Summary

It’s been two months since the hotel and the chaos and the carousel. Matt died mysteriously, and now, as a new year begins, Karen Page is feeling more alone than ever. Death seems to cling to her, and even though Frank Castle is out there (and leaving little gifts on her windowsill), he isn’t talking.

Everything changes again when Karen is confronted by her past. Her deepest secret (her “first rodeo”) was buried in a small-town cemetery nearly a decade ago, but now it’s haunting her again. Jason Chatham, Todd’s older brother, has learned that it was Karen who was truly responsible for Todd’s death. He’s out for revenge, any way he can get it, and in order to survive this shit storm Karen is going to need to trust someone with her secrets.

Good thing she knows a dead man. After all, dead men tell no tales.

OR:

The one where Karen knows all of Frank’s secrets, but he doesn't know any of hers. She learns to trust him with more than her life, and he learns what ‘after’ might look like.

Notes

The reticent volcano keeps
His never slumbering plan;
Confided are his projects pink
To no precarious man.

If nature will not tell the tale
Jehovah told to her,
Can human nature not survive
Without a listener?

Admonished by her buckled lips
Let every babbler be.
The only secret people keep
Is Immortality.

-The Reticent Volcano Keeps by Emily Dickinson
Funerals aren’t for the dead. They’re for the living. They’re a way to process grief, to say goodbye, to neatly wrap up a complex life in a simple wood box. Funerals were a reminder of mortality, that every life ends, that what happens after is a secret, one more tightly kept than any other. Humans had stolen fire from the gods, and yet death remained a mystery.

Karen sat in the arching vaults of the St. Matthews and listened as the other mourners sang of grace. She wondered how many of them knew Matt’s secret, knew the whole truth of his demise. He hadn’t died because he was blind; because of some accident he couldn’t see coming.

He’d died because he was Daredevil, because he couldn’t let anything go, because he was the most idealistic and hopeful person Karen had ever met. And now he was gone, too.

When the service was done and the tears were dried and incense smoke pooled with prayers in the vaults of the cathedral, Karen tried to slip out the door.

“It was Foggy, brushing off Marci’s hands and moving away from his family. On another day Karen would have smiled at how much like his mother Foggy looked. The same wide mouth, the same grin, the same kind eyes.

There’s a wake after, it’s two blocks-

“I can’t, Foggy,” said Karen. “I-”

She choked on all the things she couldn’t say yet.

“Okay,” he said. “You’re okay, right?”

Karen cocked her head to the side, one eyebrow raised, and Foggy rolled his eyes. They were a little red; he’d been crying. But it looked like he was holding it together. Of the two of them (the only two left who knew), it should be him slipping away for some quiet. It should be Foggy slinking home.
“I mean, obviously you aren’t alright,” said Foggy. “But-”

Karen tugged him in for a hug. He smelled more expensive these days, like cologne and fifty dollar hair wax and chemical-free dry cleaners. Foggy was going to be okay. “I’m fine,” she told him.

*I’m never going to be fine.* She needed to accept that, and accept it now.

“Let’s get a drink sometime, okay? We could go to Josie’s, or meet closer to the paper?”

“Sounds good,” said Karen, bobbing her head. She didn’t want to go to Josie’s; Josie’s belonged to the Karen who didn’t know anything about vigilantes, to the Karen who’d thought she was building some kind of ...family, with Nelson and Murdock.

It was too saturated with memories, now.

Waving over her shoulder to Foggy, Karen slipped out onto the sidewalk, tugging her coat more closely around her. It was a new year, and January in New York was always bitter.

It was a twenty minute walk to her apartment, this new one with fob-in front doors and no bullets in the walls. It even had a bedroom, one with *walls.* She’d loved it, even though she could barely afford it. It had been another clean start.

As Karen changed out of her funeral dress and into weekend clothes (sweater, skinny jeans, knock-off vans) she ran through the list of things she’d do tonight rather than mourn. She’d set up a meeting with a source; had done it half-deliberately. If she was busy, if she was chasing stories and parsing truths, she wouldn’t have time to cry. She wouldn’t give the loneliness and the grief any space inside her. Maybe you couldn’t outrun your problems, but you could sure as hell try to outwork them.

Before she left she wandered to her windows. There was the city before her, and for a girl who’d grown up in Fagan Corners, the view would never get old. She loved looking out, and part of her had grown comfortable with the fact that others could look in. For a while, when those roses had been fresh, she’d counted on it.

There was a little blue Jeep on her windowsill. She slid up the glass and pulled in the car, ignoring
the icy air eddying around her. The little metal toy was slightly scratched, and she wondered where Frank had found it. She wondered if his heart clenched when he saw it the way hers just had.

Frank was out there, somewhere, watching her. He was alive, he was around.

And he wasn’t talking to her.

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Her source was in a denim jacket and a skirt that could have been a bandeau bra on a different woman.

“Laylah? I’m Karen,” she said, stepping into the shadow of the riverside warehouse. “Thanks for agreeing to meet with me.”

“You have the cash, right?” Laylah asked, fidgeting with the hem of her jacket. The tips of her hair had been bleached nearly white, leaving the rest in brunette scraggles.

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” said Karen, and she pulled the folded twenties from the inside of her jacket pocket. She’d learned not to show her wallet to potential contacts. “I uh, I brought you some other stuff, too. Thought you might need it.”

She passed over the plastic grocery bag and shoved her hands deep in the pockets of her coat. It was even colder here by the river, where the wind had enough space to pick up speed. January didn’t make being a New Yorker easy, especially for one living in the margins like Laylah.

Laylah rummaged through the bag, looking at the makeup remover wipes, the hand warmers, and the socks. “Yeah, thanks,” she said. “This was actually pretty nice. The church ladies, they always give me a Bible, you know? I can actually use this stuff.”

“Yeah, good,” said Karen, bobbing her head. Asking the first question never got easier, not with sources like this.

“What did you want to talk about?” asked Laylah. “You said I could be anonymous, right?”
“Of course,” said Karen, pulling her notebook out of her other coat pocket. “I wanted to ask you about a couple, ah, murders, that happened recently?”

“Sandi and Quinesha,” she said flatly. “Look, I don’t know who killed them-”

“No, no,” said Karen, reaching out to grab the other woman’s arm. “I know that. I just wanted to know where they hung out, if they’d talked about anyone new in the area recently.”

Karen could feel Laylah’s eyes scanning her up and down.

“Shit, lady, don’t tell me you’re thinking of going down there,” she said. “Ass like yours, you’ll get snatched in no time.”

“I’ll be fine,” said Karen, tapping the pen against the top of the notebook. “You don’t need to worry about me.” Worry about yourself. I could take you to a shelter…

It was patronizing and Karen wouldn't say it, but she could think it. She could want something better for these women.

“They both hung out down near the Garment District, yeah? There’s this shit bar on Tenth Ave, one of them no-name places. That’s all I got.”

“Did they have a manager?” Karen asked, scribbling in the shorthand she was trying to teach herself on the fly. Ben always made this look easier.

“No, they didn’t have a pimp if that’s what you’re asking. A few other girls hang out down there.”

“Sure,” said Karen. She always nodded, always acted like she understood. It helped, seemed to get people to open up to her more easily. Karen Page, secretsmith. Really, that’s what she’d learned over her year at the Bulletin: if you want someone to tell your their secrets, treat them nicely. Treat them like a person; don’t get hardened by the crime you type up everyday.
“If you go down there- and you shouldn’t- Crystal might like the stuff you brought me tonight. And she’s a sucker for chapstick, right? Says you can’t give good head with your lips peeling off.” Laylah smiles for a minute, and Karen can see the twenty-something Laylah could have been if the world was different.

“Crystal,” said Karen. “You’re friends?”

She has the information she needs, but she can spend another fifteen minutes out here in the wind with Laylah. She’s a person, a person that probably not many people listen to.

“Yeah, we lived together for a while, us and a couple other girls.”

“I did that when I moved to the city,” said Karen. “I lived in a one bedroom apartment with three other girls. We had two twin beds out in the living room instead of a couch. Lofted on those bricks, so we could store stuff under them.”

“Yeah? You did that?”

“Uh huh.” Karen was surprised to find herself smiling at the memory. “Two of them were born here, and they were always making up things for me to do so I’d be a ‘real’ New Yorker.”

“You just gotta love the city,” Laylah said, turning so her back was to the wind. “Look, I gotta get back out on the street, but this was good. You got a card or something? Case I think of anything else?”

“Sure,” said Karen, digging in her pocket. “Sure.” She passed over the little card, which disappeared into the denim jacket.

“Got everything you need?” asked Laylah, walking back down the alley.

“Yes, thanks again,” said Karen. Laylah turned at the corner and walked south while Karen headed north and called a cab. She needed to replace Ben’s car; she thought that every time she was out chasing a lead like this, but fuck- she’d used most of her savings in the move, and storage and insurance in Hell’s Kitchen was like making two rent payments.
A cab met her after about ten minutes, and she tried to keep her face averted from the dashboard cam. After everything, she wasn’t exactly comfortable being tracked.

Karen pulled out her notebook and scribbled thoughts in it as they worked their way north, back to her street. Violent crime against women was up nineteen percent since January of two years ago, and it had been topped off by the murders of four sex workers in three weeks. Something new was brewing in Hell’s Kitchen, and Karen Page wasn’t about to let people ignore it.

Ellison was against it; he said that after Frank Castle’s return and Russo’s arraignment and Fisk’s rise, the city needed some peace. Needed some good news, or at least a break from the bad news.

And okay, maybe that was true, maybe something good should happen, but this was real life, right? Should happen didn’t actually matter. Women were dying, poor women, women without families, and she was going to tell their stories. Someone should.

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There was a package just inside her door when she got back. A sticky note on top said: Hey Karen. UPS dropped this off and it was taking up space in the office. Figured I’d bring it up for you, hope you don’t mind. I got an A on that ethics exam! -Robbie.

Karen smiled a little as she carried the box into the kitchen with her. She’d have to pick up a six pack for the college kid/ night manager next time she was out. Foggy thought he had a crush on her, but Karen thought she was way too old for him.

Tonight she felt- oh, somewhere between thirty and three hundred years old.

Now that she was back inside, now that she was winding down in the gloom of her home, she could feel the grief edging back in, the creeping fear that this was all she’d ever have: dark corners, quiet rooms, and a cold space in the bed next to her.

Karen toed off her shoes. Her next stop was the fridge- jar of jelly, three eggs, two beers. Something sticky spilled on the bottom shelf. An expired bag of spinach.

Beer for dinner, then. She sipped at it as she tore open the package, and could almost hear Matt’s voice chiding her: alcohol on an empty stomach, Page? You know that’s a depressant, right?
“Yeah, yeah,” she mumbled to herself as she tossed packing peanuts in the trash.

She’d ordered the lamp just hours into New Years Day. One of those late-night impulses people talk about. One of those grief impulses that are less discussed.

It takes only a minute to put it together and less to plug it in. The UV lamp sits on her windowsill, making some kind of statement, something that she should be able to put into words. She was a journalist now, right? She should know what to say.

The half-dead roses are on a side table, a few shriveled leaves on the wood beside the pot. She carried it over and sets it in the glow of this false, indoor sun. The light shines off the dark window, reflecting her: shapeless black sweater, darkwash jeans, socked feet. She still has on her funeral makeup and pearls, and if she turns her head quickly enough she can smell incense clinging to her hair.

Matt would have liked today’s mass.

Karen was out of tasks. She was out of things to do and objectives to focus on and just like that the grief roared up, the loneliness swallowed her, and like the rising of the tide her tears came, salty and bitter.

She cried in the light of the roses in the window.

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Frank’s in a bad fucking mood by the time he’s driven all the way to Greenpoint. Curtis just had to live in Brooklyn, didn’t he.

There’s two hour parking a couple blocks from the Episcopalian church where group meets, and Frank hiked there with the hood of his coat pulled up over his ears. It was fucking cold, and his back hurt.

Last time he was working construction he’d welcomed the pain, welcomed how he could get mindlessly lost in the swinging of the hammer and the tackiness of his burst blisters against the
handle. Now the monotony gave him nothing to do but think, and introspection was never his fucking game.

He stopped by the church office on his way in and dropped off an envelope of cash, rent for the next month of meetings. It’s the least he could do, and there’s some kind of justice in it: Frank Castle stole hundreds of thousands of dollars from drug dealers and arms runners and skin salesmen all over the city. Now it’s funding therapy for a bunch of vets. Everything goes around.

Curtis was in the basement, setting up chairs, and Frank took the paperback out of his pocket and dropped it in the spot where Curtis always sat.

“There’s coffee if you want it,” said Curtis, the way he always did, and Frank huffed an agreement. The coffee was always shit, and he always drank it.

“What’d you think of the book?” Curtis asked, sitting gingerly and resting his leg out in front of him. Maybe the cold bothered him, too.

“Sad. All the books you give me are fucking sad. What, was happiness invented in the nineteen nineties? Or maybe, uh, maybe Disney has the patent on it, right?”

Curtis grinned the way Frank hoped he would. “It’s To Kill A Mockingbird, Frank. Pretty sure it’s not supposed to be happy.”

“Yeah,” said Frank as a couple other vets trickled in. “Suppose so.”

Curtis doesn’t open with a prayer, and it’s the only reason Frank can come to these meetings. If they had, if they were supposed to ask some higher power for help with problems that were exclusively of man’s creation, Frank wouldn’t be able to take it. They’d dug themselves in this hole, and they’d damn well claw their way back out.

Ruby talks first this time. He’s a big guy, too big for the little-old-lady name, and he’s covered in tats. Former army, deployed twice. Frank- no, Pete Castiglione- holds the records for deployments. He’s thankful for that, thankful that Madani had allowed his alias to still be a Marine. Pete had never been married, had never been a father, but at least he could keep something. Could hang on to a sliver of the identity he’d worn before.
“I can’t get over it, you know?” said Ruby. “I can’t stop thinking about how different it was over there. Here, every day the news is on and some scum has been murdered in an alley, right? And the cops investigate and they always get the guy’s mom or girlfriend on there crying about he was such a good guy. We’d kill the same kind of guys out in the desert and gets promoted for it.”

Curtis’ eyes don’t even flick to Frank, and Frank knows, because he’s watching. There’s something about both of them knowing- it means Frank doesn’t have to get defensive anymore.

Evans shifts next to Frank. “You talking vigilantes, again?”

“No- no, they’re gone, anyway. Least that’s what the news says, right?” said Ruby, rubbing his palms down his thighs. “I’m just- wondering. Why it’s okay for guys like that to die in the Middle East, but here it’s a big fucking deal.”

“They’re Americans,” says- ah, Frank can’t remember his name. Younger kid, did one tour and drove over an IED. Traumatic brain injury, and always smells like fry oil. “They’ve got a right to a trial, same as you and me.”

“So that’s it?” asks Ruby. “American bad guys get trials, but foreign bad guys can get gunned down?

Frank leaned his elbows on his knees and looked down at his boots, very definitely not grinning.

“Castiglione?” asks Curtis.

He always did have a sick sense of humor. “Yeah?” Frank asks, looking up, one eyebrow raised. This is almost funny- him and Curtis sitting here with this group of veterans, all of whom are unknowingly debating the merits of battlefield justice with Frank fucking Castle. If he’s honest, Frank never thought he’d get to this point. He never thought he’d be trying to not to smile over the all the men he’d dropped around the city.

“You got any thoughts on this? Been a while since you chimed in.”

Frank shrugs and slouched back in his chair. “Way I see it, the only difference is that out there, it was death by committee. The chain of command made a decision, and we acted on it.” He’s had plenty of time to think about this. Prison, bunker, the construction sites.
The room was quiet, and across the circle Ruby was nodding slowly.

“People don’t like to be cut out of the decision making process,” said Frank, and then settled back, done on the topic.

“Yeah, just ask my wife,” cracks Johnson.

The topic shifts. People report on things that bothered them (even in the privacy of his own head Frank refuses to use the word triggered), things they did well. It's group, and it's mostly good. These people understand what a foreign place home can be sometimes.

He was on only the early shift today, and it's only five when group ends, so he jogs back to his truck and thinks he can probably make it to the end of Red’s funeral if traffic on the bridge isn’t too bad.

It’s terrible, and he misses the service. He wouldn’t have gone, not in. Frank Castle or Pete Castiglione or the Punisher or whoever the hell he is now, with so much blood soaked into his skin, doesn’t need to sit in church. But he’d have- christ, he’d have sat up on the roof of the cathedral and watched the skyline Red had loved so much. Frank was in a unique position to know that that’s where Matt Murdock had really lived. He’d loved the city more than he’d loved anything else.

Instead, because it’s dark and the funeral is over, Frank finds parking and tails Karen back to her place.

She changes into jeans, and they’re still a novelty to him. He knew she was leggy, but shit man, the way the denim clings it looks like her legs go all the way up to her shoulders.

He sees her find the little Jeep he left, the one that he’d found in a shitty bodega by the construction site. It had reminded him so much of little Frankie, and so much of Karen. She’d mentioned it to him, the first time they’d talked. She’d remember. She seemed to remember everything. (Everything but that I’m dead to her. She remembers everything except the fact that she’s better off without me.)

She turned the little car over and over in those slim fingers of hers, and Frank wondered if this was all a mistake. If he should fuck off, move to some other city and leave Karen in peace. But he can’t, the idea hurts too much, so here he stays in purgatory: too much of an asshole to talk with her, but not stupid enough to let her think he’s dead. Again. Frank Castle is a walking mess of mistakes, but at least he learns from them. He won’t let Karen mourn his non-death twice.
He doesn’t deserve it.

She carried the Jeep into her bedroom and almost immediately reappeared, purse over one shoulder, heading out her door. It wasn’t normal for her to head out twice, and since Frank didn’t have any plans (he could almost hear David’s voice: *full schedule of brooding and gun polishing, huh?*) he tailed her down to the waterfront.

“The fuck you onto, Page?” Frank muttered to himself when she steps into the shadow of a Hudson warehouse along the docks. He wished he was up higher so he could see if anything was coming at them, but he’s not putting that much space between the two of them, not down here.

Curtis had called Frank a shit magnet of the highest order, and Frank agrees wholeheartedly, but he’d like to make one addition: he’s a magnet for shit, and Karen is a magnet for trouble. He knows firsthand that she’ll run towards it headfirst.

She talks to the other woman for about fifteen minutes after passing over a soft-looking grocery bag, and then they go their separate ways back at the corner. He’s followed her like this to meetings before, and most of the time they’re quiet. Frank isn’t willing to settle for *most of the time*. It’s worse now that she doesn’t have a car. At least she could get away efficiently when she only has to sprint back to a locked car, but now that she has to wait for a cab there are so many variables in play that it makes Frank’s head ache and fingers twitch.

He gets it. Fuck knows he spends more on his car than he does on his apartment, but this is a safety issue. This is a Karen safety issue. The first time he’d ever raised his voice to the woman, he’d been so furious and confused as to how she could still- after *everything*- think that he didn’t have to keep her safe. Where the fuck had she been?

He fights through traffic to follow her cab, and misses her walking down her block as he hunts for parking, along with half the city. People are home and tired and their feet hurt. He can’t say he blames them.

He finally parks and jogs into the alley of the apartment building across from hers. It takes him seconds to pull himself up into the fire escape and to work from there to the roof. He likes this rooftop. It’s practically become a second (fifth? ninetieth?) home.

As he settled in, she was messing around in her kitchen, and then she moved to the window and plugged something in. It was a light, white and brilliant, and she set a familiar pot under the lamp.
He’d given her those roses before, before—everything.

She’s trying to keep the fucking flowers alive. She really is all heart.

He watches her watching the roses, her hands on her hips, and as he turns to go he sees her face crumple, eyes squeezing shut, and then she’s sinking to the floor, her face in her hands, shoulders shaking.

If he wasn’t such an asshole he’d go comfort her; he knows how it feels to grieve alone. If he wasn’t such an asshole he’d stop watching. If he was a better man he wouldn’t be jealous of Matt Murdock. Red wasn’t worth her tears. He never was. Nobody was.

Frank holds vigil until Karen’s breathing evens out and she stumbles into her bedroom. Then he leaves: Karen Page has one problem he knows he can solve.
Frank’s waiting for her outside the Bulletin when she leaves the next evening. He doesn’t have a blanket draped over his head this time, but he does have the same sheepish, half-embarrassed/half-pleased expression. He’d been leaning against a tree sipping a coffee and looking for all the world like any other guy waiting to walk someone home from work.

He looked… good. His hair was longer on top, maybe a couple inches at most, but still buzzed in a military fade. It’s enough to soften the angles of his face, and his close-cropped beard obscures a jaw on which Karen is pretty sure she could cut herself slapping. Which she’s still tempted to do, because how dare he just… appear like this?

“It’s been two months, Frank,” she said, striding down the sidewalk slightly faster than she might have normally. He falls in beside her, the coffee held loosely at his side.

“Yeah.”

One word, and she feels a little guilty. He’d let her know he was alive, and that’s more than he’d done before. *You did tell him he was dead to you,* a voice reminds her.

She dreams of that night, sometimes. She dreams of car crashes: sometimes Kevin is there beside her, and sometimes Frank, and sometimes she’s alone. Sometimes Kevin tells her that *she’s* dead to him. Sometimes she tells Frank (but not Kevin. Never Kevin.)

Besides, she and Frank weren’t ever exactly friends. They weren’t… anything with a label, something that she could write off and put in a box of adrenaline-laminated memories. The best term she could find was *allies,* and one ally didn’t get mad when another didn’t call.

“Do you, ah. Do you need something looked up?” she asked, all the acid gone from her tone.

“Nah,” said Frank. “Thanks for that. I didn’t ever- I didn’t have a chance to really thank you, before. I was all- all wound up trying to fix it, you know?”
She glanced down when his fingers wrapped loosely around her arm, and then he was guiding her around an open steel grating, the caution tape loose and floating over the void. Frank didn’t even seem to be aware he did it; he dropped her arm immediately afterwards, stuffing his hand right back into his coat pocket.

“I know. I’m glad it turned out okay,” she told him.

“I figured you’d have some questions about that.”

Karen shrugged. She did, but now wasn’t the time for them. “Madani filled me in on most of it. You saved her life. Again.”

She peeked over at him through her hair. He was smiling a little, and shaking his head. He had a great smile when there wasn’t blood on his teeth, or a cut bisecting his lip. His lips looked like the only soft thing on him-

“So you called Madani, huh?” he asked. (And thank god he did.)

“Of course I called Madani,” said Karen. “There was a shootout in Central Park in the same place where your family was killed, and Homeland was all over the place and- it had to be you.”

She’d called Madani a countless number of times, and hadn’t felt bad when the woman’s mother answered to tell Karen that Dinah was in the hospital.

“She filled me in eventually, and then you left the bullet on my window, so…” she trailed off. Their communication system via windowsill worked, but only in the privacy of her head. It sounded stupid out loud.

“You eat yet?”

“What?”

He’d spoken like this at the diner too, changing topics whiplash fast. She wondered how his mind worked. She wondered a lot of things.
“Dinner. You eat dinner yet?”

“Um-no, but-”

“C’mon. Let’s go for a drive, get some food, and we can talk. Okay?”

He was looking at her, those dark eyes focused. Schoonover had been right about one thing: Frank Castle had a way of looking at you that made it feel like he was inside you, peeling all your secrets away.

_Get it together, Page._

“Okay,” she said. “Dinner. But you aren’t using me as bait!”

She said it lightly; as a joke, but… well.

“No ma’am,” he said, moving in and resting his palm at the small of her back. She couldn’t feel the warmth of him through her coat, only the pressure of his hand. Wasn’t it weird that she knew how hot his skin was, pressed to hers, but she had no idea what movies he liked, or… anything _normal._

She smirked a little, letting her hair swing forward to cover her face. Here she was, wondering about the Punisher’s favorite movies, or if consumed anything but coffee, or what he thought of the latest White House scandal. Not a single thought about the CIA coverup.

Some journalist _she_ was.

“Hey-” His fingers brushed against her cheek, pushing back her hair. “What’s the joke?”

Karen let herself really smile this time. “Nothing important. How have you been, Frank?”

He kept his hand at the small of her back, and she could feel his wrist, feel his hip bump against hers
when they squished together on the sidewalk. Frank Castle was a toucher.

She added that to her mental list of known information: Marine. Husband, father, grieving man. Takes coffee black. Listened to Earth, Wind & Fire. Toucher.

“Better,” he rumbled next to her. It had been three blocks, and they were getting ready to make the first turn towards her apartment.

“A buddy of mine- from the Corp- he runs a group for veterans out of this church basement. Sometimes it’s just guys bitching about their wives, and they, uh- they didn’t lose anyone the way I did-”

He breaks her heart.

“But it helps. ’M working, too. Construction.”

“It sounds like that would bore you,” said Karen, before she could stop herself. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean-”

He laughed. She’d seen him laugh before, but it was bitter: that almost soundless chuckle of such deep cynicism and upset that noise can’t be bothered to come out your mouth. This was an actual laugh.

“It does. Bores me to fucking tears. I ought to be used to it- being deployed could be boring as hell, but at least I had the other guys to talk to.”

Karen wondered if before-Frank (before the deaths and the revenge and the baptism in blood) had been talkative like this. She started to pull towards her turn, but Frank stopped her.

“I’m parked down here,” he said. “So how’ve you been?”

“Ah-” All in a blur, in a run-on montage of thoughts and memories, Karen wondered what to tell him. He’d been keeping an eye on her, checking the window and everything, sure, but how much did he know? Did he know Matt was dead, did he know about Daredevil, or-
“It’s been fine,” she started, gauging his reaction as they crossed down another block.

“C’mon,” he said, glancing at her.

“What do you want me to say, Frank? That things have been shitty?” It slipped out before she could stop herself; bitter as day-old coffee.

“That’s exactly what I want you to say,” said Frank. He stopped walking. “This is us.”

He stopped them beside a silver Ford sedan, one with plush leather interiors and a blinking theft prevention system. It was so jarring, so absolutely discordant with the mental image of Frank that she’d carried in her head, that she barely noticed him beeping the doors open.

“You just gonna stand there?” he called from the driver’s seat.

She slid in, dropped her bag into the back floor well, and tried not to be too obvious when she ran the tips of her fingers over the leather. Frank flipped on the turn signal to pull out into traffic and glanced over at her. “Things are shitty, huh?”

“Yeah it- it sounds stupid when you say it,” said Karen, angling herself towards the window. “With everything that’s happened.”

“It’s not a competition,” said Frank. “If you’re having a shitty time, then you’re having a shitty time.”

It still felt stupid. She remembered him scolding her last time: you have it. So hang on with two hands, and don’t let go. She wondered if he remembered saying that.

“Hey- Karen. What’s going on?”

They were stopped at a light, idling in traffic, and he was looking at her with those dark, focused eyes and-
“Did you know Matt was Daredevil?”

His expression didn’t change, but something shifted in his eyes, just enough for her to know.

“You did,” she said. “I was such an idiot. You’d think I was the blind one.”

“Wasn’t my place to tell,” he said. “And you aren’t an idiot.”

Karen huffed. “I- he told me last Christmas, and this Christmas he’s dead, and I never, you know. We never made it back to normal. Not really normal.”

*His was the fifth death, if you don’t count, but you should. Your death should count; I grieved for you.*

Somehow the inside of the car was the quietest place in the city.

“That’s the worst part,” said Frank slowly. “Going over all the thing you’d do different. You can drive yourself nuts, that way.”

“You’d know,” said Karen, and he barked out a surprised laugh.

“Yeah, I’d know,” he agreed.

Karen needed to be done talking about this; needed it tidied up and put away before she told him all the rest, her guts spilling out like fluff from a torn cushion. “Where we headed?”

“Figured we take a drive. There’s this little mom and pop place in Jersey. It’d give us a chance to talk, whatever.”

“Yeah, ah- sure.”
New York City was really only hospitable about four weeks of the year; roughly one week each season. In the summer it was so humid and hot that smog hung in the air, turning the lights into glowing blurs and choking anyone who moved too fast. Now, in the winter (and in the heated seats), Karen could admire the city lights as they twinkled outside her window.

“I-mmm.”

“What?” asked Frank, glancing over at her.

“There haven’t been, ah, your style of crimes, recently,” said Karen, flicking her eyes to his profile and then away again.

“You been looking, ma’am?” He sounded amused.

“It’s my job, I’m a crime reporter for the Bulletin. And I’ve seen some of your work firsthand, so…”

“I’ve been keeping out of trouble,” said Frank, shifting to sit a little straighter. “Madani, her boss got me a clean set of credentials, and- well, I think I got ‘em all, right?”

He looked over at her, and there was just something about his expression. He’d looked like that down by the Williamsburg Bridge, when she’d been crying over the grief that was him and he’d been yelling that of course he had to keep her safe. He’d looked at her so intently, his head cocked a little bit so he could make eye contact with her as she tilted herself away. He wanted to be seen, wanted to make sure there was no way she misunderstood.

He was wearing that same intent expression now.

“You asked me where it ended and I- I had to hurt this kid, one who’d joined up just like I did. I didn’t kill him, but I hurt him, and I guess… you were right. It had to end. I got Rawlins, Russo’s locked up, and if it didn’t end there it wasn’t going to end ‘til someone put another bullet in my head.”

Karen’s fingers were laced tightly together in her lap, and she had to take a slow breath in. She didn’t cry (she’d gone through tear gas and being used as a human shield for a suicide bomber without crying) but something about Frank Castle choked her up.
(He broke her *heart*.)

“That’s good,” said Karen. “I’m happy for you.”

“Yeah, well. I didn’t die with them, right?”

It was so simple, and a year ago- hell, two months ago- it would have been a battle cry. It would have meant, *I didn’t die with them, but I’ll take as many of the fuckers responsible down with me as I go.*

Now… it was a statement. A painful statement, sure, but it wasn’t a mission statement; it wasn’t a declaration of war.

“I know,” said Karen. “And I really am happy for you.”

He shrugged, a graceful rise and fall of one shoulder. His left hand was light on the steering wheel, and the other rested loosely on his thigh. He looked relaxed; as relaxed as she’d seen him. Granted, they’d only spent about a day’s worth of time with each other. And that had almost all been with people either trying to indict, arrest, or kill Frank. And, by extension, her.

Compared to all that excitement, going to an undisclosed location with a known spree killer was tame.

“C’mon,” said Frank. “You’ve got to let me know what’s so funny.”

“I wasn’t laughing,” Karen pointed out.

“Shit lady, you’ve got the worst poker face I’ve ever seen. Something’s funny.”

“I was just thinking that after - all that stuff, you know, the courtroom and the diner and the hotel, this is pretty tame.”
Frank’s lips quirked at the corners. “Always knew you had a taste for danger,” he said. “You can
dress it up in those nice clothes, but you like the rush.”

“I didn’t ask for any of it,” Karen pointed out. But he’s right, a little voice whispered inside.

“Uh-huh,” said Frank. “That why you head out to meet sources all by yourself? You aren’t careful
and some other reporter will be writing up your death.”

Karen didn’t know what to comment on first. “You’ve been following me?” she asked. She’d
known he’d been watching her apartment, but watching her felt way more invasive. She slept at
home. She lived…

“Sure,” said Frank. “Told you I’d keep you safe, didn’t I?”

Karen felt her mouth fall open. “What, indefinitely?”

Frank shot her a look. “Point is, it’s not like you’re avoiding risk.”

They were crossing over into New Jersey now, and beneath them the river glinted; all dark depths
and pale streaks of reflected moonlight. It was the first time she’d seen Frank in months, and she was
picking a fight. Well, they were both picking a fight.

“Allright,” she said on a rush of air. “How about this. No more, um, shop talk until after we eat.
Okay?”

Frank grinned at her and oh god he had little crinkles in the corner of his eyes. “Okay,” he agreed.
“No talking shop.” They both traded in death (or Frank had, until recently). He dealt it out, and she
wrote it up.

“What are you up to when you aren’t working?” asked Karen. She was used to this, the ebb and
flow of a conversation. You start ‘em out easy, lob a few softballs their way, and then start swinging
for the fences.

“I read, and go for runs. Curtis keeps lending me books, but they’re all depressing as shit. I’m gonna
“I just finished *To Kill A Mockingbird*; you ever read that?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “I’ll keep that in mind. What do you read?”

“Recently? Nothing,” said Karen flatly. “Just work stuff. I used to love—” She had to mentally scan through her shelves, ignoring stuff that was too embarrassing to mention. “Ah, I really enjoyed Dean Koontz, and I think you’d like his stuff. It’s really well written, mostly thrillers with a twist.”

“If I get that library card, I’ll look him up,” said Frank, merging onto an exit. “He can’t be worse than the stuff Curtis keeps giving me.”

“He’s better,” said Karen, confident about this, at least.
“Seems like you’re doing alright, apart from the whole ‘flirting with death in a dark alley’ thing,” Frank said, and Karen was a little bit amused. That was almost poetic for Frank Castle.

He continued, “Got a new place and all. Better building.”

“I like it,” said Karen. “Frank, it’s got an actual bedroom door. It’s been something like ten years since I’ve lived in an apartment with a door I can close.”

“Hey, it’s the little things in life, right? I remember back when Maria and I first got together. She was going to school, wanted to be a nurse, and she and another girl shared a one room apartment in Greenwich Village. They had two twin beds crammed in there, and a kitchen table and the little kitchen area, right? I think we were both relieved when I moved her out to the ‘burbs.”

“I lived like that for… a while,” said Karen, thinking back. “But yeah, things are good at work. Look at me, almost thirty and I’ve got my first place with a bedroom. NYC, eat your heart out.”

Frank grinned and turned them off the highway again. “So why’re we out here?” asked Karen. “New Yorkers usually will fight tooth and nail to stay off the road.”

Frank shrugged again. “It’s quieter out here,” he said. “And sometimes I just want to go for a drive. Be moving.”

Karen thought she could understand that.

“Besides,” said Frank. “Lieberman lives out this way, and I drop by sometimes.”

Karen nodded. They were quiet as he drove down a one-way street and parked at the curb on a non-descript block. “Just around the corner,” he said.

Karen wrapped her coat more tightly around herself as she stepped out into the winter air. Her feet also threw a red flag, reminding her that she’d been in heels since eight thirty that morning, and she’d promised herself to keep the heel-wearing to eight hour stretches.

“It’s not far,” said Frank, watching her, and Karen wondered how much he’d guessed and how
much he’d seen flicker across her face.

“Have you been here before?” asked Karen as they turned the corner.

“Yeah. Coffee’s good,” said Frank. Coming from Frank, that meant a lot.

It was a little diner type place with a red awning and a clean font declaring: The Dixon Cafe.

“It’s good,” said Frank again. “Lady who runs it makes everything herself.”

“I’m starting to think that the beard has changed you,” said Karen as the hostess led them back to an empty booth. “Maybe you are going a little hipster.”

Frank rolled his eyes, and Karen had to press her lips together to keep from laughing at him.

It was a one-page menu, mostly what Karen would have categorized as ‘southern brunch’. Foggy would love this place, she thought, making a mental note to tell him about it. She ordered the chicken and waffles (it was Frank’s turn to hide a grin) and he got steak and eggs with red-eye gravy. They both got coffee.

“I’m sorry about Matt,” said Frank, turning his mug with two fingers. “I know the two of you…” he trailed off and glanced out the window.

“Yeah,” said Karen, looking into the dark depths of her own coffee. “I mean- not like that. But we were friends, and it’s hard. He was a good person.”

Frank huffed, and Karen glanced up at him.

“Well he was,” she said.

Frank shrugged. Karen wondered if this was a theme with him: take Karen to a diner, discuss Matt Murdock, drink coffee like it’s what runs in his veins.
“So your buddy from the Corp- does he know about, you know. The past couple years?” Karen asked as the waitress swung back by with the coffee pot.

“Yeah, he knows. I think he thinks it’s funny. He was corpsman over there; his whole thing was to keep wounded guys alive long enough to get them back to a hospital. You develop a weird sense of humor when that’s the shit you carry everyday.”

“He’s the one who keeps giving you books?”

