her out and bagged her to take her and Lester to a warehouse. She woke up on the drive there and overheard a conversation. I’ve got a meeting point and a time - three a.m. - where they make a routine drop.”

“I gave her Brett’s number, told her she could trust him.” He bites his lip, takes a deep breath. “There’s - there’s one other thing.”

“What?” Foggy asks, gently.

“You wanted to be in the loop, right?”

“Yeah.” He hears the shift and rustle of sheets. “Of course.”

“You won’t like this.”

There’s a pause. He can hear Foggy breathing, heavily.

“What is it, Matt?”

“Frank Castle offered his help today. Said we’d do things my way. I… I don’t think he can sit on the sidelines any more than I can. I believe him when he says he’s gonna try not to kill anyone. So I’m gonna bring him along tonight. I thought you’d rather know than not.”

There’s a long silence - so silent that he knows Foggy’s moved the phone away so the mic won’t pick up anything in his breathing. Matt waits, heart pounding. He’ll readily admit he’s enough of a coward that he’s glad they’re not having this conversation in person.

Finally Foggy clears his throat.

“Okay,” he says, voice rather strangled. “Okay. First of all. Why the hell do you want Castle in on this?”

Matt swallows hard. His free hand is shaking and he shoves it into his pocket in an attempt to make it stop. He doesn’t know what to say, because the truth is-

The truth is, Foggy, I could’ve died the other night if Castle wasn’t there, and it would’ve been my own fucking fault, and I don’t know if it’ll happen again, and I can’t even trust myself anymore.

The truth is, I’m scared and I don’t want to be alone.

“I think I might need back up,” he says. It’s not a lie. Just very careful phrasing. “I don’t know how many of the Hounds will be there. And the meeting point’s outside of Hell’s Kitchen. I can’t get there on foot in time.”

“I can drive you.”

“No,” he snaps, “I’m not putting you in any more danger than I have already. Besides, Castle lives close to here. Look, I promise I won’t let things escalate.”

He hears something in the background - shifting, murmuring - then Karen’s voice, tinny and distant, asking, “Is that Matt?”

“Yeah,” Foggy replies. “He’s fine. Just updating me on the Hellhounds stuff.”

Something happens then, something Matt can’t explain. He doesn’t know why it’s now, of all moments, that it strikes him, just-
The thought of Foggy and Karen sitting in bed, warm under the sheets, knees probably touching. Safe, together, close...

Maybe it’s because it’s half past one and the rest of the night is still stretching dark ahead of him and he knows he won’t be home until dawn. Maybe it’s because lately the city streets at night somehow seem far colder and lonelier than they ever have before, making Hell’s Kitchen feel less like home and more like a haunted house.

For a moment, he feels a pang of intense, ugly, fist-to-the-throat jealousy.

It hits him like a slap in the face. He hates himself for it as soon as he has time to process it. The worst part is how fucking multilayered it is.

He’s jealous of Foggy for having Karen there beside him, for being the one to get her lying next to him at night, soothing the nightmares away. Her soft hair against his cheek, her gentle hand on his shoulder, or pressed to his chest over his heart.

He’s jealous of Karen for getting to be there right now with Foggy in person, to have his steady, anchoring presence. Jealous that in a second she’ll be the one he tucks his warm arm around, who gets a kiss on the forehead, who he’ll probably spill all his worries and fears about Matt to. To be curled up next to him, fall asleep in his arms - everything he’s wanted since college.

And he’s jealous of both of them for not having to be out here tonight. That’s the most nonsensical of all, because it’s not like they haven’t pulled all nighters themselves, it’s not like they haven’t all been hurt-

It’s not like he didn’t choose this.

Stupid, he tells himself, stupid, stupid, stupid - they’re your best friends. Don’t be like that.

It’s pathetic. It’s childish. It’s unfair of him.

But he can’t help it. He bites his lip until he tastes blood. When Foggy speaks again, it takes Matt a second to focus.

“Look… you’re right, I don’t like it. But I also don’t like the thought of you going into this alone. You trusted me to tell me what you’re planning, so - I’ll trust you to know what you’re doing. To stop him if he gets out of control.”

“I will,” Matt says, “I promise.”

“Okay.” Foggy still doesn’t sound happy about it, but he doesn’t sound angry, and they’re not having a screaming match, so. It could be worse. “Be careful, Matt. Stay safe.”

“I’ll try.”

He hangs up. Closes his eyes for a moment and tries to ignore the way his stomach’s twisting itself in knots. Waits for the feeling to pass. It doesn’t.

He’d thought he learned a long time ago all the different ways there are to be lonely. Apparently not.

But there’s nothing he can do about it, except take a deep breath and suck it up and accept this, and turn and head once more into the night.
“It’s two a.m.,” Frank grunts, opening the door. He’s warm from sleep and there’s a gun stuck down the back of his pajama pants.

“Vigilante justice is a nocturnal venture,” Matt informs him, and pushes past him into the flat. He fills Frank in on the details while the other man gets dressed and Pi runs between each of them dropping a very soggy tennis ball hopefully at their feet.

“You need a mask,” he says, when Frank finishes strapping on a bullet-proof vest. He hears him grab something from a drawer and pull it over his face. He reaches in the bottom drawer and Matt stiffens. “Don’t bring a gun.”

“Plenty of ways to shoot a guy without killing him,” Frank says, but his heart rate’s quickened. “What if we just bring it to threaten someone with?”

“If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee-”

Alright, I get it. We’ll avoid the temptation.” He slams the drawer shut. “Also, new rule, no quoting bible verses. What about a taser? That acceptable?”

“Taser’s fine,” Matt allows, and Frank rummages around a bit more before moving towards him.

“Let’s go then.”

He can tell Frank’s nervous. Most people wouldn’t know it; he’s not shaking, and his breathing’s steady, and there’s no hesitation in his movements. But his heart is beating just fractionally faster than normal.

As for Matt, he’s the opposite. He’s calmed down since he arrived at Frank’s flat. It’s - almost disconcerting how just having someone else there, with him, has seemed to make everything shift back into focus. Part of him feels weak for not being able to stand alone. The other part is just relieved that things feel more in control.

“So Daredevil doesn’t have a Devilmobile?” Frank grunts, as he sets the GPS and they head off.

“Yeah, I just take a guess at the street signs and what colour the traffic lights are,” Matt replies, flatly. “Got a one in three chance of getting it right. I mean, there’s worse odds to bet your life on.”

“Sorry,” Frank says, “Figured since you can run around you could maybe drive.”

“The super-senses don’t extend that far. And anything printed or involving a computer screen tends to fuck me over.”

“Noted.”

They drive mostly in silence. It’s not too bad. Matt leans his head against the window and lets his mind drift for a bit. It’s actually nice, getting driven somewhere for once. Usually night patrols stretch him thin, because he spends the entire time with his senses on overdrive making sure he can run around with running into a wall, not to mention focusing on the five different things that are generally flying in his direction during a fight. It wears him down way faster than you’d think. So it’s nice to switch off for a bit, to let himself focus on the thrum of the engine and Frank’s steady heartbeat next to him.
Eventually his mind turns to Karen and Foggy. The knife twists. He thinks of the supermarket, thinks of what he told Frank.

If he’s honest - it was a relief to admit to someone his feelings for Foggy. Those have been stewing for so long that just getting it out in the open was a bit like yanking a splinter. Was it embarrassing? Sure. But you gotta acknowledge shit before you can get over it, right?

*Get over it. That’s optimistic.*

And then, he thinks, *Frank and Karen…*

The thing is, he can imagine it. If Karen wasn’t dating Foggy he would not be surprised if she’d started going out with Castle when he arrived back in Hell’s Kitchen. They’ve always had a strong connection, and they’re clearly attracted to each other, and they have the same sort of tragedy in their past that means their darkness won’t scare each other off. They would be a good match.

*In another life,* he thinks, and then shakes himself. It’s not the time or place to be thinking about this.

“We’re close,” Frank grunts, and the car pulls to the side of the road. “Not much cover around here. Let’s go the rest of the way on foot.”

Matt nods. They get out.

“What time is it?” he asks.

Frank checks his phone.

“About quarter to. Jesus, it’s dark out here.”

"Good," Matt says. They inch forward, out of the cover of the trees. Frank's sticking close behind him.

There are no streetlights out here, the typical electric hum of the city replaced instead by the rustle of wind in the trees and the distant, ringing song of cicadas. Up ahead there's a bridge; he can sense it, a solid stone structure with a damp, echoing space beneath. It once spanned a river that's now long since dried up, leaving a wide, muddy track beneath it. Another road leads away from the opposite side of the bridge, and parked there is a car. He can hear the hum of the engine and a single heartbeat inside.

"There's just one guy," he murmurs to Frank, as they slip towards the bridge. He moves where Frank's moving; across an open space that he figures must be shadowy enough they can't be seen, wearing black as they are. "He's waiting for someone."

Frank hums. They reach the bridge and dart into the darkness beneath it. It's cold under here, and smells like mildew and rot. Matt crouches and presses a hand to the ground.

"Someone's coming," he says. "Another car, along the road. The other guy's getting out to meet them."

Frank nods. He's silent, letting Matt do his thing, but one hand at the taser on his belt, reading to spring into action if need be. Under the cold haunches of the bridge his body's radiating heat like a beacon.

Car doors slam shut. Five men get out. The one guy from the Hounds meets them - young and fit, Matt can tell, from the way he moves. Confident, despite being alone - his heartbeat steady,
something almost bored to his voice. The cold metal of a gun resting in the back of his jeans.

They exchange few words. Delivery as usual, it seems. The men pass over a package and receive a heavy duffel bag in return. The way it shifts sounds like money. They get in the car and leave again. The Hellhound leans against the hood of his car, pulls out his phone and starts texting.

"Well?" Frank hisses. He must've heard the car leaving. "Whatcha get?"

"Pretty standard drug deal. Give them a minute to get far away then we'll question this guy."

Matt stands, cracks his knuckles. He can feel Frank staring at him.

"What?"

"Just curious what your questioning tactics are gonna involve," Frank says, voice carefully measured.

"I'm not a saint. Just because I don't like to kill people doesn't mean I don't spend my evenings beating the shit out of them. I'll take the lead," he adds hurriedly, before Castle can start getting any ideas.

Frank nods. He sweeps a hand out invitingly and Matt swats irritably at him before ducking out of the bridge and moving up behind the guy as he finishes texting and moves to get in the car.

Matt moves fast. All the guy probably sees is a shadow in the corner of his eye. He barely has time to spin around before Matt's grabbing his wrist to stop him going for the gun, hooking his free hand around the back of his neck and yanking him down to drive a knee up into his stomach. The guy doubles over, gagging, and Matt knees him a second time before swinging an elbow around to smash it across his face. The man stumbles, dazed, and Matt backs him up against the car, reaching around to grab the gun. He flings it aside and Castle, close behind him, catches it and shoves it into his own belt.

"Who the fuck-"

The guy struggles. He's small, wiry, and manages to land one blow on Matt's shoulder - barely hard enough to hurt - before Matt punches him across the face, two jabs to the jaw followed by a solid right hook that sends him reeling. He lands across the hood of the car and Matt grabs his arm and twists it up behind his back, drawing a shriek of pain. The guy twists to look over his shoulder. Matt's not sure what sort of light they're in - but he hears the guy's heart rate quicken.

"Daredevil," he breathes, and then, horrified, "And... what the fuck are you?"

From the tone of his voice, Matt is suddenly very curious about Frank's mask.

"Daredevil's intern," Frank supplies, and Matt blinks a few times. Castle's sense of humour seems to pop up when he least expects it.

"We have some questions," Matt snaps.

"Go fuck yourself," the guy spits, then yelps when Matt twists his arm higher up behind his back - the joint straining, on the brink of dislocating.

"I think you have answers we need about the Hellhounds."

"You can think again. I'm not saying shit-"
He breaks off as Matt slams his face down against the hood of the car; his nose snaps and the air fills with the coppery tang of blood. The guy gives a low moan. His heart is racing. He kicks back at Matt, struggling weakly, and Frank moves in and grabs the back of his neck, holding him still.

"Start talking any time," Matt says, and dislocates his shoulder. There's a muffled scream. Frank's own heart rate spikes a little, and Matt turns his head towards him, but he doesn't look back at him.

"You don't kill people," the guy says weakly, the words coming out in muffled half-sobs, "What the fuck should I be scared of."

"Think of all the shit I can do that will hurt without killing you," Matt informs him. He starts to twist the guy's other arm back and hears his breath hitch. "Who's the leader of the Hellhounds?"

"Fuck... fuck off."

"You think we won't find them anyway?" Matt asks. "Make things easier on yourself."

"I don't know who's in charge."

"I can tell you're lying," Matt snaps.

Frank shifts.

"Shall I go get the hacksaw?" he drawls. "I reckon we'll start with the toes and work our way in a vertical direction."

Matt turns towards him furiously, but the guy's heart is nearly slamming out of his chest now.

"Okay, okay!" he shrieks. "I don't know his real name, alright? But he... he's a foreigner."

"Be more specific," Frank growls.

"I don't remember, he - he sounds Australian but he gets all pissed off if you say that he is-"

"New Zealander?" Matt asks.


He breaks off. He's sweating hard, now. Reconsidering. Matt tightens his grip on his arm.

"Keep talking," he prompts.

"Alright, alright! Look, he kept the Hounds underground for a long time. Wouldn't let us have a proper name or do anything really big-time. Just cook and sell under a lot of different aliases. But when Wilson Fisk died, that chaos with the cops being all corrupt seemed like a good time to step it up. Start taking centre stage."

A long time, Matt thinks, heart jolting. That's not good.

"How many of you are there?" he demands.

"In the main gang or-"

"Yeah, let's start with that."
"I don't know, fifteen, twenty originally? A lot more have joined since then."

"And how many are in on it?" He tries to keep the hysterical note out of his voice. "How many in the police?"

"Police?" The guy sounds confused.

"Yes." Matt shakes him; he lets out a groan of pain. "How many have sold out to you?"

"What? I don't know, like... two maybe? Who we've bribed to turn a blind eye to deals? There's civilians, but he's got something hanging over them, so I wouldn't say they're in the gang."

Matt nods. His racing heart settles a little. Foggy was right. A lot of it must just have been talk to get people on side.

"You're using the subway tunnels," Frank speaks up, when Matt doesn't keep asking questions.

The guy's heart jolts, just like Cunningham's did.

"It's one way to get around," he supplies.

"Where's your main hideout?" Matt asks.

"There's no main hideout." A pause. "That would be stupid."

"Well, where should I start looking for this Cerberus-"

Matt breaks off. An engine in the distance; heat, exhaust, the thrumming vibration of wheels on tarmac. His head whips around, and Frank's whips towards him.

"What?" he demands.

"They're coming back," Matt says.

"What, those guys from before?"

"Yeah." It's the same car.

Frank's hand goes to the gun he just took off the guy; Matt startles, but after a second Frank just turns and hauls the man upright.

"Let's get him out of here," he snaps, and starts to yank him towards the car door-

But apparently there's a bit more life in him than it seemed before. He suddenly squirms free and takes the chance to bring his knee up to Frank's groin.

Taken by surprise, Frank lets him go with a grunt. He manages to worm his way out from Frank's arm and stumbles towards the road. Matt dashes after him and grabs him from behind; he hooks an elbow around his neck, starts choking him out, but he's just lowering him to the ground when the car pulls up.

They've seen the fight. They're out of the car in an instant and closing in on them - five men, big guys too, all pulling guns.

"It's fucking Daredevil!" one of them yells, and starts to lift his gun to fire.
Matt had been scared, going into this, that he’d freeze up again like he did back at the old dumping ground. In the moment, it turns out, years of Krav Maga kick in and he instinctively moves in. In a second he’s on the guy - moving himself offline, twisting the gun out of his hand, throwing it aside as he kicks the man in the groin and then moves in with a flurry of punches before a final kick to the chest sends him down.

He twists sideways as a second guy fires at him. Beside him, he’s distantly aware of the crackle of electricity and a racing heartbeat as Castle deals with another of them. Both of them go in for another guy each; Matt struggles with his one for the gun, keeping his free hand up to protect his head as the guy swings at him. A punch grazes the side of his head and disorients him for a second, but he recovers and breaks the guy’s wrist before striking him in the throat hard enough to send him stumbling back, choking-

Frank yells suddenly, a sharp, pained noise, and then there’s an explosion of blood in the air, and Matt whips around, worried. Distracted.

So distracted that he’s just a second too late when he notices the fifth guy coming up next to him.

The guy’s drawing and firing just as Matt ducks, but the crack! of the gunshot is loud enough that for a second-

For a second, it drowns everything else out. For a second his ears ring and he loses sense of where he is, all the small details painting a picture - the footsteps, the rush of air displacing, the sound of every movement echoing off everything around them - vanishing.

He stumbles back, disoriented, instinctively lifting his arms to protect his face.

There’s another gunshot from somewhere - he only distantly hears it, muffled like it’s underwater, but he-

Smells the gunpowder-

Feels the impact in the man’s shoulder in front of him, the blazing heat as the bullet cuts through muscle and bursts free on the other side-

Tastes the tang of blood in the air-

The man drops his gun, but he doesn’t go down. He bullrushes Matt and knocks him to the ground, seeing that he’s dazed. They hit the ground hard; the man knocks the breath out of him. Matt gets in one good punch across the face before the guy grabs his head - fingers digging into his hair through the fabric of the mask - and smashes his head against the ground.

Everything spins. If Matt could see he thinks he would be seeing stars; his hearing’s clearing, now, but he can barely focus on anything, his senses assaulted by so much sound and movement and chaos that he feels like he’s drowning in it. He senses something close to him - cold, metal - and fumbles to grab the guy’s wrist.

They grapple for the weapon, Matt trying to hold him off, the other guy trying to drive the blade down. It sinks into Matt’s shoulder and he lets out a hoarse yell; the guy wrenches it free, goes for his throat-

And then suddenly his weight lifts off Matt and he’s thrown aside. Matt sits up, dizzily. Frank is a blur of noise and motion next to him and he can’t pick apart what’s happening, his head still spinning. Punches are being thrown, he knows that much. And then everything falls still.
There’s still too much, too much. Too many people breathing and wheezing raggedly around them. Too much blood in the air. And in the distance, sirens shrieking, on their way towards them. Then Frank’s by his side, and Matt has to turn away from him with a grimace because the other man’s shirt is absolutely soaked with blood.

“Jesus Christ, Red.” He crouches next to Matt, reaches out, touches the back of his head. Matt flinches. “Are you okay?”

Matt opens his mouth and can’t think of anything to say. Frank’s hand shifts around, touches the side of his face instead, oddly warm and gentle.

“Are you with me?” He sounds worried. “You can hear me, right?”

Matt swallows hard, ends up downing a mouthful of blood, and kind of wants to throw up.

“I can hear you,” he manages, hoarsely. “Hit m’ head. Cops coming.”

It’s a lot of effort to even string that sentence together, but he’s - slowly getting himself together. He squeezes his eyes shut and takes a deep breath and tries to filter every sense apart so he can take them one at a time. He slowly gets a sense of where he is - the muddy ground under him, Frank’s warmth next to him, a steadying hand on his arm. Pain, pain in the back of his head and in his shoulder.

And five heartbeats around them. Five?

“Who’s dead?” he rasps, and Frank looks around.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” he says firmly. “Can’t say I wasn’t tempted, but they’re all alive. Think that guy we were questioning got caught in the crossfire. C’mon. The police are coming. We can talk about this later. Right now we need to get the fuck out of here.”

“You okay?” Matt asks then, because when Frank starts to lever him to his feet he catches the other man’s wince.

“Had worse. We’ll chat about it later, come on.”

Frank’s arm is around his waist, steadying him; Matt has to cling to him because the second he gets upright he feels dizzy again. There’s just too much input, from all directions, all at once.

“God, you’re a mess,” Frank says, and drags him to the car, and really all Matt can register is that as the sirens wail closer and they leave the mess of unconscious bodies behind is that he’s really, really fucking glad he isn’t alone tonight. And also that they have a car because he has no idea how he would’ve walked away from this. Turns out a motor vehicle is really good for getting the fuck out of somewhere, fast.

It’s possible that Matt passes out in the car.

Everything’s sort of a blur from the time he sits down until the next thing he knows they’re in front of Frank’s apartment and the other man is shaking his arm roughly.

“-urdock. Murdock! Matt!”
“Huh?” he replies, and then nearly bites his own tongue off when Frank touches his shoulder right where he got stabbed. “Fuck - fuck, get off!”

Frank pulls back straight away. The car smells like a slaughterhouse. Matt coughs a few times and shakes his head.

Passing out actually helped. It worked like a fucking factory reset; everything was blurring together before, but now he’s back to filtering out the useless stuff, like the couple arguing in the flat across the street and the cats mating behind the dumpster in a nearby alley. He feels exhausted and unfocused, but he knows where he is, which is, y’know, always a good thing when you literally cannot see shit.

Frank’s staring at him, frowning.

“You need a hospital?” he asks gruffly.

“No.”

“I’m serious, Murdock, if you hit your head that hard-”

“I’m not concussed.” He can sense Frank’s disbelief. “I promise. I know what that feels like. Look, I - it takes a lot of control. Not letting everything around me get overwhelming. Kind of like a sensory overload. When I hit my head I let everything slip and it was - a lot to take in.” A pause. “Thanks for getting me out of there.”

Frank nods, slowly.

“Well, you’re losing blood,” he grunts. “Let’s get inside and sort ourselves out.”

“You’re bleeding too,” Matt points out, and feels a jolt of concern. Frank’s one of the toughest bastards he’s ever met - he’ll never forget the night he dragged the other man out of that building, barely in one piece but still filled with fire and fury - but he’s actually soaked with blood, and Matt doesn’t want to think about what they both must look like.

He climbs out of the car and has to pause, leaning against the door.

The adrenaline is dying away now, but his heart is pounding and when he lifts a hand he can feel how hard he’s shaking. It was a close call, he realises grimly. A really, really fucking close call.

Frank touches his arm, gently; Matt gives in and leans on him, both of them stumbling up the steps. He can feel Frank trembling, too; neither of them comment on it. He gets the key in the lock and they stagger into the flat.

Pi goes crazy the second they’re in the door; Matt can’t blame him, the dog must be able to smell all the blood. He leaves Frank to calm him down - “Easy boy, easy, it’s fine, we’re fine!” - and stumbles into the living room, where he sinks to the floor against the nearest wall.

You’re okay, it’s okay.

You got what you needed. You got out alive.

He saved your life. That’s the second time now. Great job, Matt. His stomach’s twisting itself in knots and he doesn’t really know why. It’s not usually like this after a patrol. He just - hasn’t bounced back as well as he’d like; from Fisk, from Midland, from everything.
Something nudges at his side and he jumps; the dog’s come over to him now, is nosing at his arm; he lifts a hand weakly and grips at its fur.

“Pi!” Frank snaps, across the room, and shakes something that jingles; a toy. “Leave him alone. Come here.”

Matt lets his head fall back against the wall and instantly regrets it when pain resonates through the back of his skull. Frank walks over to him. He puts down a bucket, strips his own shirt off in one fluid motion, and drops it in, then stands there staring down at Matt.

“You can sit on the couch, you know,” he says flatly.

His heart’s racing, Matt realises. He’s rattled, too. He doesn’t doubt Frank’s been in much worse situations, that he has been hurt worse than this. Which means it’s all the other stuff - being back in the middle of a fight, guns firing all around him, torturing a guy for information. He feels a pang.

“I’m sorry,” he says, and hears Frank’s face scrunch up into a frown.

“For what?” he says gruffly.

“For all that. How it went down.”

“You ain’t got shit to be sorry for, Red,” Frank says, and walks away. He comes back with the medkit, a washcloth and a basin of water and crouches in front of Matt, who can only sort of sit there uselessly. “You in shock or somethin’?”

“No,” Matt replies, unconvincingly.

“You’re shaking like a leaf.”

“I’m fine.”

Frank tilts his head and wrings out the washcloth. The flat seems suddenly very, very quiet; the neighbouring apartments are all asleep, everything around them still and silent. He’s too aware of Frank’s pounding heartbeat, of the warmth radiating off him-

Safe, he thinks, we’re safe here, but everything still feels a bit warped and wrong, it seems like only a second ago that they were standing under that bridge surrounded by bodies. Time is slipping through his fingers like sand and he can’t keep up with it.

“Tonight went well,” Frank says, abruptly. “We got the information we needed. The cops will have picked up those guys. You did good.”

“That guy died.”

“Can’t save ‘em all. His blood’s not on your hands. In this sort of work nothing’s ever gonna turn out perfect. Take it for what it is. That was a success. And we’re both alive, so that’s something.”

Matt nods. He accepts the words, he knows they’re true. His heart’s still pounding, though, he’s all wired and he knows he’s gonna be worked up for the rest of the night. From the way everything about Frank is buzzing he knows he will be, too; it was just one of those jobs where you’re not dead exhausted at the end, you’re all keyed up with energy and nowhere to put it.

“Thanks,” he manages.
“Don’t mention it,” Frank says, “You threw your share of punches back there. Come on, let’s see the damage.”

Matt pushes away from the wall with a wince. He eases his shirt off, choking back a groan of pain when he lifts his arm, and Frank shifts in front of him, leans in close, dabs at his shoulder with the warm washcloth. Water and blood run down his chest, over his stomach.

This is where things get weird.

Later Matt won’t be able to figure out exactly what was going through his head. Or maybe the answer is nothing, he wasn’t thinking, that’s the problem.

He opens his mouth, ready to tell Frank that he’s fine, that he can do it himself, that Frank should tend to his own wounds first - but the words die on his tongue. Frank is very close and very warm and suddenly that’s all Matt’s senses are filled with; his heartbeat, so familiar now that Matt could pick it out of a crowd in an instant. The smell of his sweat and blood, his steady breathing.

He lifts a shaky hand and rests it on Frank’s chest. The other man goes very still as Matt’s hand slides up to his shoulder. There’s a gash down the length of his arm where a knife must have caught him; it’s shallow, Matt can tell, but it’s still been bleeding relentlessly. That’s gonna need stitches.

“Murdock…” Frank starts, then trails off, voice a little choked. Matt moves his hand back to his chest, rests it over his heart for a minute. Feels it, hammering against his ribcage, fast as a hummingbird. There’s something reassuring about feeling it pulse, rhythmically, under his palm.

He lets his hand drop, trailing down Frank’s side before falling back to his own lap. Feels hard muscle and the weaving ropes of scars. His skin is very warm.

This is the most he’s touched someone in a long time, Matt notes, absently.

Frank swallows hard. Both of them are blushing, Matt realises. Both of them buzzing with every hair practically on end. It’s the adrenaline, he knows, it’s that post-fight crazy you get. But he knows, suddenly, that Castle’s attracted to him. His body’s practically a neon sign screaming it at him. Frank reaches up and his thumb brushes against Matt’s cheek and then it’s slipping up under the mask. Matt reaches up and grabs his wrist.

“I’ve seen your face, Red,” Frank says, and Matt bites his lip.

This is a bad idea. But he still lets his hand fall, lets Frank slip the mask up over the top of his head.

He feels far too vulnerable suddenly, as the cool air hits his face, and something about that makes him ache, but there’s something a bit thrilling about it, too. Maybe he’s just getting way too tired of holding all his walls up. He stares straight ahead, knows he’s not meeting Frank’s eyes, that his gaze is way off. But then Frank’s hand is cradling his jaw, moving to tilt his head towards him-

And Matt leans in and kisses him.

It’s all a bit of a blur, to be honest. A bit of a head rush. Impulse control? What’s that?

If he’s thinking - and he’s really, really not, not properly - it’s just little things, stupid things that rush through his head like swooping birds, like-

Like it’s been a bad night and I need someone to touch me-

Like Karen and Foggy are together and you’re alone, alone, alone-
Like *he saved your life-*

And *my shoulder really fucking hurts, it kills, I could have died tonight-*

And *he saved you, he cares about you, he was worried-*

*It’s been a long time-*

*I can’t-*

*Everything’s falling apart and I just need-*

*You’re safe.*

Frank’s lips are rough and chapped against his. He tastes like blood and coffee. He kisses back, hard and demanding at first, but when he pushes Matt too hard against the wall and he winces, something softens; his hand gentle now against Matt’s cheek, the other curled around his bicep, thumb rubbing slow circles against his arm.

When they pull apart they’re both breathing heavily. Frank lets his forehead drop against Matt’s; he can feel the other man’s breath still, against his lips. Their hearts are both racing but it’s different to before; he actually feels steadier rather than off-balance. Matt swallows hard.

“Um,” he says, eloquently.

“Jesus, Red,” Frank mutters. “*Jesus.*”

*He loves Karen,* Matt thinks, as he closes his eyes and lets himself drink in the other man’s warmth, how it seems to soak into his skin into his very bones, melt away a cold that’s been there too long. *You love Karen and Foggy. And here you both are.*

There’s probably something fucked up about this. But he’ll take it, for now. To not feel so cold, just for a moment.

He opens his mouth, only to freeze when Frank claps a hand over it.

“If the next word out of your fucking mouth is *sorry,* I swear...” he warns, and Matt freezes-

And then starts laughing, a bit hysterically maybe. Muffled at first until Frank drops his hand and joins in. And God, everything *hurts,* every bruise and cut from the fight, his head and his shoulder and-

And his life, he knows, just got five thousand times more complicated. As though he didn’t have enough personal shit to deal with-

But Frank’s not radiating *horror,* or even *regret.* Maybe he will in the morning, when they’re not fresh out of the fight and kinda fucked in the head, maybe they both will.

But for now, all Matt can think is *why fucking not. Not like there’s anyone else around who’s as lonely and fucked up as you are. Not like Castle has anyone else.*

So he lets himself relax. Let’s himself have this night for what it is - as Frank picks up the washcloth again, as Matt tries to breathe deep so his hands stop shaking, knowing he’ll be stitching up the other man in a minute. And when Frank steadies him with a hand on his good shoulder, when he mumbles “You’re alright,” he can almost let himself believe it.
11. CAN FOGGY’S DAY GET ANY WORSE? LET’S FIND OUT

Everything’s fine but not fine.

Foggy wakes up and cooks Karen eggs. They stand next to each other in the bathroom. He shaves and watches her put on her makeup. They watch the news while they have their coffee, murmur about the big headlines. Captain America spotted a few times. Still on the run. Police arrest five in a drug deal gone wrong down by the Southport Bridge, with one unidentified body to add to the fun.

Karen drives him to work. Before they go in she straightens his tie and he brushes some hair out of her face and they exchange a quick, pleasant kiss.

Everything’s fine.

But something - something feels off. He can’t explain why. Dinner last night was perfectly nice; they didn’t discuss Frank Castle or the Hellhounds or anything else. Just the news and stupid things they’d seen online recently and a few other cases they’re working on. Karen spent the night at his place, and neither of them had really bad dreams for once.

Everything should be okay. But it all just feels - a bit flat, a bit paper-cut-out, like they’re just going through the motions.

He catches Karen’s arm as she makes her way up into the building.

“We’re okay, right?” he says slowly.

He can see in her face. She feels it too. But she nods, smiles.

“Of course,” she whispers, and reaches down and tangles their fingers together and tugs him after her into the office-

But something inside him feels hollow, hollow, hollow. Maybe he’s just getting old and tired.

Matt walks into work twenty minutes late. Foggy hears him coming before he sees him. Or more accurately, he hears Karen’s chair scrape back from her desk before she says, “Jesus Christ.”

“Good morning,” Matt replies.

Foggy exits his office and grimaces. Even Matt’s glasses can’t hide the fact that he looks like shit. Like he looks tired at the best of times, but today he actually looks sick. He clearly hasn’t had time to shave, he must barely have slept, but he’s got this sort of bruised-eye, pallid look that makes it look like he belongs in the hospital.

Not only that, his arm’s in a sling.

“You doing alright, buddy?” Foggy asks, pointedly, and Matt turns towards him and smiles a bit.
“Got a little bit stabbed.”

Foggy’s heart nearly jumps out of his chest. He sees Matt’s smile fade. Forces himself to take a deep, calming breath.

It never gets easier. Days like this when it’s clear that Matt could just - not have come back from patrol last night, as easy as that. There one day, gone the next.

“Define a little bit,” he insists.

“Not life threatening,” Matt clarifies, “But I lost a lot of blood and I don’t think I’ll be climbing around for a while. I need to let it heal.”

“You should go home,” Karen says, exchanging a worried look with Foggy. “Rest. You look like you could use it.”

“I don’t want to mess up my body clock,” Matt informs them, making for his office.

Foggy follows him in.

“You don’t have a body clock,” he points out, “You literally never sleep. Seriously, you alright? I thought…”

He trails off, not wanting to say it, but Matt stops and turns towards him, slowly.

“Castle had my back,” he replies, carefully, “Saved my life for the second time, actually. I owe him a good few at this point. He got hurt, too. But we got the info we needed. A name - Cerberus. New Zealander, not a local. Doesn’t live in Hell’s Kitchen. See what Karen can dig up?”

Foggy nods. There’s a funny, guarded look on Matt’s face that he can’t figure out. For a moment they stand there, facing each other a bit awkwardly.

Last night…

Last night Foggy had been worried. And also pretty fucking shocked because Matt? Voluntarily offering the truth? He’d thought he was dreaming, or maybe that the world was ending. But in the light of day, he’s glad that Matt trusted him - and, in hindsight, glad he wasn’t alone.

*Positive reinforcement,* he thinks grimly, and reaches out and squeezes Matt’s arm gently.

“Hey - thanks for calling me last night. I appreciate it,” he says. “I like to be in the loop.”

Matt smiles a little, something relaxing in his shoulders.

“Thanks for being there,” he replies, and Foggy grins back.

“Take it easy today, I’m serious,” he says, and Matt nods, and things feel kind of okay. It still tugs at his heart, seeing him all beaten down - but that’s just life, these days, and at least they’re not fighting, and if he gets the sense Matt’s hiding something, he doesn’t think it’s something big, something that involves the rest of them. So he leaves it, for now - backs out and shuts Matt’s office door.

Karen’s standing at her desk, staring at him.

“He okay?” she asks, and Foggy nods.
“I think he’s fine,” he says. “He’s got a name - New Zealander who goes by Cerberus, if you can find anything on that.”

“I’m on it,” Karen says, and sits down to get to it, and Foggy stands there for a second. Looks at the top of her blonde head, bent intently over her laptop, knows she’ll soon be so wrapped up in her work she’s barely aware of what’s going on around her. Looks through the window to Matt’s office - he’s sitting in his chair with his eyes closed and Foggy’s not sure if he’s listening to something or if he’s actually legit just fallen asleep right the fuck there. With his head tilted back Foggy can see the sharp line of his jaw, the stretch of his neck, bluish bruises spreading like spilled ink from under his shirt collar.

He feels a sudden surge of affection for both of them - and something else. Something fierce, protective almost, of the three of them, of this feeling of when they’re all in on the secret, a sense of balance that’s been off-kilter the last couple of days. It passes abruptly, leaves him feeling a little nervous, worried about how easily everything could veer off course, and he wanders back to his office to get some work done.

Shit starts going off the rails that afternoon, just before lunch.

As disasters go, it has a very mundane beginning. Karen’s sitting at a table in the kitchen eating another of her carefully prepared boxes. Matt’s standing, very slowly making a coffee with his one good hand. Foggy’s digging around in the fridge for leftovers. Pretty typical workday.

“Hey, can you SuperNose this for me?” he demands, thrusting a box of old Pad Thai at Matt, who recoils.

“Uhhh,” he replies, looking very dubious, and Foggy abruptly remembers the one time he asked Matt why he didn’t want a hot dog from the park and got a rundown of exactly how much shit (including literal shit) was inside it.

“Just give me a yes or no, will I get food poisoning if I eat it?”

“Probably not?” Matt says gingerly, and Foggy nods and grabs a fork. Karen rolls her eyes as he sits next to her.

“You know I can make lunch for you as well,” she points out.

“And waste these perfectly good leftovers?”

“Hey,” Matt cuts in abruptly. He’s not looking at them. “Can I ask you kind of a weird question?”

He sounds… not quite nervous, but hesitant. It’s unusual enough for him that both Foggy and Karen look up in alarm, and Matt starts to laugh.

“No need to be so scared. It’s… it’s trivial, really. Just something stupid.”

“Of course,” Karen says softly.

Matt’s - Matt’s feeling awkward, Foggy realises, with dawning amusement. He’s shuffling around with his coffee like he doesn’t know what to do with his hands, and for a second Foggy’s startlingly
reminded of their uni days - of Matt back when they were invited to parties or had to do a group project with people they didn’t know. Of when he first met Elektra. It makes something warm and fond rise in his chest.

That lasts about five seconds.

“Purely out of curiosity,” Matt prefaces his inquiry with, which is always such an encouraging sign, “What does Frank Castle look like?”

Foggy nearly chokes on a piece of tofu.

Karen’s eyes go huge. Then she grins a bit, looking almost flustered. Matt finally peeks around at them and Foggy can’t quite tell if he’s blushing or not. Dear God. What’s going on?

“What do you know already?” Karen asks.

Matt shrugs.

“How tall he is? I get a sense of people’s size, but all I can really do after that is imagine from their voices. I’m just curious,” he adds again, rather too defensively in Foggy’s opinion, “I’m not exactly about to ask to touch all over his face.”

“Please do,” Foggy says, “It’d be hilarious.”

“I like my hands. I’d rather they stay attached to my body,” Matt says. He leans against the counter, sips his coffee, then adds, quietly, “Honestly, though, I’d like to know.”

Why, Foggy thinks, a bit sourly. Why do you want to know. Since when are Matt and Castle best buddies? He still doesn’t like this, doesn’t like the direction it’s going, doesn’t like the distinct lack of control he has over the entire situation. It’s bad enough that Karen’s all over Frank. He’d thought Matt had more sense than that.

“He’s got this giant, fucked up nose,” he declares, “And the world’s biggest earlobes-”

“Foggy!” Karen chides.

“On a scale of one to ten I’d rate him, like, a two or three.”

“Foggy.” Karen sounds genuinely pissed off. Here we go, Foggy thinks. “Don’t be a dick.”

“It’s okay,” Matt says quickly, and moves to make a hasty escape. “Don’t worry about it. It’s a pointless question-”

“No it’s not,” Karen snaps, stopping him in his tracks. “It’s not. I think it’s a perfectly reasonable thing for you to ask about anyone. And if you want to know what someone looks like, I’m gonna tell you.”

“Karen…” Matt sounds pained.

He thinks we’re gonna end up fighting, Foggy realises. Are they? Are they fighting over Frank Castle again? Karen’s still glaring at him; he folds his arms, looks away. After a second Karen turns back to Matt and her face softens.

“He has dark hair,” she says, with that earnest sincerity that usually Foggy loves so much about her.
“And dark eyes. He does have a big nose, but it suits his face. It probably has been broken a few times. His hair’s a bit longer now than it was when we first met him. He has a very square jaw. He frowns a lot but I think it’s just a bad case of resting bitch face.”

Matt’s lips twitch a little. He’s hanging on her every word. Foggy glances between them, eyes narrow, unsure what the fuck is going on here.

“On a scale of one to ten,” Karen adds then, pettily, “I’d give him an eight.”

“That’s very generous,” Foggy replies, icily. And in his head, thinks, *that was pretty fucking unnecessary. She’s trying to hurt you.* It’s mean in a way that’s very unlike her. Karen glances at him, and after a second her face softens.

“You’re a nine,” she says, and leans across and kisses his cheek. It doesn’t really mollify him. The only reason he forces out a laugh is because Matt’s starting to look very awkward, clearly feeling caught in the middle.

“Matt’s a ten, obviously,” Foggy says, because he set this train in motion so might as well commit to making *everyone* feel self-conscious, right.

Matt scoffs out a laugh, head lowered, gaze directed at his coffee cup.

“‘When he doesn’t look like he just got the crap beat out of him, sure,’” Karen says.

“Your numerical scale of attractiveness really means *nothing* to me,” Matt points out, “That’s the sort of shit only sighted people come up with.” And then, softer, “Thanks, Karen.”

She smiles a bit. Matt takes his coffee and leaves the room. The second he’s gone a frosty sort of awkwardness descends over them. Foggy can’t tell if Karen’s actually genuinely angry with him. In fact, he doesn’t know if he’s really angry with her.

*Uneasy,* he thinks. He’s uneasy about this.

Same sort of uneasy he was the other day, when Frank just *happened* to drop by and hang out with all of them—

Same sort of uneasy when she didn’t tell him he was back in town. When he went over to her place for drinks. The only reason he hasn’t totally freaked out is because every single time, Matt was there with them too—

But still. It’s starting to reach a breaking point. He doesn’t like this. He thinks, suddenly, that he’s *about* to get angry, and rises from the table.

“Gotta make a phone call,” he says, just for an excuse to get some air. Karen doesn’t stop him. She does look a bit upset, but Foggy can only leave, miserably, thinking, *of course it couldn’t last.*

“I’m gonna work late tonight,” Foggy declares when he gets back in, “Got a lot to do on the Harper case.”

He proceeds to lock himself in his office and actually legit get stuck into work, because *one* of the
three of them needs to earn a living around here. Karen leaves early, chasing the Cerberus lead, and even if he’s a bit pissed Foggy still makes her promise to text him updates. She can take care of herself, she knows, but it still makes his heart jolt nervously when she does go out there to pursue something dangerous.

It’s just past five when Matt raps at his office door. Foggy looks up.

“You okay?” Matt asks abruptly, and Foggy blinks.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he asks, and Matt shifts. He can’t seem to put it into words, but that’s understandable, Foggy things. He can’t put it into words either, he just knows that he’s not. Something’s off with Karen. Something still off with him - he has this sense of looming dread that he hates. It’s making him feel far too fragile.

“Well,” Matt says, after a very strained pause, “I’m gonna head out early if that’s okay. I’m ready to crash.”

“No patrol tonight?” Foggy asks, and Matt gestures at his arm.

“Need to let this heal. Shouldn’t take too long.”

He turns to leave. Foggy weighs up the bad decision he’s been tossing around all afternoon and thinks why the fuck not.

