Be my saviour and I'll be your downfall

by PunkyNemo (TheVampireCat)

Summary

Once upon a time she derided herself for imagining they were a done deal on a collision course straight to her bedroom. But that's all over now and he's gone, hasn't been back since he walked off her roof and disappeared into the night air. It's not all bad though. She has friends, she has work and tonight she even has cause to celebrate. It is, after all, her birthday and there's a chance the universe will be kind. It's just a chance though. And not a very good one.

Sequel to You're a ghost town (and maybe I'm a ghost) and As days go by, the night's on fire

Notes

Okay, so part three of this monster has been started. This is going to be considerably longer. I said before that I tend to write in a format where my story kind of covers a specific scenario and that they could be almost one shots (even though that is not strictly true and you do have to read part one and two to appreciate everything). This same applies to part three here but it is going to span about five chapters, maybe six. It depends on whether I just find a natural place to stop. A lot has to happen here but it still (at least in my head) is kind of self contained.
I will be posting chapter two of this very shortly, probably by Wednesday or Thursday at the very latest. You'll probably see why when you get to the end of this chapter. I will be posting previews too - you can check for them on my tumblr.

Then I want to thank everyone again for all their lovely reviews and message. I appreciate every single one and it really is what keeps me going. I write for me but the fact that other people are along with me for the ride is everything. Thank you, please continue to shout at me.

So, title for this part is from Matchbox 20's Downfall and the title for this chapter is coincidentally from Matchbox 20's If you're gone.

Happy reading.
There's an awful lot of breathing room but I can hardly move

It's counter-intuitive but things actually get better after that. Not that they'd been bad before he rocked up on her fire escape with the task of breaking her heart as his top priority. She'd had work and Foggy. She'd had something resembling the daily grind of everyday life. Maybe it hadn't been living but it hadn't just been existence either. But she'd missed him. Missed him so much and while she was not one to give herself over to ideas of only being complete with another person or someone else giving your life purpose, not having him around was sad. Because it's sad to not be near the people you care for most in this world. In any event she didn't like the idea that she could be so head over heels for someone just because he found some sweet words and told them to her.

But there was always the anticipation. The rounds on her windowsill, the free lattes. There was Earth, Wind and Fire and that stupid song she hates so fucking much. That spark of hope that he'd turn up, that he'd answer his own question.

Don't you know Karen. Don't you know?

And he did. And then he took it back.

And now that anticipation has gone, ripped off fast and quick like a Band Aid. And that's not to say it doesn't hurt. It does. It hurts so fucking much she wants to scream sometimes. But the hurt doesn't get any worse. It doesn't chip away at her. She tells herself she's still here, she's still okay and surviving. And he can't be any more gone than he already is.

Except he can.

And she pushes that so far down onto the list of Things Karen Page Refuses To Acknowledge Ever that some days she only thinks about it two or three times.

She works too much and too late. It seems a good escape and she’s desperate to dig up something on this new Russian interest in Hell’s Kitchen. Desperate to find something on this Alexei Smirnov, with his rugged good looks and empty smile and a name as common to Moscow as John Smith would be to New York. And even though Ellison is wary and keeps throwing Frank in her face and is slowly trying to direct her interests elsewhere, he gives her as much leeway as he can.

She moves too. Claire tells her about a rental going in her apartment block and it's both cheaper and twice the size of her place. And it doesn't matter that the bedroom and the lounge occupy the same
space. There's a separate kitchen and a bathroom with a shower and the water pressure is good. Better than good.

She does miss Howard and his carrot cake though - his seemingly bottomless pit of relationship advice, some of which she wishes she could take to heart. The new place’s security is actual security in the form of a severe middle-aged woman called Irene who Karen is convinced was once a drill sergeant. And while Claire insists that you get used to her disapproving stares and the way she looks meaningfully at her watch when you get home after 9pm, Karen has yet to find a way to stop feeling like she's sixteen and sneaking back home after a night of underage drinking and hookups in the park.

She avoids Matt and she knows that's not helping and it makes Foggy whine about having to “cheat” on his two best friends but she can't do anything about that. It's too much. After everything she doesn't think she can deal with Matt too. There's a hard limit, this is it.

She knows that Claire patches him up every few weeks and there was one incident the day after she moved in when Claire called her to come and help move him onto her couch when he was so wounded that he couldn't stand and was bleeding out all over the floor.

It had been a terrible night. Matt was delirious, wailing from the pain as Claire stitched him up slowly and methodically. And Karen had held him down by his shoulders and talked nonsense to him.

She's not sure what she said. There was so much blood and he was in agony and he kept telling her over and over again how sorry he was. How they could work it out and he'd never hurt her again until Claire had eventually injected him with something that rendered him speechless and unable to move.

She'd shrugged. He was pissing her off, she said.

And then they'd sat together and drank tea until he woke up and Claire called Foggy and sent her home.

After that they didn't talk about him much. Claire knows she can call for help if she needs it but she's wise enough to know that much like anything else in Karen Page’s excuse for a love life - shambles that it may be - her dalliance with Matt is off limits.

Frank was right. Red does still love her. And while she's not really sure what's going on with
Elektra, she's willing to hazard a guess that he isn't either.


To be fair Frank’s a hard limit too but the only one who has any idea about the specifics of that is Foggy. And even he doesn't know all that much. He's asked, she's deflected. He's side-eyed her and she's told him to stop. And then he's reiterated that she can tell him anything. That he's good at keeping secrets. And he is. She knows this first hand.

But even if she was ready to talk about this in any capacity she's not sure what she would say. Frank Castle’s kind of in love with me and I'm kind of in love with him, but things are kinda awkward right now? He broke my heart and left me on the roof in the cold? I want to fuck a mass murderer and I'm not even sorry. And I’m pretty sure he wants to fuck me too, what do you think of that?

Thing is she thinks Foggy probably would understand. He'd tell her she was stark raving mad. He'd tell her she was fucking up in the worst way possible. And then he'd tell her that we don't choose who we love and let her sob into his shirt. Because she would sob. She's decided to stop being embarrassed about it.

Maybe she’ll tell him. One day. Maybe.

In the meantime she has work, she has this kinda sorta friendship with Claire that they both need more than they care to admit. And then there's Pickle. A loud and obnoxious ball comprised entirely of black fluff and rage that walked in off her fire escape one day and never left. And no, she tries so hard not to think about how that's a thing. Because it's not. It's not.

Either way it means she has a cat in a building that has a no pet policy and a former drill sergeant guarding the door.

Life is interesting, even when it's not.

But no Frank. No sign of him. Nothing at all. And it's not just the lack of free lattes or the fact that she hasn't heard Shining Star in weeks. It's once again the severe absence of cadavers, of gunfights, of gangs of Irish and pedophile rings being slaughtered wholesale. Either he's gone quiet or he's found better ways to hide bodies. She's betting on the second option.
She knows she could always ask Matt. It wouldn't be weird even inasmuch as it wouldn't be weird that their first real conversation in months would be about Frank. But then he knows her and Frank have a certain closeness - he wasn't even remotely concerned about sending her off with him that night when the world went to shit and The Punisher vomited his feelings all over a cold cabin in the middle of nowhere. So it would hardly even register on a normal person if she just casually dropped it into conversation. But Matt isn't a normal person. And she doesn't trust her heartbeat not to elevate, nor her skin not to bloom heat, nor her voice to stay steady.

He’ll know. And she doesn't want him to. Not for any nefarious reason, not because she wants to give him false hope that she hasn't moved on. But because she feels she at least deserves to be able to figure out what is going on with her and Frank before Matt does.

And yeah, there's something uncomfortable asking one vigilante about another vigilante. Like violating a criminal version of the Bro Code or something. Not that Frank and Matt are bros. But the thought makes her smile.

Either way she thinks it's probably better not to try and force any sort of contact with Frank. Not after everything that happened. Not after the roof and his knee between her legs and his hands all over her.

Not after that. Don't pick at wounds that are only just starting to scab over.

“You going to your own damn party or am I going to have to get security to throw you out?”

She looks up from the empty document on her laptop.

Ellison. Dressed in a plaid shirt and an ill-fitting pair of chinos, one foot in her office the other in the passage outside, hand on the doorframe. That seems to be his thing, always half in, half out, like he thinks he could be invading her space if he actually moved himself all the way into the room. She's starting to wish some of the other men in her life might do the same.

Although Ellison can keep the beard. It looks terrible.

“It's a drink with three friends,” she says shutting her laptop, glancing at the sunflower arrangement on her desk and the brightly coloured gift bags in the corner. “It's hardly a party.”
He nods like he doesn’t really believe her. Same expression as when she claims not to know if The Punisher is alive or what the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen’s true identity is. He humours her, she realises. He humours her a lot.

But in this instance, she isn’t hedging. Yes, it is her birthday and yes, she is indeed going out for a drink, but it’s not a big thing. It’s not even a big birthday and she’ll be in bed by 11:30. Maybe with some take-out or a whole cake that she plans to eat all by herself and consequences be damned. Maybe with a good book or a bad movie. Her plans aren’t big - they never are anymore.

“If it was four, would that make it a party?”

He’s retreated slightly out of her office, not fully, but there’s less of him inside than out and she wonders if he’s anticipating being turned down. Which in itself is ridiculous as she was the one that suggested he come along in the first place.

She rakes a hand through her hair, looks out of the window at the rapidly darkening sky, the storm clouds which have yet to move on from Hell’s Kitchen even though weathermen far and wide are reporting that summer is just around the corner. It’s not cold anymore, not truly, but the sun has yet to show its face and the air still feels heavy and saturated. Cloying, like it doesn’t want you steal too much of its air. Foggy insists that the weather is just wet enough to piss him off. But she knows he’ll be saying the same thing about the heat when the scorching summer rolls around.

She turns back to Ellison. She guesses he’s about 70 per cent out of her office now, but he’s still clinging to the doorframe. Holding on with both hands.

She pushes the thought away. “I guess so. At least as much as anything is a party at Josie’s.”

He rolls his eyes, makes a face. “Josie’s? I knew I was going to regret this.”

She smiles, asks him if he’s up to date with his tetanus shots and he gives her a sour look, retreats even further out of her office as she stands and slips her laptop into her bag. Ellison is wonderfully squeamish when you know the right buttons to press. He won’t bat an eye at gunshot victims and eviscerated remains found floating in the river, once even commented that the meat hook incident with The Punisher was “not his best work”, but give him a dirty plate or show him a cockroach and he turns a nasty shade of green. And well, Josie’s has both of those in abundance.

She uses her hip to push her chair in under her desk and glances around the office. The flowers can
stay. She’ll take the gifts home on Monday. There are times she’s not 100% sure about this journalism gig, not sure about the bullshit and the hours or that she even has thick enough skin to make this her life, but her colleagues in general are great. Better than great.

Ellison finally commits fully to the passageway and let’s go of her doorframe as she steps towards him.

“They water down their beer you know?” he says as she locks her door. “And their glasses aren’t clean.”

She nods. “They always give the dirtiest ones to old men who complain too much. Josie knows where it’s at.”

He narrows his eyes, purses his lips. She knows he’s going for mock concern but he’s not quite managing to hide very genuine worry. And she wants to tell him not to worry. That her and Foggy have been visiting Josie’s for the best part of a year and a half now and they’re both still alive, but he’s been dishing out some godawful deadlines as of late and his critique of some of her ideas has bordered on downright nasty, so she decides to let him suffer a bit.

It’s just dirty glasses. He’ll survive.

He should at least.

They decide to walk to Josie’s. It’s near enough because most places within Hell’s Kitchen are and you generally only need a car if you want to avoid being mugged (or if there’s a man with a double barrel shotgun blowing his way through a hospital and you need to get the scumbag he is after away really fast - but she’s not going to think about that now). Besides it’s not cold and parking is always a bitch to find near Josie’s which somehow manages to stay popular despite it’s less than sterling reputation.

“So who’s coming?” Ellison asks as they sidestep some falafel vendors. “Who are these fine friends with whom you're going to spend this here, day of Karen Page’s glorious birth?”

She gives him a dry look. He's not an idiot. She spends enormous amounts of time in the office, more than she should, more than he expects and he can’t honestly think it’s all for the love of the job. Yeah, he might think she’s a workaholic and he might think she’s still newish in town and that the fact people keep dying around her could keep potential friends at arm's length but he must know there is
no way she could be this enamoured with her job. He's got to know that her social circle is small, that her love life is non existent, and she's not even slightly partnered up or looking to become such.

Apparently not.

“Come on,” he’s saying as he dodges around a man selling keyrings of the Statue of Liberty. “Karen Page must have a life outside the paper, even if it's a small one.”