“Karen- the first book he gave me to read was fucking *Moby Dick*. Can you believe it? I was reading it the whole time- you know, Ahab is chasing this thing that he can’t have that will ultimately destroy him- I was reading it just imaging how fucking happy Curtis had been handing it over to me.”

Karen had to laugh. “That’s pretty twisted,” she agreed. “It sounds like you’re doing well, Frank. I’m really happy about it.”

“Yeah, well. Group helps, running helps. The dogs help.”

“Dogs?” If Frank had a dog, Karen might die of envy right there on the spot. Whenever someone brought their dog into the office for the day she was all over it. She knew she was out too much for a dog, but god she wanted one.

She knew it was a selfish longing. She wanted a little friend to sleep with in bed; wanted someone to be happy to see her when she got home. But she wasn’t home enough, not nearly enough, and paying a dog walker was something else she couldn’t afford.

“The Humane Society is on my way back from group, so I swing by and help out on Thursdays.”

“Oh my god,” said Karen, before she could stop herself. The Punisher cleaning cages and walking dogs and trying not to scare the little old ladies who ran the place was an image she’d savor forever.

Their food came in a shuffle of plates and cups, and then it was the two of them again, separated by a table of steaming food.
“Did you have a dog before?” Karen asked, pouring syrup over her waffle. “Wait- you don’t have to answer that. Sorry.”

Frank shook his head and punctured the yolks of his eggs. “It’s fine. You can ask about it- I ah. It’s nice talking about them sometimes, you know? It means it was real.”

He toyed with his fork, not meeting her eyes.

“Yeah, Frank,” said Karen, her throat tight. “I know. And you can always tell me about them, if you want. It won’t bother me.” Because we’re real, too.

She stuffed waffle into her mouth to fill the silence, and would have gasped if it wouldn’t have resulted in her death by asphyxiation. “Frank, there’s bacon in this syrup,” she said.

“Good?” he asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Frank.” She snatched his fork out of his hand, speared a chunk of waffle, and passed it back to him.

“Yeah, that’s fucking good,” he said, eyeing her plate speculatively.

They ate in companionable silence for a few minutes, and the waitress came back to top up their coffee for a second time. “You guys want to switch to decaf?” she asked.

Frank looked insulted, and Karen smiled up at the waitress. “No, we’re fine, but thanks.”

She nodded and went to check on a couple college students who had books spread over their table. They didn’t want decaf, either.

“So, you want to tell me what story you’re chasing down at the docks?” asked Frank.

“I thought we weren’t talking shop,” said Karen teasingly.
Frank pointed down at his empty plate. “You said no shop ‘til we’d eaten.”

“Fair enough,” said Karen. She shoved her plate at him. “You want this?”

He shrugged and tugged it towards him while she sipped at her coffee and tried to figure out where to start the story. That was the hardest part- it didn’t matter how many facts she accumulated or what she knew the truth to be. It had to be framed and presented just right.

“So. Ah, violence against women is up in general right now.”

She glanced up at Frank, and he rolled his eyes again. “You keep looking at me like I’m gonna fly off the handle at every bad thing that happens, and we’ll never get through a conversation,” he said. “Just talk.”

“Right. Right, okay,” said Karen, feeling better. She could do this- she’d always been able to communicate with Frank- with flowers, with nods, with the messages he’d yelled at an alt-right terrorist. This wasn’t any different.

“I requested stats from the hospitals and precincts, and domestic disputes rose over each quarter of the last year. Two women- foreign nationals- were found dead along the waterfront, and two more local sex workers were murdered, too. The M.O.s don’t match, but it’s weird. Something’s going on.”

“Traffickers?”

“That’s what I thought.” She took another sip of coffee and thought about what angle to take next. “What’s missing are kidnappings. You’d think if it was the flesh trade, girls would be going missing too, right? But there haven’t been any more reports of runaways or missing kids.”

“Most of the girls who get taken, they’re targeted because no one would report them gone.”

“I know,” said Karen. “But there’s usually one or two.”
“You think they’re linked?” asked Frank. “The wife beaters and the hookers?”

“Sex workers,” Karen corrected. “I don’t know. I don’t know if they are, but it’s a hell of a coincidence.”

The waitress returned with more coffee, dropped their check, and cleared the plates. “I got it,” said Karen, snatching the black folder.

Frank glowered at her.

“I’ll get it this time, and you can get it next time,” said Karen, smirking at him. “If I go first, I know there’ll be a next time.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Frank. “Real clever.”

“Well, I’m not the one who disappears for months at a time,” said Karen, tucking her card into the folder and setting it at the edge of the table.

Frank shook his head. “It just- didn’t feel right.” He was looking out the window again, and Karen wondered if he was avoiding her eyes or checking their surroundings. (Probably both.)

“And it does now?”

He shrugged. “Got any leads for the story?”

“My source- the one you apparently followed me to- told me there’s an underground bar on Tenth near the Garment District. Some of the girls hung around there.”

Frank eyed her as she signed the receipt and dropped twenty percent on the table. He followed her out of the restaurant, and walked close to her down the sidewalk.

“I’m not the smartest guy, but I know better than to tell you not to go down there and poke around.”
“Good,” Karen murmured.

Frank plowed on. “But I will tell you that I’m going to follow you down there regardless, so you can include me, and we can work together, or you can make this harder on both of us.”

“And then what?” asked Karen. “You’re just going to follow me into every scary place I go? Indefinitely?”

His jaw twitched.

They were by the car now, and he tossed the keys at her. She caught them out of reflex, and looked down at them in confusion. “What’re these for?”

“It’s yours,” he said. “Drive us back.”

Karen felt her jaw drop and her eyes go wide. “What do you mean this is mine?” she hissed. “You can’t just give me a car.”

“I just did,” said Frank, nuding her around the car towards the driver’s door. “C’mon, Page, yell at me in the car. It’s freezing out here.”

He was right, damn him, so she beeped the car open and slid into the luxurious, stupidly comfortable seat.

“Did you steal this car?” she asked, looking right at him.

“Kinda?”

He looked sheepish and proud, half defiant little boy and half vigilante Marine. It was a look that shouldn’t work, but it did.
“How do you ‘kind of’ steal a car, Frank?” Karen asked, her voice an intent whisper. It didn’t matter that they were inside the car, she didn’t want to talk about this in a normal tone of voice. It just felt wrong.

“I took it from the guys who’d already stolen it,” said Frank. “Nobody died for it, so keep your panties on.”

Karen felt like her eyes might bug right out of her head when Frank said keep your panties on in that amused rumble of his, but he kept on talking.

“It was part of an insurance scam, okay? I checked it out. Some poor slob is getting divorced and needed an insurance payout, so he arranged to have his car stolen. I just- repossessed it. After they’d changed out the VIN. It’s clean, Karen. You can start breathing again.”

Air whooshed out of her. “You can’t just- just-”

“I owed you,” he said, and there was that intensity again, never buried for long. “And I totaled your last car. That was on me. I fix the things I break, Karen.”

She did need the car. She’d just been thinking that when she’d met Laylah down at the docks.

When she stuck the key in the ignition and turned the engine over, it felt like acceptance. It felt like fun.

“Too bad there ain’t a cassette player,” Frank mumbled as she merged onto the highway back towards the city. “We could use some good tunes.”

The lights on the bridge were brilliant in the clear night air. Traffic was moving, and this car didn’t rumble and shake like it might come apart beneath her.

“Want me to drop you off at home?” Karen asked when they were a few blocks out from her place.

“Sure,” he said, and Karen was half surprised. She was finally going to learn the location of the Batcave.
It turned out to be in shitty building about a twenty minute walk from her own. “Thanks for dinner,” said Frank, unbuckling his seatbelt.

Thanks for the car,” she told him, and they grinned at each other like naughty kids sharing a secret.

“Night,” he said, sliding out into the noisy dark.

“Goodnight,” said Karen quietly. He was moving down the sidewalk and tugging up his hood, his stride loose and easy.

With a little smile on her lips, Karen drove home.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for the welcome into this fandom! I truly appreciate every comment and kudo and subscriber. I'm so happy to among people who also can't get enough Frank and Karen in their lives!
Frank spent his time at work thinking about Karen’s face when she’d asked if he’d stolen that Ford. He kept thinking that Maria would have liked her, and then the follow up to that disaster of an idea was how fucked up that train of thought was. Karen was a product of the apocalypse timeline; he’d only met her because everything in his life had gone to hell in a motherfucking handbasket. There wasn’t any universe where she and Maria would meet, but Frank kept thinking it anyway.

Karen Page took no bullshit. And Maria would have liked her.

It put him in a weird frame of mind for group. It was Friday, so the crew knocked off early enough for Frank to head home and shower and then catch the subway over to Brooklyn.

If he was honest with himself, it freaked him out that he kept putting Karen page in the same category as Maria. He’d always known he had a weird definition of family, one more expansive and fluid than a lot of people’s. The guys he served with, they were family. Maria and the kids, they were a different family.

So far Billy had been the only one to bridge that gap, and look how fucking well all that turned out.

The chairs were already in a circle when Frank wandered in out of the cold, and he nodded at Evans and Curtis as he got himself a cup of nearly toxic coffee. The other usuals trickled in, and one by one they started talking.

“I keep fighting with my wife,” said Johnson. “It’s over the stupidest shit, and that’s the problem- I know we’ve talked about it before, but her boss asking, and paying, her to pick up his lunch or whatever just… I don’t know, it doesn’t matter, right? And then she can tell I don’t think it matters, and then she starts yelling and it just escalates.”

The room was quiet, and Curtis was nodding.

“I just- I don’t have any perspective anymore, I guess. And it’s been more than a year since deployment.”
“Just have to be patient with yourself,” said Curtis. “You love your wife, don’t you?”

Johnson ducked his head. “Best thing to happen to me, man.”

“Then try to remember to think about it from her perspective. Her whole life carried on while you were out in the desert. Maybe having you home again, and fucking up her routine, hasn’t been so easy for her, either.”

Johnson blew out a breath. “You’re right. I just needed-” He laughed, humorlessly. “I just needed some place to say it.”

“Hey man,” said Curtis. “That’s why we’re here.”

Evans talked about nightmares, and most of them had something to say about that.

Curtis looked around the circle about ten minutes before their time was up. “Anyone else? Remember, next meeting isn’t until Monday.”

Danny twitched and started to speak. She was the only woman who came regularly to the meetings, and she was the only one who talked even less than Frank did.

“Yeah, I- I don’t think I’ll be coming back,” said said, looking over their heads to the little basement windows high in the cinder-block walls. “I think I need a new group. I served like you, and I saw fucked up shit too, but the worst thing; the thing I can’t move past- didn’t have a goddamn thing to do with war.

“I was raped. By my CO, in a shipping container out in the desert, and I know my squad could hear me. I know they did.”

There was always noise in the city, always traffic or people talking or the rumbling of the subway or clinking of old HVAC units. Frank couldn’t hear any of that now- Danny’s words had turned the church basement into a sound vacuum.

The other guys were, to man, staring at their shoes. Frank wouldn’t look away from her. Not now,
when it would feel like an admission.

“The worst fucking part-” she took a deep breath. “The worst part was that I couldn’t stop bleeding *there*, so I went to the medic and he reported me for fraternizing. All those men getting their dicks wet with the natives, and I’m raped, and I’m busted down.

“I don’t think I can come back here, you guys, because I keep wondering if you all would have heard and ignored it, too.”

She stood so quickly her chair flipped, and walked out of the room. The slamming of the church door echoed down into the basement like the sealing of a tomb.

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Frank walked back to the subway and rode the train home on autopilot. He’d known that shit happened; he’d heard the statistics. At the time, in special ops, it had felt like the moon landing: it happened, it was remote, and didn’t really have anything to do with him.

Apparently the Corp and Joint Chiefs had tried to cover up the statistics, and some scandalous documentary had been made. Deployed men gossiped like old women, and the consensus was mostly… *well, of fucking course they had.*

Once he’d told Frankie Junior that just about the worst thing that could happen was being betrayed by a friend.

Frank hoped Danny would come back to their group. That’s the thing a rape group couldn’t offer her: he understood how bad that was. He knew how it was to trust the guys in your squad with your life, with you hopes and fears, with your rifle and knife and well-being. And then to have that taken away in the most demeaning, most hurtful way-

His fingers were tapping on his knee, eager to fire a weapon or form a fist. Eager to hurt.

He’d never guessed. He’d assumed Danny’s nightmares were like everyone else’s; about seeing her friends blown up and civilians killed and knowing that, mostly, it had all been for nothing. He’d been dead fucking wrong.
How many women carried stories like that around with them?

Maria had told him that she’d been groped so many times that she didn’t have the energy left to get mad about it anymore. She said it was the cost of public transit, and he’d been nearly incoherent with rage.

As his thoughts did too often these days, he wondered about Karen. Had anything like that happened to her? Would she tell him if it had? Considering that she’d been willing to save fucking Grotto, probably not. She’d be too worried he’d blow someone’s head off in her name.

What *did* he know about Karen Page?

She hadn’t grown up in New York. She’d worked for Nelson and Murdock after they got her out of jail for… something. Obviously something she didn’t do; it was *Karen*.

*She did break into your house,* he reminded himself. And then, in the same thought, *Yeah, but you were glad she did, so does that count?*

She was brave (too brave), stubborn, and smart. She lived alone. She didn’t have any pets, and she worked too hard.

…and that was it. That was all she’d told him.

Now that he’d realized, it felt unbalanced in comparison. She knew *everything* about him, about his past. She probably had records of his from high school; she probably knew where he’d ranked in his boot camp platoon.

And he didn’t know where she’d grown up.

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“Mail call, Page,” said Ellison, dropping a heavy pile onto the corner of her desk.
“Yeah?” asked Karen, glancing away from her screen and blinking a little to clear the retina burn. “Since when are you the delivery boy?”

“Since I decided that Cindy didn’t get paid enough to be the one to interrupt you. What are you working on?”

“The women at the docks,” said Karen. “I already sent over 2,000 words on crime in international waters- is the paper really that desperate, Ellison?”

“I saw that, it was good. Could have used more pirates, but you know. I’ll take what I can get.”

“Don’t say it-” said Karen, cupping her forehead in her palm.

“The people love pirates,” said Ellison. “And cute, heroic dogs, and ‘orrible murder’, he said in a truly awful cockney accent.

“So you’re interrupting me… why?” asked Karen, flicking through the envelopes he’d dropped on her desk. It didn’t seem to matter how many times people were instructed to send rebuttals to the ‘Opinion’ office, they always seemed to address her, directly.

“Because it’s my job,” said Ellison. “They pay me to manage, and managing journalists is like herding angry, self-aware cats. I have to earn the hazard pay somehow. Have you made any connections yet?”

“No,” said Karen. “I’m doing what I can now with the information I requested from the public hospitals and police precincts, but it there aren’t any correlations yet.”

“Could you connect it to #MeToo as a preliminary piece?”

“I’m a crime writer, Ellison,” said Karen, exasperated.

Ellison interrupted her. “No, you’re a journalist. You write about what’s going on, and #MeToo is
going on. If you can get a couple stories out of this research, that’s even better.”

Karen pinched the bridge of her nose. “I’ll see what I can do, okay?”

“Good,” said Ellison. “Hazard pay earned. It’s Friday night, Karen,” he called as he walked out of the office. “Head home.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Karen mumbled to herself as she started ripping open envelopes. Two were form letters from local high schools asking her (or any interested colleagues) to come speak at their journalism clubs. Three were angry letters from readers who wanted to correct her about … whatever, and another was a letter from someone “writing the definitive book on the rise and fall of Frank Castle”. Apparently they couldn’t proceed without firsthand testimony.

“Keep dreaming, buddy,” she said, setting the pile of papers aside for shredding. In the middle of the pile was yet another envelope without a return address. All these people wanted her to hear their opinions, but didn’t want to tell her their goddamn name.

This letter was not an opinion piece.

Karen,

You killed my brother.

I always wondered why you didn’t hang around for the funeral. Now I know.

You killed my brother. I hope you didn’t forget it, because I won’t.

I’ll be in touch again soon,

Jason Chatham.

Karen didn’t know how long she’d been sitting and staring at the letter, but her fingertips were numb and it was getting dark when she finally glanced away.
It had been ten years since she’d moved to New York City. She’d been nineteen and alone and grieving, and this was why: one snowy November night, when she’d been high and drunk, she’d killed her drug dealing boyfriend and then her brother, all in one fell swoop. It was the worst day of her life.

The second-worst day was the next one, when she’d been told to pack her things and get out. She hadn’t been mad about it. She’d deserved everything her father had said. She’d thought it was just her, and her father, and the sheriff who knew. That was the agreement, that was the price she’d paid for taking two lives, and it hadn’t been enough. (Nothing would be enough.)

And now Jason knew, too.

She’d only known him in passing, through pictures on Todd’s fridge or in stories or over one hurried family dinner. She’d been with Todd for a year, and had seen his older brother once. She’d assumed they weren’t close.

An internet search didn’t bring up anything about Jason Chatham. He had a Facebook page, but it looked perfectly normal for a small-town, beer loving, single guy. He’d voted for Trump, and she wrinkled her nose at that, but it didn’t mean that he was a blackmailer. How had he found out? What was she going to do?

Karen jumped when her phone began to vibrate angrily against her desk. It was Foggy, and she should check-

“Hey,” she answered, hating how her voice was higher than normal.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, the phone just startled me, is all,” she said, deleting her browser history.

“You need to come up for air more. I know they don’t pay you enough to keep you in the office at seven on a Friday night.”

“Like you’re one to talk,” said Karen, shoving the letter back in its envelope and sticking it down into the bottom of her bag. “I’d bet anything you’re still in the office.”
“Yes, but I’m being paid for it,” said Foggy smugly. “C’mon, I’m heading out. Let’s meet somewhere, get a couple drinks and eat food that we’ll regret in the morning.”

“Foggy, I” I have to deal with a blackmailer, and deal with my own guilt, and…

“He’s gone, Karen,” said Foggy, his voice unusually serious. “We can’t keep avoiding it.”

Oh god, he thought she was upset about Matt. Of course she should be upset about Matt, what kind of person was she?

“No, of course,” said Karen, shaking her head a little. “I know. I should have asked how you’re doing, if everything is okay.”

“It will be if I can get a beer with my best girls,” he said with forced cheerfulness.

“Marci’s coming?” asked Karen, stuffing her laptop down in her bag, too.

“Sure- Oh god, that’s not the problem, is it? Don’t make me pick between the two scariest blondes in New York, please-”

Despite herself, Karen was laughing. “No, no Marci is fine. Pick a place, Fogs. Not a sports bar.”

“Yes ma’am!” said Foggy, and Karen momentarily remembered another voice saying that to her in a dark rumble. Yes ma’am.

“Text me the address,” she said. “I’m heading out.”

Her phone buzzed when she got to the lobby, and she saw Foggy had picked a spot about twenty minutes from her. Sorry feet, she thought to herself, stepping out into the cold. Next two days, it’s only tennies. I promise.
The bar was one of those vaguely Irish-themed ones that seemed to pop up all over the place. There was only one TV (thank god) and so far nobody was screaming. A solid win for a Friday night.

“Over here!” Foggy was waving at her from a booth, and Marci was beside him sipping at a bottle of beer.

“Hey!” said Karen as Foggy hopped up to hug her. Marci gave Karen a finger wave and signalled for more beer as Karen slid into the other side of the booth.

“You okay?” asked Foggy as the waitress dropped off three bottles. “You look… pale.”

“Fogs!” Marci smacked Foggy lightly on the arm and smiled over at Karen. “You look great. Awesome shoes, by the way.”

“Oh- thanks,” said Karen. “I’m fine. Just a long week, you know?”

“We know,” said Marci, crooking her elbow around Foggy’s neck and tugging him in to kiss him on the forehead. “I think he’d sleep in his office if I’d let him.”

Foggy rolled his eyes and shook off Marci. “I appreciate you coming out,” he told Karen, clinking his beer bottle to hers. “I know things were still weird with Matt, and then- and then he died. So they’ll never get better.”

Karen thought it would hurt. Karen thought that blunt, so-very-Foggy speech would kill her, but it didn’t. It was a relief to hear the truth from someone’s lips.

He continued, “But I don’t want that to mess us up, okay? You’re my best pal, Page. I’m not letting you off the hook that easily.”

Karen reached across the table to take Foggy’s hand in both of hers. “I just love you,” she said. She felt bad lying to Foggy, but this wasn’t his problem. It was hers, and it would always be hers. Past, present future. I have killed, I kill, I will kill. The participles of her life.

Foggy actually blushed. “Uh, thanks,” he said. “Love you too.”
Karen took a couple long pulls of her beer. “Alright- now that we’ve got that out of the way, tell me about what it’s like to live on the other side of the poverty line.”

Foggy grinned and told her about his new office, about having a records assistant who brought him case law and had “a scary cross index of precedent, you wouldn’t believe it”, and getting his first custom suit.

“Bet you look good,” said Karen as the waitress brought them another round of beers.

“Damn straight,” said Foggy.

Here in the slightly greasy, darkly lit bar, with Foggy and Marci laughing across from her (and so in love) it was almost possible to forget that she had some kind of blackmail note in her bag.

Jason hadn’t asked for anything yet- but he would. He just had to figure out what he wanted.

By the time Karen was ready to head home she was sitting cross-legged in the booth, barefoot, and had had… six beers? Probably six. Definitely four. She remembered four.

“We needed this,” she told Foggy, giving him a kiss on the cheek as she jammed her feet back into her shoes. “You were right.”

“I’m always right,” he said. “It’s what makes me such a good lawyer.”

“The best,” said Karen, and Marci cooed her agreement. She remembered the note again (and gunshots, and the crackle of flames) and when they staggered out of the bar and into the shockingly cold winter air, she pulled Foggy in for a hug. “No other lawyer I’d want.”

“Well, you can’t have him tonight,” said Marci, marching to the curb to flag down a cab. “I’ve got dibs.”

A cab stopped and flipped its light. “You take this one,” said Foggy. “I’m not leaving you alone on a
sidewalk in half-off shoes.”

“I’ll text you,” Karen called, sliding into the musty backseat.

Foggy waved.

Karen told the driver her address and off they went through the city that never went dark. She felt a little sick—too much beer, too little food, and too many lies.

It had been a lie (well, an avalanche of lies) that had pushed Karen and Matt apart before they’d even had a chance to discover what they could become. That was a relief, in a way. She didn’t have him on her conscious as anything more than a friend, but— but it had still been lies that had driven them apart.

And now she was lying to Foggy, and Ellison, and herself.

Karen Page was not a good person. And she was not okay.

~~~

He always woke from the same dream. Oh, the details changed: sometimes he was home in bed with Maria, and sometimes he was at the park, but it was always the same, in the end: they were there, and he was so goddamn happy, and then in the next moment they were dead; their blood drying on his skin.

He always woke up with sweat sticking to his skin and a shout jammed in his throat. More often that not tears would be pricking at his eyes, and whether or not they fell depended on how tired he was.

He got up. No point in trying to go back to sleep.

New York never slept, not really. Sometimes it dozed for a few hours here and there, but it was never really dark, never really quiet. That suited Frank fine. It made it easy to go for a run, but it was gloomy enough that nobody should be calling the cops saying they saw ‘The Punisher’ out for a turn around the park.
Karen’s lights were off when he ran by, and why shouldn’t they be? It was just after six on a Saturday morning. She should be sleeping. But she hadn’t been home when he’d gone on his rooftop patrol last night, and sometimes she slept with a light on in the corner of her living room...

He jogged into the side alley, jumped up to grab the end of the rusted-shut fire-escape ladder, and pulled himself up. He could move quietly when he needed to; none of Karen’s neighbors deserved to wake up to his ugly mug outside their window.

Karen’s purse was on the little table by the door, and her coat was hung up on its usual peg. Nothing was out of order, and he was glad (for once) that the fire escape didn’t extend to her bedroom window. He’d be too tempted to look in; see her asleep.

He was on his hundred and sixth block when he made it back home, sweaty and winded. Karen was at home and okay, and that made things a little easier to sort out. It made his breath just that much easier to catch.

His hall-mates weren’t up when he dragged himself into the shower. Six rooms on a floor; two stalls for men, two for women. At least the water pressure was good; building like this wasn’t going to spring on energy efficient shower heads.

He was still anxious and finger tapping, at nine. He’d cleaned; scrubbed his sink, made his bed, re-folded his clothes. He’d gone for a run, he’d done the things that were in his control. Only thing he hadn’t tried was meditating, and that was only because he fell asleep every damn time he’d tried in the past.

He was a fucking Marine- you were either on, or you were in down mode. The Corp stripped most of your middle gears.

He could walk to the library, get a card, check out those books Karen had talked about. It would get him out of the apartment; it would give him a task, but he wasn’t calm enough for reading today. He’d learned (a long time ago) that he needed to listen to his body, listen to his instincts about this.

He called Curtis.

“What’s up, Castiglione?” asked Curtis. He drew out all those syllables, seeming to enjoy how the word moved from Castle’s real name into his fake one. Curtis ate up all that symbolism shit.
“You working today?”

“Youssir, not all of us have nice Monday/Friday jobs.”

“Yeah? Well not all of us get to work in a heated office,” said Frank, sinking down onto his one narrow chair.

“Touche, brother. What’s up?”

“I just-” Frank squeezed his eyes shut. “I wanted to see if, ah, we could meet up on your lunch break or something. I just- need out of my apartment, you know?”

He could hear Curtis shuffling papers. “Yeah, yeah. There’s a burger place down the block from my building. I’ll text you the address.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Frank. “I’ll let you know when I hit that subway stop.”

“Frank?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m glad you called.”

“Me too,” said Frank, and he flipped the phone shut. “Me too.”

~~~

Despite Karen’s joke (he hoped to god it was a joke) Frank was relieved that the burger place wasn’t one of those hipster joints with “Today’s cow was named Tulip!” written in fancy chalk on a blackboard over the register. They had two burgers to choose from, you picked out your toppings, and carried the plastic baskets over to any of the narrow, wobbly plastic tables.
“Thanks for meeting me,” said Frank. He still felt like an idiot, running to Curtis, but he guessed it was better than running for one of his weapons caches.

“Anytime, man. You’ve been working hard,” said Curtis, swirling ketchup and mayonnaise together in a little paper cup.

Frank ignored the comment, because he still wasn’t totally sold on his whole ‘work towards you emotional well-being’ thing. His emotionally well-being had been buried under a stone that said “Maria Castle”.

“The fuck are you doing over there?” Frank ased, pointing to Curtis’ weird pink sauce with a fry.

“It’s good dude,” said Curtis, dunking a fry of his own. “Tangy and sweet.”

“Fucking hell,” mumbled Frank, unwrapping the foil from his burger.

“So what happened?” asked Curtis with his mouth full.

Frank huffed out a breath and looked out the window at the people passing by. “That’s the thing. Nothing fucking happened. I woke up, and went for a run, and just- couldn’t get back in my own skin, you know?”

“Brother, all the running in the world isn’t going to give you the adrenaline rushes you’re used to. You need to fight.”

“Thought the whole point of all this feel-good bullshit is to keep me from doing that, Curt.”

“People fight without actually trying to kill the other guy. There’s a gym I’ve heard of, okay? They’re open to... special cases.”

“Don’t you fucking send me to some guy’s basement fight club,” said Frank.
“You really think I would? This guy’s legit. He’s just got some weird rumors being spread about him.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

“I don’t even know. Like he was framed and went to prison, or he actually did kill a ton of people and go to prison.”

Frank rolled his eyes when Curtis kicked him under the table.

“Or that he hasn’t ever lost a fight.”

“Alright, I’ll check it out.” A gym would be expensive, but if they had a couple guys who wouldn’t mind a fight… could be worth living in his shithole a while longer. He was trying to save the cache of drug money for when he’d need it, because of course he’d fucking need it. It wasn’t like his shitty construction health insurance was going to cover the bullets that would, inevitably, get him.

You could stop being Catholic in practice, but that guilt and dread? That was something you carry for life. You live by the sword you die by the sword, right? Frank thought the same thing could be said about rifles.

“It’ll be good for you,” said Curtis. “Help you burn off some of that energy.”

“What energy?” asked Frank, giving in and trying some of Curtis’ ketchnaisé. “I keep falling asleep sitting in my car at red lights.” The weird mix wasn’t half bad.

Curtis shrugged. “You’re recalibrating, man. Shit takes you like that sometimes.”

“I think I’m so fucking boring, even my own head doesn’t want to be awake for it,” said Frank.

They finished their food, bussed the table, and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

“Thanks again for meeting up with me. You said it’s Cage’s Gym?”
“Yeah,” said Curtis. “Central Harlem.”

“Goddammit,” Frank muttered as they headed back to Curtis’ building. “Isn’t anything in Manhattan? I’ve got group here in Brooklyn with your dumb ass, and you want me to go to a gym in Harlem?”

“It’ll be worth it. Hope you’ve got a MetroCard.” Curtis waved over his shoulder as he walked into the glass-walled lobby.

“Harlem,” Frank mumbled to himself.

~~~

It was a block north of Central Park, and, in theory, it should only take half an hour to get there from his local subway stop. On the outside it looked like any other New York gym. Some old flyers, yellowed and curling, taped to the windows. When Frank was buzzed inside it looked normal. Two boxing rings, a punching bag, a speedback. There was an auxiliary gym off to the side, and Frank could see free weights and a couple treadmills.

A big guy a head taller than Frank walked over. He was in a black tee and loose nylon track pants, and he moved with the grace of a man comfortable with himself. “You Pete?” he asked.

“Yeah,” said Frank, looking at the big man in front of him. “You Cage?”

“Yeah. This is my place. Call me Luke,” he said, sticking out a hand.

Frank shook it. “How do you know Curtis? I know he isn’t coming all the way up here.”

“I had a guy that I thought needed a group to talk to. Looked up Curtis, and he did good things for my boy.”

Frank tried to squelch a grimace. He was one of Curtis’ charity cases, too.
“You serve?” asked Luke, and Frank could feel the man scanning over his body.

“Marines,” he said flatly.


“I’m good for it,” said Frank, resenting this interview. There were two women in the far ring, a tiny brunette with no padding, and a tall blonde that had him thinking of Karen (no fucking surprise, there). The blonde had on her protective gear.

“What’s with them?” asked Frank, jerking his head towards the women. “You don’t require headguards?”

Luke glanced over at the women. The blonde was on the ropes, arms up.

“I just require waivers,” he said. “And don’t worry about them. Trust me, they’re fine.”

Luke walked Frank around the gym, pointing out the weight room and the locker rooms and the office. “We’re open six in the morning until ten at night. There’s a kid I’ve got that watches the place on the evening shift, but don’t ask him to spot you on weights.”

“Roger that,” said Frank. He would have sworn he saw the little brunette toss the blonde across the ring, but he’d only caught it out of the corner of his eye.

“So that’s it,” said Luke as they wandered back into the main area of the gym. “I’ll get you those disclaimers and a copy of the rules, and then we’ll get in the ring, see what you do.”

“This some kind of test?” asked Frank, tailing Luke back to the office.

“Isn’t everything? I’m not letting you beat on my people unless I know you can control yourself and keep from hurting anyone too much. You can’t do that, your partners are going to be limited to me and Jones.”
Frank was well on his way to being pissed off, but he knew Cage was just trying to protect his people, and that soothed him back down. Protection was a language Frank spoke fluently.

“Fair enough.”

He signed the stupid papers, passed over a ten for a new mouthguard, and unzipped his boots, setting them against the walls.

“MMA?” asked Luke, wrapping his knuckles. He tossed another roll to Frank.

“Close enough,” said Frank.

“You ever really studied formally? Any flavor of martial arts?”

“Not really. Mostly it was focused on weapons. Neutralize the blade, the rifle. Just survive long enough to kill the other guy any way you could.”

Frank remembered his scuffles with Murdock up on the roofs. He’d been a righteous prick, but the man could fight. It had been fucking art, if Frank was honest. The only reason he’d been able to walk away had been that he hit harder. Murdock had been all speed and grace and footwork. Frank didn’t have any illusions as to what his hand-to-hand strengths were: he could take the fucking hits, and he could put more torque into the blows he landed. Those were his skills, full stop.

“This ought to be interesting,” said Luke, climbing into the ring, barefoot as well.

Frank knew the guy that swung first usually went down first, but there wasn’t any point in them standing there staring at each other. He charged forward, throwing a punch and ducking, ready for the other man to block him.

From there… it was the ballet of war. It was movement and breath and focusing at the microsecond level. He could feel them both pulling their punches at first, both testing the other, and then it sped up and blows got harder.
Something in Frank began to suspect that this was not a normal fight when he landed a jab in Luke’s solar plexus, and the man didn’t even jolt. Instead, he grinned.

After that, Frank didn’t think anymore.

The fight ended as abruptly as it had begin, with both men staggering back away from each other, each breathing hard.

“Holy shit,” said Frank. He already ached, and tomorrow morning was going to be a problem. Good thing it was Saturday.

“You’re good, brother. No finesse, but some damn good hits.”

Sounded about right.

“Next time we can sell tickets,” someone said from ringside.

Frank looked down at the delicate-looking brunette.

“You could finally afford to get this place fumigated,” she said.

“My place is fine,” said Luke, sliding between the ropes. Frank followed him down.

“I’m Jessica Jones,” said the brunette.

“Uh, Pete Castiglione,” said Frank.

“Yeah, right, okay,” said Jones. She wandered back towards the locker rooms.

Luke tossed Frank a towel. He wiped his face off and then slung it over one shoulder as he unwrapped his hands.
“Your footwork needs help,” said Cage, doing the same. “You’re hard to unbalance, but you’d be a lot faster and less predictable if you worked it out. Maybe some Muay Thai or JiuJitsu.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said Frank dryly. “Most of my friends think I should be fighting less, not trying to improve.”

“You a brawler?”

“Something like that,” said Frank, rolling his socks back on. He’d noticed that Cage’s knuckles didn’t even look bruised. And what about his jaw? Frank had landed a good one there.

“You know you can use the showers, right?”

“What, and put sweaty clothes back on? Might as well wait.”

Cage shrugged. “Suit yourself. You’re fine to practice with whoever, so long as they’re willing. Just handle yourself.”

“Can-do.” He didn’t go beating on people just for the hell of it.

Okay, he didn’t go beating on innocent, unarmed people in a gym just for the hell of it.

“I’m glad you found us… Pete.” Luke turned and walked back towards the locker rooms, and he passed the tall blonde on her way out.

“Hey,” she said to him. Frank paused as he tugged on his boots, listening. “I wanted to know if I could hang a flyer in the women’s lockers.”

“For?”

“A women’s hour, once a week.” As though sensing Cage’s refusal, she added quickly. “I’ll rent the
space, and they’ll pay fees. An hour for women to fight other women or learn defense from other women. It’ll be good.”

Cage heaved out a huge sigh, and out of the corner of his eye Frank watched the big man run a hand down his face. “I’m not running some do-gooder camp here, Trish.”

“No, you’re running a business, which is why good PR and another person paying you for the space is beneficial to you.”

“Fine. Put up the damn flyer.”

“I’ll put a check on your desk!” the blonde called after Cage as he walked away.

Yeah. She definitely reminded him of Karen. Blonde, tall, and tenacious.

She walked over to him in fitted jeans and some kind of drapey top. Her hair was damp, and he wondered if she was waiting for the other girl- Jones. “I’m Trish Walker,” she said, sticking out a hand.

He shook. “Pete Castiglione,” he said. “I couldn’t help overhearing- that ladies thing open to anybody?”

“Any women, yeah,” said Trish. “Do you think it’s a good idea?”

Frank had never bothered much about what gender people were. He didn’t give a shit if his doctor was a man or a woman, or if his stateside processing officer was gay, or about any of that shit. But he’d also never been a woman, and he thought that probably there were women who’d prefer to get physical (for defense purposes) with a strange lady as opposed to some guy off the street.

Granted, if they were actually attacked, Frank would bet everything he had that it would be some asshole with a dick.

“Yeah, it’s a good idea. I’ve got a couple friends I might tell if you’ve got some extra flyers.”
She grinned at him, her teeth white, her blue eyes crinkled and happy. “I’m glad we bumped into each other, Pete.”

That was absolutely a first. Most women these days looked at him like they were afraid of him (they were right to be, even though he’d never hurt a woman), and a few others looked like they wanted to fuck him. (He wondered about those women. Some people liked getting hurt in bed, but...)

“Yeah,” said Frank, not really sure what to do in the face of such enthusiasm. “Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

Frank is absolutely a feminist and you can pry that headcanon from my cold, dead hands.

I think I should have another chapter edited and ready-to-go tomorrow! I really want to get this story out while there’s still a fandom to care. Thank you to everyone who has read and/or commented on this story! I’ve gotta love people who need more Karen and Frank in their lives <3
We've All Got Secrets

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Karen spent her Saturday doing all the adult things she pretended didn’t happen during the week. She swept her apartment and mopped the floor and took her laptop down into the basement laundry room to guard her panties and socks as they tumbled in the machines. (Should she have to guard her hot-wash load? No. Did she learn that the hard way? Yes.)

She stayed busy enough to keep the worry and fear and grief away, but it wasn’t ever far; wasn’t ever quite out of sight. As she hung up her delicates to dry on a rack in her bedroom she wondered if she’d be back in stiff cotton and recycled jail air sooner than later.

What she kept thinking, as she scrubbed down her apartment, was how fucking selfish she was. She regretted the deaths—she really did, especially Kevin. But now, now that she was still fighting to make herself a life, one she could enjoy, she was angry that this was coming back to bite her when she’d dared to think she might pass as normal someday. Now that it was personal, she was okay with people never getting their answers. Now that it was her head on the chopping block she wasn’t advocating for justice, no matter how late. The irony hadn’t been lost on her.

Oh, she knew she deserved justice. She just didn’t want it.

As daylight faded and the buzz of the city slowed to a rumble, Karen cracked open her laptop. It couldn’t matter that her life was dissolving; she had a deadline to keep.

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The note was on her floor the next morning.

She stumbled out of bed and across the den into her little kitchen, her adrenal system screaming for coffee while her lizard brain whispered, sleep. While the machine hissed and spit, she walked back over to pick the envelope up. She’d assumed it was from maintenance; every so often they’d come in to spray for pests and inspect the sprinkler system, and they always slid a warning under her door.
Everyone knows what they say about assumptions.

Karen,

You killed my brother, and you’ve gone without consequences for too long. You thought you were safe, and you’ve convinced half of New York that you’re a good person.

Let’s put that to the test.

Bring a cashier’s check for $100,000 to the Ladies Pavilion by midnight tonight. I’ll have someone there to collect it. If you don’t, I’ll kill a pretty waitress who looks a lot like you.

Regards

-JC

He had to know that she couldn’t give him the cash. She couldn’t come up with that kind of money if she begged every friend she had. Some part of her knew that this was a scheme, it was a power play: he had information on her, but he also had this, this ability to turn any additional guilt back on herself.

It would work.

She couldn’t come up with the money, and if she asked around, it would only broadcast her distress and involve more people in this clusterfuck. So she’d research; she’d dig deeper. Court records for him, for his social media friends, for his family members. Any financial information she could get; hell, running a credit check wasn’t illegal. And then, at ten or so, she’d go sit in Central Park. And she’d wait, and she’d beg. From the sound of it, this guy would like begging.