“Matt,” he calls out. “Wait.”

Matt turns, and Foggy waves for him to sit down.

“I need to talk to you about something.” He swallows hard. “Just - please?”

“Of course,” Matt repeats.

“This is like - the sort of shit I’d tell you about if we were back at uni.” He lets out a hysterical sort of laugh. “I just - I need you to be straight with me. No bullshit.”

“Okay…”

“I’m serious. I - I trust you to be honest with me, about this at least.” He knows it doesn’t matter, that Matt can’t tell either way, but he makes himself look up and meet the other man’s eyes. “It’s been bothering me since the other day. Something I noticed that you can tell me for sure. I don’t know if I’m just being an idiot or overthinking this or what.”

“Foggy,” Matt says gently, “You’re rambling.”

“Sorry. Sorry.” God, it’s so hard to get the words out. His palms are sweating. “I don’t think I’m wrong. But. Karen’s into Frank, isn’t she?”

He sees Matt’s shoulders stiffen. His mouth presses into a thin line, and he suddenly doesn’t seem to know what to do with his hands. He opens his mouth, reconsiders, then swallows.
“What do you mean?” he asks.

“You know what I mean.” The words come out in a rush now. “The way she talks about him. This connection they have that she can’t explain to me. The other day when he came to say hi to us, the way they were looking at each other… even today, when she was describing him-”

“Foggy…”

“Look, I’m not trying to - to be that guy, alright? Just. I need to know. You can tell, can’t you? She’s into him.”

The thing about being friends with someone as guarded as Matt is that Foggy now has a fucking PhD in reading between the lines. There’s as much in what he doesn’t say as in what he does, and his silence right now is very, very telling. Foggy leans back in his seat, runs his hands through his hair.


“Attraction is a weird thing,” Matt starts. “It’s - it’s not something you control. Not really.”

“I know.” A pause. “He’s into her too, isn’t he?”

Matt grimaces.

“Nothing’s going to happen between them,” he says firmly. “She’s with you, Foggy. Not him. And Castle… for all his faults, he’s not - he wouldn’t try and make a move on her. He’s not that sort of guy. And Karen would never.”

“I know.” And he does know. “I’m not - I’m not worried about that. Not really.”

“But you’re not comfortable with all this,” Matt observes softly, and Foggy looks away. “Look, Foggy… old feelings, they don’t… they don’t mean anything. You learn to get past them, learn to work together either way.”

There’s something too heavy in his voice. Foggy’s head snaps back up.

“What’s that mean?” he asks.

The look on Matt’s face makes him pause. *Him and Karen? Is that what he’s getting at? Jesus fucking Christ, if he’s still into her too…*

Matt must be able to tell he’s being sized up. His face abruptly closes off.

“I can’t get involved in your and Karen’s business,” he says, “I just - Foggy, it’s too... When we all work together… it puts all of us in a bad spot.”

“I know you and Karen were-”

“I still have dreams about Elektra,” Matt interrupts him, and Foggy’s mouth snaps shut. He hadn’t meant to make Matt uncomfortable, but from the look on his face it seems like he’s pushed a bit too far. “Nightmares, more like. I just - you don’t need to worry about me, Foggy. I’ve got too many ghosts for that.”

“I wasn’t worried about that,” Foggy whispers, and Matt nods. He must be able to tell it’s true.
“Okay. Good.” He starts to stand up and Foggy bites his lip. He feels like he should say something, like he’s made things awkward and needs to fix it, but he doesn’t know how. A second later Matt adds, in a flustered rush, “No one would… would be stupid enough to give up a chance with you, anyway. You’re the biggest catch of everyone I know.”

“What?” Foggy asks - he’s not fishing for anything, he’s legitimately not sure he heard that right - the tips of Matt’s ears turn very red. “Says you, Mister Popular. Remind me, which one of us got anyone they wanted in college?”

“Not everyone I wanted,” Matt mutters, and then bites his lip like he hadn’t meant to say it. He rubs his hands over his face. “I… Sorry, Foggy, I really, really need to sleep.”

“Of course.” Embarrassed now, Foggy rises in a flustered rush. “Sorry, I - I didn’t mean to put you in an awkward spot.”

“It’s fine.” Matt smiles. “Happy to talk about it. Just - don’t worry, okay? You trust Karen, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Foggy whispers. It’s not a lie, not really. He trusts Karen not to betray him. He just doesn’t trust everything not to fall apart on its own.

Matt gives a brief smile. He leaves in a hurry and Foggy feels faintly guilty and isn’t sure why. And faintly unsettled, just by how cagey Matt was being. There’s something going on with him that Foggy can’t figure out.

Too many secrets, he thinks miserably, and for a second he wants to stand up and just - freak out, just sweep everything off his desk and scream.

We’re not meant to be like this.

The three of us, it isn’t… after Fisk…

Things are meant to be okay now. And if they were actually, actively going wrong he could find a way to fix them, but it’s just - little things.

Stupid little things that it would be petty to focus on, but they’re still eating away at him. He has no idea what to do, except sit down, and take a deep breath, and get back to work, and wait.

They ambush him two blocks away from his apartment.

Foggy’s walking home, hoping the air and exercise will clear his head. In hindsight, given the state of their city recently and the fact that he knows Matt isn’t out tonight, this is not the best idea he’s ever had.

The tread of footsteps rushing up behind him is the only warning he gets before a thick arm pulls tight around his neck, dragging him back into the shadows of an alley he was just passing by. Foggy chokes, tugging desperately at the arm. Through his blurred vision he sees three or four other figures closing in from the darkness.

“Is that him?” a voice growls.
“Yeah,” the man holding him says, “It’s the lawyer prick.”

“Where’s the other one?”

“We only need one to know what Lester told ‘em.”

Fuck, Foggy thinks. He can barely breathe and his vision is beginning to spot dark at the edges. The man spins him around and he sees the headlights of a car parked deeper in the alley. His stomach drops.

He’s read enough stories about kidnapping to know, never get in the car. You’re fucked if you let them get you in the car.

Okay, so here’s the thing. Foggy was not joking when he was all maybe I should learn some self defence, and maybe Matt didn’t get around to teaching him anything, but you gotta be proactive with that shit. He wasn’t just waiting around. He’s taken a grand total of three Krav Maga classes but they did cover holds, and although he’s not exactly expecting to pull off some sort of black belt move, he does remember, be aggressive.

They’re not expecting some white collar guy to fight back.

There’s no time to waste. Before he can overthink it, in a single explosive movement he bends his knees, brings his hand down, fingers forming a hook that curls around the guy’s arm and drags it down. It gives him a centimetre of room, but that’s enough to suck in a breath. Enough for him to stamp on the guy’s fucking foot, stagger a few paces forward, swing a fist back around to hammer-strike him in the groin, and run the fuck away!

It’s clumsy, but he was right - it does take them by surprise. He sprints out of the alley and down the street, heart racing-

They’re after him.

He can hear their footsteps, their yells, and there’s no one around, and-

Fuck this, Foggy thinks. He’s so scared that he’s, like, ascended to a higher plane above panic. Everything around him seems very sharp and clear. He’s a fast son of a bitch when he wants to be; he veers around a corner, takes another sharp left. Glances over his shoulder. They’re still behind him.

The streets around here are dark and quiet. The nearest main road is a little distance away, but to be honest in Hell’s Kitchen even a main road doesn’t guarantee your safety. No police stations in running distance. His flat is in a desolate enough area that it’s not really an option, plus he doesn’t want them knowing where he lives.

He takes a few more sharp turns, barely aware of where he is at this point, then skids to a halt and grimaces. He’s ended up in a dead end filled with dumpsters.

There’s no time to turn back.

He’s got a bit of a head start on them. Without thinking about it he picks one near the back and clambers in, yanking the lid shut behind him. He lands on something soft, his heart skipping a beat as he’s plunged into such total darkness that for a second it makes a primal fear rise deep in his belly. He flounders for a moment until his shoes hit the bottom of the metal bin.

Paper. It’s a recycling bin. He crouches near the bottom and drags what feels like a sheet of
cardboard over him, hoping for some cover. It won’t be enough, he knows grimly, they’re gonna catch up and there aren’t that many places to hide around here.

He gets out his phone, glad when the screen lights up the bin around him with a faint glow - then freezes.

**What should I do? Call the cops?**

Thing is. Matt’s made him all paranoid now with his “trust no one and especially not the police” schtick. Usually Foggy would not hesitate to have 911 on fucking speed dial. But now he feels a sudden shaky uncertainty.

**If the cops show up and they’re on their side...**

“Hey!”

“I think he went down here.”

Distant voices. Footsteps. A fist squeezes his heart so hard he’s sure it’ll burst. He remembers Lester’s shaking voice, the fear in his eyes. He doesn’t have long until they find him.

Trembling so hard he can barely navigate his phone’s touchscreen, he calls Matt.

“Foggy?” He must have been sleeping; he sounds groggy.

“Matt.” He’s surprised how calm his own whisper sounds considering he feels like he might pass out any second now. “I'm in trouble. Hounds are after me.”

“What?” Matt’s instantly more alert. “Where are you?”

“Hiding in a dumpster,” he hisses, “I can hear them out there - they know we talked to Lester-“

“A dumpster where?”

He can what Matt moving, flinging open a cupboard door, rustling around with something.

“I...” His mind blanks. “One second.”

“What? Foggy?”

Panic has wiped his mind clean. He has to pull open Google maps, wait an agonisingly long minute for the GPS to figure out his location, and then finally get back on the line to give Matt the address.

“I’m on my way,” Matt says, “Don’t hang up.”

And then he goes silent. Foggy puts his phone in his pocket and then shoved his fist in his mouth to keep from making a sound.

Every noise - passing cars, the rustle of paper - seems deafening. His legs are cramping where he’s crouched, but he barely notices. All he can focus on is how his chest feels like it’s being squeezed in a steel vice.
It feels like forever, although it must be maybe five minutes. But then he hears the Hounds’ voices, and their heavy boots approaching.

_This is it_, he thinks, and realises he’s gasping for breath like a drowning man. Goodbye cruel fucking world. And what strikes him for some reason is _regret_, that he didn’t call Karen to say goodbye, and a heavy concern for Matt and how guilty he’s gonna feel when Foggy’s body inevitably turns up floating in a river somewhere. Like they weren’t all traumatised enough already.

The dumpster lid is flung open with a _bang!_ A bright light shining in his eyes nearly blinds Foggy as rough hands haul him free.

“Here he is!” someone yells - he blinks, spots dancing in his vision, an iron grip around his arms - before he can get his bearings a fist strikes him across the face and he falls sideways, spitting blood-

There’s a _thud_ from the back of the group. A yell. Another thud. Two guys down and the other three spinning around. The man holding Foggy lets go and he staggers free and turns to see a dark figure beating the shit out of one of the men, then dragging him close, using him as a shield when the other two advance on him. He flings him to the ground, ducks a solid right hook from one of the other guys and then drives his fist up into his stomach. There’s a flash of light and the man screams.

A _taser_, Foggy realises - his face throbs and he’s so dazed he can hardly think straight. _That’s not Matt. That’s-

_No fucking way_, he realises grimly, as the last guy swings his torch around and the beam lights up... well, to put it in his own words, a giant fucked up nose and the world’s biggest earlobes.

Why! Just why! He watches Castle grab the guy’s arm and cringes when he breaks it with an audible snap, then wrenches the torch free and beats him over the head with it until he goes down.

A heavy silence falls.

Foggy’s standing there frozen. He can hear himself gasping - terrible, inhuman noises that at any other time he’d be embarrassed by. Everything tilts dizzily and he realises that his jaw is swollen, that it really fucking hurts. The next thing he knows Frank Castle’s all up in his face.

“You okay?” he demands, gruffly.

Foggy swallows a few times.

“What…” he manages. “What are _you_ doing here?”

“We need to go,” Castle snaps, “That’s not all of ‘em. They split up to look for you.”

“…”

He trails off. He doesn’t know what to say. _Snap out of it_, he thinks, _you need to get your shit together_. He’s just feeling a bit - shaky and weak and shocky.

Castle steps forward. Foggy yelps as the other man spins him roughly around. One hand grips his arm tightly, the other is braced across the back of his neck. He’s frogmarched down the alley. It takes him a second before he starts struggling weakly. Castle has a firm grip on him and Foggy has no choice but to stumble along.
“What - what’re you doing?”

“Getting you the hell out of here!”

“But why are you here?”

Castle suddenly stops. He shoves Foggy behind him and Foggy blinks a few times. Then he sees the three men stepping out from a side street ahead of them. His heart sinks.

Let me tell you, for all that he despises the other man, in that moment Foggy has never been so fucking grateful that Frank Castle is there by his side. Because as he watches the other man crack his knuckles and start striding towards them, suddenly he has very few doubts that the Punisher is gonna be able to deal with this situation.

The three men advance on him. Castle seems unfazed. He’s just sliding one foot back into his fighting stance when suddenly a black blur leaps down from the nearest rooftop and lands on one of the men’s backs.

All hell breaks loose. Foggy staggers to the side and watches, breathless, at a blur of fists and feet. It takes him a second to pick out Matt in the middle of the fray; he’s in his Daredevil get up and, Foggy notices with worry, one arm is carefully cradled by his side.

He hasn’t actually seen Matt fight up close - not really, not like this. Even with one limb out of commission, it’s pretty fucking breathtaking to watch - how easily he ducks and side-steps swipes, how he pivots on his toes to land a devastating side kick, how he swings an elbow around to smash it solidly against his opponent’s jaw. There’s a brutality to his movements that Foggy’s never seen in him before.

His mouth is suddenly very dry. He feels like he’s watching a stranger - he’s not sure what emotion it is that rises up in his chest and throat, that makes his heart pound with something else suddenly. Not fear. Excitement? There’s just something - strange and thrilling about actually putting two and two together. That’s Matt - his Matt, moving like a dancer, flinging a guy to the ground, weaving in and out between blows.

His breath catches when one of the guys lands a kick that sends Matt stumbling back a pace, clutching his shoulder - but Castle’s on the guy a second later, hauling him back by the throat and punching him across the face. When one of the others gets back up and grabs Frank in a bear-hug from behind, Matt moves in and strikes him in the face with his palm, sending him reeling backwards, clutching his nose. They both spin around to finish off the two guys, and a second later the street is still and quiet again.

Foggy sees Matt shake himself, sees him finally drop his fists and relax. Then his head snaps up, and he’s rushing to Foggy’s side.

“Foggy.” His voice is ragged and desperate. “Are you okay?”

Foggy nods mutely. Matt’s hands are on him - running down his arms, reaching up to cup his cheek. His fingers linger lightly over Foggy’s jaw for a moment, tracing the bruise that’s already forming, the blood where his lip split on his teeth, and Foggy has to fight back a shiver. It’s - weird, Matt doesn’t touch him like this, not usually, and he’s not sure why it makes something electric tingle down his spine.

“I’m fine,” he forces out, and takes a deep breath.
This, Matt being here, is what finally steadies him. His head clears; he feels nothing but exhausted, but quite certain that, now, everything will be okay.

“They hit you.” There’s a dark undertone to Matt’s voice that’s almost frightening. Foggy reaches up and grips his wrist; a second later he slides his hand down to tangle their fingers together instead.

“I’m fine, Matt. Really. Just glad you’re here. Is that all of them?” he asks.

Matt tilts his head like a dog, listening, and then nods.

Castle comes up. He looks between the two of them, his gaze dropping to their intertwined hands. A funny look crosses his face, then he turns to Matt.

“Nice timing, Red,” he says. “I had it handled, though. I didn’t patch up that arm for you to fuck it up again less than twenty four hours later.”

“Says the one who’s bleeding,” Matt fires back, and Foggy realises there’s a spreading dark patch on Castle’s arm. He’s just wearing a t-shirt and jacket, not any sort of masked getup.

“They saw your face,” Matt adds after a second, and Castle shakes his head.

“It’s real fucking dark. Doubt they got enough of a glimpse to recognise me.”

Matt’s shoulders slump in relief. He turns to Frank then, letting go of Foggy’s hand, and says, softly, “Thanks.”

Foggy’s eyes narrow. There’s something - weird, about the two of them. The way they’re angled towards each other. The way Frank keeps staring at Matt, something way too intense in it. But he doesn’t have time to dwell on it, not right now. He clears his throat.

“Um, guys. Can we move this conversation somewhere with four walls and a door that locks?”

“He’s here again?” Foggy demands, as they start following him down the street.

“Sorry.” Matt does sound apologetic. “I… my arm’s so busted I can’t get around the roofs as fast as I usually do. I didn’t know if I’d get here in time. You’re close to Frank’s apartment so I knew he’d be in the area. I - I was worried. I needed to make sure we got to you as soon as possible.”

Foggy swallows hard. He can’t bring himself to be angry. It makes sense. And Castle did save him.

He nods, not up to arguing just yet. It’s starting to sink in. Someone targeted him - him - and it won’t be the last time, and shit just got really, really real.

Matt must sense his heart pounding. He moves closer to Foggy’s side, shoulders bumping against one another a little. Foggy fights the sudden urge to grab his hand and cling tight, not let go.

“You sure you’re alright?” he murmurs, and Foggy bites his lip.

“Fine,” he whispers, but he knows it’s a lie, and Matt knows it’s a lie, and if he’s certain about one
thing it’s that he won’t be sleeping easy, not now, not for a very long time.
12. IN WHICH KAREN MULTITASKS (AKA JUGGLES THREE EMOTIONALLY CONSTIPATED MEN PLUS ALL HER OWN TRAUMA)

The second he walks through the door, Karen flings herself at Foggy and pulls him close.

"You're okay." She's close to tears and can't stop squeezing him as tightly as she can. "You're okay, you're okay-"

"Karen." His voice is muffled into her hair; he wraps his arms around her and hugs her back. She can feel him shaking, feel his heart pounding. "I'm fine."

"I almost-"

Her voice breaks. She can't even think about it. Since she got the phone call from Foggy on the car ride over here, explaining what happened - her heart hasn't stopped pounding. She went to the bathroom and threw up the second she got off the line.

*I can't lose him.*

She knows it with a sudden, sinking certainty. Things were weird between them - before, and earlier today - but the second the possibility struck, she knew it in her bones; she loves this man, she cannot, will not, let him be taken away from her. And the thought of him out there, alone in the dark, the Hellhounds after him-

It makes her tremble, makes her feel so fucking helpless, makes her more scared than she's been in a long, long, long time. Not since Fisk sent Dex after her. That feeling of being hunted - it fucks with your head. But even worse than that is the thought that someone's after the people she loves.

She's shaking too, and she's trying so fucking hard not to cry but a salty tear slides down her cheek either way. It's only when the other two move up that she comes back to herself.

Matt - all done up in his Daredevil get-up - his jaw set so tense that it looks ready to shatter. And Frank - as she lifts her head a little, they lock gazes. His eyes are soft and concerned, and Karen feels a great surge of relief in her chest at the sight of him. Having Matt here helps, makes her feel physically safe; he can fight off practically any threat. The only problem is he's also a contagious, buzzing bundle of anxiety at the best of times; as much as she loves him, it can really stress her out.

Having Frank around, though, leaves her with a sudden certainty that everything will be okay. That no matter what they're up against, they'll find a way to fix it.

She pulls back a little. Puts a hand on Foggy's cheek and looks into his eyes. There's a nasty, swollen bruise on the side of his jaw, already purpling, and he looks so rattled that it makes a lump rise in her throat.

*I can't lose him, I can't lose him.*

"Let's get inside," she whispers, and he nods, and she wraps her hand around the back of his head, fingers tangling in his hair, and pulls him in for a moment, their foreheads pressed close together. He
takes a shaky breath.

They walk inside. Matt and Frank follow, fussing over the door for a moment, looking out the window before drawing all the curtains. Karen leads Foggy to the couch and sits him down.

"They hit you." The anger in her own voice startles her.

"Not the first time I’ve been punched," he replies. He’s aiming for lighthearted but it comes out so shakily that it makes Karen’s heart ache. His hands are fisted tightly in the fabric of his pants. “Could’ve been worse.”

She doesn’t want to think about that. She reaches out, cards her fingers through his hair again, rests her hand on his back. Needs to feel him suddenly - warm, safe, alive. There are bruises on his neck, she notices in horror. Don’t think about it. Don’t think about how this could all have turned out.

Matt enters the room and pulls his mask off. His hands are shaking too; his hair is sticking up in every direction. In the dim lamplight of her living room his eyes look huge and dark. He turns towards them and she sees his face crumple a little - now that the adrenaline’s fading, she imagines it must be hitting him, too, what a close call this was.

“So probably time for a group meeting, huh,” Frank grunts, wandering up behind Matt and folding his arms.

“Oh my God, Frank.” Karen’s hand goes to her mouth. “You’re bleeding.”

“What?” He looks down and pulls a face as he must notice his entire left sleeve is dark with blood. It’s dripped onto the carpet, leaving small dark spots. “Shit, pulled my stitches.”

“I’ll get the first aid kit,” Karen says, and rushes out before anyone can stop her.

She’s glad just to leave the room, even if it’s just for a second and just to the bathroom. She needs a moment - she opens the cabinet and pauses, closing her eyes, sucking in deep breaths.

Don’t you dare freak out. You don’t have time.

But for a second - for a second she needs to grip the edge of the sink, dizzily. She’s scared to go back out there and can’t quite figure out why. Not of the boys themselves, just - everything. Everything piling mountainous around her. The blood, the bruises. That same shell-shocked look on Matt’s face that can she see on her own in the mirror; we could have lost you, we could have-

And the three of them, all in one spot - it makes her nervous, suddenly. She couldn’t articulate why if she tried. It’s not even that she’s worried that they’ll fight. It’s something else, something filled with suddenly too much possibility. Too many dark, uncertain roads that they might travel down.

She wishes she could just - stay in here. Hide away and not have to deal with it.

But she’ll deal with it, same way she deals with everyone else. Deep breath, suck it up, game face on. Push it all to the back of her head, where skeletons are piling up in the dusty back of her closet.

She grabs the kit, pauses to make sure her hands aren’t shaking, and heads back out, returning to the bizarre sight of Frank shaking bicarbonate soda all over the stains on the carpet. The three of them all look up when she arrives.

She must not have done as great a job concealing her emotions as she thought, because they all get this look on their faces, like they want to go over to her and comfort her. She quickly hurries to
Foggy’s side.

“Frank,” she says, “Don’t worry about that.”

“I asked him to,” Foggy says, “Look, I’ve given the fuck up when it comes to Matt’s apartment but I refuse to let bloodstains in the carpet become the norm for you and me.”

Matt huffs out a laugh. He comes up next to Karen, tries to take over - but she has to do this, has to fix this - there’s a slightly awkward moment where both of them are fussing over Foggy, trying to inspect the swollen, split lip. Their hands bump together, and they both turn to each other. Even without eye contact, the tension is palpable. After a second Matt backs off and lets her take over.

“Red,” Frank barks suddenly, “Gimme a hand here.”

Matt turns to him - Frank’s leaning against the table, unbuttoning his shirt. Matt grabs the sewing kit and some of the swabs and goes over to him, and before Karen turns back to Foggy, she sees Frank reach out and grip Matt’s arm and mutter what sounds a lot like “Get your shit together, huh?”

It’s quiet, obviously not meant for the rest of them to notice. But she looks back at Foggy and sees him staring at them with narrowed eyes. They exchange a well that was fucking weird sort of glance.

“So,” Matt says finally, “They know we’re looking into them.”

“It was inevitable the second we took their case,” Foggy replies, wincing a little when Karen dabs at his lip. “But it’s weird to go after the lawyers. They must be pretty damn desperate to keep their secrets.”

“Well, we have a reputation for exposing shit like that,” Matt points out. “If they got wind of our names they might have panicked.”

“Seems to me,” Frank chimes in, “That if they’re desperate to keep it all secret then they’re either hiding something real big, or they’ve actually got fuck all and they don’t want people to know.”

They turn to look at him. He’s standing there shirtless and Karen bites her lip, trying not to stare. The blood from his arm has run in rivets down his side; her eyes track its path for a moment, over bare skin and lean muscle. Newer scars are littered amongst the old, ones from only a couple of months ago; raised, pinkish welts.

Foggy’s staring at him, too. He’s not quite as subtle about it. After a second he shakes himself and turns away, and Karen forces her gaze away too.

If Matt notices their reactions, he makes no mention of it. He stands there blindly mopping away at the blood with an alcohol wipe. He’s not looking at any of them; his head’s turned to face the wall so that he doesn’t have his back to anyone.

“Well, if they’re after us, maybe we can’t take this as slow as we’d like,” Foggy says finally. “They don’t seem like the sort to give up easily.”

“You’re right,” Matt agrees, “I don’t like the thought of either of you being targets. I need to move in on this.”

“Yeah, well don’t rush in half-cocked,” Frank warns, and now Matt turns towards him. “Something
like this, you wanna know your target.”

“I’m not gonna stand around while they’re after Karen and Foggy,” Matt snaps. He moves to start sewing Frank’s arm up again and Frank grabs his hand; Karen can’t help but keep glancing over at them. There’s something kind of… off, about the way they’re interacting. She can’t place it. Matt doesn’t usually let people manhandle him; Frank’s not usually touchy.

But maybe she’s reading into things. Maybe Frank just doesn’t want a pissed off Matt jabbing at him with a needle.

“No one said to stand around,” Frank growls. He’s staring at Matt, intensely. “I don’t like it either. Two of them shouldn’t be alone.”

“I agree,” Matt says tersely, “But I can’t be with both of them twenty four seven.”

“You don’t hafta be,” Frank says.

Foggy clears his throat loudly and pointedly, and Frank abruptly lets go of Matt.

“Matt,” Foggy says, “It’s not on you to be our bodyguard.”

“I dragged you into this.” Matt’s voice is all tight and Karen can practically taste the guilt dripping off him. Not this again. “So yeah, it’s on me.”

“We can take care of ourselves,” Karen says. “If it comes to it, I’ll…”

She trails off meaningfully. Matt’s shoulders are still practically up around the ears. Apparently Foggy’s rubbing off on her too, she has to break the tension and decides the best way to do it is to declare, “I’ll shoot a bitch!” and supplement it with finger guns.

Frank turns his face away, biting back laughter. Foggy rolls his eyes.

“Karen.” Matt sounds very pained. “I don’t want you shooting anyone.”

“Shoulda seen the way I punched that guy in the dick,” Foggy pipes up, “We’re not entirely helpless.”

Matt really must be feeling like shit, because he doesn’t make the obvious blind joke, just shakes his head.

“I’m not gonna abandon the two of you to fight off a fucking meth gang, Foggy.”

“You don’t have to,” Frank says, with a mixture of irritation and long-suffering patience, “What happened to your whole all in this together schtick?”

“He’s right,” Karen says, “No one here’s a lone wolf. We’ll all take care of each other.”

Frank is staring intensely at Matt, and Karen’s getting the distinct vibe that he’s trying to silently communicate something to him. Unfortunately, when it comes to Matt, silent communication is not really a thing. Finally Frank gives a heavy sigh.

“Fuck it,” he mutters, “For God’s sake, Red, I’m trying to say that there’s two of us and two of them. Not gonna be hard to make sure no one’s wandering around on their own with a big fucking target on their back.”
Foggy stiffens.

“We don’t need babysitters,” he starts, a bit peevishly, and Frank shoots him a glare.

“You sure needed one a fucking hour ago.”

“Frank,” Karen chides - he shoots her an apologetic look - “Thanks. We do appreciate it. I think we’ll all be relieved if the heavy lifting on this one isn’t all on Matt’s shoulders.”

Foggy looks a bit guilty at that. Matt still looks like there’s way too much rattling around inside his head, but he doesn’t argue, and after a second Karen forges ahead.

“I followed up those leads on this Cerberus guy today,” she says. “He’s pretty much a ghost. No luck finding a real name. The only thing I managed to track down was an arrest record for a gang of illegal weapons dealers. One of the names they were supplying was Cerberus, but looks like the cops had no luck finding him either.”

“Any of those weapons dealers get away?” Matt asks.

Karen nods.

“Got the names,” she said, “I was going to look into them next.”

“Frank and I will look into them,” Matt says immediately. She can’t help her defensive bristle.

“Don’t sideline me on this,” she says, and Matt shakes his head.

“I’m not trying to. I just don’t want you running headfirst into danger.”

“We can have this fight another time,” Foggy says, tiredly. “At least we have a name and something to go on.”

Both of them nod, deflating a little; Karen’s not really angry, just - it’s been a long, stressful day and she already knows she’s not gonna get any sleep. Things feel weird with all of them here, like none of them can quite say what they’re really thinking.

After a second Matt takes a deep breath.

“One thing I’m not budging on,” he says. “We’re not leaving either of you alone. I refuse to risk it.”

Foggy presses his lips together, but he must be rattled from before, because he doesn’t fight it. Karen doesn’t ether - not right now, at least. She’ll wait and see just how literally he’s gonna take that statement before she starts upsetting him by arguing specifics.

Matt’s finished patching Frank’s arm up. When Karen looks at them, her eyes meet Frank's and she feels suddenly shy; she glances away quickly and gets up from the couch.

“I’ll find you a shirt,” she says, and leaves the room quickly.

When she returns Frank is standing alone in the kitchen helping himself to her coffee.
“Hope you don’t mind,” he grunts, and she waves a hand. She passes him the shirt - an old one of Foggy’s that she found in the dryer - turns away and tries very hard not to look when he lifts his arms to pull it over his head.

She hears voices from the bedroom - muffled, can’t quite make them out. Frank follows her gaze.

“He’s scared,” he says abruptly.

“Who? Foggy?” she asks - but Frank shakes his head, a funny look on his face.

“Murdock.” He hesitates, then adds, haltingly, “Really fucks you up. Losing people. It’s…”

He trails off, but he doesn’t need to finish. Karen swallows the lump in her throat.


“Think he’s gonna stay the night,” Frank adds then, “That’s where the conversation seemed to be going before, anyway.”

“Good,” Karen replies softly, “I… I don’t want any of us to be alone.”

Frank looks like he wants to say something, but seems to think better of it. He rubs his arm, pulls a face, and turns like he’s gonna leave. Karen reaches out and catches his wrist; he freezes, and she pulls her hand back a bit awkwardly.

“Frank.” She doesn’t know why his name comes out so shakily. “Thank you. For… for helping Foggy. I can’t tell you how much I-”

“You don’t need to thank me.” His voice is very gentle, but he won’t meet her eyes. “He’s important to you. And to Murdock. Was hardly gonna leave him in the lurch.”

“Helping with all of this, it isn’t… you do want this, right?”

“Think I want it too much,” he admits. “It’ll be okay, Karen. Whatever happens next, we’ll sort it out. Can’t be worse than Fisk, than some of the shit I’ve found myself wrapped up in. They’re low-life drug gangs. We’ll get ’em.”

She nods, but there’s still something awkward about all this. He keeps glancing at the door to the next room, where Foggy and Matt are.

“Is everything okay?” she asks finally - the way he glances guiltily back at her makes her frown. “You’re acting a bit off.”

“I’m-”

She can practically hear the fine he bites off mid-sentence. He looks torn for a moment, and she tries not to feel hurt. He doesn’t owe her an explanation, after all. But after a moment he takes a deep breath.

“I… did something kinda stupid the other day,” he finally says. He’s not quite meeting her eyes, staring at the opposite wall instead. “It was a… weird, messed up night, and it was impulsive, and I don’t really know what’s gonna happen next. What I want to happen next.”

Well that isn’t vague and confusing at all.
“What happened?” she prompts softly.

“Just somethin’ stupid.”

“You didn’t kill-”

“Nothing like that!” he snaps, and then looks embarrassed suddenly. “Something with a friend. Might’ve - messed things up. Or not. I’m not sure.”

“Oh.” There’s a very awkward silence in which he is clearly loathe to give more details and she tries not to look desperately curious about what sort of friendship drama Frank Castle of all people might find himself embroiled in. She knows about the Liebermans, she knows he has a support group. He has his own social life that she isn’t part of.

“Well,” she manages finally, “If… if you care about each other, I’m sure you’ll work it all out.”

“Right.” He looks, if possible, even more awkward. “I should get home. Feed the dog, y’know.”

“Of course.” She feels flustered suddenly, but pushes her awkwardness away and reaches out to give him a hug. Frank returns it, readily, and for a second—

For a second she lets herself feel safe. Lets herself just - appreciate that she has this, that he’s here, that he’s sticking around, that he’s gonna make sure nothing happens to her and Foggy. If she can believe anyone will protect them, it’s him.

She barely realises she’s shaking until Frank’s arms tighten around her and he mutters, “You okay?”

“No really,” she admits. “Better now you’re here, though.”

His shoulders tense. After a moment he pulls back - gently, carefully, something almost too formal in it. Karen stares at him quizzically, wondering if she’s done something wrong - but after a moment he smiles, then turns to go.

Matt’s just leaving the other room. His shoulders are slumped and he looks so exhausted that Karen’s heart aches for him.

“You’re staying here tonight?” she asks, and he nods. “I’ll get the sheets.”

“I can do it,” he says, “I know where.”

She doesn’t argue. He looks like he needs something to do. She heads into the bedroom and shuts the door and sinks down on the bed with her head in her hands. Foggy’s in the bathroom; she can hear the shower running.

Too much. All too much. Just - try not to think about it. Matt’s here. Everything will be fine. Nothing actually happened.

But she feels shaky and anxious, jumping at shadows. She goes to the drawer and checks the gun is there. Then checks again. Then once more, making sure it’s loaded. Her hands shake and she slams the drawer shut and balls them into fists.

When she closes her eyes there’s an odd, unsettling roar in her ears, like a thousand voices at the back of her mind screaming at once - her brother, or Wesley, or Ben - she shakes herself, unsettled, and gets to her feet.
It’s possible that she wants a drink before bed. That’s why she heads back out to the living room in her pajamas - only to freeze in the doorway.

She thought Frank was long gone by now. But the front door is open and he’s standing out in the hallway with Matt. They seem to be having a low, intense conversation, but she can’t hear what it is - and either Matt doesn’t care that she’s listening, or he’s not paying attention and hasn’t noticed she emerged.

Something’s - weird about it. Matt’s holding onto Frank’s arm and speaking right into his ear and Frank’s letting him, staring at him with that same too-intent gaze as before. As she watches, Frank nods twice and then reaches up and wraps a hand around the back of Matt’s neck and kind of - jostles him, a strange, macho gesture that she can’t figure out. It seems affectionate more than anything, but that - that doesn’t make sense.

Then Frank’s leaving and Matt’s turning back to the door and Karen quickly power walks over to the kitchen to make her nightcap, not wanting to be caught. Her mind’s racing. Something’s going on here.

When she turns back Matt’s sitting on the couch, made up with sheets, lost in thought. He’s wearing some of Foggy’s old clothes and the sight makes something strange ache up in Karen’s chest.

“Hey,” she whispers, and sits next to him. “Want a drink?”

Matt shakes his head. Something’s troubling him, she knows him well enough to tell. It’s not hard to guess what it is.

“He’s okay,” she says, not sure if she’s trying to reassure him or herself.

Matt swallows hard.

“If Frank hadn’t been nearby,” he says slowly, “I would’ve been too slow.”

“Jesus, Matt. Don’t start with all that. Not everything is on you.”

“Well, it didn’t go down that way. No point post-morteming the situation. I’m serious, Matt,” she urges, and bumps their shoulders together, “You can’t keep beating yourself up over stuff like this. It’s… it’s not healthy.”

Matt bites his lip. He looks a bit like he’s about to cry, and that makes Karen want to cry. She reaches out and pulls him close, buries her head in the crook of his neck, wraps her arms around him like she can hold him together if she only tries hard enough.

Matt starts to put an arm around her. Then he hesitates, and detaches himself, and pulls away. Karen bites her lip, fighting not to feel hurt.

“Get some sleep, okay?” she whispers. “I’m serious, don’t stay up watching the door. You’ll wake up if anything even comes close to the building.”
Matt nods, and smiles weakly, but she doesn't need super-senses to know it's a lie. He's not sleeping tonight. None of them are.

Still. She drains the rest of her drink and gets up to turn the light off.

“Goodnight, Matt,” she says, and doesn’t wait to hear his reply before she slips back into the bedroom.

Foggy’s lying in bed in the dark, facing the wall. He doesn’t move when she comes in, but she knows he’s awake. She slips in under the covers behind him, rests her chin on his shoulder, hooks an arm protectively around his waist. There’s too much to talk about and she has no energy to get stuck into it.

She presses a kiss to the back of his bare shoulder and he reaches a hand around to brush against hers. Neither of them will sleep tonight. But it helps, to lie here, together, and she feels a sudden fierce protectiveness for him.

I can’t lose this.

No more - no more of the fighting, of the tension between them. He needs her here. Needs her present. Here - together, cocooned, warm, alone - it feels safe, it feels perfect, but so, so fragile.

You can’t lose this. Don’t fuck it up. Don’t let anything fuck this up.

She closes her eyes. Pretends she’s stronger than she feels. Pretends she isn’t fucking terrified of what tomorrow will bring. Pretends she isn’t far too acutely aware of Matt, out there, on their couch, lying awake with his thoughts too.

13. FRANK GOES WITH THE FLOW

This is how they (very efficiently) sort things out:

“So this ain’t gonna be weird, right,” Frank grunts, before Matt leaves his place that other night. Dishevelled, bruised, his eyes far too wide and haunted. All Frank’s really tryna do is not stare at his lips. Although it’s not like Matt can tell, anyway. Still. It’s the principle of the thing.

Matt hesitates in the doorway. It’s hard to tell what he’s thinking at the best of times, and God knows what must be going through his head now.

“It’s only weird,” he says slowly, “If we make it weird.”

“Very insightful.”

Matt gives him the finger. Frank huffs out a laugh. He sees Murdock’s lips twitch, and then he’s off into the night and Frank’s left standing there wondering what the fuck he’s gotten himself into. Like, really? Matt Murdock, of all people? He doesn’t know why he went along with it-

Except it’s been a long time.

A long time, and Matt - Matt gets it, kinda. Or at least, he’s pretty sure Matt’s not looking for
something he can’t give. And there’s a point where the loneliness, the absence of touch, of intimacy, starts driving you fucking crazy. When you just need - some sort of human connection. Something to get you out of your own head.

Anyway.

Less than twenty four hours later he’s getting a frantic phone call, and Murdock’s voice is shaking so hard he can barely get the words out, and Frank’s heart sinks into his shoes at the thought of him just - freaking out, freaking the fuck out because he can’t lose anyone else.

Of course he goes to help Foggy.

Of course he follows them to Karen’s after.

Of course he offers to stick around.

For once in his fucking life, he doesn’t feel like he’s second-guessing every move he makes. They don’t talk about what happened, but Matt doesn’t shake him off when Frank puts a steadying hand on his arm, and Frank doesn’t shove him back when he gets in so close that it’d be awkward if they could actually see each other, and it feels like they’re coming to something like an understanding.

“You're in a mood,” Frank observes.

Matt lets loose another Muay Thai style roundhouse kick, hitting the weighted bag with a thud that echoes throughout Fogwell’s. His arm’s still in a sling to stop him fucking his shoulder up more than it already is, and he wavers slightly, off-balance before he catches himself.

It took a lot for Frank to convince him that the Hellhounds were not, in fact, likely to go after Karen and Foggy in broad fucking daylight. To be fair, he doesn’t like the idea of leaving them alone either, but Karen had texted him. Told him that she needed to take Foggy out to breakfast and could he stop Matt hovering. Told him the two of them needed alone time, that there were things they needed to fix.

Frank’s fine with this.

He is; he saw the way Karen was looking at Nelson the other night. She loves him. Of course, after what happened, she wants to be alone with him. Who wouldn’t?

So what if he’s maybe pounding away at his own punching bag a bit harder than necessary? At least he wrapped his hands this time.

“A mood?” Matt demands.

“Yeah.” Frank glances over his shoulder at him. They’re both working up a sweat - being careful of their injuries - he watches as Matt lets loose again, kick after kick, pivoting back and forth on his toes.

“It’s nothing,” Matt says, after a strained silence.

“Sure, Red,” Frank thinks. It’s not because Foggy and Karen are out there somewhere just the two of them. It’s not ‘cause you’re worried. It’s not ‘cause you’re the one left out. It’s not ‘cause you
probably saw them cuddling up to each other all last night and this morning.

He abruptly turns and moves towards the ring.

“C’mon,” he says, “Let’s spar.”

“You sure that’s a good idea?” Matt asks, even though he’s already following. “My shoulder’s still fucked.”

“What, you want me to tie one arm behind my back?” Frank drawls. “You’re fast. You’ll adapt.”

“Fifty percent power and we stop if anyone starts bleeding,” Matt warns, and Frank shrugs.

“Sure.”

He holds the ropes up for Matt, pauses and takes a look around. The gym’s nice; it has character, the weight of history. Old school in a way that makes him feel at home. There are tattered posters up around the walls, and he’s not an idiot, he saw the one with Murdock’s old man on it. Didn’t comment. There’s some shit you don’t need to bring up, don’t need to poke at old wounds.

They face off against each other. There’s something unsettling about Matt not having his mask on. It means Frank can see the way his brows are furrowed and he’s hyper focused on every little sound. He knows the second he makes a move, the other man will react.

He moves forward, fists up. It would probably be safer to wear gloves and headgear, but he finds, oddly, that he trusts Matt completely not to, y’know, knock one of his teeth out. He’s a bit less confident in his own control; his first jab is light, testing the waters, and Matt easily leans back and dodges it. A second later his foot meets Frank’s chest in a push-kick that sends him stumbling back a few paces, coughing.

“No fucking way that was fifty percent,” he grunts.

Matt laughs, lightly.

“Sorry. I’ll be gentle.”

He moves in. He’s at a pretty big disadvantage with one arm out of commission, and Frank parries his right cross easily, but has to back away from the two kicks that follow. He grunts when one of them catches him on the flank, and moves to the offensive; Matt backs up, and Frank can see him adapting and figuring out how to protect his weaker side; he’s light on his feet, twisting and ducking, keeping his head and his injured shoulder offline.