So he’s being an ass, but a well-intentioned ass, and he's made the effort to celebrate her birthday when he could probably have a much nicer evening at home with actual unwatered beer in clean glasses. He could have been with people he liked and not her strange little crowd of misfits, all of whom are probably twenty years younger than he is. So she tells him about Foggy and Marci who may or may not be dating but are definitely screwing. About Claire who can't stay long because she has a date that she would like to be screwing.

“So Frank Castle isn't putting in appearance? Because I'd very much like to avoid being shot.”

It's meant as a joke but it stops her dead in her tracks and a woman with a shopping cart full of kitchen towels walks into her, curses, then apologises and wanders off in the opposite direction.

It’s not that she falls apart every time someone says his name. It’s really not. It’s just that some days - and today is one of them - she is a little overcome by how much things still hurt. Just because the hurt doesn’t get worse doesn’t mean it has got any better. No, she doesn’t cry, she doesn’t hole herself away anymore than she did before, she doesn’t put her life on hold. But he’s not part of her life now and it hurts when the people who are special to you are not. Whatever the reason may be. And she realises - and yes curses herself for it - that somewhere in those fantasies she had where he does indeed romance her and take her on dates and share himself with her, that spending special occasions like birthdays and Thanksgiving and Christmas with her was part and parcel of the package. She knows though, that even if he hadn’t walked off her roof seemingly into the night air, that they are just fantasies after all.

“Oh come on Karen,” Ellison is saying. “I was kidding.”

Of course he was. Ellison doesn't know. Nobody does but it's times like this that she wonders if she's got “Frank Castle broke my heart” tattooed across her forehead. If she's so much more obvious than she thinks.
“Frank Castle is dead,” she says and even saying those words, lies though she knows them to be, is like poison in her mouth.

He looks at her like she's lost her mind, bushy eyebrows raised and lips pursed.

“Come on Page, I was born at night but it wasn't last night. Frank Castle is alive and you know it. Bet you’ve even seen him,” he gives a knowing smile that’s half mocking and half deadly serious. “Besides you and The Punisher, always been a thing. You sure know how to pick them.”

He thinks he’s being funny, smooth even, which is a very silly thing for him to think. She knows he expects a capitulation, a half embarrassed smile, possibly even hoping that she’ll spill the proverbial beans on what she knows, because he has to know that she knows something, but he won’t get it. He knows better than this, better than to play with this - he was there when she went through all this shit the first time around.

She doesn’t look away. She doesn’t smile. If she can outstare The Punisher, then Ellison is amateur hour. He seems to realise almost instantly that he’s overstepped the mark. But to his credit, he lasts a few long moments before he holds up his hands.

“Oh, okay. I'm sorry. Mea Culpa. No Frank Castle,” he looks away. “I'll stop giving you grief on your birthday, it’s bad enough that you’re spending it with me.”

She nods. It’s okay. She knows she’s over-sensitive about this, that it’s more about things he doesn’t know than those he does and that his ribbing is just that: ribbing. He's a good person. Something of a pedant and stuck in his ways but he looks out for her and he cares. Genuinely. They start walking again, narrowly missing a kid racing by with a bright red ice-lolly which looked set to explode all over her skirt.

It's early yet but Josie’s is packed by the time they arrive and through the window she can see Foggy is already there with Marci and has laid claim to a battered and probably filthy formica table next to the pool area. Marci, dressed like she thought she was going to a Broadway play rather than the biggest dive in the diviest part of town looks suitably uncomfortable and Foggy, bless his cotton socks, seems to be revelling in that.

Ellison pulls out a handkerchief, uses it to hold the door open for her.

“I'm glad I met you Page,” he says as she steps inside. “I know you have a thing for brooding
vigilantes but you've got integrity in spades and you're a fucking bulldog when it comes to a story. And you can actually write. I can count the number of journalists who can do that on one hand. Who knows what you’ll do one day with that?”

She bites her lip. Her turn now for mock suspicion.

“You going soft on me Ellison?” she scoffs. “You know that's not what I signed up for.”

He snorts, rolls his eyes and herds her inside into the heat, the noise and the overall general unpleasantness that is Josie’s Bar and it feels like coming home.

She breathes in deeply. It smells. It always did. The less than faint odor of spilled beer and the industrial detergent than never quite covers that hint of vomit just below the surface. And sweat. *Oh God the sweat.* Old and stale and acrid.

It's easily the worst place in the Kitchen, probably New York. Maybe even the States. The broken seats, the rickety tables, the pool tables that don't have all their balls and the cues that give you splinters when you touch them. She doesn’t care. Hell’s Kitchen’s seedy underbelly is not something that scares her any longer. She can’t let it.

Foggy stands and waves them over, points a little too excitedly to a fishbowl in the middle of the table and she's pretty sure is meant to be less grey and more blue than it is, but she doesn’t care. Next to her Ellison mutters something about E. coli and threatens her with a doctor’s bill and a good-natured warning not to call in sick on Monday.

Not that she would. Not that she ever *has*.

She ignores him and picks her way through the crowd to Foggy, shoes already sticking to the floor, a fat biker at the bar checking out her ass and letting out a low whistle as she goes. She’s about to say something when she sees it’s Lou. Lou who is probably a more permanent fixture at Josie’s than the toilets or possibly even the walls. He’s whistled at her since the first ill-fated day she ever set foot in here and she guesses that unless he dies on his barstool (because nothing will convince her that isn’t where he lives) he always will. She gives him a dry look and he raises his beer in her direction, takes a swig.

And then Foggy is holding out his arms and folding her into a giant bear hug, kissing her cheek and telling her she still looks great for such an ancient woman, asking if he can get her some hot cocoa.
and a blanket for her lap, a pair of slippers maybe. He calls her grandma and then whispers low in her ear that he’s missed her and he’s not comfortable only seeing her once every couple of months and on special occasions. And he’s right. It has been too long. She hasn’t seen him, as in really seen him and spoken to him since the night of the cocktail party, the night that Frank Castle danced with her on the roof and then pulled her heart out of her chest and wrung it out to dry in amongst the beer bottles and candy wrappers. Sure there was the time he came to fetch Matt from Claire but that wasn’t exactly a social call. She knows why it’s been so long. And sure, they both work. A lot. More than they should. But that’s not it. It’s because Foggy knows that she’s keeping something from him and while he has never pressed, not truly, and while she knows that he’s curious but happy to respect the boundaries she’s put up regarding the night she spent with Frank in the Catskills, it feels wrong keeping secrets from him.

They haven’t been good to each other. And they should. He’s her rock. No matter what happens, no matter how bad things get, or how much she fucks up he’s there. Complete with his special brand of Foggy advice and a good dose of salt. But there. And that means more than he’ll ever know. She squeezes him tight before letting go and resolves to do better.

She says hi to Marci, asks how she is. They’re friendly and despite the nastiness of their first few encounters they actually get on surprisingly well, but Marci’s not the hugging type and it makes Karen wonder even more about her and Foggy and what odd and slightly off-kilter spark exists between them that keeps this all from falling apart. It’s not exactly friends with benefits but it kinda is. And yet, the idea of Foggy actually picking up the phone for a booty call is both the most wonderful and the most surprising thought she’s ever had. It gets a spot on the list of Things Karen Page Wonders About But Doesn’t Really Want To Know.

She sits. Ellison draws in beside her with a beer which he eyes as if he’s holding a particularly, yappy, smelly dog and Foggy hands her a straw which he wipes off first on a tissue.

He shrugs. “Can’t be too careful.”

Ellison rolls his eyes.

“Speaking of being careful,” Marci pipes up and leans across the table holding out a pink envelope and Foggy sighs, puts his head in his hands.

“She picked that,” he says defensively. “I had no idea. I told her to go to the bookstore or the wine shop or the flower shop but she … does her own thing.”

Karen doesn’t miss the look that passes between them. It’s fleeting but it’s full of both exasperation
and affection. She also doesn’t miss that they’re now giving combined gifts and she wonders how far down this path Foggy has gone and she feels bad that she hasn’t really been around to witness it.

She hopes suddenly that Matt has. That despite Foggy’s near constant (and overly dramatic) bellyaching about being the kid caught in the middle of a divorce that Matt has in some sense been there for him while he navigates his way through this. Because it’s scary and wonderful but it can also hurt like a bitch.

She knows. Lord, she knows.

But not tonight. Tonight she’s with friends, motley crew though they may be, and she’s not going to let men in long black coats with blood on their hands change that. Tonight is hers.

Maybe.

She opens the envelope, slides out a plastic card, pale pink and red stripes, swooping lines of a V and S in gold.

“I buy all my underwear there,” Marci is saying and Foggy turns bright red and buries his face in the fishbowl again. “Gives me something to show off.”

She gives him a nudge. “Doesn’t it?”

He nods without looking up from his drink. His earlier shyness now replaced by something more like casual interest and even a little guilt and Karen grins. Sure, this thing between them is a little weird but it's weird in all the right ways and Foggy doesn't seem remotely intimidated by it which is great.

She thanks them. It's a nice gift even if it's also a reminder that she doesn't really have anyone to show this kind of thing off to. But it doesn't matter. It never has.

She's about to brave the fishbowl when her phone vibrates, Claire’s face popping up onto the screen.

“Ah Nurse Temple,” Foggy says. “Tell her she's late. Tell her that if I'd had a medical emergency I would be dead right now.”
The message is short and sweet. To the point. All a bit like Claire when she thinks about it. She reads it aloud. Claire can't make it. Her shift ran over and she needs to be across town for her date in an hour. She still has to change. She thinks her date might not think she looks her best in old scrubs but she’ll see Karen tomorrow. Maybe. It depends on how the date goes.

Foggy gives her a sour look, grabs her phone and starts punching the keypad furiously.

“Don't be rude,” she tells him and he makes a sound like she’s just driven a knife through his heart.

“Sometimes it's like you don't know me at all Karen.”

Marci leans forward, peeks over his shoulder, “He's telling her that he's bringing a whole fishbowl to her place and she's gotta down it. And that he’s going to film it. Also he's using the poop emoji as much as he can.”

Karen laughs, dips her straw into grayish liquid, takes a sip. As she expected it tastes like swill and somehow the jelly sweets in the bottom only serve to make it worse. But then again, she's more than a little surprised that anyone at Josie’s had half a clue on what a fishbowl was in the first place, so she guesses she can't complain too much.

Ellison watches her as if she's drinking curdled milk out of the carton and she wonders if maybe that would be better.

It honestly can't be much worse.

But then there a few things that can make Josie’s worse. To be fair it’s never been shot up like a certain diner where the coffee is bad and the pie is good but she's willing to hazard a guess it's seen enough blood on the floor and the walls. Bar fights, smashed heads. Foggy once told her about a guy who had part of his ear bitten off in the bathroom and returned the next day to look for it. Worst part was, he found it.

“We really need to start going to better places,” she says and next to her Ellison nods, sips his beer and then pulls a face like it bit him.
“Come on,” Foggy hands her phone back, coughs dramatically as he takes a mouthful of the punch. “Thing about Josie’s is that you know when you're here that things can't get worse. You go out somewhere nice and the food is bad or the wine is oxidised and your whole evening is ruined. Or maybe there's a rowdy kid or some douchebag waiter and you're done. With Josie’s you know the drinks are watered down and you’ll end up in the hospital with food poisoning, probably catch something from the toilet seat. Service is going to be shit because I think Josie pulls people off the streets, gives them an apron and calls them a bartender. But you know it. You know what to expect. It literally cannot get worse.”

And because the universe is an evil bitch with a fucking sick sense of humour, he's proved wrong seconds later when the front door swings open and that unmistakable tap of Matt’s cane sounds against the dirty, sticky floor.

She doesn't even have to turn to know for sure it's him. Somehow despite the noise, the smell, the overwhelming number of people already here, she has no doubt. Maybe he isn't the only one with superpowers. She snorts at that. Karen Page with superpowers, wouldn’t that be a joke? Unless being catnip to vigilantes and the world’s best list maker is some sought after talent, she’s not really sure how much use she is to anyone.

And then he's at her side, tall and handsome, the smell of his cologne washing over her and for a second blocking out that unmistakable stench of Josie’s Bar. He looks good. He obviously hasn’t been running the streets much of late because he’s not bruised and she can’t see any discernible cuts or scrapes. He’s dressed casually in dark jeans and a black Henley that fits him a little too well. And suddenly there's an ache in her chest. Not for what could have been. But for what they lost. For the lies and then the truths that didn’t make up for it. For the night they sat under the bright lanterns in a bad Thai restaurant and laughed. For the way he kissed her on the steps of her building and declined to come upstairs because he was so sure he was going to ruin it. And then he did.