~~~

Nobody showed up. She sat in Central Park huddling, and then shivering, and then nothing- just waiting, half frozen to the bench- until one in the morning. It only reaffirmed what she’d known: he’d never intended for her to raise the cash. He’d never really wanted to let her off the hook so easily. She wasn’t supposed to buy her absolution, that’s not how this worked. He was going to
make her sweat, and then he was going to make her hurt.

Karen was jumpy and skittish all the way back to her apartment. It was two in the morning when she managed to stagger in through her front door, using her left hand to turn the keys. Her right hand was still down in her purse, wrapped around the barrel of her gun. She was tired, and she couldn’t feel her toes or nose or fingers. It was January in New York, and she shouldn’t have been outside for four hours. She didn’t have a coat for that. *Probably nobody outside Antarctica had a coat for that.*

The hot water burned when she stepped into the shower, and she was forced to turn it down to lukewarm until the skin on her toes was the same color as the rest of her. Then she turned it up to scalding and, as was becoming her habit, cried.

She had a hymn stuck in her head, one her mother had hummed when Karen was very, very small.

*What can wash away our sins...?*

Not a goddamn thing.

~~~

She caught a two hour nap before her alarm woke her from sleep. It was always funny, in a sick kind of way, that she felt more awake after an all-nighter than she did after a short nap. Supposedly it was better to sleep, even if it was only a little, but from the inside of a groggy head it didn’t feel like it.

Karen splurged on a giant latte from the local place on her block as opposed to getting a cheap coffee from the cart in front of her building. If ever she deserved thirty-one ounces of coffee, it was this day.

Her heels clicked on the sidewalk as she walked to work, the sharp retorts echoing the pounding of her heart and the throbbing of her temples. There might be some woman dead, somewhere, because she wasn’t rich enough. No... there might be some woman dead somewhere because Karen had *killed two people* and walked away from it unscathed and unpunished.

She had the caffeine jitters by the time she made it into her office, but that didn’t stop her from pouring a cup of coffee from the tar-stained pot in the breakroom of the Bulletin. She was supposed to have the draft of her #MeToo article to Ellison by noon, and it could still use some edits, but she had research to do. She had a dead woman to find.
None of the early news reports contained anything about a waitress, and Karen obsessively refreshed for all five boroughs. Her tab collection looked like a screenshot of a serial killer, and by eleven she hadn’t found anything.

She called Mahoney, ignoring how the coffee was burning a hole in her stomach. She thumbed out a tums as the phone rang, and swallowed quickly when he answered. “What do you want, Page?”

“I have to want something?” she asked, trying to make her voice cheery. *Of course she wanted something.*

“Yes,” said Mahoney in the same flat voice. “You do.”

“I was warned... a source told me a thirty-something waitress was going to die, and I wanted to see if you’d heard anything.”

“Dammit Page, you know you have to report this stuff, you *know* you do; I ought to come up there and arrest you now. You had declared intent to kill and you ignored it for what, a story?”

“No,” said Karen, shaking another tums out of the box. It rolled a little ways across her desktop before losing momentum and tipping over. *You’re slipping,* she told herself. *This is what Jason wanted. He wanted you to panic, wanted you to incriminate yourself.* “No, I had a source mention to me that that’s the word on the street. Some kind of threat to somebody. I was just checking up on it.”

It was believable, and that’s what made it such a good lie. She wondered, vaguely, when she’d gotten so good and telling untruths. Had she always been like this? Or was this some new and terrible evolution? Once she’d felt guilty for getting in the car with Frank Castle; had felt bad for aiding a fugitive. She’d gone from that to *admitting* she’d used her body as a shield for him, and now- now she didn’t know what she was.

Brett was quiet, trying to decide if he could believe her. Trying to decide if he *wanted* to believe her. “I haven’t heard anything,” he said. “It was a quiet night.”

“Yes, you fucking do,” he said, and disconnected.

Karen didn’t stop looking. She emailed her article to Ellison, warts and all, and expanded her search. There’d been pretty standard overnight crime in New Jersey; nothing that caused an outcry or was worthy of the front page. A car crash, an ATM robbery, a burst water main turning morning traffic into a living nightmare of modern transportation.

Finally, just after one, when her eyes were beginning to cross and her ass was starting to hurt, she found it. There was a diner off the highway in Westchester in the northern suburbs of the city. One of the night-shift waitresses had taken out the trash, and had been found twenty minutes later out by the dumpster, shot dead. It had been a rifle shot, right through the head.

Her name was Juliet. She’d been thirty two, blonde and blue eyed, and at first glance (just for an instant) the picture posted on the local channel nine news site looked a little like Karen.

He’d done it, then. Jason had killed some woman just to get to her, just to make a point. And it was her fault.

How many deaths did that make? By Karen’s count Juliet made seven (the seven seals of her own personal apocalypse- mother, brother, Todd, Wesley, Frank, Matt, Juliet. Seven deaths tied to her; seven pieces of her soul).

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Frank’s life was falling into a rhythm again, and he wasn’t sure if he liked it. He’d always been a creature of habit; it’s why he thrived in the Corp and why having little kids on a schedule never bothered him. But now he was falling into a routine as himself, mostly. So many pieces of his identity had been stripped away (not in the Corp, not a father, not a husband), and it left him exposed in a way that he hadn’t been ...ever. He’d transitioned from his parent’s authority into that of the Marines. And now, in his late thirties, he was on his own for the first fucking time.

He got up at four. Made it to the job site at six, and knocked off at two. Depending on the location he’d go home and shower or go straight to group. Home, dinner, bed. Rinse, wash, re-fucking-peat.

Danny was at group again, which was good. Frank had picked up one of Trish’s flyers, and he’d scribbled, ‘Thought it might help. Hitting someone who hits back helped me’ on it before folding it in fourths and tucking it into his back pocket.
Curtis talked a little this time. He’d met someone, some nice girl (Frank hoped she was good enough for him), and Curtis wasn’t sure how to explain the group and the life he’d had before he turned into a veteran-amputee-insurance-salesman. It wasn’t that he was ashamed of it, he just didn’t know how to put it into words. And, if he was honest, he was afraid of scaring her off.

*Everyone*- including Danny- hurried to reassure Curtis that he was the best catch around.

The hour ticked away, and with fifteen minutes on the clock Curtis spoke again. “I was reading over the weekend, and came up with something I think you’ll find interesting. There was this guy, Maslow, he studied psychology back in the 40s. He said that every person has some basic needs, and we’re only really happy when they’re all met.”

He pulled a stack of papers out from under his chair and passed them around the circle. On the papers was a pyramid divided horizontally into five sections, with different variables in each chunk. “See, these needs all build on each other. Food and water, that’s the most basic type of need. They’re there at the bottom. At the top is creative expression. A purpose, a group, belonging, those are all in the middle somewhere.

“What I found so interesting about the hierarchy of needs is that the military designed itself to fill all these things. Your drill sergeant wasn’t lying when he said Uncle Sam was your momma and daddy now. They gave you food, gave you a place to sleep, and made us a family. They gave us missions, and rewards, and hell, they let us fuck around on the guitar or set up reading groups or any quiet thing to make us feel like individual people. It was all set up to see to your needs. Military was efficient, smart, and straightforward.”

“Well I’ll be damned,” said Ruby, running his finger over the triangle. “No wonder we all fuck up trying to readjust. We aren’t just having nightmares, we’ve been turned loose into a whole different system.”

“Exactly,” said Curtis. “But maybe now we have a map.”

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Frank pulled the paper out again when he caught the train back to Manhattan. In so many ways life had been so goddamn simple in the Corp, and now he knew why. They were simple like a knife was simple: sharp and multi-purpose and straight. But life had been *designed* to be simple. What use was a knife that asked about ethics?
He wrote *apartment* next to the bottom of the pyramid in the neat block writing he’d been taught in the Marines. Next to *security/safety* he wrote ‘Lieberman’s cameras, arsenal. Backup drives.’

(“You really thought I’d give *everything* to Madani, Frank?” Lieberman’s voice had been dripping disbelief.

“You said you did!”

“C’mon, Frank. You believed that?”

“Yeah, I believed that. Story of my fucking life.”)

Next up was *belongingness*, and there he hit a wall. The lady next to him kept trying to read is paper, so he thought about it until she got up and left and someone else took her seat. He didn’t really belong anywhere, he just borrowed space and lived a lie until it ...kind of broke in around him, like a pair of new boots.

Finally he wrote down *group*. He started to scratch a K and then shoved that thought right to the back of his mind. Karen belonged with someone better than him, nicer than him, less scarred and damaged and dangerous than him.

He glanced at the next level before shoving the paper and pen down deep in his pocket. No way was he thinking about sex.

He swapped lines and rode up to Harlem, walking a few blocks to the gym. He hoped Cage was around; Frank was jonesing for a fight.

“‘Sup Jarhead,” said Jones when he walked in. She was watching Trish box some guy Frank didn’t know in the first ring. Trish was good; quick.

“Cage here?” Frank asked, headed back to the locker room where he now kept some gear.
“Nah,” said Jones.

He changed anyway, and came back out to the same scene. “You want to fight?” asked Jones, tying her dark hair back.

“Ah-”

He’d met recruits like this and the cause always went one of two ways: they were either delusional, thinking they were the toughest thing around, or they wanted to die.

“C’mon, Pete,” said Jones. “Don’t go all chivalrous on me.”

“Look-” he didn’t know what the fuck to say.

“Come here,” she said. She walked into the weight room, which was empty and dark. He should have expected something like this, some kind of weird bravado, but-

- but she picked up the weight rack. Not a weight, singular. The rack that held all the disks, a couple thousand pounds, and she picked it up one-handed without any strain.

“See?”

“What the fuck?” asked Frank, blinking as she set the weights back down. “Why are you telling me this?”

“We’ve all got secrets, Pete,” she said, emphasizing his name. “And sometimes. God, sometimes we all need a fight.”

They fought, and it was even more fun that fighting Cage. She was faster, and stronger, and she laughed when she hit him and she cursed when he hit her. When they staggered away, smiling and holding their ribs, Frank noticed Trish leaning in the front doorway, looking out. She could be bored and people watching. What she was actually doing was letting the two of them act like - act like themselves with some amount of privacy.
He fistbumped Jess on the way out of the ring, and knew what Trish was going to ask before she even opened her mouth. “You got anything you need to demonstrate? Maybe you breathe fire?”

“No,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t fight, same as you.”

“Doesn’t feel right,” Frank hedged, and dodged around her into the locker room.

His phone was blinking with a message when he’d finished showering and redressing.

Karen: Could you stop by sometime? I’ve got something I want to run by you.

Maybe she’d thought better of going out to meet snitches on her own? He dismissed the thought immediately. She was too stubborn; she wouldn’t give in that easily. He also knew she wouldn’t contact him just to chat, or because she was lonely.

Frank discovered he didn’t like that. Karen shouldn’t be lonely (that’s all life is, people struggling not to be alone!) and she should know by now that he’d want to know.

Shouldn’t she?

Not like you ever told her, asshole.

As he stepped onto the sidewalk he texted back, You eat Chinese?

Food, yes. People, no.

Classy.

You coming by tonight?
See you in 30.

Feeling surprisingly loose, Frank headed towards Karen’s.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! Oh my god, thank you for all the support on the last chapter. It was such a boost; I think I wrote 3k words on Chapter 8 this afternoon.

I knew this chapter was kind of short and Frank-heavy, so I didn’t think you’d mind if I posted it back-to-back with yesterday’s ;)

Once again, thank you so much for supporting this story. I appreciate each and every one of you!
He looked good. He always looked good, even when he was bruised and cuffed to a hospital bed, or bloody and reeling from a bomb blast. It wasn’t his body (even though Karen knew how’d they fit, knew how warm his skin was against hers). He always looked… alive. He looked like he was being pushed through the world by some internal spring that had been wound too tight, by some force that had come into the universe along with light and energy and the earth itself.

At the moment Frank Castle was standing in her doorway holding a bag of Chinese food out like a shield. He’d brought her flowers, last time. Maybe he thought he had to ...earn his way into her space, somehow.

“Thanks for coming,” she said, polite as ever. It felt a little like thanking the executioner as he measured you up for the rope, but she was Karen Page: polite to the end.

“Yeah.” he said, moving to stand awkwardly in the dark entryway. “There’s something you needed to talk about?” he asked, handing her the bag and sliding out of his coat. It wasn’t the leather duster he’d worn on the rooftop a year ago, back when he’d been trying to convince everyone (including himself) that he really was as bad as everyone said.

She walked into the kitchen, knowing he’d follow her. “We can talk about that after we eat,” she said. She could already feel the rumble of the slope; she could feel the avalanche of lies she’d built getting ready to cascade down on her. She could wait a little longer. A few more minutes with her shame just between her and the stars.

“I, ah, I didn’t know what you liked so I got a couple things,” he said.

Karen started unpacking the bag. “I really appreciate it,” she said. “Oh- soup!”

“Soup kinda day,” said Frank, wandering over to look at her bookshelves. She watched him study the photo of her and Foggy and Matt and then start scanning titles on her shelves.

“You like this Dean Koontz guy, don’t you? You’ve got what, a dozen of his books?”
And more on my kindle, thought Karen. She didn’t have to try to haul kindle books up two flights of stairs every time she moved.

“Yeah,” said Karen, carrying Frank a bowl of hot and sour soup. He was holding her battered copy of *Watchers*, the one that had made it through all her moves, even in the one from Vermont. “You can borrow one, if you want. But it sounds like you don’t have a lot of time to read.”

“Some nights it seems like all I’ve got is time,” Frank muttered, taking the bowl from her. “Thanks.”

“Hey-” she touched his jaw lightly, then turned his chin so the light hit him. “What happened here? You’re bruising.” Distantly she registered the face that beneath the five o’clock stubble, his skin was soft.

“I joined a gym,” he said, backing away. Maybe he didn’t want to be touched. Karen shrugged and pulled out a stool at the kitchen island. If he wanted to eat standing up, more power to him.

“Yeah?”

“It’s… kind of an MMA place.”

“Oh.” Karen thought about that, about Frank punching at someone who’d asked for it and was punching back. “Oh. That’s really good! Did it- um. Did it feel good?”

Frank sat down beside her. “Yeah,” he said, spooning in some soup. “It really did. Actually, I thought you could come, sometime.”

“Frank, I couldn’t outfight a twelve-year old.” She knew she had talents- just not those.

“That’s the problem,” he said, reaching across her to snag a container of what turned out to be Hunan beef. He dumped it into his now-empty soup bowl. “You keep taking yourself out in the middle of the night, and one of these days that hand cannon ain’t gonna make a difference. A lady I met- ah, her name was Trish Walker, I think- she said she was going to host a class for all-girls. Teach self-defense and stuff.”
Karen raised her eyebrows. “You go to a gym with Trish Walker? Like, ‘Trish Talk’ Trish Walker?”

“I guess,” said Frank.

Karen added that to her mental list of Things She Knew About Frank Castle: weirdly lucky. Not good lucky, obviously, but… lucky. Like if Lady Luck had a weird sense of humor and a drinking problem.

“I’ll think about it,” she said. She wasn’t going to admit it (yet), but he was kind of right about learning some basic self-defense.

They ate in companionable silence for a few minutes, and it made Karen jittery. At the diner, when they’d gone to Jersey, it had been fine. Kind of warm, two friends sharing a space. Now it made her nervous.

“Want a drink?” she asked, walking to the fridge.

“Got a beer?” he asked.

“Sure.”

She grabbed a beer from the fridge, hooked it on the edge of the counter to pop off the top, and passed it over. For herself… she knew it looked bad, but she took a bottle of whiskey out of the freezer, poured a couple fingers into a clean coffee mug, and tossed it back. It burned all the way down, and when combined with the soup, managed to make her feel just a little bit warm.

“This must be a hell of a discussion we’re getting ready to have,” said Frank, watching her with calm, dark eyes.

“You could say that,” said Karen, closing up the food containers to put in the fridge.

Frank wandered into the living room and checked out the grow lamp in the window. “I like this,” he told her. “It makes your apartment glow.”
“Yeah,” said Karen. “I like it too. It’s kind of...cozy, right?

Neither of them was willing to mention that the light was keeping the roses alive, the one’s he’d given her when he’d come back from the dead a second time.

She was wiping down the counter when he came back into the kitchen and took the dishcloth from her hand. “Spill it, Page,” he said, tossing the rag into the sink and towing her towards the couch by her wrist. “I’ve been to interrogations that have been less painful.”

She sank into the cushions and sighed, letting her head tip against the back of the sofa. She wasn’t sure how to start this, how to let him know…

“Alright,” said Karen, sitting up and meeting Frank’s eyes. She couldn’t let him get the wrong idea, not about this. Not for a minute.

“I’m- I want you to know that I’m not asking you to do anything,” she said. “It’s not- not about your skill set.”

“Now I’m really worried,” he said, but his eyes were calm. She clung to that.

“I wanted to talk about this- um, with you, because-

*How was this the worst part? She hadn’t even gotten to the bad shit, yet.*

“Because you’ve already seen me. You knew it wasn’t the first time I’d pointed a gun at someone’s head.” As non-sequiturs went, that was a doozy, but he followed just fine.

“No,” he said. “I knew it wasn’t your first time.” He settled back into his corner of the couch like an army digging in for a seige.

“My- I killed my boyfriend, when I was nineteen. I used his gun, and I put three bullets in his back.”
“Must’ve had a good reason,” said Frank from the shadows, and that hurt; it felt like her heart had been squeezed too tight. He shouldn’t have faith in her, not like that. Not her.

She got up to pace, tugging on a strand of hair that was curled over her shoulder. “No, I really didn’t,” she said. “But I did-”

“You don’t have to tell me.” It was soft, gentle. He wouldn’t push the issue, wouldn’t prod at that wound.

Karen pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. “No- I really, really do. I have to tell someone.”

If this kills me, someone needs to know.

He was quiet while she thought, looking unseeing out the window.

“When I was sixteen my mother died. Cancer. We’d known it was coming and-”

There was so much stuff, so many variables in a story that boiled down to double homicide.

“My father owned a diner, and when she died, he didn’t- she ran it. Did the accounts, ordered supplies. I didn’t realize how badly it was doing until just before I graduated high school. I was accepted to Cornell- I know, I know,” she said, even though he hadn’t said anything.

“I deferred for a year. I told myself I’d get dad and Kevin sorted out, and then go to school.”

“Kevin?”

“My brother. He was three years younger than I was.”

She knew he hadn’t missed the past tense. Was.
Her voice was a little higher, a little more desperate when she continued on, still looking at the dark window but not seeing the city beyond. “So I stayed, while all my friends left, and I just- I had to pretend I didn’t care. I met Todd that fall, when I should have been unpacking in my dorm. He was - sarcastic in that way that people think is smart, you know?”

“I know,” said Frank, his voice a low rumble. If she hadn’t been saying this all out loud (for the very first time), she could have forgotten he was there.

“He- I knew right from the beginning what he was. Met him at a party while he was selling pills, and-

“I wanted out as soon as I realized I’d somehow fallen in, but I must not have wanted out enough. He knew things, could tell people, could ruin me and my dad and Kevin…” she trailed off, momentarily caught in the memory of Pine-Sol and maple syrup and day-old grease.

“One night we went off to another party, where I got so, so numb. So blissfully unaware that I was still in Fagan fucking Corners, that I was in a relationship that I was too chicken to end, and that if I didn’t watch it, I’d become one of those losers who never got anywhere and just swallowed pills until they drifted right out of life.

“Todd and I went back to his place- this shitty trailer in the woods, a few miles outside town- and it was just starting to burn. Kevin was standing there with a gas can and this smile… he said he was freeing me. He wanted me to go to school.”

“Karen…”

“No- I’m almost done.” She felt like she’d just thrown up- her stomach still cramped, and she had cold sweat sticking to her face, but most of it- the worst of it- was over. And that feeling of grace, as always, ended.

“Todd got out and grabbed a crowbar from the back of the truck. He hit Kevin with it, and he just… he dropped.” She’d never forget watching his body fall to the ground, backlit by the smoking trailer.

“And Todd was standing over him, bringing the crowbar down on him again, and I just- suddenly I had the gun out of the glovebox, and I was behind him, and then the gun kicked- it flew up so much more than I expected, after I fired. Almost hit myself in the face with it.
“And then I fired again, and again, and Todd fell.” She looked down at her hands, half surprised to find them empty.

“We put his body in the burning camper, and left the gun on the table. Kevin was wheezing; half out of it, so I shoved him into his truck and we drove- I drove. And fifteen minutes later the truck was through the guardrail Kevin was half-crushed, right there next to me. I heard him die, Frank.”

She was crying again. She’d cried more in the last week than she had in the ten previous years combined. “I heard Kevin wheeze out a breath, and then he was gone.

“The fire department came and cut me out of the car. Then the Sheriff came, and my father. They went to school together, still had beers on Friday night. They hushed it up, and gave me until the next day to get out of town. I ended up here, in Hell’s Kitchen. Didn’t even get to say goodbye to Kevin. Dad didn’t want me at the funeral.”

She sank to the floor where she’d been standing, frozen, with her arms around herself. It seemed to give Frank permission to move, because he crossed to her soundlessly and sat down beside her, his heavy arm draped over her shoulders. When she tipped towards him and his shoulder caught her head… it felt right.

“Were you hurt?” His voice was quiet: husky and deep.

Of course that would be his first question, of course it was. He was Frank Castle, the man who’d been worried about her bumps and bruises when he’d had a four inch chunk of metal sticking out of his own arm. She let a watery sound that was half laugh, half choke.

“Nothing that didn’t heal,” she said.

“There’s more, isn’t there,” he said after a while. “You didn’t ask me to come here so you could tell me that.”

“There’s more.” There’s always more.

“I got a letter from Todd’s brother. He knows what happened, he knows it was me. At first he didn’t ask for anything, but then- Sunday… he said if I didn’t take a check for $100,000 to the Ladies Pavilion he’d kill a waitress that looks like me on Monday. And he did. Her name was Juliet, and
“She’s dead now.”

“You went to the park, didn’t you.” It wasn’t a question. He knew her too well (and wasn’t that why she’d picked him for this confession?).

“Nobody came.”

“He didn’t want the damn money. You know that. He’s fucking with you, Karen.”

Karen leaned a little more of her weight against him. He was warm and solid and smelled like soap and some kind of subtly spicy deodorant and she was tired. She’d been up so high on the mountain of lies, the one she’d built this new life on, that there hadn’t been enough oxygen for her to even scream. Now she was on the ground again, and she was tired.

“I know,” she said. “And I know I deserve it.”

“You don’t deserve it.”

Karen didn’t shift. She wasn’t going to be the one to walk away from this, not even now. She’d always left the proverbial ball in his court. “Justice, Frank,” she said quietly. “You and I have ...defined ourselves with it, gotten obsessed with it. You know this is justice. It’s the kind of thing you would do-”

He stiffened, spine going rigid and shoulders tensing.

“No- you wouldn’t torture me like this. And you probably wouldn’t kill me, because I’m a girl. Which is sexist, by the way, but I find it weirdly endearing.”

“Yeah? Well consider it reparations for the past ten thousand years or something.”

Frank Castle made jokes. Karen felt punch-drunk, and the words just kept coming. “But if I was a man, and it had been your brother that I’d killed, and it had all been hushed up- you’d drop me. Bullet in the brain, pop.”
“Not you, Karen,” said Frank. “Stop that shit. Stop that shit! It’s not me, it’s some asshole maniac that doesn’t deserve to breathe your air. You think I’ve always had a rule about girls? Think I’ve always had a rule about innocents? I ended up in the fucking Corp because I didn’t have rules.”

He shifted, turning to face her, there on the floor in the brilliant pool of white light cascading down from the window. His hands were on her shoulders, holding her up and forcing her to look at him, and for a moment—just a second—all the rumbling noise of the city stopped. It was her and Frank and the glow of the roses, and the world and all its problems dropped away.

“I didn’t get fucked up in the Marines. My ma said I came out of the womb waving my fists. I joined the Marines because the only thing I was fucking good at was picking fights and staying on my feet just a little bit longer than the other guy. I was thrown out of two schools, and I broke my nose three times before my eighteenth birthday, always on some other asshole’s fist.

“You think you’re so fucking bad because you shot some fuckwit who was killing your brother? That’s bullshit, this is all bullshit. Look, the Corp spends twelve weeks trying to condition men into killing other guys they don’t know. I never needed that. I was fucking born for that. That’s the fucked up thing, Karen. I got medals for doing the thing that I was born to fucking do.

“It’s the reason Maria and I worked, and I still ain’t okay with that. The desert—killing, over there, it’s a fucking binary: me or him, us and them, bad and worse. It was so fucking easy—there were so many days that I’d rather have run into a gun nest of enemy soldiers than deal with dropping my kids off at school. The whole world just narrows down to your hands and your instincts and the guy right there in front of you. I’ve been chasing that feeling since I was twelve years old.

“Don’t you even think you’re the same as me. You fucked up? Yeah, you did. And you have to live with that, and seems to me you were doing a damn good job of it. You made a life for yourself. So what if you’re lonely, you were dealing with it. I am not going to let this scum take that from you. Do you hear me?”

Karen was crying, her eyes closed and head hanging in the space between them. Frank shook her a little, his hands just slightly too tight on her shoulders. “Hey. You hear me?”

Karen wrapped her fingers around his wrists, linking them in a circuit, feeling his pulse thudding against her first two fingers. How many times had he come back now? Once, in the hospital. Dead for a minute, the nurse had said. Heart started again, all by itself.

Then again, after Rawlins (well, during Rawlins). Madani had filled Karen in: adrenaline to the thigh, CPR in the car on the way to her parents’ apartment. It was possible that here was the
renewable energy source humanity needed; here was the thing that could power the world: Frank Castle’s bleeding heart, the one that won’t stop beating.

It’s comforting, a gentle thumpthump, thumpthump against her fingers.

She met his eyes, and was somehow still surprised by the connection there, by the intensity of his gaze.

“You’re good,” he said.

“So are you,” she whispered. “So are you.”

“This ain’t about me,” he said. “Not this time. I’m so deep in the red, Karen, I’m not ever getting out of it, but you- you aren’t going down for this. Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

She felt a tear drip off her chin and onto the skin of her chest, but she didn’t let go of Frank’s wrists and didn’t look away. “I didn’t want this,” she said. “I didn’t want you to do anything. Don’t- don’t go back. Not for me.”

“I know you didn’t. But I’m going to anyway.”

“I just wanted- I just wanted someone to know.” Her voice cracked.


Karen started crying in earnest, the messy tears of a wound that’s been open so long the pain becomes a part of you the way your laugh is a part of you, or your eyes or grin or heart. He had known- he’d seen her right from the beginning, peeling away all the layers of propriety and confidence and wry good humor that she wore like armor.

He’d known. You look at yourself differently, once you’d taken a life. You can never meet your own gaze quite the same way.
He tugged her into him, planting her ass in his lap and draping her legs off to the side, cradling her firmly against the planes and hollows of his body.

He didn’t tell her it was going to be okay. He didn’t lie. Instead he shushed her, low and smooth, and cradled the base of her skull in one warm palm.

When she felt hollow and most of her tears were gone, Frank asked the her the next, logical question: “You look up this loser?”

“Yeah,” she said. “He seems- clean. No weird credit history, no red flags on the internet. He seems normal.” She sounded bewildered, even to her own ears.

“He isn’t,” said Frank. “You got the notes?”

“Um, yeah.” She scrambled awkwardly out of his lap, trying not to bump up into him too much. “They’re in my bag.”

She dug out the slightly crinkled envelopes and passed them over.

“Good,” he said. “I’ll- I’ll look into it, and get back to you.”

“Okay,” said Karen, wrapping her arms around herself again. She was cold. She felt like she was always cold. “You’re leaving?”

Frank looked at her and cocked his head a little to the side. “You alright?”

“Sure,” said Karen automatically.

Frank sighed and looked off to the side, his eyes focused on something Karen couldn’t see. “Remember that night, at the diner? When I killed Schoonover’s men?”

“Hard to forget it,” said Karen, her voice wry.
“You remember what you said? When I asked why you’d come with me?”

Karen swallowed hard, already hung by her own words from more than a year ago. She swallowed, and the little noise was loud, even in her own ears. “Yes,” she whispered.

“You told me that I was honest; that I didn’t lie to you. ‘Bout killed me, because the whole time we were talking I knew they were coming for you, that I’d staked you out like decoy. I’ve tried to be honest with you since—”

“Not always,” said Karen. “At the park- by the bridge-”

“I’ve felt bad about that,” he said, voice still even (too even). “You tore me up, telling me that I was the honest man in your life. First thing I thought was fuck, girl needs new friends. Then I tried to live up to it. Don’t lie to me, Karen. You don’t owe me shit, you don’t have to give me the goddamn time of day, but if you want to give me anything, you give me the goddamn truth.”

Karen could feel herself shaking.

Frank took another step forward and looked her right in the eye. “You okay?” he asked again.

“No,” Karen whispered. She might never be okay again. The truth tasted strange on her tongue.

“Okay,” said Frank, his voice soft. He glanced around the kitchen, looked at her bag on the counter, and then focused on her bedroom door. She could almost hear him making a plan.

He took her hand and towed her into her dark bedroom. “Pajamas?” he asked.

Karen went to her dresser and pulled out the soft, bad-day-at-work flannels that she usually wore on the couch while drinking wine and brooding.

“Good.” Frank nodded, and steered her towards the bathroom, the jammies clutched to her chest. “Brush your teeth, wash your face, all that stuff.”
“Yessir,” said Karen, relieved. Not relieved about anything in particular, just… relieved. Frank was on the job, so success was pretty much guaranteed.

She brushed her teeth, and grimaced at the sight of her tear-swollen eyes. “Not your best look, Page,” she mumbled to herself before returning to her dark bedroom. Frank was sitting on the edge of her bed, his gaze fixed on the toes of his boots.

“Bed,” he said.

She tossed the little throw pillows on the floor and pulled back the covers, not at all worried that the Punisher was watching. She patted the bed beside her, and Frank hesitated just for a moment before he sat down near her, his back to her and his feet on the floor.

“You talked out?”

“Yes.” Her throat ached. She knew she hadn’t talked all that much in the scheme of things, but it felt like she had strep. It felt like she’d been spitting fire instead of truths.

Frank nodded, a dark silhouette against the deeper shadows of her room. “Sometime- sometime I want to know about your rocket ship in the broom cupboard. I want to know about school, and what you planned to study. You know so much about my life Karen- you probably know my goddamn shoe size, and how fast I ran a mile in boot camp. I want to learn about you sometime, but I guess tonight I’ll tell you a story.”

He was quiet, and Karen wondered if he was trying to find a story that wasn’t painful for one or both of them. She’d always known he’d had this in him- this propensity for caretaking, the ability to look at someone and know what they need. He’d known that it had been hard for her to watch him throw his court case, bellowing about how much he enjoyed killing.

“I- my parents were pretty old when I was born. Ma was forty-two, dad was forty-seven. By the time I was in high school they were getting notifications from AARP. They couldn’t control me, couldn’t tell me anything. I didn’t want to hear it- didn’t want to listen to the sermons.

“Feel bad about it now. They loved me, and they didn’t deserve the problems I brought ‘em. They were all soft- about god, about the Church, about helping people. God has one fucking sense of humor, cause he sent ‘em hell. He sent them me.
“We got snowed in one winter. Had plenty of supplies, but the power cut out. I bitched, complained up one side and down the other.”

He paused, and the stop of his low rumble was enough to have Karen coming out of her drowse.

“It’s a fucking miracle my kids weren’t little hellions just to spite me. Must have been more Maria’s than mine. Anyway, she said if I wanted food, I was going to have to make it because she was tired of trying to make me happy. We had a grill and a camp stove and she left me alone to figure it out.

“I caught the back deck on fire, Karen. More than a foot of snow on the ground, dead of winter, and I managed it. They put it right out, but I had to buy ‘em a new pan. Never lived that one down. It was the first story they told Maria when I took her home to them.”

“Where are they?” Karen asked, her words blurring together at the edges. She loved Frank’s voice, always had.

“Dad died first, during my first tour. Massive heart attack. I was home when Ma went, right after Lisa was born. She got pneumonia that didn’t let up.”

“‘M sorry,” said Karen.

“Shit,” mumbled Frank. “Here I thought I was telling you something nice, and it always ends up back here.”

“All the people we know are dead,” said Karen, and it was kind of funny, wasn’t it? “If we didn’t talk about dead people, we couldn’t talk at all.”

“There’s always the weather,” Frank deadpanned.

“Cold,” Karen sighed.

“That it is,” said Frank. His voice rumbled on, but Frank Castle, joking about the weather, was the
last thing Karen remembered.

Chapter End Notes

Who doesn't want to cry about the fact that pretty much all of Frank and Karen's friends are dead, amirite??

I know this was long and wordy (and dialogue heavy), and I really hope I got all the emotion in there that I wanted. I'm getting too close to this stupid story to tell anymore.

Thank you to all of you who are reading/supporting this story! I'm so truly grateful for each and every one of you! <3
Frank’s knuckles were bleeding when he called Lieberman.

“How’d you get this number?” Lieberman hissed into the phone. It was just after seven on a Wednesday morning, and he could hear Sarah in the background fussing at the kids.

“You gave it to me,” said Frank, avoiding a homeless man stumbling out of an alley. He’d been waiting outside Cage’s Gym when Luke had opened it up just before six, and the big man had looked him over and let him in without a word. He’d turned the lights on, kicked off his boots, and stepped into the ring with Frank.

Neither man pulled their punches this time.

“Oh, Fr- Pete. Hang on a second.”

Frank could hear a door close, and the background noise dropped away. “You weren’t supposed to make contact until Thursday- oh god, you aren’t bleeding out somewhere are you?”

“No- no. I’m fine, but- I need information.”

“I thought you stopped, you know. Punishing.”

Frank took a deep breath through his nose, counting out the seconds. How was it that the only friend he’d made since the Corp was the biggest pain in the ass on the fucking planet?

“It’s Karen,” he said. “I need information for her.”

“You’re investigating your girlfriend? This is Karen Page we’re talking about, right? Karen, as in, ‘run off to a hotel and get blown up’ Karen?”
“Lieberman-”

“And you thought I was lacking class for talking to Sarah when she was drunk,” David muttered. “I don’t know-”

“She’s being blackmailed you prick,” Frank muttered, cutting through an alley that smelled like piss. “I need to help her.”

“Oh. Oh.”

“Yeah,” said Frank. “Oh.”

“Come over for dinner tonight, yeah? Leo can show you her school project, we can eat, and then after we’ll look for your information. Okay?”

“Oh,” said Frank, the panic clouding his mind receding a little. “Okay.”

He hung up with Lieberman, and his phone—his real phone, the one that wasn’t encrypted or invisible or whatever the fuck Lieberman had done to it—buzzed with a text. It was his boss, Mickey.

_You alive? Didn’t turn up._

Ah, fuck.

_Slowly, cursing his too-big, too-blunt, too-clumsy fingers Frank painstakingly texted back, _Sorry boss. Bad Chinese last night. Shoulda texted._

_Mickey: You’re good. Just don’t do it again._

Frank replied, _Thanks_, before jogging the rest of the way home.
The women in Frank’s life had taught him long ago not to show up to someone else’s place empty-handed. It was a habit that had stuck around, even though the women were gone. When he’d been pretending to be Pete, the first time, he’d taken Sarah a new headlight for the van and a part for the garbage disposal and when all else failed, he’d taken her Maria’s favorite flowers.

Call him an old fashioned guy.

This time he picked up cannoli from the bakery where Sarah had gotten Leo’s birthday cake. Kids would get a kick out of them, and he wouldn’t have to pretend to know what the fuck he was doing in the corner wine store.

Once again, Frank found himself outside a bright front door listening to the bustle of a family inside. It wasn’t his family, but he knew them. He cared about them. And nothing- absolutely nothing- made him feel more alien than this.

He’d done it with his own family. He’d come back from deployment, or a few week’s training exercises, and he’d park in the driveway, close enough to hear his family inside, their lives flowing on without him.

At some point- maybe between deployment two and three, or maybe three and four- his family had closed the gap left by his absence. The little space that had been left for him, that was filled by him, was gone. They’d closed ranks in his absence, and he couldn’t blame them for it.