They circle and swipe at each other for a bit - playing more than anything else, falling into a comfortable rhythm. It’s nice, Frank thinks, to fight in a contained environment. He can feel the stress he’s been carrying around the last two weeks melting away. It’s still good to hit something, to take his mind off things - to focus on the strategy of it, the routine of throwing and blocking a hit.

It’s actually better to have to be so controlled. Makes him conscious that he doesn’t have to lose himself in the adrenaline of a fight, that he can choose not to go on the rampage if he wants.

Things shift a bit after they finish two rounds; Matt’s drifting, he can see, starting to go off in his own head again. Frank takes advantage of his distraction to grab him by the bicep and the back of the neck and haul him down, throwing a knee. Matt grunts when the first one hits him in the stomach; blocks the second with his forearm. They grapple for the moment - Matt tries to get him around the
waist; they stumble back, trying to manhandle one another into a position where they can take control. That’s when Matt gets vicious; he strikes at Frank’s throat and Frank barely ducks before grabbing his wrist.

“Gettin’ nasty, there, Murdock,” he chides. “You’re seriously in a mood. Don’t take it out on me, huh?”

Matt scowls, shaking hair out of his eyes.

“I know Karen told you to get me out of her hair,” he says, abruptly, and Frank’s eyebrows rise.

That was a text message. Ain’t no way Murdock’s powers extend to, like, sensing electromagnetic waves travelling through the fucking air.

“Read minds now?” he says casually, and Matt’s frown deepens. He breaks his wrist out of Frank’s grip with a practiced twist of his arm.

“Read bodies,” he snaps. “I could tell since this morning she wanted to be alone with Foggy. She could’ve just asked me.”

Well. This is a situation Frank has found himself in. And, like, usually he’d be like fuck no to getting in the middle of Murdock’s love-triangle drama. He doesn’t know why he jumps straight to teasing instead.

“What, you jealous?”

“Fuck you, Frank,” Matt spits, and throws a punch that Frank blocks easily.

“It’s real fucking attractive being bitter and angry,” Frank needles. He is not sure what his goal is, here. A second ago it was just amusing seeing Saint Matthew all riled up. But now, the more he thinks about it-

Suddenly it just feels real fucking weird. The way he’s tangled up in all their pining. Something about Karen asking him to get Matt out of the way. Something about Matt being so upset about it. His own position in it all - off on the sidelines-

He’s not quite annoyed, not really, just feels a sudden surge of an emotion he can’t name, and he goes all-in too with a brutal uppercut that Matt barely side-steps.

They exchange a flurry of quick blows; Frank reels when Matt gets him in the nose, not hard enough to do any real damage but enough that he flinches back. He tries to take advantage of Matt’s weak side and grab him, but Matt loops a leg around his and sends him crashing to the ground; a second later Matt’s on top of him, swinging for his head, but with one arm out of the picture it’s easy for Frank to flip them over.

Matt grunts when he hits the ground and Frank hesitates, mindful of his injury - but a second later he scoots back and gets a leg up and Frank flinches.

For a second - the way Matt’s got his leg up, the look on his face - he’s certain he’s about to break the unspoken code of sparring and just fucking kick him in the groin. He’s about to get up and back off, because fuck that. But then Matt reaches up suddenly, and grabs a fistful of his shirt, and yanks him down into a biting kiss.

Frank responds instantly, hands going down either side of Matt’s head to hold himself up. His heart’s pounding. They’re pressed too close together, sweaty from fighting - too close, too warm. He feels
frenzied and lets himself just - let go, just have this.

Maybe he was angling for this. Maybe not. Maybe Matt’s not the only one who’s bitter and angry. Neither of them talked about last time since it happened, about whether it was a one-time thing.

Matt’s hand shifts around to the back of his neck, pulls him in deeper, but Frank’s forced to break apart a second later when his injured arm buckles a little under the strain of holding all his weight up. They’re both breathing heavily. He takes one look at Matt’s face - flushed and wide-eyed - and has to look away again and shift so they’re not pressed against each other so closely.

“So,” he says finally, “I’m your jealous rebound.”

Matt looks away.

“If you don’t want to do this-”

“I want to,” Frank replies, perhaps a little too quickly. After a second he swallows hard, unsure what to say. His heart’s pounding and it’s not just from the kiss, it’s from how fast everything’s changing. How uncertain he feels. This is getting way too complicated and he knows it’s a bad idea, knows it’s the last thing he needs.

But here and now - within these walls - it feels like it’s only the two of them. Like everything else is far away and doesn’t matter.

“Maybe it is a rebound,” Matt says. He’s moving his head like he’s trying to figure out where to turn and after a second Frank grips his jaw gently and tilts his face to the right angle for them to look at each other. “Is there a problem with that?”

Frank hesitates. There are - a lot of directions this could go and he has no clue which one he actually wants.

But for now…

“Suits me just fine,” he hears himself say, and Matt loses some of the tension in his shoulders. He shifts like he wants to get up, and Frank clambers off him, offers him a hand. He thinks that’s it - they’ll just move on, pretend this didn’t happen like last time - but the second Matt’s on his feet he’s moving in.

Okay then, Frank thinks, and decides not to obsess too hard over it. It’s just - easier, for now, to let things happen. See where the pieces fall. He lets Matt back him up against the ropes, lets his own hands fall to the other man’s waist, steadying him. Lets him take whatever it is he needs.

Frank’s not rostered to work the next day, which means he gets to tag along to the law firm so that in case the Hellhounds decide to just fucking storm the place in broad fucking daylight, they have two people to fight them off instead of just one. Look, there are more impossible things that could happen.

He brings Pi, just because he knows it’ll make Karen smile, and spends most of the day sitting out in their waiting room reading a book and staring out the window at any suspicious looking passers’ by-
And also trying very hard not to stare to his left, where if he looks through the glass panel on Karen’s
door he can see her bent over her work at her desk. Can let his gaze linger on the way her hair is
falling down over one shoulder like a sheet of spun gold, tucked behind her ear on the other side.
Her brow furrowed a little, chewing thoughtfully at the end of her pen, occasionally reaching down
to pat Pi under the desk.

The problem is, if he stares to his right, he gets to look right into Matt’s office. They both greeted
each other so fucking awkwardly this morning - not ‘cause of what happened yesterday, but because
Foggy and Karen were there too - and now he sort of can’t really bring himself to look at the other
man. Not when he knows that there’s a reddening bite mark hidden under the collar of his nice shirt.
Not when he’s now got the insider knowledge of what his hair looks like all dishevelled from
someone pulling at it.

So this is fun. He gets to just - stare straight ahead and wait for the off chance he gets to spring into
action to defend them all.

Anyway. It’s Foggy he first encounters; he’s been at his own desk all day but he gets up now and
starts to head out. He catches Frank’s eyes a bit awkwardly.

“Coffee run,” he says, and Frank gets up. Foggy rolls his eyes. “I don’t need an escort.”

“Take it up with Murdock,” Frank replies, and follows Foggy out. The other man doesn’t like him,
that much is pretty damn clear.

They walk out onto the street in a somewhat strained silence. Despite Foggy’s protests, he’s so on
edge that it’s making Frank nervous - eying everyone they pass like he thinks they’re gonna jump at
him, one hand up near his face ready to ward off an attack that isn’t there. When a loud motorbike
roars past, he nearly jumps out of his skin. Frank can’t help feeling a bit sorry for him.

“You know it’s different for everyone,” he says abruptly.

Foggy glances over at him, suspiciously.

“What?”

“This shit. What it does to you. Some people freeze up. Some people just get numb all the time. Me,
I get flooded with adrenaline. That’s a pretty common reaction. Your body wants to make sure that if
it happens again, you’re ready to deal with it. Defence mechanism.”

Foggy’s mouth drops open. He doesn’t seem to know what to say.

“I’m… I don’t have PTSD, Castle,” he says finally, not looking in Frank’s direction. “I haven’t…
I’m not a-”

“You’re a civilian,” Frank says patiently, “So it probably hits you even worse.”

“It’s not the first time someone’s tried to kill me.”

“Is that meant to make it better? Look, I’m just sayin’ - let us look out for you. It’s fine. Doesn’t
make you weak.”

“I know,” Foggy snaps, a bit too defensively. Then, softer, “I know. But this - you don’t need to do
this, Castle. I appreciate it, but - we don’t need to talk about it. I have people for that.”
“Good,” Frank replies, because quite frankly he was not exactly angling for a deep and meaningful moment, he just - it felt weird not to say something.

They reach the coffee shop. Foggy gets in line, fumbles with his wallet. There’s a picture of him and Karen and Matt inside and Frank can’t help but sneak a look at it; they look younger, there, less worn down. In a pub and flushed with drink with big, goofy smiles on their faces. Foggy’s in the middle, an arm slung around each of the others, pulling them so close their cheeks are nearly touching. Frank doesn’t think he’s ever seen Matt smile like that in person.

“What do you want?” Foggy asks, and Frank blinks and looks up at him.

“Huh?”

“What coffee do you want?” Foggy repeats, patiently. Then, when Frank starts to frown, “Look, you saved my life. Least I can do is shout you a drink.”

“Black,” Frank replies, for lack of any other way to deal with this situation.

Foggy orders. They stand aside to wait. The silence is excruciating. Foggy keeps just - darting him these little glances. Like he’s trying to size him up but doesn’t want to be caught doing it. Honestly, Frank’s got no idea what the fuck’s going on in his head.

“Hope this won’t go on too much longer,” Foggy says finally.

“What?”

“This - the Hellhounds stuff. Having to watch our backs all the time.”

So that’s what this is about. He doesn’t like Frank hanging around Karen. Probably around Murdock, too. God, he’d flip the fuck out if he knew what the two of them had been up to yesterday.

“Don’t worry,” Frank growls, “I’ll be out of your hair soon enough.”

Foggy looks startled.

“No - it’s not that,” he says. “Just - you must have better things to do with your life than hang out with your damn lawyers, right? Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate it. But I know you didn’t want to be pulled into all this again. A bit of peace and quiet, it’s a good thing. I think we all needed more of it.”

Now Frank’s the one who doesn’t know what to say. In the end he opts for an indeterminable grunt and is relieved when the barista calls them a second later.

They head back in silence. Frank sits in the waiting room, opens his book, closes it again, and broods over his coffee. He watches as Foggy delivers Karen’s to her desk, but looks away when her hand goes up to his cheek to pull him in for a kiss. Things seem to have settled between the two of them; near-death experiences can do that to you.

Then he watches as Foggy goes to give Matt his coffee, leaning over his shoulder to look at something he’s working on. He says something that makes Matt laugh and Frank’s heart squeezes once, tightly.

The fuck.

There’s just - something about it. The familiarity. The way Matt smiles and for a second looks like a
normal guy, not someone carrying the weight of the world (or at least one little neighbourhood in New York) on his shoulders.

He’s just - sorry for Murdock. That’s it. He sees the way he doesn’t go back to his work until Foggy’s left the room entirely and shut the door to his own office. That sort of heartbreak’s hard to get over.

It’s getting late at night by the time they’re ready to leave. A decision was made at lunchtime that it’s Frank’s turn to camp out on the couch in case someone comes to attack them in the night. He makes his way to Karen’s office where she’s packing up; Pi yawns, lazily, and pads up to him.

“Hope this won’t be weird,” he says. “Me hanging around you guys all night. I can sit in the car if it makes Nelson feel better.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she says, looking up at him with a grin, “We’re not gonna make you sit in the car all night. Foggy will be fine with it.”

Frank hums. She puts down the papers she was packing away and moves to stand in front of him.

“I’m serious, Frank,” she says, “We appreciate it. If it wasn’t you keeping an eye on us, it would be Matt, and he - he can’t have that burden on him all the time.”

“Yeah,” Frank agrees quietly. She reaches up like she’s gonna touch his arm, then drops her hand again.

“You know I can take care of myself, though, right?” she adds, teasingly. “I’m not totally your damsels in distress.”

"At this rate Murdock and Nelson are,” he replies - she laughs a bit - “I know. I’ve seen you point a gun enough times to know you can use one. But it shouldn’t be on you either, y’know that? I don’t want you killing more people.”

Karen looks away, her smile faltering.

“I don’t want you killing anyone else, either,” she says softly. “I know you said you want this, Frank, but don’t - don’t throw away your chance to get out on our account.”

“It’s not like that,” he says firmly. She’s still not looking at him; he moves in a bit closer. Reaches out and tilts her face up towards him. “I have zero regrets about getting involved in this. I’ll do whatever it takes to protect the people I care about. And I care a lot about you.”

Karen’s breath hitches. It - came out way too intense, and he regrets it instantly, because he can tell that she knows, from the look on his face, exactly what he meant. And he meant way, way too much.

He drops his hand quickly. Karen bites her lip.

“Frank…” she whispers, sounding very pained. “Foggy’s… Foggy’s just outside waiting.”

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” he says quickly, like he can fucking salvage this.
“I know, just... sorry, I can’t - do this, Frank. Not like that.” Her fists clench. “He… he needs me, right now. More than ever. Everything we’ve been through - he holds it together for Matt, for me, but it takes a toll - I can’t.”

It’s the way she’s biting her lip. It’s the way she won’t meet his eyes. It’s the slight tremor in her voice, like there’s more she wants to say but keeps swallowing back.

But suddenly - suddenly he knows, with shocking certainty, that she has feelings for him too.

He nods, feeling like he’s just been punched in the stomach.

“Of course,” he manages, and Karen turns away.

“I’ll - I’ll see you in a minute. We’ll just be outside.”

He stands there, not watching her leave as she walks out. Hears the door shut. Hears her say something to Foggy, out in the waiting room. Hears both of them start down the corridor. He stands there, fists clenching, trying to compose himself.

Okay. Okay. So he has a chance - had a chance, rather. Somehow that makes it even worse.

Foggy’s a good guy. God, he’s such a good guy - it’s irrational and wrong for Frank to feel so... so angry. Because hell, he’s not even angry at Foggy; he can’t bring himself to resent the man. Not when he knows how much he’s sacrificed for Karen and Matt already.

It’s at the timing. How things didn’t quite line up.

It’s at himself for wanting this so much, wanting what he can’t have.

It’s at the stabbing guilt that always hits him when he starts getting close to someone new - the reminder that he had this, once. Had it and then it was all torn away.

He’s not really thinking clearly as he turns and marches into Matt’s office.

It’s dark. Karen and Foggy turned most of the lights out when they left and apparently Matt doesn’t bother with his in the evenings. The room’s only dimly lit by the glow of the city lights out the window and the evening lights from the corridor and lifts outside. But Matt lifts his head as Frank enters, shadowy form silhouetted against the window.

“You hear all that?” Frank asks gruffly.

He sees Matt pull a face that must mean yes. Probably heard every excruciating heartbeat. Could probably, like, taste the awkwardness in the room.

He stands up when Frank moves towards him. Honestly, Frank wonders what sort of signals he’s giving off; he’s full of energy that he needs to get out somehow. Same sort of burning energy he used to feel right before going to kill a bunch of gang members, or spending the whole night just hitting a wall with a sledgehammer. He could punch a wall right now.

He doesn’t.

He grabs Murdock by the lapels instead and yanks him in.

It’s angry. It’s rough. He shoves Matt against the desk so hard that something falls off with a clatter; Matt shoves him back, hand coming up around the back of Frank’s neck and tugging him in closer - then running down his shoulder, down his back, gripping at the fabric of his shirt. Frank bites at his
lip and Matt gasps a little.

“Your turn, huh?” he says, when they finally pull apart, mostly because humans need oxygen to survive.

“Maybe,” Frank growls, tightening his grip on him. Matt mouths at his jaw and he fights back a shiver. “This is kinda fucked up, huh?”

“Yeah,” Matt agrees, but seems to have no desire to stop.

Still. It’s not like Frank’s making it weird by, like, imagining it’s Karen or anything. That would be impossible, anyway. Matt’s too different - all rough edges, with his calloused hands and stubbled jawline. So fucking sensitive that even Frank’s breath against his neck when they break apart and he rests his head against Matt’s shoulder makes him tremble.

His anger fades, abruptly. He pulls back, but finds himself reaching out to cup Matt’s cheek in his hand, a gesture that seems too affectionate suddenly, too much like how he reached out to Karen before. He doesn’t know why he does it.

“Working late?” he asks.

Matt nods.

“You gonna be okay tonight?” Frank asks. He means it - as much as they both want to get stuck into the leads they’ve found, they figured one night to rest up their injuries was probably the safest way to play it. Which means Matt will be staying home - no patrolling, no going out to fight - and left to trust Frank will take care of the other two.

“I think so,” Matt says, slowly. “Are you?”

Frank hesitates - then nods. He’s calmed down; he’ll deal with this like he deals with everything else. Take a deep breath and try not to fuck everything up and hope it all settles.

Matt reaches up and folds his hand over Frank’s. He squeezes, once, and they pull apart.

So. This is - something. Frank doesn’t know what he thinks of this all, just - it’s nice having someone to go to. Someone who cares.

He wonders what Matt thinks of this. If it’s just a distraction or if, like with Frank, it feels like something else - something standing on its own two legs. But it’s late, and he’s so God damn tired, and all he can do for now is wait to see how the dust settles.

14. KAREN WITNESSES, SPILLS, AND PHILOSOPHICALLY CONTEMPLATES THE TEA

Ha ha ha okay, what the fuck? What the fuck?

They were waiting for Frank in the lobby. Then Karen had realised she left her USB on her desk. So of course she went back up to get it, only to freeze because the door to Matt’s office was wide open and-
Well.

She’s pretty sure they didn’t see her. Or - sense her, whatever. Pretty sure they were too distracted.

Oh my God. Is this really happening?

Thing is, suddenly a lot makes sense. How uncharacteristically open Matt’s been to Frank lately. The weird looks. The touches. She just - doesn’t know how all the puzzle pieces fit together. And she doesn’t know why she feels sick suddenly, except that-

A lot’s changed tonight. Jesus, two seconds ago Frank was-

Was what? Admitting his feelings for you? Then why the hell would he and Matt… what was even happening?

She walks back to Foggy in a daze. He straightens up, frowning at the look on her face.

“What is it?” he demands, “What’s wrong?”

“Oh my God,” she breathes. “I… we have to talk. At home. You won’t believe it.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll tell you in private,” she replies. Foggy’s frown deepens, but a moment later the lift doors open and Frank walks out and strides over to them. If Karen hadn’t been looking for it, she wouldn’t even have noticed the way his collar’s slightly rumpled.

“Ready to go?” he demands, all casual-like, as though he didn’t have his tongue halfway down Matt’s throat like two seconds ago. What the hell. How long has this been going on?

Karen can barely look at him, but he can also barely look at her, which she puts down to the sheer fucking awkwardness of the conversation they had just now, and she nods. Foggy glances between them suspiciously, but he knows when not to push; he starts an enthusiastic conversation about what they want to order for dinner, and Karen could kiss him, she’s never been so fucking grateful to him for being so good at breaking the tension in a situation like this.

The car trip passes in a daze. She is dimly aware of the two men arguing over which Vietnamese restaurant in Hell’s Kitchen is the best, and Foggy trying to convince Frank that UberEats is in fact very convenient and not “fucking weird, I’ll just pick my fucking food up myself, why would I need some sort of unrelated middleman?” Pi rests his head on her knee and she fondles his soft ears, closes her eyes, tries not to spiral while thinking about how this will change everything.

Why are you so upset?

Because she is upset, she realises suddenly. She’s got this sinking feeling, like she’s - disappointed, maybe. There is no justifiable reason for it.

They reach her flat. Foggy drops back to her side as Frank leads the way up the stairs - one hand on the taser at his belt, like if someone springs at them from the darkness he’ll be all set to zap ’em.

“You okay?” he whispers. “You’re being really quiet.”

“Just thinking,” she murmurs back, “I’ll tell you soon, promise.”
She squeezes his hand, rests her head on his shoulder. Feels, suddenly, very close to him. Up ahead, Frank glances back over his shoulder; when he sees them pressed close, he looks away.

Frank sets up shop on their sofa. He sets his tazer on the coffee table along with some sort of police-issue baton, shoves two knives under his pillow, and Karen catches a glimpse of a gun in the duffel bag he throws at the end of the couch.

“I’ve got a baseball bat in the bedroom,” Foggy says, watching him. “Frying pan in the kitchen. There’s a plunger under the sink.”

“I could absolutely fucking incapacitate someone with a plunger,” Frank grunts back. “Keep your frying pan. You need it more than I do.”


Frank nods. Foggy follows her into the bedroom; they shut the door and she sinks down on the bed and grips her hair in her hands.

“Well this isn’t uncomfortable at all,” Foggy says. “Like, I’m not ungrateful, but it’s just a bit surreal, isn’t it? The Punisher sitting out on the couch like a guard dog. Wait, no, he literally brought a guard dog.”

“Foggy,” she says, a bit weakly, and he sits next to her and wraps an arm around her shoulders.

“What did you want to talk about?” he asks, and he just sounds so - gentle, so concerned. She feels a sudden surge of affection for him.

“Don’t get loud, okay?” she says, with a glance at the door, mindful that Frank’s just on the other side. “You won’t believe what I saw when I went back up to the office before. I’m just - trying to wrap my mind around it.”

“You’re killing me here, Karen. What was it?”

“Frank. And… and Matt.” Saying it out loud is hard; it all suddenly seems very surreal. “Making out.”

Foggy stares at her.

“Sorry,” he says, “I think I heard you wrong. What was that?”

“Making out!” she hisses. Then, at his disbelieving look, “I’m serious, Foggy, they were all over each other! I couldn’t make this up!”

The series of emotions that pass across Foggy’s face as he processes this are incredible.

“What the fuck,” is the first thing he says, And then, a second later, “I don’t… understand.”
Karen throws her hands up.

“Me either!” she cries.

“No, like.” Foggy stands up. Then seems to realise he has nowhere to go, and sits back down. “They barely saw each other today. Matt was just in his office. What could’ve happened in the last twenty seconds of the day to…”

Karen turns blazing red and covers her face in her hands to hide it.

(I care a lot about you-)

(I can’t do this, Frank, not-)

Oops. That one might be on me. Frank was... was acting perfectly normal until we had that awkward conversation.

Thing is, she’s not about to tell Foggy. She feels guilty, but - he doesn’t need to know about shit like that. It’s not like Frank actually said anything outright. Karen just read it - in his voice, in the look in his eyes, in everything she knows about the man.

“I don’t think it was the first time,” she says instead. “Didn’t you notice how weird they’ve been acting the last two days? Hell, just this morning they would barely look at each other.”

“Matt doesn’t look at anyone.”

“You know what I mean. They’ve been strange since … hell, since that first night Castle came over for drinks. You must have noticed.”

“Kinda,” Foggy says, a bit miserably. “I don’t know.”

He’s… taking this way more sadly than she anticipated. She’d expected shock, maybe anger or disbelief. But he just looks really down.

“What is it?” she prompts, putting a hand on his shoulder.

Foggy bites at his lip.

“I know it’s… it’s not the same thing, not the same kind of secret, but - Jesus, I’m so sick of finding out shit about Matt from third parties and not from his own mouth.”

She feels an ache of guilt; it’s stupid, it’s not like Foggy would’ve been any happier if she hadn’t told him. Still; she knows what he means. It’s a shock - to discover by accident.

“I don’t think he really knows what he’s doing,” she offers.

“No wonder he was asking about what Castle looks like the other day,” Foggy continues, as though he hasn’t even heard. “Seriously - just. What the fuck.”

Karen frowns.

“They’re not together,” she points to. “I think. I don’t know, Frank said something the other day-”

“What, he talked to you about it?”
“Well, he just said he’d done something stupid with a friend! And that he wasn’t sure where things were going. I only just realised he probably meant Matt.” And then, firmer now, “But I don’t think they’re dating.”

“Why the fuck would they not,” Foggy says miserably, “At this rate I’ll believe anything! Matt just… jumps headlong into poor life choices. Date the Punisher, fucking marry him, I won’t be surprised. Maybe they’ll elope to Australia! I wouldn’t put it past him! Honestly, though, just the other day he was telling me he’s not over Elektra, so who fucking knows!”

“Wait, what?”

This time it’s Foggy who goes red.

“I don’t know,” he says, a bit too quickly, “It was - confusing. It was a weird conversation.”

They’re both hiding something from each other, she can tell. Not a big something, just - shit they don’t want to start so soon after they made up. Part of her wants to tell him about Frank and what he said tonight, wants to be honest, but things are so up in the air that she doesn’t want to make things worse unnecessarily.

“Fuck, though, Castle,” Foggy says again, when it seems too much silence has passed without him continuing to express his disbelief. He gets up and starts pacing. “Matt and Castle. I… I always thought if he-”

He breaks off, abruptly.


“Nothing.” His face is flushed, now. “Just. There was Elektra, and then - no one, for a long time, not until Claire. Not until you. Matt… doesn’t really do long term stuff much.”

“I don’t think they’re together,” Karen repeats, slowly, but there’s something in what he’s saying, something between the lines.

“How do you know?” Foggy insists.

Karen bites her lip.

They should be happy for them, she knows. Or at least, she should. Two of the guys she’s closest to? If they can make each other happy, why not? Especially when Matt usually avoids human connection like the plague, and she knows Frank’s hurt runs right to his core… for both of them, moving on should be a good thing.

But she’s not. She just feels a low, sick disappointment.

And the way Foggy’s pacing… the look on his face… there’s something in it.

“Is it because it’s Castle that you’re unhappy, or because Matt’s seeing someone?” she blurts out, without thinking about it.

“What?” Foggy whirs around. “What’s that mean?”

Karen swallows. Gathers her thoughts.

“Are you jealous?” she rephrases.
A funny look flashes across his face.

“What? No!” There’s something way too defensive in his voice. “Why would I be-”

Karen must be giving him a disbelieving look. He folds his arms, then unfolds them.

“Look,” he says, flustered, “Elektra fucked him up big time. She was this… the only person who understood or whatever, but you know what else she got? She got all murder-happy and then fucked off out of his life and left him more broken than ever. Castle’s the same way.”

Karen looks away.

“What would I be jealous?” Foggy continues, softer. “Me and Matt aren’t… it’s not like that. It never has been.”

Karen bites her lip. Thing is, with her it has been. With both of them. It was like that.

“Are you okay?” Foggy prompts then. “You’re taking this kinda weird too.”

“Just confused,” she says. “Should we bring it up with them?”

“No,” Foggy decides, “I wanna see if Matt tells us on his own.”

*Oh, Foggy. You’re setting yourself up for pain.*

“He won’t,” she points out, “You know he won’t.”

“Well, let’s see,” Foggy insists, grimly.

He sinks back down on the bed next to her. Their shoulders brush, but the silence is awkward. Karen just - still can’t wrap her head around this.

See, the thing is, with Frank… maybe it *is* a rebound. He was into her. But she’s out of his reach. Maybe it’s selfish, or petty, or just fucking vain and arrogant to think that way. But it’s *possible*.

But Matt?

Foggy’s right, he isn’t - he isn’t dating at the moment. His head’s not in a good spot. He hasn’t shown the slightest interest in anyone. Hell, he barely interacts with anyone else apart from the two of them and maybe his mother. So what… so why…

She doesn’t know what to think of this. All she knows is that, y’know what, maybe her question was projecting, because she’s jealous.

She’s jealous.

It’s unpleasant and a little embarrassing to realise, but that’s what the emotion is. And she’s pretty sure Foggy might be too - she doesn’t want to push, but the note in his voice… he’s always been kinda weird with Matt in a way she doesn’t want to call out. In a way she’s found she doesn’t actually mind, because she’s weirdly close to Matt too.

But here they are now.

And the bigger problem is, she has no clue *who* she’s jealous of. Both of them are too close to her,
too much history and possibility. Too many could have beens. She has Foggy now, it shouldn’t matter, to *either* of them. But somehow it does.

After all, how do you get over an *almost*?

Chapter End Notes

SUP GUYS thank you so much for your support of the fic so far, you keep me writing 😄

Where can I make friends and take prompts? Is tumblr my only option?? (or should I just scour the kink meme for oneshot ideas haha)
So Many Dumb Ways To Die

Chapter Notes

Really sorry for the wait on this one! I ran out of backup chapters <3

15. IN WHICH MATT’S MENTAL STATE IS LIKE, ROCK BOTTOM? BITCH YOU THOUGHT

Two days of sick leave later, Matt returns to work feeling worse than ever.

The downturn had king hit him out of nowhere and at the worst possible time. Forty-eight hours is a lot of time to just hit pause on a criminal investigation, especially when said criminals are after your friends. Nothing had happened, but still - it’s the guilt that’s weighing on him more than anything else when he finally walks back through the doors of Nelson, Murdock and Page.

You’re pathetic. Useless. Sitting around on your arse for two days while the Hellhounds are up to God knows what? If they’ve got a head start on you because of this, it’s your fault.

“Matt!”

Karen’s the first one up from her desk. She hurries towards him, radiating worry. “Jesus, you look like shit. You should’ve taken another day off to rest.”

“I’m okay,” Matt says, standing there patiently as she rests a hand against his forehead. He feels oddly numb. “It’s not a fever, Karen, I’m fine.”

“What caused it?”

“I just get migraines sometimes.” The lie slips out easily. So does the next, bigger one. “I feel much better now.”

“Hey!” Foggy says, coming up on his other side. His heart’s racing way faster than Matt would’ve expected; both of theirs are. He thought he’d sounded pretty convincing on the phone. It’s not like it’s the first time he’s taken a sick day, although they’re usually more like injury days. Worry squirms in the pit of his stomach.

Why are they both being so weird?

“You okay, buddy?” Foggy rubs his arm. “We wanted to come over but you said it’d just make it worse and I remembered how when you used to get headaches in college you just needed, like, total silence. Sensory overload thing, right?”

“Right,” Matt agrees weakly. Foggy had been amazing back then, making sure he had dark and silence to recover in. He feels guilty now for how sympathetic the other man sounds. “Just gotta ride it out.”

They’re both fussing over him and it makes something anxious and sick rise up in his chest.
He hates lying to them.

He hates it, especially Foggy, but *migraine* was a lot easier to explain than the truth. How can he possibly tell them that he just- woke up one morning and couldn’t get out of bed? That everything felt too heavy, the world outside too loud and chaotic and he just- couldn’t stomach the thought of seeing any of them. That he’d suddenly felt anxious about every tiny little thing, from work to Frank to the Hellhounds to the idea of Karen-and-Foggy. All of it had suddenly seemed looming and dreadful.

Getting dressed. Walking to work. Even just having to be out where people could *see* him, all of it seemed to demand energy he just didn’t have. All he’d wanted to do was sleep and not think about it. Being unconscious was better than being awake.

It scares him to think about. The only reason he got up today was because he overheard his neighbour’s television playing some news about a drug deal downtown and the stress of not being out there fighting the Hellhounds had been bigger than the stress of coming into work and dealing with human interaction.

Even so - he still feels shaky and raw and like he just - doesn’t want to do *any* of this. Part of him wants to take Karen’s offer and go home and get back under the covers and not have to be around anyone.

When Frank walks in from the kitchen it’s a breaking point; too many people in the room, too many eyes on him. Too many heartbeats and *humans* around.

“Hey Red,’” he says, and Matt suddenly feels a spike of panic. It’s been two days and the last time he saw Frank they were making out against his desk. What does he want? What will he expect? ‘Feelin’ better?’

Matt nods, but suddenly he can barely breathe.

“No. I’m fine.” It comes out smoothly, a practiced lie, even as he turns to flee from the room. “I - I gotta make a phone call, sorry. A lot of work to catch up on.”

He sits out on the stairs of the fire escape and tries to get rid of that feeling like he’s about to cry. Like, what the fuck. Nothing’s even *happened*.

*Pull it together, Matty,* Stick’s voice says somewhere in the back of his head, faintly disapproving. He squeezes his eyes shut and shoves a hand in his pocket, runs his rosary beads through his fingers, counting them.

The door opens behind him. Frank comes out and Matt turns his head away, jaw clenched.

“That’s a new one,” Frank says. “Invisible phone call.”

“Frank.” His voice comes out too raw and pleading. “I can’t do this right now.”

He needs space. He needs-

Frank sits next to him. Doesn’t touch him. After a moment he passes Matt a mug; he takes it
reflexively. It smells like coffee - strong and sweet, laced with whiskey and cream. Warmth seeps through the ceramic and into his fingertips. He takes a small sip, then another, closing his eyes with a sigh.

“You can stay.”

“What?” Frank asks.

“After months of the shit Karen manages to produce with that coffee machine, this is like manna from heaven.”

Frank huffs out a laugh and settles back, leaning on his elbows. He doesn’t push for them to talk, and Matt closes his eyes, relieved. Being alone was good, but - this is okay. He tries to settle down. Drinks half the coffee and feels a spreading warmth. The sunlight on his skin is nice. Frank next to him is nice. The sound of his breathing is steadying.

After a little while he finally feels a bit less like he’ll fall apart if he talks.

“Thanks,” he says, and clears his throat. “Thanks for taking care of them the last two days. Nothing happened?”

Frank shakes his head.

“Hellhounds have backed off - for now at least. We kept researching, but we haven’t gone after ‘em yet. Figured we’d wait for you. Got a few leads.”

Matt nods. He still feels guilty, but it settles a little at Frank’s words. Nothing’s fallen apart. Yet.

“Sorry for the delay.”

“Can’t help getting sick, Red,” Frank points out. There’s something disapproving in his voice. After a second he says, carefully, “Migraine, huh?”

Matt shrugs. Looks down.

“They can hit out of nowhere. Just gotta wait for it to pass. Sleep it off.”

“Right.” There’s a pause. He can tell Frank’s mulling something over. “You know, Murdock, the look on your face when you walked in that door… ain’t never seen someone so scared to see his friends before. And I know nothing happened with them the last two days. No big fight. Nothing.”

Matt’s heart pounds. He doesn’t want to talk about it. But Frank’s voice is steady, measured - no judgement in it.

“Wasn’t a migraine,” Frank deduces.

“I wasn’t lying,” Matt snaps. “I’ve spent the last two days sleeping.”

“Didn’t say you were lying about that. You sure look like you haven’t eaten or shaved in two days.” He shifts a little, looking at him; Matt stares straight ahead. “You know they can tell you’re not okay, right? They’re not idiots. And they care about you.”

“I know,” Matt whispers. His chest feels tight and heavy.
“You shoulda seen the look on Nelson’s face when I came out here. He wanted to be the one to go talk to you.”

“Surprised he let you do it.”

“They’ve been weird the last two days,” Frank admits. “Not sure what I did to piss ‘em off but they’re both barely talking to me. I think it’s just - awkward. Me bein’ over at their house all the time.”

Matt hums.

“The thing between you and Karen?” he says, and pretends not to notice the way Frank’s heart spikes, just a little. “Pretty sure Foggy’s picked up on it.”

“That ship’s sailed,” Frank says. His voice is firm but his heart’s telling another story. “Ain’t nothing happening between me and Karen. It’s up to her to make sure he knows that. We’re not talking about that, though,” he adds, and shifts again. “Look… Red… I was worried.”

“What?”

“Come on. You disappear for two days outta nowhere. At least we got a phone call to know you were alive.”

“You didn’t have to worry,” Matt says, but Frank shakes his head.

“I did.” Something too heavy in his voice. “You know why.”

Matt squeezes his eyes shut. That night hangs in the air - that horrible, frenzied night. Dark, dark. Standing in the face of a dozen gun barrels and not fucking moving. Another stab of guilt. Of course that… that’d affect Frank, too.

“It’s not like that,” he forces out. His voice is tight and choked. “I wasn’t - I wouldn’t hurt myself.”

“But you’re not okay,” Frank says.

“Nothing happened.” His voice is barely convincing to himself. “I was just - tired.”

“Nothing happened?” Frank demands. Now he shifts closer, his shoulder bumping against Matt’s. “Fisk happened. That shit with the Hand, with your girl, that all happened. And now this? Nelson getting attacked? A lot happened, Red. That shit builds up.”

Matt bites his tongue. He doesn’t know what to say. His heart is pounding desperately, and you want someone to notice, you wanted this, but in the moment he just feels - too exposed, too vulnerable. Too much like someone knowing makes it real.

“Look.” Frank’s voice is gentler now. “I’ve been there, done that. You gotta talk to someone. Not saying one of us, just - someone. ‘cause it doesn’t get better on its own. Trust me on that.”

Easy words. Problem is, Matt’s got fuck all friends aside from these guys, and it’s not like he can just find a therapist he trusts.

“Father Lantom was…” he trails off. It hurts to even think about. “But he’s gone now. I guess… my mum, but - things are weird between us. It’s not that easy, Frank.”
“You can’t ignore stuff like this,” Frank insists. “It festers.”

“I know. You’re right.” Part of him just wants to get Frank off his back, but he also knows it’s true.

“Look, I told you - I’ve been there, okay?” Frank adds, like he suspects Matt’s just agreeing for the sake of it. “It fucking sucks. You just - feel like nothing’s worth doing. Easier to let it all slip past. But you gotta let yourself heal. Got to get it through your head that it’s - that *you’re* - worth the effort.”

Matt’s quiet for a moment, gathering himself. Frank’s voice is a little stilted and awkward, but very sincere. He appreciates the effort, even if it’s hard to let the words sink in.

Finally he takes a deep breath.

“Don’t worry,” he says, “Murdocks always get back up.”

“Good.” Frank claps him on the shoulder. “’C’mor, let’s go in. You’ll feel better after eating something.”

“Frank…” his voice is so soft Frank leans in a little to hear. “Thanks.”

He lets his head drop down against Frank’s shoulder. It’s a bit weird - a bit too intimate, too close, too affectionate a gesture. Not like all that shit they were doing before, impulsive and fuelled by something else - frustration or anger or jealousy.

Frank doesn’t seem to mind. He wraps an arm around Matt and holds him close for a moment. It’s - nice. Comforting. And Matt suddenly doesn’t know where things between them are going, what this all actually means, but - Frank’s here, and he feels safe, and the other man and all their parallels, their shared stories, make it suddenly seem a bit less impossible that he might eventually be able to fight his way through the dark. He’s just very tired.

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Foggy wants to talk to him.

He keeps getting up, moving towards Matt’s door, then going and sitting down again. His heart is pounding as fast as a hummingbird’s wings. It’s really making Matt quite nervous.

Even worse than Foggy is Karen. Matt’s work crosses over with hers a lot more that day and she’s being *really* weird. She’s not looking at him when she speaks - he can tell - and her heart’s doing all sorts of weird shit whenever he gets close to her.

*What the hell’s going on?*

It’s not just that they’re worried about him. He is intimately acquainted with what worry feels like, and it’s not this. In his already rattled state, it really fucking freaks him out. Is she angry with him? Did he do something without realising?

Because Matt is Matt, he doesn’t bring it up with her directly. Instead he swallows his nerves and knocks on Foggy’s door a little after lunch.

“Hey!” Foggy cries, a bit too excitedly. He ushers Matt in and pulls out a chair for him. Then sits next to him, instead of across the desk. “You doing alright?”
“Much better, thanks,” Matt says automatically. He can feel Foggy’s gaze on him, and the other man’s hands are awkwardly gripping his knees, like he’s halfway to reaching out to touch Matt. “This is a bit awkward, but did I do something to annoy Karen?”

“What?” Foggy says. “No. Dude, you haven’t seen her in two days, how could you manage to piss her off when you’re not even here?”

He’s not lying. Somehow Matt still can’t relax.

“She seems a bit off around me,” he says. “I don’t know.”

“Oh.” Now Foggy’s heart skips faster. “She’s not angry with you.”

“If she’s just worried.” Also not a lie. Also not the truth. It’s not like Foggy to be so evasive; that’s usually Matt’s domain.

He doesn’t really know where to go with this next. It’s unpleasant, he realises, being the one served half-truths. He feels a pang of sympathy for all the times he’s been the one to do this to Foggy instead.

After a second Foggy shifts a bit closer to him.

“Hey,” he says, softer, “You know if you… if you need to talk about anything, I’m always here, right?”

“Of course,” Matt replies, but Foggy shakes his head.

“No, seriously, Matt. I… I feel like we’ve been kinda distant lately.” He’s upset. His voice is just slightly thicker than normal. “I know that… that everything that happened after Fisk came back was kinda crazy, but we’re past that now. I’m past that.”

I’m not, Matt thinks, but doesn’t say it out loud. He knows that’s not what Foggy means, anyway. They never really sat down and properly talked about everything - about Matt coming back, about how much of a dick he was when he did it, but Foggy doesn’t sound like he’s lying now.

“I know,” he says softly. Then, “Thanks.”

Foggy is quiet for a moment. Matt gets the distinct impression that he’s waiting for Matt to say or do something. Then the distinct impression that he’s disappointed. Finally he takes a deep breath.

“You seemed upset this morning,” he says finally. “I’m glad Frank could help. I just…”

He trails off, and Matt catches his breath.

Oh.

Of course. Of course Foggy would feel left out. He’s already got to deal with the whole Frank-and-Karen thing. Now Frank usurping his position as best friend, as support…

“Foggy,” he says quietly, “It’s not like that. You’re my best friend.”

“But there’s things he gets that I don’t,” Foggy says heavily. “Right? Things you can’t put into
words?”

Matt doesn’t know what to say.

“Same story with Karen,” Foggy murmurs, and Matt closes his eyes for a moment.

That’s not it. Not all of it, not really. It’s part of it, sure, because Frank does get it, but that doesn’t mean Foggy can’t listen. Doesn’t mean he hasn’t been the one for years who’s been there to pull Matt out of his own head.

The real problem is that these days, it hurts too much. To be close to Foggy, to know that however much he cares, it’s not enough, it’s not what Matt really wants. What he wants is something he can never have.

That’s selfish, he realises now. He’s been pushing his best friend away without even knowing it.

“Nothing can replace you,” he says, and Foggy smiles a little, but Matt knows he’s not happy.

“I’m not trying to make it about me,” he says. “I just - I worry, Matt. I want you to trust me with things.”

Brave Foggy, valiant Foggy. But there’s no way Matt can ever tell him.