She doesn't love him. She could have once. She came close. But she doesn’t now. Apparently when she has to choose between darkness and light, she’ll choose darkness. And Matt wasn’t exactly light to begin with so she’s not really sure where that leaves her. There are things Karen Page doesn't even bother to categorise because it's simply too hard to go there.

“Hey,” he says.

“Dick move bro,” Foggy mutters under his breath, but Matt hears. Of course he does because he has fucking bat ears or something and if you can’t hide an elevated pulse or a raspy lung from a cold you had over a month ago, you’re not going to be able to hide actual spoken words in his presence. But then again, she doesn’t think that was Foggy’s intention.

Matt sighs and has the decency to look sheepish and she’s suddenly extremely grateful for the
hubbub in the rest of the bar, that even though the tension that’s descended over their little table - which she is pretty sure even Ellison and Marci have picked up on - is at least being partially drowned out by the noise.

“I'm not staying,” Matt says and then he turns to her and even though she knows he can't see anything, it feels like he's scrutinising her. “I just wanted to wish you, and give you this.”

He holds out a flat rectangular package wrapped in brightly coloured polka dot paper and tied with blue foil bows. She kind of hates him for this. For his sweetness, for this strangely oblivious manipulation. For the fact that it's not really like that but feels like it is.

She takes it from him and he holds on a second too long.

“The woman at the store said the paper was nice,” he says. Shrugs awkwardly.

“It is.”

“Anyway,” he breathes in deeply, seems to gather himself together as he turns towards the door. “I just wanted to say happy birthday Karen.”

He nods to everyone else, “Foggy, Marci, Mitchell. Have a good night.”

She bites her lip, looks down at the gift, then at Foggy who's not even bothering to apologise for his friend. He shakes his head and she can hear him screaming silently at her to just let it go, to not open that specific can of worms again. That this is best left where it is. In the ether.

Karen Page has never done a sensible thing in her life.

“Matt,” she says and he turns towards her and she doesn’t need to see his face to know that his expression is something between hope and fear.

And she really doesn’t want to do this, because this is a really, really bad idea and she wishes that she’d never met one vigilante, let alone two. But she says it anyway.
“Matt. Stay. Have a drink.”

And he does.

xxx

To be fair, it's not as awkward as she thinks it should be. Matt keeps his distance, sitting close to Foggy and listening to him bellyache over Claire’s absence. Ellison, true to his word, doesn't mention Frank and steers the conversation away from Smirnov when Marci mentions him citing that it’s not the time for talking shop. Either of their respective shops. They talk a little about Ben, however, have a few drinks on him, and Fisk comes up once or twice when Matt mentions that he still keeps tabs on Vanessa who’s seemingly still living it up in Italy. But overall it's pleasant.

She doesn't drink much. The beer is indeed watered down and when Foggy starts calling for shots, she begs off. Not that she thinks she’d die from alcohol poisoning at Josie’s because that would require that they actually served alcohol but in her experience, shots of any type have never been a good idea. Under any circumstances.

She tells herself that she needs her head but she has no idea what for. Her weekend is free save for a tentative arrangement with Claire and the most exciting thing she might do is take a walk in the park and try and sneak some cat food past Irene.

Karen Page. Living on the edge.

It's late when Ellison eventually leaves. Despite his bitching about the beer, he's put away a few bottles and he calls a cab, tells Karen that he’ll see her on Monday. Or not. He could be dead. The beer might kill him. And if that doesn't then the E. coli most definitely will.

He kisses her cheek, claps Foggy on the back as he passes him and Marci at the pool table where Foggy is showing off his apparent lack of coordination skills, and disappears onto the street, holding a newspaper over his head as the first few drops of rain start to fall.

And then it's only her and Matt. And she knew it was going to come to this. One day. It had to. And it’s honestly not as terrible as she thought it would be. There’s a lot of water under the bridge and she has secrets now that she’s not sure she’ll ever share, but maybe it doesn’t have to be that way. Maybe it doesn’t have to be brutal honesty and truth that breaks them both. Maybe it can just be.
“Long time,” he says taking a sip of his beer. “Well at least since we spoke.”

And she knows he's talking about that night at Claire’s. She wonders how much he remembers, if anything.

She nods, realises he can't see her but doesn't say anything. She's pretty sure Matt knows when someone is nodding. Probably can tell by the smell of her hair or the disturbance in the air as she moves. Or he just knows because he knows.

He gives her a smile. It's smooth and easy and she suspects it’s got him both out of and into a lot of scrapes during his life.

“Thanks for asking me to stay,” he says, “I’ve missed hanging out like this.”

“Me too.”

It's the truth, he'd know if it wasn’t anyway.

He nods, swallows another mouthful of beer. She can see him edging around this. That he's going to move in soon, ask her about all the things she can't tell him. Beg her to forgive him. Like she hasn't already. They've been here before. Standing next to Frank's truck while he ground his teeth over the sound of Matt’s voice.

Sweet nothings in her ear which were just that.

She can’t do it again. It's not that she's angry. Despite her apparent animal magnetism when it comes to Hell’s Kitchen’s criminal and not so criminal element, she's not all that upset about Matt keeping things from her. She guesses it even makes sense. It's probably not wise to advertise your secret identity all over town if you're trying to keep it secret.

But she’s come to realise that maybe there’s a difference between secrets and lies. There can be at least.
So no, it’s not so much that he hides things, it’s the fact that he’s so smooth and adept at lying to cover them up, that it comes so very naturally to him and seemingly doesn’t touch him. It's the fact that even after he revealed his biggest secrets to her she's pretty sure she knows less about him than before. It's about how his code, simple as it may be, has yet to account for a scared woman tied to a chair and having her world threatened and seeing a .380 as the only way to save it. That he sees himself at one end of a spectrum and Frank Castle at the other and that he has yet to even consider that she might fall somewhere in the middle and not directly at his side.

“Let’s walk,” she says, standing. “I'll give you a lift home.”

“You don’t have to do that,” he says but he downs his beer and pulls himself to his feet, reaches for his cane. And she hates that that's also a lie and a terrible truth. It's not that she wants him to be blind, that she doesn't wish he could see everything she can. It's not that she wishes he didn't have this ability to not let his blindness render him sightless. But it's this manufactured persona he has. This man who dupes everyone he meets.

She told Frank once that Matt lies to people, that he hurts people. And that hasn't changed. It's just that now Frank’s position on the list of People Who Lie And Hurt is no longer as comfortable as it once was. And maybe that’s not really fair. Hurt yes, but lies not so much. Not actual verbal untruths. Maybe one, when he told he wouldn’t take up any of her time, and another when he told her she’d forget about him. But when she thinks about Frank and lies, she doesn’t harp on these things because they’re small and inconsequential. She harps on the biggest lie of all, and that’s what he seems to be telling himself. That she can’t love him, that he doesn’t deserve this, that he needs to suffer.

And she wishes again she could just find that ordinary man to be an ordinary husband and an ordinary father to those wonderful but ordinary potential children, but some things are not written in the stars and she’d be willing to bet that’s one of them.

Foggy raises his eyebrows as they leave but she shakes her head. It’s not like that. She’s just taking him home. Yes, she knows they can all get a cab but it’s anyone’s guess how long this game of pool is going to take. Yes, she’ll call. They can do something in the week. They need to talk. She’s missed him. Maybe a better venue.

Hugs all round. Even Marci. And Foggy looking fierce and poking his finger into Matt’s chest, gritting something out that she can’t hear but doesn’t need to.

It’ll be okay. He won’t be stuck in the midst of a custody battle again. Whatever he thinks might happen isn’t. That’s over now. Better luck next time.
Outside it’s cool and even though the rain has stopped for now, she can smell it in the air. The streets are quieter although there are rowdy kids drinking in the alleys and police cars cruising slowly up and down the streets, prostitutes hiding in the shadows until they’ve past.

Matt offers his arm but she declines. He doesn’t need her to lead him, to see.

And they walk. Slowly. Her heels are high and the night air is welcoming and heady and despite everything, she doesn’t feel the need to rush this.

He speaks first. She knew he would.

“Tonight was nice,” he says, he sounds wistful. “Like old times.”

She doesn’t answer. It was nice, but it wasn’t like old times.

“I’ve missed you,” he means it, even he couldn’t fake the sincerity in his voice. “I know you think there’s something going on with Elektra but there’s --”

“Don’t,” she says. “Please, I don’t want to talk about this. Don’t ruin this.”

The truth is she doesn’t really wonder much about his relationship with Elektra. That’s something she has successfully kept off every list and out of her mind for the most part. She knows there’s history, she knows there was a deep attraction, maybe even love. And she knows that on some level maybe both of them are hoping to recapture that and that he does by dropping literally every responsibility he has when Elektra asks. And that’s fine. She accepts it and it doesn’t hurt. But she’s not going to be an emotional sounding board for this.

( Red still loves you )

She closes her eyes. Let’s the feeling pass. Takes a breath. Carries on walking.

“Karen, I’m just sorry. I’m sorry I lied to you. I’m sorry I kept things from you. I’m sorry that you can’t even stand to be in the same room as me now,” he means it. She can see the worry on his face, the way he’s throwing pieces of himself behind every word, hoping she’ll catch them, put them back
together.

He pauses. “I know I can’t turn back the clock but I just want to go back you know? To a time when it was you, me and Foggy. Before Fisk and Elektra. Before Frank Castle and all the shit that happened.”

She sighs. She doesn’t know what to say. She forgives him. Always has. No matter how much water there is under the bridge, Matt will always be special to her. He’ll always be the person who believed in her, who gave her a chance, was her friend in a place where friendship was hard to find and often not worth the search.

But it doesn’t matter. They can’t go back and she doesn’t want to. Things have changed and so has she.

“Can’t change the past Matt,” she says. “Can only go forward.”

“Can we Karen?” he asks. “Go forward?”

She turns to him, takes him by the shoulders. Looking into his eyes is pointless but she does it anyway. It’s important. Truth is important. It’s not hard to find the words. There are no butterflies. This is simple. As simple as falling down. “I think that part of what we were is over.”

He nods. Maybe he doesn’t get all of it but he gets enough.

She lets him take her arm this time and they walk in silence for a few minutes and she can feel the prickles of rain on her skin. It’s not exactly warm yet, not a time to be considering a sundress or a hula skirt. Or a bikini. But there’s a definite mugginess to the air, a hint of humidity which she despises more than the sub zero winters or the hot as hell summers.

“Have you seen Frank?” he asks suddenly and she almost stops. “You know, since that day he dropped you off?”

There’s a couple of things she could do. She could say no and he would know she’s lying. It would likely only serve to make him more determined to uncover the truth and by extension the reason she lied.
She could refuse to answer, change the subject which would have much the same effect.

Or she could be honest.

And that's important.

“Yes,” she says softly, and let him do whatever the fuck he wants with her elevated heartbeat and additional pheromones. She's human. She can't live worrying about whether he can smell her feelings on her, whether the cadence of her voice gives her away.

She tells him that Frank stopped by a month or so ago. That he turned up on her fire escape to say hello. She doesn't tell him about the fireworks, about the dancing. About Frank's knee between hers and the blood he smeared on her face and dress.

He’ll know she's not telling him everything but then again he's not entitled to all her secrets. Just because he knows they’re there doesn’t mean he gets a free pass.

But he seems to gloss over it. It doesn't seem to register on his radar and he carries on walking, arm linked through hers, cane hanging loosely at his side.

“That night,” he says and he doesn’t need to specify which one. “I let The Punisher take you and I wasn’t even worried. I wonder if that makes me an idiot or a good judge of character.”

So she’s a little pissed by his phrasing. More so when she thinks of the look on Frank’s face the next day like he’d just put her back where she belonged - in Matt’s arms - like she’s some kind of trinket to be handed off to whoever can look after her best at the time. But she gets what he’s saying nonetheless. Worries less about the subtext and more about the spirit of it.

He’s talking to himself more than to her now anyway and for now she’s content to be along for the ride.

“I mean I don’t know how many people he’s killed now. Probably dozens. But, I don’t think he’s a bad man. He loved his family,” he pauses. “He wouldn’t hurt you.”
He says it with such finality, such surety that she wants to shove him. In part because he’s Matt and has a tendency to talk about things he’s not qualified to talk about. In part because he still hasn’t realised how fucking self-righteous he sounds. And mostly because it’s a lie. And he’s wrong. And Frank Castle has already hurt her.

*(I can’t bring this to you)*

She doesn’t say anything. She can see her car, and she’s grateful that the time left for this conversation is at least limited. Sure the thought of being in a confined space with Matt while he waxes lyrical about Frank or whoever else is hardly something she’s looking forward to, but the sooner it starts, the sooner it’s done.

“Where did you go that night?” he asks as she extracts herself from him, pulls her keys out of her purse. “Foggy and I were looking everywhere for you.”

“You know I’m not gonna tell you that.”