Normal wasn’t him being home. Normal was him being gone.

He hadn’t been able to go to Thanksgiving after - after everything with Leiberman. He’d barely made it over for Hanukkah. There was something about front doors, and candles in the windows, and not fitting anywhere anymore.

Nice thing about houses, though. They had more than one door. So he knocked on the side door into the kitchen like an old-timey servant might have, with the sweet-smelling bakery box under his arm.

Sarah answered in a checked blue-and-white apron, little hairs curling around her face. “Pete! Hi, David said you were coming to dinner.”
Frank had been married for almost fourteen years. He could read that code. “He told you that… this morning, right? Not half an hour ago?”

“Actually, yes, this morning,” said Sarah. “Come on in. David said he’d be home in a few.”

“Brought dessert,” said Frank, passing her the box.

“Trade you for a beer,” she said, taking the box and leading the way into the kitchen. He snagged a beer from the fridge and then stood in the corner, awkward and angry. David was getting his pound of flesh via family dinner. He always did have a sick sense of humor. God help him if Curtis and Lieberman were ever in the same room while he was conscious.

“Mom, I can’t find- oh. Hi Frank.”

Leo looked at him from the other side of the kitchen counter, peering beneath the cabinets that framed the dining room table. She and David were the only ones who still called him Frank (other than Karen, but he couldn’t think about her now because these weren’t his walls and he’d feel real fucking bad if he put his fist through one). Zach and Sarah still called him Pete, had always called him Pete.

David was used to him as Frank. But little Leo… she broke his heart.

( “My name’s Frank. Frank Castle.

“He’s a lot scarier than Pete.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess he is.” )

Leo Lieberman was one of those girls that seemed to have been dropped down by god or aliens or some higher power that could skip over the normal gene-mixing process entirely. She wanted to see the truth in things- the reason an appliance stopped working, the reason her dad had disappeared, and the real person behind the guy she’d called Pete.
She broke Frank’s heart.

“Hey Leo,” he said. “Your dad told me you’ve got some kind of thing going on for school?”

Leo rolled her eyes. At just turned fourteen, Frank suspected there would be more eyerolls than real communication in her parents’ future. “Yeah, I’ve got a project in my physics class. We have to build a rollercoaster, and dad is useless.”

“He hot glued one of the parts to himself,” Sarah muttered while grinning down into the pot of potatoes.

“Rollercoaster, huh? Let’s take a look.”

He’d helped Sarah and Lieberman renovate their attic area into a little living space where the kids could work on school projects or play video games without sending the other into a fratricidal rage. He’d enjoyed the labor, and then he’d gone home and run around the city for almost six hours, trying to forget all the plans he and Maria had had for their house, for his kids.

Leo led him up the stairs and over to a card table covered in little pieces of wood and printed out schematics. “Look at you,” said Frank when Leo started explaining her design to him.

“See, the momentum has to be built up on the first drop. That’s where the cars build up enough speed to get them through the rest of the ride, right? But it also has to be small enough to keep the cars from flying off.”

“Shit, Leo. This looks professional.”

“It’s a program on the school computers. It helps with the math; but I’ve already done that part. Now I have to build it for a demonstration.”

She pointed at the little pieces of track scattered over the table top. A hot glue gun had dribbled clear plastic into a little puddle on the table, and a bottle of gorilla glue sat off to the side, unopened.

“It’s a kit,” Leo continued. “It has little rails and a standard car so we can test them fairly, but I need
someone to help hold the pieces and dad kept trying to change my design!” She may only have been fourteen, but already she’d developed the rising-pitch voice of feminine frustration.

“Yeah, your dad’s a whiz with the computer stuff, but I think this is a little out of his wheelhouse,” said Frank. “What’s the trickiest part?”

They assembled little pieces of lightweight wood with gorilla glue as the light faded outside. Zach came up and started playing some war game, one complete with the tinkling of spent shell casings. Frank wondered if any of the people who’d made the game had ever been to war or fired a gun.

Leo kept glancing at him, at the TV, and back again. “‘M fine, kid,” he said, holding two pieces of track still while she carefully dripped glue onto the edges.

“Dad said you’d been to war,” said Leo. “He said you’d seen too much of it.”

“Yeah, well he was right about that.”

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, and Frank knew this was building up to some question he didn’t want to answer. He hadn’t spent time with Leo like this since- since they’d fixed the headlight on the van. After that her father had been home, and she’d been sticking to him like glue.

“Why’d you lie about being Pete?” she asked. “And why’d you stop coming to see us?”

Frank didn’t let himself drop the delicate construction he was holding. He’d disappointed this family enough already.

“Your dad… he was hiding, to keep you safe,” he said. “So he couldn’t come check on you. And then, when he was home… I thought you’d like some time to be a family again.”

“We never stopped being a family,” said Leo. “I thought we were friends, Frank.”

“You told me I scared you,” he said quietly, not looking at her. “I thought you’d want me out of your life, Leo.” He’d assumed everyone had wanted him out of their life. Who the fuck wanted to be
“You could have asked,” she said. “Dad disappeared and then you came, and then dad came back and you left. It’s not like things went back to normal! People still think he’s a traitor! They say I’m a commie too, and we should go back to Russia and work for Facebook! Mom and dad fight all the time, but they don’t want me to know about it.”

“Can’t hide anything from you, huh?” Frank muttered, carefully setting down the beginning curve of an arch on a piece of newspaper. He turned Leo towards him, taking in the flush of pink on her cheeks and the way she was biting down on her bottom lip to keep it from trembling. Little Frankie had done that when he was trying not to cry.

“I’m sorry,” he said, meeting her squinting brown eyes. “I’m really sorry. I’m an asshole.”

“You are,” said Leo, smiling a little. “At least you admit it.”

She reminded him of Karen. He’d been resisting the comparison the whole time, but—well, she’d agree he was an asshole too, and she’d smile while she was doing it.

“What’s going on up here?” David called. Leo turned away and wiped at her face with her sleeve, lightning quick, and then David turned into the room. “Don’t listen to anything this guy tells you, sweetheart,” said Lieberman, tugging his daughter to him and pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “Hey, Zach.”

Zach ignored him.

“Do you think he can hear us?” David asked Leo.

“Not enough evidence,” said Leo, cocking her head to the side. “But I’d suggest it’s selective deafness.”

Frank grinned down at the floor. Girls, man. There was something about girls.

“Hey, man,” said David. “You stealing my spot?”
“Heard you got in a fight with a glue gun and lost,” said Frank, glancing at a welt on the back of Lieberman’s hand.

“Yeah, yeah,” said David, mock-glaring down at Leo. “It was a joint effort.”

“You didn’t read the directions,” Leo muttered, returning to assembling her coaster.

“Directions are for-”

Leo’s head snapped up and she glared at David with enough malice to have his eyebrows rising. “-for people who want to get As and a scholarship to Stanford,” he finished, the words tumbling over themselves.

“Maybe not Stanford,” she amended, looking away. “California’s pretty far.”

“You too chicken to go to Cali?” Zach asked, his eyes still fixed on the screen. “I’m not. I can’t wait to get away from this shithole.”

“Zach!” said David.

“What? He curses all the time,” said the kid, jerking his chin towards Frank.

“Well, after you’ve gone to war you can curse too, how about that?” said David.

“Yeah, yeah,” Zach muttered. “Maybe that’s a cover-up story, too. Everything’s a lie, these days.”

“It’s selective deafness,” Leo muttered, and this time Frank let himself laugh. This he could handle. The happy family, all Norman Rockwell and in love with each other and playing board games by a fire, that shit sent him running for the fucking hills, but this? This was a family dynamic Frank Castle could handle.
“I was supposed to tell you dinner’s done,” Liberman said. “Wash your hands and head downstairs, okay?”

Dinner passed in a flurry of conversation, mostly propelled by the kids. They debated whether or not the school’s secretary was really smoking the weed she confiscated, they fought with David over a remake of some superhero comic that David had read as a kid, and when the topic of a dog came up Sarah took on the role of bad guy and put her foot down. They munched cannoli as Frank helped Sarah with the dishes, and then thundered away again.

“Sorry about that,” she said, passing him a saucepan to dry. “Everyone who said it’s easier as they get older was lying.”

“Yeah,” said Frank. He almost avoided the thought that he’d never get to find out for himself.

David reappeared (conveniently) right as Sarah let the water out of the sink. “I’m set up in the basement,” he said. “Come on.”

“What’s with you and basements?” Frank asked, following Lieberman down the stairs. “You got something against the sun?”

“I’m watching my complexion,” said David, plopping down in a rolling desk chair. The setup was similar to the one back in their bunker, but the tech looked way more expensive.

Frank tugged an old dining chair across the room and sat down by Liberman, glancing at the information filtering across his screens. “I can’t believe you’re still doing this,” he said. “Thought you’d learned.”

“You still got your arsenal?” asked Lieberman, leaning forward to let a little camera scan his retina.

“Course.”

“And I’ve still got this,” he said simply. “Tell me about this thing with Karen.”

Frank took a deep breath. He’d held it together today, he’d stayed moving and hadn’t let himself think about it for more than a few seconds at a time. He hated - he hated fucking all of it. Hated that
she was surrounded by ghosts too, hated that she’d worked so hard to build herself a life only for this to happen, hated that he’d left her alone in her bed when the window into her bedroom had begun to pale to lavender. Most of all he hated that he couldn’t convince her she was a good person, the best person. He couldn’t just say it and make her believe.

Frank told Lieberman. He told him all of it, even though it wasn’t his secret to share, because Liberman knew.

“Shit,” said Lieberman, blinking at Frank. “Her luck is almost as bad as yours.”

“Lieberman-”

“I’m going to help,” said David, turning to the keyboard. “I’m just saying- what are the odds that it’s her on your defense team, you know? No wonder she took it personally.”

“What do you mean?” Frank asked, watching logos and passwords flash across the screen. “She’s just like that. She’d good, man. She and those fucking lawyers tried to help a bunch of people, not just me.”

“Yeah but- her whole life changed in one day too, you know? In one night she’d killed someone, watched her brother die, and then was thrown out of town. Her whole world, gone.”

Frank’s fingers were twitching against his thigh. “She’s nothing like me,” he said. He had to repeat it, had to tell himself that until the rushing blood in his head ebbed away enough for him to think.

“This him?”

Jason’s Facebook page popped up. About six feet tall, blue eyes, short brownish hair. Little beer belly on an otherwise lanky frame. Lieberman flicked through pictures- the fuckwit fishing, hunting, in coveralls, in various bars with interchangeable girls.

Liberman slid the Facebook profile over to Frank while he rolled to the end of the desk and set to work on another keyboard. “His phone hasn’t left Vermont in almost a year,” said Lieberman. “Mostly stays in ...Fagan Corners. Last time he left he went on vacation to the Jersey Shore last summer.”
“Pictures here to prove it,” muttered Frank. “So he left his phone home when he came to the city.”

“You sure the notes weren’t mailed?”

“The first was,” said Frank. The envelopes were inside his coat upstairs. “But it was stamped in the city. No return address.”

“Huh. And the second one was slid under her door? In a locked building, right?”

“It’s not like there’s any real security,” said Frank. “A kid could break in.”

“Could be he has a partner, someone in the city dropping the letters.”

The hair on the back of Frank’s neck stood up, and his heart started pounding like it always did right before a fight. This was bigger than he’d expected. It always fucking was.

“It isn’t him, it isn’t this Jason guy,” said Frank, nearly yelling. “It isn’t this asshole; someone is just using his story as a cover to fuck with Karen. Either that or it’s him and a partner, and that’s not good, David. That means this is a whole thing, this isn’t some asshole going off half-cocked for revenge-”

He stood abruptly and moved to pace back and forth across the basement, hating this. Hating every minute.

“Hey- he’s getting paid,” said Lieberman. “Not his salary. He makes thirty-seven thousand doing HVAC, but recently he’s been getting several thousand a few times a month. Started last month.”

“Where’s it coming from?” Frank knew he didn’t have to ask, that Lieberman’s fingers moved more quickly than Frank’s mouth could, but he had to do something.

“Ah- offshore. Looks like a few holding companies.”
“Can you track ‘em?”

“I’ll try, but it won’t be done tonight.”

“Okay,” said Frank, clenching and relaxing his fists. “Okay.”

“Frank- Frank. Hey.”

He glanced over at Lieberman, who was turned around backwards in his chair, looking at Frank with his Einstein brows furrowed.

“It’s going to be okay,” he said. “You’re not going to let anything happen. We’ll do this.”

“Damn right nothing’s going to happen,” said Frank. “Damn right.”

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“He hasn’t left Vermont,” said Karen, slumping back onto her couch. Frank had paperwork spread over her coffee table, and she was holding a map of Jason’s phone location. “He’s been there the whole time.”

“It’s two guys,” said Frank, shuffling another piece of paper her way. “And I don’t think Jason is the one running things. He’s being paid.”

She took another document: Jason’s bank statements. Lieberman had circled a few transactions, a couple thousand here, a couple thousand there.

“They’re offshore holding companies,” said Frank. “Lieberman’s chasing it down, and there’s not much he misses. Could take time, though.”

“Fuck,” said Karen. She closed her eyes and rested her head against the back of the couch.
She’d been more than half-convinced that Frank would be gone into the shadows after her...confession? purge? Tuesday night. Somewhere in the back of her mind she’d been convinced that he would finally realize what a disaster she was. He’d realize she wasn’t good (despite what he’d said) and he’d be gone again. All day Wednesday she’d heard nothing from him, and she’d jumped every time her phone vibrated, her heart in her throat: maybe it was Frank, maybe he’d found something she’d missed, maybe… but it hadn’t been him.

Then, early this morning, he’d texted.

*I’ve got information. Meet up with you after work.*

Her fingers clumsy and slow from sleep and nerves, she’d hurriedly texted back, *I could come to your place.* He shouldn’t have to seek her out every time.

*Your apartment. See you at 3:30.*

And now- here he was. She was so relieved to see him again, so relieved that he wasn’t looking at her with disgust that she’d been a little giddy with it, having to shove her hands behind her back to keep from reaching out to hug him.

He knew. And he’d still come back.

“If it’s two people, and it isn’t being orchestrated by Jason… this has to be about something else, too,” said Karen slowly, looking over the papers again.

“Who wants to fuck with you, Page? Who wants you out of the way?”

She shot Frank a dark look. He was leaning against the wall across from her, his arms folded over his chest.

“Who wants you out of the way, Frank? Could you list them all?”

“No,” he said, his tone even.
“Neither can I. Fisk’s empire is still mostly together; the lieutenants are just underground. I wrote about the cartel lacing fentanyl into their products a couple months ago, and none of them were happy. The cops got distributors from New York to Philly…”

A muscle in Frank’s jaw was twitching, but he hadn’t moved. “There’s the story you’re doing now, isn’t there?”

“Yeah, but that isn’t panning out. I’m still in the preliminary stages, and Ellison keeps saying that unless I come up with some lead soon, he’s going to pull the story.”

“Maybe he should.”

“I just told you I don’t have anything yet- all I have is a location, and I haven’t visited it yet.” She was not about to let Frank dictate her professional life. It was also more than a little hypocritical: he’d needed her to poke into stuff for information; he’d needed the stuff she had access to. And now he wanted her to play it safe?

“This doesn’t feel like the cartel,” said Frank. “They’d just drop you.”

“Fisk?”

Frank pulled a face and began to pace.

“Hey,” said Karen, watching the set of his shoulders. “What are you thinking?”

“I met him,” said Frank, moving to stand by her window and look out. “In prison. He… well, he’s running things. He can go where he wants, see who he wants. The guards are all on his payroll, one way or another.”

“I helped put him in prison,” said Karen slowly. Her hand slid up to cup her throat; she could feel her pulse beating against the heel of her hand. She’d never forget what it was like to choke for air, to feel her eyes bulging as she struggled… “He might toy with me this way. And…”
She’d already confessed so much.

“And?” said Frank, turning to look at her.

“And I killed his second. James Wesley, he took me and… well. I killed him with his own gun, and then I escaped.”

“Yeah?” asked Frank. The corners of his mouth were twitching up into a little smile. “I really should be glad you didn’t plug me back in your apartment.”

“Hell yes you should,” said Karen, finding herself smiling back. “Wesley… I feel less bad about.”

“You shouldn’t feel bad about that one at all,” said Frank, sitting down on the other end of the sofa. “Fucker had it coming.”

“I don’t know how Fisk could have found out about Wesley, though,” said Karen. She got up and snagged her bag, pulling out her notebook and a pen. She jotted down, Wesley, cartel, subway gropers, rise of white collar crimes (Hendersons), women & #MeToo, meth runners out of projects-

“Who’d you tell about him?” asked Frank, leaning forward to read her list upside-down. Of course he could read upside-down.

“Nobody but you,” said Karen. “I threw the gun in the river and went home and showered and showered and showered. I think it was just… adrenaline, you know?” she said, only half-paying attention.

She added ‘tenement fraud’ to the list.

Frank was looking her with his brows furrowed when he glanced up. “You didn’t even tell Murdock?” he asked.

Karen tried to stop herself from blushing and looked away. “We- let’s say we never got around to confessing our sins to each other,” she said.
“Huh,’” huffed Frank. “I thought Red was big on confessions.” He took her notebook from her and read over the list. “Shit, Karen,” he said. “Who haven’t you pissed off? Be a shorter fucking list. Why the hell do you do this?”

“Why did you go to war, Frank?” Karen asked. She was so fucking tired. She could just close her eyes… “It was the option in front of me. Nelson & Murdock disband and I needed to pay rent. I needed to eat, and I knew about your case, so Ellison took me on. Probationary, at first.”

“It isn’t safe.”

“You think I don’t know that?” she opened her eyes and turning to Frank, who was glowering at her from his side of the sofa. “My mail gets X-rayed now, Frank. They have to make sure I’m not being mailed a bomb, or anthrax, or whatever new fucking thing people come up with.”

“You need the job, fine, I get that. You’re good at it, and I get that too- it feels fucking good to be in your element, to know it’s just you and the job in front of you, and I don’t want to take that. But you don’t only have enemies in New York, you’ve got country-wide organized crime groups gunning for you. You’re one person. One person, and you run out to the fucking docks with a phone and a hand cannon and think you’re safe.”

“Yeah?” said Karen, sitting up and leaning towards Frank. “Who are you to say that? You say I’m one person, well so are you. You ran around the city with an arsenal of weapons and a bulletproof vest and got right in the faces of these assholes. You painted a fucking skull on the vest, you gave them an icon to hate. You were trying to die!”

“And so are you!” Frank said, getting up to pace, his fingers twitching by his side. “That’s the only answer I can come up with Karen. You want to fucking die and you want your death to mean something. Or maybe you only feel alive when you’re dodging assassination attempts, huh, is that it?”

There was so much there to unpack, so much to yell at him and hate him for. Karen stood too, teeth gritted, and before she could stop herself she hissed, “Yeah, Frank? Well, if I have a death wish at least I’m not leaving anyone behind, right? If I get gunned down they’ll clean out my desk at work and toss this stuff in the street. Zero-sum game. I made that decision when I got on a Greyhound bus in Vermont. I couldn’t live the rest of my life worried that someone was going to find out, or hurt me, or take everything away again. I didn’t live like that then, and I won’t live like that now.”
When Frank answered her, his voice was quiet and low. “That why you don’t tell anyone a damn thing? Before this week the most I knew about you was that you weren’t from New York and you hid in a broom closet as a kid. You keep all that shit inside because you’re so concerned about only looking forward, huh?” He turned and walked to the door, his stride long.

“Frank-”

Her apartment door clicked shut, and as it did, the heart that Karen had assumed couldn’t get anymore broken shattered, leaving only jagged shards behind.

Chapter End Notes

AAANGST. I love it.

Hello! I'd like to thank you all again for supporting this story. Every comment and kudos and subscriber is such a boost!

I've decided that I'll be updating this story every Sunday and Wednesday. I'm finished writing it though chapter twelve, and there are only going to be fourteen chapters at most. Fourteen chapters means I abandon good writing protocol and just keep writing fluffy nonsense long after the plot is actually resolved.

Good luck with your Mondays, my friends! Thank you for everything <3
He ended up back at her door. He always did. (There was something about front doors.)

She opened after he knocked, and kept her eyes fixed on the floor. She’d changed out of her work clothes into cotton pajamas, and he could see bright nail polish on her bare toes.

“Hey,” he said, soft. “Can I, uh. Can I come in?”

“Sure,” she said, stepping back. She’d taken her makeup off too, leaving her paler than he was used to seeing her. Somehow she seemed even more delicate.

“Smells good,” he said as they walked out of the little entryway.

“I, ah. It’s a soup kind of night. I needed to keep my hands busy. I like to stay busy.”

It was the first piece of personal information that she’d extended to him without prompting, and he found himself wanting to smile. He’d already known that one. She’d moved into this nice apartment (complete with bedroom door) and she was hardly home to enjoy it.

He noticed a piece of medical tape wrapped around her left thumb. “What happened there?”

Karen shrugged and hid her hand in the material of her sleep pants. “ Turns out chopping and crying don’t mix. I... didn’t think you’d come back.”

“Yeah,” said Frank, sliding onto one of the stools at her island. “I’m sorry about that. I shouldn’t have left, shouldn’t have walked out like that.”

“No- no, it’s okay,” said Karen, leaning against the counter with the island between them. A pot simmered on the stove, smelling like lemon and chicken. “I shouldn’t- I shouldn’t have said it like that.”
“You should have,” said Frank, not taking his eyes off her. “If it was the truth.”

“I… I don’t know if it was.” She was looking at something a thousand yards away, something he couldn’t see. “It might be. It was comforting, you know? Thinking that if one of these assholes got me, at least I wouldn’t be leaving a family behind. It wasn’t fair to you, it sounded like I was implying you shouldn’t have been deployed, and that’s not-”

He interrupted her. “Karen- it’s okay, I knew that wasn’t it.” He took a deep breath and glanced at her before flicking his eyes away again. “I just- you wouldn’t be leaving nothing behind. Nobody behind.”

Frank knew what fear felt like. He was feeling it now.

“I- this, with you-” Frank choked on all the things he needed to tell her. If she was gone (it was a thought too painful for him to look at straight on; something he could only consider for the thinnest skin of a second) he might as well strap on his vest and hang onto a cinder block and take a dip in the goddamn Hudson, because any remaining sense of *purpose* that he had would go with her.

Frank’s phone started ringing in his coat, the sound loud in the silence. He ignored it, but it seemed to set Karen back on edge. “It’s okay, Frank,” she said. “I know. You hungry?”

“Yes,” said Frank. He’d come up with a better way to say it, to put into words the depth of his fear for her, to communicate how much he needed her alive and okay.

(“What do you mean I don’t have to keep you safe! My family is dead! I cannot let that happen. Do you hear me? I cannot let that happen.”)

Karen got bowls out of the cabinet and ladled out broth and rice and chicken and slid it his way. In his coat, the phone started up again.

“You should get that,” said Karen, spooning up a bite and blowing to cool it. He had to force himself to look away from her lips.

“Yeah, yeah okay,” he said. When he got to his coat Frank saw he’d missed two calls from Lieberman, and then the phone started ringing again.
“What the hell, man?” he asked.

“Frank- I- I think Russo’s escaped,” said Lieberman. Frank could hear a keyboard clicking.

“What do you mean you think he’s escaped?” Frank was trying to keep his voice down, but there was no way he’d be able to hide this. Not from Karen. He had his fingers clenched so tightly around the phone the plastic was creaking, and he could hear his heartbeat thumping in his ears.

“I’ve got alerts set up, around the city, and facial recognition, it- it caught him down in the garment district. Different hair, and if it’s him he’s got some scarring, but the build and the bone structure is the same. Everything looks the same at the hospital though, they’re still recording his meds, no alerts…”

“How confident are you that your cameras saw him?” asked Frank. “How sure?”

“As sure as I was when I found you,” said Lieberman. He sounded grim. “Why wouldn’t someone have been alerted if he escaped?”

“I don’t know,” said Frank. “Are there cameras in the hospital? Can you get in them?”

“There are cameras in the hallway,” said Lieberman in that distracted tone he got when his mouth was saying one thing but his brain was processing another. “None in the rooms, though.”

“Can you watch to see if he leaves?”

“They only keep two week’s worth of data,” said Liberman. “I’ll run it, but if he’s been out-”

“Don’t even fucking say it,” said Frank. If Billy had been out in the world for more than two weeks, he could be in fucking Siberia. More likely, though, he’d already have built up an arsenal to rival Frank’s own. There was a reason they’d worked so well together. They functioned in synch.

“This… this isn’t good, Frank,” said Liberman. “They’ve been taking someone in and out of his
“He’d need one,” said Frank. “I ground his face into a mirror, David.”

“Yeah, well, the guy I saw in the Garment District didn’t look that bad,” he muttered.

“Miracle of modern fucking medicine.”

Lieberman was quiet as he typed away, and then he sighed into the phone. “I’m not going to be able to tell if it’s Russo from these cameras,” he finally said. “Whoever is taking him in and out is making sure that he keeps his face tipped down and a mask on.”

“Fuck,” said Frank.

“Are you going to-”

“Of course I have to go in,” Frank hissed. “How else are we going to know?”

“You’re clean. You shouldn’t-”

“I’ll call you back,” said Frank, and hung up. He could feel Karen’s eyes on him.

“Sounds serious,” said Karen.

“Yeah,” said Frank. He had an impulse to pack Karen up, put her in his truck, and just drive until they got to a place where nobody wanted to kill him. She could work on some small-town paper writing up fucking bake sales and the mayor’s dick pics and he could- he could work construction or something. They could meet for dinner at the one greasy spoon, and they’d be safe.

The idea was lingering in his mind when Frank paced over to the window and looked out at the neighborhood lights. He couldn’t- they couldn’t. Not that Karen would, or should.
“Russo escaped,” said Frank, still looking out the window.

“Are you sure?”

“It was Lieberman calling. One of his programs picked up Russo, and he couldn’t confirm that Billy was in the hospital.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Karen.

“Go in,” said Frank. “Go in and see if it’s Russo, and if it’s not—” he took a deep breath, tried to fight off that red tide of anger he’d welcomed for so long. “If he’s not in there I’ll find him. And I’ll end him.”

“You can’t just—what, walk into a hospital, or shoot your way in.”

Frank turned back to Karen, a little smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. “Yeah?” he asked. “Pretty sure it’s already worked once before.”

Karen flushed, and Frank thought, *Ah shit, now I’ve done it,* and then Karen, goddamn her, grinned back at him.

“Yeah, well it didn’t end that well,” she said. “Your guy got away, and you ended up all over the news.”

“He had a genius blonde helping him out,” said Frank. “I don’t think this guy’ll be so lucky.”

Karen blushed a little (he could see it without her makeup, her professional daytime armor) and Frank wondered how far her blush went before he squashed that line of thinking right back down.

“What if I went in?” asked Karen. “I could say I was writing a story; I could wave my press ID around and ask for confirmation about Russo’s escape.”

Had he not just had a whole fight with her about running headfirst towards danger? Had he
hallucinated that whole thing, too? “I’m not letting you near him. If you think for one minute I’d send you in- he killed my family; he shot Madani and- you-” He was getting all tangled up again, the twitching of his fingers and the drumbeat tattoo of his heart drowning out all the other things he wanted to say.

“Oh- okay, Frank- hey-” Her fingers were cool on his cheek, and he had to resist his impulse to turn his face into her hand and kiss her palm. It was wrong, but not wrong. Maria was dead, and he wasn’t, but it still felt like betrayal, and despite the betrayal it still felt right.

“I’m going,” he said.

He could feel Karen’s eyes on him, and when he looked over at her her brows were furrowed, and she wore an expression he’d come to both enjoy and dread.

“What if we made a deal?” she asked slowly. “I’ll go into the hospital with you outside for backup- and I won’t actually go in Russo’s room- and you can come with me when I go visit that club Laylah told me about.”

“You can’t stop me from coming with you,” said Frank. After all that, she’s just-

“You have to work sometime; have to sleep sometime.”

He could feel a vein throbbing in his temple.

“But it would be easier if you came with me, and safer. Just like it would be easier and safer for me to go to the hospital.”

“That’s where they lock up the people too fucking sick for prison! And the- the-”

“And the people who were drunks, or mentally ill, or too poor for a good lawyer! Tell me something, Frank. How come you were okay with me going to the prison to see you, huh? Getting patted down by the guards; having men scream that they’d rape me dead, why was that okay, but this isn’t?”

A cold sweat broke out on the back of his neck. He’d done that; he’d been the reason- but he had to
focus; she was still talking.

“You think that was easy for me? I almost died behind bars like those; I know exactly how fucked up the system is, but I can’t let that stop me. I cannot let fear stop me from doing what I need to do, from living my life. Stop letting it rule yours.”

Frank opened his mouth and then snapped it closed again, tight enough that he could feel his jaw creaking from the pressure. The fuck did he say to that?

“You know I’m right,” she said more gently. “It’ll be okay.”

She couldn’t know that. And yet, he believed her.

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When Frank showed up outside her building with a dark, windowless van, Karen hadn’t questioned it. The vehicle would stand out more on the street than he little would, but there was way less chance of some passer-by seeing Frank hanging out inside.

At the moment they were sitting in silence, breathing slowly, listening to Lieberman typing over speakerphone.

“The nurses are heading into his room,” he said, his voice loud in the silence. “Head in now, Karen.”

Karen took a deep breath in, slid the strap of her purse higher onto her shoulder, and turned to drop down the sidewalk from the van. Frank’s fingers wrapped around her wrist, warm and gentle.

“Be careful,” he said. For a second she remembered the last time, in an elevator, when he’d been telling her to take care of herself before he pulled himself up an elevator shaft. Now, apparently, it was her turn.

“I will be,” she said, running her thumb over the back of his hand, and then she was out of the car and clicking down the sidewalk to the front of the hospital building.
Everyday that it didn’t rain Billy Russo was taken outside to walk in the private yard of the hospital grounds. Karen’s plan was to ‘accidentally’ pass him in the hallway to see if she could recognize him from the pictures Frank had shown her. If that didn’t work she’d push to see his records, but it was *something*. They were trying.

She hit the intercom speaker outside the front door. “Karen Page, New York Bulletin? I have a 1:30 appointment.”

The door clicked open, despite her lack of appointment. Apparently the guy sitting somewhere watching a bank of monitors thought she looked trustworthy. The guy at the reception desk… not so much.

“We don’t have record of an interview,” he said, not even bothering to glance at his computer. “And besides- we’re a hospital. We don’t *give* interviews about our patients.”

Karen had been prepared to stall. She’s also been prepared to argue. “But you have- when the Bronx Strangler died Dr. Bauer gave an interview to the Bulletin-”

“After Gregory Morgan was dead! Besides, he was disciplined for that. We’re very discreet.”

“But not *too* discreet. You’re publicly funded, so some records require transparency. Financial records, lists of employees-”

“And how’s that going to help you?” asked the bulldog disguised as a receptionist.

And then… the elevator dinged.

Karen had been waiting for this. She’d studied photos that Liberman had sent to Frank, new photos, old photos.

The most recent were stills taken at a high angle, showing some sort of underground room. Someone (Frank) was strapped to a chair with his back to the camera. Russo had been leaning over Frank, facing the camera.
In contrast, the oldest had been from about six years ago. Frank and Russo and a couple other guys had been in camo flak jackets, rifles loosely slung over their backs. They’d been leaning on a big olive green truck out in the desert, their eyes squinted against the glare, shit-eating grins on their faces. Russo’s arm had been slung over Frank’s shoulder.

There was a strange intimacy in both pictures. They knew each other, they’d been to war together, they understood exactly how the other thought. It was Cain and Abel all over again.

With a whoosh of air the elevator doors opened, and two nurses and Russo stepped out. She didn’t have long; the side door to the yard was just a few feet down the hall, and Karen stopped even pretending to listen to the guard-dog receptionist.

It could be Russo. Right frame- maybe a little thinner, but that was to be expected after all the time he’d been in a coma. He had on the mask, and he had the hood of his sweatshirt pulled up so she couldn’t see his ears…

“Ma’am. Ma’am!”

She’d taken a couple steps towards Russo, and even though these seconds felt suspended (long and drawn out, adrenaline making her heart race and seconds slow) she knew show only had a tiny window of time to get a good look at him.

He hadn’t shaved, which obscured the jaw a little-

It wasn’t him. It wasn’t fucking Russo.

She turned back to the desk jockey, smile already in place. “I’m sorry. There must have been some mix-up. I’ll go back to the office and reschedule.”

“I’ve told you,” he said, clearly frustrated. “There isn’t anything to reschedule, because we don’t do interviews.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Karen, and then she was striding across the tile lobby floor, her heels echoing in victory.
It was windy outside, but even that couldn’t dilute the glee she felt. She was brushing hair out of her mouth when she slid into the van, and she couldn’t stop herself from grinning.

“It isn’t him,” she said. “The guy in there, the one under the mask, it’s not Russo. This guy has a cleft chin.”

“You’re sure?” asked Frank.

“I’m sure. Russo’s chin is smooth, this guy has that, you know, the Superman chin.” She touched the center of her own chin, miming a dent.

“Lieberman was right,” said Frank grimly. “Russo’s out there somewhere, up to god knows what, and these assholes are covering up the fact that he walked right out of their goddamn hospital. Fuck!” He hit the steering wheel and turned to the window, breathing hard. “Another fucking cover-up.”

“We’ll find him,” said Karen. “He can’t hide forever. And now that we know he’s out, can’t Lieberman set up more searches for him?”

“He shouldn’t be in this, Karen,” said Frank. “He got out, you know?”

When he turned towards her again his eyes were dark and a little desperate. “Two of you, you did your part, yeah? You helped me find Lieberman, you lied to Madani, and he- fuck, he saved my life, he saved his family, he got himself out. This isn’t his fight. This isn’t your fight. This only fucking happened because I didn’t kill him when I should have, I didn’t take out the son of a bitch that killed my family because-”

Karen was holding her breath, waiting to see what he’d say next.

“Because I was tired, Karen. Because I wanted to see what after could be like.”

(He broke her heart.)
“Don’t say it,” said Frank, turning the key in the ignition. “Don’t say it.”

He drove her home in silence.

“You want to come up?” she asked. She already knew the answer, but she wanted to ask anyway. Would she ever stop wondering if this would be the last time she saw him? Would she ever stop wondering if he was going to go back into the dark, never to come back?

“No,” he said. “I gotta take care of the van.”

Right.

“Hey- thanks for today. You didn’t have to do that, to go in there and-”

She waited to see if he’d finish the phrase, if he was just fighting to find the right word.

“It’s okay,” she said. “It’s what friends do, right?” It was a weak word for what they’d been through. Most friends could go their entire lives without almost dying together, let alone almost dying together twice.

He looked like he was swallowing something bitter. “Yeah,” he said. “Take care, okay?”

“Okay,” she said, sliding out of the car. “Okay.”

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Frank ditched the van and called Lieberman as he walked to the train. “It’s not him,” he said. “Russo’s out.”
“You sure?”

“Karen’s sure,” he said. “She said this guy had the wrong chin. Dent in it.”

He could hear clicking, and then Lieberman said, “I’ll be damned. There weren’t enough points of recognition for the computer algorithm to work, but your girl’s right.”

“Course she is,” said Frank, turning a corner. Nobody said he needed to take a direct route from the van drop to the subway. That was way too simple. “You run those groups I gave you? The ones she listed out?”

He’d sent Lieberman a picture of Karen’s list of bad guys, the ones she’d pissed off in the last year or so. If anyone could pick up on activity, it was him.

“She’s pissed off some really bad people, Frank,” said Lieberman. “No real activity in the cartel, the tenement guy’s in prison and doesn’t have many contacts left, and none of Fisk’s known henchmen have been out and about.”

“That leaves this new case, right?” He cut through and alley and exited the other side with a limp. He’d learned his lesson about gait recognition.

“Frank, it really could be anybody, but… yeah, I guess I’d go with the most recent asshole. Occam’s Razor and all.”

“It’s never fucking simple,” Frank said. Not for either of them, any of them. It was never, ever fucking simple. He’d love to tell Occam where he could stick the goddamn razor.

“Still what I’d go with,” said Lieberman.

They’d have to go to the fucking bar. He’d been hoping to talk her out of it, but if someone was using Chatham to get to Karen because of her current story, they’d have to go to that coxnsucking bar.
“I appreciate it,” he said to Lieberman, pausing to stand off to the side of the subway entrance stairs. “Look, I-”