“It’s nothing,” he manages, and Foggy heaves another disappointed sigh. Matt feels a stab of guilt, but he’s not sure what he should be saying, what else he’s done wrong now.

It’s always something. You always fuck up somehow and it’s too late to fix it.

“Right,” Foggy says. He gets up; Matt does too. Foggy reaches out and squeezes his arm and suddenly Matt wants to reach out, pull him close, hug him tightly. He shoves the urge away. Any chance he and Foggy had, he blew it a long time ago. He settles for a small smile instead, but Foggy seems no happier as they leave the room.

That night they go after the weapons dealers.

To be honest, Matt is so fucking out of it, and things go so fucking sideways, that later he will barely remember shit about what happened.

There’s stuff he does remember. Bits and pieces.

Like at the beginning of the night, when he’s stressing the fuck out over how they had to leave Foggy and Karen on their own, and Frank grabs his arm and pulls him to a halt.

“I’m gonna need you to take a deep breath,” he grumbles, “Because you’re starting to make me nervous. Pull it together, okay? They’re fine. They got us on speed dial.”

“Anything could happen,” Matt snaps, but doesn’t shake him off when Frank grabs his shoulders.

“Y’know, Red, not everyone’s gonna die the second you turn your back.”

“Past experience speaks otherwise,” Matt says, coldly.
“They’re not idiots. You think they aren’t freaking out about you being out here? We can’t all be worried all the time. Ain’t healthy.”

Matt’s silent. Not believing. After a second Frank’s grip softens.

“Can you do anything right now to fix it?” he demands. “No? Then you gotta let it go, alright? Just for now. Just to get this done.”

He rubs Matt’s back. Lets him go. Keeps walking. Matt takes his advice, takes a deep breath, and follows. He’s still worried, nothing can change that. But when your whole life is an ongoing multi-layered disaster, you gotta learn to compartmentalise that shit.

He remembers-

Walking into a seedy warehouse with Frank at his side and how good it feels just - not to be alone. To know someone’s got your back. For a second it almost reminds him of Elektra.

He remembers-

How easily the two of them work together getting info out of the guys. Their training’s paid off, he knows how Frank moves, can anticipate what he’ll do and work with it. The men give them a few solid leads; a location they used to make deliveries to and the name of another gang that the Hounds haven’t managed to absorb yet. Could make good allies.

He remembers-

How Frank makes him laugh when they get back in the car and some idiot’s hemmed them in and he can’t fucking get out of his parking spot. He swears a lot while doing a lot of dizzying forward-and-backward-ing, trying to inch his way out.

“This is a fucking nightmare. What cocksucking son of a bitch sees a gap this small and decides what a perfect spot to parallel park. Should fucking key his stupid fucking Subaru. Don’t you fucking laugh,” he adds, looking over at Matt, but he’s smiling, Matt can tell, “Mr Travel-Everywhere-On-Foot, what would you do if I wasn’t here?”

“A lot of walking,” Matt replies.

“No wonder you only patrol Hell’s Kitchen.” Frank slams on the brakes and Matt grabs the car door to brace himself. “It’d take you too damn long to get anywhere else.”

“I’m not Spiderman,” Matt points out, “I can’t just swing everywhere.”

“Didn’t you used to have a grappling hook? You absolutely could swing everywhere. Motherfucker,” Frank adds, as he hits the curb, and Matt laughs again.

He’s still jittery, still on edge - but being with someone else gives him the sort of frenzied, vague hope that maybe things are kind of under control. Maybe.

Of course, they all go wrong.

It’s hard to pinpoint what exactly sends them spiralling towards disaster. For one, it’s a bad location - a part of the city being rebuilt after some sort of Avengers-related disaster. Lots of construction around, lots of scaffolding making it hard to navigate. The only way in or out of the site is a single narrow entrance. The ground’s covered in old rubble where they’ve been digging it up and it’s pretty
impossible to move quietly. There’s not a lot of cover.

There are ten guys in there, in a makeshift base, watching over a bunch of supply crates. Matt gets the number right, counting heartbeats, but they misjudge the sort of weaponry they’ve got - they’re way, way outgunned - and the sort of security system too, assuming that a place so rundown won’t be under close watch.

Apparently not.

They barely get a chance to sneak in and start eavesdropping before the guys are on the intruders.

The fight’s a blur. They hold their own for a bit. It’s routine. At least until one of the guys opens a crate and gets the big guns out.

And this is what Matt will really remember, what will stick in his nightmares for days afterwards.

He’s standing too far away to help. Frank gets up from cover to try and get at one of the guys, only for another one to whirl around and open fire on him. In an instant he’s being gunned backwards - stumbling, then falling - back, back, into the scaffolding surrounding the building site, scaffolding that comes crumpling down on him a moment later.

Matt freezes. He hears it, every splintering beam, the crashing of metal on metal. He tastes the dust that rises up into the air. He feels Frank’s body heat vanish under rubble and dirt.

A rush of cold sweeps over him, from head to toe - frigid, numbing. Every ounce of warmth seems to drain away. An icy fist clenches his heart so tight he can hardly breathe.

For a second - it’s Elektra, all over again. It’s the crash and rumble of Midland around them and Elektra in his arms, holding him tightly, darkness descending over the two of them. Waking up to realise he made it out; she didn’t. It is that terrible, terrible numbless, like he’s alive but not really, he might be breathing and his heart beating but his soul is buried somewhere in the black depths of the earth.

Numbly, he reaches down. His fingers close around a broken metal rebar.

He barely registers the enraged scream that echoes around the site as his own. His feet take him towards the nearest man, faster than the guy can react. When he fights, it’s more viciously than he has in a long, long time.

Bones break under the crunch of metal. He feels skin split under every blow and tastes blood in the air.

Someone splits his lip with the butt of a gun, another kicks him so hard he feels a rib crack. He barely stumbles - ignores the crack of a bullet near him that makes his head pound, beats another man to the ground. The violence makes a little warmth seep back through his veins. It feels almost like he’s possessed. The devil, maybe, swinging the metal bar again and again-

He’s so covered in blood; it’s all he can smell, all he can taste, sticky over his hands, coating his arms to the elbows-

It’s a moment before he registers that it’s silent. There’s no one else around him. He’s the last one left standing. He flinches, spins around at a sound behind him, but it’s just the wind moving a sheet of metal across the ground.

Alone.
The adrenaline fades, draining away in a sickening rush. Sheer terror kicks in. The bar drops to the ground with a clatter.

_Frank_

He runs over to the rubble. Starts to dig, scrabbling at rock and gravel, hauling away broken pieces of wooden board.

_Frank_

Elektra, falling against him, head pressed to his chest as the building came down. Elektra’s arms tightening around him. Elektra, up on the roof, growing cold in his arms, but her blood so warm as it seeped out over him. Elektra, Elektra-

He feels a form under the rubble, throws more of it aside, grabs the edge of Frank’s kevlar vest and starts to pull him free.

_Frank_

His nails are torn and bloody as he tries to dig him free. Now he can’t stop thinking about the night he found his father’s cold body and has to pause, just for a second, to let out a gulping sort of sob, quite sure he’s going to be sick.

_Frank_

Matt’s hands run over his face. He tugs at the woollen mask, his hands shaking so hard he can barely get it off. Frank’s body heat is low and he’s so covered in dust and dirt that it’s all Matt can smell; he has to pause, try to filter it out. Finally he runs his hands over Frank’s face; his bumpy, broken nose, his familiar lips. Pauses. Feels a flicker of a breath. Listens. Hears the flutter of a heartbeat. Other things, too. Blood, so much of it. The scraping grind of broken ribs. A spatter of bullets, all lodged in his vest. Warm swelling in a dislocated shoulder.

_Frank_

But he is alive.

He can barely bring himself to feel relief. Matt closes his eyes, forces himself to focus. No spinal injury, he thinks. He drags Frank free a little way, then slings him over his shoulders. Can barely feel a thing as he carries him out. One foot in front of the other. No time to think.

He’s in the middle of patching Frank up when the other man’s eyes fly open and he sucks in a rattling, wheezing gasp. He reaches up and grabs Matt’s wrist, thrashing, only to freeze. Matt feels the shudder of pain that runs through his body, hears his broken groan.

“Calm down.” He’s surprised his own voice remains steady as he reaches out and grips Frank’s shoulders, holding him still. “Calm down. You’re safe. You’re gonna hurt yourself worse.”

Frank swallows a few times. His eyes are moving - left, right, then fixing on Matt’s face. Getting his bearings. Slowly he loosens his grip on Matt’s arm and gingerly attempts to stretch, only to wince. Matt holds his breath - but nothing starts falling apart again. Frank’s heart is thumping steadily.
Stable, for now.

“The fuck are we?” Frank grunts finally. His voice is barely a whisper and he breaks into a series of wracking coughs shortly after. Matt tries to steady him, flinching with each one; he can hear them jostling the damaged ribs.

“Rooftop. I couldn’t - couldn’t get you anywhere farther. There was a first aid kit in your car, you… it should hold you out for now. Jesus, Frank, are you…”

He trails off.

He can’t see Frank, but he can sense it. All the bruises, blood, fractures. Frank starts coughing again and Matt passes him a bottle of water; cradles his head while he helps him drink it.

He’s okay. He’s alive. But he nearly fucking died. It’s a sheer fucking miracle that he didn’t. A punctured lung, or a bullet three inches higher hitting his head instead of his vest, or a piece of shrapnel hitting him on the head - it’s a miracle. But he could’ve died, could’ve died, could’ve died-

Part of him had thought that if this ever happened again he would freak out. Instead he just - shuts down. He sits back, heavily, and closes his eyes, and just- just can’t deal with this. Just sits there feeling nothing at all. So numb he can’t move. He tries to swallow but his throat really hurts.

He can’t lose Frank.

It didn’t quite hit him until now, but the thought is suddenly as looming and terrible as his dread of losing Foggy, or Karen, or Maggie. He doesn’t know when they got so close, but...

He spent so long feeling like he was falling apart, and then the last few months trying to hold himself together. Now everything that happened tonight has hit him like a sledgehammer.

Next to him Frank’s slowly sitting up. Cataloguing his injuries, biting his lip so hard it’s bleeding trying not to yell in pain. He heaves himself to his knees. Matt knows he should help him. But he can’t.


He clicks his fingers at Matt, which Matt usually would not fucking stand for. He’s not a dog. Now, he barely even notices.

He can taste blood. He can - he can’t stop thinking of Elektra, dying in his arms. Her last breath. He’d felt empty then, so empty it was like everything had just - drained away, like all the fire in the world had been snuffed out. Cold, she’d said. Matt feels cold now. He’s shivering, even though it’s a mild summer night. No, he’s shaking. Shaking so hard he can barely breathe. He’s also dripping wet; his shirt is drenched in blood and sticking to him.

“Matt. Matt.” Frank’s in front of him, listing to the side a little. One arm wrapped around his ribs, the other raised. His hand lands on Matt’s cheek, cradles his face roughly. “You with me?”

“You could’ve died,” Matt whispers, around the lump that’s blocking his throat.

“I didn’t,” Frank replies. “I feel like shit that’s been run over by a monster truck, but I’m alive.”

“You could’ve, Frank.” His voice is breaking on every word. “It’s… it’s a miracle you didn’t.” He wants to reach up and touch Frank, but can’t. “I can’t-”
“Matt.”

“I can’t lose anyone else.” And now, now he’s freaking out, now he’s-

Terrified, same way he was terrified the other night when Foggy called. And God, he’s just - sick of being scared all the time. It’s exhausting. He spends every fucking day just wishing it would stop. And every night out on the streets wishing he could just go home. He wants to close his eyes and not open them again. Everything’s too much.

“Red, you think I ain’t had worse?” Frank sounds strangely calm for someone who’s bleeding in three different places and nearly kicked the bucket. “I got shot in the fucking head. Couldn’t bring me down. Hell, last year I got the shit beaten out of me so badly I was hallucinating my dead wife. Now that was a trip.”

Everyone’s luck runs out, Matt thinks, everyone’s time runs out. Everyone leaves, eventually.

He can’t, he can’t, he can’t-

Frank hugs him.

It’s strange how after everything, it’s that which shocks him. Frank pulls him close and wraps a hand around the back of his head and just - hugs him.

What the fuck, Matt thinks.

Somehow it feels strangely more intimate than anything else they’ve done. His face buried in the crook of Frank’s neck, breathing him in, pressed close - his warm body, his pounding heart... Matt can feel every single injury in both of them, throbbing warm - but Frank, against him, is solid and warm, grip around Matt still strong.

“I’m not going anywhere, you hear?” Frank growls. “I’m not. I promise.”

“I can’t lose you,” Matt whispers, and it means too much, but he can’t stop himself saying it.

Frank’s heart skips a beat. Then he shakes his head.

“You won’t.”

He pulls back, then suddenly leans back in, and presses his lips to Matt’s instead.

The kiss is different this time. It’s slow and languid and we shouldn’t be doing this, Matt thinks. It’s different. They shouldn’t be doing this. There’s - there’s nothing erotic about it, not really. Something else. Something too familiar, something reassuring. But he closes his eyes and kisses back and-

And feels a bit more settled, a bit less like the second he lets go of Frank he’s gonna fade away and vanish.

They pull apart and Frank presses his forehead to Matt’s.

“Jesus, you taste like blood,” he says, with a shaky laugh. “Are you okay?”

“I haven’t been okay in like two years,” Matt replies, a bit hysterically.

“Okay, stupid question.” His hands settle on Matt’s waist, steadying both of them. He can barely sit
“You’re really hurt,” he blurts out. “I’m… I’m not joking, Frank. You nearly died.”

“I know.” There’s a slightly more serious note in Frank’s voice now, “But that’s what we signed up for a long time ago. We’re not gonna stop staring death in the face. Can’t lie, though, everything really fucking hurts, so let’s get somewhere where I can pass the fuck out again, huh?”

Matt nods. Thing is, he was meant to go back to Karen and Foggy’s tonight, but he should take Frank home, and he doesn’t want to leave him alone. He’s torn, suddenly, and it’s fucking terrifying because - because he loves the two of them. But Frank’s hurt, and he cares about him, too.

Something about the look on his face must give it away. Frank laughs.

“You know, I’ve been taking care of myself for ages,” he says. “Get me home and I’ll be fine-”

“What was that before?” Matt blurts out.

“What?”

“That kiss.” It’s weighing on him, maybe too much. “It wasn’t-”

He breaks off. He’s said too much, given too much away. It was better when they didn’t talk about this, just let it happen. This is hardly the time, anyway. Frank’s heart is pounding.

“Look, Red,” he says quietly, “This shit we been doing...

“My head’s in a weird place right now,” Matt admits.

“Hell, mine too,” Frank agrees. “What, you wanna stop?”

His tone is casual. His heartbeat is not. And for some reason, the thought gives Matt a terrifying, sinking feeling. He shakes his head. Frank’s body sings relief. This just got a whole lot more complicated, but he’s… well, for once he doesn’t want to run. Not from this. Not even if it scares him.

“Good,” Frank murmurs, “Me either. Think we’re in too deep. Look, I know what happened tonight was - was fucked up. But that’s the way it is. You can’t think of this,” he gestures between the two of them, “As a weakness. Second you get thinking that way is when you lose yourself.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Matt whispers, and it comes out far too lost and broken, but Frank just shakes his head and huffs out a rasping laugh.

“Hell, me either half the time. But you trust me, right?”

“Yeah,” Matt says, and Frank smiles, and apparently just that one word is a much bigger deal than he expected.

“Right. Well, we’ll figure it out. Another time,” he adds, a bit grumpily, “When I’m not an eight on the pain scale, Jesus Christ, get me somewhere with painkillers. Now.”

“Sorry,” Matt says, and he can move again. He goes and helps Frank up; the other man lets out a groan as he rises, leaning most of his weight onto Matt. He feels a jolt, a protective surge, same as he did when Foggy got hurt. He doesn’t want to leave Frank tonight - but the others need him, too - and
this, all this, is only gonna get worse. Being torn between the two of them. Three people to lose instead of two, instead of one-

You’re spiralling, Matty, Stick says in the back of his head. And sounds smugly pleased about it.

He does trust Frank. He does. He wants to believe that this will be okay. But it takes very little to push Matt to a breaking point nowadays. It’s only adrenaline and necessity that keeps him anything close to steady as he helps Frank towards the stairs leading down off the roof. One foot in front of the other.

16. ONE TEACHES FOGGY LOVE, ONE TEACHES HIM PATIENCE, AND NO PRIZES FOR GUESSING WHO’S GONNA TEACH HIM PAIN

Alright, let’s start with the one that’s, like, marginally less emotionally devastating.

He and Karen get home that night exhausted as hell from a day of hard work, but also pretty damn relieved because Frank and Matt are both out chasing up a lead. That means they get the place to themselves.

Jesus Christ. You would not believe how awful it is having someone around the apartment all day. Especially when that someone is Frank Castle. It’s so fucking awkward, legit-

Go to the kitchen for a midnight snack? There’s Frank, judging you hard while you eat some late-night cereal!

Go to the bathroom? Frank Castle’s on the couch right fucking outside listening to your business! Foggy hasn’t taken a shit at home in three days. Gotta wait until he gets to work. It’s called bowel shyness and it’s a problem, okay? It’s really thrown him off his rhythm!

Also - and this is the worst part - he can’t really touch Karen, can’t really go up and hold her and kiss her like he wants to, because thanks to Matt, Foggy now knows that they’re both into each other. And if he was a certain type of asshole maybe he’d want to rub it in Castle’s face, but he’s not that guy. He’s not.

So when they get home that night and he remembers they’re alone the first thing he does is say, very enthusiastically, “Thank fucking God!”

“Oh!” Karen cries, as she finishes locking the three additional bolts that Frank added to her door on top of the five she already had, “He left Pi here.”

“Did he not warn you he was leaving the dog?” Foggy asks. Not that he has a problem with the dog, just. There’s nowhere for it to shit except out on the balcony. It’s not great.

“No,” Karen says, “But I have no objections.”

She crouches down and starts fussing over it. Foggy watches her, a fond smile on his face. Some of the tension’s drained from her shoulders; she looks happy for once. Younger and less world-weary.

Things are weird nowadays.
After the revelations of the last few days, he is... very conflicted within, to put it mildly. He is trying very, very hard not to think about all of it. Especially when it comes to Matt, because Jesus Christ is there a lot going on there - but we’ll get to that later.

For now, the one thing he is certain of is Karen, and he watches it now with a fond smile. It’s no wonder Matt picked up on it, because she has been off lately - a bit upset, a bit all over the place - but Foggy can’t lie, he has too, and the one thing he does appreciate? That even with Frank here, it’s been Foggy she’s come to first for everything. And if there was one benefit to having Castle around all the time, it’s that Foggy actually feels more secure than he did before, because this whole time it’s been the two of them together and then Castle off over there, and, for once, Foggy’s feeling okay with their relationship.

“He,” he says now, quietly, “You okay?”

“What?”

“So that Frank’s not here, there was something I wanted to talk about.” He perches on the arm of the couch; she looks up at him, worried. “Matt thinks you’re pissed with him.”

Karen had looked terrified; now it drops away a bit. She gives a little laugh.

“Okay, but does Matt ever not think one of us is pissed at him?”

“I hate that we can say that so flippantly but yes, that is also true,” Foggy says, and sighs. “No, really, though - he can tell something’s off.”

“We should tell him we know,” Karen says, and rises, stepping towards him. “About him and Frank. Look, we’re all a mess lately. We can’t just ignore this and hope it goes away.”

“Forget Matt for a moment,” Foggy says.

“Foggy!” she chides.

“No, I’m - look, of course I’m worried about him, am I ever not? But I just wanna talk about you for a moment. What’s going on? You’ve been really weird lately.”

And she has - she’s been weird around Castle, barely talking to or looking at him. She’s been weird around Matt, to the point where it’s stressing him out. And at night she’s been antsy - she tosses and turns, not having nightmares but also not sleeping.

Now, Foggy rises. He draws her into his arms and she rests her head on his shoulder. This is okay, he thinks, no matter what’s going on, they’ll figure it out.

“I don’t want to lie to you, Foggy,” she whispers. There’s a hesitation in her voice that reminds him of Matt right before he drops the bombshell of whatever horrifically escalated situation he’s been hiding.

“Well I sure don’t want you to either,” he says, a bit hysterically.

“But I don’t want to hurt you,” Karen continues, “But I know that… that not telling you the truth is the fastest way to do that, so...”

She pauses. Takes a deep breath. Foggy’s heart is thundering, but aside from that, he feels oddly calm. It’s just the two of them, and Karen’s in his arms, and nothing can touch them here - right?
“I don’t ever want you to think that you’re not enough for me,” Karen begins, and finally looks up and meets his eyes. Hers are brimming with tears, but under that - soft, lost. Sincere, above all. “Because you are, and I - I can’t lose you, and you’re a better person than all of us.”

But, Foggy thinks.

“But,” Karen says, “It’s… it’s weird. Matt and I were together, and I… it’s stupid, I don’t own him, but it’s just… odd. Seeing him with someone else. Because I know how hard it is for him to trust anyone, how slow he likes to take it. And it’s even stranger that it’s Frank because… well, we were never together, but he’s important to me.”

Okay, Foggy thinks. Okay. He doesn’t know how he’s taking this. He doesn’t know how he should be taking this.

“But that’s my issue,” Karen says, “And I’ll deal with it, and I’ll get over it, and it doesn’t matter anyway because their relationship is nothing to do with us. Not when I have you and that… that makes me the luckiest of all of them.”

She stares into his eyes for a moment. Foggy doesn’t know what she can see in his face. After a second she leans up and kisses the corner of his mouth.

“I know that I’ve been off lately,” she finishes, “I’m just processing everything. But I’ll get over it. I promise.”

“Okay,” Foggy whispers, but he feels a little numb and hollow, and it must show in his face. Karen frowns.

“It’s just hard when we’ve been through so much,” she admits softly, “And with so many different people. It’s… you don’t get connections like that anywhere else. Matt and me, and what happened in the church, and… and the first time he saved me - we have so much history.”

Tell me about it, Foggy things, because him and Matt - it’s a whole other story. A long, convoluted, tragic story. A story he’s been trying not to think about. Trying not to dwell on how Matt-and-Frank is- A thing. A thing that’s giving him lots of very confusing feelings.

“Foggy, you’re the only one who’s never left,” Karen says, “And I know that you and I have stuff we… we can’t really talk about. The dark stuff, the bad stuff, it’s not something we bond over. Frank and Matt have been there; it’s different. But you and me, we don’t… but maybe that’s a good thing.”

Her cool hands brush over his cheeks, cradle his face. He was getting upset, he realises vaguely. But now she leans in and kisses him again.

“I love you,” she whispers. “You’re enough. You always will be. I don’t regret this, any of it. You’re the one I want.”

And he knows she means it. He can tell. He means it, too. It’s just - a complicated, weird situation. Is it enough to want this?

“I’m glad Frank’s not here right now,” Karen adds then, firmly. “I missed it being able to be just us.

And thing is, he believes her. He does. Or he believes she means it. But you can’t…. what you feel, you can’t control that. And the thing is…
He feels very, very strange about a lot of it too. There’s shit he needs to process. He’s just not in quite as deep as Karen.

Still.

He takes a deep breath and tells himself, the two of us, it has to be enough, it has to be.

“I love you too,” he says - and now he leans forward, and takes her face in his hands, and kisses her.

Her hands settle on his shoulders, run down his back - pulling him closer, pressing up against him. There’s love in all of it - the way she laces their fingers together to lead him to the bedroom. Her hands in his hair, carding it through her fingers - she pulls the buttons of his shirt free, pushes it down over his shoulders, traces gently over the fading scar where he was shot. Kisses the bruises on his neck, still a little tender, still standing out stark against his skin. All of it.

*Enough,* he thinks, *for now.*

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Okay, so Foggy and Frank.

Look… it’s complicated, alright?

To be fair, it’s hard to *completely* hate the guy who’s saved the life of you, your best friend and your girlfriend - on multiple occasions. But they just don’t click. It’s not Foggy’s fault. Sometimes you and another person just don’t vibe, y’know? And they’ve been living in close quarters for three days. There were a lot of stupid fights over a lot of stupid things. Like Frank’s tendency to leave a tiny bit of milk in the carton in the fridge instead of just using the whole thing up and throwing it away. Or the masterful renditions of Eurovision classics that Foggy likes to conduct in the shower. Or who gets the last bagel in the packet.

Still. When they walk into work the next day and he gets a good look at Frank - sitting in the waiting area, propped up on half a dozen couch cushions - he can’t help the jolt of worry that strikes him.

“Jesus *Christ,*” he says.

“Sup,” Frank grunts.

“Oh my God, Frank.” Karen’s dithering like she isn’t sure whether to rush to his side or not. “Matt said you got hurt but-”

“Looks worse than it is,” Frank assures her. He tries to sit up a bit and winces.

“Looks pretty fucking bad,” Foggy says. His heart’s hammering.

Frank’s face is covered in bruises so dark they’re nearly black. There are more on his shoulders; Foggy can see them spreading down past the collar of his shirt. His clothes are bulky with bandages and he’s clearly favouring one side.

It’s shocking. It makes a jolt run down his spine. He feels the way he did that night he found Matt lying motionless in a pool of blood; a little sick, a little scared. Thing is, now, although Matt gets hurt, usually it’s not this bad. Usually it’s covered by his clothes and sunglasses.
He’s worried, despite himself. Clearly whatever shit went down last night was bad.

“Had worse,” Frank informs them. “I’ll be fine.”

“You should be home resting,” Karen whispers. She still hasn’t gone over to him. Foggy really doesn’t know how to feel about this.

“Well I’m not at work,” Frank suggests. “Besides. I can shoot someone from right here on the couch.”

“No one’s shooting anyone,” Matt supplies, from the door of his office. Foggy turns to look at him. He’s got a badly swollen lip that matches Foggy’s own fading injury. There are lines of tension on his face, same as he gets every time he’s got some internal crisis going on. Still - he smiles when Foggy turns towards him, and Foggy manages a weak smile back.

Then turns to look at Frank, because it’s pretty fucking interesting watching the two of them nowadays. A lot of intense stares coming from Frank, a lot of awkwardness radiating from Matt.  

_God. The two of them._ He can still barely wrap his head around it.

A second later, though, Matt jerks his head towards his office.

“Foggy. I have some things to run by you.”

“Yes,” Foggy says, and the spell is broken; he follows Matt into his office. Sees Karen look at Frank, then look away, then head off to her own room as he goes.

It’s a relatively uneventful day. Karen’s working on the vigilante stuff; he and Matt are in the thick of a different case. When Foggy starts to head out to go to a meeting with another client, Frank rises from his nest on the couch and starts limping after him.

“Dude,” Foggy says. “What are you even gonna do if the Hounds attack us? You already got the shit beaten out of you.”

“Not by another human,” Frank grunts, sounding quite offended. “By poorly constructed scaffolding. The real enemy here was shitty workplace health and safety compliance.”

“Hilarious. That’s not any better.”

“I’m fine,” Frank snaps. “‘sides, Red’s busy, so you’re stuck with me.”

At this point Foggy’s given up arguing. The ride there is very awkward; Frank doesn’t seem in the mood to talk and the extent of their interaction involves continual, passive aggressive switching of the radio station in the car.

They’re pulling into the car park when Frank grimaces and attempts to discreetly check something under his shirt. Unfortunately for him, continual exposure to Matt and his myriad of hidden injuries has given Foggy eyes in the back of his head. You can’t hide shit from him. At this point _he’s_ practically the one with super senses.
“You okay?” he asks.

“Yeah,” Frank says, without even looking at him.

“I’m serious. If you’re bleeding I don’t want it all over my car.”

“Ain’t bleeding.” He adjusts his shirt. Grimaces. Digs a packet of over the counter painkillers out of his pocket and pops one dry. Foggy watches with what can only be described as a mixture of horror and morbid admiration.

“Don’t you get sick of being hurt all the time,” he says - Frank casts him a glance.

“Sure,” he says, “I don’t exactly go out at night with the intention of gettin’ the shit kicked out of me. But it comes with the territory. Trust me, no one likes pain. Gets real fucking boring real fucking fast having a busted wrist or not being able to sneeze without pulling something. Then again,” he adds in a mutter, “Some of us could stand to be a bit more careful.”

Matt, Foggy thinks, and feels a grudging moment kinship with Frank, because hell if he hasn’t spent most of his life trying to get Matt Murdock to take it easy.

“Yeah,” he mutters, and rubs his own jaw ruefully. “Had enough of a taste of it.”

He’s distracted for a moment, trying to reverse his car into a very treacherous gap. When he finally succeeds he turns to find Frank staring at him. It is rather unsettling.

“Are you okay?” Frank demands.

“What? Of course,” Foggy says, automatically. And then realises, shit, Matt’s rubbing off on me. You gotta model good behaviour, right? So he takes a deep breath and adds, “I’m pretty tired, to be honest.”

“Nightmares, huh?” Frank says, and Foggy swallows hard.

“Yeah,” he agrees quietly. He doesn’t know why his heart is pounding. This stuff is hard to talk about at the best of times.

But somehow - the way Frank just kinda gives a sympathetic nod with a very sort of blase, macho camaraderie actually feels alright. Feels a bit like, yeah, been there. Sympathetic without making a big deal of it. Something tense relaxes a little in Foggy’s shoulders.

They’re just getting out of the car when Frank’s phone starts buzzing. Foggy motions for him to take the call.

Frank hesitates, for a moment - then picks up.

“Hey, Leo.” His voice is far softer and gentler than Foggy ever expected to hear it, and he does a double take. “What’s up, sweetheart?”

Who the fuck’s Leo, Foggy thinks.

“Oh, well that’s fantastic. Yeah, of course I’ll be there... Seems like you’ve got a good chance of winning. What’d your teacher say?... Well that seems promising!... yeah, I’ll let you know when I’m free and we can find a time to troubleshoot it... maybe ask your dad for now. Alright. I gotta run, darlin’, I’ll see you later, okay?”
Foggy fights very hard to keep the incredulous look off his face.

The thing is, he knows Frank had kids. He’s read the file, he’s heard the painful truth. Everything that happened to them, it’s tragic on a level that’s almost beyond comprehension.

It’s still hard to imagine him as a Dad - the way he is now, it’s all sharp corners and bared teeth. Soft is not a word anyone would associate with him.

But the way he smiles - it’s different. It’s nice. It melts away the hard edges a little bit; he looks younger, somehow, less burdened, and for a second-

For a flash of a second - and Foggy will deny this vehemently if anyone ever asks - he thinks he can almost see what Karen sees in him. A side deeply and passionately caring; something a little protective, a little sweet about it.

But - as is usual these days - a second later Matt sweeps into his head and transposes himself right there next to Frank. Because him and Matt - Jesus, it boggles the imagination. Foggy’s been alternately picturing it and trying very hard not to think about it for the last three days. His brain is a fucking traitor and keeps taking him places (we will not get more specific than that)!

Frank hangs up the phone. There’s a slightly awkward pause.

“Out of curiosity,” Foggy says, “How’d you know the kid?”

Frank shifts.

“Friend’s daughter,” he grunts, “We… worked together recently.”

“While you were on the run?” Foggy asks. He still doesn’t have all the details; Karen didn’t tell him everything. He didn’t really ask. “What exactly happened with all that?”

“Not something I particularly wanna relive,” Frank informs him, but not as testily as he once might’ve. “People I thought I could trust turned out to be fucking me over. And others who I didn’t know if I could trust had my back all the way. Made some new enemies. New allies, too. Which is good - they’ve been a big help.” He shifts, broodily, then offers up, “You can’t do this shit alone.”

“I keep telling Matt that,” Foggy grumbles, and Frank’s lips twitch.

“He’s stubborn, but I think he’s gettin’ it through his head by this point.”

They exchange a small smile. Another odd moment of camaraderie. They clamber out of the car, and Foggy pauses to check google maps on his phone to figure out where they’re going. Frank’s leaning against the car staring at him.

“Speakin’ of,” he says abruptly - Foggy looks up, startled - “You’re a good friend, Nelson.”

“Thanks?” Foggy replies, thoroughly befuddled.

“To Murdock, I mean.” Frank’s not quite looking at him. “People like me and Matt, I know we can be shit to deal with sometimes. So the people like you, and Karen, and some of my mates - the ones who stick around - you’re practically saints.”

“And here we all thought Matt was the martyr,” Foggy jokes. He has no clue where all this is coming from, but he’s weirdly touched. “Thanks, I guess. Glad someone appreciates it. No, that’s
mean - Matt’s trying. I know he is."

But not enough to tell me you two are banging, he thinks, then feels rather mean about it.

“Still!” he adds, with forced cheer, “Gotta learn to defend myself. Can’t leave it all to you superheros.”

“You really should,” Frank grunts, a bit disapprovingly, “At the rate you lot get yourselves into trouble.”

“Yeah, well, I’m trying. Krav Maga, bitch.” He throws out a very sloppy jab and instantly regrets it when Frank turns to him with the most disappointed frown he’s ever seen. “Okay, that wasn’t my best-”

“Jesus Christ, tell me that ain’t how you throw a punch.”

“I was just mucking around.”

“Hold up.” Frank limps around to his side of the car. “Show me again.”

“Really? Right here in the car park?” He shifts his satchel uncomfortably against his side, feeling terribly self conscious.

“Your best shot.”

I don’t know why I’m entertaining this, Foggy thinks, but grimly shifts into a fighting stance, lifts his fists and throws what he thinks is a perfectly respectable attempt at a jab-cross. Frank watches with narrowed eyes.

“Yikes,” he says finally.

“Well fuck you too,” Foggy snaps, and starts to walk off, but Frank heaves himself off the car and hobbles over, holding up a hand to stop him.

“Feet shoulder width apart,” he orders, and Foggy finds himself obeying. “Left foot takes one step forward. Not that far. Yeah, like that. Okay, right foot goes up on your toes. Perfect. That’s your fighting stance. Fists up - higher - they’re up to protect your face so they gotta actually cover your face. Okay. Good.”

Suddenly he’s even closer by Foggy’s side, close enough Foggy can hear him breathing; the sort of wheezy breaths you get with broken ribs, and feel his warmth against his side. He doesn’t turn to look at him, feels suddenly nervous. Rough, calloused fingers close around his left wrist.

“Extend your arm - straight, like this - all the way out. All the way. If you’re gonna throw a punch, aim like you’re punching through the guy. Shoulder up to protect your face. Rotate the fist. Just like that.”

He tugs Foggy’s arm into the right position. Pulls it back. Watches him try again. Takes his wrist, adjusts the angle a little. His hands are very warm and Foggy’s certain Frank must be able to feel his pulse pounding through the thin skin of his wrist. He doesn’t know why he’s so nervous.

He sneaks a glance at Frank and is glad when their eyes don’t meet. The other man’s dark eyes are narrowed, brows furrowed in concentration.
Damn, okay. He can kind of see what Karen sees in the guy. He’s not exactly pretty, but there’s something magnetic about how intense he is.

My girlfriend and best friend are both into you, he realises - it’s kinda weird to think about - but look, Foggy’s only human, and he can kind of see the attraction. Especially up close like this.

“Show me your cross,” Frank orders, and Foggy shakes himself and throws his right. Frank nods slowly.

“Pivot your foot a little,” he suggests, “Throw your hip into it. Yeah, you’re getting there.”

He claps Foggy on the shoulder. His approval is oddly pleasing in a way Foggy once would never have wanted to admit. Now, he just gives a little smile, lets himself accept the compliment. Things are already weird as fuck. Not like they can get much more complicated from here.

“You’ll be kicking ass in no time,” Frank says, and Foggy scoffs a bit.

“I doubt that. Took a guy out with a baseball bat once but that’s the extent of my kick-assery. I’m not even the brains of the operation,” he adds, glumly, “That’s Karen, at this rate.”

“You were the brains of my legal case. Way I hear it, Red did fuck all to help me out.”

“You did fuck all to help yourself out,” Foggy points out, and Frank pulls a yeah fair sort of face. “Still. The law shit’s one thing. All this… investigating, Daredeviling, Punishing stuff, it’s beyond me.” Maybe a bit too much bitterness seeps into his voice. “I’m the moral support. I’m the one who sticks a bandaid on Matt and makes sure he’s eaten breakfast.”

Maybe there’s a bit too much frustration in it.

Maybe he’s been feeling a bit too left out lately, with all these new revelations. Not even so much with Karen, anymore, just-

Frank. Frank-and-Matt. Frank who understands all the things Foggy can’t. Frank who provides something Matt apparently needs, something he doesn’t want Foggy for. Frank who’s even taking that away from him - the one to talk Matt down from a freak out on a fire escape. Okay, maybe he’s still a bit salty about that one.

Frank who, now, gazes at him intently and then shakes his head.

“Don’t underestimate the importance of bandaids and breakfast,” he says. Foggy starts to scoff, and Frank reaches out and grabs his arm. “Hey, ‘m serious. End of the day, you need something to come home to. Need a centre of gravity to stop you falling off the face of this shitfest of an earth. Trust me, I - I got people for that. I think Murdock needs some too. Don’t underestimate yourself, Nelson. He needs you. Karen does too. Just be patient. You’ll see.”

Foggy stares at him. There’s a lump in his throat and he can’t quite figure why. Just-

It means a lot.

Something about it means a lot, and coming from no-bullshit Frank Castle? It’s maybe the one person he trusts not to throw empty platitudes in his face just to make him feel better.

“Thanks,” he murmurs, and Frank shrugs.

“You’re gonna be late for your meetin’,” he points out, and laughs as Foggy swears and hurries off.
Well, I guess we can’t put it off any longer.

Matt, huh?

Okay, so it’s like this. They’re early twenties and roommates and there’s something about Matt, yeah? Foggy doesn’t know how to put it into words, just that it’s not really like any friendship he’s ever had before. Matt’s all broken glass to interact with; his eyes are locked windows. Most people would’ve given up after two weeks, but Foggy isn’t a quitter.

Curious. That’s what it is at first. He’s so fucking curious he can barely stand it. Then, later, he finds he cares too much; there’s something about Matt that makes him want to get close. Make sure he’s okay, because he’s pretty sure half the time he isn’t. The way he goes too quiet, or pretends he didn’t spend half the night tossing and turning, or how when he jumps at a loud noise his hands fly up ready to protect his face.

Matt just - intrigues him, manages to worm his way into Foggy’s heart. He’s just intense and sincere and clearly super fucking damaged in a way Foggy hasn’t quite managed to work out, and he reacts sometimes like he’s never had a proper friend before. He gets protective when Foggy stays out late, and makes a pretty damn good study partner, and sometimes the sight of his rare smile makes Foggy’s heart skip a beat, but he tries not to think about that.

Matt’s just - an anchor. He really makes Foggy believe that between the two of them they can save Hell’s Kitchen, they can do some good in this city.

Purpose.

He gives him purpose, in a way nothing else has.

And then everything changes, and nothing Foggy knows is the same anymore. And then Matt’s gone, and he doesn’t think anything will ever, ever compare to how fucking empty everything feels. His heart seems to drop right out of his chest; the whole world seems a little dimmer. He carries stones around in his stomach for months.

Some days that all seems very long ago. Other times he wakes up from startled dreams and it takes him several slow, dreadful seconds to remember that everything is fine now - Fisk is gone, Matt is alive, and they are okay.

He knows what Karen thinks. Are you jealous?

He knows because he’s thought it, too, a hundred times since she told him what she saw. Frank and Matt - it seems so impossible he can barely believe it. Frank was everything Matt stood against - or at least, he used to. And even now, there’s a flicker of resentment.

It took me years for Matt to trust me. And now he trusts Castle in a matter of days? Enough to… to…

He doesn’t want to think about it. He doesn’t want to, but he does, anyway. Castle’s hands on Matt - in his hair, lifting his glasses gently off his face, running over his scarred body. It makes something twist, deep in his stomach, something ugly and bitter tasting.
Jealous? What’s there to be jealous of? He has Karen. And him and Matt-

It’s not like that-

It’s not, it never has been. He had Marci and Matt had Elektra and he’s always loved Matt, but not like that. He’s always just wanted to be the one person who never leaves Matt’s side, to be there for him. What they have is special and nameless and-

It’s not like that.

But the one thing - the one thing that nearly pushes him over the edge is that day when Matt comes back after two days’ sick leave and clearly is not fucking okay, is clearly lying through his fucking teeth that he had a migraine or whatever, and he goes off outside and Foggy makes to follow and Frank holds up a hand, easy as anything, and says, “I got this.”

That makes Foggy’s blood run cold.

That makes his heart squeeze so hard he thinks it might burst.

That makes him want to punch Frank Castle right in the fucking face and say, no, you don’t have anything, he’s not yours. He never was.

But he bites his tongue, and he goes to his office and tries to breathe, and wonders why it hurts so much. It’s just how easily Frank said it. How certain he seemed.

He should be happy for Matt. It’s stupid. God knows it’s good he’s not alone.

But he isn’t, and he doesn’t know why, just that he knows he should be the one out there. That feels right.

Anyway. He thinks he’s okay. He thinks he’s gonna swallow it down and get over it, wait and see what Matt says, how things play out. Maybe it’s nothing serious. Maybe Matt just needs a… a warm body, someone to hold, maybe it’s not actually a thing.

But of course - of course - it all blows up.

It’s innocuous. It’s that night after he gets back from his meeting and Frank’s taken Karen home and Foggy’s not even worried about the two of them any more, not really. Today with Frank, it was okay. And he trusts Karen.

It’s him and Matt, working late like old times, and they’re getting ready to head home. He watches Matt lean back in his chair, stretch his arms up and then wince and rub his side. He must catch Foggy’s disapproving frown; he turns to him and smiles a little.

“Don’t give me that look.”

“You can’t even see it,” Foggy complains.

“I can sense it. I’m fine. Frank got the worst of it. How were things, by the way? When you guys went out today.”

There’s something careful in the way he asks. Foggy’s heart beats faster, trying to get an angle. What’s he thinking? Does he want Foggy’s approval? Does he think he knows something? The fact that he’s sure Matt can tell he’s nervous really isn’t helping.
“It was fine,” he replies, slowly, “He seemed pretty busted up though. Why’d you ask?”