He smiles back. “Yeah I know. Karen Page, loyal to a fault.”

She pulls the car door open, leans across the seat to unlock the passenger door and Matt slides in beside her.

She sighs, grins at him even though he can’t see it and turns the key in the ignition and the whole night changes.

Sometimes things happen in life that you don’t expect. That’s just one of the features and the bugs of living in this big wide world with endless possibilities. You go to the store and fall in love, you find a new job and move countries, a cat walks in off your fire escape and suddenly your life is less lonely than it was the day before. And all this is fine. Truly, how boring would life be if it was all planned out?

But then there are things that knock you sideways. Things that you just don’t ever expect and it seems like the universe has actually had to conspire, gain some kind of sentience, for it to happen. Things like finding out the man you thought you were in love with, who also happens to be your boss, is the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen, that you can shoot someone seven times at point blank range and know full well you’d do it again. That Frank Castle is out there and he’s alive and he wants you to
know it after all this time.

You’re a shining star
No matter who you are
Shining bright to see
Whatever you could truly be

She wants to say she was startled but that’s not the truth. Startled to her implies that she jumped or yelled. That that heart rate of hers she’s so worried about Matt hearing skyrocketed, and she started hyperventilating. But none of these things happened.

She freezes, everything locking up. Her mind, her limbs, her throat. Dimly she’s aware that Matt is saying something about her musical tastes not being up to scratch and she wonders insanely if she left the tape on this morning. If she’s gotten to that point that she’s so pathetically needy that she’ll listen to trash like this just to keep the memories alive.

But she didn’t. She might be sad. She might miss Frank more than he deserves and she might find her own desire for him a little disconcerting but she knows this isn’t her. That this was him and he’s been here at her car tonight. That he’s trying to tell her something and she has no idea what.

“Karen?”

Matt. He’s still talking but he no longer has that easy smile on his face. He’s no longer teasing her about bad music. In fact he looks downright concerned, far more than he should be about bad music.

And that’s what snaps her out of it. Say what you want about Matt, his instincts are top notch and if he’s worried, there generally is something to be worried about. She presses the eject button and the cassette pops out with an audible click that echoes through the car.

“Karen are you hurt?”

She glances at him. Hurt? Why would he think she was hurt? They were just talking and she was fine. And then Frank made his presence known and they weren’t and she doesn’t know what he thought happened in between.

Hurt? No. No. She’s fine. She’s not even tipsy.
She shakes her head, remembers he can’t see her, tells him no and his expression doesn’t change.

“There’s blood in this car,” he says. “Can’t you smell it?”

No, she can’t but that doesn’t mean it’s not there. And that in turn means that unless someone is playing a very cruel joke on her and happens to know things about her and Frank that no one on earth could possibly know, that Frank is out there somewhere and he’s hurt and bleeding.

She reaches up, flicks on the interior light, scans the dash and the steering wheel. There’s a dark red smear on the radio, another on the steering wheel, more on her upholstery and she’s sure she has it on her clothes now. Another arc against her window and a handprint on the side mirror.

“Oh God,” she whispers.

Next to her Matt is twisting in his seat. He’s saying her name and something about going to the police. Asking questions that she knows the answers to but can’t tell him, won’t tell him. And all she can see is the blood, already brown and congealed and oh God, how long does blood take to do that? How long ago was he here and where is he now? How far could he have gone?

She looks out onto the street, wonders if she’d be able to track blood from her car but that seems ridiculous, even if she had Matt to help, which she won’t. But it’s started to rain a bit harder now and she doubts she’d be able to see anything.

She curses and Matt’s fingers close around her arm.

“Karen, what is going on?”

His voice is level. Steely calm. And when she looks at him she wonders how she could have ever not known that he was the Devil. That she could have ever not seen that square jaw and downturned lips and have even for one second not known it was him. How she could have heard his voice and not found that self-righteous tone, that hint of superiority.

But then again, she didn’t know that Frank was falling in love with her. That those days spent at his bedside and the nights drinking bad coffee were leading to something else. Not that he knew either -
not at the time - and maybe that’s why she missed it.

Karen Page. None so blind.

She takes a breath. She can do this. She’s allowed secrets. Even from Matt. Especially from Matt.

She turns to him, rips her eyes away from the smeared blood and the smell of death in her car.

“I’m going to take you home,” and her voice is amazingly level and clear and when he starts shaking his head she carries on without paying him heed. “I am going to take you home Matt. And I am going to leave you there and you are not going to follow me. You are not going to come to my apartment and you are not going to try and find out what’s going on.”

“Karen-”

“No,” she pulls her arm out of his grip. “Matt. I am asking you to do this for me. If you don’t I’ll know and then everything that’s happened tonight is for nothing.”

She waits for him to get her meaning, even though every second that ticks by feels hours, every minute like another nail in Frank’s coffin. But she holds out, waits to see that he gets it, that he accepts it. She’s so tired of this, weary to her core that she has to guard herself like this from him.

He sets his mouth in a thin line, makes a sound in the back of his throat that sounds both unsure and angry, swallows heavily.

“Are you in danger?” he asks and she’s 100% truthful when she tells him she isn’t. That she’s safe and that no one is trying to hurt her. At least not in the capacity that he thinks.

Frank would never knowingly bring trouble to her door. He’d rather bleed out in the streets, she knows this. If he’s looking for her, needing her help, he’s doing it only because he knows she’ll be safe.

He sits back in the seat and suddenly she’s pissed that they are even having this conversation. He’s not her protector, her husband, her father. He’s a man she once kissed on her front step under some
fairy lights. He’s a man she hasn’t had a proper conversation with for more than six months. And that conversation involved mostly him and his apologies and her sending him packing out of her front door. So yeah, it’s sweet and all that he’s so worried about her and that he doesn’t want anything bad to happen to her, but she’s not asking permission.

She doesn’t wait for his answer, for him to make some sage decision about what he thinks is best for her. She pulls out into the road, heads east towards his apartment, driving faster than she should. She has no doubt he can smell the particular brand of her anxiety, can feel her shaking next to him but she doesn’t care. And all the time she’s looking, staring into dark alleys and shadowed alcoves, looking for any sign of Frank. Anything at all.

But there’s nothing and she doesn’t know what she expected. The Punisher thumbing a lift on the roadside?

When she stops outside his apartment block, Matt turns to her and he sucks in breath like he’s about to say something but she cuts him off.

“Please Matt, don’t make me regret this,” she says and he chews on the inside of his lip, tilts his head slightly. “Please, just do this for me.”

It seems to take a long time for him to say anything but she waits him out even though she wants to toss him out the car. And she doesn’t think it’s really more than a few seconds.

“I won’t follow you,” he says slowly and she can hear how hard this is for him to say, to accept. “But you need to promise me you’ll call me when you get home. If I haven’t heard from you by 2 am, I’m coming okay?”

She wants to object, wants to tell him he can take 2 am and shove it up his ass but she needs to get out of here and the truth is maybe it is the least she could do to help alleviate his fears. Being worried for her isn’t the worst thing in the world. And she gets it. It’s hard being away from those you love and just because they don’t love you back doesn’t mean it’s any easier.

“Okay,” she says. “2 am.”

He nods once. Short. Sharp. Touches her arm gently and gets out of the car.
“Goodnight Karen. Be safe.”

She’s relieved to be alone as she pulls away. That she can curse and shake and let the tears come if that is what they are planning to do. That she can say Frank’s name aloud and shout at him and there’s no one to hear it.

She heads to her apartment block, unable to fathom where else he would have gone. He has to know she moved - that’s not the type of thing to have escaped his notice even if he never intended to see her again - but oh God, what if he doesn’t? What if he’s pulled himself to the seventh floor of her old building? Or frightened Howard? What if he’s back at the diner? Or the docks? What if he decided this was too much and actually went to go and find some real help, someone who actually could stitch him back together? How can she find him then?

She shakes her head. This isn’t helping. She isn’t helping. He wanted her to find him, so he’ll go somewhere she’ll go too. Although why the hell he didn’t stay by her car is a fucking mystery to her.

“Damn you Frank,” she whispers as she turns into her road. “Damn you.”

Her apartment block looks the same as always from the outside. A gloomy building standing tall against the night sky, the foyer illuminated and Irene behind the desk staring at the door with an expression like curdled milk. But then again what would be different? A banner across the front with Frank’s name on it and an arrow? A radio announcement blaring from the roof about where The Punisher can be found? Irene rushing out to tell her there’s a thickset man waiting for her and she just casually let him in, never you mind?

She tells herself to stop. This isn’t helping. She knows that this is just her brain’s way of trying to cope, of trying to find some light and easy way to deal with, but this isn’t light and easy. This is really fucking serious and all it’s doing is distracting her from the task at hand.

She breaks it down. Step one: find Frank. Step two: who the fuck knows?

She gets out of her car, crosses the street and has no idea where to go next. He could literally be anywhere and she has yet to figure out a good reason why it should be here, other than he would have known she was going to come here eventually. Which means he walked from her car. Which means he’s a fucking idiot.

She slips through the chainlink fence that leads to the alley behind the building. Irene would
probably have kittens if she saw that but Karen can’t bring herself to care. Having kittens would be violating the no pets policy anyway and then they’d have something in common.

_Fuck it Karen, stop it._

She shakes her head as she makes her way through some scrubby grass to the back of the building. These racing thoughts are never helpful and they always seem to pop up at the worst times imaginable. On some level she gets that this is how she processes stress. With humour and sarcasm, a decent amount of self-deprecation. But she doesn’t have time for that now. She needs to find Frank. Wherever the fuck he may be.

She calls his name softly as she walks but all she does is startle some teenagers smoking and making out behind the dumpster. They give her guilty looks and grumble as they walk away flicking their cigarette butts into the long grass.

She ignores them, walks a little further, scanning the ground for blood, for tracks, for him. But he’s not there and she can feel the panic starting to gnaw at her, settling in like an evil little demon that moves slowly but methodically through her veins, little starbursts of fear and frustration shooting through her with every step.

She calls for him again. Let him be here, oh God, let him know to have come here. Let him not be trying to climb a seven floor fire escape at her old place. He must know, he has to.

She stands for a moment, surveying the no man’s land around her. The bins, the cracked flagstones and the inappropriately cheerful yellow weeds growing through them, a few old broken benches. This was once a yard, she’s sure that before the recession hit in 2008 it was probably quite nice. Maintained for residents, a place kids could play and mom’s could gossip. But now it looks like a concrete wasteland, ugly and lifeless, stinking of garbage and part of her hopes he isn’t here. That he hasn’t come here to die in the stench of the trash. No matter who he is or what he’s done he deserves better than that.

She shakes the thought away. He’s not dead and she’s being overly dramatic.

“Come on Frank,” she says to the gloom. “It’s been a long day.”

And then she hears the sound of a boot scraping on metal, the whisper of wind against leather. It lifts her hair, brings her the smell of blood, the acrid stench of sweat and dirt and she follows it around the
He’s sitting on the bottom step of the fire escape, gathered back into the shadows, hunched over and shaking so badly that even in the low light, she can see the vibration of his shoulders, the way his hand trembles on the railing.

The universe gives her a moment for relief. A second to feel that elation that she’s found him now and everything will be okay. He’s there and he’s alive and he might look more like shadow than man, but none of that matters because they’re occupying the same space at the same time and whatever happened she can fix it.

And then she sees him pitch to the side, spit blood onto the ground

And the moment is gone.

She runs.

She stops caring about her high heels and her sore feet, her pencil skirt that’s a little too narrow to allow for big strides. He’s here. He’s alive. For how long she doesn’t know but she intends to make sure it’s a while yet. This isn’t the universe righting the wrong that is Frank Castle. She won’t let it be.

The moon moves out from behind a cloud as she draws near, throwing everything into stark relief and shining on him, his coat, his hair, the black pool of blood at his side.

She hunkers down in front of him, skinning her knees and barely noticing the pain. Her heart beating in her chest like a little bird’s and then sinking low into her belly as she surveys the damage.

“Frank,” she says softly touching his face, feeling the hot stickiness of his blood as she does. “Frank.”

He lifts his head slightly, seems to have to throw a lot of effort into focusing on her. His pupils are huge, devouring his eyes and his face is whiter than the skull on his chest. He looks terrible. Worse than when she saw him for the first time chained to that hospital bed. Worse than when he took her out for coffee and killed two men in front of her. His eyes are puffy and there’s a nasty gash on his cheek, bruises on his jaw. His clothes are ripped, the coat’s arm almost hanging clean off, the shirt
down the middle and even in the dim light she can see blood seeping into the material, staining the faded cotton and turning the skull on his chest from a dirty white to a brownish red.