Frank didn’t know if he’d always been much of a shit about saying ‘thank you’ or if all the emotional stuff had gotten scrambled when he’d taken a bullet to the brain (or maybe he’d buried the capability with María), but it was fucking frustrating.

He pressed on. “Look, you don’t have to do this. You saved your family and got out, yeah? You should tell me to fuck off. You don’t have to do this; you shouldn’t be doing this.”

Lieberman didn’t say anything for a minute, and that was a miracle in itself. When he finally did say something, he sounded thoughtful. “Well, neither should you, Frank. You should be off working in a bar somewhere or reading Twain or- I don’t know- being a gunsmith for hire.”

“Yeah.” No fucking way, he thought. “Thanks man.”

“Anytime,” said David, and the little shit sounded like he meant it.

When Frank got to group he was the last one there. He grabbed a seat next to Danny (she’d come back, that was good) and let the conversations of the guys flow over him. He thought about that triangle of needs; the crinkled paper tacked to the wall of his shitty apartment. He did belong here, in this group of discarded fighters. He belonged in the shit, too. This shit with Russo, with Karen’s blackmailers, with the scum of the fucking earth. It was his lot in life.

And the scary thing was that Karen seemed to belong there, too. Which, if he thought too hard about it, meant she might belong with him, in a weird kind of way, and that was not a thought he was ready to entertain.

Chapter End Notes

HAHA! You thought I forgot! (I totally forgot to update this until LATE. Sorry East Coast/European friends.)

Ugh, this is such a plotty chapter. You'll like the next one more ;)

Once again, I deeply appreciate all of you who comment, subscribe, or tell a friend about this story! In case you want to hang out, I'm @caseydoesfandom on twitter.
Depreciating Stock

Chapter Notes

Two things:

1. This chapter discusses human trafficking. There's no assault and some mild sexist language, but I wanted you to know.
2. If this was a 'real' story I was working on (aka an original for publication) I would have cut, like... at least half of the chapter. But it was fun to write, and this is fanfic for christ's sake, so... I left it. Cut me a little slack if it doesn't exactly go with the rest of the story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She could feel the bass through the sidewalk even before they walked into the club. Her heels- taller, sharper, colder than she normally wore- clacked on the sidewalk, and she felt her legs start to tingle as the cold really set in.

Frank tugged her against him, and Karen let herself curve into his side. In these heels she was three inches taller than he was. “Last chance,” Frank breathed, turning his mouth to her temple. “We go in, we can’t break. You’re a broken, captured woman. I’m an asshole flesh trader. And you do what I say, when I say.”

“Yes, sir,” Karen whispered, pretending to stumble a little. There were two men out smoking, leaning against the rusted iron railing of steps than ran down below street level. The music was coming from somewhere behind the stained wooden door.

“Hey,” said Frank to the two guys standing in clouds of dissipating smoke. “What’s up?”

Was there nothing Frank couldn’t do? Suddenly he sounded just the littlest bit Jersey. Not fake, and not enough to call it an accent, just... enough. Enough to register.


Frank nodded and ushered Karen down the stairs, his hand warm on the small of her back.
She was always nervous before going to meet a source. It was always an unknown situation, but it was also the thrill of the hunt. And this time she was in a dress that showed the upper curve of her bra and the bottom curve of her ass and she was with Frank. Her nervous system was so full of feelings that they’d all intertwined in a jangly cacophony of jitters.

The door opened to reveal a smoke-fogged room, filled with too little light and too much music. The bass was loud enough to act as a surrogate heartbeat, thudding through her chest and rattling her bones and connecting her, just for a moment, with her lizard-self that remembered creeping out of caves and dancing around a crackling fire until the darkness wasn’t so severe.

A few women were out on the little square of cleared space that likely passed for a dance floor. They were dancing with each other or alone, a few with a vacant, thousand-yard stare that Karen recognized and wished she didn’t.

Frank guided her along the edge of the dancers and into an empty booth. His silk shirt was cool against her skin as her fingers brushed over it, and Karen was careful not to let her gaze linger too long on the occupants of the other booths. Frank slid in next to her, his back to the wall, and Karen draped herself against him, one of her legs curled up on the bench beside her, the tip of her heel jabbing into the fake leather.

Seconds later a girl all in black walked to the table, her eyes downcast. Karen thought she couldn’t be much over eighteen. “Can I bring you anything from the bar?”

“Scotch for me, vodka rocks for the girl,” said Frank.

She nodded and scurried away. Karen turned to Frank and pouted up at him. “I can’t see anything,” she whispered, hoping she looked like a petulant lover.

She gasped a little when Frank jerked her hair, bending her neck backwards and arching her away from him. “You’re supposed to be a thing,” he told her. “And don’t worry. I can see ‘em.”

When the waitress brought their drinks Karen kept her gaze on the table. “You can drink it,” said Frank, and she couldn’t tell if he was playing the part of domineering trafficker or telling her it hadn’t been spiked with anything. Probably both.

He drink burned her sinuses and belly, and after that initial sip Karen kept her eyes downcast and toyed with the glass, spinning it a little on the table top, raising it to her mouth and letting the liquid
only brush against her lips before setting it back on the table, or resting it against her thigh.

Frank leaned over and brushed his lips over her temple again. They were soft, like she’d suspected, and she felt her arms go up in gooseflesh again, despite the relative warmth of the bar. Nerves, she told herself.

“We’re being watched,” said Frank. “Get in my lap.”

Before they’d even left Karen’s apartment Frank had made her promise (more than once) that she’d do what he said, when he said it, no questions asked.

It was the ‘no questions’ that was going to be a problem.

She tried to maneuver as gracefully as she could in the tight space between Frank’s body and the edge of the table, but she managed it. The skirt of her stretchy dress was short enough that she could straddle Frank’s hips, and it felt natural to let her fingers toy with the buttons on his silk shirt (black and shiny).

“They thought we were watching them,” said Frank. His big hand smoothed up Karen’s thigh and around under the hem of her dress to the curve of her ass. If he could feel her skin prickling in the wake of his touch, he didn’t comment on it. “This’ll help.”

Karen nodded slightly, trusting his judgement, and bent to kiss him. His mouth was warm and soft and tasted a bit like scotch and a bit like toothpaste. She wondered if he’d anticipated this kind of activity, and then, just for a second, she forgot where they were and why they were doing this. She was kissing Frank, full on the mouth, on those soft, biteable lips, and his hand was kneading her ass, and the other was still wrapped loosely around a half-finished glass of scotch. He was the picture of masculine don’t give a damn, and later, when Karen’s heart rate dropped back out of stroke range, she’d wondered if she’d always had that inside her, that little bit of exhibitionist lust.

Karen would be lying if she said she’d never thought about kissing Frank Castle. His lips were plush when everything else about him was hard and sharp, and he did this thing where he’d press his lips together and look away when he was upset about something. She’d thought about what it would be like to kiss Frank, but never in her wildest imaginings did she think their first proper kiss would be in a dark, underground bar where slave traders worked.

Her fingers were splayed over the warm skin of Frank’s collarbone and she was just starting to wish
that Frank would let his hand drift a little bit lower when someone behind her cleared his throat.

“Sir,” said the person behind her, and then Frank was dumping Karen out of his lap, seemingly unaffected by their previous position. Karen shuddered a little at Frank’s side, brushing her hair behind her ears and tugging her dress back down over her thighs and trying to look like a working girl; like this was a normal Tuesday night.

“Mr. Martin has invited you and your… companion to the back, where you might be a bit more comfortable.”

Frank stood smoothly and extended a hand to the other man. He was built thicker than Frank was, and was just a little bit shorter, with thinning dirty blonde hair. “Will I get to meet our host?” he asked, and his voice was just a little bit Jersey again. Maybe he’d been in the drama club in high school…

He leaned down and grabbed her wrist, tugging her out of the booth, all without breaking eye contact with the other man.

“Mr. Martin prefers to meet all his guests,” said the lackey evenly. “Back here, please.”

Karen was glad she hadn’t finished her vodka. She was freaked out enough as it was. She followed Frank and the bar guy around the edge of the dance floor and through a dark door set to the right side of the big wooden bar. When the door swung shut behind her the noise level dropped almost completely. Soundproof, she thought to herself. Not good.

“Just a precaution,” said the blonde guy. He patted her down first, lingering on her boobs, and then gave Frank a much less sexual and much more thorough taste of the same before leading them on. She and Frank had been prepared for the pat-down. Neither of them had any weapons, and both of them had given each other shifty, “I feel naked” looks when they’d locked her apartment.

This behind-the-scenes space reminded her a little bit of a fancy private library, or maybe a yacht. It was all polished wood and dark-colored cloth and wall sconces designed to look like gas lamps.

They walked down a short hallway to a larger room that had been set up like a big lounge. Clusters of low leather chairs had been arranged around coffee tables and brass reading lamps. There was a smaller bar in the corner, and at the other end of the space was a low platform.
Two men were seating in the center of the room, a newspaper was on the coffee table, the sections haphazardly tossed aside like someone had really *read* it as opposed to using it as a prop. There was an ashtray on the side table, next to a tall glass of something carbonated and clear.

Both men stood when Frank walked into the room, and Karen remembered to look down at her toes. They looked uncomfortable in the nude, strappy heels.

“Neil told me we had a visitor,” said one of the men. He had a slightly raspy voice and a midwest accent- Chicago, maybe?

“Told him to bring you back,” said the second man. He was pure nasal New York.

The first guy spoke again. “I’m Thomas Martin. This is Henry Anders. I think Neil was right- you aren’t just looking for a drink with your, ah, friend, are you?”

“Who isn’t looking for a drink?” asked Frank. “I’m James Rizzoli.”

The three men sat, and Karen managed to catch Frank’s eye. *What do I do?*

He jerked his head and tugged her so she was standing behind his chair. For a lack of anything better to do she rested her hand on his shoulder and studied his hair. She’d slicked it back herself with some of the mousse she used to set her curls, and it was, again, the subtlest kind of disguise. He *looked* like a flesh-trader from Jersey.

Everyone was quiet for a second, and Karen could feel Martin and Anders’ eyes on her. Despite it all (the setting, the dress, the fact that she and Frank were unarmed) Karen knew she wasn’t as scared as she should be. She was with Frank, and could anyone in Frank Castle’s presence really consider themselves unarmed? Karen thought about how terrifying it would be to be kidnapped and drugged, raped and transported, and finally sold in the basement lounge of an illegal Manhattan club. *That* thought tipped Karen over into anger, and she was okay with that. Anger wasn’t a passive feeling; anger felt *productive*.

“Neil, get Rizzoli here a drink,” Martin said.

“Scotch?” asked Neil. Karen kept her eyes on the back of Frank’s head, but thought, *So they had been paying attention out there.*
“Sure,” said Frank, almost lazily. “Nice place you have here.”

Neil brought Frank his drink, and Karen could smell his aftershave when he walked back out into the main bar and shut the door behind him. Probably he was going to run ‘James Rizzoli’ to see who his bosses were dealing with. When he did, he’d find the carefully constructed personality that Lieberman had constructed.

“Easy,” said Lieberman when she and Frank had called with their plan. “Making someone exist is a hell of a lot easier than making someone disappear. I’ll keep it classy, though. Accusations, suggestions, but no charges that have stuck.”

Frank sipped his drink, and Karen watched as the muscles of his shoulder bunched and shifted. She wished she could look at the faces of the other men, the ones who bought and sold women like cars and stocks. She wanted to look at their eyes and tell herself like they wouldn’t get the chance again.

“So what brings you to New York, Mr. Rizzoli?” asked Martin.


“What can a couple of small-business owners do for you?”

Martin still sounded laid back, politely bored by this small talk, but Karen knew better. “Well, I’m looking for a couple distributors,” said Frank. “I’ve got a line on… some stock that depreciates in value over time. Years, mileage, you know.”

Karen concentrated on keeping her breathing even. He did not just compare women to used cars. She must have misheard that rumbling voice of his.

“Had my guy do a little poking around, you know. Everything’s on the goddamn computer these days,” said Frank. “He said there was already a pipeline in place here, you know? Better to work together than compete. That’s bad for business.”

Neil walked back into the room again; Karen heard the door click shut behind her. “Top off your
drinks?” he offered, and this time his tone was a hell of a lot warmer.

That must have been code, because as ice tinkled and drinks were poured, the tension in the room dropped dramatically.

“I assume you brought your companion as a sample of your product?” asked Martin. Karen was barely able to keep her gaze on the back of Frank’s neck, and her fingers tightened where they’d been toying with Frank’s collar.

“Yes,” said Frank. “The product is clean, and usually have finished the fist stage of their training.”


“Lure ‘em, hook ‘em, and then a series of reinforcement exercises,” said Frank, managing to sound a little bored. Karen wondered how much of this persona he’d needed to research, and how much he’d known from his… past activities.

“Hmm. Mostly we’re a… stop on the larger route,” said Martin, “So having less excitable product would be a benefit. We do occasionally host private events, usually once a year. With that… well, it takes all kinds, doesn’t it.”

“I don’t fuck with that,” said Frank. “Too dangerous. Can’t vouch for the buyers, puts the girls in too many places.”

“Interesting,” said Martin. “It’s very lucrative.”

“Good for you,” said Frank.


Karen hadn’t practiced for this, she wasn’t prepared for this. She’d been told to act like a thing, but she moved beside the chair and glanced down at Frank. He jerked his head towards Anders, but something in his eyes flashed. He was as miserable as she was; he was just as pissed off and scared and ready to raze the place right down to the ground.
She walked over to Anders and kept looking at her toes. He was wearing brown loafers and slightly wrinkled khakis. When his hand ran up the outside of her thigh, she shuddered.

“Turn,” he said, and she did.

“Do you try to run?”

“No,” she said, and now her adrenaline was really pumping; now she had that clarity of purpose that comes with real fear.

“Do you fight?”

She knew what he was asking. “Only if I’m asked to,” she said, and then immediately wondered, *Where the hell did that come from? I’ve watched too many episodes of SVU.*

He pushed her back towards Frank, who snagged her and tugged her down into his lap, one hand high on her thigh.

“She’s nice,” said Anders. “A little boring.”

“And not… hmm. Not as young as she could be,” said Martin.

“She’s personal,” said Frank. “You don’t sell your prize winning bitch. Lotta time went into this one.”

It was all so insulting- the age thing, the dog show metaphor, the handling- it was all so *absolutely bizarre* that Karen didn’t know what to be mad about first.

“Her behavior is stunning,” said Martin thoughtfully.

*You have no idea,* Karen thought.
“Well, Jim, don’t let me keep you from enjoying your trip any longer. If you have your fellow get in contact with Neil, we’ll see if we can’t set something up.”

“Sounds good,” said Frank, nudging Karen out of his lap and shaking hands with both men. “I appreciate the time.”

When they turned Neil was already at the door holding Frank’s coat, and they followed him back out into the throbbing bass and gyrating women.

“Have a good one,” he said as they stepped out into the midwinter air. Karen started shivering almost immediately.

Frank’s fingers twitched against his leg the whole first block, and then without warning he shoved her into an alley and towed her at the fastest jog she could manage in the towering heels until they hit sidewalk at the other side. Then, after he looked around, he tossed her his coat.

“Those- those fucking-”

His eyes were wild, and Karen tugged on his coat as quickly as she could. “Not here, Frank,” she said, trying to keep her teeth from chattering. “Gotta get home.”

He looked at her, his eyes wide and unfocused, and slowly seemed to come back into himself. “Right,” he said. “Right.” He took his palm in hers and pulled her down the sidewalk. When that didn’t seem to have her moving fast enough for his taste (her feet were killing her, and now that the adrenaline was wearing away she knew it) he wrapped his arm tightly around her back and towed her along.

They turned a few corners that Karen didn’t think they’d made when walking to the club on the way in, and then Frank turned his lips to her ear once more. “Guys following up,” he said.

“From the club?”

“No. Picked them up a couple blocks back. Can’t lose ‘em.”
“Fuck,” said Karen. That was just their luck: meet with human traffickers, walk away without an issue, end up the victims of completely random street crime. Just great.

“Gott face ‘em sometime,” said Frank, and his voice was grim. He tugged her into a closed-off alleyway, checked to see if anyone was already in there, and turned to her. “You stay behind me,” he growled, slinking along the wall away from her.

Karen didn’t answer. She was too busy taking off her shoes. Better to be barefoot than to try running away in these things.

The first man came around the corner, and everything was motion: the snake-quick strike of Frank’s hand catching the gun muzzle and pointing it up at the sky as it discharged, filling their corner of the world with noise. Frank wrenched the gun out of the man’s hand and turned it against him in the same graceful movement, and poppop put two bullets in the first of their would-be attackers in the time it took the second to round the corner. That one took a bullet to the head, and then two came into the alley at the same time, one from one direction, the second from the other.

Karen felt like an idiot watching Frank take out these men, cowering in the back like some nineteen fifties damsel, and then, while Frank was elbowing one of the men in the throat and shooting him in the foot, the other guy lunged at her.

He didn’t go for his gun. It was the only reason Karen stayed upright; the fucking idiot didn’t go for his gun. Instead he lunged for Karen, arms out, and when his fingers went around her throat her hands came up and before she knew what she was doing she was scratching at his eyes. He shrieked and dropped her, holding his face, and while Karen sucked air Frank stormed in pressed the barrel of his gun to the attacker’s head. Bangbang, the guy’s head shattered, spattering Karen and everything else with brain matter and blood.

“C’mon,” said Frank, grabbing her hand and pulling her out of the alley. She was shivering again, from cold and adrenaline and fear, and after they’d walked the first block, trying to act like there weren’t four men lying dead in an alley, they began to run.

He was faster than she was, and he towed her along, his hand wrapped around hers hard enough to hurt. She wasn’t sure how long they ran, her bare feet skittering over frozen puddles and rocks and god only knew what. She just concentrated on breathing and following Frank.

Eventually they made it back to his truck. He’d insisted on driving them instead of catching a cab,
and now she understood why. It would have been hard to call an uber when you were running for your life.

Frank wrenched open the door and boosted her inside before sprinting around the truck and jumping into the driver’s seat. He had the ignition started before she’d gotten her seatbelt clipped (it took her three tries), and he looked… controlled.

He’d looked wild when they’d walked out of that club, when he’d had to pretend that Karen was a woman he’d stolen and broken, when he’d heard that there were men who routinely bought and sold women and he had to walk away. Now he had a mission: get home safe, get home without a tail, get everyone home in one goddamn piece.

Karen didn’t say anything on the ride back. She could barely stop her teeth from chattering.

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When they walked into her apartment the only light on was the one over her flowers in the window. Karen was limping and Frank was favoring his left arm, but they both walked in under their own power. That had to count for something.

“Thanks,” said Karen as she shrugged out of Frank’s coat. (It was stained with things that Karen didn’t really want to think about, but she could deal with that later.) She wasn’t sure if she was thanking him for coming with her, or for the coat, or for saving her life (again).

“Don’t you fucking thank me for that,” said Frank, flipping on the overhead light and tugging Karen into the main part of the apartment. “None of that shit would have happened if I hadn’t agreed to go with you.”

He was looking her up and down, and when he put his hands to her shoulders and turned her she knew he was checking her over for wounds.

“You’re going to bruise,” he said finally, touching the tip of one blood-crusted finger to her throat. She was willing to guess that none of it was his.

She took his hand and held it loosely between them. “Frank…”
He wouldn’t meet her gaze, again. He looked half-furious and half-shamed and one hundred percent dangerous. A muscle was twitching along his jaw.

“Frank, I would have gone without you. I have a story to write. Maybe I wouldn’t have gone at night, and I probably would have let someone know where I was looking, but you and I both know that I’d have gotten snatched.”

His fist-flattened nose flared a bit at that.

“So I’m glad you were with me,” she said.

“Let it go, Karen,” he said, his voice low. “Just let it go.”

She stepped back, and now that they were in the warm and her toes were starting to register sensation again, she was aware of the fact that her feet were killing her. “I can’t let this go, Frank. I can’t let you walk out of here thinking you failed me, because you didn’t. This- this whole thing is because of me. It’s my fault. I killed Todd ten years ago. I’m the one being blackmailed, I’m the one who started poking around this trafficking ring in the first fucking place. I drug you into my war.”

“You didn’t drag me into anything,” he said eventually.

Karen decided to be the bigger person and let it go.

“I want a drink, Frank,” she said, and shuffled to the refrigerator. When she turned and held a beer out to Frank he wasn’t looking at her. Instead, he was focused on the floor, on the little mud and blood splotches that trailed out from where she’d been standing.

“Well, fuck,” said Karen.

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Frank walked out of the bathroom with water droplets still clinging to his hair and her old tee
stretched across his chest. She’d lived in the city long enough (and had been broke enough) to appreciate sleeping in second-hand sweats as opposed to expensive matching sets. If Karen was a jealous person, it might have bothered her that the old cotton clothes looked better on him than they ever had on her.

“You get your feet fixed up?” he asked. “And I was wondering: what the fuck happened to your shoes?”

“I took them off while you were waiting to jump those creeps,” said Karen, smoothing another butterfly bandage over the one real gash on the arch of her left foot. “I knew we’d have to run, and I couldn’t run fast enough in those things.”

“Yeah,” said Frank, nodding slowly. “Smart.” He crossed the room to stand in front of her, and Karen would have guessed that he looked just a little bit uncomfortable here in her bedroom, wearing her clothes. He glanced down at her feet. “Can I see?”

She knew he wouldn’t let it go. If there was anyone out there as stubborn as she was, it was Frank Castle. Besides, she didn’t want him to worry. Feeling suddenly shy, she uncurled one leg from her lap and stretched it out towards Frank.

They hardly ever touched each other outside of life and death situations. Come to that, they hardly saw each other outside of high-stakes scenarios. She’d given him one hug, and the next time they’d touched she’d been acting as his human shield.

His hands were warm and gentle when they cupped her ankle and heel, and (thank god) he ignored the way she shivered at his touch. “You were really trucking,” he said, studying the road burn on the ball of her foot. “You run?”

Instead of trusting her to lower her own damn foot to the floor he crouched, lowered her one foot gently, and picked up the other.

“Uh—” C’mon Page, he’s touching your foot, she told herself. “Yeah, I run a couple times a week. I have to admit it’s less about being able to outrun bad guys and more about managing the coffee jitters.

He flicked a look up at her through his eyelids, a look that said, Coffee jitters my ass. I know what it’s like to need to be exhausted enough to sleep.
“You need to get something on these scrapes,” he said, standing to paw through the meager first aid kit open next to her on the bed. “And take an uber into work tomorrow.”

“It’ll get my bed all greasy,” Karen bitched, but she opened the antibiotic cream he tossed into her lap.

“Got socks?”

“Top drawer of the dresser,” said Karen.

Oh my god, I just asked Frank Castle to open my underwear drawer, she though, feeling her face go hot. The tangled knots of rainbow lace didn’t seem to faze him. He calmly shut the drawer and tossed her a roll of socks.

“Thanks,” she said. “Do you have anything that needs cleaned up?”

She watched as he smeared ointment over the broken knuckles of his right hand.

“Just bruises,” said Frank, as though that was proof he hadn’t been fighting hard enough.

“You sure?” Karen asked, her suspicious squint ruined by a jaw-cracking yawn.

“Yeah. I’ll, ah, I’ll take the couch, okay? I appreciate you letting me stay here. I’ll be out of your hair in the morning; get those names to Liberman.”

“You don’t need to take the couch, Frank,” said Karen, tired to her bones. He stiffened, clearly upset and Karen felt herself get a little bit mad. He was so good, so eager to be a martyr for the cause, for any cause, and it was just-

“Frank, today I worked a long shift, pretended to be a sex slave, almost got strangled, and ran for my life. I’m too tired to make a move on you.”
His facial expression didn’t change from ‘wary’, but at least he was still listening.

“Look,” Karen pressed on, not sure why this meant so much to her. *Maybe she was more freaked out than she thought.* “Didn’t you have to share space with any of the guys from your unit? It can get pretty cold in the desert at night.”

“Yeah,” said Frank, closing the first aid kit. “But none of ‘em were as pretty as you.”

“Poor you,” said Karen lightly, and finally she was rewarded with a smile.

“Yeah, poor me,” said Frank, the corners of his mouth twitching. He returned the kit to the bathroom cabinet, and Karen slid under the covers. When she patted the space next to her he huffed but lay down on top of the covers, careful not to touch her.

“Just pretend I’m a soldier,” said Karen as she clicked off the bedside light.

“Yeah, yeah,” Frank mumbled. She could feel him groping around the end of the bed for the extra blanket she kept there. Apparently they were going with the “middle school sleep-away-trip” modesty strategy. He’d sleep on top of the covers, and she’d sleep inside them.

It still felt like a victory. She’d know he was here, and not out getting blown up or bleeding out in a gutter. She’d also know he was getting a better night’s sleep than he would on her couch. Isn’t that what good friends did?

“You coulda been a hell of a Marine,” said Frank into the stillness of her bedroom. At first it seemed random, and then she remembered she’d told him to pretend she was a soldier.

“You hide it under those fucking skirts and shirts,” he continued, his voice a rumble. “But you’re a fucking fighter. You’ve got steel balls, Page.”

“Thanks,” said Karen quietly. She’d- she didn’t know. She’d befriended Frank in part because he’d seen her, really *seen* her. She shouldn’t be surprised when he said stuff like this, but she was. “I think- well, it could be said that I have authority issues,” she chuckled.
“No shit,” he said into the dark, and Karen could hear his smile. She settled a little deeper into the mattress and listened to his steady breathing in the dark. “Everyone who came into that damn hospital room was terrified of me, but here you come, running right across that cocksucking red line to shove my family in my face.”

Karen was nearly asleep when he asked his next question, just a little more quietly than before. “Why’d you do it? Why’d you go through all that shit for me?”

That question had weight. It warped the darkness like Einstein’s gravitational body on a stupid rubber sheet: this was a chance for her to tell the truth, and Frank Castle knew it.

(. .you don’t have to give me the goddamn time of day, but if you want to give me anything, you give me the goddamn truth .)

She thought about it. “It started with Reyes,” she said slowly. “She smelled dirty, so it started with me looking into her. When I saw your X-ray… um, the gunshot wound?”

“Yeah, I know the one,” said Frank dryly.

“Well, it was all tied up with Reyes, and I thought- well, you had to have a reason, right? So that’s how it started. I was investigating Reyes long enough to wonder why you’d done what you’d done. And then I knew- and- and-”

“You don’t have to,” said Frank quietly.

Karen took a couple deep breaths and was thankful for the darkness. She wondered if that was why Catholic confessionals were always small and gloomy: it made you feel invisible.

“I never got to say goodbye to Kevin,” she said quietly. “I didn’t get to go to the funeral. And… and he was mine. He was my brother. We spent a lot of time together, the two of us. When I was ten they let me stay home with him, because mom and dad were working at the diner, trying to save on payroll, so it was- it was him and me. And then mom died, and… I was supposed to protect him too. I know it’s wrong. I did my therapy. I know I couldn’t protect him from everything, and that I was a kid, but your grief- I don’t know. It reminded me of my own.”

Frank had been laying on his back for her whole confession, his breathing slow and even. Then he
rolled towards her, his face a slightly lighter shadow in the darkness of her room. When his lips brushed against her forehead Karen had to hold her breath in, otherwise she’d have been exhaling a sob.

“Goodnight, Karen,” Frank said, his voice thick.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! If you're thinking that I went WAAAY out of my way to get them into bed together, you're correct. I have no regrets.

Also I finished writing this fic yesterday! It's 13 chapters total, and I'm pretty happy with it. As happy as someone can be with made-up artistic first drafts on the internet.

Anyway, if you read this: thank you. I appreciate you. Let me know what you think, please!
He snuck out of her apartment like a shamed man, and maybe he was. He shouldn’t have let himself get talked into sleeping by her, because now he knows how she looks in her sleep, and now he knows what her hair smells like fresh from the shower, and now he knows how she looks in the half-light as he sneaks out of her bed.

He’d spent a long time trying to forget soft things exist. He’d spent even longer telling himself that softness especially does not exist for Frank Castle.

He texted Lieberman the names on his way back to his own apartment (had to get boots and his hardhat and an entire fucking pot of coffee) and then he was on the bus to his work site for the day.

His phone buzzed with a message. It was from Karen: You’ll let me know what Lieberman says?

Yeah. Tonight. He snapped a picture of the extra flyer from Trish, the one about the women’s class. After last night Frank thought Karen needed it more than ever. He texted her the picture and followed up with, We could go together?

Not going to let this go, are you? she asked.

He grinned a little. At least they were both stubborn. Nope.

Fine, she replied. But do not laugh at me. It's good networking, anyway.

Yeah, yeah, he texted back before tucking his phone away again. If she wasn’t being hunted by some maniac attached to the current ring of sex traders in New York, it could almost be fun.
“You laughed,” Karen pouted as they stepped out of the gym onto the sidewalk.

“No,” said Frank. “I almost laughed, but I managed to hold it in.” She’d been so fucking surprised blinking up at the instructor from the mat.

She grumbled next to him, low mumbles of feminine discontent that had him laughing in earnest. “C’mon,” he said. “Let’s get back and I’ll buy you dinner.”

“Fine,” she said. “Who were you fighting with?”

He was surprised she’d taken this long to ask. “I- ah. Her name’s Danny, I know her from group. I took her one of Trish’s flyers. I thought she could use a fight.”

“Not everyone copes by beating the snot out of someone else,” said Karen, but she sounded amused.

“Yeah, well. Turned out she did need a fight, and Trish was too busy playing teacher’s aide to give her one. I was handy.”

“Good,” said Karen, hunching her shoulders a little against the wind. “Glad it helped.”

“Me too,” said Frank, thinking of Danny’s slightly too-grateful thanks when she’d left. “Me too.”

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She chose some curry place a few blocks from the train, one full of dim corners and saturated with complex spices. He got lamb and she got chicken and as soon as their asses hit the pleather of the booth Frank pulled out his phone and thumbed up Lieberman’s email.

When he slid the phone across the table to her whole goddamn face lit up; her eyes going wide and alert. It was like he’d given her some fucking fantastic gift instead of stories of blood and rape and betrayal, and that’s when Frank realized he was in big fucking trouble.
Oh, he’d known he had to keep her safe; that imperative to protect was nothing new. But this clusterfuck of emotions he was feeling as he watched curiosity and anger and determination flicker across her features…

He’d kill for her, he had killed for her, and he felt justified doing it. Even more insidious, he wanted to keep feeling this sense of accomplishment that she’d just given him. He’d brought her fucking information on a ring of human traffickers that would grab her as soon as look at her, and she made him feel goddamn whole.

Karen Page was fucking dangerous.

He wondered if she realized that she was the thing tethering him (or Frank Castle, or the fucking Punisher, whoever the fuck he was now) to his mostly-lost humanity. He’d seen the fricking think pieces on the news: The difference between The Hulk and The Punisher is that the Avengers hold each other responsible. For the man formerly known as Frank Castle, there’s no one who stands in his way.

Yeah, yeah. He wondered what the prick of a news anchor would think if Frank told him that the only thing standing between Frank Castle and a scorched-earth policy is a leggy blonde with brass balls and big blue eyes.

When Karen looked up, face flushed, Frank panicked for a second, worried that she’d somehow plucked that thought right out of his head.

“Have you read this?” she asked, looking up at him with those goddamn eyes.

Frank cleared his throat before he could answer her. (The problem isn’t that he doesn’t feel: it’s that he feels too goddamn much but can’t come up with the words to express it.) “Yeah,” he said. “I read through it on the train from work.”

“So there is someone- there’s someone behind all this that’s helping to coordinate and then taking his share.”

“Yeah,” said Frank, quickly thanking the waitress when she dropped off their food. Karen ignored hers, too focused on the chain of documents linked to Lieberman’s email.
“I wonder if he ever goes to the sales,” she said, seemingly noticing her food for the first time. She took a bite and chewed thoughtfully. “If he does, we could try to get evidence. Photos maybe, because this… this looks like the kind of thing Fisk could have wriggled out of.”

“You think it’s Fisk?” He manages to get the question out evenly, even though his pulse is hammering in his ears. Fucking Fisk.

“No, it’s too… well, it’s like New York is the central hub, and there’s a bunch of smaller families feeding it. That’s not his style. I was just using him as an example; he organized Union Allied and the waterfront thing and the heroin runners, but it never seemed to stick in court.”

Families. Christ, she even spoke the fucking language. “You made it stick,” he said. She was scanning through the emails again, and nodding distractedly.

“I guess nothing on the banks came through.”

Frank nudged her plate a little bit closer to her. “No, and nothing on Russo, either.”

“How’s he doing it?” asked Karen. “There are so many cameras in New York you’d think he’d pop up somewhere.”

Frank shrugged. “It’s not that hard,” he said. “I managed it, and Lieberman was looking for me too.”

“How did he find you?” she asked. “I’ve always wondered.”

Well, at least she was eating. He glanced up at the ceiling, then back down at her. “He, uh. He said he waited for a bunch of bodies to drop and then just looked around there.”

“Smart,” said Karen. “Probably what I would have done, too.”

Frank wondered if Karen had always been this blase about death. She’d sobbed with a hand over her mouth that night he’d used her as a lure (somehow it hurt even more in hindsight, knowing what he knows now), and now…
Well, once upon a fucking time she’d balked at getting in a car with him, snarking that she didn’t have attorney/client privileges. She’d gone from ‘I’m aiding and abetting a fugitive’ to using herself as a shield for his sorry ass pretty fucking quick.

“I, ah-” She was looking at him through her eyelashes now, the way she did when she wanted to say something but wasn’t sure how he would react.

“Yeah?”

“I’m surprised you’re not out there ripping the city apart to get to Russo,” she said finally, drawing designs in the leftover pilak with the tip of her fork. She wasn’t looking at him.

“He- if he’s just out there hiding, biding his time, there’s not much I can do to find him that Lieberman can’t,” he said. “And, ah. Well, the identity the spooks gave me- it’s kind of a hail mary, you know? I don’t get another one after this, and like you said- it had to end somewhere. I’ll get Russo, but I don’t need to make it… messy.”

One shot, one kill. This time Frank would drop him.

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She took half of her food home in a little plastic bowl thing that fit down in her purse, and then they were back out in the night again.

“Fucking cold,” Karen muttered. She was fidgety in a way she hadn’t been before she’d read Lieberman’s email, and she wasn’t talking.

Before he could stop himself (or hate himself) Frank twined his fingers through hers and shoved their linked hands down deep into his coat pocket. He had heat to spare.

She blinked over at him in surprise, and he deflected all that emotion by asking a question: “What’s the matter, Page? You got the fidgets.”
“I just- I hate this waiting. You probably won’t let me go undercover to get pictures of whoever this trafficking ringleader is-”

“You’re fucking right I won’t,” he muttered.

“-and Russo is laying low, and we still don’t know about the blackmailer- it doesn’t seem like there’s any connection, right? There are three terrible things happening all at the same time, three, and that shouldn’t be a coincidence, but it’s looking more and more likely. How fucked up is that? And we just have to… wait.”

She was so fucking stubborn and so fucking brave. She’d ripped his heart right out and shoved it in his face that night at the waterfront. She’d told him that he was lonely and then in the same breath she’d shown him her own absolute desolation, and he hadn’t been able to handle that; he’d felt his own face twitching as he tried to process the fact that she had, without any shame whatsoever, admitted to him that she was lonely while living in a city of eight million people.

She was doing it again, now. She was scared and nervous and looking for a plan, and what killed him was that he couldn’t fix it. She wore her emotions on her face, she always had, but she’d never asked him to do anything about them. She just was.

Karen Page was fucking dangerous.