“I know you don’t like him,” Matt says.

“I don’t approve,” Foggy says, and takes a deep breath. “Look, he saved my life, I gotta be grateful for that. I’m not gonna get pissed he’s hanging around - it’s not like that. What happened last night?” he adds, “You’ve been rattled all day.”

Matt’s shoulders stiffen. It’s a giveaway, same as the way he’s been barely interacting with Frank all day. Both of them holding themselves too carefully around each other. Or maybe Foggy’s just paying way too much attention to the two of them.

“He nearly died.” His voice is very tight. “The scaffolding fell on him and-”

He breaks off. His voice is shaking a little. He’s staring across the room, vacantly.

“It was bad, Foggy,” he adds, softly, and Foggy bites his lip. It hits him, then - Matt’s track record when it comes to buildings going down - his heart sinks a little. He wants to reach out - and realises, after a moment, why shouldn’t he? So he does, hand going out to settle on Matt’s shoulder, squeezing reassuringly.

“Jesus,” he murmurs, “I can’t imagine..”

“He’s okay, though,” Matt adds, and takes a shaky breath.

If they’re together, Foggy thinks, it must’ve been even worse for him.

And God - suddenly, desperately, he needs Matt to tell him. He wants them to have that trust; he needs that validation that Matt will tell him things. That they can share things like that with one another. Maybe that’s why he pushes.

“Must’ve been a shock,” he says, and then, carefully, “You guys seem closer lately.”

Matt goes rigid under his hand.

“He’s been a good ally,” he replies, “It’s nice to have backup.”

“Yeah?” Foggy probes.

“Yeah,” Matt says, cautiously.

Foggy remains very tactfully silent, even as his hand slips back down to his side. As he expected, Matt starts shifting uncomfortably after a moment.

“Why?” he demands, “Did he say something?”

“Something like what?” Foggy asks, and it comes out maybe a bit too hostile. And thing is, he’s not aiming for hostile. He shouldn’t be. He has no reason to be. But suddenly he needs Matt to be honest, maybe a little too much, maybe to prove something Foggy barely realises he needs.

Matt’s turned his head now, staring at him - or his equivalent of staring - probably figuring out a hundred small tells. The room is filled with the most excruciatingly awkward silence.

Why the fuck did I think this was a good idea?
“Foggy…” Matt says after a moment - questioning, a bit pained, a little vulnerable.

But Foggy waits. Waits, thinking, *tell me*. Waits expectantly. Suddenly he is done giving in, giving up. His heart’s hammering. He thinks, *if I mean anything, he’d tell me. He’d trust me.*

*Years, fucking years of friendship, surely he’ll tell me.*

But Matt’s idea of a response is apparently to just go silent and *wait too.*

Okay! This is fine! This is a *fucking standoff,* alright, so it’s like *that* then.

The silence feels like it lasts forever. Matt breaks first, reaching up to adjust his glasses and then asking, “Is everything okay?”

“You tell me.” The disappointment’s setting in and it comes out colder than Foggy intends.

“It’s fine,” Matt says, like *always,* and something *breaks.* Foggy turns away, shoulders hunched.

*Karen was right. He doesn’t want us to know.* It somehow hurts far more than he should expect by now.

“Okay,” he mutters, and maybe it’s petty and passive aggressive, but he can’t help it. “So it’s like that, then.”

“Like that?” Matt asks.

“Nothing,” Foggy replies, coldly, “Just, I thought we were over all the secrets.”

“What secrets?” Matt asks, and fucking *hell,* it’s the fact that he’s actually daring to *play dumb* that sends Foggy right over the edge. Like fine, be like that, but no need to be fucking *condescending,* no need to act like Foggy’s some sort of clueless idiot.

He gives up. He sort of *explodes,* actually.

“Well!” he cries, with a lot of very angry gesticulations, “Well! I was trying to give you the chance to *tell me,* because I thought we were *best friends,* but okay! If it’s gonna be like that - I *know,* alright, Matt? I know about you and Castle!”

Dear God.

The *look* on Matt’s *fucking face.* The colour drains from his skin; his mouth falls open a little bit. It’s shock, first, then sheer horror, and Foggy realises with a sinking resignation that he was never intending to tell them. It feels like a stab in the gut.

“Karen saw you two,” he adds, and maybe it’s mean, but he feels a vindictive satisfaction at the way Matt flinches, and hates himself for it, just a little.

“Foggy…” his voice is soft, and very pained.

“So what is it?” Foggy asks, tiredly. “Are you guys just fucking or are you actually together? ‘cause I kinda thought you’d *tell* me something as important as that.”

“As what?” Matt demands, a little life coming back into his voice. “Every single person I sleep with?”
“You say that like there’s loads but I know you haven’t been seeing anyone,” Foggy snaps, “I don’t know, I thought stuff like that was important, after... after everything that’s happened. But maybe I was wrong, God. Half the time I feel like I don’t even know you.”

He’s aiming to hurt, but he still feels guilty at the way Matt clenches his jaw and turns away a little, like he’s been hit.

“It’s not like that,” he replies, tightly.

“Then what is it like?” Foggy cries - the raw hurt and anger coming out in force now.

Matt’s getting upset.

He can see it, in the way he’s gritting his teeth, in the flushed spots of colour high on his cheeks, how he’s swallowing. His voice, now, is thick and choked.

And Foggy? Foggy’s getting kinda upset too. There’s a lump rising in his throat and his eyes are burning and-

He doesn’t know why, doesn’t know why, doesn’t know why.

“Just the other day,” he continues, hysterically, “You were telling me you’re not over Elektra. So what is it, Matt? Where do the lies-”

“I wasn’t lying,” Matt snaps. His voice is shaking so hard he can barely get the words out. “Unless lying by omission counts, but - for fuck’s sake, I get some secrets, Foggy!”

“You’ve had more than your share of fucking secrets-”

“I wasn’t trying to hurt you-”

“Well you did-”

“I’m in love with you.”

Wait.

What?

Time seems to freeze. Everything’s just - still. Silent. As soon as the words leave Matt’s mouth it’s like they suck all the air out of the room; he goes still as a statue and Foggy, Foggy feels a cold rush sweep over his body. He can’t move, can’t look away from Matt’s eyes - huge and dark and desperate behind the red lens of his glasses - and he can see his own face reflected in them, pale and shocked. Nothing seems quite real.

“What?” he whispers - sure he’s heard wrong.

Matt lifts his fingers to his lips, like he can’t believe his own tongue betrayed him. His hand’s shaking so hard Foggy can see it from here.

“No more secrets, huh?” Matt says, and gives a bitter, hysterical laugh. His voice is raw and breaking. “You want to know everything? Yes, I’m not over Elektra. She died in my fucking arms - twice - you think I can ever get over that? You think that hasn’t fucked me up irreparably? But you, Foggy - God, I’ve been in love with you since practically the day we met, and... and everything just got so fucked up. The lies, the secrets, it - it wasn’t fair-”
He breaks off, swallowing - again and again - reaches up and swipes angrily at his face. Foggy can’t move, can’t speak, is struggling just to draw breath.

“I know it’s stupid,” Matt says, and his voice is so thick he can barely force the words out coherently. “I know you don’t feel the same way, I know this probably ruins everything, I just - I didn’t want to lose you. I couldn’t lose you too.”

Foggy’s chest is throbbing, throbbing, throbbing with every beat of his heart, like a dull knife twisting somewhere between his ribs. He feels words rising up in his throat, but when he opens it, nothing comes out. He wants to scream but can’t give voice to it.

Matt’s turned away from him. He swallows again.

“Sorry,” he chokes out, and somehow the fact that he’s nearly crying just about makes Foggy spill over, too. “I can’t lose you - not to this, not to anything, I just - it’s stupid.”

“Matt,” Foggy chokes out, but Matt barely hears him.

“The last few months,” he barrels on, hysterically, “Have been so fucked up. I can’t - I’m barely holding it together, I… I know it’s not fair to you, I just - I don’t know what I’m doing, okay? With you or with Frank or with any of this. I know it’s all my fault.”

“Matt.”

“I fuck up everything I touch,” Matt says, hoarsely, “And it - I never wanted to hurt you, Foggy, but it couldn’t - I still don’t - I shouldn’t have told you this.”

He rises, stumbles for the door, but Foggy lurches forward and grabs his arm tightly.

“Matt,” he says - but that’s all he can get out. He just - doesn’t know what to say. Matt’s refusing to look at him. He feels sick and helpless.

“Forget I said anything,” Matt urges, and sounds so desperate that it makes Foggy’s heart ache. “It’s nothing. It’s stupid. I’ll get over it. I don’t want it to change anything. Please, Foggy. Don’t let it change anything.”

Foggy’s mind is blank. He has to reply, he knows he does, but it’s like his entire knowledge of the English vocabulary has fucked off all at once. In his second of hesitation, Matt gives his arm a practiced twist and breaks free of his grip. He leaves the room so fast that Foggy can’t even call after him before the door slams shut.

And then he’s alone.

He can’t move. He’s paralysed. Then, a second later, his legs buckle and he stumbles sideways, gripping the edge of the desk.

*I’m in love with you.*

*I’ve been in love with you since practically the day we met.*

He has no idea what to do with this.

All he knows is how much it hurts - how everything’s been so thoroughly turned on its head.
Why does it hurt so much?

He feels so stressed and lost that he could cry. He doesn’t know what’s happening. What will happen. What he might gain, what they all might lose.

Everything he had thought he was managing to pull together has suddenly slipped out of his control, scattered and shattered around him, and he squeezes his eyes shut and clenches his fists until his nails dig into his palms, and thinks-

What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck-

What are we going to do now?
17. IN WHICH KAREN IS MCSTRUGGLING

Karen's not sure why she doesn't want to go home.

They've just spent way too much time cooped up together in that apartment lately. Her, and Frank, and Foggy, and the thick tension of their secrets. She's spent half the time feeling like there's a scream lodged up in her throat that she can't get out. She doesn't know what it is, just that it's unbearable.

Not that this is much better.

She's just met with a contact, an investigative reporter friend who'd done some work looking into the gang they're hoping to ally with. Now they're sitting looking over the files. In her car. In a McDonalds parking lot. On the plus side, she has a twenty pack of Chicken McNuggets that she’s steadily working her way through. The stress eating is real.

Luckily the fact that they’re both reading is preventing her from having to look in Frank’s direction, because Jesus Christ is that hard lately.

It sucks being jealous.

It sucks even more because she knows, she knows she has zero reason to be. Not when she has Foggy. But like she told him - it’s complicated, and she can’t help it, and it’s eating her alive.

Frank shifts in his seat. She glances at him. They make eye contact and he suddenly clears his throat and leans forward.

Shit, Karen thinks. She’s been trying not to give him an opening.

“Hey,” Frank says, all hesitantly. Her heart clenches a little. He sounds vulnerable. This is dangerous.

Don’t panic, she thinks.

“Hey,” she replies, very casually. “What’s up? You find anything?”

“No, but.” He shifts again, fiddling with the lid of his coffee cup. “Wanted to ask you something.”

“What?” she asks, like her heart isn’t hammering as enthusiastically as Thor himself.

“This might be kinda stupid, but... Are we okay?” There’s something painful about hearing Frank of all people reduced to sounding so awkward. “You’ve been… weird lately.”
Karen closes her eyes. Takes a deep breath. Shoves another chicken nugget in her mouth to buy a little bit of time.

This is it. Moment of truth.

She could lie through her teeth. She could pretend nothing’s wrong. She could do what Foggy suggested and wait for the others to tell them what they’ve been doing.

But this is Frank.

Frank, who she trusts. Who trusts her. Who she’s never wanted to lie to. Even now, it’s killing her not to have the answers. What are they gaining from this?

*It’s none of your business. Don’t rock the boat.* But neither of those are good enough reasons, and she takes a deep breath.

“I’ve got to admit something,” she says. “I probably should’ve told you right away, I just - it seemed awkward to bring up.”

“What is it?”

“What’s going on with you and Matt?” she asks, and Frank’s lips twist. “I, um. May have seen you guys together.”

“When?” Frank demands.

“After we had that awkward chat in my office. Before he got sick and was gone for two days.”

She sees the realisation dawn. His cheeks turn red; his gaze shifts uncomfortably away. He opens his mouth a few times, then closes it again. Finally, he swallows hard.

“Well,” he says, voice very strained. “You are right. That is… really fucking awkward to bring up.”

“Sorry.” She bites her lip. “We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to-”

“No, you should know.” He shakes himself, and his shoulders slump a little. “Nelson know too?”

“Yeah.”

“That why you guys been so fucking weird around us lately?”

“Probably,” she admits. “He… he didn’t wanna bring it up. Was hoping Matt would tell him first.”

Frank snorts.

“In what universe is Murdock ever *voluntarily* gonna share something personal?” he says, and Karen can’t help her laugh, and after a second Frank laughs too. The tension breaks a little. He gives her a strained smile and she manages to smile back.

*It’s just Frank,* she thinks, relieved suddenly - there’s nothing to be scared of. At least she’ll get some answers.

“So are you guys…”

“I don’t know what we are,” he admits, and lets his head fall back, gazing up out the windscreen at the evening sky as it darkens to dusk. “Look, I…. some of it ain’t my place to tell. I don’t want to
“spill all Murdock’s secrets.”

Secrets? Karne thinks, with another pang of jealous hurt. After everything that went down with Fisk, she and Matt had gotten closer. It’s a bit of a punch in the stomach to realise there’s shit he’s been telling Frank that he wasn’t telling her.

“Anyway,” he says - not quite meeting her eyes - “We had... a bad night. Mission didn’t go well, the Hellhound we were interrogating wound up dead, we barely got out with our lives. We were both feeling like shit and we just-”

He breaks off. Karen doesn’t say anything; she’s waiting for him to go on, but he seems to take her silence as something judgmental. When he continues his voice is flustered, defensive.

“You just - need someone sometimes. And since my wife... and his girl Elektra... it felt like there was no one else.”

No one else. It’s like a stab in the chest. Yes, it’s objectively true, but it just feels - wrong.

“But we understood each other. Understood the shit that no one else can if they haven’t been there, y’know? So it started as that. And then we just - didn't stop.” He darts a little glance at her. "Look, we had our differences in the past, but… I think we get each other now. He ain't so bad."

"Right," she murmurs.

"And now - I don't know where things are going with us, but they're definitely going somewhere. Guess I care about him."

"Guess," she manages, teasingly, and somehow it breaks the tension, makes him laugh a bit.

"Yeah," he says, and a tiny smile tugs at his lips. It's - sweet. She can see from the look on his face; he does care. He cares a lot. She's never really seen that look before-

Except, sometimes, when it's been just the two of them, in their quieter moments. When a comfortable silence falls and they're just enjoying each other's company.

She swallows hard.

"I'm glad," she says softly. It's not a lie. "Matt... needs someone to have his back. And it's good that you have someone too. You guys have both spent a long time alone."

"You're not..." he trails off; she lifts an eyebrow and he adds, a bit awkwardly, "I know he's your ex. Probably a bit weird."

"I mean, I can't say I saw it coming, but at the end of the day I just want both of you to be happy."

It comes out flat, like it's the sort of thing you're just supposed to say. She doesn't mean it to, because it's true. She cares about them both. She's hated seeing Matt like this the last few weeks. It's just-

Just-

Frank's giving her a speculative look. Now she's the one who can't meet his eyes.

"What about you?" he asks. "Are you happy?"

She opens her mouth, but the words choke up in her throat. She knows what the right answer is.
Of course I am. I have Foggy and you have Matt. We all have someone. Fisk is gone and we are okay and-

Everything should be fine, we should all have everything we want-

But every syllable suddenly seems to taste like ashes on her tongue. Her chest is so tight she can hardly breathe. She doesn't know why, doesn't know why, doesn't know-

Yes, she does.

"Frank..."

It comes out pleading and pained. She sees him bite at his lip.

"Whatever it is," he says, "You can tell me."

She squeezes her eyes shut. The car suddenly feels very small and suffocating. And she trusts Frank, she does, but what she thinks she's about to admit feels suddenly so vast, so capable of crushing them beneath its weight.

But if she doesn't say it now...

It feels like there'll never be a better time than this. And it's been building up for so long that it feels inevitable it must eventually come bursting out.

"I love Foggy," she blurs out, and it comes out high, nearly hysterical, but once she's started she can't stop. "I do. More than anything. But I want what I can't have."

"What's that?" Frank asks, and she swipes a hand across her eyes.

"You're gonna make me say it? You, Frank. Of course it's fucking you. And Matt. And... and I feel like shit because Foggy's enough, he is, he should be, and I hate myself for wanting more than that. But I can't help it. I guess I... I never quite got over Matt. And you and me..."

She trails off. She doesn't dare look at him. It's hard to breathe past the lump in her throat.

Frank takes a shaky breath. But after a moment his warm hand lands on her arm, and squeezes gently, and she feels a little of the weight lift.

"Karen..."

"It can't work," she says, abruptly. "Whatever you're thinking-"

"I don't know what I'm thinking," he says, and she bites her lip.

"I know. Just - this is the way things are, and it's... it's too fucking complicated, and I need to just let it go. It's no one's problem but mine."

"They're more complicated than you think," he says, cryptically. She casts him an odd look, but after a second he shakes himself. "Look, Nelson's a good guy-"

"I know," she says miserably, "And Matt and I have both hurt him a hell of a lot, so - we should just forget I said anything. I don't know if he'd understand if I tried to tell him. I'll get over it. I have to. I don't want to lose him or hurt him."

Frank looks torn, like there's something he wants to say but can't find the words. But before he has
"Sorry," he starts, and Karen starts to tell him it's fine, when her own ringtone trills from her purse. They exchange a startled glance and fish the devices out.

"It's Foggy," she says, and Frank holds his own up.

"Matt," he replies, puzzled.

A jolt of fear strikes her. They'd left the two of them back at the office, and her first thought is that something bad has happened. She scrambles to answer.

"Foggy?" she says. "Everything okay?"

"Karen." She can tell right away that something's very, very wrong. His voice is strangled and tight, like he's trying not to cry, and she can hear how fast he's breathing even across the line. "Oh my God. Oh my God."

"Are you okay?" she asks, urgently. "Where's Matt? Did the Hounds come after you-"

"Slow down, Red," Frank’s saying next to her, "I can barely hear what you’re sayin’.

"Matt left," Foggy says, and takes a deep, shaky breath. "Jesus, I barely know where to start."

"Are you okay?" she insists.

"Yeah," he manages, and the fist around her heart unclenches a little. "Well, physically, sure, emotionally it is very much a maybe. Look, I - we had a fight. I just got so pissed off with all the secrets and I told him I know about him and Castle-

"Jesus Christ, Matt," Frank says beside her, "You sure know how to pick your moments. Calm down, okay? It can’t be that bad…. look, slow down, that won’t happen."

"-and admittedly," Foggy barrels on, "I was kind of being a dick about it all, but I didn’t expect - he just suddenly told me he loves me, Karen."

Time stops.

"Wait, what?"

"Not like, I-love-you-like-a-brother love," Foggy babbles, "Like full on I’m-into-you love."

"Okay-"

"Like Jim-and-Pam-pining-after-you-for-like-five-years-love."

"Look-"

"Like I’m telling you, it’s not a fucking new thing, Karen! Since college! College!"

"Why the fuck would you leave?" Frank demands suddenly. "Wait, don’t answer that. Alright, just take a deep breath, no need to lose your entire shit about this. We’ll sort it, alright? Where are you now?"

"Foggy, just slow down," Karen says. Her heart is racing, things suddenly seem way too... too...
“I don’t know what to do with this.” His voice is pleading. “First Frank Castle and now... it’s too much. It’s too much all at once.”

“Take a deep breath. We’ll work it out, okay?”

“How are you so calm?” Foggy demands, and Karen’s silence tells a whole story. There’s an awkward pause. “Don’t tell me you saw this coming.”

“You didn’t?” she asks softly, and he starts laughing hysterically.

“Fuck. Fuck me. No, I fucking didn’t. Not in a million years did I expect he’d be into me. This is a mess.”

“Let’s talk about this in person,” she urges. “Where are you now?”

“The office, still. I am paralysed with shock, Karen. I’m sitting on the fucking floor.”

“Okay. We’ll come get you.”

“We?” A frozen pause, a dawning realisation. “Don’t tell me you’re still with fucking Castle.”

“Yeah,” she admits, “Matt just called him. Foggy, I told him we know. We gotta discuss this all together. All of us. We’re all tangled up in it.”

“I know,” Foggy admits, miserably. “Better to get it all out in the open.”

“I’ll see you in a sec, okay? I love you.”

“Love you too,” Foggy whispers.

Karen hangs up and pauses. Rubs her hands over her face, takes a deep, shaky breath.

It’s true, she isn’t surprised. She always suspected - borderline hoped - never knew for sure. She doesn’t know if this makes things easier or harder. She sure as hell doesn’t know what Frank thinks of all this. But it feels a bit like all the pieces are coming together. She just doesn’t know if this makes things easier or harder.

And what about me? she thinks, struck by a sudden bolt of doubt. Matt loves Foggy, but...

They’ve felt closer lately. But it’s hard to tell with Matt sometimes.

Frank lowers the phone. She jolts, wishing she’d listened in on the end of his conversation. They exchange a glance.

“Well,” Frank says.

“This is a mess,” Karen says, and runs a hand through her hair. “Where is he?”

“Fogwells. Nelson still at the office?”

She nods.

“Office is closer. We’ll head there first.” He sounds so matter of fact that it’s quite extraordinary, and
Karen’s eyes narrow.

“You knew!” she cries. “You knew he liked Foggy.”

“Yeah,” Frank says, “He told me early on. Can’t say I expected him to just full on blurt it out, but Murdock’s life choices are usually questionable at best.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” she mutters. “And you… you’re fine with that? Since the two of you are…”

“Like I said. Don’t know what we are. Besides,” he adds, “He ain’t the only one who’s interested in someone else.”

Karen bites her lip, looks away. Fights the blush rising on her cheeks. She puts the car in gear and starts them back towards the office.

“What do you think Nelson’s thinking?” Frank asks, after they’ve been driving in silence for a while.

“He had no idea,” Karen says.

“So he’s not… he never said anything about-”

“I don’t know how he feels about Matt,” Karen says. “I thought… I don’t think he’s ever realised it, if he does like him. I think to him Matt’s always just been - out of reach.”

“Yeah,” Frank murmurs, “He has a way about him.”

“But when he found out you two were together, he wasn’t happy. Anyway, we shouldn’t speculate. The only one who knows what he’s feeling is Foggy himself,” she says, and Frank nods. She forces herself to focus on the road, tries not to let her head go into overdrive.

The office is dim and quiet. She enters first, Frank limping behind her, still slow from his injuries.

Foggy is, indeed, sitting on the floor - legs sprawled out in front of him, leaning back against the desk. His tie is loosened, his hair hanging in his face. He looks up when she comes in, and her heart clenches as she sees how wrecked he looks; eyes red, lips wearily downturned.

“Karen,” he says, and she lowers herself down beside him and wraps an arm around his shoulders. He tucks his head in the crook of her neck and she presses a kiss to the top of his head.

“Hey,” she murmurs. “You okay?”

“Hanging in there,” he replies. “God. It’s just stressful, y’know?”

“What are you thinking?” she asks softly.

His eyes slip shut for a moment. But he’s clearly had the time it took them to get over here to mull it over. When he speaks his voice is measured.

“I can’t lie, Karen. I wasn’t… I didn’t think of Matt like that. Not - not since the very first time we met, when I realised how very firmly he was out of my league.”
“Foggy,” she chides.

“I know, I know. But honestly, it was pretty fleeting. Since then I’ve just seen him as my best friend. You know how much I care about him. But the last few days - yeah, things felt different, but I don’t... I can’t label it, Karen. It’s all too confusing.”

“You don’t need to label it,” she whispers. “What do you want?”

He opens his mouth, only to hesitate as Frank enters the room. Both of them look up, and an awkward silence falls.

“Hey,” Frank says, and Foggy swallows hard. Karen sees the conflicted emotions that play out over his face. She knows the two of them have been getting along better lately, but still - everything’s so damn complicated. She doesn’t know where to even begin with this.

“Hey,” Foggy replies. “So I figure Matt told you what happened.”

Frank’s face softens a little.

“He’s very upset,” he says. “Thinks he’s ruined everything. As usual.”

“He hasn’t,” Foggy says instantly. “No matter what happens - he hasn’t.”

“You sure?” Frank says - Foggy stiffens - “Unrequited feelings are a relationship killer if I ever heard one.”

For some reason that’s when it hits Karen. This could actually tear them apart.

She’s been hoping for the best case scenario, operating on the assumption that no matter what they’ll find a way to balance all this. But she remembers, suddenly, how they were back after the Hand and Castle, back when Foggy and Matt had that massive falling out and decided to call Nelson and Murdock quits.

She hadn’t realised until then how much the two of them were the heart and soul of everything.

She gets up and goes over to the window; Foggy glances after her in concern, but she just pauses, resting her forehead against the cool glass, closing her eyes for a moment.

"There's nothing in the world," Foggy replies fiercely after a moment, "That could make me abandon Matt. Nothing. Everyone in his life has left. I won't be one of them. No matter what he does, no matter what he feels."

Frank grunts.

"You think it's easy for him to be around you, though?" he points out.

"Yeah, well, he's fucking you, so clearly he's not that attached."

It comes out way, way too fucking bitter, and Karen looks around in time to see Foggy wince. He knows it and Frank knows it and it's way too telling. But Frank just smiles a bit.

"I think you and Karen needa have a chat about this," he says. "Privately."

Foggy looks over at her, and she glances away, feeling suddenly too vulnerable. She knows Frank’s right, knows she needs to be open with him about everything she’s feeling so he has a space to figure his stuff out as well. They’ve all been hiding too much for too long. But the thought is terrifying.
"C'mon," Frank says, jerking his head towards the door. "I'll get you lot home to talk then go find Matt. Everything will look better in the morning."

"Easy for you to say," Foggy mutters as he clambers to his feet.

"You think I'm not embroiled in all this too?" Frank points out. "Like you said, we're fucking."

A fleeting movement outside the window catches Karen’s eye. She turns and frowns at the sight of a black car pulling up at the end of the street. As she watches, a cluster of men climb out and begin to head around to the back lane behind the building. One, two, three... half a dozen of them, in leather jackets and overcoats.

The Hellhounds. Of fucking course they'd pick tonight of all nights.

Dread crawls down her spine. It takes her a shocked moment to process it - *not again, not again* - then she swallows hard and whirls around.

"Guys. They're back."

"Shit," Frank hisses, and rushes to the window. He stares out, grimly - Foggy moving up beside him to peer over his shoulder. Karen bites her lip.

She knew they couldn't put this off forever. She just thought they'd have more time. Now, she can't help her shiver of apprehension as she looks over Frank's bruised face - his swollen eye, the pools of black and blue over his skin, the way one arm is still wrapped protectively around his ribs.

They're not exactly in fighting shape.

The men are coming towards the building, moving with purpose. She sees Frank's shoulders heave.

"Got a gun?" he demands abruptly.

"Don't you?" Karen asks.

"Yeah. In the car. You can thank Murdock for that one."

"Mine's in my bag." She snatches it up from the floor and passes it to him; he's a better shot. Her heart's pounding, but she feels strangely detached and calm.

Foggy, on the other hand, is looking the exact opposite of detached and calm.

"Should we call Matt?" he asks, with barely contained hysteria.

Frank shakes his head.

"No time to sit around and wait for him. They're near the car," he says, heading for the door. "We gotta get around the back, go around. Our priority's to avoid a fight here." He takes two steps and pulls a face that Karen knows means that moving hurts like hell and he's trying very hard to hide it. "Shit."

Karen reaches out and squeezes Foggy's hand. Her heart's slamming, but everything around her seems very focused and clear. It's been a while since she was the one in the line of fire, but even now she's more scared for the two of them.

"Follow me," Frank barks, "Do everything I fucking tell you."
"Frank," Foggy says uncertainly, "You can barely stand."

"I've fought in worse condition than this," he says, and takes a shaky breath. "Look, there's a lot of 'em, but the lights are off up here. They ain't here to kill you, they probably want to trash this place, see what you got on 'em. If we can get out quick and quiet, we got a chance to slip away."

Karen nods. She keeps hold of Foggy's hand as they follow Frank down the corridor; dark and gloomy, lit only by the nauseating green glow of the exit sign and the elevator lights. A door slams somewhere on the floor below them; she feels Foggy jump and her own heart leaps.

"Fire stairs," Frank says, coming to a halt outside the door. "You know where this leads?"

"It exits down the back," Karen confirms.

"Great," Frank says, and yanks it open.

What happens next is decidedly not great. As he opens the door they all freeze as an alarm begins to scream; shrill, high blares that echo through the entire building. In any other situation, the look on Frank's face would be priceless.

"It's a fucking alarmed door," he says.

"We didn't know," Karen says, exchanging a startled glance with Foggy.

"Haven't y'all ever had a fucking fire drill?" Frank demands.

Karen shakes her head helplessly. Jesus. Jesus Christ. Of all the situations in which their lack of a fire drill could lead to their downfall, this was not the one she anticipated. It isn't even a fucking fire, it’s a meth gang after them. What the fuck even is this.

"Maybe it'll scare them off," Foggy suggests, "Like a burglar alarm."

"I appreciate your optimism, but there goes the element of fucking surprise," Frank says, and begins to limp aggressively down the stairs, one hand clutching his side, the other holding the gun at the ready. They rush after him.

The wailing of the alarm is getting to her, making the hair prickle down the back of her neck.

"Frank," she says, raising her voice to be heard, "Are you gonna kill them?"

Frank's face is unreadable. In the harsh fluorescent light of the stairwell the shadows under his eyes and in the wells of his cheeks are nearly black.

"I'm gonna do whatever the fuck I have to to protect you two," he says fiercely.

"You don't have a mask on," Karen points out.

He doesn't reply. She bites her lip, feeling sickly overwhelmed by just how much he's willing to give up to protect them.

They pelt down the stairs. Frank pauses at the door at the bottom. He holds out a hand, ushering them back; Karen clutches Foggy's wrist tightly. He opens the door and peers out, gun raised, then beckons.

They slip out around the back of the building. Her worries about the mask ease a little; it's dark as fuck out here; there are no streetlights, just a shadowy courtyard where their recycling bins are. They
creep through the shadows, Frank moving first, sticking to the sides of the yard. Sweat trickles down her spine.

They reach the gate leading out towards the road when Frank suddenly swipes a hand at them. Instinctively, Karen pulls back, dragging Foggy with her, her heart leaping up into her throat.

The two men must have seen them from the road. They lunge through the gate and set upon Frank; too close to fire but swinging at him with clubs. He gets one shot off but misses; one of the guys launches themselves at him and he's forced to move in close to get out of range of the end of the baseball bat the guy's swinging.

Karen winces as she watches Frank stumble, a glancing blow to his shoulder sending him off balance. He's moving sluggishly and she realises he's in much worse shape than she thought; he grabs the guy's arms and they grapple for a moment, but the man knees him in the stomach and he doubles over with a hoarse yell. The other guy's moving up behind him.

"Shit," Foggy hisses, and starts to surge forward-

But a second later Frank’s straightening up, and with a furious roar he smashes his fist up into the nose of the guy holding him. The man’s head snaps back; Frank drives a knee up into his groin and spins around.

The other guy swings the club at him; Frank’s arms go up, protecting his head. He stumbles under two blows, his arms and shoulders taking the worst of it before he dives in and grabs the guy’s arm, immobilising it while he brings the butt of the gun he’s still holding down on the back of his neck.

The man crumples. Frank kicks him once more, for good measure, and then turns and fires at the other guy, who’s starting to lever himself to his feet. Karen bites back a scream; the bullet passes through his left thigh and he falls back with a cry.

Frank pauses, breathing heavily, shoulders heaving. There’s blood dripping from his nose and his face is twisted into a feral snarl. He looks up at them - backed against the wall, eyes huge - and gestures with the gun towards the gate.

“Go, go!” he snaps, “The fuck are you waiting for? Get to the car!”

They rush out the gate. There’s the car, across the road, gleaming under the streetlamp. It suddenly seems a million miles away - the night sky around them a black void, the air a fragile silence waiting to be broken.

The coast seems clear. That’s why they start to run, adrenaline making them reckless.

The gunshot shatters the world around them like a dropped glass. It takes them a second to register; it comes from directly across them. From a dark silhouette that has suddenly popped up from behind their car; a woman, holding a pistol aimed right at them.

Foggy shoves Karen behind him.

Frank promptly shoves Foggy behind him.

The bullet arcs across the side of his body; spins him a full 180 degrees. He falls back. It’s his head hitting the ground which makes Karen’s heart leap into her throat.

“Frank!”
It comes out a raw scream that she barely even registers is hers. Foggy yells too - a startled, wordless noise that Karen’s never heard from him before.

The gun clatters from Frank’s hand. Karen moves instinctively, ducking forward and picking it up. She aims. She fires.

Blindly, without thinking about it - again, and again-

(Wesley flashes into her head. That startled look on his face, how the force of the bullets drove him back in his seat, how his white shirt blossomed with red-

Again, and again-

The woman ducks back. The windows of Karen’s car shatter. Then she staggers away, clutching her shoulder - turns, and runs into the shadows.

Karen’s heart is pounding so fast that she can barely feel it at this point. She feels empty and floaty. She turns, slowly, to find Foggy staring at her - hands clapped over his mouth, the look in his eyes unreadable. She swallows, mouth very dry.

“Come on,” she says.

“Karen…”

“We’ll talk about it later.” If she stops and thinks about this, she knows she will fall apart. “We need to get out of here.”

She turns and crouches by Frank. His side is bleeding sluggishly, and he’s reaching up and touching his head. His eyes are dazed and his gaze unfocused. She gently brushes his hands away and touches his head. Her fingers come away sticky with blood.

“Get him up,” she orders.

She shifts to wrap one of his arms around her shoulders; Foggy takes the other.

Between them they heave him upright; he lets out a choked groan and Karen bites her lip; his side, where it’s pressed to hers, is warm and wet with blood.

We got this, she thinks, we just need to get to the car. Just across the road.

“Come on,” she says.

They start to walk. Frank’s dragging his feet unsteadily; Foggy’s bearing most of his weight, arm around his waist and bodies pressed close, as Karen clutches the gun. Her hand is shaking now, just a little, and with every step her lungs seem to squeeze tighter until she can barely breathe.

Get to the car. Just get to the car.

“Karen,” Frank murmurs suddenly.

“Don’t talk,” she replies, “Just stay conscious. We’re nearly out, alright?”

“M’fine,” he replies. This is unconvincing for multiple reasons, chief of which is the fact that he still can’t stand upright on his own.

They pause briefly for Foggy to shift his weight a little; Karen glances down at Frank’s side. The
bleeding is steady but slow. She’s pretty sure the bullet just grazed him - it’s the head injury she’s more worried about.

“Why’d you fucking jump in front of the bullet?” Foggy says abruptly.

“They were gonna shoot you,” Frank replies. He managed to muster the energy to raise an eyebrow.

“Yeah, well they actually shot you!”

“Not the first time.”

“It wouldn’t have been for me either,” Foggy points out.

Karen’s about to tell them both to shut up, because they are really stressing her the fuck out here, but a moment later Frank sighs.

“I said I’d protect you.” His voice is so quiet Foggy has to lean in close; even Karen barely catches the words. “Wasn’t joking.”

“Idiot,” Foggy murmurs, and reaches up and swipes some of the blood from Frank’s face.

They reach the car. Karen fumbles for the car keys, gives up when she realises what a fucking disaster her handbag is, and reaches through the broken window to unlock the doors from inside. She’s just pulling the door open when she hears footsteps and yelling behind them.

She lets go of Frank and spins around. Beside her, Foggy yelps as he’s suddenly holding all the other man’s weight.

Two more guys are running towards them. Only one of them’s lifting a gun, and Karen doesn’t even think about it. She fires frantically in his direction. The air’s split once again, three shots before the gun in her hand clicks emptily-

But it’s enough, she’s got one guy in the leg and he crumples back. The other one sprints at them, swinging a tire iron.

“Karen!” Frank yells hoarsely next to her - he’s slumped on the ground against the car, trying to heave himself up and failing.

Karen ducks. The iron slams down onto the roof of the car right by her head and leaves a dent that would’ve shattered her skull.

Let’s be honest, she has no idea what the fuck she’s doing here; in that split second of panic when she realises she has no weapon, no martial arts training and is the only line of defence between some giant gang motherfucker and an injured Frank, she acts on sheer, blind panic and instinct. This involves going directly for the balls.

The guy yells and doubles over when she charges him, headbutting him in the stomach and slamming her palm into his groin. Then Foggy’s next to her - he yanks the guy away from the car, sending the tire iron clattering to the ground, and delivers a solid punch to the face. The guy reels sideways; Foggy moves in, hitting him again and sending him to the ground. He kicks him once more for good measure, then turns to Karen.

For a second they stare at each other - eyes wide and white, hair hanging in their faces. Then Foggy shakes himself.
“Go, go!” he cries, and Karen jolts into action.

Frank’s trying to struggle to his feet; she turns and gets him under the arms, hauling him up. They deposit him in the backseat; Foggy scrambles in after him and Karen takes the driver’s seat. Her hands are shaking so hard she can barely get the key - which thank fucking God has decided to materialise at the top of all the shit in her bag - into the ignition. She yanks at the handbrake and gets the car in gear before tearing off down the street.


It takes three streets before it hits her that they’re out - they’re not being followed, no one’s firing at them - and she realises she’s shaking all over. She looks up in the rear view mirror. Frank’s slumped against Foggy’s side, both of them staring out the window.

“Put your seatbelt on,” she says, automatically.

Foggy sits up a bit and turns to fuss over Frank, who still seems a bit dazed. For a second, in the ropes of light that pass across his face from passing streetlamps, Karen can see the concern in Foggy’s eyes, the worried furrow in his brows. He’s frowning, but his hands are very gentle. It’s the same look she’s seen when Matt comes into work with visible injuries.

“You okay?” he asks quietly, and Frank grunts.

“Yeah. Not bleeding out or anything.”

“You need to get to a hospital,” Karen says. “You hit your head really hard.”

“No hospitals.” Frank struggles to push himself upright; Foggy levers him back against the side of the car and lifts up his shirt, grimacing at the wound.

“That definitely needs stitches,” he says. “Matt used to go to Claire, but she’s not in town any more. What about Maggie?”

“Maggie?” Frank asks.

“Matt’s mum,” Karen says, and sees the face Frank pulls. “Look, we don’t have much other choice-”

“Here’s what we do,” Frank says. “You guys call the fucking police, because I’m sure half your neighbours already have. That O’Mahony guy you told me about, Karen - he’ll take care of you, right? Don’t tell them the specifics, just that you took a case that pissed off the Hounds and they came after you. If Murdock wants to do this inside the law, I think it’s time we let them in on it, at least a little bit. Then you guys drop me off at Murdock’s and go to the station.”

“You really think we should call the cops?” Foggy asks.

“You gotta sort this shit out. This isn’t Daredevil beating them up in a back alley, they showed up at your workplace.”

“I trust your plan,” Karen says quietly, and after a second Foggy bites his lip and nods.

“Matt’s gonna freak out when he hears what happened,” he murmurs, and Frank snorts a bit.

“Some punch you threw back there,” he says. There’s something almost fond in his voice that makes Karen do a double take.

Foggy laughs a bit hysterically.
“Not gonna lie, I think I broke my hand.”

“It was effective, though,” Frank says. “Next time go for a palm strike. Does just as much damage.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Foggy replies.

Karen can’t help but smile. She thinks, despite everything, things might be okay. Or at least, not awful. They’re all alive - Foggy pulling out his phone now to call the police, Frank getting out his.

“I’m gonna text Murdock to head back to his apartment,” he says, and looks up. His eyes, still a little unfocused, meets her in the rear view mirror. “Hey - tomorrow we’ll all talk.”

“Okay,” Karen whispers, and looks over at Foggy. She can’t quite read the look on his face, but he nods too, and even gives Frank a small smile.

“Things always look better in the morning, isn’t that what they say?”

“They can hardly get worse than tonight,” Frank says grimly.

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After everything that’s happened, there’s something a bit surreal about the bright lights of the police station, about the bustle and chatter, about being surrounded by efficiently moving bodies that aren’t trying to kill them.

This has happened enough times by now that it’s almost becoming routine. Karen sits there - a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, a steaming styrofoam cup of coffee beside her - and watches her hands shake, and feels a hysterical laugh bubbling up in her chest.

She barely remembers what they told the cops. She barely remembers what Brett said he’d do. She barely remembers what they’re waiting for - sitting here, side by side, in their fluorescent orange shock blankets, in a clinical little waiting area with plastic flowers on the coffee table.

Foggy reaches out, next to her, and takes her hand. His are cold and clammy and shaking just as hard. She looks across at him.

“You’d think after everything we’d get used to this part,” she says. Her voice is trembling, too. “Somehow every time it just - feels like a dream.”

“Karen.” The look on his face is very pained. “You shot two people tonight.”

“I know.” Now she feels the laugh coming on, but it seems so fucking inappropriate, and she swallows it down. “I know, I - it hasn’t hit me yet. I don’t think any of it has.”

But it will. Frank’s blood, sticky on her fingers. The sound the tire iron made as it hit the car. The shattered glass on leather seats.

She doesn’t know how Matt does this - night after night - the violence, the fists and guns and knives coming at him. Thinks, for a bitter second, no wonder he’s so fucked up.

Foggy’s hand squeezes hers. It’s warmer now. After a moment he lifts it to his lips and presses a kiss to her knuckles, and something loosens in her chest, like a knot being pulled free - some deep,
subconscious fear that he might hate her, now, after seeing her lift a gun and fire like it was nothing.

She should’ve known she couldn’t scare him away that easily.

"And here I thought tonight couldn’t get any worse,” he says, and she gives a little scoff.

“Talk about bad timing, right? But Foggy… we need to talk. About what happened before, about all of this.”