“Ma’am,” he says looking at her like he’s only just recognised her, and a strangely pained smile crosses his face. “Ma’am, I think I fucked up.”

“It’s okay,” she says. “It’s okay.”

It’s not, but it has to be. This is not her life. This is not her birthday. She is not done.

He shakes his head, pulls his coat open and she can see his left side is in tatters, the shirt torn down to threads and blood oozing thick and red from slashes in his side.

She claps a hand over her mouth.

“Sorry,” he rasps.

“It’s okay,” she says again like it will magically be if she just keeps saying it. “Don’t try to talk.”

He shakes his head, spits more blood onto the concrete, let’s go of the railing and lets his hand fall to her shoulder, smallest softest squeeze which is nothing like him at all. He always holds on tight. That night at the cabin she felt like he was holding himself back not to crush her ribs and when he held her on the roof it was like he was trying to bind himself into her, make them part of the same body. And now this. This weak grasp that seems like some kind of final insult. This isn’t how he touches. This isn’t how he holds on.

“Wanted to see you…” he grits out. “Say… say good--”

“Stop it,” she says and despite his obvious distress he manages to look like she’s just given him a beating on top of the one he’s just had. “You are not fucking dying on me Frank Castle.”

And she realises that this is when step two of the plan is supposed to kick in. The one that she labelled “who the fuck knows” and hoped that by the time step one was finished someone would.
She has nothing. Literally nothing.

But she’s not leaving him here to die. She won’t.

“Can you stand?” she asks and he looks at her like she’s asked him to do a jig and fly to Mars.

He starts to shake his head but she’s grabbing his hands and hauling him to his feet, pulling him out of the shadows, which seem to cling to him, reluctant to give up their hold. And she doesn’t think about how the last time she did this they danced on the roof and she told him she knew. Because she did. Because they both did.

“Come on you son of a bitch,” she says as she shoves her shoulder underneath his arm. “You are not fucking dying on my birthday. You are not giving me that.”

He groans, grabs at his side, like he’s trying to hold himself together, grips at her clothes, his movements clumsy and awkward as he loses his balance and she has to bear his full weight for a second as he finds it again.

He's big. He's heavy. He could crush her like a bug and she's already breathless.

He staggers, turns to her and grabs at her hip and she throws an arm across his belly, rams her shoulder into him again so that he’s pushed upright. He winces, takes a shuddering breath that she thinks is only shuddering because he can’t scream. But he stands.

He stands.

Because she won’t let him fall. She won’t do to him what he did to her. She can be better than that. They both can.

He’s saying something about not going to a hospital and she tells him to shut up. She’s handling this, because he - big man baby that he is - can’t. Because he did not fucking come to her to die on her birthday. He came to live and she can make that happen.
Because she owes him and when he walks out of here as good as new, she’ll know she’s at least one third of the way out of her debt.

_Fuck you Frank. Fuck you._

She half stumbles, half drags him to the door of her building and Irene is already looking up from her desk, half moon glasses on the edge of her nose and her mouth pulled into that grimace that makes her look permanently offended.

“Frank,” she says and she doesn’t really know how much he can comprehend, let alone hear. “Frank, you need to take my lead on this. Don’t look up okay.”

She thinks he nods, can’t be sure but it doesn’t matter. He’s not going to be on his feet for much longer and if he falls over there won’t be much of a farce to hold on to either way. And she’s praying her own legs don’t buckle, because he’s dead weight and she’s not cut out to be keeping musclebound vigilantes standing. Except apparently, she is.

She pulls his coat closed, slides a hand around the back of his neck, wincing as she feels blood and scabs against her palm, and pulls his head down to her shoulder, fumbles at his waist. He’s already grabbing at her, bunching the fabric of her blouse between his fingers in an attempt to stay standing. So there’s that. He gets it. On some level.

She drags him close, lips to his temple and pushes the door open with her foot, let’s out a giggle that she hopes sounds less fake than she thinks it does and steers him towards the lift, aware that Irene’s gaze is drilling a hole into her back.

“Yes Baby,” she says and can’t honestly believe how ridiculous it sounds to be called The Punisher “Baby” or any term of endearment really. “Those shots were _such_ a bad idea.”

His hand slips from her back and she grabs at it, pulls it back and holds him there, staggering under his weight. She can see he won’t last long, his knees already buckling and if Irene decides she needs to assist, then all bets are off.

She presses the button for the lift, hopes she doesn’t smear any blood on the wall, giggles again, lets out her best approximation of an airheaded shriek.
“Stop it,” she says and hears him grunt questioningly into her neck. “Just wait until we get upstairs. We’re almost there.”

She glances over her shoulder at Irene who is staring at them tight-lipped. She gives her what she hopes is something between a naughty and conspiratorial smile. It really doesn’t matter what this woman thinks about her comings and goings. Or who she has them with. Irene seems to have already made up her mind about literally every unattached woman in the block and that’s her thing. She guesses if she’s now filed away as “Karen Page, sluttiest slut to ever slut, slutting it up in her apartment” it makes very little difference.

She kisses his cheek, makes some more wildly inappropriate comments, as the bell for the lift chimes and she maneuvers him through the doors, giggling like an idiot as she does.

“Come on,” she laughs again, shouts goodnight to Irene and sees the older woman roll her eyes as she presses the button for the fifth floor and wedges herself against him as the doors shut.

He groans again, grasps weakly at her and it makes her want to cry that somehow he’s been reduced to this. This man who has literally beaten death and flipped off the world now this boneless mess that can barely stand. The man who held her so tightly that she could hardly breathe and didn’t much care if she did, now looking to her to keep him upright, to be the strength that once flowed in his veins.

“It’s gonna be okay Frank,” she says again. “You’re gonna be fine.”

She won’t let that be a lie. She won’t.

He mumbles something when the lift reaches her floor but she shushes him, drags him out of the lift and down the corridor to her door, fumbles for her keys and hauls him inside. She’s finally caving under his weight and he seems to understand this and reaches for the wall, bloody handprint smearing against the cream paintwork like a sigil, a sign for the Lord not to come and take the first born son. She grits her teeth, This is ridiculous.

She is ridiculous.

She kicks the door closed as Pickle comes charging out of the shadows like a small ball of rage and ferocity, meowing loudly and aggressively attacking the side of the couch, which is usually a sign she thinks she’s been left alone for too long.
Karen ignores her.

“Come on Frank,” she says as she pulls his coat off, lets it fall into a bloodied heap on her floor and then herds him towards the bed, pushes him down on his ass. He lets out a shuddering breath and looks up at her blinking rapidly, like he’s completely unsure why he’s here and who she is or what she’s doing.

She berated herself once for imagining they were on a collision course headed directly to her bedroom and look how far they’ve come?

The universe aka High Bitch of Cruel Jokes.

She shakes the thought away.

He’s swaying a little again, looking ready to pitch forward and she knows if he falls she will never get him up again, so she shoves him backwards, hauls his legs up so he’s lying diagonally across the bed. He’s bleeding into her sheets, staining the white fabric red and he’s starting to shiver even though her apartment feels unbearably hot to her.

“Frank,” she whispers. “Frank stay with me okay? Stay with me.”

She grabs her phone. Punches a few keys and dials Claire. Listens to it ring and ring and go to voicemail, screams a garbled message into the receiver and calls again, let’s it ring as she grabs a blanket off the couch and covers him with it, touches his face to make sure he’s still awake.

Voicemail.

This isn’t happening. This cannot be happening.

But it might be. It really might.

She looks at her phone, blue light shining cheerfully in the dark room and sighs.
Fuck it.

She’s getting ready to punch 911 into the keypad when suddenly Claire’s face appears on the display and she’s so relieved that part of her wants to let herself have a good cry before she answers it. It feels like a remarkable achievement when she doesn’t.

And then she babbling to Claire about what’s happening, about the mostly dead man in her apartment and how she has to save him and she has no idea what to do and Claire is telling her that she’s on her way, to keep pressure on the wound, to elevate his head and talk to him and keep him awake, keep him warm. Stop him going into shock.

She’ll come, she’ll be there.

*You can do this Karen. You can.*

And she does. She drops her phone, kicks off her shoes and climbs on her bed, towel in her hands. She pulls his head awkwardly into her lap and tells herself not to think about how cold he feels, nor how much he’s shaking. She reaches down to press on the wounds on his side and he moans aloud but doesn’t try and stop her.

And when Pickle, seemingly having worked her passive aggression out on the couch, jumps up and curls at her side, she’s never been so grateful for the day the cat walked into her life and her heart.

That’s how she stays until Claire arrives, holding him, trying to stop his bleeding with her hands, talking soft and low and mostly nonsense save for one unassailable truth.

“I’m holding on Frank. I’m not going to let you go.”
All I can breathe is your life

Chapter Notes

Okay so, here is chapter two of this extended interlude. It is unlikely I will update this fast again, but as I left the last chapter in a bit of a cruel place I had decided I would post them in quick succession.

I have a rather lofty and well, frankly fanciful goal of finishing the entire part three of this series by the end of the month. This is because September will see me completely out of commission until about the 23rd because of an enormous work project.

This is however very pie in the sky and I don't think it will be possible especially as I seem incapable of writing short chapters (and also for the most part don't like to), but I am going to try. I have a portion of the next chapter written so if nothing else I am hoping that can be up in the next little while. But the chapter after that is probably going to take a little longer because, well you'll see when we get there. Suffice to say I have never really written anything like I am planning for chapter 5 so I have no idea how long it might take me.

Anyway, I will get around to answering everyone's lovely reviews ASAP. I just thought you would probably prefer me to beat this current chapter into shape. In the meantime, thank you all for your kind words.

So, let's find out what happens to Frank shall we?

Title is from Iris by Goo Goo Dolls. Come on you had to know they were going to show up.

She washes his blood off in the shower.

There’s a lot of it. Apparently not as much as she thought, but a lot. Too much. It’s in her hair and on her skin, trapped under her nails. She struggles. It’s sticky and it clings to her much like he couldn’t, and she has to use a nailbrush to scrape at it, to turn her skin almost as pink as the water swirling around the plug and ebbing away.

She doesn’t think her clothes will make it, her white blouse bloodied and torn, grey pinstripe skirt equally ruined. No matter though. They fell in the line of duty to a good cause. That of saving Frank Castle’s life. It’s a small price to pay. Insignificant even.

He’s always getting blood on her anyway and she doesn’t care. She can’t. He didn’t want to bring this to her and he did and it’s done now. There’s no going back.
Her skinned knees sting under the spray as she rinses off the last of the soap. They were worse than she thought and she’s bleeding and bloody like a child that fell playing hide-and-seek in a school playground, cried for her mother and then got her scrapes painted with hydrogen peroxide by a severe school nurse, too old and jaded to care about childish mishaps.

She doesn’t have any hydrogen peroxide but she does have crumpled tube of antiseptic cream somewhere and that’ll have to do. It’s not high on her list of priorities now. In fact her actual priorities are not even making that cut at the moment.

She turns off the water and steps out of the shower, grabs a towel and wraps it around herself. She stands for a minute dripping onto the bath mat and staring at the garish turquoise tiles on the floor, the strange shell mosaic on the wall that someone, once upon a time, must have thought looked cheerful and fun. If she’s honest it does lift her spirits a bit, but then after tonight her baseline is not exactly high.

Or maybe it is. He is, after all, alive. He is stable. She thinks that’s pretty fucking fantastic all on its own.

He’s also mostly naked and in her bed too. The universe has a pretty fucking sick sense of humour.

She dries herself, dabs at her legs with some gauze. It stings again, makes her catch her breath as she presses down, and then retreats in a blissful rush of endorphins. She’s going to have to wear pants for the next little while. She draws the line at plasters on her knees, especially as the last time she bought them, the pharmacy was only stocking kids’ ones and her choices were *Beauty and the Beast* or *Mickey Mouse*. That seems a step too far. She is, after all, a grown-ass woman. She’s had a birthday and everything to prove it.

But then again, she also has skinned knees, and her pajamas, neatly folded on the toilet, is a pair of purple check flannel bottoms and a matching tank top with a sleepy looking white daisy on it. It even says “Sweet Dreams” and, after tonight, maybe that’s the biggest joke of all.

It’s also not exactly how she imagined dressing when Frank Castle was in her bed for the first time inasmuch as she ever let herself imagine it in any real capacity. But as she already said, the universe is playing a pretty sick game tonight and she’s not convinced that she’s won yet. She’s not going to let a narcoleptic flower be the deciding factor.

Right now, Claire’s with him. Claire, dressed up to the nines, cutting her date short to rush back to Hell’s Kitchen and save a man she probably shouldn’t. She says he’ll be okay. Says that while he’s been stabbed with the fucking nastiest blade she’s seen since they stitched Matt up a few weeks ago,
nothing major has been hit. No arteries, no organs. He’ll be a bit woozy and he needs to stay put. He needs to eat. He needs to sleep and he needs to take it easy at least for a little while. She’ll do what she can about antibiotics and painkillers, even though that means she’s stepped off the very grey area she was already operating in and straight into something very dark and very not legal.