“War’s like that,” he said. “Your mind- it imagines everything bad that could happen to you, all the shit the enemy could be planning. You get so worked up it’s almost a relief when the fight starts because everything just narrows down to killing the guy in front of you and completing the mission. Clarity of purpose.”

Karen leaned against him for a minute, and Frank found himself straightening to take her weight. “There’s no clarity here,” she said softly. “It’s all just grey.”

Yeah. She broke his fucking heart.

That was probably the reason why he let her steer him into her building and up the stairs. He had no real reason to go up-

Except he had every reason to go up because it was Karen and she shouldn’t be lonely but the fact
that she was lonely made him want to fucking howl. That he could fix. He could question her taste in friends and he could rage inside about the justice of the fucking world but if there’s one thing Frank could do, he could show up.

His noble intentions crumbled to dust when he followed her into the half-dark kitchen. She stiffened and sucked in a breath and he had a gun out, safety off.

“What?”

“On- ah- That wasn’t there, when I left.”

She was shuddering a little, looking at a white envelope left in the middle of the kitchen island. In the gloom, it almost seems to glow.

“Get out of here, go,” said Frank, moving to stand between her and the dark bedroom door.

“I don’t think-”

He knew he’d regret it, but Frank pushed Karen down to the floor and stepped over her to the narrow pantry- empty. He checked the bedroom and bathroom and closets before Karen got herself onto her hands and knees, and Frank had scanned under the bed and the couch and in every dark corner by the time she was back on her feet.

“Wasn’t necessary,” she snapped, picking up the envelope. It hadn’t been sealed.

“Ma’am, with all due respect, you weren’t going to listen. You never fucking listen, because you’re the stubbornest goddamn person I’ve ever met.”

She hit him with a hard side-eye before taking a deep breath and pulling the note out of the envelope.

But it wasn’t a note. When she unfolded it Frank could see over her shoulder that it was a picture of her. A little grainy and shot with a long-range lense, but her- and the Karen in the photo was wearing the same clothes she’d worn to work today.
“Oh, shit,” she said.

“Get what you need,” said Frank, snatching the picture from her and stuffing it back into the envelope. “You aren’t staying here.”

“You-”

“They know where you fucking live, and unless you’ve had those windows replaced with impact glass you are not fucking staying here, do you hear me?” He was yelling, and god only knew what the neighbors were thinking, but just this once he needed her to actually listen to him. “Just do it- for once in your goddamn life just listen to me. I can’t keep you safe here.”

She eyed him warily, her hands fisted so tightly her knuckles were white, so he said the last thing he had left, the only argument still afloat on the sea of rage that was his bullet-addled brain: “Please. Please Karen.”

“Okay,” she said. “Okay.”

He followed her into the bedroom because like hell was he letting her out of his sight. To his surprise (although not much about this woman should surprise him anymore) she went to her closet, kicked a couple pairs of heels out of the way, and pulled out a big, heavy-looking backpack. She grabbed a phone charger from the outlet by the bed and shoved it down into the front pocket, and then looked down at herself and her gym clothes.

“I’m going to change,” she said, riffling quickly through drawers and her closet before stepping into the bathroom. She was back out in less than three minutes, dressed in heavy socks, jeans, a thermal shirt, and a flannel. He doesn’t even know what to think when she laces on heavy, ancient-looking work boots.

She caught him looking and almost smiled as she hoisted the backpack. “They came from Vermont with me,” she said. “I guess- they’ve made it this far, right? Maybe they’re lucky.”

“That it?” asked Frank, following her back to the foyer. He had an eye on her windows, but the stupid flower light made the glare almost impossible to see through.
“Yeah,” said Karen. “I just need my purse.”

“Give me the pack,” said Frank. “You carry the Mary Poppins bag.”

She smiled at him again, that thousand watt grin that he’d first gotten from her over a plastic diner table and shitty coffee. It doesn’t fit their situation, and yet it does, because this is Karen Page, and apparently, in her mind, she belongs in the shit right along with him.

“Ready?” he asked, settling her surprisingly heavy bag on his shoulders.

“You’ve got the note? I didn’t get a chance to read it.”

“I’ve got it,” he said.

“Then I’m ready to go.”

She lingered by her door for only a second, and Frank didn’t let himself think about that. He didn’t want to understand this- she might not be burning the apartment down behind her, but she was saying goodbye all the same. Somewhere inside what Frank had hoped was the empty cavity that was his chest, his heart lurched.

“Why’d you have a go bag?” he asked as they stepped back out into the night. She was tired, and he knew it, but he was going to have to make her walk before they went to his place. He had to be sure his place was safe, too.

“Doesn’t everyone?” she asked lightly, trying to play it off.

“No ma’am,” he said. “Most people who have an emergency pack think they’re going to need it. Either that or they’re paranoid. So which one are you?”

“I don’t think I’m paranoid,” she said quietly.

Frank huffed his agreement.
He walked her around for almost two hours, and the last forty minutes it’s up and down ladders and over rooftops. He could get a better view of their surroundings up there, and on the second-to-last building he let her rest in a dark corner between to air intakes and texted Lieberman.

*If you’re up, I need to know if my apartment is clear.*

The response came less than two minutes later. *Alarms haven’t been tripped. Trouble?*

Frank taped out a message and stuck the phone back in his pocket: *Always.*

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He was a little relieved he hadn’t moved out of the shithole yet, because he and Lieberman had set this place up with motion sensors. Was it allowed by the building administration? Hell no. Did he give one single fuck? Also no.

“You weren’t kidding about having one chair,” said Karen, and she sounded a little surprised.

His place was tiny, but he knew it was fucking clean, no shame there. A queen-sized mattress neatly made on the floor, dorm fridge, coffee pot, hot plate, microwave. One chair.

A duffle locked with a padlock more suited for a junkyard gate than a canvas bag.

One plastic box of clothes.

A bedside lamp on the floor.

He knew it looked like a serial killer’s bunker, but he also knew that Karen knew *him.*

“Sorry it’s cold,” he said, dropping her bag down by the door. “This floor shares a thermostat.”
“I’ve done that before,” she said absently, still looking around the room. She paused when she saw the picture of Maria and the kids propped against the lamp.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Hall bathrooms and all. I told myself I was getting the college experience for half the cost.”

She turned to look at him again. She was pale and her nose was a little bit pink, probably from the wind that had picked up somewhere around the twelfth rooftop. “I need to see the paper, Frank.”

He took the now-crumpled envelope out of his pocket and passed it over.

There was writing on the back. He read over her shoulder, close enough to smell her shampoo:

*Stop poking around. Stop poking around, or we go public. Just so you know we’re serious, we’ll have a present for you in the morning.*

“Shit,” she said.

Frank squinched his eyes shut and focused on taking deep breaths. It hadn’t been like this in Afghanistan (or Iraq, or Kuwait). He’d been collected then, cool under fire, knowing exactly what he needed to do and how he needed to do it.

Now it was all he could do to keep his mind in the here and now.

“Well,” she said, moving to set the note on top of his microwave. “We know they’re connected.”

“That’s not fucking good,” said Frank. “Jason is working with a ring of human traffickers who have put a target on your back.”
“Well, at least we know the enemy,” said Karen, finally dropping her purse. She nudged it under the chair while she undid her coat and kicked that into the shadow, too.

“Take the bed,” said Frank. Of course she was tired, it was pushing midnight and he’d dragged her over half the city trying to check for a tail.

“We’ve been over this before,” said Karen.

Yeah, they had. And Frank knew it wasn’t something he should do again.

“Pass me the backpack?” she asked.

He slid it over. “What the hell do you have in there?” he asked as she rummaged.

“Necessities,” said Karen. “Couple changes of clothes, a photocopy of my passport, cash, meds, first aid kit, and bullets. And-” she pulled out one of those makeup bag looking things- “My toothbrush.”

“I’m impressed,” he told her. “You don’t play.”

“No sir,” she said, heading out into the hall. “I don’t.”

He waited outside the bathroom. It was stupid, but he wasn’t taking any chances. Once she was under the covers of his bed he took care of his own ablutions, trying to tell himself that she was fine. She was safe.

Karen was curled on her side facing the door when he got back to the room. She was quiet as he bolted the door and clicked to Lieberman’s security app on his phone.

It was too cold to sleep on top of the covers tonight. Besides, Karen would probably unmake the bed around him in his sleep just to spite him. He kinda liked that about her.

He locked his phone, checked to make sure it and his Ruger were by his pillow, and slid into the bed. The sheets were freezing against his feet, and Karen was almost off the other side of the bed. It
was a decent-sized mattress, and neither of them was very big. Probably she was nervous, too.

“I appreciate- all this,” she said quietly, into the dark. “I know you probably don’t like anyone in your space.”

“Please don’t fucking thank me,” he said. He couldn’t listen to her thanks. “Of course I fucking brought you here. I’ll sleep better because of it, so don’t worry.”

It was one of the few times in recent memory when Frank hadn’t thought about what he was going to say before he blurted it out into the world. He thought he ought to just get up and go out now, before she-

“Me too,” she said, quiet as the breeze. “So thanks.”

She’d sleep better too.

He held that thought to him, as warm and disconcerting as a newborn, and listened to Karen breathing evenly in the velvety dark. Slowly- slowly enough that he almost didn’t notice, at first, he felt her feet creeping across the mattress towards him.

At first Frank figured she was just curling in sleep. That was not, in fact, the case. She inched closer and closer, until her toes were almost but not-quite brushing his calves.

He’d been married. He knew what this was.

She squeaked when he slid his arm under her pillow and curved himself around her.

“Frank?” she asked, her voice crisp. He was impressed; his drill sergeants hadn’t always managed to sound so brisk fresh out of bed.

“It’s cold, alright. Go to sleep.” He didn’t want to make it sound like he was offering out of pity because then she’d freeze all night out of spite and neither of them would get any sleep.
“It’s- yeah, it’s pretty cold,” she said, and then she pressed those frozen toes of hers into his shins. Like a fucking man, he barely hissed. Just a little.

“Alright Elsa,” he said, tucking her hair over her shoulder (and knowing half of it would be in his mouth by morning). “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” she whispered back, a smile in her voice.

Breathing easily for the first time in months, Frank fell right to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

This is ABSOLUTELY the calm before the storm; I can't wait to post the next chapter on Sunday. Mwahaha!

Thank you to all who are supporting this story! I couldn't be doing this without you. Also let's have a drink (or whatever the vice of your choice is) for all the lost Kastle potential in the season 3 we'll never get. RIP.
Karen was woken up three times Thursday morning:

The first was early, when her body was still heavy with the knowledge that it was fully night outside. Frank had gotten out of the bed, and it wasn’t any noise that had woken her- Frank could move almost as silently as death. No, she’d woken because the temperature in the bed dropped without him in it, and she was cold.

He froze when she sat up, a darker shadow ever-so-slightly backlit by the ambient light of the city.

“Sorry,” he whispered, and oh Christ now Karen had slept against his skin and heard his morning voice and if she thought she could live with being friends, if she thought she could let him go back to hiding after this, if she thought there would be any kind of ‘after’ for this, well. She was wrong on all fucking counts.

“You’re fine,” she said, huddling back under the blanket.

“I have to go to work,” he said, crouching down beside her.

She heard one of his knees pop, and it was a strange moment of empathy- he was as human as she was, despite the body count and the seeming imperiousness to pain.

“Please- please don’t leave here today. I’ve got motion sensors on the door and window, so if you stay I’ll know you’re safe. Okay?”

“You can’t keep me safe forever, Frank,” she said. “You know that, right? I can’t just stay here.”

He shifted, cloth rustling, and then his forehead was pressed to hers. She closed her eyes and tried to preserve this moment, every detail: the smell of toothpaste on his breath, the warmth of his skin on hers, the utter devastation inside her that came with loving Frank Castle.
“Stay today,” he said. “Please.”

“Okay,” she said, her voice thick. She wondered if the definition of ‘okay’ could be expanded to include, *I love you*.

“Okay,” he whispered back. “Get some sleep.”

Quickly, and so lightly that Karen thought she’d imagined it, Frank pressed a kiss to her forehead before standing, gathering a few things, and stepping out of his room.

Karen woke the second time to her alarm. She didn’t need to dress, didn’t need to hike into work, so she emailed Ellison to let him know she was working from home and promptly drifted off again.

She woke a the third (and final) time to the angry ringing of her cell phone. The last bit of drowsiness cleared when she saw it was the precinct calling.

“Karen Page,” she said.

“Page, we need you to come down to the station,” said Mahoney on the other end of the line.

“Why?” she asked, rolling out of bed and lunging for her purse. She needed her notebook.

“Just come down,” he said.

“Is that an official summons?” she asked, scrounging in the depths of her bag for a pen.

She heard Brett sigh and then the level of background noise died down. “Look, Page, I’m down at the docks and there’s- there’s a corpse addressed to you.”

“What?” Addressed to her?
Then she remembered the note written over her picture; she remembered the reason she was in Frank’s shitty room in the first place. *We’ll have a present for you in the morning.*

“Yeah, I know. We got a dead hooker—”

“Sex worker,” Karen mumbled through her rising horror.

“-And there’s a paper pinned to her shirt that says, “Back off, Page.” There’s even a goddamn bow.”

Karen had a sudden feeling of vertigo, and she shivered in the cool air of the cheap apartment. “The-woman. About five seven, dark hair with bleached tips?”

“Goddammit Page,” said Mahoney, very, very softly. “I was hoping you’d tell me it was someone else in this fucking city, that plenty of people are named Page. But no, ten days ago you called asking about a murder, and today you’ve got one addressed to you.”

“I need to come see,” said Karen, shaking out the clothes she’d worn yesterday while she held the phone with her shoulder.

“This is a crime scene,” said Brett.

“And you need someone to identify the body, right?”

She recognized the address when he told her: it was the same place she’d met with Laylah back before this whole shitstorm had started.

“I’ll be there,” she told Brett.

After yanking on her jeans and shirts she dialed Frank. *C’mon, c’mon, c’mon,* she thought as she pulled her .380 from her purse. She wished she’d cleaned it more recently.

He didn’t answer.
She ran to the bathroom to pee and brush her teeth, and then she was tearing out of the apartment and into the street. It took her a second to catch a taxi, and inside she braided her hair back (another new look, to match the complete lack of makeup on her face and heel on her shoe) and called Frank again.

This time, he answered.

“There’s no time to really explain,” she said, conscious of the taxi driver and the camera. “But I had to leave. Detective Mahoney called me down the waterfront. Remember who I met down there a while ago?”

“She’s dead, isn’t she?” he asked. Karen could hear saws or drills whirring in the background.

“Yeah. And addressed to me.”

“Fuck,” he said. “Look, I’ll be around, right?”

“No, you cannot do that, he’ll recognize-”

“They won’t fucking see me, okay? And keep your phone on you. Not in your purse, not in your coat, on you.”

“Okay,” she said. I love you.

The taxi dropped her a couple blocks from the warehouse where she and Laylah had met, and Karen tipped him too much before jogging down the alley.

“We aren’t commenting, Page,” said one of the uniforms stationed along the police tape.

“I know,” she said. “I’m here to see Mahoney.”
“Let her through,” he called.

“You need to tell me what’s going on here,” he said, his voice low. “You’re involved in this up to your eyeballs if you’ve got people sending you messages via corpse. The fuck did you find this time?”

“It’s- it started with looking into violence against women,” said Karen, weavng through crime scene techs.

“I caught that article,” said Brett. “You don’t pull your punches.”

“Yeah. Ah, it’s part of a bigger story about human trafficking,” she said, and then they’d rounded a corner and were looking down at Laylah.

She was sitting upright against the brick wall of the warehouse, head lolling towards her right shoulder, a bullet hole in her left temple.

“I wouldn’t go around the other side,” said Brett. “Most of the other side of her head is gone.”

Karen took a couple deep, slow breaths. “Then she wasn’t killed here,” she said. “Not enough blood.”

“No. She was killed with a rifle. Mid-range, we think, then transported here.”

Karen looked at the note, complete with shiny Christmas-style bow before turning to look at the river. It was a clear day, and the reflection of the sun off the ice was enough to make her eyes water.

“She gave me information about an underground bar off Tenth. We only talked for a few minutes, and then- I only saw her once. She told me her name was Laylah Howes.”

She died because of me. Karen’s knees didn’t shake. The knowledge didn’t change anything; didn’t block out the flash of patrol lights or the sound of people talking or the nearly painful brilliance of the sun. Laylah had died because she’d talked to Karen.
“I’m going to need your files,” said Brett, turning to stand by Karen. “On this bar.”

“I-” her mind whirred. She legally had to turn most of it over, and Brett was smart enough to spots holes in her records if she kept some of it back. “Yeah, I’ll get everything to you, but I get the exclusive, okay?”

“You know I can’t-”

“And you know I can just keep investigating from my end, and it would be better if we worked together.”

“Were you always this much of a pain in the ass?” he asked, running a hand down his face.

“Yep,” said Karen, without any of her usual enjoyment. “I really was.”

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Frank was waiting for her a few blocks from the crime scene. One minute he wasn’t there, and the next second he was walking along next to her. “I have to go to the station,” said Karen. “Mahoney’s making me turn over my notes.”

“You’re actually going to?”

“Yeah, at least the first half. If they want to go knocking on doors, I can’t stop them.”

“This guy’s gunning for you,” said Frank.

“I only wonder what’s taking him so long,” said Karen.

“Don’t you fucking talk like that,” said Frank, his fingers wrapping around her wrist hard enough to bruise. “You didn’t do this. This is not on you.”
“It kind of is,” said Karen. “Look, I- I know I didn’t do it myself, and that I couldn’t know this would happen, but… people around me die, Frank. All the time. Sources, friends, everybody. You ought to start running.”

Frank glanced over at her as they wove around a street cart. “Yeah, well. I’m pretty hard to kill.”

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He tailed her to the police station and then ducked into a used bookstore while she went in to drop off (most of) her files. It didn’t take long- most of the cops in this precinct knew her by name, now.

“We’ve probably got forty-eight hours before they have a warrant and kick down the door of that club,” she said as they hiked back towards his apartment.

“Yes, well we know they’re involved with Chatham, now,” said Frank. “I could get the information out of them tonight. They’d tell me who’s running the show eventually.”

“That’s even more conspicuous,” said Karen. “The night after I turn over files the guys running the club go missing.”

“Not like they would suspect you.”

“No,” said Karen, groping around in the pocket of her purse for her roll of Tums. “But it’s too fishy.”

Frank watched as she crunched the antacids down, and Karen could hear him think: Note- lecture Karen about self-care.

As they turned onto Frank’s block her phone started to ring, and Karen answered it automatically: “Karen Page.”

“Hi, Karen.”
She stopped and grabbed Frank’s arm. He raised one eyebrow and then tugged her to the edge of the sidewalk out of the flow of traffic.

“To whom am I speaking?” she asked.

“Oh, you know me,” said Jason. “We’ve met. You’ve been in New York so long you’ve forgotten what home sounds like?”

“Nope,” said Karen. “Haven’t forgotten a thing.”

Frank’s head was pressed to hers now, both of them listening in on the call like middle-school girls.

“You haven’t been listening, Karen. You don’t get out of this looking good. Probably you don’t get out of this at all.”

“What do you want, Jason?” asked Karen, working to keep her voice brisk. *Buck up Page, it’s not like this is the first time you’ve been threatened.*

“Well, really, it’s about what you want,” said Jason. “I’ve got your old man, Karen. You took my brother from me- and I guess karma works fast, because it took your brother from you, too. That same night. Did you know they staggered the funerals? Your brother got to go first. The whole town turned up for your boy. Why didn’t they stay for mine, huh?”

Karen wanted to say, “Because he was a weaselly little drug dealer who never did anything for anybody,” but if he really did have her dad…

“Then we’re even, right,” said Karen. Frank’s hand slid up and down her back in smooth, even stroked. “Your brother and mine.”

“No, we’re not fucking even!” There was so much venom in his voice now, a mercurial shift from the overly friendly tone of before. “You *got off*, you got to walk away because you’re the perfect Page Princess, yeah? But *my* brother wasn’t even mourned because he was just one of those Chatham brothers living back in the woods.”
“That’s not-” Karen started.

“No!” roared Chatham into the phone. “You don’t get to say what is and fucking isn’t! I do! I’m in control now! And if you want to see your pops again, you’ll come up here and turn yourself over to me. An even trade, yeah? Cause if you don’t hurry, I might start cutting off bits.”

Karen swallowed. She was leaning against Frank now, and he was keeping them both upright, his head still pressed to hers. “Where are you?” she asked.

“Chatham barn. Bet you still remember where it is,” he said, and hung up.

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The next little while passed in a blur. She and Frank ran up to his apartment to grab their respective bags and then tore back down to his truck. From there he drove to a different garage, one over in Brooklyn, where they transferred everything into a dark panel van with a light kit.

The drive out of the city was silent and tense. Karen kept thumbing Tums into her mouth, and Frank forced her to down a protein bar.

Once they were on the highway headed north and well outside the NYC suburbs, Frank asked the question. “So where we going?”

“Fagan Corners, Vermont,” she said. “It’s about eight hours from the city.”

“We can do it in six,” said Frank. He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder towards a complex radio system bungee-corded in the back. A cord snaked up to hook into the cigarette lighter. “Police radio,” he said. “Real deal.”

Right.

They stopped once at a rest stop just over the Vermont line. They both had some water and then
climbed into the back of the van. “You’ve practiced with the .380?” Frank asked her.

“Not as much as I should have,” said Karen, watching him unload sniper rifles, automatic rifles, clips, boxes of ammo, and about three dozen handguns, and a couple shotguns. If she made it through this, she was going to ask Frank to take her to the range.

“Then use that one,” said Frank. “Always better to use the weapon you know. Here-” he dug around in the bag and passed her a sheathed knife. “It’s supposed to go down in your boot.”

“I don’t know-”

“You should always carry a knife,” he said. “C’mon.”

“Okay,” she said. After their weapons had been holstered, hidden, and distributed, they hit the road again.

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Fagan Corners was just as colorless as Karen remembered it. At the end of January there was snow everywhere, and the colored Christmas lights that had broken up the gloom had been taken down. A few storefronts on Main Street were still lit, but most closed at sundown.

The Sawmill Diner was across from the public library. The awning needed replacing, Karen noticed. And the windows needed washed, but it was there, and the windows were lit, and a few trucks were out in the parking lot.

“That it?” asked Frank as the slowly rolled by.

“Yeah,” said Karen, the words feeling like a curse, like doom. “That’s it.”

They drove back out of town and into an increasingly thick evergreen forest. “You tell me when we get close, right? I’ll go around the perimeter, and you take the van up to the barn, yeah?”
“Yeah,” said Karen. “It’s this right, and then a left onto the driveway. The house and barn are about a mile off the road. Farmhouse with wrap-around porch.”

On the whole drive up from New York she’d kept her thoughts focused only on the next turn, the next stage of the plan, the next thing she had to do to see this through. She hadn’t thought about her father, or blame, or - or if there would be an after. Now, though, with only a couple miles to go…

“Frank- I want-” She didn’t get a chance to finish the sentence. She didn’t get a chance to find out what she was going to say.

The world shook. Everything was motion and noise and spraying snow and mud and dirt, and the van was flying, flipping, rocking upside down. The airbag was in Karen’s face and her nose hurt and she was struggling to get a breath in, and she dreamed of car crashes, but this wasn’t a dream, it couldn’t be a dream.

“Frank?” She wiggled, tugging against her seatbelt. They were upside down, and please, don’t let thing be another, don’t let Frank die-

“IED,” he said, working at his own seatbelt. “Karen? Karen you okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, pulling harder against the restraint.

Through the windshield, Karen watched as a truck pulled up. Her first thought was Help! Her second was incoherent fear.

Two men got out of the truck and ran towards the flipped van where Frank and Karen hung. One was Jason Chatham. The other was Billy Russo.

Karen started screaming and flailing as Jason wrenched open her door.

“You didn’t say there would be two of them!” he was yelling, cutting through Karen’s seatbelt and trying to catch her flying arms. “What the fuck now, man?”

Karen could barely hear him over Frank’s bellowing. He was cursing Billy and threatening Jason all
in the same breath. “I’m going to kill you fuckers, I am going to cut off your dicks and feed them to you, do you hear me? This is how you die!”

Karen saw Billy press a stun gun to Frank’s arm. A light flashed, and Frank went limp. She was still shrieking, and now that she knew what was coming it was so much worse. “It’ll be fine,” Billy yelled over to Chatham. Jason caught the stunner, pressed it Karen’s neck, and everything went black.

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She came around inside somewhere. She could smell hay and snow and dust, and her fingers were twitching. Right- she’d been stunned, Jason was there, and Russo-

Karen struggled to get her muscles under control enough to sit up. Her .380 had been taken out of her waistband, but she could feel the knife in her boot. That was good, and probably Chatham’s mistake. She imagined Russo had been busy with Frank. “Frank?” she whispered.

“You really know how to pick them.”

Karen blinked a few times and looked up at Jason, who was crouching over her. “You get with my asshole brother- yeah, I know he was an asshole- and now this wacko? The fuck is wrong with you?”

He stood up and looked down at her. “Oh wait, I don’t care,” he said, and kicked her.

The toe of his boot caught her in the hipbone. It hurt, but didn’t hit anything critical. She tried to stand up, looking all around before Jason shoved her down again.

Frank was strung up in the center of the barn, his arms up in a Y, and Karen’s dad was nowhere in sight. It looked like Frank was still out- probably they’d had to zap again to tie him up like that.

“Where’s my dad?” Karen asked as Jason knocked her back down.

“Fuck if I know,” he said, and hit her across the face. Karen tasted blood.
She had to draw this out, she had to give Frank a chance to wake up and come up with a plan, because she had no idea how they were getting out of this one. She spit blood and cleared her throat. “What about you?” she called to Billy. He was leaning against one of the big beams in between empty stalls. “It was a pretty good plan. How’d you keep the hospital from letting everyone know you’d escaped?”

Billy Russo walked over, her .380 held loosely in his hand. Gone was the urbane, could-have-been Ivy League business man she’d met back at the hotel. His hair was shorter now, and over his cheeks and nose ran a network of silvery, crookedly knit scars. The left edge of his mouth pulled up, just a bit, into a knot of scar tissue.

“I’m paying the chief resident,” he said. “In every place… in ever circle, money talks.” He rested the barrel of the gun under Karen’s chin. “Just like you will.”

“How’d you find out about Todd?” Karen asked.

Jason hit her again, closed fist right to the cheekbone. It took a minute for her vision to clear, and when she tried to stand again he shoved her down, harder. She couldn’t run, not without Frank.

Both men were focused on her now, and behind them she could see Frank’s fingers twitching.

“You don’t say his name!” said Jason, kicking out again. He caught her right in the chest, but her coat took most of the glancing blow.

“Well,” said Billy, a manic little smile on his lips. “It’s a funny story, really. I was trying to come up with something I could take from old Frankie boy, here, and you know what? You were the only thing that came to mind. Remember, I was there that day, in the hotel. I thought about it after- why the hell had Frank Castle snuck into a hotel full of Homeland agents and a full protection detail? Why?”

He tapped the barrel of the gun against his temple. “I thought about it, and then I knew- he’d come for you. He didn’t care about some rich asshole Senator; Frank had never been about politics. He was in it for the blood, same as I was. At first.”

Russo spun, pulled a knife out of his belt, and slashed it over Frank’s chest in one balletic movement. “C’mon asshole,” he said. “I know you’re awake. I know you’re listening.”
Russo looked over his shoulder at Jason and nodded, and then Jason was kicking her again, right in the stomach this time, and when she doubled over he caught her in the ribs. When she felt herself falling Karen wrapped her arms over her head and hoped for another miracle.

“C’mon, Frankie,” Russo sing-songed. She could hear him, could imagine his face as he taunted Frank. “Don’t you want to see me kill the new girl?”

Frank grunted, and Karen peeked around long enough to see Billy dragging the tip of his knife down Frank’s torso again, beads of red springing up in its wake.

“This-” he gestured to Jason and the barn. “God, Frank. She’s about as far from Maria as she can get, isn’t she? This, her whole small-town drama, it was a fucking gift. I knew you had to save the girl. It’s just a pain she figured out my business at the docks so quickly. Jason and I had to move the whole plan up a month.”

“I will end you,” Frank muttered, his eyes locked on Russo’s. His voice was quiet, and that was somehow worse than the yelling.

Russo looked back at Jason and nodded again, and he started kicking again, another to ribs, one to her arms, then around to land one right in her kidneys. That one was the worst; she felt little shivers of white-hot pain skittering up her spine to lodge at the base of her skull from that one.

“Why’d you bring the girl into it, Billy?” asked Frank. Karen wished she could see his face. “Why couldn’t this have been you and me?”

“We tried that! We tried you and me, but you didn’t end it, Frank!”

“Cut that shit out, Russo! It wasn’t you and me, it was us and those fucking kids you almost killed.”

“Why didn’t you just end it, Frank? It would have been clean! That’s what we did, one shot, one kill, and you balked at the last fucking second! You took everything, you took everything I had, and it wasn’t clean!”

“Yeah? Yeah I took everything? You killed my family! You took the people who loved you away
from us both!"

“And now I’ll do it again,” said Billy, his voice calmer than before.

As if on cue Jason started laying into her again, blows thudding against her rhythmically, her heart pounding away in time.

“The fuck do you have that for?” Karen heard Frank yell. His voice had that edge to it, and she tried to listen over the sound of her blood rushing in her ears. “You were never a knife guy. Let’s finish this!”

He had a knife. That wasn’t good, because right now Karen was pretty sure she’d still be able to run away if she had to: wasn’t adrenaline a wonderful thing? But if he started cutting on her, and she lost too much blood, it was anyone’s guess-

Oh. She had a knife.

The next time Jason’s boot connected with her body she pulled herself into an even tighter ball. “Yeah, not so high and mighty are you now, you bitch,” he said. She saw his boots pace around her again, coming to kick her from the front, and as his foot pulled back she reached down into the boot and pulled out Frank’s knife.

Jason’s foot was already in motion, and as it collided with her ribs she grabbed his calf with her free hand and drug the blade across the back of his ankle with the other, watching in horror as blood sprayed.

Jason staggered back and fell next to her, his face twisted in pain and shock and then Karen didn’t need to think anymore, she was all motion and rage and fear as she lurched over to him and fell across his chest. He didn’t even have his arms up; he was too busy hanging onto his bleeding leg when she brought the knife down into his neck the first time.

It took more pressure than she was expecting. The knife skittered off bone, and the wound squelched when she pulled the knife back out and slammed it home again.

Blood was pouring over her hands and she didn’t notice as she jabbed and jabbed, not until she heard Russo’s laughing and noticed Jason’s fixed eyes.
“Well, I’ll be damned, Frankie,” said Russo. “She’s fucking perfect for you.”

Karen didn’t hear whatever it was Frank said next. She was half-lunging, half-falling towards the stalls on the other side of the barn, and as she heard the crack of a pistol she rolled under the stall door and kept crawling. She’d played in this barn as a kid- the Chathams hadn’t had horses for as long as she’d been alive; mostly the tractor and old odds and ends had been stored in here. It had been good for a game of hide and seek on a rainy day.

The stall doors on this barn were dutch: there was a door inside, the one she’d just rolled under, and there was a stall door that could be accessed from the outside, as well. The door to the outside was lower, and she could hear Russo shouting behind her as she dragged herself along the dirt floor and out into the drifting snow.

She hoped that shot hadn’t gone into Frank, but she didn’t have time to worry about that now. She had to do something.

It was snowing outside, and the wind was blowing it in shifting, kaleidoscopic patterns. She might be able to run and get get help, but it would take too long. She knew by the time help came Billy and Frank would be gone (one way or another).

_Breathe, Page._

There was a ladder up to the hayloft out here, and she shuffled around to it, trying to keep keep her ears out for whatever was happening inside the barn.

“Come out, come out wherever you are,” Billy was sing-songing. “Don’t you want to save Frank? You worked so hard to save him the first time, before he blew his trial and sent himself to prison. I was watching. I was rooting for you. Come out, Karen.”

The ladder was rough, half-rotted under her hands, and when she pulled herself up into the hayloft she prayed the old boards wouldn’t dissolve under her weight. She did not come this far to die of a broken neck.

Carefully she pulled herself to the edge of the loft platform and peeked down into the aisle below. Billy was pacing from stall to stall, looking in and then out into the snowy night beyond. He knew she couldn’t have gone far, too, and it was only a matter of time before he looked up.
She didn’t think about jumping. This wasn’t a “weigh the merits of jumping or not jumping, or feet first or head first” situation. She had an opening and she took it because this was her fight- Karen fighting for her future, fighting for Frank, fighting to forgive herself for a past that she couldn’t take back and change no matter how hard she tried.

She jumped.

Billy must have felt the shift in the air or heard her mad scramble over the edge because he turned right as she was falling, and instead of slamming into him from behind she awkwardly caught his side- but not before he’d turned, knife out, and stabbed it through her calf.

It registered- the pressure registered, and the sudden weakness in that limb, but the pain was distant and remote and cold. The knife in her leg was still less important than two things: the gun (her gun) had skittered away from Billy, and her impact had knocked the breath out of him.

She lunged for the gun, felt Billy’s hand wrap around her ankle and she kicked back, fingernails digging into the packed earth of the barn floor, and then he was looming over her and oh god he was yanking on the knife that was still in her leg-

She grabbed the gun, cocked it as she flipped onto her back, and shot Billy as he loomed over her. He didn’t fall immediately- he looked more surprised than anything, and Karen wondered if he was wearing a flak jacket like Frank’s (which would make sense, right?) so she shot him in the head. And then, slowly rolling onto her knees, she shot him where he lay, just one more time.

Just to be sure.

Because Karen was done with the past coming back to haunt her.

“Karen- hey, Karen, it’s okay. You did it baby.”

Frank’s voice sounded like it was coming from a long way away, and slowly, through the haze of pain and tears and adrenaline that fogged her mind, Karen realized that she was probably in shock, and that she really should cut Frank down.
“You’ve gotta look for the cuff keys, okay? He stuck them in a pocket, Karen. You’ve got to get the key out of Billy’s pocket.” She was still looking over at Billy, at the blood mingling with the dust beneath him. It was a good thing Frank knew what was going on.

It had always bothered Karen that people died with their eyes open, so she tried not to look as she slowly rifled through Billy’s pockets. She found a whole handful of keys, and tried to stand up.

The first attempt didn’t go well, because she’d forgotten that there was a knife stuck through the muscle of her calf.

“I know it hurts, Karen, and I’ll get you out of here just as soon as you cut me down, alright? You just gotta unlock one of my wrists, okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Okay.”

Alright Page, she told herself. You’ve just gotta keep moving. Doesn’t matter if you can’t walk- if you can’t walk you crawl, and that’s okay, because you’re working. You’re trying.

She crawled to Frank, the keys clenched in one fist. She could hear her own rattling breaths and the wind outside, and finally her face was only a few inches from Frank’s knees.

“Sorry,” she mumbled to him when she hooked her fingers into his belt. She had to use him to pull herself up, and it was probably hell on his shoulders.

“I’m fine,” he told her as she wobbled on one foot, bracing her shoulder against Frank’s chest. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

“Don’t feel amazing,” she mumbled, trying to sort keys with shaking fingers.

“Yeah, I know, but we’ll get you fixed up. Those are car keys, yeah? Can you put those in my pocket?”

She slid the ring of big keys into Frank’s front pocket, leaning up against him the whole time. He didn’t shift, not even once, and Karen thought about that, that unyielding determination that was
Frank Castle as she clumsily jammed a small, silvery key into the cuff locked around his right wrist.

When his arm dropped he didn’t reach for the key. He reached for her, wrapping that heavy arm around her and tugging her close. “Karen-” he said, and for the first time since the van flipped his voice cracked.

“Gotta get you down,” she said.

“Yeah.” He pressed his lips against her hair and then took the key from her.