“I don’t even know where to start,” Foggy says, and when Karen opens her mouth he shakes his head. “It’s… if I’m honest, it’s not just Matt, Karen. It’s you and Frank, too. I know, alright? I’m not blind, I’m not stupid, I - I can see how you two are together. I can’t ignore that.”

She swallows, hard. But he hasn’t run away yet, and when she leans against his shoulder he doesn’t pull away.

“Okay,” she whispers. “Okay, I… I need to sort my shit out too, alright? So let me be honest, then, and… and I never wanted to admit it, to myself or anyone, but I’m jealous, okay? I’ve been jealous since the second I saw the two of them together. I’m so jealous it makes me sick.”

Foggy’s watching her, his eyes very intense.

“I wish I wasn’t. I wish things weren’t this complicated. But they are, it’s… it’s always been different, with the two of them. But the more I try to deny it, the worst it gets. I don’t know what to do, but I… I don’t think ignoring it is helping.”

“Thank you for being honest,” Foggy says finally. It scares her that she can’t tell what he’s thinking.

“This could ruin us,” she tells him, bluntly, and he looks away, fingers still tangled in hers.

“Leaving it could ruin us,” he points out.

He looks so tired. She bites her lip.

“I… I don’t want you to feel like you have to just go along with this. I don’t want you to feel like you have no choice, that what you want doesn’t matter. It’s not like that.”

“I don’t know what I want,” he admits, “Or what I feel. Everything’s just - spiralling out of control.”

“We’ll work it out,” she whispers. “But you and Matt need to talk.”

“I don’t know what to say to him,” Foggy says, and Karen leans her head against his shoulder. “It… it changes everything. I think I’m still processing it.”

“You’ll figure it out,” she whispers, and reaches up, cupping his cheek. “And you… you have my permission to do anything you need to to figure this out.”

Her heart’s pounding. She doesn’t quite know what she means by that, what she expects or is hoping for. But Foggy doesn’t question it, just nods, and runs a hand through her hair before kissing the top of her head. She rests her head on his chest, closes her eyes.

The doubt will overwhelm her if she lets it. She has no idea what tomorrow will bring. She’s exhausted just at the thought of all the questions the police are going to ask. It’s a long, long night ahead.
“So I’m not about to drop dead?” Frank grunts.

“Not yet,” Matt replies, grimly.

His hands come down from where they were pressed lightly to Frank’s temples, leaving a lingering warmth. Frank closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

It’s reassuring to know he’s not gonna die from, like, internal brain bleeding. That was a close fucking call, and for all his reassurances to Karen and Foggy, he’d been worried. But he trusts Matt to know what he’s doing, to detect even the most miniscule changes in heart-rate, blood pressure, metabolism.

Matt moves off to the bathroom, doubtless to get the first aid kid, and Frank makes himself comfortable on the couch. He’s still shaky with adrenaline, and more tired than he can say, and everything hurts. New bruises where he got hit today as well as all the old shit that still hasn’t healed. Torn stitches, swelling in more places than he can count, fractured ribs that ache when he breathes too deeply.

He feels like shit. More stressed than he’s been in a long time and upset, suddenly. Not like he hasn’t been hurt before, but-

It piles up.

It piles up and now it’s almost, almost too much.

But something about Matt’s apartment is weirdly settling.

The dark, the quiet, even the sporadic neon flashes of light from the billboard through the window - there’s something quiet, churchly about it, something that makes it easier to stay calm. Like he’s drifted off into the stage between waking and sleep. After the wailing of the fire alarm and the gunshots, it feels a bit unreal.

Matt heads back over to him. Puts the first aid kit on the table and kneels in front of Frank, reaching out to open his shirt gently. Frank bites back a wince at the first dab of an antiseptic wipe on his skin.

He wants to sleep without worrying about all the shit he’ll have to deal with upon waking up. He’s rattled and in a lot of pain and it’s not just that it hurts, it’s that it’s been constantly hurting for the last, like, week, and he wasn’t lying to Foggy before - you get sick of it. It wears on you.

Not only that, but he can’t forget the look on Matt’s face when he arrived at the door to find Frank waiting outside. There was a lot of blood, he could probably smell it a block away. Something about that hurt - how frantic he’d been, how worried. Even now, he’s far too quiet, head lowered as he dabs gently at the deep cut on Frank’s side.

Frank reaches down and grips Matt’s chin, tilting his head up a little.

“Quit that,” he says.
“What?” Matt asks, making a passing effort at eye contact and managing to get it sort of ninety percent right.

“Beating yourself up for not being there,” Frank says, and knows he’s spot on at the face Matt pulls. “It’s not your fault.”

“I was meant to be there with Foggy,” Matt says, voice tight. “I was the one who ran away. If you guys hadn’t gone to pick him up, he would’ve been there alone when the Hellhounds came, and it would have been my fault.”

“Don’t start with what ifs,” Frank grunts, “They don’t get you anywhere useful.”

Matt makes a disgruntled sound.

“Tonight was a shitshow from beginning to end,” he mutters darkly.

“You can say that again,” Frank says. In all the chaos he nearly forgot that right before the ‘guys with guns after us’ crisis they were having the ‘Matt and Foggy’ crisis. At the time it’d seemed like the peak of all possible problems.

Matt continues cleaning his wound, then stitching him up with neat, methodical motions. Here they are again. Frank lets his eyes slip shut, tries not to focus on the pain of needle moving through flesh.

Suddenly, he’s very glad Matt can’t actually see him - not really. He feels wrecked and weak. He doesn’t want to think about how covered in bruises he is, how ugly his face must look spattered dark with scabs and dried blood. There’s something too vulnerable about it that he hates.

And the thing is-

Matt makes him feel safe, too. Just not having to sew himself up, just having someone else there, someone who gets it - a warm surge of affection rises in his chest. He doesn’t want to lose this, to lose him. Tonight was so bad it feels like it came close to breaking him. He can tell himself that just making it out alive is enough, but part of him still feels like he’s been beaten into the dust and doesn’t have the energy to get up.

“You okay?” Matt asks quietly.

“Not really,” Frank says after a second. It’s a relief to admit it. To feel like he can. Matt smooths a bandage over Frank’s side and pauses, resting his head against Frank’s leg; a warm, steadying weight. Frank lets his hand drop to the other man’s hair, fingers carding through the thick strands.

“It was bad tonight,” he admits. “I’m sick of being injured. Sick of being hit while I’m down, again and again and again. I felt useless. Nothing like lying there feeling as fucking helpless as I was when my family-”

He breaks off. Thinks of Karen, that iron coming towards her. Thinks of the bullet coming at Foggy. Feels sick.

His heart’s beating faster. Matt squeezes his knee and Frank runs a hand through his hair.

He wants to - needs to - protect them, all three of them. He has far too much to lose, and it’s terrifying to realise how close he’s gotten without realising it. When it was just Karen, it was one thing. He didn’t think anyone else could ever be that important to him. Guess he was wrong.

“You need to rest,” Matt says. “Heal.”
“You’re one to talk,” Frank points out, and heaves a sigh. “But yeah, you’re right. If I can say one thing it’s that Nelson’s tougher than he looks. Both of ’em held their own.”

“They shouldn’t have to.”

“Yeah, well. Not got a choice any more. But - I was scared.” He doesn’t mean to admit it, but when it slips out it’s like a weight off his shoulders. “Scared I was gonna watch them die in front of me. Scared I wouldn’t be able to stop it happening…”

He trails off, voice breaking.

Matt rises and sits on the couch next to him. Wraps an arm around him and presses a kiss to the bare skin of his shoulder. Frank curls into him, lets himself be held. The shared understanding wraps around them like a blanket; of everyone, Matt knows this fear. It’s nice just not to be alone, to let himself feel like he doesn’t have to hold everything together, that someone else can help him keep the pieces in place.

“I didn’t kill anyone tonight,” he muses after a moment. “Wasn’t as hard as I thought. Karen, though - tonight’s gonna mess her up.”

Matt stiffens. When he speaks his voice is thick and as dead-exhausted as Frank feels.

“Everything keeps getting worse,” he chokes out. “I thought it’d end with Fisk, but it hasn’t. It feels like it’s never going to. I don’t… I don’t know how long we can keep going.”

Frank doesn’t know how to reassure him. There are a thousand trite things he could say, but somehow he knows, tonight of all nights, none of them will get through. Instead he tangles his fingers in Matt’s and hopes even that small contact can be some reassurance.

After a while they get up. Matt checks his wounds again, rubs ointment on bruises, bandages cuts, then goes to get Frank a drink. Frank pulls on a clean shirt; it smells like Matt’s soap, is comforting in a way he hasn’t felt in a long time.

Matt’s standing in the kitchen, idly stirring a mug of coffee; Frank finds himself limping over to him, wrapping his arms around his waist and resting his head on the other man’s shoulder.

It’s too intimate, maybe. But it’s close to midnight, now, and the shadow and silence of the apartment feel safe, and he thinks he needs this. Needs Matt to hold him close, to feel like maybe if the two of them can only hang onto each other, neither of them will sink away into the dark.

Matt turns in his arms and leans in to kiss him. His hands are light on Frank’s shoulders, his lip is still swollen from two nights ago. Every bruise throbs but Frank can ignore it, just for a moment - can lose himself in Matt’s warmth in his arms, in the comfort of being held, in the rise and fall of the other man’s ribs as he breathes where Frank’s hands are settled on his sides.

When they pull apart, he pauses, studying Matt’s face - in the sharp shadows and neon glow of the billboard outside the window, he looks very tired, and very sad. Frank reaches up and cups his cheek.

“What is it?” he prompts.

Matt swallows, hard. He starts to shake his head, but Frank grips his arms, doesn’t let him turn away. After a moment he takes a shaky breath.
“Seems stupid when we have bigger problems,” he begins, but Frank shakes his head.

“Don’t start with that shit, what is it? You’ve had a bad night. Doesn’t matter that you weren’t in the firefight. The rest of it was still shit.”

“I am so,” Matt admits, “So fucking sick of being scared that I’m going to lose everything. It’s like I’m dragging an anvil around waiting for it to drop and crush everything. It’s never gonna end.”

“It will,” Frank says, but Matt shakes his head, and the resigned despair on his face is like a stab to the chest. Frank reaches up, cups his cheek. “Red, listen to me. It will.”

“I don’t think so,” Matt says, “It - it feels so God damn hopeless, and I can’t - this thing with Foggy was just the icing on the cake. I’ve ruined everything.”

“How do you know that?” Frank demands, “You ain’t even talked to him yet. Not properly.”

“He doesn’t feel the same way,” Matt says, miserably, “So yeah, I’ve ruined everything.”

“You barely gave him a chance to think about it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Matt snaps, “He’s had about eight years to mull over it. I… I was stupid, I thought… there was a little while, after we brought down Fisk, that I thought maybe… but I was an idiot to hope. He started dating Karen soon after, anyway.”

“You dated Karen,” Frank points out.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Matt asks, but Frank can’t put it into words, not yet, the way the pieces are starting to fit together in his mind. After a moment Matt’s shoulders slump. “I don’t know how this ends, but I… I was the one who fucked it up.”

“This might be hard for you to believe,” Frank says, “But you trust my judgement, right?”

”Generally,” Matt replies, a bit suspiciously.

“Then believe me when I say this: not everything in the world is your fucking fault, Murdock. You got it? Stop running away. You’re not the problem. You’re not gonna ruin things just by looking at ‘em.”

Matt opens his mouth to argue; Frank reaches up and presses a finger to his lips.

“Shut up for a second, I don’t wanna hear it. Look, I… I beat myself up everyday about the way things went down with my family. I still miss them, more than I can say. That shit, it doesn’t go away, won’t ever. But I… I’m not unloveable ‘cause of it. Neither are you. Took a hell of a lot of therapy to get to that point, but - you can move forward, Murdock. If someone as fucked up as me can do it, so can you. And I promise - just being yourself, just having feelings, it’s not gonna ruin everything with Nelson, with any of us. It hasn’t. I promise.”

“You can’t promise that,” Matt says quietly.

“I can,” Frank insists. “You needa trust that you can’t run us off that easily. Some of us are in it for the long haul. Hey,” he says, when Matt starts to twist away, “Hey. You trust me?”

Matt hesitates - then nods, and it breaks something a little in Frank’s chest, something that’s been fragile and taut all night, that needs at least one thing to feel okay. He pulls Matt close, their cheeks
pressed together.

He needs to sit down in a minute. Everything hurts and he can tell tonight’s gonna be a bad one and he needs a fuckload of painkillers, he needs the world to stop spinning so damn fast. But for now - they breathe, just breathe, they’re alive for now, that’s enough.

Frank must sleep for about twelve hours straight.

Matt’s bed is obscenely comfortable, and he’s so exhausted that he just passes out. He’s surprised that he doesn’t have bad dreams - not until the very end, right when he’s on the brink of waking up. Even then, they’re not the same sort of terrors he used to get, watching his family turn to blood and bone in front of him again and again and again. They’re just filled with a vague, shadowy unease; he’s hurrying Foggy of all people through dark streets, knowing someone’s after them, trying to get him indoors before they can be found.

He wakes up feeling unsettled, groggy, and so fucking sore he can barely move. He makes a variety of interesting and animalistic noises as he heaves himself out of bed, and Matt appears in the doorway.

“Are you okay?” he asks, and Frank glances up at him. He doesn’t look like he got much sleep last night; dishevelled and unshaven with dark bags under his eyes - but he smiles a bit when Frank’s gaze lands on him. “You sound like you’re giving birth in here.”

“Fucking hell, Murdock,” Frank snaps, and reaches out. “Give me a damn hand.”

Matt wraps an arm around him and heaves him up.

“I’ll make coffee,” he offers, as he manoeuvres Frank towards the bathroom. Frank leans over and kisses his cheek, or tries to; it lands more on his neck and Matt huffs out something like a laugh.

Maybe Foggy was onto something. Things do feel better in the morning - all the bad stuff feels distant. It won’t forever, but for now, for a few moments, it’s nice to pretend maybe things aren’t that bad.

It’s a bit harder to pretend once he actually sees himself in the mirror.

He knows how bad he looked after all that scaffolding fell on him the other day; now he’s even worse. A mix of new and old bruises has turned him an unattractive, mottled mixture of yellow and purple, all over his face and arms. When he lifts his shirt to check the damage, the rows of stitches are reminiscent of Frankenstein’s monster.

At least Matt can’t see it, he thinks. But he can imagine it, probably, with everything his senses must be picking up.

It hurts even to lift his arms. Brushing his teeth is a fun experience, but Frank powers through it, then drags himself, sloth-slow, out to the living room, where he collapses on the couch and hopes to God that he doesn’t have to move for the rest of the day. Touch wood.

Matt brings him a mug and a plate of toast.
“What time is it?” Frank asks.

“Just past noon,” Matt says. “Karen and Foggy were at the police station half the night, I think they only just got up too. Karen texted me.”

There’s a funny note in his voice. Frank feels a flash of pity. Of course this is gonna be awkward as hell for him until they talk through all this.

“She say anything else?”

“Just that they’re fine, that the police are looking into the Hell Hounds and that we should all take the day off work.” He shifts, a bit uncomfortably, then adds, “She asked if I’m okay.”

Frank raises an eyebrow and Matt frowns.

“Don’t. I’m fine, but. I think Foggy’s coming around to talk soon.”

*Fine* is apparently Matt-speak for *fucking terrified*. Frank reaches out - a Herculean effort giving that it involves leaning thirty centimetres forward - and squeezes his arm.

“Good,” he says firmly, “You two need to hash this out. Don’t be scared, he’s your best friend.”

“That’s what makes it scary,” Matt mutters, “There’s too much to lose.”

“You’re not gonna lose anything. You’re just gonna talk and figure this out. No matter how things go down, we’ll all still be here.”

He doesn’t like the look on Matt’s face. But after a minute Matt nods, and shakes him off, and jerks a head at the stairs.

“Gonna go have a listen on the roof. Make sure nothing’s going down we should know about.”

It’s actually a half decent excuse for getting out of there, so Frank allows it.

“Sure,” he says, and watches Matt flee the room like his arse is on fire. Shaking his head, he turns back to his breakfast.

He doesn’t quite know what to expect from today. Last night feels like a fever dream. He locates his phone on the coffee table and checks his messages.

Two from Foggy - *Finished at the station; headed home.* Then another, *home safe.*

Karen’s sent three.

*Hey, how are you feeling? Matt said you’re okay?*

*Staying home today. Police are looking into the area. No bodies found there last night; guess the Hounds got their own out of there.*

*Foggy’s on his way over.*

He feel a flash of affection, glad that she’s alright and checking on them. Then concern, because he knows today will be hard for her too.

He types a quick reply. *I’m alright. Can you go get my dog and bring him over here?*
He wants to see her. They need to talk. Better if they’re all here, but poor Pi’s been cooped up since yesterday.

It only takes her a second to reply.

*Of course. See you soon.*

He smiles, but it fades after a second. The four of them, all in one place - he doesn’t know where things are going to go, and he’s not usually one to get nervous, but something’s different about the other three, especially when they’re all in one spot. Too much history. But he’s not one to run away from things. They can’t avoid this. Gotta rip the bandaid off.

There’s a rap at the door..

“Hey,” Nelson’s voice yells out.

“Come in,” Frank calls back.

Foggy must have his own key. He lets himself in, hesitantly, like he’s dragging his feet. He looks as scared as Matt did this morning, but the startled deer look fades when he realises it’s just Frank sitting on the couch - then quickly morphs into horrified concern.

“Jesus, Frank,” he says. “You looked bad the other day, but…”

“Thanks,” Frank replies, flatly. “Glad you’re here to tell me I won’t be winning any beauty pageants since Murdock can’t provide that valuable information.”

“No, I’m serious. Jesus. Jesus Christ. Please tell me that looks worse than it feels.”

Frank just shrugs.

Foggy shuffles towards him. His hand rises like he wants to reach out and touch Frank, but he doesn’t. His eyes flick up and down him, taking in every bruise, every scrape. Frank frowns, puzzled - Foggy looks genuinely pained. To be fair, he really, *really* looks like shit.

“They’ll fade,” he offers after a moment of slightly awkward silence. “Just a lot of bad bruises. Head feels alright today, at least.”

Foggy’s lips twist. He perches on the end of the couch, watching Frank out of the corner of his eye, a funny look on his face.

“You saved my life last night,” he says, abruptly.

Oh, God.

“Don’t get sentimental about it,” Frank grunts.

“I’m not, just - it means something. It *does*,” he insists, defensively, “I don’t know, maybe you and Matt just do this all the time, but… you jumped in front of a fucking bullet for me, Frank.”

“What did you expect me to do? Just let them shoot you?”

Foggy shrugs. He bites his lip, looking away. The silence is a bit awkward, but the usual simmering, annoyed tension between them isn’t there. Foggy just looks very tired.
“Didn’t do such a bad job yourself protecting me,” Frank says finally.

Foggy snorts.

“Trust me, it was sheer blind panic and adrenaline. Very little strategic thought was involved.”

“Karen okay?” It comes out too soft, too tender, but Foggy doesn’t seem to mind.

“We both didn’t sleep well last night,” he admits. “We haven’t had much of a chance to debrief. Guess we were waiting for you guys. I… I think it helps that there weren’t any bodies. We don’t know if anyone actually died. But it’ll bring stuff back for her.” He looks away, hands twisting together in his lap, and adds softly, “I don’t think I’d have the balls to shoot someone.”

“Ain’t about balls,” Frank replies. And then, inanely, “It’s good. That no one died.”

God, it comes out so clumsily - Foggy glances over at him, but he must be able to tell Frank means it. He smiles a bit.

Frank doesn’t know why he suddenly feels so unsure of himself. Usually, despite how many doubts are whirling in his head, he’d stay silent. It’s not like this is Karen, or even Matt - not like he usually voluntarily opens up to people. But things feel different suddenly, after last night. Now that it’s just the two of them.

“I wasn’t that useful last night,” he says.

Foggy nearly chokes on his own spit.

"Sorry," he says, “Did you forget the part we talked about two seconds ago where you literally jumped in front of a bullet for me?"

“After that.”

“Yeah, because you got shot.” His voice is rising, “And hit your fucking head, like - it’s a miracle you weren’t unconscious! Are you seriously trying to apologise for not being able to get up and bodily defend the two of us when you were so injured but you could barely move? I’m sorry, but that’s just not happening. I won’t accept it.”

He says it so easily, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. Frank finds himself swept up in the other man’s certainty.

“Matt’s rubbing off on you,” he continues, passionately - “Look, we’ve had our differences, but I’m fucking glad you were there. You got us out. You led us to safety. You took care of two of those guys. If it’d just been me and Karen, I - I don’t know what I’d’ve done.”

Frank looks down. He doesn’t quite know what to do with this.

“Thank you,” Foggy says then, with such sincerity that it makes Frank feel all strange, suddenly, all warm and way too aware of his heart, his breathing. “It’s good you’re here. You’re getting shit done. We’d all be floundering without you. You’re, like, a very hardcore ex-military mother duck. I mean that as a compliment.”

Frank snorts. He feels very fond of Foggy suddenly - he can see why Matt likes him. He makes everything seem so easy, so clear - like when he’s around it’s somehow easier to breathe. He shoots the other man a small smile, and Foggy smiles back.
“Where’s Matt?” he asks then.

“Up on the roof,” Frank says, jerking his chin towards the door. “He can probably hear us.”

Foggy’s smile fades. He gnaws at his lip, staring up at the door to the roof with trepidation.

“Alright?” Frank asks.

Foggy shakes his head.

“I don’t know what I’m doing any more than he does,” he murmurs. “I - don’t know how to deal with this. Don’t know what will happen when we talk. I’ve been… I spent all night trying to figure out my thoughts and not getting anywhere. Things are… complicated.”

*Complicated, Frank can’t help thinking, means there’s something to think about. It’s not a straight up no.*

“Your friendship is too strong for something like this to ruin,” he offers.

“There are worse secrets he could’ve told me,” Foggy agrees, “That isn’t saying much, though.”

Frank shrugs. He sits up, managing to keep a straight face despite the havoc it wreaks on his ribs, and claps Foggy on the shoulder.

“I trust you to figure this out,” he declares.

“Wish Matt trusted me,” Foggy mutters.

“He does.”

“He didn’t tell me about the two of you.”

“It’s not that he doesn’t trust you,” Frank replies. “He doesn’t trust himself not to ruin everything. So he hides things so people won’t get caught in the fallout. He *trusts you,*” he repeats, and Foggy manages a little smile.

He gets up off to the couch and heads for the stairs. Pauses, head lowered, and takes a deep breath. Then looks up.

“Matt,” he calls.

It takes a minute, then the door opens and Matt appears. He looks strangely vulnerable - arms wrapped around himself, hair mussed from the wind outside. Watching the two of them from the couch, Frank suddenly feels like he’s observing something too private.

“Hey,” he says quietly.

“Hey,” Foggy replies. They can barely look at each other; Matt’s hiding behind his glasses again. “I’m just gonna say it straight up, we gotta talk. C’mon.”

“Where are we going?” Matt asks, and looks over at Frank. “You gonna be okay here?”

“Karen’s bringing Pi around,” Frank says, and snorts. “I’ll be fine. I’m not a fucking old man, I won’t fall over and not be able to get up!”
Matt turns back to Foggy, who’s got his hands shoved in his pockets now like a nervous schoolboy.

“Fogwells,” Foggy says.


“You said ages ago you’d teach me to box.”

Matt looks like he really has no clue what to do with this. Foggy takes a deep breath, and determinedly heads for the door. Frank doesn’t need super senses to tell he’s shitting himself, too - that every word uttered is like navigating a minefield.

Matt comes down the stairs slowly. He pauses and looks over at Frank like he can give him answers.

“Good luck,” is all Frank offers, and reaches out to squeeze his hand.

He watches them leave, thoughtful. Foggy’s gotta have a plan here, he just has no clue what it is. But he wasn’t full of shit before. He does trust them to figure this out. He has to.
Foggy’s nervous.

Maybe that should be some sort of consolation. Both in the same boat, or something like that. But it isn’t - Matt has long transcended beyond nervous. He has reached a higher plane that’s somewhere between “emotional breakdown” and “low key having an anxiety attack.” He couldn’t sleep last night, he felt so sick.

He kept replaying it over and over in his head - the way Foggy froze. How his heart skipped a beat in shock. The tension that’s materialised in his shoulders, the tremor in his voice.

It hadn’t been relief, or excitement, or anything positive, really. It’d been sheer, awkward shock - he’d had no idea, no fucking idea. Matt doesn’t know if that’s better or worse. What he does know is it’s uncertain, and he does not deal with uncertainty well.

The car smells like Karen’s perfume; she sat here, in the last few days. Matt closes his eyes and breathes and tries to imagine she’s here next to him, hand on his shoulder. It’s better when she’s here. She balances them out somehow.

But it’s just the two of them, and Foggy turned on the radio so he clearly doesn’t want to talk yet, and Matt closes his eyes and tries very, very hard not to flip out, taking slow breaths like he does when he’s meditating, willing his heart to calm down.

They’re halfway there when Foggy clears his throat.

“Hey - Frank looked really bad back there. Is he okay?”

“He’ll heal,” Matt replies. This is fine, this is a safe topic of conversation. “But he needs to rest. We can’t keep going on like this.”

“He tell you we told the cops?”

“Yeah. I think it was a good idea.” He shifts in his seat. “I... I trust Brett. I’ll get in touch with him as Daredevil. I have a plan, just needa get all the details worked out. Then I’ll fill you guys in.”

“Well, I’m glad someone has a plan that isn’t just run around screaming.”

“Frank told me you were fine last night. Held your own.”

“He hit his head. I think he was concussed. That’s the only reason it might’ve been impressive. Really there was a lot of wild flailing involved,” Foggy admits.

“That’s why we’re here then,” Matt murmurs. He can tell they’re nearing the gym, from the sounds outside the car.


Matt bites his lip. He still doesn’t quite know what to expect from today, and it’s got him feeling off-balance. When they get out of the car, for a second he almost feels dizzy.

*Just breathe. Just breathe. It’s just Foggy.*
But a darker voice, at the back of his head - *you’re gonna say the wrong thing. You’re gonna fuck this up like you always do and drive him away. You can’t fucking help it.*

He doesn’t know what Foggy wants from him here. He trudges after him into the gym - quiet and empty, no classes this time of day - and they set their bags down.

“Your turf,” Foggy comments.

Was this meant to put him at ease? The familiar smell of sweat, leather, and polished hardwood are reassuring, but not very. Tied to this place are other weird memories. He remembers sitting here, wrapping his hands, and hearing his father’s voice so vividly real he wasn’t sure if he was dreaming or hallucinating, half afraid he was in the middle of a mental breakdown. He remembers wondering how far he would go to stop Fisk. There are good memories, here, but there are nightmares too.

“What do you want to do?” he asks carefully.

“Talk and work out,” Foggy says. “Frank taught me to throw a punch but I’m pretty sure I still fucking up my hand.”

He holds it out. The knuckles are split and scabby, a spreading bruise across the back of his hand. Matt hesitates, then takes it. He feels Foggy’s slight tremble. The heat rising to his face. The blood pumping faster through his veins.

“It’s not broken, just bruised,” he says, and drops it like a hot coal. “We’ll wear gloves for now. I’ll help you wrap.”

“Okay,” Foggy says. They get changed in silence. Foggy’s not looking at him, but his heart is quick and nervous. He keeps swallowing like he’s waiting to say something.

*I think I’m going to pass out,* Matt thinks, and maybe it’s ridiculous and overdramatic, but legit. This is killing him here.

He wraps his hands slowly, Foggy looking over his shoulder and copying his motions carefully. Matt’s nearly brittle with tension, too aware of every flex of Foggy’s fingers, of the heat of his breath in the air when he exhales, of how close he’s standing. There’s something torturous about all of this. He doesn’t think it’s intentional, doesn’t think Foggy realises just how much this means-

Because he and Elektra used to spar. He still remembers the way she’d wrap her hands in quick, tight motions, and her lithe, nimble movements around the ring. The taste of her blood in his mouth. And he and Frank, too - hurling fists at one another in this very room.

*Is this some sort of punishment?* he thinks, fleetingly, then shakes himself. *The world isn’t setting out to be your personal purgatory. Don’t be arrogant.*

“Ready?” he asks.

Foggy nods. He grabs his gloves and Matt goes to get focus pads, then shakes the tension from his shoulders, or tries to - shifts into a fighting stance and bounces on the balls of his feet, like if he can only move fast enough he can outrun every doubt and insecurity that seems to be breathing down his neck.

“Before we start,” Foggy says, as he returns, “I need you to promise to be honest today.”

Matt hesitates. It’s not that he’s hurt, not quite, or even that he’s suspicious. But you lie for long enough, even by omission, and it becomes habit. It feels a bit like giving up his glasses; leaves him
“Matt.” There’s something soft and chiding in Foggy’s voice. “I just need us to be on the same page here.”

“Okay,” Matt replies quietly. He senses Foggy’s small smile.

“Anything you want to ask me, I promise I’ll be honest too.”

“Okay,” Matt repeats.

They start shadowboxing. There’s a mirror on the wall opposite them, Matt knows. When they’re facing it, it’s impossible for him to tell what Foggy might be looking at, his own reflection or Matt’s. It leaves him feeling like he’s treading water so deep he can’t even sense the bottom.

It’s kinda awkward without music. He can just hear the two of them huffing out little hissing breaths. Every footstep echoes around the space, rivets off wood and glass.

He thinks of his father, thinks of standing behind him as a boy imitating every step, every strike. He doesn’t remember all that much from when he could see, but that one stuck in his head; his Dad’s broad shoulders, the sweat sticking his shirt to the small of his back. A warm hand on his wrist. “Keep your jab light.”

Thinks of Stick, how he’d pace around Matt, swing at him now and then to keep him light on his feet. Misses both of them, fucked up as it is, with a dull ache.

“Why boxing?” he blurts out.

Foggy’s head turns towards him. He throws another, slightly clumsy, uppercut.

“Firstly, I legitimately want to learn self defence,” he says. “Last night scared me. I mean, you’d think with Frank there we’d have nothing to worry about, right? But we did. No ones invincible. I don’t just need to be able to protect myself, I gotta be able to take care of you guys too. Worst case scenario.”

Jab, cross, left hook, uppercut. Matt wonders who Foggy’s picturing as he throws them. He still imagines Fisk, sometimes, as he swings an elbow around. It’s probably not healthy.

“Secondly, I’m pissed off,” Foggy continues. He must catch Matt’s flinch because he adds, hurriedly, “Not at you! Just - at all of this. At the general disaster that is this Hell Hounds situation. At last night, at myself for feeling useless, at life for throwing so much crap at us. The stress levels are through the roof, man. This sort of thing makes you feel better, right?”

“Kind of,” Matt says. Thing is, he knows he’s got anger issues. He knows it’s not normal to want to go around beating people up every night. It’s not exactly the most stable outlet. “It makes me feel like I’m at least doing something, but - other things make me feel settled.”

*Like hanging out with you,* he doesn’t add. *Like drinking with Karen. Like Frank and his dog and his coffee and his shitty instant noodles.* That stuff grounds you.

“I’ll settle for this,” Foggy says, and Matt nods. He throws one last kick and then waves Foggy into the ring.

At least they’re talking. A little of his fears have settled; Foggy legitimately doesn’t seem angry with him.
“Throw a punch,” he says, lifting one focus pad.

He feels the way Foggy’s whole body tightens in concentration. His punch is pretty solid, actually, all things considered.

“Not bad.”

“Really? Frank seemed to think I was flailing around like one of those wacky inflatable tube people outside car dealerships. I’m sure they have a technical name but I don’t know what it is.”

“Frank broke his hand after punching a wall with the wrong knuckles, so he is not one to talk.” He steps forward. Foggy’s breathing stays easy, stays calm. “Tuck your chin and rotate your wrist more.”

“Like this?”

“Not quite.” He swallows, hard, takes Foggy’s wrist and pulls it to the right angle. “The twist will get more power behind it.”

“Okay.”

They’re too close. Foggy’s eyes are on him and his face must be giving too much away - he knows, knows he is breathing way too fast. He turns away.

“Okay. Again.”

They do padwork for a little bit, moving slowly around the ring, throwing different combinations. Foggy seems focused, but Matt can tell he’s just working up the nerve to start the conversation. He knows a minute before it happens that it’s time; Foggy sucks in a little breath, wets his lips.

“So you and Frank.” Deliberately casual, as he throws another cross. “How’d it start?”

Matt’s stomach twists. But. Honest, he thinks. He wants to bridge the rift between them. That has to start somewhere.

“That night I rang you up? Said I was gonna ask him to come with me?”

“I remember. Wait, you invited him cause you like him?”

“No! Jesus.” He swipes at Foggy, who parries it with a laugh. “ Seriously, though. I invited him ‘cause... ‘cause I was having such a shit day. I felt really anxious and... I... I know I seem like I always want to work alone, but - not this time.”

Foggy nods. He’s frowning. Matt holds the pads for an elbow; it lands heavy but sloppy, too much emotion behind it.

“We barely got out of there alive. I’d hit my head; I was super out of it. But he got me out of there. We went back to his and we were super worked up and it just- happened. It’s hard to explain but after a fight-“


“Not just that. We both needed someone. And after that it just escalated. At first it was just a distraction. He knew I liked you, and he...”

“He liked Karen.” Foggy doesn’t sound angry, or even resigned. He says it like a simple fact.
“Then it went beyond that. I like him for him.”

Foggy nods. Matt bites his lip, pauses to go and grab a drink. He doesn’t know if this is going well or not. He’s so nervous himself that it’s hard to get a proper read on what Foggy’s feeling.

They touch gloves. Start again. Foggy’s eyes are trained square on Matt’s face; he keeps his down as they move around the ring.

“What do you like about him?” Foggy says almost instantly.

_Why does he want to know? _But he promised honesty, so he swallows and says, “I... he’s decisive. He’s more caring than you’d think. He isn’t afraid to call me out - I like that. I... around him everything just feels steadier. I know I can trust him to have my back. I like how he doesn’t take shit from anyone, and that he’s funny, and that he’s willing to do so much for the people he cares about.”

It comes out a little too sincere. It isn’t until he says the words out loud that he realises just how much he means them, and it isn’t until he hears it in his own voice that he makes a realisation - quite suddenly, but with a certain inevitability to it: _I think I love Frank_.

Foggy’s gone still.

Matt swallows, mouth suddenly very dry. He... he’s getting the vibe he’s almost _upset_ his friend, but he doesn’t know why. He did ask, after all. But after a second he realises it’s not upset, not quite. It’s something else - something strained and uncertain, something that’s making Foggy’s heart beat too fast, that makes his gaze feel like two lasers burning into the side of Matt’s face.

“Okay,” Foggy says, and takes a deep breath. “Okay.”

“You asked.” It comes out a bit too defensively.

“I’m not... it’s... I’m glad you have someone, Matt. Truly, I am. Frank’s a good guy.” Not lying. “But you get why I was so upset the other night, right? Jesus, why didn’t you just _tell me_? Wouldn’t you be hurt if I had a secret boyfriend and didn’t tell you all about it?”

This is the part Matt was dreading. He holds for a knee and the force of Foggy’s blow drives him back a step.

It’s hard to be open.

He’s kept his walls up for so long, even around his friends. It’s been a struggle to rebuild them after everything. Letting someone in is terrifying. But he takes a shaky breath.

“He’s not my boyfriend, not really, I... You’re right, Foggy, and I’m sorry, and I should know better by now. I was a coward. I thought you’d be upset because you don’t like Frank and I... I hate when we fight, I didn’t want to deal with it. But it’s not just that. I didn’t know what I was doing with him. I was sure I was gonna fuck things up like I always do and I - it would hurt less if I hadn’t gone around making it sound official by telling people. Less tethers to break when he inevitably leaves.”

“Matt...” Foggy’s voice is soft and pained.

“I know, I know. I’m working on it. But that was my thinking at the time.”

Foggy nods. There’s a pause that’s more thoughtful than anything.

“Are you happy?” Foggy asks finally.
Matt bites his tongue. He can’t really answer that one.

**Happy?**

*I’m never happy. I haven’t been completely happy in a long, long time.*

“I like Frank,” he says instead, “And I feel good around him, and I’m glad that all of us are working together.”

He hears Foggy’s eyebrow rise. Knows he noticed he ducked the question. But he doesn’t push it, just nods.

They pause for a water break, standing by the ropes, mopping their faces with towels. Foggy’s body temperature has risen from the exercise. Matt can feel the heat radiating off him. They’re standing close; if he shifted sideways their arms would touch. But he can’t, not even accidentally; he doesn’t know what Foggy’s thinking. Everything’s changed, now that he knows - Matt has to be careful, careful not to do the wrong thing, to send him running.

“So,” Foggy says then, voice abrupt and nervous, “Since college, huh?”

Okay. Here we go. Matt leans on the ropes, stares straight forward, doesn’t turn his head even as Foggy leans against them too and he feels them sway under his weight, feels the other man’s elbow nudge against his.

“I legitimately had no idea,” Foggy says. “That’s why I kinda freaked back there. You just - it surprised me.”

“I don’t exactly wear my heart on my sleeve for daws to peck at,” Matt mutters.

“That’s a hell of a long time, Matt,” Foggy says softly. “You never made a move. How come? You know I was single for a lot of that.”

Matt gnaws at his lip until he tastes blood. There’s a reason he hates talking about shit like this. He’s spent his entire life trying not to feel weak, and this? This feels weak. His instinct is to lash out, or run, or cover up and defend himself.

But he promised.

“So many reasons,” he forces out, finally. “First, you didn’t know about my senses. It wouldn’t be fair - to build something on that big of a lie. I never expected going to college that I’d even have friends, let alone someone as close as you. So I didn’t tell you, and then it had been too long, and I was in too deep, and I knew if I told you then it would ruin everything and you’d leave. And I didn’t want to lose you.”

Foggy lowers his head.

“Other reasons, too,” Matt continues. “I knew you didn’t feel the same way and I didn’t want to fuck up what we had. I knew there was no way you’d be into me.”

“Why not?” Foggy asks, voice quiet and tight.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“I know you haven’t seen yourself in nearly twenty years but I’m pretty sure you know you could walk into just about any room and be like, *listen up fives, a ten is speaking,* and no one would bat an
“It’s not about what I look like,” Matt snaps, “Bloody hell, Foggy, I couldn’t care less about that. That shit’s all just surface level. I knew you wouldn’t be into me because you’re - you deserve better. You’re everything that’s good about this world. You’re kind and you make people happy and everything about you is just - good. Me, I’m so f*cked up that anyone who comes near me ends up as collateral. I’ve got a triple whammy of trust, anger and abandonment issues. I’m like a black hole that sucks all the joy out of everything and just turns it into pain and despair.”

“Jesus, alright, Prince Hamlet. You realise how ridiculous that sounds, right?”

“I’m not joking,” Matt says.

“Black hole of pain and despair? Seriously? That’s not fucking true.” Foggy sounds oddly offended on his behalf, but Matt just shakes his head.

“Well that’s what it feels like,” he says. “I knew I’d just mess things up and then you’d hate me. And then you’d leave, and I’d have no one. So part of it was selfish. I liked you too much to take the risk that you’d go. And then Elektra happened, and I sure as fuck didn’t want to date anyone after that. Not when I knew how much it could hurt if things went wrong. And then you were with Marci and then all that shit went down with Fisk and I just - it would’ve been a bad idea. You know it would’ve. Like hell I was gonna add more chaos into the mix by telling you I was in love with you.”

Foggy’s very quiet, but it’s not a confused quiet, so Matt knows he understands. He’s just - processing. Matt’s breathing heavily now; he hops out of the ring and paces over to one of the heavy bags, then starts throwing knees at it.

After a few minutes, Foggy follows him. He stands a little way back, watching, then clears his throat.

“And it never… you didn’t…”

“Get over you?” Matt drives another knee into the bag with a solid thud. “I tried. Elektra, and Karen, that was all real. But those old feelings never went away. I was happy - I am happy - just being your best friend,” he adds. “I wouldn’t give that up for the world. It’s okay that you’re not into me. I’ll get over it.”

Foggy’s silent. Matt switches his fighting stance, starts on push kicks instead. The bag swings back and forth, like a pendulum.

“I’m not asking this to be arrogant,” Foggy says at last, “But what do you like about me?”

That one stops Matt in his tracks. He pauses, turning to face Foggy, and absently puts one hand out to stop the bag hitting him. Swallows hard.

“I… everything. You’re the best person I know. You… you have a good heart. Being around you makes me want to be a better person. Things feel easy around you, and I… I don’t say that lightly. You were the first person since… since my Dad, since Stick, that I ever wanted to open up to. The first person to make me smile and laugh so easily. The first person I ever felt safe around. I can hear so much, I… the world is full of so much shit and it drowns everything else out sometimes, but not around you. You’re smart and funny and kind.” Foggy’s heart’s pounding so fast now that it makes Matt falter to a stop. “I can go on.”

“Matt.” His voice is strangled, tight. He starts to step towards him and Matt freezes up. Starts to reach out - Matt’s shoulders tense; he almost wants to step back.
When Foggy’s hand brushes against his shoulder, he flinches.

He can’t do this.

Can’t get so close to what he wants but can’t have - can’t let himself hope. It’ll hurt too much. It’s like some sort of cruel punishment; he doesn’t want to step away, to make it look like a rejection, is scared what sort of message will be sent. But when Foggy’s hand curls around his bicep and he steps in so close that Matt can practically feel his chest rising and falling as he breathes, he feels something snap; he steps back.

“What are you doing?” he blurts out.

Foggy drops his hand like he’s been burned. A cold fist squeezes Matt’s heart.

“Working things out,” Foggy says, “Or trying to.”

“What did Karen say about this?”

Foggy freezes. His body’s reacting in all sorts of ways, but somehow Matt can’t put the puzzle pieces into any sort of coherent picture.

“She said she wants us to sort things out. But speaking of Karen. You said you’re still in love with me. What about her?”

Now that’s a loaded fucking question. Matt thinks of how Foggy reacted when he figured out Frank had feelings for Karen. That she, on some level, had feelings for him. If Matt being in love with Foggy hasn’t completely shattered their relationship, being in love with Karen might just be the killing blow.