Claire is a godsend. She really is. Karen thinks she might just be about ready to qualify for sainthood.

It frightens her to even imagine where she would be now if Claire hadn’t answered. If she would be at a hospital full of police officers who wouldn’t let her see him. Who’d ask questions and post guards and then probably kill him anyway. Poison in his drip, torn stitches. It would be easy. Too easy.

She pulls her pajamas on, sits down on the edge of the bath, closes her eyes, gives herself a moment to poke at that slowly dissipating ball of anxiety in her belly.

He could have hemorrhaged. But he didn't.

He could have gone into shock. But he didn't.

He could have died. But he didn't.

He is, after all, a tough son of a bitch.

Still scares her though. The “what ifs” always do.

They always will.

Pickle is scratching at the door angrily and, when she opens it, the cat shoots inside, eyes huge and tail poofed like a feather duster before turning around and casually strolling out again. She shakes her head. The world has gone totally fucking nuts tonight. There is no reason a cat that's already wacky at the best of times, should be any different.

She stands up, towels off her hair, rakes a comb through it, gets rid of the worst tangles. The rest will have to wait.
Karen Page. Living on the edge.

The Punisher in her bed.

Oh God. The Punisher in her bed.

She guesses it’s about time to see to that very specific turn of events. She guesses she can’t really avoid it much longer. She glances at herself in the mirror. Hair wet and stringy, skin still pink and dewy. But no blood. Not even a speck and that makes her feel better. At least she won't be going Lady Macbeth on anyone's ass. At least not tonight.

Claire has him propped up against some pillows when she walks into the room. The light is low, not like before when she arrived and turned every lamp on as bright as she could. But still, he looks like a shadow against the sheets. His face is a mess, a patchwork of bruises and crusting scabs, skin swollen and purpled. Claire says he won’t be pretty for a while but there shouldn’t be noticeable scars, except on his torso and shoulder where the deepest wounds are.

She doesn’t care about pretty. She’s not sure about him though. He does have his strange little quirks, his ways of surprising her that seem totally at odds with the barbarity and severity of his crimes. His coffee addiction, his love of dogs and she’d warrant a guess, other furry creatures. His taste in music. Don’t you know?

(That’s a pretty dress ma’am.)

So it could be that pretty matters. She’s not sure. Even if it does, it’s probably only low importance right now.

She makes herself look at him. Forces herself to accept the reality of this, to accept the ugliness of this thing - whatever it may be - that happened tonight. He’s naked from the waist up except for the bandages covering his side and his shoulder and her sheets are streaked with dirt and blood, but she finds it very hard to care. They can go in the wash tomorrow. What doesn’t come out will stain. And that doesn’t matter because that’s just how things work. There are worse things in life than some of Frank’s blood marring her bed. Like the fact that he could have died. Like the fact that he was so ready to and had come to say goodbye. And Christ, she doesn’t want to think about that. About how he needlessly dragged himself across town looking for her. How he didn’t come here so she could save him but because he thought it important that she should know, that someone at least should witness his passing and maybe mourn him. That there would still be someone who cared
enough to do that.

She pushes the thought away. She can’t dwell on that now. He’s not suicidal, that much she knows. If there was ever a time for that it’s passed, and while she’s pretty sure he considered it, pretty sure he wanted to be there in the ground with Maria and Lisa and Frank Jr, he’s chosen a different path. Maybe one that's darker than the first, but different nonetheless. That’s not to say she’s never considered this cause of his could be suicide by proxy, a subverted silver lining while he gets to annihilate rapists and drug dealers and child pornographers in the meantime. He’s not suicidal no, but he does have a death wish and maybe the only thing keeping him here is that he’s too stubborn to die.

*Leave it. Move on. There are more important things to deal with now.* She can dissect and analyse the implications of this once things have settled. Once they’ve talked and he’s healed, however long that may take.

She moves across the room to where Claire is perched on the edge of the bed with a bowl of warm water and a cloth that she's using to wipe the blood and dirt off his skin.

He's quiet, a little unfocused, but staring at the wall as if he can somehow beat her apartment into submission with his gaze. He *is* letting Claire see to him, although he’s refusing to look at her either because he’s trying to hold onto some of his dignity or because he’s simply too high from blood loss and ibuprofen to care. Claire isn’t fazed, at least not anymore.

She was at first. She was incredibly fazed - and it could be that “fazed” is too much of a euphemism to be remotely accurate - when she arrived and realised that this apparent half dead man in Karen's bed was The Punisher aka The Scourge of Hell’s Kitchen aka What The Fuck Are You Doing Karen Page?

And somehow in the midst of garbled explanations and pleas to just get him stabilised and she’d explain everything later Karen had managed to stop her reaching for her phone and calling every cop in the city to the front door. At the time it had felt like it was close, that there was every reason for Claire to ignore her and do the wise thing, the right thing. Police, ambulance. Fucking FBI if that was necessary. Hand Frank over and wash her hands of it. But then Claire was never one to take the easy way out. She’s seen Matt through God knows what, and while Frank might be a step up (or down, depending on your perspective), this wasn’t all that different. And she saved him, stitched him up, pulled his pieces back together.

She doesn’t know how Claire does it every day and then seems to come home and do it most nights too. This city’s vigilante problem would disappear overnight if something were to happen to her. There’s just no way any of them could survive without her.
But that too comes with a price. There’s a payoff, a comeuppance of sorts. Because, while Karen
knows that Claire tries to keep herself in the dark about the things Matt gets up to, she doesn’t think
she’s going to adopt the same policy towards Frank. He’s a mass murderer, she not going to let that
slide. She’s going to demand answers. And frankly, she’s owed them and Karen knows she isn’t
walking out of here until she tells her the whys and whens of how all this came to be. And maybe it
won’t be so bad. She’s kept a lot of things locked up inside lately, she holds onto the secret of Frank
Castle like he’s her truth and she won’t share it - whatever there may or may not be to share - and
maybe it’s time for all that to end. Maybe it’s time to unburden.

“He’s eaten,” Claire nods at an empty bowl on the side table. “Not much but enough. He’ll live. For
better or worse.”

Claire’s voice is dry, slightly exasperated and Karen nods. He does look better or maybe that's just
her own wishful thinking but he's not shivering and while he's still the same colour as her sheets
that's a vast improvement on his clammy corpse grey hue from earlier.

“Do you want some tea? Coffee?”

Claire stops what she's doing. Straightens up. Seems to consider the question for a while as if it is far
more important than it really is. As if the decision weighs heavily on her shoulders and she needs to
examine every conceivable outcome.

“You got anything stronger?”

Karen grins. “Vodka? Gin? I think I might have some Bourbon in the cupboard.”

“Now you're talking.”

“Why don't you get it?” She nods at Frank. “I don’t mind taking over here.”

That earns her a mildly suspicious look but Claire doesn't say anything as she hands over the cloth
and heads off to the kitchen cursing as Pickle charges under feet and trips her up. The cat is a
menace. A ball of black Hazard Fluff designed to turn her and everyone else who enters her
apartment into a slave. Those who resist will be summarily destroyed with teeth or claws.
Maybe Ellison was right after all. Maybe Karen Page really does know how to pick them.

She sits down on the bed, wedges herself in next to Frank’s hip and leans across him to plant one arm into the mattress close to his hand. He smells of soil and sweat. Copper. So much copper. It’s everywhere and the room stinks of it.

She looks down at him, tries to see through the bruises and the blood, the dirt. He seems small, frail even and she hates that because he’s neither. He’s big and powerful and while he’s not all buff, oiled muscle like a WWE superstar or a professional bodybuilder, he’s defined, corded and hard. He could break her and, in a wild contradiction, that’s part of the reason he’s always made her feel safe. Because he knows his own strength - he does - but sometimes he doesn’t know all of it, doesn’t know it as well as he should and that’s why he’s always held a little too tight, gripped a little too hard, stolen her breath and kept it for himself and that was a part of him she always thought of as constant and unbreakable. And admitting that she could be wrong is so, so hard.

But she is and she does and he looks deflated and diminished, as if he shrunk and sagged when the blood ran out of his veins.

She shakes her head. He’s going to be fine. He will be. So help her God, Frank Castle is going to walk out of this apartment one day better than he has been in years. She’ll keep him safe when he can’t.

She is not done.

“Frank,” she touches his face and he turns his head to look at her, blinks a few times. He’s disoriented and his pupils are huge and blown but he knows her. She sees it in the way his expression changes, how his eyes soften and he stops grinding his teeth, how he doesn’t look away and stops taking his impotent rage out on her walls.

She runs her thumb along his cheekbone. It’s badly bruised but he doesn’t flinch, even though he probably should. But, then again, when he touched her bruises it wasn’t sore. Not even slightly. Maybe this is what they can do for one another. Maybe this is their bond. They don’t hurt each other.

Except they do. They really do.

“You're okay,” she says softly. “I'm just going to clean you up a bit.”
He nods slowly, as if he needs time to understand her words, decipher them so that they make sense and she wants to cry with how weak he is. This isn't him. This isn't him at all. Yes he's tough and he's mean and he breaks her heart without even trying. Yes, he’s difficult and there have been many, many times since they first met that she’s wished things were different, that those flashes of humour and affection would be more commonplace and he wouldn’t be living this double life where he shows her his sweetness and deference and everyone else his rage. But as she runs the cloth across his face and neck and he accepts it, weak as a newborn, she finds herself wishing he would fight her. Resist somehow. That he'd object to being babied like this.

But he doesn't. So she carries on. Long, gentle strokes against his skin, the hard lines of his collarbones, the dent of his breastbone. Over and over, wiping away at the grime and the blood, the water turning a ghastly grayish pink at each rinse. He watches her. His eyes are heavy and bruised but she’s aware of his gaze. It burns her, more so than usual. She can feel its hardness against her skin, the way he’s drawing her in, taking notes like he always does and filing them away. It doesn't scare her. It’s one thing that never has. His eyes could bore into her blood and her bones and her soul if she has one and she wouldn’t look away, wouldn’t crumble under his scrutiny. She has more power here than him. She always has.

She rinses the cloth, runs it across his ribs, his belly and, when his skin turns to gooseflesh and he sucks in a sharp breath, she glances at him to see where she’s hurt, where she needs to be softer, kinder, but the look on his face, the way he’s chewing on his lip and swallowing heavily tells her that has nothing to do with pain and everything to do with something else. Something darker and wilder and scarier than either of them could imagine. Except she thinks they both could. They both have.

Truth is, he’s not even attempting to hide it anymore. Not even a little bit. May be that he doesn’t have the energy to expend trying, may be that he doesn’t want to. And even though this now feels like apocalyptic levels of disaster, she’s starting to wonder if the bigger disaster would be to carry on pretending it isn’t there. Denying it. Trying to let go over and over again and never truly succeeding.

Him and her and he's in her bed and he needs her and cares for her and would set the world on fire to save her. It doesn’t matter that she doesn’t need saving. Not now. Unless maybe it's from him. Him and this rage that lives inside him. The beast that lets itself be gentled under her hands.

She’d do the same for him. She already has.

Because she knows. She knows. And so does he.

She's aware that there are tears on her cheeks. She's not even angry about it. In fact she's amazed she's held on this long. Keeping the floodgates bolted throughout this ordeal is some kind of victory all on its own. Could be that she deserves a medal, a commendation of sorts. Karen Page: intrepid reporter, lover of vigilantes and holder back of tears under extreme duress.
And then his hand twitches next to her and she feels his fingers closing around her arm anchored in the mattress. His grip is weak but it’s warm and he's holding on and not needing anyone to help him. He rubs his thumb across the inside of her wrist, presses down slightly, maybe because he wants to, maybe just to see if he could. He might not be strong now, but that’s okay, he will be again.

She gives him a watery smile, returns to the business of cleaning him. His neck, the slow and steady pulse where she put her lips once upon a time and made a promise, his shoulders, down his arm to his free hand. He lifts it off the sheets for her and she rubs the cloth across his palm, between his fingers, against his wrist where she can see his veins, that other nexus of life and part of her longs to put her lips there too. To make another promise. One she can keep. One that won’t make her a liar.

But maybe they’re not ready for that. Maybe not yet. This is, after all, a crisis situation. This is not the time to be falling in love or falling into bed or falling into any other nightmare that could exist when The Punisher and the woman he calls “ma’am” are in the same orbit. Because terrible things happen when they are. Terrible, wonderful, fucked up, amazing things.