~~~

He left her in the barn while he went to look for Russo’s car. Billy had gotten here from New York somehow, and Frank knew it had to be parked within a mile of the barn.

“Don’t move,” he told Karen. He had her lying in her back looking up at the shadowy tin roof, her leg propped up on an old wooden crate. “And don’t touch that knife. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said. He knew, she thought to herself as his running footsteps thudded away. He knows ‘okay’ really means ‘I love you’.

It’s possible that she fell asleep in that barn. It’s also plausible that she passed out, opting for the warm dark instead of cold, and terror, and pain. When she opened her eyes it was to Frank’s concerned face. “C’mon,” he said. “Wake up Karen. Don’t you pass out on me. Let’s get you home, yeah?”

He worked one arm under her shoulders (and oh god, her ribs were adding a nice countermelody of pain to twine with the agony of her leg) and carefully hooked an arm under her knee.

“The prick only had a Charger, but at least it’s warm, okay?”

His breathing didn’t even change as he stood up with her in his arms, and Karen kind of wished that she wasn’t half out of her mind, because there was still some part of her that wanted to appreciate how comfy it was to be braced against the solid planes of Frank’s chest.
Well, the good news was that if she’d managed that thought, probably she wasn’t going to die. Her leg jostled as Frank set her down into the car, and Karen thought that even though she might not currently be dying, death would be a whole lot easier.

Frank had already reclined her seat back all the way, and delicately he unfolded her leg and rested the heel of her boot up on the dash. Their cell phones were in the center console cup holders, and Karen realized her purse was in the tiny ‘backseat’.

“You went back to the van,” she said as the cobwebs cleared. Her thoughts were sharper now, but so was the pain, and her teeth were starting to chatter.

“Yeah,” he said. “Had to get anything that could identify us, and I had to check the rest of that road for IEDs.

One day she was going to have to yell at him for that; for risking blowing himself up to check the road for her. Today, however, was not that day.

“Smart,” she mumbled as he jogged around the hood of the car and slid into the driver’s seat. It was warmer in the car, but she still shivered.

Frank shrugged out of his coat and draped it over her. “Here.”

The coat smelled like blood and dirt and Frank, and somehow that meant it smelled like home.

He kept their speed down until they made it back through town and turned south onto the highway. After that, though, everything that went by outside the window was a blur.

“Don’t you fall asleep on me,” he said. “Don’t you do it.”

“Why not?” Karen asked, annoyed. She was in so much pain; why couldn’t she sleep it off?

“Concussion,” said Frank. “C’mon, tell me about that broom cupboard. Didn’t take you for a rocket
ship kind of girl.”

Karen swallowed, trying to come up with the energy to talk, and Frank reached around into the back and pulled out a water bottle. Without taking his eyes off the road he held it between his legs, opened it, and passed it to her.

In her weird reclined position Karen dribbled some into her hair, but honestly, a little water could only improve the situation that currently was her face. “Alright,” she said, making an attempt at getting the bottle into the empty cup holder.

She thought past the pain of her leg, of her ribs, of her arms and face and head. This was a story, and that’s what she did for a living, wasn’t it? She told stories.

“Out here- at least on clear nights- the sky is so big,” she said. “We lived outside town a little, so it would get really dark, and I could see all the stars from my window. I liked looking up at them on nights I couldn’t sleep, because they always kind of, you know- flickered, like Christmas lights.

“Then I saw Star Wars, and I was in love with the idea of going to space, of being able to get into a spaceship and blast off and just be free. Be the first one to find all the cool planets I knew were out there.

“The broom closet was in the diner. Kevin and I got dropped off there after school, and we’d sit in the back booth and do our homework or watch the little TV that was up over the counter. If the diner got busy we’d have to hang out in the kitchen, and if we got too loud they’d break us up, and I’d go hide in the closet and just… pretend. Pretend things were different.”

Silently Frank’s hand slid across the seat and took hers. She hung onto it tightly, wishing she could use two hands, and wishing she didn’t have to ever let go.

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A few minutes later Frank broke the silence. He gently disentangled his fingers from hers and passed her his phone. “Dial Madani, will you?” he asked.

“Why?” asked Karen. She wondered how much farther they had to go.
“Because I need to ask her something,” said Frank, glancing over at her.

Karen realized she was leaving bloody fingerprints on the phone. As she passed it back to Frank she looked at her hands- really looked at them- and noticed that there wasn’t a sliver of unbloodied skin to be seen.

Frank pushed her hands back down into her lap and held one tightly. Karen tried to ignore the fact that their fingers were sticking together.

The phone was on speaker in Frank’s lap, and after the fourth ring Madani picked up. “Agent Madani.”

“Madani, it’s Castle. Listen, how good are those papers your boss gave me?”

“What? Castle you’re on your own-”

“How good are the fucking papers?” he asked, louder. Karen saw a muscle in his jaw twitch, and she wanted to press her lips to it.

“Why?” Madani’s voice was hard.

“Because Karen and I just tracked down Billy Russo, who is currently lying dead in a barn, and Karen’s hurt and I have to get her to a hospital and they’re going to fucking run me when I take her in looking like this, right? So I have to fucking know if those documents are going to hold, goddammit!”

“They’ll hold,” said Madani. Karen liked Madani: she was smart, and stubborn, and she understood Frank, too, even if she didn’t want to. “Tell me about Russo.”

Frank told her everything: the hospital, the women, the blackmail- everything.

“For fuck’s sake, Frank. You should have told me the minute you knew Russo was out! I have
“Yeah? And what were you going to say? It wouldn’t have been Homeland’s business, you and I both know that! I took care of it, okay?” he glanced over at Karen. “It’s done.”

“I’m sending a team to the hospital where he was supposed to be locked up,” said Madani. “Where’s the body?”

Frank glanced over at Karen again, and she nodded. “Vermont,” he said. “Chatham family farm outside Fagan Corners.”

“And Karen?”

“Concussion, probably fractured ribs, and a KA-bar through the calf. That’s the worst of it.”

“Take her to New York Pres if she can make it that long, okay? My father’s on duty tonight. He’ll open doors for you if it comes to that.”

Frank glanced at a passing road sign. “We’ll be there in two hours. Black charger, New York Plates. It’s Russo’s, and probably stolen,” he said. “And thanks, Madani.”

“I’ll meet you there,” she said, and hung up.

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He made her keep talking. She told him about wanting to go to Cornell for astronomy, she told him about her first few years in the city, she told him about how she’d started staking out the police precinct on slow news days.

She told him that she hurt, and that she was scared.

He held her hand, and they both pretended it wasn’t tacky with too much blood.
She’d killed two more men tonight. She’d killed two more men, and she couldn’t find it in herself to regret it.

When they pulled up outside the ER there was one moment of peace before the brightly-lit sliding doors were opening and a team was jogging out.

“I’ll be right here, okay?” said Frank, his hand tight and his eyes intent on hers. “Right here.”

“Okay,” she said, and this time, out loud, she added: “I love you.”

The devastation in Frank’s eyes was the last thing she saw before nurses pulled her out of the car and wheeled her away.

Chapter End Notes

I always feel like I can't write action, so I hoped this turned out okay! Also I can't believe we're in the home stretch of this story! Seriously, thank you for being here with me <3
Frank wouldn’t be able to forget that look in Karen’s eyes as the EMTs pulled her out of the stolen car. It was all wide-eyed terror and defiance and determination, and that was her. She had a tactical knife jammed in her leg and an eye that was rapidly swelling shut and she told him that she loved him as she was taken away.

He followed Karen until silver doors swung closed in his face and a determined-looking nurse put a hand to his chest and told him to back off.

Madani was there waiting.

Her hair was longer than before, and there was the hint of an angry red scar trailing back into her hairline. “She’ll be fine,’ she told him. “Come on.”

He followed her into an empty patient room, and she closed the door after him.

“Why didn’t you tell me as soon as you knew Russo had escaped?”

Frank moved to the window and looked out over Manhattan. “Really? You’re asking me this? Last time this happen the cover-up went all the way through to the deputy director of the CIA. You think I didn't wonder about that again? For all I knew the spooks had found a use for Russo and had spirited him away themselves.”

“You knew it wasn’t me,” said Madani, crossing her arms. “Why didn’t you call? Clearly you had my number.”

“Wasn’t DHS,” he said. Wanted to deal with it myself. You wanna do a job right, you do it yourself.

“I can make just about anything Homeland Security,” said Madani.
“What did your team find up in Vermont?” he asked.

“Two bodies, just like you said,” she said, losing some of the stick-up-her-ass rigidity that had driven Frank nuts from the very beginning. “At first glance it could look like two factions met, fought, and killed each other.”

“Uh-huh,” said Frank, going back to looking out the window.

“It lacked your usual style.”

_Fucking Madani. Too nosy and observant for her own good._ “Yeah,” said Frank, knowing she’d figure it out. “Karen was the one who got ’em. They tied me up but left her loose, the assholes.”

Madani smiled a little, the dimples she must resent flashing. “Women tend to be underestimated.”

“Not by me. Uh- I don’t know what story you’re going to tell, but leave Karen out of it, okay? Don’t pin them on her.”

“I think we can keep the two of you out of this one,” said Madani. “We’ll have gotten an anonymous tip about an escaped fugitive direct to the DHS, and the ensuing investigation discovered the whereabouts of Billy Russo.”

“You get the credit?” asked Frank.

“Yep.”

“Good.”

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Madani forced him to get the cuts on his chest stitched. The nurse who did it kept flicking glances up to his face, but Madani’s presence (and sidearm) prevented any questions. It took for-fucking-ever.
Just over an hour later Dinah’s father came to find them. “Mister…?”

“Castiglione,” said Frank, sticking out a hand for the doctor to shake. He was in scrubs, and they looked fresh. The creases where they’d been folded were still sharp.

“We anesthetized Ms. Page for the removal of the knife,” he said. “I feel confident about the subsequent repair work and subdermal sutures, but there could still be some bleeding for the next day or so.”

“What about-?” She had too many injuries for Frank to list. What about all of it? What about the woman who loves me?

“Serious bruising over her lower ribs, and hairline fractures on one. A slight concussion, and an irregular x-ray of her zygomatic, so that’s likely fractured as well. Dinah has assured me that you had nothing to do with these injuries…?”

I didn’t stop them, thought Frank. I didn’t see them coming, and I didn’t protect her. “No sir,” said Frank. He was almost relieved this guy had asked; relieved that someone gave a shit about women who’d been brought in beaten.

“Good. She’ll be out for another hour or so, and with the pain medication she’ll probably sleep through the night.”

“Can I stay?” asked Frank, looking from Dinah to her father and back. “Can I stay with her?”

“It’s a family-only policy-”

Madani put a hand on her father’s arm. “She doesn’t have family,” she said softly.

The doctor’s face fell. “I see. Well, Mr. Castiglione, I guess that leaves you. You’re welcome to stay- I’ll have a cot put in her room.”
“Thank you, sir,” said Frank.

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*She doesn’t have any family.*

Madani’s words echoed through his head, around and around, while he sat by Karen’s bed and held her cold hand. The regular beeping of the machines around her soothed him: he could hear her heartbeat, could see it on the monitor, had tangible proof that she was here and whole.

Mostly.

In the half-light of the hospital night cycle she looked so fucking fragile. She was all watercolor shades: peaches and pinks and blues blending softly together, but inside she was fucking steel.

Now, though, she had a universe of pain across her skin. A blue and purple galaxy spun out across her cheekbone beneath the heavy, swollen singularity of her eye. Her forearms were studded with dark, angry bruises; an asteroid belt of abuse, and Frank knew beneath the blanket there was only more pain, only more injuries that he didn’t think he could forgive himself for.

*She doesn’t have any family.*

That just wasn’t right, it wasn’t. She was good, and kind, and smart. She’d go to the ends of the earth for the people she cared about, so why the fuck was she alone? What did it say about her life that he was her last option, the one to sit with her when shit got hard?

He only realized it was dawn when the dayshift nurse came in to see if she could wake Karen up. Two hours before the night nurse hadn’t been able to rouse her, and her blood pressure was low enough that anaesthetic could still have been in her system. This time- this time she woke up.

Frank saw her jump when the nurse picked up her arm to check the IV line. “It’s okay,” he told her. Her eyes were wild and panicked and it killed him to see her like this, to know that she was afraid and confused and he couldn’t do anything about it.
She loved him. She broke his goddamn heart.

“Good morning,” said the nurse. “Can you tell me your name?”

“Karen,” she whispered. Her voice was so fucking thin. “Water?” she asked hopefully.

The nurse poured water into a plastic cup, unwrapped a straw, and held it to Karen’s lips.

“Do you know where you are?” she asked.


The nurse asked Karen what the year was, what her phone number was, and then she uncovered Karen’s leg and checked the bandage. Frank saw her face flicker- Karen had bled through the bandage and down onto the pillows where her leg was propped.

“I’ll be back with a clean dressing,” she said, and walked out.

Karen shifted, trying to bend towards her leg, and Frank crouched down and cradled her cheek. “It’s okay,” he said. “Madani’s dad- he’s a surgeon. Top one. He fixed you up himself.”

“Home,” she whispered, and that’s what fucking broke him.

“Yeah,” he said, watching her eyelids flicker. “We’ll get you home.”

She woke up again when two nurses rewrapped her leg, but she was out when the doctor came by. Dr. Madani was in khakis and a button down now, and he looked like he’d had a shave since Frank had talked with him in the wee hours of the morning.

“Has she woken up?” he asked, snapping on a pair of gloves.
“Kinda,” said Frank. He felt like a fucking useless idiot sitting around while Karen was poked and prodded, so he got up to pace. “She told me she wants to go home.”

“She’ll need to stay under observation for another night,” said the doctor, once again peeling back the blankets that were draped over Karen’s lap. The nurses had given her a shot of pain medication before they rewrapped her leg, and she didn’t wake now. “And if you do take her home, you cannot let her get up. The wound site needs to be elevated at all times for the next seventy two hours. Then if there’s no further bleeding she can sit up or be on crutches for brief periods of time.”

He scribbled on Karen’s chart before hanging it back on her door. “I’ll be back this evening,” he said. “Get some rest, Mr. Castiglione.”

~~~

He didn’t. Instead, he got to meet Karen’s boss.

Somewhere around noon Karen’s door flew open and a short guy with a greying beard walked in. “Oh my god,” he breathed, and then he noticed Frank.

Frank held a finger to his lips and made the face that never failed to elicit silence from Frank Junior. He jerked his head towards the hall and the bearded guy followed.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Karen’s boss, Harlan Ellison. I’m an editor at the Bulletin. How are you here? I had a Homeland Security agent run my credentials to get back here; I can’t be the only one that recognizes-”

Frank loomed a little. “Yeah, they fucking know who I am, okay? That a big enough clue for you?” He didn’t like this guy. He didn’t like him at all.

“Oh. Oh.”

“Yeah,” said Frank. “She clearly can’t fucking work, so why are you here?”
Ellison pinched the bridge of his nose. “Look, I just- she lives by herself and has a habit of running around after the worst assholes in this city. I hadn’t heard from her in twenty-four hours, and the last place any of my contacts had seen her was a police crime scene. She wouldn’t have missed a byline like that, so- so this morning I started calling hospitals, and the truth of it is that finding her in a hospital was best-case-scenario.”

Alright, Frank could feel a little bit bad for this guy. He knew how much energy it took to keep track of Karen Page. “Yeah,” he said. “She uh- look, I don’t know what story Homeland is running with.”

Ellison eyed Frank. “Okay,” he said. “You’ll let her know I visited?”

“Yeah,” said Frank. “Do I need to tell you what would happen if I end up in the news?”

Ellison’s lips twitched into a grimace. “Nope.”

When Frank went back into Karen’s room she was still asleep, and he went digging for her purse. Homeland had taken the car, so Frank had brought her gear up and put it in the little closet thing in the corner.

Her cell was dead, but (as he suspected) she had a charger down in her fucking Poppins bag.

“Shit,” he mumbled when the screen came on. Forty seven missed calls, more than a hundred emails, and twenty four text messages.

He leaned over to use her index finger to unlock the phone, feeling like a voyeur the whole time.

The texts were all from Foggy Nelson. Good- Frank needed to go out.

He called the lawyer, who answered on the first ring. “Karen, I’ve been-”

“Nelson,” Frank interrupted.
There was a pause on the other end of the line. “Who is this?”

“A former client,” said Frank. “Listen, I’ve-”

“Ohmygod,” said Nelson, all in a rush. “You’re supposed to be dead.”

“Yeah, well I’m not,” said Frank. “Just fucking listen, okay? Karen’s in the hospital. New York Presbyterian, Room 5418. I have to- I have to go out for a while, and someone should sit with her.”

“I’m on my way,” said Nelson.

What kind of life had that poor fuck been living, caught between Murdock and Karen? He was probably used to being summoned to the hospital at the drop of a hat.

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The explanations took longer than Frank would have liked. “But- but why didn’t she tell me?” Nelson asked, sinking down into the chair by Karen’s bed. “We’re friends, and after- after Matt I figured.”

“That’s between the two of you,” said Frank, tapping his fingers against his thigh. “But I’ll tell you she’s torn up about it.”

“Where are you going?” asked Nelson when Frank headed for the door.

“Why do you care?” asked Frank.

Nelson pointed at Karen. “Because she will.”

It landed like a punch to the gut, stealing his breath and sanity all at once. Why couldn’t Karen love a man like this? Stable fucking job, good attitude, and attuned to what she needed? But no, Karen Page had to go and fall in love with him.
He took a deep breath. “The doc said she might get to go home tomorrow. I wanted to clean things up before she’s discharged, okay?”

“Yeah,” said Nelson. “Good.”

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He hadn’t lied. He was going to clean things up: namely, he was going to take out every last member of that trafficking ring he could find. One of them had been the one to take the picture of Karen, and that meant they knew where she lived, and that meant it wasn’t safe.

Maybe if it had been something else (or someone else) he could have convinced himself to wait and give Mahoney a chance to do this all legally. But it wasn’t someone else, and he didn’t have time to let the system do its inefficient work.

It was fully dark when he made it to the rooftop across from the trafficking bar. He was in a balaclava and flak vest and heavy boots. Suddenly not being recognized mattered: he’d be useless if he was ID’d. He needed to be able to take care of Karen, and he couldn’t do that if he was hiding from the NYPD again. Slowly men began to filter, in ones and twos, into the club.

Frank climbed down from the roof and crossed around to the back of the club. If he was a modern slaver, that’s where he would take the girls in and out. All he needed to do was wait. Sure enough, twenty minutes later the door opened and someone in dark slacks slipped out. Frank shot them before the door swung closed.

He used the body to prop the door open, checked the silencers on his Sigs, and crept into the building. He was in some kind of shallow staging area, and through the door across from him he could hear the murmur of male voices. Maybe it was one of those private auction nights- all the better. If he could take out some of New York City’s most abusive pimps, that was all the better.

He had twenty nine shots left.

The asshole up on the ‘stage’ went down first, and from there- jesus he’d missed this, the mindless movement and calculation and rage. It was all cool clarity now, just precision and efficiency and the heady, metallic smell of blood. Part of Frank, the bit that he’d tried to keep chained up for his entire goddamn life, rejoiced.
One shot, one kill. The bastards hadn’t been prepared, and only one of them had managed to pull their own weapon before Frank had taken him down.

He’d left Martin alive, sprawled on the floor with blood running out of a hole in his shoulder.

“Where are the girls?” he asked.

Martin spit at him, his face white with pain and rage. Frank shrugged and shot him in the foot. He could feel the bass from the club up front rattling through the soles of his boots.

“The girls,” he repeated.

~~~

They were in a box truck out back, parked in an alley about a block from the club. The Smith & Wesson in Frank’s shoulder holster made short work of the lock, and this close he could hear the muffled screams from inside.

As he rolled up the door a heeled foot kicked out, catching him in the chest.

“Hey! Hey, it’s okay!” He put the gun back in the holster and held up his hands, scanning the six women in the back of the truck. All of them had duct tape over their mouths and wrapped around their wrists. They were all dress- inappropriately for the weather.

“Hey is it time- who the fuck are you?”

Some asshole that smelled like cigarettes came around the back of the truck, and Frank shot him in the thigh.

“Where’d they come from?” he demanded, planting a boot on one of the man’s hands and grinding it against the asphalt. “You drive ‘em?”
“Florida, man,” the driver gibbered. “I brought ‘em up from Florida and after they were done with them over on 35th Street I drove them here!”

A couple of the women were crying.

“Where on 35th?” asked Frank.

“An old warehouse! It has a big fish painted on the side!”

When he had the answer, he put a bullet in the drive’s brain. Then he put the gun away again.

“I’m not with them,” he said slowly. The woman who’d kicked him spoke to the two closest to her in Spanish. “If you wait here, I’ll walk you to the police station, okay? But first I have to- take care of some things.”

The woman who had been translating nodded and held out her wrists. Frank cut her loose, and then handed her the knife, watching as she freed the other women.

These fucks. *Women* was generous for the two in the back- they didn’t look any older than Leo.

When he was handed his knife back he nodded and headed for 35th Street.

~~~

The fucks in the warehouse had been watching television when Frank walked in. The first two went down easy, still on the ancient old couch where they’d been. The last tried to run, and Frank put a bullet through the back of his knee.

“The other sites,” he said. “Where are they?”

The man glared up at Frank. “I die either way,” he said. “Fuck you.”
“Yeah, you die either way,” said Frank. “But there are a lotta ways to go.”

Torture was a dance. The body shut down from too much stimulation, and that was the opposite of what Frank wanted. What you aimed for was a balance of recovery and sharp, unpredictable pain. The human body could take a helluva lot- it was the mind that you had to get on board.

While his new friend bled and whimpered in the chair, Frank poked around the warehouse. It was set up like a cheap kennel- mattresses on the floor, heavy bolts in the wall, a couple communal showers. Yeah- death was too easy on the first ones he’d shot.

It turned out bolt cutters were what got to the scum that Frank had left alive. Two fingertips in he seemed to realize just how many things Frank could snip.

“There’s a warehouse in Staten Island!”

“And where did the girls come from?” asked Frank.

“Look, there’s this place outside Florida City, okay? The *Muerte Tranquila* moved in, it’s-”

Frank decided he could spare a bullet, and shot the bastard in the dick before putting one in his skull. It was going to be a long fucking night.

(It *was* a long night, and he ended it by going to Karen’s apartment and cleaning up: both the apartment and himself. Washing the sheets, scrubbing out the sinks, emptying the weird, half-rotten vegetables and takeout she had in her fridge. He hadn’t told Nelson a lie.)

~~~

Karen woke up as light started to creep in through the hospital window. Her day nurse was fiddling with the heart monitor, and she smiled at Karen when she turned. Frank was asleep in the cot next to her bed, one arm hanging over the edge towards her.

The nurse put a finger to her lips, the widely acknowledged signal for quiet and willing conspiracy. Karen nodded, and when she tried to smile her face hurt.
Really, her everything hurt.

When the nurse checked her leg, Karen finally got a look- at least one that she’d remember. The skin was visibly purple where the bandage was the thinnest, and she felt a little light headed just looking at it.

“Nice and clean. No bleeding today,” whispered the nurse. “We’re planning on removing your IV and catheter later this morning. Once you have breakfast and use the restroom normally and everything still looks okay, we’ll start your discharge paperwork. Your boyfriend is going to stay with you at home, right?”

*Boyfriend?* It was such a completely incongruous title for Frank that it took Karen a minute to figure out who the nurse was talking about.

“Right,” said Frank from behind her, his voice thick with sleep.

“I’ll be back in about an hour,” said the nurse, and then she was gone, leaving Frank and Karen alone in the growing morning light.

“Go back to sleep,” said Karen. “I’m okay.”

“I’m up,” said Frank, rubbing the heel of his hand against his eyes.

Karen looked him over. Bruised knuckles, clean jeans and flannel shirt, dark circles under his eyes. “You look like shit,” she told him. “How long had you been up?”

“A while,” he said. “And ma’am, you’re one to talk.”

Karen gingerly raised a hand and probed at her face. Her left eye was swollen and hot the the touch, and the rest of her face just hurt. “Yeah, I bet,” she said. “I don’t- was Foggy here?”

“Yesterday,” said Frank. “I had to go out and clean up.”
Karen ran through her memories of that night in the Chatham barn. It all started getting hazy around the time she’d uncuffed Frank. “Did you get stitched up?” she asked. It felt like her lips were so dry they’d crack open just from breathing.

“Yeah,” he said. He tugged the cot over a few more feet and took her hand. “I’m so fucking sorry,” he said. “I should have-”

He looked so hangdog. Gone was the half-furious and half -shamed look that was so typical to him. This was one hundred percent devastation

“You couldn’t have known,” said Karen, letting her head fall back onto the pillow. “And it was my shit. Not yours.” The pain medication the nurse had given her overnight was wearing off, and all her wounds were starting to beat in time with the heart monitor.

“I’m pretty sure Russo was my shit to clean up,” said Frank, pressing a kiss to the back of her hand.

“They piggybacked,” said Karen.

Frank took a deep breath. “There’s something else,” he said, and Karen’s stomach dropped. She’d told him that she loved him- she knew that much- and now he was going to throw it back in her face.

“I- ah. I took care of the traffickers last night.”

Oh- there he was. There was the defiant and angry and scared Frank Castle that she’d learned to associate with situations like these. “By cleaned up, you mean…”

“Permanently removed the threat,” he said, his eyes steady on hers. He always did this, he always wanted to her to look at the worst of what he did. She understood it: he was waiting for her to say, “Now this, this is enough. This is what makes me stop loving you.”

The thing was, they’d already been there. It was maybe the fourth time they’d been alone together and she’d shouted that he was dead to her. Everything else… everything else came after.
“Why?” That was the question that mattered.

“Because they had seventeen girls on the move last night, and fuck, Karen, they knew where you lived. Some of them had to know you’d been investigating them, and Christ, Mahoney’s too by-the-books for this shit- he’d have gone in one at a time, and taken down the one bar, sure. Then by the time he’d interrogated the fucks and moved onto the next place they’d have been gone.”

It was true, and she knew it. “So- so this wasn’t some stress-relief coping mechanism?” she asked quietly, her fingers hanging onto Frank’s so tight it nearly hurt.

He scoffed, rolling his eyes and looking away. “You think it’s fun for me? Doing that?”

“Maybe not fun, but I was sitting there when you announced to a courtroom full of people that you liked it.”

For a second Frank’s expression didn’t change, and then he cracked a smile and pressed another kiss to her fingers. “Yeah, guess I did say that. No, this was- this was loose ends, Karen.”

~~~

She flipped the news on when the nurses came back and Frank stepped out. She’d hoped it would be a distraction from the discomforts and humiliation of IV and catheter removal, and she had to admit, it worked.

“Last night forty three men were killed in five different locations. All of the deceased had ties to crime syndicates involved with human trafficking, drug running, and prostitution. Even more astounding, seventeen women reported to three different precincts, all of them talking about a man in black who saved them. For more on this story, we’re going live to Britney Morris at the Manhattan precinct…”

When the nurses were done Karen swallowed a pain pill and antibiotics and then sat quietly, thinking. She told Matt once (another pang, this one regret) that she sort-of agreed with what Castle did. Matt had been horrified, and it had been the start of them gently falling apart: she’d fallen off the pedestal where he wanted her to stay, and he’d been more rigid than she’d wanted.

She asked herself again: did she really agree with Frank? Did she truly think that there were men
who needed killing?

She thought of Martin’s face from the trafficking club. She thought of Russo and Wesley.

Yeah- she really did.

Chapter End Notes

I really, really love Frank Castle. It's a little disturbing.

Also it's been brought to my attention that you guys might want more stuff in this 'verse? I don't have the energy for another long fic in me right now, but I might write some interlude pieces, like the gang hanging out in the gym, or little vignettes from Frank and Karen's life. Should I string them together with the series function?

Anyway, if you're reading this, thank you <3
A Brutal Lesson in Love

Chapter Notes

So. This is the chapter that I wrote and reworked and refined until I couldn't make it any better. (Aside from spelling mistakes which are an eternal thorn in my side.) I hope you guys like this chapter as much as I do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Once upon a time Karen had been marched into Ben’s old car at gunpoint. She’d been out in the suburbs, no one had known where she’d gone, and she had been pretty sure that that was the night she was going to die.

And then Shining Star had blared out of the cassette player.

It hadn’t taken her more than a second to figure it out, and her trembling had gone from fear-fueled adrenaline to relief. Frank was around somewhere. Frank knew what was going on. And if the worst happened, well, Frank would probably make sure she at least got a funeral.

Once again, the divine or Frank or the world’s own sick sense of humor decided to send her a message via car radio.

The nurses helped her shower while still keeping her leg up, and it was worth the embarrassment to finally feel her scalp clean and oil-free again. Frank brought her clothes from home, she signed a million forms, and then she was a free woman. A mostly bruised, free woman. They wheeled her out the door, Frank lifted her up into his truck (her ribs screaming the whole way) and then they were off.

“You doing okay?” Frank asked as they merged into traffic and slowly made their way towards her place.

“Just great,” said Karen, focusing on the fact that soon she’d be in her own bed. They hadn’t had a chance to talk since Frank had told her about killing forty some people overnight, and she hadn’t had a chance to tell him that if she could condone the killing of one or two people, she had to live with all of it. She didn’t get to pick and choose.
It was going to infuriate him. He was going to have to live with it.

Something was playing softly on the radio, blending with all the unsaid things that hung between them, and then a twangy, unmistakable guitar riff filled the cab of the truck. Seemingly without thinking about it, Frank leaned over to turn the radio up, and she remembered how he’d looked the last time they’d done this: in a dark windbreaker and hat that had matched the navy and purple bruises covering his face from forehead to jaw.

Well, she looked like that this time- keeping the tradition alive, she guessed.

They were stopped at a light, and people were hurrying by in the crosswalk, heads down and collars turned up, and then-

And then Karen was in the car with Frank Castle, a man who was legally dead, and Stayin’ Alive was playing on the radio.

It turned out Frank knew every word.

At first he bobbed his head a little, all casual, and even Karen found herself tapping her fingers in time with the beat.

And now it's alright, it's okay; and you may look the other way

We can try to understand; The New York Times' effect on man...

When she met Frank’s eyes he grinned, his eyes getting those goddamn crinkles in the corners, and they both just laughed. She was Karen Page, the unmasked, unarmed vigilante of Hell's Kitchen, the one who took down criminals with a word processor and pure grit. He was Frank Castle, the man who’d outlived everyone he’d loved; who had died more times than any one person should.

They were whole. They were alive. And they were going home.

“Ah, fuck,” said Karen, smiling and gasping and blinking back tears as she held her bruised ribs. “Hurts.”
The light changed, and Frank reached over to twine his fingers with hers. “I know,” he said. “I know it does, but fuck- it’s good to see you smile.”

~~~

Karen had been injured before. She’d fractured her arm falling out of a tree when she was six, and when she was twelve she’d had strep-throat so badly she’d nearly ended up with scarlet fever. As an adult she’d had her share of stomach bugs and summer viruses, but this-

This was a lesson in intimacy, pain, and vulnerability. If she was a more philosophic kind of girl, she’d say it was a brutal lesson in love.

She slept most of the first couple days. Frank was around (when she pried it out of him he said he’d lost his construction job for not showing up), and he shuffled her into the bathroom and brought her food he’d cooked himself and refused to sleep next to her in the bed. He wouldn’t budge, and by day three at home Karen felt needy and dirty and embarrassed and pissed. She was mad at the whole fucking world, because you were supposed to have eighty-odd years to get used to the idea of needing such invasive help.

She needed space, and thank any god that might be listening, she got some.

“You okay tonight?” asked Frank, standing to take their bowls back to the sink.

“Yeah,” said Karen. “Just took one of my pills, so you know me. I’ll probably pass out on the couch and abandon you to the television again.”

“ Doesn’t bother me,” said Frank, filling the sink with water. “You know I don’t mind quiet.

Karen did. They still hadn’t talked, hadn’t really talked since she told him she loved him and he’d told her that he’d murdered forty three people.

“You thinking of going back to your apartment?” she asked, trying to feign casualness.

His shoulders stiffened. “No,” he said, stiffly. “Just give it some time, Karen. I’ll be out of your hair
“No I- I’m not trying to get rid of you,” said Karen, giving in and closing her eyes. “I like you being here. I should have asked why you were going out.”

“Oh,” said Frank. She could hear him resume dishwashing. “I- Curtis has been on me about going back to group now that you’re at home and doing okay. It’s in Brooklyn, so it’s kind of-”

“Jesus,” said Karen, snapping her eyes open and leaning forward and then regretting it. “Of course you should go. He’s the one who set you up with the gym, right?”

“Yeah,” said Frank, carefully stacking a pot in the drying rack.

“You should go tomorrow,” said Karen, legitimately relieved. “I’ve been feeling so… guilty for having you holed up in here with me. There’s no reason we should both be miserable.”

Frank hung up the dish towel and walked back into the den, his shoulders swaying in the slow swagger that was Frank Castle at ease. He dropped down to his haunches by the couch, cupped her chin, and turned her to face him.