But he said he wouldn’t lie. He promised.

“Karen is very important to me,” he says, reluctantly. “Things… things didn’t work between us because of Elektra. If she hadn’t returned… I regret the way things went down.”

“You love her,” Foggy says flatly.

“I guess.”

“No I guess,” Foggy says. He sounds frustrated, and a bolt of panic spears through Matt’s chest. Here it comes. “If we’re gonna do this, you can’t be holding back.”

“Foggy…” It comes out soft and very pained.

“I’m not gonna be mad, but I need you to be honest.”

Matt turns away, fists clenching. He’s starting to get that feeling like an animal backed into a corner. See, Foggy can say he’s not gonna be mad. People can say anything. But they can’t help what they feel, and so far this conversation hasn’t given Matt anything to reassure himself with. He just feels like he’s sinking deeper and deeper into something he can’t come back from.

You owe him this, you owe him-

But it’s nearly impossible to let go, to allow himself the vulnerability this conversation needs. Even if he wanted to, it’s just - he’s a coward, he’s too scared, it’s too much-
“Frank says you trust me,” Foggy says then, his voice beginning to rise. “But I - God, Matt, it doesn’t feel like it sometimes. And I can’t begin to explain how much that hurts. Just - you gotta give me something here. I can’t… I can’t do this if I still feel like half the time I don’t know who you are - I know you said you deserve some secrets, but… if we want to make anything work, friendship or anything else, you… you can’t shut me out. Just give me something, Matt, anything. For once don’t just tell me you trust me, you gotta fucking show me”

He’s getting upset. He’s getting upset, and if he’s upset, he’ll leave, and Matt - Matt feels everything swelling in his chest, like a balloon ready to burst. Something has to give.

Things he’s been carrying too long.

“Frank’s right. It’s not you, Foggy, it’s me. I’m not… not trying to shut you out, I just…” And there’s a lump in his throat suddenly; he wishes there wasn’t, hates himself for feeling so weak, but suddenly his chest is tight and his words are coming out all choked. “I should’ve told you this earlier, but I don’t… I had it drilled into me a long time ago, don’t look weak, don’t ask for help, don’t get reliant - it doesn’t come easy, okay? Weak gets you hurt. Don’t surround yourself with soft things. If you can’t do it yourself, you’re just not trying hard enough.”

“Jesus, Matt-”

“I’m not - since Fisk died, I’m not coping. At all.”

The words land like a dropped anvil between them.

“I feel like shit all the time. It’s stupid, because things are meant to be fine now, but I - I’m so scared we’ll have to go up against something like that again. So the Hounds, all this, it’s fucking with my head. It’s… it’s bad, Foggy, it’s really bad, I - I scare myself sometimes with how fucked up I feel.” He can barely get the words out now. “I think I need to see someone about it. I mean, medically. But I… I wouldn’t even know where to look. Maybe I’m just being stupid-”

He breaks off. His voice is barely a rasp; he can smell the salt of the tears sliding down his cheeks. Foggy is very quiet next to him - but he’s crying too, his chest moving in tiny jerks, eyes streaming with tears.

“Matt,” he starts, and reaches out, but Matt bites hard on his lip and turns away.

He wants to let Foggy touch him, comfort him. He wants it more than anything. But he knows it’ll just make him fall apart, and this is too embarrassing already.

It’s meant to feel like a weight off your chest, isn’t it? Admitting shit like that after so long? Instead he’s teetering on the edge of a panic attack.

“Sorry,” he manages, “One second. I’ll be back.”

He turns and marches for the bathroom. Doesn’t stop until he’s surrounded by cool tiles, until he can splash water on his face and grip the cold porcelain of the sink and let himself break apart, just a little bit, in hitching, heaving sobs. His head’s tight with pressure, he needs to just - get it out, get it out-

What the fuck were you thinking-

Why did you run?

You shouldn’t have told him-
It’s not even that bad-

You’ve only upset him now-

You’re too broken, you can’t be fixed, you’re not strong enough to handle any of this-

You’ve only made things worse-

He barely notices the footsteps until they’re right behind him. And then there’s a warm hand on his shoulder, and he’s being spun around and pulled into a familiar chest, arms around him tight, holding him close, wrapped in a familiar scent, familiar heartbeat pounding against his.

“Matt,” Foggy whispers, and he doesn’t sound angry, and he’s not letting go, and it feels the same sort of safe it used to back in college, same sort of feeling that Foggy was the first one in a long, long time to trigger in him. Like maybe it can all be okay after all, like maybe it’s okay to not be alone.

INTERLUDE: THE LOVE SQUARE

So this morning, right, as Foggy’s leaving the apartment, he turns to Karen - clearly very nervous, if the way he keeps licking his lips and hesitating is any indication - and goes, “What did you mean?”

“What?” Karen asks, intelligently.

“Sorry. I mean, the other night. When you said,” and here it comes, word for word, a dead giveaway he’s been mulling it over all night, “You have my permission to do anything you need to to figure this out.”

Oh.

She pauses, stomach twisting. Can’t read the look on Foggy’s face. She could fix this up in so many ways if she’s reading the vibe wrong, but-

Honesty.

“I like Matt,” she says slowly, “And I like you, and he likes you, and I think you know too that - that things between you guys might be more complicated than just friendship.”

“So you’re saying,” Foggy says, nervously, “that you want me to fuck him and figure it out.”

“Okay, you just jumped like ten steps ahead. Jesus, Foggy. You’ll scare him off if you go around like that. No, I’m saying figure it out. Tell him whatever you need to. And if you want to...”

She trails off. It’s flusterling to put it into words, it feels so inauthentic. But Foggy swallows hard.

“Kiss him?” It’s nearly a whisper.

“If that’s what you want. And what he wants.”

“You’re really okay with that?” he asks.

“Of course.” Except now she’s second guessing. “Is that super weird?”

“I mean, it is a little weird, but that’s okay. We’re all already weird. We’re probably the weirdest four
people in Hell’s Kitchen,” he says, and she starts laughing, and he grins too, and she’s relieved when he reels her in for a peck on the lips before he leaves.

Anyway.

So that’s how her morning went, and she kinda can’t stop thinking about it. It’s still circling around in her head as she pulls up outside Matt’s place and makes her way upstairs with the dog.

As soon as she opens the door Pi bounds forward, yelping. There’s a grunt from the couch and by the time she gets around the corner Frank is struggling to sit up and ward off a concerned tongue from laving his face.

“Oh! Okay, boy, I’m alright! Sorry I didn’t come back last night. I’m alright.”

Pi worms under his arm; he’s nearly too big to join Frank on the couch, but it sends a warm flush through Karen’s chest to see Frank wrap an arm around him and rub his knuckles against the dog’s head as he nuzzles in close.

“Oh my God, Frank,” she says, her heart dropping as she gets in close enough to have a proper look at him. “Are you-”

“I’ll fine, just not very pretty. Nelson gave me that spiel already,” he says, a fond exasperation in it. “And Matt doesn’t seem to think I’m about to drop dead.”

“It looks like it hurts.”

“That happens when you get the shit beaten out of you repeatedly,” he says.

Still. He got this protecting us. It’s a weird mix of guilt, gratitude, and a blazing deep affection as she steps forward and reaches out. Frank goes very still as her hands rise, fingers brushing gently across his bruised cheeks. His face is rough with the beginnings of a stubbly beard, and he leans into her touch a little.

“Karen...” he says, voice low and uncertain.

She lets her hands drop, flustered.

“I’ll make coffee,” she says, and escapes to Matt’s kitchen.

Nothing can happen. She knows that, not until she and Foggy properly unpack this. But her heart is pounding; whatever goes down with him and Matt today could change everything - or nothing.

Everything in Matt’s kitchen is carefully labelled with Braille stickers; it makes her miss him, with a sudden jolt. The two of them haven’t hung out in a while. They need to talk soon, too.

She heads back to the couch and passes Frank his mug. He sits up a bit, pats the seat next to him. She sits besides him, their shoulders pressed together, Pi’s chin resting on Frank’s lap.

“You doing okay?” Frank asks after a while, softly. She swallows hard.

“Been better.”

“Last night...”

“We don’t know if they’re dead,” she blurts out, and takes a shaky breath. Yeah, she’d be lying if
she said it hadn’t been a pretty fucked up night. When she did manage to sleep, she’d dreamed of gunfire and woken in a cold sweat. “Either way, I… I’ll be okay. Not the first time I’ve shot at someone. God, not even close.”

“Karen.” His voice is very gentle. “You’re not a soldier.”

“I’m not really a civilian at this point either,” she points out, and takes a deep, shaky breath. “It’s alright, Frank, really.”

“If you wanna talk about it…”

“I don’t know that there’s much to say.” She swallows hard. “Is it terrible that I don’t regret it?”

“Only if it’s terrible that I don’t regret any of the lives I took as the Punisher. We can’t all be torn up with guilt like Murdock. And he hasn’t even killed anyone.”

She snorts, even if she knows it’s terrible.

“I appreciate it, really,” she says, and reaches out and squeezes his hand. It’s very warm from where he was holding his coffee. “But I think I’m okay. I’m just - learning how to live with what I am. I’ll figure it out.”

“Good,” he says, and smiles at her, and Karen feels another sudden, great surge of affection for him. She slumps back against the couch until their sides are pressed against each other and holds her coffee up near her lips.

“So,” she says, “Foggy and Matt.”

“They went boxing. You reckon they’ll be okay? Did Nelson say anything?”

“Not really, but I think… the way he’s been acting since you two got together… I think there’s something there. But maybe I’m just seeing what I want to see.”

“So what you want,” he says slowly, not looking at her now, “Is for him to realise he likes Matt too? Then what?”

Her face blazes hot - but somehow, of everyone, he’s the easiest to talk to.

“I want it to be all three of us,” she says, with more confidence than she feels. “That’s what I want. What I hope Matt wants too. What I think… if I’m right about Foggy, then I think it could work.”

Frank hums. She dares to glance over at him. He doesn’t seem shocked, just thoughtful.

“So where do I fit into all this?” he asks finally, and she bites her lip.

“It doesn’t bother you that Matt loves Foggy?” she asks.

“I knew that going in.”

“And if Foggy decides that he… that he wants this too?”

“Matt and I didn’t really put a name to what we are,” he says. “But he’s not the only one I’m interested in. This is gonna be a bigger conversation than just the three of you, is all I’m sayin’. I
don’t know, maybe once it would’ve bothered me. Maybe if it was anyone else… but things feel different. With the three of you.”

*The three of you.* Foggy included. But she doesn’t want to jump to conclusions.

Still - it’s a weight off her shoulders even just to have said it out loud, and she manages a smile.

“This whole situation’s not exactly normal,” she admits, and Frank snorts.

“Matt’s got superpowers. His girlfriend came back from the fucking dead. We’ve all been accosted by zombie ninjas and now there’s a meth gang after us. What the fuck *is* normal at this rate?”

“Good point,” she says, and rests her head against his shoulder.

She’s scared. Of course she is. So much here hangs on them all managing to sort out their feelings, and that’s the one thing none of them have ever been that good at. But there’s nothing she can do about it - just wait. Wait, and *hope* that against all odds, everything manages to come together.

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**20. FOGGY AND MATT SITTING IN A TREE**

“I didn’t mean to push too hard,” Foggy says.


God, when Matt - when Matt burst out like that… of everything, he hadn’t expected that sort of breakdown. He’d spent ten minutes in the bathroom just hugging him. It’s not the first time he’s seen Matt’s walls crumble, but every time it never fails to break Foggy’s heart. In those moments, he almost gets a taste of what he thinks Matt must feel like as Daredevil; a righteous fury, a blazing desire to *protect*, a certainty that he would do whatever he had to in order to keep him safe, to punish anything and anyone responsible for the hurt.

“It’s okay,” Matt replies. He’s staring straight ahead and Foggy bumps their arms together a little.

“No, it’s not. I was… I upset you. I shouldn’t have pushed.”

“Don’t apologise,” Matt says, and takes a deep breath. “It’s… it’s good. I’m glad I told you. I was meaning to for a while, I just - didn’t really know how to. And I was too chicken shit to, didn’t want to look weak. But it’s… it’s a relief.”

“Okay,” Foggy whispers. “Well, I’m glad. You know we’re all here for you, Matty, we just want to help.”

“I know,” Matt murmurs, and turns towards him a little, and on impulse Foggy reaches out and folds a hand over his. Matt doesn’t pull his hand away, just squeezes back gently. He seems to have gathered himself now, but he’s still a bit pale and shaky, eyelashes matted together with tears.

Foggy closes his eyes, takes a shaky breath.

*Okay. Okay. Well, here we are.* Last night was crazy as fuck and today’s been a pretty wild trip too.
His emotions have been all over the place. Since his conversation with Karen, he’s been-

Well, *imagining*.

Imagining what it would’ve been like if they *had* dated in college. Or if they started dating now. What scares him the most is how fucking *easy* it is to picture. In fact, not a lot changes. And the thought puts a little thrill deep in the pit of his stomach.

But acting on it - that’s a big leap.

Still. Today’s all about honesty. They’ve all spent way too long hiding things from each other.

“I was jealous,” he admits, and Matt properly turns towards him now, “When Frank helped you out, that day after you came back from being sick? I was really fucking jealous. I… I can’t lie and say I was into you this whole time, but… I think you just weren’t even on my radar, like - you were so out of my league it just didn’t seem possible.”

“Out of your league? You were out of mine,” Matt says.

“No, you,” Foggy says, and pokes him, and Matt huffs out a laugh and squirms away. It’s nice to see him smile. Something very warm and fond spreads through Foggy’s chest. It bolsters his courage.

“Karen said I can do whatever I need to figure this out,” he says.

“Yeah?” Matt says, and hesitates. “What’s that mean?”

Foggy opens his mouth - then pauses. He realises that once he puts it into words and makes it real, he can’t take it back. Everything will change.

*Do you really want this?*

But the more he thinks about it… the more sure he feels. Matt’s already one of the most important people to him in the world. There’s the start of something there. Now that he knows it’s a possibility, it’s like his vision has shifted; everything feels different.

The one thing that would’ve given him doubts would be the idea of more secrets. He had been lowkey worried there was something big, something he wasn’t being trusted with. Finding out it’s a mental health crisis is… well, it’s not a *relief*, that’s not the right word, but at least it’s something that it’s understandable for Matt to hide. Something that Foggy can try to help him with.

“I think,” he says slowly, “Karen… Karen wants it to be the three of us.”

“Oh,” Matt says, after a pause. His face gives nothing away.

Foggy’s heart might just about explode at this rate.

“Is that what you want?” he asks, his voice shaking a little.

Matt swallows hard. Then he nods - and tenses, bracing himself for Foggy’s response. But Foggy just takes a deep breath. Thinks, *okay, okay*.

“Okay. I… if we’re being honest, I just - I need to wrap my head around it a bit. But I don’t think I’ll know unless we start - trying things out. You know?”

God, he feels like an awkward fifth grader trying to ask his crush out to the school dance. Luckily, Matt’s good at picking up on all sorts of unspoken signals. It’s sort of his schtick. Unluckily, Matt is
also a super emotionally constipated fuck and even though Foggy *knows* he knows what he means, he doesn’t say anything. Just sits there nodding.

“Dude,” Foggy says.

“What?”

“You *know* what I’m getting at.” He shifts, reaches for Matt’s hand, rethinks it, rethinks it *again*, and then reaches out and pokes his arm instead. “Jesus Christ, you’re gonna make me say it out loud? Well, I guess that’s fair. I’m trying to say I want to kiss you.”

Matt bites his lip. Foggy’s eyes track the motion and his mouth suddenly goes very dry; his stomach explodes with butterflies.

“What,” Matt says quietly, voice a bit too vulnerable, “As an experiment?”

“It sounds awful when you put it that way.” Foggy shifts back a bit. “But also, let’s get one thing clear, we’re not gonna do anything you don’t want to. If… If you want more time to think about it, or you’d rather not at all, then-”

“God, Foggy, you think I don’t want to kiss you? You think I haven’t wanted to for like ten fucking years?” Matt blurts out, and something about the heat in his voice, the sincerity, sends an electric rush down Foggy’s spine. “Of course I do, just - I need to know we can do this and not… not get hurt more. Not ruin everything if it *doesn’t* work out.”

“I can’t promise we won’t get hurt,” Foggy says softly. “That’s the nature of this stuff. You gotta take a risk. But I can promise one thing, even if things go disastrously wrong, even if one of us realises we don’t want this after all - we’ll still be friends. I won’t leave. I’m never going to leave.”

He lifts Matt’s hand to his chest, presses it close over his heart.

“You know I’m not lying,” he says, and Matt swallows hard and nods.

“Okay,” he says quietly.

“Okay,” Foggy replies.

There is a *very* awkward silence. They both know what’s coming but now that it’s time, Foggy’s like, freaking out just a little bit. Ha ha ha, this is fine! He’s only been picturing it all last night! He’s kissed people before! He knows what he’s doing!

Matt is clearly not going to make the first move. Fucking hell, why does it feel like the entire weight of the world depends on this?

But he knows if he doesn’t do something Matt will literally just leave them sitting here forever. He reaches out and gently wraps a hand around the back of Matt’s neck. His skin’s blazing warm; Foggy can feel it even through the wraps. He leans in. Presses their lips together.

At first contact Matt’s whole body freezes up. And not gonna lie, it’s not perfect, not even remotely. In fact, it’s not even *good*. They can’t get the angle right and they’re both strung more tightly than a violin and oh my God, why are there so many teeth? And okay, maybe Foggy’s kinda freaking out a bit. *This is going so badly and what the fuck are you doing and this was a bad, bad idea, he’s gonna think you’re the world’s most shit kisser what the fuck-*
He pulls back and takes a shaky breath.

“Okay, reset,” he says, and huffs out a sort of hysterical giggle. It’s a rather embarrassing sound but it makes Matt laugh too, breaks the tension between them a little. “Sorry, that was like eighty percent my fault. Let’s just relax, okay?”

“Relax?” Matt says. “I don’t know what that means.”

“Ha. That was funny,” Foggy says, but the sight of Matt’s grin does ease something in his chest. It’s just Matt. Matt who he’s known for so long, who he’s shared a room for years with, Matt who’s seen him at his worse - shit-faced drunk or bawling after a break up, seen his highs and lows, Matt who’s apparently loved him all the way through it. They’ve seen each other through the trenches of law exams, the flu and the aftermath of some very messy college parties. This is the last person he should be self-conscious in front of.

“Relax,” he murmurs again, more to himself than to Matt.

He shifts so they’re facing each other. Lifts his hand to the back of Matt’s head instead and runs his fingers through his hair. Matt leans into it, lets out a happy sort of hum.

It’s encouraging, and Foggy bolsters his courage and tries again. He’s better placed now to tilt Matt’s head so they can fit their lips together properly, careful not to yank at his hair too roughly.

This time, this time he gets what people mean when they talk about feeling sparks.

This time sends an electric tingle over his skin. He’s hyper aware of the heat of Matt’s body against his, the other man’s hands shifting to rest gently on his waist. He lets his free hand run over Matt’s shoulder, down his arm. Feels rough, ropy scars, feels his muscles tense - then relax as he seems to finally let go, to melt into it.

Matt’s much shyer than he expects. It’s Foggy taking the lead and he can practically feel the effort it’s taking for Matt to let someone in so close. To let him in. Somehow that makes a heat spark deep in his chest; something about it all feels strangely more intimate, even if he knows Matt’s let Frank in, let others in before.

But this is different, this is trust - trust that Foggy means what he says, that they can take this leap of faith, can risk everything to see if this works.

And above all-

It feels right. It doesn’t feel awkward, doesn’t feel like pushing something too far with a platonic friend. It feels like sharing, and something about feeling timidity from Daredevil of all people, from Matt Murdock who wears suits and sunglasses like armour, who’s always had a chip on his shoulder about not wanting to seem like he needs anyone- it’s endearing.

By the time they pull apart they’re breathing heavily. Foggy feels like between this and the workout his clothes are sticking to his skin; everything’s too warm, too intense. Still, he can’t bring himself to go too far. Stays cradling Matt close, enjoying feeling his chest heave as he breathes in, out.


Matt laughs, a bit nervously, and Foggy cups his cheek.

“Hey. You okay?”
Matt nods and lets out a deep breath.

“Yeah. Just - didn’t think that would ever happen. Everything about today feels unreal.”

“Did we go too fast?” Foggy asks, concerned - but Matt shakes his head.

“I’m good,” he assures him, and smiles. “Really good.”

“If it isn’t already obvious, I’m really good too,” Foggy says. He finally lets go of Matt, and shifts to sit next to him, leaning over so their shoulders are pressed together. “Well. That was something.”

“Got the answers you needed?” Matt asks, and Foggy reaches out and laces their fingers together.

“I want to take this somewhere,” he murmurs, “Or try to. Is that still what you want? You… you said before you and Karen…”

“I really regret the way things went down with Karen,” Matt admits. “I… I hurt her a lot, when Elektra came back. It wasn’t what she thought, but - I should’ve just been honest with her. But we got closer again when we were taking down Fisk. I wouldn’t want to do this without her.”

“Good. We’re on the same page then.”

“What about Frank?” Matt asks hesitantly.

That makes Foggy pause.

This is… so, so much more complicated than he originally thought. Every time he thinks they have the path laid out clear ahead of them, some other twist or turn comes along.

The thing is - especially since last night, Foggy can see the appeal of Frank. At first he was like, fuck that, why would anyone be into a mass murderer? But the more time they spend together, the more he has to grudgingly admit he knows what Karen sees in him. And last night…

He almost has a crush too. Almost. Look, it’s hard not to when someone literally jumps in front of a fucking bullet for you.

Or maybe his head’s just all mixed up. He can’t jump into anything. Hell, he’s barely sure of his existing relationships without throwing any new ones into the mix. He needs to get to know Frank more. The other man probably doesn’t even feel the same way, so no need to get ahead of himself.

“We gotta talk about it,” he says, diplomatically, “With all of them.”

“Me and Frank,” Matt says, a bit pained, “I can’t just drop it. He’s important to me.”

“I know.” Foggy squeezes his hand. “And I… I know that Karen’s into him too. We’ll sort it out.”

“Foggy…”

Matt turns to him. He hesitates, then reaches out and squeezes Foggy’s shoulder.

“You put up with a lot from us,” he whispers. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“That’s why we’re talking about it,” Foggy says patiently. “So none of us get hurt. Including you. Including Frank. We’re all into Karen, so she’ll be fine.”
Matt snorts out a laugh, and Foggy sees a little of the tension fall from his face. It’s odd, sometimes; he doesn’t realise just how tired and sad Matt looks all the time until those little moments when he finally smiles, or relaxes, and seems to put down whatever burden he’s always dragging around on his back.

Foggy wraps an arm around his shoulders. Pulls him close and, on impulse, presses a kiss to his temple.

“Sorry I snapped at you before,” he whispers. “And sorry if I stressed you out with this whole thing. It’s just - been hard to figure out. I wasn’t angry with you, not really.”

“It’s okay,” Matt says. “Sorry I lied, even by omission. I do trust you. I’ll try to show it more, it just - doesn’t come naturally to me.”

“I know. It’s okay. You know I’m always here, right? I’m not gonna leave, no matter what.”

“I know,” Matt says, and Foggy can tell that he’s not just saying it to pacify him.

“It’s gonna be okay,” he repeats, as much to convince himself as Matt. “And what you said before? Thank you for telling me, I... I’m really glad you trusted me with that. We’ll sort out this shit with the Hellhounds. Brett will help us and we’ll fix things up. After all you’ve been through, it’s no wonder you’re not okay. But you’re not alone. You know? You won’t ever be. We’ll figure it out together.”

“Okay,” Matt says softly, a little choked.

He’s looking a bit upset again, a bit too vulnerable, a bit too close to closing himself off - without even really thinking about it, Foggy lifts the arm around his shoulders, cradles his jaw and gently tilts his face towards him. The kiss this time is soft; they lean into each other, pushing and pulling, lips working together slowly. It feels-

Way, way too easy. Way too natural. They can’t go back after this, Foggy realises. He’s opened a can of worms he can’t shut here - but in a good way.

_I know what I want_, he thinks with a sudden fierce certainty. _I want this to work. I really, really want this to work._

And once you’re sure of something like that - once you know, you can fight for it, whatever else happens.

“C’mon,” he murmurs against Matt’s lips when they finally pull apart. He strokes a hand down the other man’s back, reassuringly. “Let’s go talk to the others. I’m ready to figure all this out.”
21. IN WHICH KAREN CHAIRS THE BIG DISCUSSION OF FEELINGS™

“So what are you gonna do? After all this.”

Frank looks over at her from where he’s stretched out on the couch, one hand hanging down to idly fondle Pi’s ears. Karen’s standing over in the kitchen; she’s just come back from a grocery run because apparently Matt has fuck all food in his kitchen. While she was out Foggy had texted saying they were about to head back. She’s nervous, but excited.

He’d ended his text with a smiley face. That’s a good sign, right? If things had gone badly he probably would’ve used a much less jovial emoji.

Now she’s making an omelette, both because they’re hungry and because she needs something to do with her hands. It was getting a bit too weird just sitting on the couch with Frank, watching the news. Being so close, but knowing she can’t reach out and touch him - knowing what they both want, not being able to act on it - it’d gotten her all antsy.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“After we take down the Hellhounds. Are you gonna…”

She trails off, trying to think of a tactful way to put it. Are you gonna go back to murdering people or is the Punisher still retired?

Frank seems to know what she means. He heaves himself up off the couch with a groan. One hand clutched to his ribs, he limps over to the counter and leans against it.

“You sure you should be getting up?” Karen asks, concerned.

“No, I’m not an invalid.” His brows are furrowed, and he drums his fingers against the counter. “After? Ain’t thought much about it.”

“I was just curious.” She attempts to flip the omelette and proceeds to ruin all her hard work. “Matt tried to retire from being Daredevil, shortly after everything that went down with you and the Hand. Didn’t take.”

Frank hums.

“As long as he can hear all the shit that went goes down in this city, I don’t think he’ll be able to retire,” he says. “And me, I… I don’t think I’m cut out to be a civilian, either. Doesn’t feel like me. I...
tried, but I… old habits die hard.”

“So the Punisher…”

“Punisher’s work’s done. But going out with Matt…”

“Stopping crime but not killing people,” Karen says, and Frank pulls a face.

“I still don’t think it’s a perfect solution. I’d much rather put those motherfuckers in the ground and be sure that they can’t come after us again. But I’m not… I don’t wanna fight with Red about it. And I don’t wanna fuck up the second chance I got to have a clean slate.”

“Right,” Karen murmurs.

“There’s too much to lose.” He fixes her with an oddly intense look that makes her cheeks heat suddenly; she can’t quite explain why.

“Well, I’m glad you guys have each other’s backs,” she says, and smiles.

A noise at the door, and the moment is broken. They both turn.

“We’re back!” Foggy yells, as he marches in the door. “That smells really good! Who’s cooking?”

He’s smiling, Karen notices, and it feels like a knot’s unravelled in her chest. He’s grinning from ear to ear.

Matt’s come trailing in the door behind him. He goes to put away their gym gear and Pi follows him excitedly. Karen catches a smile on his face, too, as he bends down to play with the dog.

Frank goes to collapse back on the couch and Foggy comes up by her side and touches her shoulder briefly. She casts him a small smile.

“All went well, then?” she whispers.

Foggy nods.

“Really well,” he says. “We’ll talk about it in a second.”

He looks – radiant, almost. Eyes filled with a shining hopefulness, something almost childlike to his glee. Like it’s Christmas morning and nothing could possibly go wrong.

Matt emerges again. He goes and perches on the arm of the couch, next to Frank. Out of the corner of her eye, Karen sees him reach up and squeeze Matt’s hand.

“You good?” he asks quietly, and Matt nods.

For a second it fills her chest with a sudden, blazing fondness. It’s been kind of strange, thinking of the two of them together. Maybe, to some extent, coloured by her own jealousy. But there’s something so intimate, so domestic about the small motion – so comfortable. She doesn’t see that look on Frank’s face much. Or on Matt’s. It’s sweet.

Foggy’s watching them too, thoughtfully. His eyes meet hers for a second and she can see, too – he approves, for whatever it’s worth.

“How was boxing?” she asks, as she starts to plate up. She’s eager to get to the elephant in the room,
the conversation they all know is coming.

“Terrifying,” Matt jokes, “He’s a force to be reckoned with. He beat me up.”

“I beat him up with emotions,” Foggy quips. Matt ducks his head, biting back a laugh, and Karen cannot express how relieved she is to see him smile. “Also,” he adds, turning to Frank, “Matt said my punch was good. So there. Bitch.”

Karen nearly drops the eggs on the floor.

Did he just call the Punisher a bitch?

Frank just scoffs.

“Yeah,” he grunts, “Because I fucking taught you.”

“Oh my God. Are you seriously trying to take all the credit?”

“The teacher’s responsible for half the work. You think me and Red sprang from the womb as heavily armed black belts?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Foggy mutters. This time Frank’s the one who snorts out a laugh.

“C’mon,” Karen says, as she sets the table. ”Let’s eat.”

They gather at the table. Foggy sits by Matt, so Frank comes around to sit with her. He pulls her chair out and smiles at her. She smiles back. Her heart skips a beat. Matt casts her a look she can’t figure out. Foggy’s gaze shifts between all three of them. There’s a very awkward silence.

“So,” Frank says finally.

“So,” Foggy repeats, and heaves a deep breath. He was bouncing off the walls this morning, but when he and Matt got back he’d seemed perfectly calm. Now, for the first time, he seems nervous again.

“What happened?” Frank asks, cutting through the bullshit as usual.

Matt and Foggy turn towards each other. Whatever silent exchange takes place ends with Foggy clearing his throat.

“We talked about a lot of things,” he offers. “I did a lot of processing. I... what Karen wants...”

He glances at her uncertainty, and she smiles.

“I told Frank already,” she says, and Foggy nods, looking relieved.

“I wasn’t sure if I... I felt that way at first. But I thought about it a lot. We decided we want to at least try.” He pauses. Swallows. Then adds, a bit awkwardly, “So, y’know, we sat around and made out.”

Matt lowers his head. Karen’s heart is pounding; she would be embarrassed about all this except she’s quite sure she’s not the only one. It’s not exactly a normal situation. None of them seem to quite know how to deal with all this.

“A few times,” Foggy adds, “Because, you know. Practice makes perfect.”

Matt laughs. Foggy reaches out and folds his hand over his; a rush of relief spreads through Karen’s
chest. She’d been worried; it’s like walking on a tightrope with Matt sometimes, and Foggy’s been near breaking point lately too. So she’s glad that the two of them seem okay.

“So yeah,” Foggy says, articulately, and turns to Matt expectantly. Karen’s eyes land on him and he lifts his head and smiles in her direction.

“We... we want to try,” he agrees.

“That right, Red?” Frank asks, and Matt’s head tilts towards him. Karen glances between them, uncertainly; Frank is the one piece that doesn’t quite fit into the puzzle just yet. But he doesn’t seem upset, just like he’s - she doesn’t know how to put it. Like he’s treading carefully, maybe.

“Yeah,” Matt says quietly. “I didn’t think this could ever happen. I knew what I wanted, but it - it wasn’t possible. And if it doesn’t work out-”

“If it doesn’t work,” Karen cuts in quickly, before anyone can start spiralling. “We’ll talk about it like adults. Look, we’ve all been through too much together for relationship drama to end us.” She looks at Matt, then at Foggy. “It’s not like any of us was ever the bitter ex, no matter how things went down.”

“You’re optimistic,” Matt says, and Foggy reaches out and pokes him.

“Yeah, well, you’re enough of a pessimist for all of us.”

That gets another laugh. Matt smacks him on the arm, gently, and Foggy pulls a wounded face.

“Now who’s beating who up?”

Frank’s being uncharacteristically quiet. Karen doesn’t really know how to pull him into the conversation.

“Matt,” she says instead, because sometimes it pays to double check things with him, “You’re happy with this?”

There’s maybe something a bit too vulnerable in it. They’ve heard from his own mouth how he feels about Foggy. She’s less certain about her own position in all this.

But he nods, leaning across the table towards her.

“And you?” he asks, softly. She swallows hard.

“Things didn’t work out well between the two of us,” she whispers. “But I... we never had closure.”

“I’m sorry about that,” he says, genuinely.

It suddenly feels too personal to talk about - about them, about how Elektra fit into it all, in front of the other two. But she reaches out and squeezes his hand, and he gives a small smile, and she thinks the two of them will be okay. Since the second they met, they’ve always had something. They’ll make it work, this time.

“But you and Frank...” she adds, glancing at him.

“We’ll keep figuring it out,” Foggy jumps in.

Frank’s eyebrow rises.
“That’s the sort of vague that gets people in trouble,” he says.

Karen tenses. It’s the sort of situation that could easily turn into an argument between the two men - but Foggy just nods, and smiles, and a little of the tension seems to deflate.

“You’re right. What I mean is, we’re not asking Matt to break up with you or - whatever,” he adds.

Frank nods slowly.


It’s weird to hear it put into words.

“A very open relationship, within...” Foggy trails off, waves a hand around the table. The four of them, sitting in a circle. “Within this.”

Except then Frank glances at Karen, and her cheeks heat, and she feels the awkwardness ratchet up again. The others must sense it too, because Matt rises abruptly.

“You two should talk,” he tells her and Foggy, and then turns towards Frank and says, rather pointedly. “I’m gonna take Pi for a walk.”

Frank nods.

“Think I might have a sleep,” he adds, “I’m beat.”

It’s hardly subtle, but Karen has to agree; there are parts of this that she and Foggy just have to figure out. It just comes with being the first two, the only ones with a properly established relationship. She watches Matt help Frank up and towards the bedroom, one arm wrapped around his waist. It’s strange to see both of them touching so comfortably; Frank’s arm gripping at his sleeve, Matt’s other hand steadying on his arm. Frank leans in and murmurs something in his ear as they reach the bedroom door, but neither she nor Foggy have super hearing; she has no idea what passes between them.

There’s an excruciating few minutes in which she and Foggy sit there eating in silence until Matt emerges and calls the dog, clipping a leash on him. He gives them a rather awkward wave and hurries out of the room.


“I think if he wants to hear us he’ll find a way,” Karen replies, “And if he doesn’t he’ll focus on something else.”

“Fair enough.” Foggy’s shoulders slump a little, and she reaches out in concern, but he gives her a smile. “I’m not upset. Just tired. It’s been kind of a crazy day.”

She slips into the chair next to him and reaches out to take his hand, only to gasp a bit when he tugs her in and kisses her suddenly. She laughs against his mouth; it still makes her heart pound. Everything now seems new and exciting, seems different.

“So you and Matt,” she teases, when they pull apart.

“Oh my God.” He slumps back in his chair. “We had the worst kiss ever. It was so awkward.”

“In what way?”
“Just terrible all around.” He makes a number of jumbled hand gestures that she can’t decipher. “We were both so on-edge and nothing was going right. But we tried again and it was better.”

“He okay?” she asks. And then, gently, “You okay?”

“I think so,” Foggy says. “The two of us were already so close. It just - feels right.” And then, with a glance at her, “Don’t you dare say I told you so.”

Karen laughs a bit.

“I’m happy with this if you are,” she says, and Foggy squeezes her hand and nods.

“I want it to work,” he says, confidently. “I love both of you. There was never a question about that. Taking Nelson, Murdock and Page to the next level!”

“I strongly maintain that Nelson, Page and Murdock sounds better,” she teases, “The syllables just work nicely.”

“I’ll let you be the one to tell Matt that his name’s getting booted down the chain,” Foggy says. After a second, his grin fades a little. “But we don’t need to discuss the firm.”

“Boundaries,” she confirms, and he nods, looking down.

“Let’s not mince words. You like Frank. Frank likes you. You - you want my permission.”

“I don’t want to push you into anything,” she starts, but he cuts her off with a finger to her lips.

“Matt already gave me that spiel,” he says, gently. “It’s okay, Karen, really. Things are bigger than just the two of us now.”

“Nothing will change with you and I,” she assures him, but he shakes his head, smiling a little.

“Things will change,” he argues, “It’s inevitable. But they’re already changing, with Matt in there now. You and Frank, I... it’s not jealousy. Not exactly. Not now, not with the way things are, not with Matt and him already together, and now me and Matt together too. It’s just...”

He trails off, flailing a bit.

“New ground,” she offers.

“New ground,” he agrees. “It’s scary. But I - I had some good talks with Frank, actually, when we went out to meet that client that one time. I guess sometimes I feel like I’m from a different world from all of you. I used to get worried about being left behind. But not anymore.”

“I like that you’re from a different world,” she says, and rests her head against his shoulder. “Some of the shit the rest of us have done, it’s... it’s not pretty, it’s not nice. It’s just more shit we’re carrying around. We need an anchor.”

His hand cards through her hair, then wraps around her cheek, turning her face to kiss him. Her hands settle on his waist - steady, sturdy Foggy. Just being together is comforting. She can’t imagine doing this without him.

“All I’m scared of,” he says when they pull apart, “Is that we’re jumping in too deep, too fast with all this.”

“We’ll take it slow,” she promises. “Figure it out one thing at a time.”
“Okay. In that case, go for it.”

She strokes his cheek, but his eyes are fixed on the bedroom door Frank disappeared into. She doesn’t quite know what to think of this - but she feels excited and floaty and happy, the sort of adrenaline rush you get at the crest of a rollercoaster; the fall coming doesn’t seem like a danger but a thrill, like all the best parts are yet to come.

Frank must have actually legit been tired, because when Karen goes in to check on him later, hoping to talk, he’s dead to the world.

She stands for a moment, staring down at him. In sleep he seems oddly peaceful; lashes long and dark on his bruised cheeks. Mouth open a little, curled in on himself like a child. She feels a warm, fond swell and reaches to brush hair out of his face, then runs a hand down his rough cheek.

Later, she thinks, with an excited flutter in her chest.

The front door opens; she hears the scratch of claws on wood floors. Then the bedroom door slides open a little more and Matt feels his way into the room.

“Where’s Foggy?” he asks.

She turns towards him.

“Down in the car. We’re about to head home.”

Matt nods. There’s a funny, quiet pause. He looks tired, and gaunt, with his face shadowed from the baseball cap pulled low over his brow.

“What did he say?” he asks abruptly.

“He said yes.”

She doesn’t really need to expand. It’s there between all of them - a world suddenly full of open doors. Something flickers in Matt’s face that she can’t work out. He nods, and leans against the wall. Both of them stand watching Frank or a moment.

“What are your plans for tonight?” she asks finally. When his head turns towards her she raises her index fingers and makes horns on her head; he lets out a soft snort.

“Yeah. Working on the Hellhounds stuff.”

“You have a plan?”

He nods.

“I’m gonna talk to Brett. Drop a hint that I’m gonna drive them out of the subway tunnels soon. See if we can work something out. Then that gang you were researching, the one that aren’t in with the Hounds yet. Gonna meet with them and propose we take them down together. The original plan, except we’re getting the police involved a bit sooner.”

“You need us to do anything?”
“Not yet. Tonight’s just a lot of negotiating. But once I have the gangs onside, we’ll start doing more recon about exactly where their underground hideouts are. And then get the charges to blow them to smithereens. Frank can probably help with that.”

“Because of his connections?”

“Because he works on a construction site.”

“Oh. Right.” They both laugh, and on impulse she steps a bit closer to him.

“Still - be careful tonight. Frank’s already so hurt - you’re still healing.” she rests a hand on his shoulder. “I don’t want all of us bedbound.”

“I’ll try,” he says, and smiles a bit sadly. She reaches up and takes his glasses off; he doesn’t stop her, but also doesn’t make an effort to meet her eyes, staring blankly across the room instead. There’s an odd, pained look on his face.

“What is it?” she askssoftly.

He swallows hard, but when she rests a hand on his cheek he leans into it.

“The Daredevil thing is - complicated lately.” He seems to force the words out; she frowns.

“What do you mean?”

“I was telling Foggy... after Fisk... it’s a lot.”

*It’s a lot.*

Three simple words, but somehow she knows what it means. That feeling of the building weight of everything they’ve been through, slowly growing heavier and heavier, nearly forcing them to their knees. Standing at their bedside, stroking their faces with black fingers as they sleep.

She’s done enough interviews with reluctant subjects to know when to wait silently. After a minute he swallows hard and continues.

“I’m... I’m not as strong... or as sure of myself... as people think.”

“Oh, Matt.” She curls a hand around the back of his neck, draws him in to rest their foreheads together. “You’ve done more for this city than anyone. More than anyone could expect from you.”

“It’s still never enough,” he murmurs. “And everyone we lost-”

“That’s on Fisk. Not you.”

“Some of it’s on me,” he says, with heavy certainty. “And there things I can’t - get over. Things I still haven’t... processed, I think. I just try to keep moving and not think about them. But then they come breathing down my neck when I least expect it.”

“Like what?”

“Like Midland going down.” It comes out in a rush, like it’s been on his mind. “Like Elektra murdering Stick right in front of me.”

She...
She doesn’t know what to do with this.

“And other things, too,” Matt continues, and shifts. “But I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I’m upsetting you,” he observes. She swallows hard. It’s true - there’s a lump in her throat and her heart’s pounding. But she shakes her head.

“Only because I care about you and I want you to be okay. I’d rather you tell me than not.” She lets her hands drop to his, takes them in hers and squeezes. “It’s gonna be okay.”

“People keep telling me that,” he says, with a tight smile.

“Maybe you should start listening,” she fires back.

He huffs out a laugh, but his smile fades quickly.

“I can’t let my guard down, even for a second.”

“That’s why you need people to watch your back,” she says, patiently. “Take a bit of the burden off you. We can’t carry all of it, all the time. I can’t. Frank can’t. Why should you?”

Matt bites his lip, but looks like he can’t really argue with that. She tangles their fingers together.

“I’m really, really happy this is working out,” she whispers.

“Bit early to say it’s working out,” he says, and she laughs and slaps his chest lightly.