His knuckles are bloodied and she reaches for the Bactine in Claire’s bag, sprays it on the barely scabbed wounds and sees him flinch as she does. It’s instinctive and stupid and ridiculous but she tugs his hand to her and blows gently, feels him stiffen next to her, watches as his chest turns to gooseflesh for the second time in minutes, jaw clenching and nipples puckering. And she’s screaming at herself to stop, to leave this, to go and call Claire and let her take over, but his hand tightens at her wrist and his thumb draws another circle onto her skin, harder this time, with purpose. And somehow he makes that feel like gratitude and an apology and something else all at once.

She looks up, meets his eyes. He staring at her in that hard, unwavering way. Even in his current state it still manages to border on lewd even though it isn’t. She’s wondered before how he was with Maria, if she’d also found him magnetic in this way. Or if he was so very different then. If nothing of The Punisher lurked in his blood. If he could just be the man he was meant to be, the one that saved a box of kittens from the side of the road and then brought his girl a pretty dress to make up for a ruined date. She guesses she’ll never know. And she doesn’t want to. The man he was then is not for her, can never be for her.

“You can put your hand down now,” she takes a deep breath. “We’re done.”

His hand stays where it is though, wavers for a few seconds and then he clumsily touches her face, wipes the tears off her cheek and slides it into her wet hair, cups the back of her head. And then, seemingly with great effort, he drags her close so that her forehead is touching his, pressing against her and breathing heavily in time with her, and all she can think is how the last time they were like this she thought he was going to kiss her. That he’d cover her mouth with his and nothing else would matter.
Except it would have. And that’s fine too.

She closes her eyes, wraps her hand around his forearm. Squeezes. She can smell his breath, heavy and bloody, his skin, sweaty under the antiseptic. And yes, that purity is still there. Even now, it’s still there.

He says her name soft and low, weak but there's something in it. Something that sounds like him, the toughest, meanest son of a bitch she’s ever met. Something deep. Foundational. His voice is raw and hoarse and she thinks of when he told her about Lisa and her never realised grey tabby called Daisy and how his voice had cracked then. How he'd sounded like he was pulling pieces of himself apart just to force the words out of his mouth. How this sounds like that too.

His fingers press into her scalp and his chest heaves, shudders. And she turns her head so that her lips brush his arm, presses a kiss into his skin.

She could stay like this, she realises. This is all it has to be. Ever. His one hand in her hair, the other wrapped around her arm, his breath on her skin. It would be enough. She would take it. She thinks he would too and it occurs to her that that thought, if it has ever entered his head, is probably more frightening to him than the idea of fucking her, of having her. But then again, she can’t be sure. Aside from that one infinitesimally small moment when he’s knee went between her thighs and his teeth scraped her throat, he’s always been about the confessions. The feelings. The honesty. Until he wasn’t.

Until then. Until now.

Because she knows. She knows.

Eventually she pulls away and his hands fall to his sides, energy expended and his eyes are glassy. She leans in, presses her lips to his forehead, lingers, the taste of his sweat and blood in her mouth.

“You're going to be okay Frank.”

It feels less like a lie now. More like a promise. More like something she can control.
He nods, his fingers finding hers again and giving a weak squeeze.

“Ma'am.”

“You sleep now. You're safe. We'll sort everything out tomorrow.”

She scrubs a hand across her face, straightens up. Pickle is rubbing against her foot and intermittently flopping onto her back to claw carpets and toes and anything else she might see.

And when she turns around to look across the room, there's Claire standing in the doorway to the kitchen, one hand resting on the door frame, the other on her forehead and she’s staring at her like she doesn't know her at all and she's not sure if she wants to.

“What are you doing Karen?” she asks and her words come out quickly and it's obvious she's not talking about the here and now, although it's a fair bet that that is at least part of it. But no, this is a far more generic and all encompassing question. The type you ask a one time fling when you find out that he's The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen, the type you ask yourself when you realise you're in love with a mass murderer. It’s not so much a demand for an explanation, as it is a comment on your life choices. A tempered “what the fuck” often moonlighting as something else but ultimately still a “what the fuck”.

Yes, it was always going to come to this. And it’s honestly a relief that it has.

She stands, slides an arm around Frank’s shoulders and eases him down as she pulls the pillows out from behind him, covers him with the duvet. She think she even sees a ghost of a smile as she switches off the bedside lamp.

The big bad Punisher mostly naked and sleeping in her bed.

Karen Page. Living on the edge. Not a hint of irony in that statement.

She inclines her head towards the kitchen and Claire stands aside to let her through. Like the rest of the apartment the kitchen is bigger than she initially thought when she saw the place. It has real counters and even an island, came fitted with a stove, fridge and a washing machine which she didn’t expect. So the decor is a little garish with it’s bright yellow cupboards and pink gingham curtains and sometimes the fridge hums a little too loudly. But overall she still thinks she got a good deal, that
Claire putting in a good word helped, that Irene’s death stare which, after tonight, will no doubt get worse, is a small price to pay.

There are two glasses of whisky on the counter and she takes one, hands the other to Claire and downs it. It burns her mouth, stings her throat and make her eyes water but she doesn’t care. She pours another, knocks that one back too.

She’s exhausted. They both are.

“I guess since I have a pair of working eyes, I probably don’t need to ask the question, but I think I want to hear it from you anyway,” Claire pours herself a refill too. “So you gonna tell me what’s going on here? You can start with why I just spent the last hour stitching The Punisher up and I didn’t call the cops and then carry on with what I just saw back there.”

Karen closes her eyes, leans against the counter, gives herself a moment to wade through this complex, convoluted series of events that led to Frank showing up half dead at her apartment, figure out how much she’s willing to say, what’s up for grabs and what she’s going to keep close to her chest. It’s not that Claire has a squeaky clean record when it comes to cleaning up vigilantes. She knows that Matt isn’t the only one who comes to her door in the dead of night needing to be patched up. She’s seen a big man in a hoodie and a petite brunette, some others that are less than regular and therefore possibly better at what they do, she doesn’t know. So no, Claire doesn’t have all the moral high ground, but it’s fair to say she has most of it. And it doesn’t really matter either way because Frank, well Frank is different. This isn’t a righteously driven hero fighting for a cause. This isn’t Matt trying to clean up a dirty city. This is a man fuelled by rage and revenge and if there is any honour and selflessness involved it comes second to vengeance, a byproduct to his war with the world. Or at least that’s what people think. Even the people who know he’s not the fascist monster he’s been made out to be.

He’s a nightmare. He’s a good man. She’s stopped trying to reconcile the two. They both just are.

She opens her eyes, looks at Claire. She’s not really sure where to start. Not even sure how much Claire already knows, how much talking her and Matt actually do and, if they do, why Frank Castle would ever come up. But then again, she doesn’t think Claire is going to care about hearing the same story again. She probably would insist on hearing Karen’s side anyway.

So she starts at the beginning. Or a good approximation thereof. She leaves out the bit where he chased her through the hospital with a shotgun. Claire knows that already and she’s very aware how childish she’s going to sound insisting that he would never have hurt her and that she was safe simply because he told her as much.
Besides it was in the papers and it is what it is. He did walk through a hospital with a shotgun, and he did shoot in her general direction and even though she believes him with all her heart because he’s shown her again and again that she can trust him, she does only have his word that she was safe.

She tells her about how her and Matt and Foggy went to see him after he was arrested, how he would only talk to her and how he called her ma’am and sometimes still can’t look her in the eye. She tells her about his family, how she helped him remember, how they were the victims of a sting operation that went tits up and left all of them lying in the dirt. That he blames himself. That he couldn’t protect them, couldn’t do his job. How he lost everything and then how he saved her life and then saved it again. How he doesn’t lie to her and he saves dogs. That he’s bad and he’s wrong and he’s messed up but she can’t hate him. That he’s good and he’s right and might be the sanest of them all and she can’t forget that. She tells her that he visited her on the roof, that up until six or so weeks ago, he would let her know he was alive, because he knew she would worry and he didn’t want that.

She leaves out the bit about Schoonover, about how she sank to her knees in the woods and told him she was done. She doesn’t tell her about the cabin and how he said "don’t you know?" and how it opened up a world of possibilities in her head that she never imagined existed. How it doesn’t matter much now. She doesn’t tell her about how he danced with her and scraped his teeth down her neck and shoved his knee between her thighs and put blood all over her dress.

It’s exhausting and she tries so hard to stick to the facts, to not sound like an infatuated teenager who fell in love with the darkness one night and never pulled herself out again. It’s also cathartic in a way she could never imagine it would be. And while she hasn’t shouted out to the world that she’s in love with Frank Castle and isn’t that just the darndest thing, all she really feels is relief. Sure she still has some secrets, or she’d like to think she does. But after tonight and what she did and what Claire saw, she’s not counting on holding onto an awful lot of them. Claire’s too smart for that anyway.

Her mouth is dry when she finishes and she downs another shot of whisky, which doesn’t really help. She should stop. It’s really late and she’s tired and she hasn’t eaten because you have to be insane to drink at Josie’s let alone eat. But it’s her birthday and it’s been remarkably shitty even if the bar for shitty birthdays isn’t that high.

She runs a hand through her hair, smiles wanly.

“So here we are,” she says. It sounds lame and trite to her ears. Must sound even worse to Claire’s.

Claire takes a deep breath, bites her lip. She really does look great, even though she’s still wearing Karen’s kitchen apron to stop getting Frank’s blood all over her cream satin dress and Karen knows she’ll have to make up for cutting her date short.
“Do you know what happened to him?” she asks.

“Tonight? No. But I can guess. He went sniffing around where he shouldn’t have been sniffing. He bit off more than he could chew. He saw someone he could save or someone he should kill and ended up nearly getting killed himself.”

“And then he dragged himself across town so you could kiss it all better?”

It’s a dig. A small one, but a dig nonetheless. She ignores it in favour of the bigger question, the scarier one. The one she’s thought since she found him hanging onto the fire escape, but hasn’t truly admitted to herself.

“He didn’t come here for me to fix him. He came to say goodbye.”

Claire considers her for a long moment. “Maybe. Or he came to the place that would give him the best chance of surviving.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think that was his plan. You should have seen him outside. He was ready to go.”

Claire shrugs in a way that seems to imply it doesn’t really matter and Karen guesses it doesn’t. He might have a death wish but he’s going to stay alive long enough to take as many bad guys down as he can. He’s not going to do anything to jeopardise that.

“He still came to you,” Claire pours herself another drink, downs it, narrows her eyes. “So you gonna answer my second question?”

Yeah, sure. Sure she will. Could be an interesting answer considering she barely knows what’s going on. Considering this is a big fucked up mess and she has no idea how tonight will change things, if it changes them at all. It’s not like she doesn’t know there’s something there. Of course she does. He does too. He said as much when he told her they had to let it go. When he chose to keep her in his heart and not in his life.

She shrugs. It really is the best she’s got.
Claire snorts but she’s smiling. She gets it.

“He looks at you like you hung the moon Karen. Maybe the stars too.”

And isn’t that just fucking hilarious? The big bad Punisher brought low by a plucky little reporter who doesn’t know when to let go, who doesn’t want to know when to let go and wouldn’t even if someone told her.

It’s ridiculous. Even more so because it’s true.

_Don’t you know?_

“I don’t know if it’s like that,” she says and she has no idea why, maybe a final attempt at self preservation, at having some kind of control over this thing that seems to burn like wildfire between them. Maybe she’s just tired and confused and overwrought.

Claire purses her lips, “Well then it’s like something that looks just like that.”

She can’t argue. It is like something. Something profound and deep and something she seems unable and unwilling to extract herself from.

“It’s a mess.”

Claire nods. Apparently she agrees. As she should.

“Look Karen, it seems to me that this,” she indicates vaguely in Frank’s direction, “is just kind of what I do. And that’s okay. I’m not climbing on my high horse, pretending that I’m somehow better than everyone else. I shouldn’t do it. I could lose my licence, I could go to jail. But most of our police force is run by Fisk and from what you’ve told me now the DA is corrupt too. And you know, if I’m saving lives, if I’m putting goodness back into the world, I can live with the risk. But that’s the payoff. I have to go to bed at night knowing that I’m causing less harm rather than more.”

Karen nods. This is all fair enough. Claire makes sense. She always does.
“I trust you Karen. You're smart. I don't think you'd be swayed by a pretty face or a little charm - not that he has either of those at the best of times. But I guess what I'm saying is I don't want to regret this and I know you can't promise me I won't so I'm not going to ask. I'm just saying that I think there's a shorter expiration date on this than on anyone else I help.”

She has no delusions about what Frank is, so this isn't a surprise. She's not going to try and win Claire over into believing that the things Frank does are good when she herself doesn't believe it.

Claire downs another shot, takes a breath.