“I am not miserable with you,” he said, precisely enunciating every word. “I have never been miserable with you, and it’s kept me up at night. You’d- you came to see me in prison and I didn’t care that I was in there because you were throwing my bullshit right back at me; you were making jokes and smiling at me like I wasn’t some kind of monster. I used you as bait, and it was one of the best nights I’d had in months.”

He looked away from her, a muscle in his jaw working as he ground his teeth and looked for words.

“I- When Lisa was about one I came home on leave. Hadn’t seen my wife in months, had missed my daughter’s first steps. We did the family thing for a few days, and then took Lisa to her grandma’s house and rented a hotel room upstate. We didn’t have plans-”

-Karen had to check to see if Frank was blushing, because if that happened the world really definitely would be ending-
“But Maria ended up with the stomach flu. We spent a long weekend in that fucking hotel eating room service and watching crap TV and talking about all the stuff that had happened to us, you know? All the stuff I’d missed, and all the things I’d been worried about while I was away. We used to talk about it, later. She’d say, “Shit, I think I’m coming down with something,” and I’d say, “Should I get a room?” because-

“I dunno. It gave us a chance to talk. It was better than what we’d had planned, honestly. And you and I, we ain’t been talking much because you’ve been sleeping and jesus, I’ve had broken ribs, and if you can sleep through the worst of it fucking do. God. I just want you to know: I’m not ever miserable spending time with you.”

Karen reached out and ran her fingers down the curve of Frank’s cheekbone, not quite trusting herself to talk yet. “I’m sorry. I’m - go to group,” she said.

His eyes narrowed, and she knew what the follow-up question would be.

“Go to group, and I’ll figure out my thoughts and get them all neat and tidy, all right? And then when you get-” She almost said home- “When you get back, we’ll talk. Okay?” I love you.

“Fair enough,” said Frank. He rose and bent close, close enough that Karen could feel his warm breath on her skin, and kissed her on the cheek.

“Happy thinking,” he said as he shrugged into his coat.

“Be safe,” she called to him as the door closed.


~~~

It was a little scary how important group had become to Frank. In a world that kept shifting and reforming like sand grains on a beach, it had become a kind of touchstone, a continuity point. Curtis tied together Frank’s past and and present, and the group spun around Curtis like planets around the sun.
“I told my girl,” he said. “She gets it, as much as she can. If feels good, sometimes, to just have everything out in the open.”

“That’s why I was able to come back,” said Danny. A few of the guys looked away, but not Curtis and Frank. It was fucked up if people thought they would be able to ignore this. If Karen were here she’d tell them that it was some kind of- of male privilege to pretend it didn’t happen. (His girl was rubbing off on him.)

“I just needed you to know,” Danny continued.

“What about the rest of you?” Curtis asked. “You open up about anything recently?”

A couple guys murmured ‘no’, but Evans spoke up. “I asked my boss if I could move into the empty office. It’s quieter down there, and I can have my back to the wall and- well, it’s good. I’m glad I did it.”

“Good. I know we don’t always have a lot of control over our environments, but owning what you can- that’s really good.”

Frank held off his confession until most of the others had filtered out.

“Russo’s dead. Really gone, this time.”

“I didn’t know he was a threat,” said Curtis evenly, carrying the insulated coffee dispenser into the tiny kitchenette to rinse it.

“Look, he-” How did Frank explain all of this to Curtis, all at once? “Alright,” he said, stubbing the toe of his boot into the floor and scuffing, like he was putting out an invisible cigarette. “There’s this girl.”

“I knew it,” said Curtis, shaking his head and leaving the thermique upside-down to dry. “I fucking knew there was a girl. You’ve always been a romantic, Frank.”

“Yeah, well. We met back at my trial-”
“Your girl is Karen Page?” Curtis asked, his head whipping around.

“You know her?”

“At least half the city knows her. Every few weeks she breaks some story open that sends everything into a tailspin. She’s a shit magnet, just like you.”

“Yeah,” said Frank. She’s nothing like me. “Billy- he got out, and he started fucking with Karen to get to me, and - it’s done. Madani came in and helped clean it up, and it’s better. Karen got banged up, so I need to get back. I’ve been staying with her. That’s why I missed meetings.”

“You should bring her over sometime,” said Curtis. “We can grab dinner.”

“Yeah? This like the grown-man version of ‘meet the parents’?”

“Maybe,” said Curtis. Frank turned to go, and he started up the stairs

Curtis called, “Hey! I’m happy for you, man.”

“Thanks,” Frank called back. If he didn’t watch it, Frank might end up happy, too.

~~~

Karen wasn’t on the couch where she was supposed to be when Frank walked back in. The TV was still going, and nothing looked like it had been disturbed, but this wasn’t right, she couldn’t get around yet, not even with crutches.

“Karen?” he called, stepping into her dark bedroom with his gun down by his side. The light was on in the bathroom, and the door was cracked, and she hadn’t answered. “Kare?” he called again, nudging the door open with his foot.
“’M in here,” she said from the tub.

Her back was to him, so he wasn’t seeing anything scandalous—just the bare curve of her shoulder, a lot of wet, tangled hair, and the length of her calf resting on the side of the tub.

“The hell are you doing?” Frank asked, still in the doorway, still transfixed by the pale skin over her shoulder blade.

“Washing. Well, I was washing, but now I’m just kind of sitting here.”

“You could have fucking drowned,” said Frank. *Stupid, stubborn, sneaky, brass-balled woman.*

It served him right. If he was going to get saddled with taking care of anyone, it might as well be someone just as pig-headed as he was. Some kind of karmic fate or shit.

“Nope, couldn’t have drowned,” said Karen. She hadn’t turned to look at him, but then the torque would be murder on her ribs. “I let the water out.”

“So you’re just, what? Air drying like an asshole?” *Get it together, Castle,* he told himself. “I would have fucking helped you if you’d just asked, goddammit.”

Her head turned away, looking at the wall to their left, and the dark strands of her hair slithered after her. “Well, that’s the thing, Frank,” she said softly. “That’s the thing I was thinking about. This is—”

She stopped talking but didn’t move, and from this angle Frank couldn’t see her chest rising or falling or her pulse fluttering in her throat. He couldn’t see any movement at all.

“I’ve never been married. I’ve never lived with a partner. It’s… it’s been me, on my own, for over a decade. Keeping stuff to myself… it’s second nature.”

She shivered, and Frank remembered that she was wet and naked and he was a dick, because of course she was cold.
“Let’s get you out of the tub, okay?” he said. He had a feeling he knew where this was going, anyway. She tugged her leg back into the tub and curled in on herself, all pale and damp and angry. He did his best not to look, and mostly succeeded.

When she was perched on the edge of the bathroom counter he passed her a towel, which she immediately drew over herself. He could see the length of her back reflected in the mirror: her vertebrae marched down the smooth expanse like soldiers, looking far too delicate for the steel he knew they hid.

“Did you grab clothes before you tried this stunt?” he asked. He wasn’t mad anymore. He’d have probably done something similar, except he’d have drug himself back to his own place, first.

“No,” she said, as belligerent as anyone he’d ever met, including toddlers and fellow Marines.

He went to her dresser and pulled out the set of pajamas that were on top in the middle drawer. They were plaid flannel, matching and faded and washed soft. She still didn’t look him in the face as he tugged the baggy pants up over her knees, and they both ignored the way her breasts pressed to his now-damp chest when she stood on one leg to get them up over her hips.

The shirt didn’t have to go on over her head, god bless it, which meant she could do it herself.

He stripped his own shirt off before he carried her to bed, not wanting to get her clean, dry clothes damp all over again. She scrabbled on her bedside table for her comb while he pulled a clean thermal shirt out of his bag and on over his head.

Karen was combing out that long, reddish-blond hair when he sat down on the bed beside her. She still kept her face tilted away, and it looked like he was going to have to be the one to say something. He could live with that: he was used to being sent in first. That’s what the Marines did as a group (first in, last out), and it’s what he did as a person.

“Can’t lie and say I hadn’t thought about you naked, but I can tell you I didn’t think it would happen like this.” It wasn’t a joke, and he didn’t say it lightly. It was just- the way things were.

Karen huffed out some noise of surprise or consternation.

“Yeah,” she said. “I can’t fucking believe it either. First guy to see me naked in three years, and it’s
when I look like post-match Rocky.”

“He won the fight though,” said Frank. He decided not to ask about the celibacy, but stored that tidbit away for later. It sounded like she hadn’t been laid for even longer than him.

“That’s basically it,” she said quietly, the comb making a silky little noise as she carefully drug it, one handed, through her hair. “I just- ah, fuck it.”

What did it say about him that he kind of liked hearing her curse?

“I’m not prepared for this kind of intimacy. I don’t know if I like it. It’s one thing to be, you know, naked with someone and having sex, right? It’s… the point, I guess. The context is sexy. This is- it’s just humiliating.”

There were a lot of ways he could take that. If he wanted he could interpret her discomfort as something unique to his presence, but he knew that wasn’t it. This didn’t have anything to do with her being somehow ashamed by, what, having a killer play nursemaid to her? No. Fuck that. This was systematic. That was the bullshit that was unique to Karen Page.

“Yeah, I get it,” he said finally. “It’s weird. Maria and I did the same thing, ‘cept when we moved in together she was almost four months pregnant. She was fucking- I don’t know- self conscious, nauseated or horny, crying over commercials for that flea stuff to put on dogs. She was a wreck, and I was twenty-two; still wet behind the fucking ears. It’s just- it’s bodies, you know? We all have one. They don’t freak me out.”

“I bet they don’t,” grumbled Karen darkly, and that did make him laugh. Nah, this girl wasn’t going to put up with his shit, and he wasn’t going to take hers.

“Look, when we met you kicked my ass. You threw all my crap right back in my face and told me to get over myself and try harder, even if it was just so I could get answers about Maria and the kids. You were fucking right, and I did it.

“I guess now it’s my turn to tell you to get over your bullshit, Karen. You don’t get to tell me you love me and then bitch that we’re what, too close for comfort? You’ll let me sit in your bed but you don’t like that I’ve been washing a few fucking dishes? It’s a package fucking deal.”

“It’s not fair to you,” said Karen, the comb held loosely in her lap. She was still turned slightly away
from him, and in profile he could only see the side of her face that was bruised in every color of pain. She was still fucking perfect.

“Yeah, it isn’t fair,” said Frank, fighting the impulse to tug her into his lap. “That’s fucking life. Being with someone- loving someone- it’s never fair. You always think they’re giving you more than you give back, and you spend your whole life trying to make that up to them. And the craziest shit is that they’re doing the exact same thing for you.”

Without looking at him Karen scooted back across the bed until her hip was against his own. It was the easiest, scariest thing in the world to pull her back against chest, his legs bracketing hers. Frank thought he could fall asleep just like this; soothed by the steady rise and fall of her lungs expanding against his own.

“I remember, you know,” said Karen, and Frank could feel her relax against him a little more. He couldn’t have stopped himself from running his fingers through her hair for all the money in the world.

“Remember what?”

“How you looked when I said I loved you.”

Her sentence hung between them, both of them frozen in place, Frank’s fingers snagged on a snarl of her damp hair.

He didn’t have to ask how he’d looked to her. He’d felt the emotions run over his face.

“That was the most scared I’ve ever seen you,” said Karen. “Pain, death, prison- none of those fazed you at all, but someone loving you- you looked so scared.”

“They were taking you away into surgery,” said Frank, buying himself some time.

“Yeah,” she said. “I know. But it wasn’t that.”

“It’s-” He closed his eyes and buried his face in the curve of her shoulder, in that sweet-smelling
hollow of her neck. “Yeah, I don’t- It’s too fucking huge, okay? It’s not you loving me that scares me, even though I wish you’d love Nelson for you own fucking sake. It’s having something to lose, you know? What if I can’t keep you safe.”

As she took in a breath he added, “And don’t even fucking say it.”

Karen snorted. “Alright,” she said. “But I’m not so afraid of losing something that I’m not going to try for it.”

“Fair enough,” said Frank. He knew better than to argue with Karen by now. She’d nod and argue and make perfectly reasonable arguments and then go off and do her own thing anyway. Frank wasn’t the smartest guy around, but he knew better than to try to fight the tide.

He held her until she fell asleep with a little furrow between her brows. He’d spied on her enough to know she was a side-sleeper, and between her ribs and her leg that cozy, curled position was off-limits.

He held her until she slept, and then he held her some more, waiting for REM sleep to take her under. Frank wondered what she dreamed.

When she was well and truly out he slunk out from behind her, lowered her head to the pillow, and covered her with a blanket. Then he put on his boots and coat, took her keys, and left.

~~~

Maria’s grave was at the top of a slight hill. He’d always found it interesting that here, in this sprawling jungle of cement and steel, half the green spaces were reserved for the dead. It was some kind of reminder, that shit Lieberman had mentioned. People could build shit as high as they liked; they could live halfway to the sky, but when they died they went right back into the ground. Dust to dust and all that.

His kids’ headstones were on either side of Maria’s. He was happy for that; neither of them had to face whatever death brought alone.

“Sorry I’ve been gone,” he said to the grass. There was less light pollution here; the cemetery a darker shadow in the city of half-light and dingy darkness. “It’s been-”
He’d been able to skype home on deployments. Usually the kids chattered to him first, holding up school projects or a book they’d been reading or showing him the gummy spot where a baby tooth had been. After they’d been shooed away he’d been able to talk to Maria, only sometimes they didn’t talk.

Sometimes they’d looked at each other, murmuring, I miss you over and over like Hail Marys, like those miss you, miss you toos, were their only prayers.

Sometimes that was all they’d had left when the anger and loneliness and despair had been too much. They’d told the only truths they could bring themselves to say.

“I’m- There’s a girl, Maria.” It felt almost sacrilegious to tell her this, but he also knew she’d understand. She’d been his best friend in so many varied ways, and besides- he’d listened to her compliment that Hemsworth asshole enough for a lifetime.

“Her name is Karen. She’s so smart, and brave. She doesn’t put up with shit, not from anybody, and that scares the piss outta me. She’s in the shit with me. She’s in the shit with me and I like it, and that feels so fucking wrong. If she’s there with me, that means she’s gonna end bloody too, and if that happens-”

He slammed his fist into the dirt by his hip, his eyes screwed tightly shut. Frank took a couple deep breaths and then pushed on, because this was important and Maria deserved to know. He’d always been able to take a little pain.

“She loves me, Maria. And I know if you were here-” and that was a thought he couldn’t think in the context of this situation. “You’d have liked her,” he finished lamely. “And Maria-”

He took a deep, rattling breath, the air shuddering between his teeth. “I didn’t think I’d love anyone. I was a one-woman man; past, present, future, you know? I don’t love you any fucking less, and- I haven’t told her yet. Had to tell you first. Get your blessing, kind of thing.”

He looked at the little drifts of slushy snow that had survived in the shadowed space behind each gravestone, sucking in cold, sharp air.

“I haven’t told her yet. We kinda do everything backwards. She broke some kind of law for me before we’d even been properly introduced.”
He paused like he was waiting for a response.

“Yeah, that should have been my first fucking clue,” he said with a quirked smile, remembering the way Karen’s cheeks had flushed when he’d been ready to face the electric chair.

“I just—” he was whispering now, his breath puffing out in quick-fading silver clouds of vapor and wishes. “Maria, I’m so fucking scared. I didn’t have the sense god gave a flea when we got together. I didn’t know I was supposed to be scared. But with this girl—she isn’t safe, baby. She could get taken from me just like you were, and. I’m not going to be able to keep her safe.”

The background buzz of the city rumbled on, and it was almost a comfort to Frank. All his problems, they were fucking small-fry. This city would go on with or without him, the same loud, dirty, brassy, unstoppable force that it had always been. He wondered if Murdock had ever been comforted by the same thing.

Frank wondered if that’s what called sailors to the sea. Maybe there was just something in the blood.

He looked back at the shine in the dark that was the granite of Maria’s marker. “I- Karen told me that she wasn’t so afraid of losing me that she wasn’t going to try. Guess that’s what it comes down to, for us. It’s all probably going to go to shit, but we may as well try.”

He huffed out a sigh and scraped his palm over his stubble-rough face. “And that’s the bitch of it all. She makes me want to try, Maria. Hope you don’t mind waiting for me a little longer.”

When he stood his knees popped and his back ached, and yeah maybe he should start acting like he wanted to see fifty.

He went to Lisa’s little headstone first. He pressed his first two fingers to his lips and then pressed the kiss to her name- his little baby, the one that had changed his whole fucking world. He’d have burnt it down for her. (He almost did.)

He did the same to Frankie’s stone; the bright-eyed kid that had to have been proof that karma existed.
And then he kissed the center of his palm, held his fingers closed for a moment, and splayed his hand over the cold, hard rock of Maria’s headstone. “I’ll be back,” he told her. “Don’t get into too much trouble.”

He’d told her that, every single time. *I love you. Don’t get into too much trouble while I’m gone.*

She’d smile and laugh, knowing he was the problem child.

As Frank walked away, he thought the wind whispered, *I love you too.* The rumble of the passing train told him, *Be safe.*

If the city wanted to talk to him in the voice of his dead wife, he’d fucking take it. After all the other shit he’d seen, this didn’t even rank on the weird-o-meter.

Nah. Top of that list was being loved by a snarky, leggy blonde.

Chapter End Notes

These fools are so in love I just CANNOT. Can you see why this is my favorite chapter?

If any of you are on tumblr, you should look at this gorgeous edit Brooke made! She’s also writing one of my favorite Kastle WIPs, which I hope you’re all reading. It’s a smutty apocalypse AU and I’m not sure what more information you'd need.

As for this fic, welp, we’re just about done. I want to let you guys know that I have a work trip to another state on Wednesday, so I’ll be posting the final chapter next Sunday. I just won't be in a place to physically or emotionally process that this story is over after 6 hours in the car!

Thank you to all who are reading and supporting this story! I truly think that art is something that's meant to be shared, and you guys have been the MOST welcoming. <3 Hearts for days.
Two weeks after Karen got home from the hospital the bruises on her face had faded to a green pale enough that she could cover them with makeup. She summoned Ellison (blackmailed would have been more accurate) and badgered him into letting her work from home.

“Puff pieces only,” he said, pointing a finger at her. He wasn’t playing this time; there was no gleam in his eyes.

“Fine,” said Karen, as close to meek as she could get. “After I write up what happened.”

“Old news,” said Ellison with a shrug. “We don’t sell olds.”

“Yeah, but not the first-person eyewitness account,” said Karen. “You can ask that hospital- I was there a few days before Russo’s death.”

“You-” Ellison threw up his hands and cursed in Yiddish. It poured over Karen like a wave, all cold, clean salt. “You knew, and you didn’t tell me.”

“I was tracking leads,” said Karen. Sort of.

Ellison sat heavily in her old wingback chair. “Karen- you can’t do this again. I need to know, I have to know what’s going on, so that next time I have to call all the hospitals, I can at least then alert the police.”

“Yeah, you’re so sure there’ll be the next time,” said Karen lightly.

“There will be,” said Ellison grimly. “And you and I both know the insurance plan at the Bulletin
isn’t that good.”

Karen shrugged. It still hurt.

“I’ve already talked to a Homeland agent,” she told him. “My source is good. Really good.”

The byline got him.

“Fine,” he snapped. “Blow me off. But after this article you’re on fluff pieces and pre-recorded interviews until I can forget what those bruises looked like.”

She hadn’t known Ellison cared, not that much. She’d been his news-getter, the one who’d run after the newsmakers. It hadn’t been personal— she didn’t think it had been personal. She sent him cookies, and a top-shelf bottle of scotch. He didn’t let her off the puff.

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Frank started going to the gym again. He brought home takeout and Jess and Trish, and they all got a little buzzed on honey whiskey. They teased her and Frank for being an old married couple, and when Karen looked at Frank, ready to see panic in his eyes, she saw only quiet amusement.

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Four weeks after the nightmare in Fagan Corners she was allowed to crutch around, which made absolutely no one happy. New Yorkers hate nothing more than a sidewalk block, and that’s what the dictionary definition of the word “crutch” should be. But Karen went out anyway, because she’d been trapped in her apartment for way too long.

They met Frank’s friend Curtis for sushi, and Frank good-naturedly took an hour of them ribbing him about watching nature documentaries and reading thriller novels like an old man.

“Yeah?” he said, using chopsticks like a pro (like a New Yorker). “Well, ain’t like I claimed to be anything different.”
Five weeks after Russo, Karen got Frank a job.

“What are we living off?” Karen asked as Frank walked in with a canvas bag of groceries.

“Air, food, water,” said Frank, unloading the bag onto the counter.

“No, I mean- I know I got a couple weeks of sick leave from the Bulletin, but you’ve been paying for most of the groceries. And I- I think you’re still paying on your apartment?”

Frank looked shiftily at the little bag of lemons in his hand. “Uh- yeah. Wasn’t sure about- you know. You’ll be healed up soon.”

“I want you to stay, Frank,” she said. It wasn’t soft- he should know this. He’d been here this long.

“Okay,” he said, and it sounded like I love you.

He still hadn’t said it, and Karen wouldn’t push. Things had already been so good between them.

“I gotta get a job,” said Frank, continuing to put away chicken and vegetables and a bag of rice. “But shit, I think I’ve been blacklisted by the fucking builders. That’s twice Pete Castiglione has disappeared from a site.”

He grimaced, and Karen knew he regretted it. Frank Castle did the job, and he did the job right.

“You might as well know,” he said, closing the fridge and then dropping onto the couch beside her. “We’re living on ill-gotten gains.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.
“I- well, the scum in this city made a lot of money, right? And there was no point in letting the police take it in as evidence, so… yeah.”

“You robbed the drug dealers and cartel guys and thugs you killed?” asked Karen, a laugh wedged in her throat.

Frank looked over at her, all affronted dignity and dark eyes. “Wasn’t stealing if they were dead,” he mumbled.

Karen did laugh, and leaned over to kiss Frank on the cheek. “So you’re a rich man,” she said. Of course he was.

“Kinda?” said Frank, and she laughed again, and took his face in her hands and kissed him. It was so him, so logical and straightforward and totally without artifice.

It was the first time they’d kissed like this since the nightclub, only this time there weren’t any human traffickers watching over their shoulders and Karen knew that Frank wouldn’t immediately head out to wash the taste of her from his mouth.

He could kiss- thoroughly, deliberately, excellently. Just like he did everything else.

For all that they were the same height, his hands were so much bigger- she loved when he cradled her cheek. His hands were warm and calloused and devastatingly gentle. It was the gentleness that was keeping her up at night as she lay curled against him, hip to hip. Would all his touches be delicate, or… well. Karen wasn’t opposed to some bruises.

“What was I saying?” she asked when they pulled apart.

Frank snickered. “That good, huh?”

“It’s been a long time,” said Karen, flipping her hair. “You’ve been holding out on me, Castle.”
“Noted,” he told her. “I think we were talking about my lack of job.”

“And excess of money,” said Karen. “Right. I did a story on a guy- do you remember that kid, about a year ago? He was taken off the subway, and the family found him with an uncle in a cabin upstate?”

“Yeah,” said Frank. Karen could tell by the growl the uncle had been on his list.

“Well, he was tracked there by a woman named Georgia Hampstead. She does canine search and rescue and cadaver retrieval. She told me—” Georgia had told Karen about being deployed to New York City after 9/11. She’d told Karen was it was like to stand in the smoking rubble listening to all the whistling rescue badges of fallen first responders, all of the ones who had died trying to help. Georgia had said she still dreamed of those screaming badges.

“Anyway,” said Karen, breaking out of that memory. “She runs the training group out of New York, now. She also works with FEMA, they deploy her when there are earthquakes and stuff and need help finding survivors. She said it didn’t pay much.”

“Why do you think I’d be good at it?” asked Frank, his eyes steady on hers and ever so slightly narrowed. That was his thinking face. Karen wanted to press her lips to the little divet between his brows.

“You already have the field training,” she said. “Survival, first aid, land navigation. You like dogs, and honestly, I’m not convinced there’s anything you don’t do well.”

Frank grinned at her, once more a shit-eating super-Marine.

“I’d probably like it,” he said. “They looking for a recruit?”

“Probably,” said Karen. “She said it took about a year to get a team ready for field work.”

“Pfft,” said Frank. “That’s nothing.”

Karen called Georgia and set up the meeting. The two of them hit it off immediately, trying to top
each other with, “I’ve camped out in the shittiest conditions” stories. Karen was just happy that she didn’t have any to tell. Living in a house in Vermont had been plenty, thanks.

Frank started reading the papers and Craigslist looking for puppies. “I’d rather get a grown dog,” he said. “But Georgia said that since I’m new, a puppy would be easier. I won’t go purebred,” he said.

Karen had already been treated to a long lecture about the god-like hubris of in-breeding for specific traits.

“Just not a hound,” she said, going back to her article. “I can take anything but howling.”

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Six weeks after the fuck-up in the barn she was cleared to start physical therapy. Trish helped.

“He’s the best yogi in Manhattan,” she told Karen, guiding Karen through her sprawling and luxurious apartment.

“You have a home gym?” was Karen’s question.

“Yeah,” said Trish, oblivious. “Karen, this is Rafael. He’s licensed in physical therapy and yoga. Tai Chi, too, right?”

“Right,” said the tall, thin man in Trish’s fucking personal gym.

Those things didn’t sound too bad, right?

He kicked her ass.

“It gets easier,” said Trish sympathetically as Karen sprawled on her kitchen floor, enjoying the cool tile. She had a water bottle pressed to her forehead.
“Fucking hope so,” Karen gasped. Just the small stretches he’d had her do ached.

“I promise,” said Trish, given Karen a hug when she walked her to the door, sweat and all.

It was kind of nice, Karen decided as she staggered home. She hadn’t had girl friends in… too fucking long.

~~~

Karen didn’t have a chance to worry too much about Frank. One day he came home from the gym with his giant duffle and his boxes of clothes. Everything he owned fit into a sedan. It would have been sad, except that Frank was now officially living with her.

They made out on the couch to the background of Blue Planet that night, like teenagers reluctant to be separated. When she fell asleep on his chest he carried her to bed. Their bed.

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He told her he loved her on the Saturday before she went back to work in the office. They were laying on her bed in a pool of sunshine, the windows open to the false-spring day. It was just slightly too chilly to have the apartment opened up, but after the bleakness and the pain and the cold they were ready for any sign of warmth.

Karen was propped up on the pillows with Frank’s head resting on her stomach. She carded her fingers through his hair between page turns, and in the honey-gold light of a March afternoon she read out loud to him. They took turns picking the book and took turns reading, too, both claiming that the other did it better. It had become their routine in the quiet moments.

Today the book was one of Frank’s picks: that battered copy of Watchers by Dean Koontz, the one that he hadn’t known had a sex scene. He’d white knuckled his way through that particular chapter, to Karen’s secret glee.

“I thought of you as my guardian, Einstein.” Karen read. “That’s what I called you once, when you saved me. My guardian. You not only rescued me from that awful man- you also saved me from loneliness and terrible despair. And you saved Travis from the darkness within him, brought us together in a hundred other ways.”
“I love you,” said Frank quietly, with his head still on her belly as he twisted a lock of her hair through his fingers.

“What?” Karen whispered, the rhythm of her reading voice gone. The sun was in her eyes and the breeze was too cool on her skin, but that wasn’t why she had goosebumps. It wasn’t why her heart was pounding so hard that Frank could probably feel it.

He rolled up to lean over her, one hand on either side of her shoulders, his face inches from hers. “I love you,” he repeated. “I want you to know that.”

Like she didn’t already know. He broke her heart.

“I love you too,” she whispered.

The smile spread across his face like salvation: first in his eyes, widening a little in wonder—here they were, him and her, and they loved each other. Next came the little crinkles at the corners of his eyes, the ones he got when he grinned or winked or smirked. She’d kissed those crinkles, and laughed when his ears went red after. From there it was all laugh-lines and flashing teeth, and then that smile was pressed to her own, soft and hot and perfect.

He tasted like sunshine. He tasted like the future.

It was the book sliding onto the floor with a thump that reminded Karen that yes, despite her heroic restraint, there could be more done in a bed than kissing.

“Frank,” she said, pulling back for air.

He hmmed a response into the skin over her collarbone.

“Frank, I want you,” she told him, tightening her fingers in his hair.

“Okay,” he told her, sucking wet kisses over the top of her shoulder. She knew: his ‘Okay’ meant I
love you, too.

For a man who’d brought unprecedented and nigh apocalyptic levels of violence down on their city, he was aching deliberate and gentle. Slowly he undressed her, kissing the shivering skin he exposed, seemingly immune to her fluttering hands running over his arms and shoulders and chest.

“Been wanting you,” he told her, tugging her jeans down and off.

“You too,” she said, propping herself up on her elbows to watch him undress. His shirt was first as he toed off his boots, and then his jeans and briefs fell to the floor in one fell swoop.

“So fucking pretty,” he breathed into the skin of her belly as he crawled back between her legs, his skin hot against hers. “So fucking strong,” he murmured before taking her lips again.

“Frank-” Karen muttered, rolling her head back on the pillow as his rough cheek rasped against her jugular. It wasn’t a question or a statement, she didn’t want anything (because she wanted everything); his name on her lips was more of a prayer and expression of incredulous disbelief. How was this her life; how had they come through the storm for this? She was Karen Page, and things this good did not happen to her.

So she might as well enjoy it.

She shuddered when Frank tugged a nipple between his lips, worrying it to a berry-pink point.

“Wanna taste you,” he huffed into the undercurve of the opposite breast. “Been thinking about it. I wake up beside you and wanna crawl under the covers and put my mouth on you.”

Karen whimpered, feeling her belly muscles go tight and her core go loose and hot. “Yes please,” she managed, her voice high and breathy.

“Yeah, now you go all polite,” Frank smirked, dragging his teeth over the crest of Karen’s hipbone. “Scooch up on the bed.”

She did, pushing herself backwards, entranced by Frank’s gaze: it was open, so fucking loving and
admiring and amused, and that’s when she finally forgot to be nervous. This was Frank, and he’d seen her every which way. This was Frank, and she loved him.

“You good?” he asked, running one heavy palm up her leg.

“I’m good,” she told him, brushing her hair out of her face.

He grinned, that carnivorous, mischievous grin she’d come to know and love, and then he was pushing her legs apart and bellying up to her pussy, swinging one leg over his shoulder, and then the other.

“Gorgeous,” he muttered, parting her with his fingers. His breath against her cunt lips made Karen shiver and whine.

“We’ll work on patience,” he told her, and it sounded like a threat (and a promise, dark and rich as sin), before he lowered his mouth to his task.

Karen had had a couple steady boyfriends here and there; mostly unobjectionable guys whose only crime had been being boring, or aloof, or (once) an actual, sociopathic asshole. (She wasn’t counting Matt. He was... other.) They’d gone down on her out of a sense of fair play, which had been nice.

This wasn’t nice. Calling Frank’s head between her thighs ‘nice’ would be like calling a perfect, bleeding, transitory sunset ‘pretty’, or like labeling the first smile of an infant ‘cute’. There are experiences and feelings that are too fleeting and elemental and transformative to be put into words.

That was Frank’s mouth on her cunt.

She was shuddering and drawn tight on the mattress, half-aware of the fact that she was making guttural, rasping moans, and half in another place where the world was better and she and Frank could stay locked like this forever. One of her hands was fisted tightly in Frank’s hair, and the other was fisted in the sheet like a lifeline.

“Frank-” all high and breathy, desperate need.
He didn’t stop what he was doing, bless the man. He knew how this worked: you found the magic rhythm and *did not stop*, short of the bed itself catching on fire. Instead he disengaged one hand and slid it up over her belly to Karen’s chest. His fingers stopped over her racing heart, pressing down just a little. He was anchoring himself to her and her to him; palm to heart.

He loved her.

“Frank,” Karen sighed, and then the orgasm took her. He worked her though it until she was squirming to get away.

Through half-lidded eyes Karen watched Frank wipe his face on the sheet before crawling back up beside her, his eyes smiling. “Yeah?” he asked her as she panted, boneless and blissful.

“Oh yeah,” she said, finding his fingers and hanging on tight.

“I don’t have rubbers,” he told her, bending to kiss her again. She tasted herself, and it had *never* been as erotic as this.

“I’m on the pill and clean if you are,” she told him.

“Yeah I’m- I’m good,” he said. “Got everything worked up a couple weeks ago. I guess I was hoping for this, you know?”

“Oh, I know,” said Karen on a laugh. “I’ve been sneaking in here to play with myself every time you leave for group.”

He looked like Karen had hit him over the head, and there in that sun drenched bed, in a room that smelled of spring and sex, she laughed.

“Jesus,” he said. “I’m gonna have to start coming home early, huh.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Karen, pulling his lips down to hers again. “Just consider it a warm-up round, now.”
“Karen,” he murmured into her skin. He sounded half-strangled. “I’m going to be sitting there, listening to my guys, and imagining you here, all- oh, christ,” he said, rolling back over her.

Point 1 for Karen Page.

“I love you,” she told him as Frank braced himself over her, his cock nudging at her cunt.

His eyes went soft and he slid home, slowly, letting her feel every inch.

“Love you too,” he said, and dropped a kiss to her forehead.

She hitched her legs up around his hips and then they were moving together, both their eyes open and wonderous, both of them a little too afraid to close their eyes: what if this was all a dream?

Slowly, like the dawn breaking, Frank’s hips sped up, driving into Karen, and she felt that familiar tension coiling low in her belly. She let go of his bicep to slide her hand down between them, her slim fingers toying with her clit and occasionally slipping down to touch the place where the two of them joined.

Frank’s eyes followed the movement of her hand. “Oh, Christ, Karen that’s so fucking hot,” he growled out, his voice raspy and low. “So fucking hot. You’re just- you’re perfect.”

She bowed up to press her teeth into the skin of his shoulder, her nails biting into his arm for leverage. “Wanna come,” she keened, shuddering against her fingers and his cock.

“Oh baby,” said Frank, grinding his hips against hers. “You will.”

He buried his face in the shadow of her neck, slid his arm beneath her to grip her shoulder and hold her to him, and changed the angle.

“Oh, Frank, oh my god,” Karen whined through her teeth. “Frank!”
This orgasm was almost as transformative as the first: all rolling waves of bliss clenched around the heavy cock inside her. Frank was in her and over her and around her; his skin and smell and self. She could stay right there, she decided. Bracketed in his body, just like that—until they starved. It would be worth it. It would be fine.

He followed her over just after, his hips stuttering against hers, his breath gasped into her skin.

They stayed like that, his weight warm and comforting, pinning her to the bed, until both of their heart rates had returned to something approximating normal.

“You told me, once,” said Karen, stroking her fingers through his sweaty hair, “That you fixed the things you broke.”

He didn’t say anything, but she could feel him listening.

“You broke my goddamn heart, Frank,” she told him. “Every fucking day. You got inside me and smashed it to pieces. Think you’re up to the task of putting it back together?”

He pushed up to kiss her, his fingers holding her face to his. The heat and desperation of their earlier kisses was gone: this kiss felt like a promise. “Yes ma’am,” he told her. “Think I can try.”

THE END

Chapter End Notes

Hello my friends!

What do I say at the end of this story?

Mostly I’d like to thank you. ‘The only secret people keep’ is one of the most emotionally focused stories I’ve written, and you have made it such a rewarding experience to share with you. At the end of the day, I think we as people make art to try to pin down some transitory facet of being human. And if that’s why we’re driven to make things, I think those things are supposed to be shared.

Thank you again for sharing this with me <3

If you enjoy my writing and are open to other fandoms, my main account is lifeofsnark here on AO3. I have a bunch of Star Wars Sequel Trilogy and Game of Thrones works
on there. (It’s also the account I’ve probably used to read your Punisher stories since I’m HORRIBLE about logging in and out.)

If you’d ever like to yell about fandom stuff I’m @caseydoesfandom on twitter. No need to follow; I just like fandom pals.

PS. I'd love it forever if you'd let me know how this story made you feel! It's the only way I get paid ;)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!