“Shut up and just enjoy it, Murdock,” she says, and he lets out a chuckle. The silence is comfortable; she shifts a bit, then adds, shyly, “I was worried. That you didn’t like me.”

“Of course I like you,” Matt says, sounding genuinely startled. “I like you a lot. Why would you think that?”

“I know, but - after things didn’t work out with us the first time... I hoped, but I wasn’t sure. So I was worried. I knew you liked Foggy.”

“Obvious, was it?” he asks, sounding a bit disgruntled.

“I’m a PI now. You can’t hide anything from me.”

Matt snorts.

“Trust me,” he says, gently, “I definitely like you.”

“Good,” she says.

It comes naturally to lean in and kiss him. There’s no hesitation in the way he reaches down to rest his hands on her waist. There’s something shy and gentle about it, a little coy. It’s not their first kiss, but it still feels different. This time, she knows. When they were last together, as far as she knew the man she was with was just Matt Murdock.

Now, she remembers - Matt, the man in black who first saved her. Matt, who she sees every day in the office, slumped over paperwork or standing with his head held high in court. Matt, returned from the dead.
Matt - avenging angel, lost child, everything in between.

They break apart, but he’s the one to hold her close for a second, cradling her in his arms. She rests her head on his chest.

“Be careful tonight,” she repeats.

“I will,” he promises. For once she believes him. She leans up and kisses him once more, briefly this time. Casts one more glance over her shoulder at the sleeping Frank, and leaves with her heart pounding.

Everything seems different now. And it’s exciting, but at the same time, the stakes feel higher than ever.

22. IN WHICH FRANK GETS A BIT UPSETTI SPAGHETTI

Frank wakes up, in pain, from unsettling dreams.

The room is dark. It was late afternoon when he fell asleep, but night has fallen now; he can see the faint glow of the city lights falling through the window. There are no lights on, no voices - the others have all left, then.

His wounds ache, and he’s stiff from the position he fell asleep in. He rolls over and grabs his phone from the bedside table. One text from Karen, one voicemail from Matt.

‘We went home! Hope you feel better. See you soon. <3’

The voicemail is from a couple of hours ago, which is bizarre since he’s been here the whole time, but then again Matt hates texting and may have not wanted to wake him.

“Hey Frank. I’m going out to meet with Brett and that gang we talked to. Just talking, I won’t be going after the Hounds. See you soon.”

He closes his eyes for a moment. Thinks of Matt, somewhere out there roaming the streets right now. Thinks of Karen and Foggy, back at their apartment. Probably eating together, in a brightly lit kitchen, talking through everything that’s happened. His chest feels very tight.

It’s past midnight.

He gets up and stretches, biting back a loud groan of pain as every single muscle protests. Everything hurts, he feels-

Beaten down, and tired, and melancholic. The apartment is very, very dark, and very quiet, and very lonely. He heaves himself out of bed and Pi, stretched out at his feet, whines and yawns before jumping down to follow him out.

“Good boy,” he whispers, reaching down to tangle his fingers in the dog’s fur. There’s something calming about his solid, warm presence.

Outside the living room is awash with neon light from that stupid billboard. Still, there’s something almost comforting about that, too. Matt’s place is becoming familiar. He switches on the kitchen light
and starts making coffee, careful to return everything to its right place after using it. It's becoming habit; they're getting used to each other. The first time he was here he'd left a glass out on the counter and Matt had knocked it to the floor almost immediately.

“Didn’t you sense it?” Frank had asked, while sweeping the broken shards into a plastic bag.

“No one focuses twenty-four seven,” Matt’d replied. “It’s exhausting. And unsustainable. When I get home it’s back to autopilot for most things.”

And Frank has seen him - taking uniform steps, feeling around for things on the countertop. He gets used to cleaning everything up after he uses it, not leaving shit lying around. There’s something almost satisfying to how organised everything is. Sometimes it reminds him of his early days in the military, the discipline of it all.

Now-

Now, he sits down on the floor, his back to the couch, his mug steaming warm next to him, Pi’s head a heavy, comforting weight in his lap. He closes his eyes, and tries to breathe.

He dreamed of Maria.

He thinks about her a lot lately. He wonders what she’d think of all this. This being the vigilantism, this also being him and Matt - and Karen and Foggy, now, too. Sometimes, he gets this guilty pain deep in his gut, like he’s betrayed her somehow. Betrayed all of them.

He puts on a tough show. Makes it seem like he’s taking all this in stride.

But he doesn’t know if they realise he’s just as fucking lost as the rest of them. More so, sometimes. Red gets it, to an extent; there was Elektra, so a lot of this isn’t just a new relationship, it’s moving on.

Frank…

Frank had a whole fucking family. Frank was married. And for a long time was terrified of ever getting close to anyone again.

And yeah, maybe today was good. They talked things out. Karen seems happy, so Foggy probably said he’s cool with them moving things in a much more open direction. And Frank should be glad, but instead-

Instead he feels a bit like he wants to crawl back under the covers and not have to think about all this, just for a little while. Feels a bit like something dangerous might come through all these open doors.

“Stop it,” he whispers, and takes a sip of his drink, relishing the way it sends warmth spreading through his chest. “You’re overthinking this shit.”

Is he?

Or is he making sure he doesn’t get in way, way too far over his head?

He closes his eyes. Maria’s smile. Maria’s hands on him, straightening his collar, pulling him into a kiss. The sunlight on her hair. The way he could always hear her laugh from anywhere in the house.

There’s a lump in his throat. Suddenly he misses her much more than he can say - misses her so much it hurts. Misses all of them. A grief he’d thought he’d been starting to heal from has resurfaced.
Suddenly, he feels tears welling up, along with a familiar rage. *Fuck Billy, fuck all of them who ever had anything to do with it*- 

He wants to hit something, wants to smash things with a sledgehammer like he used to - but he hurts so much he can barely lift his arms. All he can do is sit there, clenching his fists as silent tears slide down his face.

Pi whines and he leans down and buries his face in the dog’s fur, breathing in his warm scent, heart slamming in his chest.

*Breathe. Just breathe.*

There’s guilt, somewhere in there, for being so torn up. Especially now, when things are objectively going pretty well for him.

But these are the sort of wounds that don’t heal. Because *God*. He loves Karen so much it takes his breath away sometimes, and he knows he’d die for Matt-

But that doesn’t change the fact that he’d give anything, *anything*, to have his little girl in his arms again. To be able to tell his son he loves him one more time. To wake up next to his wife.

Pi licks his face and Frank laughs. It turns into a sob halfway through. He lifts his head, lets it fall back against the sofa, and slowly drinks his coffee. Thinks, *you’re a mess, Castle, you’re a God damn mess*, but then again, aren’t they all? Shattered in their own different, jagged ways.

There’s a sound on the roof, and he sits up a bit. Matt’s back. The door opens and he trudges down the stairs, barely more than a silhouette in the dim light. His face is hidden in the same mask he still uses that, to be totally honest, really does look like he just made it out of torn scraps of cloth. Less Daredevil, more the Man in Black. He really needs armour, Frank thinks, just looking at him. He worries, sometimes, what just one bullet in the wrong spot could do.

Matt pauses at the base of the stairs.

“Hey,” Frank offers.

“Hey,” Matt replies, cautiously. And then, with a faint smile, “You can sit on the couch, you know.”

That makes Frank snort out a laugh. God, that first night - that first kiss - it feels long ago now. Matt steps closer and eases himself down next to him with a wince Frank doesn’t miss.

“You okay?” Matt asks quietly.

Frank hesitates. There’s zero doubt Matt can tell he’s been crying. It seems like a lot to explain when he just got back, though.

“Sort of,” he replies. “*You* okay? Thought you were just talking?”

Matt huffs out a laugh.

“Got in a *little* scuffle with some muggers on the way back. Nothing’s bleeding, I just bruised a rib.”

“Everything go well?”

“Pretty well. I’ll tell you in a minute. Gonna go shower.”
Frank nods. Matt hesitates, then suddenly leans in and kisses him.

“What was that for?” Frank asks - amused, but not displeased. It wiped a little of the fog from his mind, steadied him a little more in the present.

“Do I need a reason?” Matt replies, but sounds a bit nervous. Frank shakes his head, then reaches up and pulls the other man’s mask off. His hair is dishevelled and he has a very black eye. Frank strokes his cheek for a moment, then pats him on the shoulder.

“Go clean up. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Matt nods. Frank watches him head off to the bathroom. A small smile tugs at his lips; he takes a deep breath.

They’re damaged, but this - this is good. This is okay. It’s easier to remember when the others are around him, when he isn’t just off getting lost in his own head. He feels a little more on solid ground.

Back in bed, Frank lies curled next to Matt, head resting on his shoulder, fingers gently tracing over the blackening bruise low on his chest.

“Is it bad?” Matt asks. His eyes are shut.

“It’s colourful,” Frank replies. He takes Matt’s hand and runs a thumb over his scarred knuckles. “Couldn’t help yourself, huh?”

Matt gives a thin smile. It’s true, though. He’s not such a good Catholic boy after all; Frank’s seen him in a fight. Knows that he doesn’t just mete out violent vigilante justice because he feels some moral obligation; no, he enjoys it. He has anger issues to rival Frank’s; they just draw the line in different places.

Just one more fucked up way they understand each other.

“It felt better tonight,” Matt says - Frank gives him a confused look, then makes a confused noise to go with it just in case he doesn’t catch it. Matt laughs. “Sorry, what I mean is- I wasn’t… after Fisk, going out there sometimes felt… I was worried. What I’d do.”

He clearly doesn’t want to say it, but Frank knows. Frank was there. Let someone stick a gun in your face and not move out of the way? Yeah, Red, I’m pretty fucking worried about that too.

He slips his arm around Matt’s and tugs him closer.

“But it wasn’t like that today,” Matt says. “I don’t know. Maybe… maybe it’s because I wasn’t going after the Hounds, but… it was fine. Felt more like before.”

“Good,” Frank says, and Matt smiles a bit. He reaches down and prods his own bruise hard enough to make himself grimace.

“Foggy won’t be happy,” he comments, and Frank gets this weird possessive jolt that is - well, not a good sign, not really, not when today’s been all about opening new doors and other such fun
polyamorous things. It just - makes it sink in suddenly, makes it seem real; Matt ain’t just his anymore.

He mouths at Matt’s shoulder, suddenly wanting to be close to him - feeling way too needy, too alone, too much like there’s a void in his chest that needs to be filled.

It’s strange to be in bed together and not fucking.

Maybe that’s crude, but it’s true. This - the soft parts, the domestic parts, the parts that sometimes remind him too much of Maria - this is new.

He’s still wrapping his head around it. Not in a bad way, more in a so what are we way. Partners? Boyfriends? Lovers?

He runs a hand down Matt’s chest, careful of a still-healing row of stitches, a few other angry patches of bruising. Honestly, Matt’s a bigger mess of scars than he is, due to a combination of the lack of body armour and more people going after him with knives.

“So today was-”

Matt breaks off, not seeming to quite know how to start the conversation. S’pose Foggy and Karen got their chance to talk; now it’s their turn. Frank stops touching him and rolls to lie next to him instead, their arms just touching. He stares up at the dark ceiling.

“Productive?” he offers, and Matt laughs.

“Guess that’s one way of putting it.”

“After I fell asleep,” Frank says, “What happened with the others?”

Matt takes a deep breath. His eyes are still shut. It’s hard to tell if he’s happy or what.

“They talked,” he says. “I wasn’t eavesdropping, but they seemed okay when I got back. I mainly just talked to Karen. Foggy said yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes to all four of us being - whatever we are. To figuring it out. Yes to you and me.” A pause. “Yes to you and Karen.”

An electric bolt of excitement strikes at his heart, seems to fizzle down every nerve end.

“I see,” he says, with great restraint.

It feels a bit unreal. To want something for so long and finally have it within reach.

Karen.

Just thinking about her makes a shaky excitement build in the pit of his stomach. Karen is sunshine, is warmth and light and hope. Karen is the one damn person who makes him feel like even after everything, he might be able to be a good man.

He’s thought about being with her. He’s wanted it, more than he’ll admit even to himself. Now that it’s an actual possibility, though - he suddenly finds himself nervous.

You want this too much. You’re all assuming it’s gonna work out.
What if you’re wrong?

What if, once you all actually try this, it just falls to pieces?

“You think the two of them are gonna be okay?” he asks carefully. “They’ve been together a while now. This is… it’ll be a big change, even if we’re all in agreement on it.”

“I think so,” Matt says, “But what do I know? I’m the last person out of the four of us to be an authority on relationships. In fact, I’m a negative authority. You should take what I think and do the opposite.”

He’s clearly joking, which is the only reason Frank doesn’t call him out on the self-deprecation.

“I don’t know,” he teases instead, “You have your moments.”

“Like what?”

“Like deciding to make out with me that first time.”

Matt laughs a bit.

“Trust me, I had no clue what I was doing. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Maybe you should continue to not think,” Frank says, then sighs. “Seriously, though, what’s on your mind? About all this. You and Foggy, you wanted that for years.”

Matt swallows hard. Frank rolls over, props himself up on his elbow to look down at him. His eyes are open, now, but he’s just vacantly gazing across the room. In the dark the wells under his eyes look bruise-deep; he seems worn down, fragile.

“I know I should be happy,” Matt says, abruptly. “I should be fucking ecstatic. I have everything I wanted. All three of you. And I… I am happy, but I’m mostly fucking terrified.”

“There’s a lot to lose,” Frank murmurs.

“Exactly. I’m scared that… that if something, if anything happens to you guys it’ll break me. I’m scared that I’ll fuck up and be the one to ruin us. I’m scared that the skeletons in my closet will make one of us realise that all this isn’t worth the trouble.”

His voice is raw and Frank knows, suddenly, there is nothing he can say, no comforting words that can fix this. Not now. These aren’t the sort of wounds that can be healed by verbal platitudes. He just nods, slowly. Sticks close, his arm just nudging the other man’s.

Matt swallows hard.

“Is it awful,” he asks, “If I come into this with secrets?”

That makes Frank freeze.

“How big a secret are we talking here?” he asks, trying to sound calm. “Like another secret identity?”

Matt gives him a the fuck sort of look.
“You think I have time to have another secret identity?” he demands. “I have a day job and a night job already!”

“I dunno,” Frank replies indignantly, “Maybe you’re Spiderman.”

“Hilarious.”

“No, but seriously, Red,” Frank says, “You’re worryin’ me here. What sort of secrets are we-”

“If I’m with them,” Matt cuts in, nervously, “There’s... there’s stuff I should be able to tell them. Right?”

He’s so tense that he’s nearly shaking now and Frank moves forward, leans over him.

“But I can’t,” Matt says desperately. Frank reaches out and cups his cheek, tilting his face towards him. Maybe it’s pointless, not like Matt can fucking see him anyway, but it makes him feel better.

“Can you tell me?” he asks quietly.

“Yeah,” Matt murmurs. “You’re... it’s different with you.”

Frank waits patiently. Lets him gather himself. There’s a look playing out across Matt’s face that Frank knows well; it’s guilt, but not the personal sort. The sort of big-picture, existential, internal-ideological-battle sort that Catholics specialise in.

“Sometimes,” Matt admits finally, the words spilling out in a rush, “I wish I killed Fisk.”

Frank practically collapses by his side.

“You fucking serious?” he demands. “That’s your secret? Jesus, Red, you had me scared it was something way worse!”

“That’s pretty bad,” Matt argues. “You weren’t here! It was a huge thing, I - I was gonna kill him and then Foggy told me-”

“Matt.” Frank grips his shoulders firmly. “That’s not... that’s not even a secret. It’s more like - a private thought.”

“Well,” Matt says defensively, “It’s not a private thought that I want to share with the others. They wouldn’t understand.”

“I think they’d understand more than you think.” He thinks, with a flash, of Karen firing her gun the other night - again and again and again - thinks of smashing Billy’s face against shards of glass, thinks of his scream. Fights back a shiver. “You think they ain’t fucking scared of Fisk too? I bet it’s crossed their minds.”

Matt doesn’t answer. His jaw is clenched and after a second Frank reaches up and cups his cheek.

“Seriously, that’s what you’re carrying around? That’s the most understandable doubt you could have.”

“That and other stuff.” Matt still seems broody; his fists are clenched by his sides. He’s lying flat on his back like he’s on a fucking operating table, still not making any effort to look over at Frank. “I... it was all meant to be fine. Now that he was put away. I beat him, I won, but I still can’t stop... it...
it’s still like… doesn’t feel like I won. Feels like he - he’s still got some sort of power over us. If you were here, would you have killed him?”

Frank bites his lip. It’s not a question he was prepared for, it’s one that means he’s gotta dig deep into a lot of shit that he’s been trying not to think about.

But this is Matt - Matt, who usually either lashes out or runs at the first hint of vulnerability. Matt, who sounds almost pleading now. Who has reached Shakespearean levels of internal conflict.

Frank takes a shaky breath.

“Billy Russo.”

“What?”

“I think I told you about him before. My best friend. Loved him like a brother. We… we were in the army, went on tour together. He was the uncle to my kids. He was family. Like you and Foggy ‘cept without the secret pining for years. We had each other’s backs every day on the battlefield. And when I came back, I didn’t tell him because I wanted to protect him. When my family were dead, he and… and a couple other friends, they were all I had left. Would’ve died for them.”

Matt’s quiet. Frank doesn’t know how much Karen has told him, how much he might’ve looked up.

“‘cept it turns out…” And even now, even now it’s hard to voice, like digging his fingers into a wound barely scarred over. “Turns out he was in on it. Sold me out. He was there the day they killed my family. He was fucking in on it. He played me for a fool and tried to kill me. Let me tell you, Red, that level of betrayal… I can’t even put it into words. I didn’t just want him to die, I wanted him to suffer. Ain’t ever hated someone that much. So much it was-consum ing, I guess.”

Matt nods. He looks upset; he’s turned towards Frank a little more now, his frown softened a little.

“I beat him,” Frank says. “I won. I fucked him up, took everything from him. And I had the chance to kill him, but I didn’t. I made the choice not to. And sure, part of it was revenge. Death seemed too easy. But another part of me knew it… knew it was time to step back. Knew I had to let go.”

“That can’t have been easy,” Matt says.

“It wasn’t.” He takes a deep breath. It feels good to have talked about it, to be honest. To have got it all out in the open. “Still. Ain’t on you to decide who lives or dies. That’s God’s work. Right?”

“That’s what I used to think.”

“What changed?”

“Half my friends died,” Matt says, voice tight, “And I couldn’t help but think if I’d only killed Fisk earlier, it wouldn’t have happened. Exactly like you warned me. You don’t put them down, they get back up. When did you stop believing that?”

“Still do, sometimes,” Frank admits. “Don’t think I’ll ever stop believing it. But… but I also realised that once you start killing, you don’t stop. You just get more and more lost. Is it worth losing yourself to take him down? Your friends don’t want that.”

“Doesn’t matter what they want if they’re in danger.”
Frank pulls a face. It’s an impossible dilemma, to be honest. They could spend the whole night arguing in circles about it.

“Fact is, you didn’t kill him,” he says bluntly. “So there’s no point post-morteming the situation. To answer your question, if you’d asked me last year, yeah, I’d’ve killed him. But if you ask me now - I think I’d try not to.”

It’s very easy to say. To be completely honest, he only 60% believes that and it would depend very heavily on the circumstances. There is a good chance that in the moment he would still shoot Fisk directly in the face and not give a fuck.

But he’s not about to tell Matt that. It isn’t what he needs to hear. And it’s not really a lie since the key word in there is try, so he’s pretty sure his heart won’t give him away. See, you don’t gotta be a lawyer to know a good loophole when you see one!

Matt shifts. He looks torn.

“He knows who I am,” he says slowly. “If anything happens to Vanessa, he might—”

“What, expose you?” Frank snorts. “You realise you’ve got the best cover story possible, right? What the hell’s he gonna do, go around telling people it was the blind guy? He’ll look like an idiot and after what he’s done, no one’s gonna believe him.”

“He’s really fucking smart, Frank.”

“You’re really fucking smart,” Frank tells him, confidently. “So’s Foggy. So’s Karen. You beat him twice, Matt, you can do it again - but it won’t come to that.”

Matt looks away. But the hypothetical situation of Fisk coming back to haunt them isn’t the issue here. Frank reaches out and strokes a hand through his hair.

“You could tell the others all that and I bet they’d understand,” he says. “You underestimate both Nelson’s tolerance for our sort of shit and Karen’s willingness to get her hands dirty. But you don’t have to. Not until you’re ready.”

Matt nods, slowly.

“It was good just to tell you,” he offers, and Frank knows he means thank you. Means a whole lot more than that.

“Good,” he says, and presses a kiss to Matt’s shoulder. “Also, I’ll get cringey and personal because it’s two fucking a.m. but… you know you don’t have to pretend to be okay all the time, right? None of us are okay all the time. We’re all scared and fucked up, hell, I was crying back there because I miss my wife so fucking much. I’m pretty damn terrified as well - terrified that me and Karen won’t work out, terrified that I’ll fuck all this up. Out of all of us I’m the weak link. Nelson’s not exactly sold on me and I’m the most likely to fly off the rails and do something stupid.”

“Don’t underestimate my capacity for flying off the rails,” Matt says with a faint smile.

“Don’t make it a competition,” Frank chuckles. “What I’m trying to say is it ain’t just you, Murdock. All we can do is try to hold it together and make things work.”

Matt nods. He looks tired, but a bit less like the weight of the world is on his shoulders. He reaches up and grips Frank’s wrist, lightly, thumb stroking over his pulse point.
Frank leans over him, presses their lips together. It’s the sort of tender, exploratory kiss that has way too much behind it, the sort with that always reminds him of sparring, where you gotta be in rhythm with one another. They know, by now, how each other works. He knows that Matt will take as much as he can give him, knows the best angle to get in deeper, knows that when Matt goes still it means he’s taking everything in- Frank’s racing pulse, his body temperature, every minute detail that makes him tick.

He feels some of the tension from earlier fall away, the doubts. Turns out making out can be a pretty good distraction from your inner turmoil. He shifts his grip a bit and Matt makes a sharp noise and breaks away.

“Ow,” he says, “You got me right on a bruise.”

“Sorry,” Frank says. Then, “Can’t lie, it kind of hurts to sit up.”

“Let’s just sleep,” Matt offers, and Frank laughs, and Matt grins, and-

A smile looks good on you. It’s the sort of sentimental bullshit he’ll never say out loud but that makes something warm swell on his chest. And they can laugh, together, and even if there’s a good chance someone will wake up screaming, this moment, now, as Frank reaches to pull the blankets up, as they curl up warm by one another’s sides - he knows this, the two of them at least, will be fine, no matter what else changes. Or at least, he can fall asleep believing it.

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The next day is actually fairly relaxing.

After weeks of being shot at, obsessing over the others’ safety, or working their way through the various knots and snarls of their tangled relationship, it’s almost unsettling for nothing to be happening. Frank keeps thinking there’s something he should be busy doing - except there isn’t.

Matt asked him to sort out getting the explosives, and he got it done in no time. Now his only job is to rest and heal. He does end up going to the doctor, because he has to take sick leave from work - it’s been too long and he’s likely to get sacked at this rate, but he cites a car accident for the injuries, lies through his teeth and leaves with stronger prescription painkillers.

Other than that… it’s a lonely day.

He sleeps a lot, still over at Matt’s apartment. Takes Pi for a slow and rather painful walk around the block. Can’t stop wondering what the other three are up to - what conversations they’re having. If things feel different at work, after everything.

Karen texts him throughout the day - little messages that make him smile, heartened (and though he’ll never admit it, relieved) that she’s thinking of him.

_Hope you’re feeling better today! <3_

 still tracking down Cerberus, I think I’ve got a lead - I’ll tell you tonight!

_Wish you were here, it’s more fun working together :(

_How’s everything going?_
It makes him feel included - because, truth be told, some part of himself has felt a little - unsettled. A little uncertain, still, of how he fits into all this. And maybe, if he’s honest, a little too vulnerable. Because it’s not like they’re just a bunch of separate pairs. Karen, Matt and Foggy? That’s a threesome. (He refuses to ever use the word *throuple*).

If he closes his eyes he can picture them all, smiling, laughing, touching, without him.

It’s a weird flavour of jealousy that’s not specifically targeted at anyone. Like, Foggy would be the obvious target, right? Seein’ as he’s the only one Frank’s not technically with, the stand-in for what he desires now; Karen’s warm hands, Matt’s shy smile. But strangely, Frank’s not jealous, not of him, not of the others’ attention.

More like-

More like he just wants to feel like he knows, comfortably, where he fits among all of them. Not that he particularly cares what Foggy thinks of him, but… Matt values his opinion highly, and Karen chose him first of all of them, so. It’s hard to put into words, but suffice to say he feels conflicted and pretty fucking unsettled.

Matt calls him some time after lunch.

“*You doing okay?”* is the first thing he asks.

“You guys keep asking me that,” Frank says, “I’m fine, I’m healing, how are you?”

There’s the sort of pause that makes Frank picture him breathing deep, licking his lips, working himself up to *admit*.

“Good,” Matt says finally. It ain’t a lie. “Things are - good today. They’re going well.”

“I’m glad,” Frank replies. His voice comes out kind of flat. There’s an awkward pause.

“We’re all going to Foggy’s later,” Matt says quietly, “To… to figure this out more. He can pick you up.”

“Sure,” Frank says, and when they hang up he pauses for a long moment, head resting in his hands. It’s not like him to feel *nervous*, but yesterday still kind of feels like it’s hanging unfinished.

Things might be *good*, but they sure as hell aren’t on sure footing yet.

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Sitting in the car with Foggy, he thinks back suddenly to the last time they drove together. He remembers thinking Nelson sure was worked up - now, he realises, almost amused, it’s because Foggy knew about him and Matt.

It’s kind of excruciating for Frank as well, because to be honest, he doesn’t know what to say to the other man. Between everyone else, every other pair, things are clear cut. They want each other. Him and Foggy, though? Kinda weird to be dating the same people.

Foggy’s staring straight ahead, fingers drumming nervously against the wheel. Frank takes pity and breaks the silence first.
“You really okay with all this?” he asks.

Foggy glances at him and gives a quick, nervous smile.

“To be honest? I still need to figure it out. That’s… that’s why we’re all meeting up again today. Better to make sure things can work out early on instead of weeks in.”

“That seems logical,” Frank replies.

Foggy’s shoulders slump and he glances at Frank almost warmly. Like a *we’re in the same boat* sorta look. A *the boat is getting very turbulent* sort of look. A *do you have a lifejacket because I sure don’t* look.

“What do you want out of all this, Castle?” he asks - sounding pretty damn nervous, like a lot demands on the answer.

Well, shit. Frank can hardly escape this conversation when he was the one who went and got personal in the first place. And he… he usually *wouldn’t*—

But things are different now.

He swallows. It’s somehow - harder than he expected to talk about. He thought he was getting better at this, but it’s one thing with Curtis who’s known him from the start. It’s one thing with Red who’s lost just as much as he has.

But somehow - he trusts Foggy. Doesn’t know how or why or when it started, but he does.

“When you lose everything,” he says, “It feels… feels like you’ll never have anything again. I didn’t think I’d ever be anything other than the Punisher. Half hoped I’d die tryin’ so I didn’t have to face the emptiness. But now I… I think I’m ready to move on. Start something new so I don’t end up stuck. Try to figure out who I want to be after everything I used to have got torn away.”

Foggy nods. His eyes are soft and understanding. It feels like a weight’s lifted away from Frank’s shoulders; the tension in the car eases a little.

“I know I… I didn’t exactly jump for joy when I found out about you and Matt,” he admits. “But I think you’re good for each other. You’re in the same boat. Kinda.”

“Kinda,” Frank agrees.

Foggy opens his mouth, shuts it, then forces the next words out in a rush.

“He… he’s really not okay, is he? You know about it, right?”

Frank bites his lip, glances at him sidelong. *How much does he know?* It ain’t his place to give away Matt’s secrets; at the same time, he can tell how much it’s tearing Foggy up inside not knowing.

“It’s bad,” Foggy continues. “Isn’t it? I think he was underplaying it when he told me.”

“It’s not good,” Frank says, and that seems to tell Foggy everything he needs to know. His lips twist.

“I’m scared for him.” His knuckles turn white where they’re gripping the wheel. “I… he bottles these things up. It’s not healthy. I was trying to figure out someone he might be able to talk to. His priest used to help, but he got killed in front of him.”
“Jesus,” Frank manages.

“His mother, maybe, but - things are kind of weird there. Or… you know the Defenders? Luke Cage and all that? Back when that whole Midland thing went down.”

“Saw it on the news,” Frank says, singularly unimpressed.

“Danny Rand might know someone,” Foggy says, “But I don’t think Matt got in touch with them after he came back. They’re probably pretty pissed he never told them he was alive.”

“Why would he?” is Frank’s rather blase response to that. “They weren’t friends.”

“Yeah, but they worked together.”

“Once.”

“Still! They were like the Avengers of Hell’s Kitchen!”

“For about five minutes,” Frank points out, “Then they broke up again because Matt died.”

He breaks off at the look on Foggy’s face. At the words that rattle around in his head. I knew I wasn’t getting out of Midland. God, this whole situation’s pretty fuckin’ grim. “Also, The Avengers of Hell’s Kitchen probably sounds badass in your head but you realise Hell’s Kitchen is like, the tiniest, grottiest shithole part of NYC.”

“It’s not the tiniest,” Foggy argues. “Can you not. This is my home suburb. Matt’s too.”

“Sorry, sorry.” He raises his hands. “You guys are doing good work here. Sure, talk to Rand. That’s a good idea.”

There’s a pause. He can see Foggy’s brows creasing, his mind racing a mile a minute. After a moment he casts Frank a little sidelong glance.

“He barely talked to me about it,” he says, voice soft and vulnerable. “He told me some but I know this was brewing for ages. How… how bad is it?”

Given the choice, Frank would rather like to leap out of the moving car to avoid this conversation. There is no easy way to tell someone their best friend tried to kill themselves. He’s not… he’s no Curtis, he doesn’t know the right words to say. Doesn’t know if he should say anything. These situations need a soft touch and if he doesn’t do it right he’s gonna break something.

“He lost a lot of people in a short span of time,” he replies carefully. “He had to take down Fisk, again. He feels like he failed the city. It’s bad. It’s pretty damn bad.”

Foggy swallows hard.

“Since about the time when you arrived,” he blurts out, “Until we took down Fisk, it was just… just this ongoing stream of trauma. Just shit after shit after shit.”

The words are coming out in a babbling rush. Like he’s wanted to say this for ages but had no one to direct it to. Sometimes, Frank thinks, it’s easier with someone you don’t know as well - to drag things out into the light you usually would refuse to so much as look at.

“And we weren’t together for a lot of it,” Foggy continues, a bit hysterically. “We weren’t working
together. And knowing how… how he feels about me now - I don’t know. It feels different, thinking back on it. Feels worse, somehow. How distant we got… we weren’t even talking. Even before Midland, things like Elektra dying… I wasn’t there with him.”

“That’s not on you,” Frank says quietly. “Matt builds walls.”

“There’s a lot I wish I could go back and do over again.”

“I bet Matt feels the same way.” The whole conversation feels like an echo of last night. Jesus, these people need some serious work on their communication. “The past doesn’t matter now, Nelson. You can’t change it. Just let it help you work on the future.”

Foggy gives him a strange look that he can’t figure out, except that it makes him feel like a bug pinned under a microscope.

“What?” he demands.

“Nothing.” Foggy glances away, pulling into his apartment car park now. “Just - you’re not what I expected.”

“Neither are you,” Frank mutters. But it’s true - he hadn’t given Nelson much thought during the trial, but the more he sees him with the others - the more time they spend together…

He’s warm, and funny, and startlingly brave, and it surprises Frank how much he likes the other man. How much part of him wants Foggy to like him, too.

There’s a slightly awkward silence as they get out of the car and head up to the apartment.

Frank hasn’t been here before. It’s a nice place - clearly much more expensive that Karen or Matt’s apartments, and certainly leagues above any of his old safehouses or the little flat he rents now. Probably from back when Foggy was getting those big dollars working at some swanky law firm.

When they step into his apartment, Frank has to pause, the breath nearly crushed from his chest.

Karen and Matt are sitting together on the couch - leaning in close, murmuring to one another, both of them smiling. For once they look completely carefree and unburdened, and easy in each other’s company; his arm draped just over her shoulders, her hand on his knee.

It makes him feel bizarrely emotional - the two of them, there, together. Especially when they both look up and smile at him. God, he wants this. So much. Too much.

“I’ll make you a drink,” Foggy says, and marches into the kitchenette.

“Is this a date?” Frank calls after him, because might as well know upfront.

“Kinda?” Foggy replies, seeming relieved someone brought it up. Then, “Karen was being the worst this morning. She kept insisting we do an activity together. I was like, can’t we just hang out? Nope. Activity. And that activity apparently had to be strip poker.”

“Look,” Karen laughs, “I thought we could just get that part rolling. Break through the inhibitions or whatever.”

“Well, it’s a terrible idea,” Foggy shoots back, “Firstly, Matt can’t see the fucking cards, and secondly, he can tell when people are lying! So we can’t play poker, those are the two most important criteria!”
Frank has... found it kind of hard to wrap his head around Foggy-and-Karen as a thing, but seeing the two of them teasing each other, it’s like it all falls into place. Matt laughs, and Frank goes over and sits next to him. Maybe it’s weird, but he just gravitates towards the familiarity. At least with Red he knows how things work, knows they do work. Knows they fit together.

Karen leans across Matt and plants a kiss on Frank’s cheek. The smell of her perfume, the brush of her hair against his neck, makes heat rise to his face. She jumps up off the couch a second later.

“Let’s put on some music,” she declares.

A fantastic idea, in Frank’s opinion. Every time silence falls between them, the awkwardness rises.

“Since we might as well get business out of the way,” Matt says abruptly - Foggy groans, and Matt shoots him a glare - “Tomorrow night I’m going to start scoping out those tunnels. Once I have an idea of where the Hounds are operating I’ll pass the information on to the gangs I talked with the other night. And Karen’s got a lead on this Cerberus guy that we’re gonna follow up tomorrow afternoon.”

“Sounds good,” Frank says. “I’ll come with you. Don’t start,” he adds, when Matt opens his mouth to no doubt suggest something like rest and recover first. “I’m fine. I’ll take it slow.”

The music starts up, the week’s most popular hits on the radio. Foggy walks back over and passes Frank a glass.

“Matt?” he offers, but Matt shakes his head.

“Going on patrol later. Thanks though.”

Foggy sits on the arm chair. Karen comes back over and perches on the arm rest next to him; his hand drapes easily over her leg. Frank leans against Matt’s side and turns towards him. He’s not wearing his glasses, but his eyes are shut. He wonders suddenly what the other man can hear, can sense between the four of them. Things feel easy, pressed up against him like this. Easy and warm. But Karen and Foggy are sitting on the opposite side of the room to them, two separate pairs.

That isn’t what tonight is about.

He looks over and meets Karen’s eyes. She smiles back at him, then jumps up and holds out a hand.

“Let’s dance,” she suggests.

He glances at Foggy, but he just grins, and Frank gets up, feeling quite self conscious as Karen grabs his hand and drags him to the side of the room. It’s a slow song and she clutches him tight as they shuffle back and forth. He doesn’t think he’s danced since his wedding; he’s not big on it. Two left feet unless he’s in a fight.

Still - his hand settles easily on Karen’s hip, holding her close. He wants this all too much.

They sway back and forth, moving to the music. He’s too aware of Foggy’s gaze on them. Of Karen’s blue, blue eyes boring into his, of her small waist under his hands, her pulse throbbing under his thumb where he’s clutching her hand.

They pivot, turn. He’s at a good angle to see the others. Foggy has moved over and taken the spot where Frank was before, by Matt’s side. He has an arm around the other man’s shoulders, their heads bent close.
Frank nearly steps on Karen’s foot. She squeezes his hand.

“Follow,” she whispers, and he lets her take the lead. Let’s her shift her grip so their fingers are tangled together, and lean in to rest her forehead against his. He drinks in her warmth, the smell of her shampoo, her soft hand over his-

Over on the couch, Foggy is murmuring something in Matt’s ear. Frank’s eyes keep dragging back towards them. Foggy ducks his head, mouths at Matt’s jaw - it makes him tilt his head back, baring the long line of his throat. Makes a hot flash like jealousy stab through Frank’s gut.

Well, this isn’t good.

This is kind of stupid, actually, since he’s literally dancing with Foggy’s girlfriend right now. But it just - feels like something still isn’t quite sitting right, especially when Foggy looks up and catches him staring and their eyes meet really fucking awkwardly.

“Frank,” Karen whispers, and her hand is on his cheek. She turns his head back towards her. There’s something nervous in her eyes, and on impulse Frank leans in and presses their lips together.

It’s everything he wanted.

He’s spent far too long imagining this moment. And it’s - perfect, to be honest. The way she gasps a little against his mouth, and then grips the back of his neck and tugs him in, her fingers curling in his hair, her body pressed soft and warm to his-

Is it kind of fucked up that he hopes Foggy’s watching?

It is, especially because he… he likes the other man, he’s got nothing against him. Just. He’s too aware that they’re not alone-

Karen’s lips work against his; he stumbles forward, pulling her with him, and her hands trail down his back, and-

He gets a sudden panicked flash, a jolt like someone’s grabbed his heart and is squeezing it nearly hard enough to burst.

With Matt, it’s different. Matt is rough edges and stubble and scars. Matt doesn’t make Frank think of Maria.

He starts to pull back - but Karen grips his face again, and he meets her eyes - soft, concerned, so fucking blue - her warm hands settle him and he takes a deep breath, and pushes Maria from his mind. This is not her. This is-

This is something else, something new-

This is something he is allowed. He shouldn’t feel guilty. He lets Karen take the lead, lets her push him against the wall and grip his hair and kiss him until he’s flushed and breathless, and for a moment, he can lose himself.

They finally break apart. Karen slumps against him and starts laughing and he can’t help the way he breaks into a grin as well.

“Okay?” Karen asks, and he nods.

They turn towards the others. They’re making out on the couch, Matt’s shirt clutched in Foggy’s
fists. As they watch, the two of them pull apart, and Karen crosses the room towards them.

“My turn,” she says - she reaches out and draws Matt up into her arms. The sight of them together - her arms curled around his neck, long and elegant like a swan’s neck, his hands on her back pulling her as close to him as possible - make Frank’s mouth suddenly dry with want, make heat rise in his gut. He clenches his fists.

Foggy, next to him, is staring too. After a second they look at each other and - and dear God is it the most fucking awkward position Frank’s ever been in. They’re just sort of staring at each other like stunned mullets. Like hey, they’re making out, good times. And here we are. Watching. What the fuck.

After a second Frank shakes himself. They’re all meant to be doing this, right? So he walks up to them and puts a hand on Matt’s shoulder and when the two of them pull apart, he reaches up and grips Matt’s jaw and drags his head around to kiss him, too. Matt makes a muffled sound that might be his name. Frank feels Karen reach up and run her fingers down his spine, and pushes back a shudder-

And then leans in to kiss her, too, and the thought that a second later it was Matt’s lips on hers sends a bolt of desire through him like a bullet-

Except when they pull apart, he sees Foggy standing there - alone, and watching them, and thoroughly awkward.

“Foggy,” Karen breathes, noticing as well, and walks over to grab him then-

Which leaves Matt and Frank standing there next to each other. It’s like the world’s weirdest, most confusing game of pass the parcel.

Matt seems a bit dazed, gaze fixed vacantly at the wall, breathing fast. Frank grips the back of his neck, steadies him.

“You okay?” he asks.

Matt’s lips twitch.

“This is getting head-spinningly complicated,” he admits.

“What, need me to draw you a diagram?”

Matt snorts.

“It’d just be a tangled mess. Also, I wouldn’t be able to see it.”

Frank opens his mouth to reply but before he can say anything, Foggy - Karen’s arms around his waist and her mouth on his neck - suddenly reaches an arm out towards them.

“C’mere, Matty,” he says, and a second later Frank’s the one standing there on his own, watching them.

Yeah, okay, it kind of sucks.

He doesn’t really know what to do with his hands. And doesn’t like that he does feel left out, feels a bit upset watching the three of them - especially because, despite this being the first time they’re trying this, they already seem to have it down pat. A seamless push and pull, moving between one
another fluid as water. Karen’s kissing Matt; Foggy’s pressed up against his back. Then Matt’s turning to kiss him while Karen runs a hand through Foggy’s hair. The sort of wordless communication that must come with knowing each other so well that it’s almost second nature. Between the three of them, he knows, there’s no jealousy. Between the three of them…

Well, Frank ain’t ever been one not to take what he wants. How long’s an appropriate amount of time to let them do their thing? Sixty seconds? He pushes his way back in, except that in turn pushes Foggy out, except apparently he’s not about to stand for that either because Frank’s barely gotten hold of Karen than Foggy is wrapping his arms around her waist to reel her close to him instead.

They all end up in what can only be described as a tangle, which coincides with about when the music stops and the radio goes to an ad break. There’s a very uncomfortable pause.

“Time out,” Foggy says, “This needs…”

“Practice,” Karen contributes, very optimistically.

“Needs a fucking queue is what,” Frank mutters. “Needs one of those little machines they use at the deli where you get a number and wait your turn.”

“I know you’re joking,” Foggy says, “But my family literally owns a butcher’s shop, so if you think it’d help…”

Matt buries his face in Frank’s shoulder and starts shaking with silent yet distinctly hysterical laughter.

“Oh my God, we are not forming a queue,” Karen says, throwing her hands up. “You’re all ridiculous. Practice. That’s all we need. Give this time. We will be a well oiled machine.”

Frank thinks of several filthy jokes and bites all of them back.

“Let’s get dinner!” Karen decides, clapping her hands together.

She turns away, seemingly cheerful as ever, but Frank… Frank is feeling-

Feeling like he wants this, but also like he can see all the problems they’re gonna run into, like looming black storm clouds on the horizon. And one look at Foggy’s face makes it obvious that he sees them, too.

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