“I'm going home. You call me if you need anything at all.” She looks down to where Pickle is winding herself around her legs, leaving trails of black fluff on her shoes. “He should be fine. The more he sleeps the better. Keep feeding him. I'll stop by tomorrow morning, help him shower if he needs it.”

“Thanks Claire. Honestly. I don't know what I would have done without you.”

“You do,” she says. “You know exactly what you would have done.”

It’s true. She would have dialled 911, she would have called Mahoney and then Foggy. Then Ellison. She would have made a huge fucking song and dance about it so that no one could have gotten near to him without their faces being splashed across the papers. She would have sat herself down in his room and chained herself to the bed. Because him loving her is less important to her than him being alive.

She nods and Claire seems to soften, no more severe Nurse Temple pissed at having to cut an apparently wonderful date short to come and stitch up another idiot who overestimated his own badassery. Just Claire. Sweet, wonderful, ever patient and yet often exasperating Claire. One of the angels who happen to walk on earth.

“And happy birthday. Looks like you got a hell of a present.”

Karen rolls her eyes and then can’t help it and she snorts, which makes Pickle jump and miaow.
Claire picks up her purse, heads to the door, stops when her hand is on the doorknob. She seems to consider something and then makes up her mind and turns. And her eyes are sparkling. “And don't worry, if I see your vigilante boyfriend I won't tell him that your other vigilante boyfriend is spending the night.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” Yes it sounds lame. Even she can hear the petulance in her voice but Claire just smirks.

“Which one?”

“Neither.”

Claire raises an eyebrow.

“Both.”

Two eyebrows now.

“Oh God Claire, just go home,” but they’re both laughing and things feel better than they have all night.

“Take care,” she pulls the door open, steps into the hall, throws her final punch. “Oh and Karen, that man lost a lot of blood, please stop diverting what he has left elsewhere.”

Karen picks a scatter cushion off the couch and tosses it at her but she’s gone and the cushion lands against the door with a thud, slides to the floor and she swears she can hear Claire laughing over the sound of her heels clicking against the wooden floors as she makes her way to the lifts.

Still an angel or a saint, but maybe there’s a little devil there too.

She glances to where Frank lies asleep. Maybe they all have a little devil in them. A little of both.

She locks the door, leans against it for a moment. It's been a hell of a night. A hell of a night. This
city was never more aptly named. She can still barely believe that somehow everything is okay. That she found him, that Claire saved him, that he's even here and it's unlikely he will die. That he's somehow back in her life. That Matt is also somehow back even if he's only skirting the edges, standing on the periphery, hoping for an invitation to come inside.

Matt.

Oh God Matt.

She rushes across the room for her purse, pulls out his gift with its bright paper and pretty bows and reaches for her phone.

2:06.

Fuck.

She punches his number into the keypad, sees his picture come up on the display and listens to it ring. She knows he doesn't keep his phone on him when he's out prowling the streets and for good reason. But if he's not answering it means he's already on his way and she really doesn't want to have to explain the hows and whys of this to him too. Once a night is enough. Once a decade would be better.

She’s holding her breath, praying to the God that he believes in that he’s still home, that he hasn’t left, that he’s not on his way. But he answers quickly. He sounds stressed and the tiniest bit angry but she can hear the relief in his voice.

She tells him she’s home and she’s fine, to go to sleep and stop worrying about her. He presses her a little, gets that slightly Condescending Dad Tone that she once thought was sweet and now just makes her sigh. He wants to know where she went and what happened. But she tells him she’s not going to tell him and not to ask her to. And eventually he accepts it.

He says to call if she needs to and she says she will and she’s genuinely grateful for his concern. Things might never be what they were but she has friends who care about her and people who worry and that makes her life richer.

He wishes her happy birthday again and she says goodbye and then it’s just her. Her and Pickle and
the big bad Punisher mostly naked and asleep in her bed.

She got her eyeful. When the universe grants wishes and plays games, it does it for keeps.

She should rest. She should take a blanket and curl up on the couch, try and snatch a few hours before he wakes up and she has to face tomorrow. But she’s Karen Page. She’s never done the easy thing. So she goes to him, sits back down at his side.

Pickle is on the bed, purring loudly and curled up next to him, which is almost a bigger miracle than anything else that has happened tonight. But her cat is wacky and it makes sense that it would gravitate towards wacky people.

She touches his head, clean fingers against his dirty scalp, thumb snagging on his greasy hair and then finding the smoother, downier fuzz on the back of his neck. He's soft there and wonders if this is the only place inside and out that he is. But she of all people knows that isn't true.

*Don't you know Karen, don't you know? Yes Frank. Yes I know.*

His breathing is slow and heavy and she kisses his brow again, listens as he mumbles something which she can't quite hear.

He's bruised and bloody but he's beautiful.

He's a tipped scale. And she has no idea what to do about any of it.
There's a weight in the air but you can't see why

Chapter Notes

This chapter was a bit of a nightmare to write because not only did I need to get the pacing and the feel right from the previous chapter, I also had to set a few things up for the next one. So I wrote this chapter a couple of times and then I still went back and tweaked. And I think I might have it now. Truth is though, I'm doubting myself with this but every time I think I need to make changes, I find that what I have done just feels right.

We'll see. Problem is the only way to really tell is after the next chapter and I don't know how long that is going to take, because it's going to have some heavy stuff in it. On the other hand, it has a definite outline, so it might be easier. Who knows? I am terrible at predicting these things.

Anyway, enough rambling. Thanks to everyone who has been leaving comments. They are honestly what keeps me going.

Title is from Rob Thomas' "Pieces", which has been hugely influential in writing this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luna is a problem. Luna is big pitbull-sized problem Karen didn’t think she would have but does. Because Frank “Scourge of Hell’s Kitchen and Big Fucking Man Baby” Castle has done the very thing he said he wouldn’t and he kept her.

No, it’s not that she’s really mad with him. She gets it. Oh God, she fucking gets what it’s like to be so lonely and so lost that the comfort of something sweet and furry and consistently happy to see you seems like just too much to give up. You tell yourself that shelters are overfilled, that you can’t control who their next owner will be, that they have bonded and attached to you, and while all of these things make sense, it really comes down to the fact that you are not ready. You don’t want to say goodbye. So you don’t. You let them in. You make them a bed. You feed them and then you hand over your old scabby, rotten heart and they keep it as if it was the best thing anyone ever gave them. She only has to look at Pickle to know.

So Luna ... yes Luna. The sappiest, sweetest excuse for a junkyard dog that ever existed. Luna, who should be living out her retirement in some haven in Jersey because apparently, once upon a time, Frank beat someone to death for the owner. She doesn’t know this for certain. Couldn’t honestly say that’s what went down and despite everything, even if it did, she’s willing to concede that he probably had his reasons and that they might make sense to, well, him and maybe her, you know on the chance that she completely discards her moral backbone and becomes the Bonny to his Clyde. And wouldn’t that be something? She’d want fire-engine red lipstick and a wide-brimmed hat, gold buckles on her shoes. Everything else is negotiable.
But, regardless of her own personal thoughts on Things Frank Castle Could Have Done To Earn The Gratitude Of A Sanctuary Owner In Jersey, she pretty sure it involved lots of guns and fists and maybe a body or two in the bottom of the Atlantic. Pretty sure he’s got the scars to prove it.

And well, she doesn’t even need to say that she’s pretty sure he hasn’t cashed it in, because she knows. She fucking knows.

Because Luna, the sweet and sappy pibble in question is currently sitting in the back of her car, fogging up her windows, and watching excitedly as she makes her way through the Saturday morning traffic to Foggy’s place. Foggy is also destined for sainthood. Him and Claire can get murals or sculptures or fucking life-size oil paintings and she’ll put them in the Vatican herself if that’s what it comes to.

She stops at a traffic light and Luna takes the opportunity to put her feet on Karen’s seat and lick her from her neck to her cheek.

And it's slimy and soppy and her breath smells like something crawled down her throat and died but, despite herself, Karen laughs and leans back to rub Luna’s head, scratch her under the chin and get jowly drool all over her hands which she wipes on her jeans.

“It's okay girl,” she says. “You're gonna get a nice place to relax.”

Luna barks and Karen can hear her tail thumping hard against the seats.

She really is a great dog. Honestly, she is. Despite what could have only been an appalling life of neglect and very likely abuse, birthing litter after litter, and then having her puppies taken from her too young to become fighting dogs, Luna has a temperament much like a ray of sunshine.

It's easy to see why Frank loves her. In fact it's easy to see why Frank loves most of the things he does. And she staunchly refuses to add her name to that list. She won't. She will not.

Don't you know?

She yawns as the light changes from red to green and the cars in front of her start edging forward.
She hasn't slept much. She was exhausted and the slightest bit tipsy after those four or five bourbon shots in quick succession, but somehow, try as she might, she couldn’t fall asleep. Claire said Frank would be fine and it’s not like she doesn’t believe Claire knows her shit, because she fucking does. She really fucking does. But the very thought that she could go to sleep and wake up and he’d be gone in one way or another kept her up, sitting on the couch in the dark and listening to him breathe and Pickle purr. She must have drifted. She must have because she knows she lost time somewhere between watching the kitchen clock go from 3:45 to 5:20. But she’s pretty sure it couldn’t have been much more than that.

She’s been awake since then, watching the sky stay dark and dreary, the first flecks of rain against the window. The miserable grey day slowly unfolding on itself and casting its weak light on Frank where he slept in her bed.

She tried to read a bit, but the words swam on the page and then she tried to sleep a bit more but the couch, usually comfortable enough for at least one night, felt like it was made of rocks with a layer of saran wrap pulled over it. In the end she opted for a big fucking pot of coffee and a peach yoghurt and some long looks outside into the gloom like the imprisoned heroine of a gothic romance watching the world go by.

Yes she's dramatic. She’s tired and she's earned it.

And then Frank woke up. She thinks it may have been the coffee. That maybe he's like a sniffer dog but only for caffeine because she could swear that his nostrils flared and his brow crinkled just before he opened his eyes. She thinks that if Matt and Frank had a sniffing contest it's very likely Matt would win, because Matt is Matt and he can apparently smell the sandwiches you ate three years ago. So yes, he'd win. Unless they were looking for coffee, because if that was the prize at the end of what must be the world’s most ridiculous competition - real or just a product of Karen Page’s broken brain - then all bets are off.

And yes, this is what she thinks about when she tired and grumpy and The Punisher is mostly naked in her bed.

Regardless he opened his eyes and that's when the trouble started. Not that he was difficult. He seemed to recognise that he was safe and being cared for. He was less confused than she thought he would be, remembering strangely detailed aspects of the previous night, like how they'd fooled Irene and how Claire gave him a hard time but forgetting others, like how he got to her apartment and when he'd been at her car.

He did remember how Karen cleaned him up and she knows he remembered more than that too, but
neither of them said anything about it, save for his fingers brushing her wrist gently and lingering a moment too long.

And then he asked about Luna and for a moment she thought he'd lost his mind until it all came out that he'd kept her. He still intended to take her to Jersey, he was going to, but he just hadn't. Not yet. He didn't try for excuses and she didn't push him. Luna in her own way has come to represent so much and not just to him. And she gets it. She does. It’s stupid and irresponsible and he knows it's untenable, but it is what it is.

So, she did the only thing she could. She called Foggy, begged him to take advantage of his building’s incredibly flexible pet policy and do her a solid.

And because he's Foggy and he loves her and he's her rock and he's the most wonderful human being on Earth, he agreed.

And it worked out. Well, maybe that's not the right choice of words as nothing fucking ever really works out but there was a silver lining at least. Because Luna, God bless her slobbery soul, was not up in a cabin at the end of the world. Frank didn't keep her there and had seemed mildly affronted when Karen asked. No, she was in the city, a place he rented in Vinegar Hill. The seedy part of Vinegar Hill where motels are rented by the hour and you don’t need ID for a lease. She’s been there once or twice. It makes Hell’s Kitchen look like The Hamptons.

It did mean however, that Karen could pick up some of his clothes and yes, some of his arsenal too.

Silver lining. It has one.

So when Claire arrived, looking none the worse for wear after all the previous night's whisky, but dressed a bit like she was planning on washing a particularly boisterous and smelly dog (and Lord, Karen liked how many levels that simile worked on), she decided to take the opportunity to firstly change the bed sheets and secondly get her ass down to Vinegar Hill for Luna.

The last thing she heard as she left was Claire’s exasperated voice from the bathroom asking Frank if he really thought whatever he had was so damn special that she, an ER nurse, had never seen it before. And if it was could she please take a damn picture.

She's pretty sure Claire has it covered. Pretty sure she'll keep him in line.
She turns into Foggy’s road. Despite his new and decidedly lucrative job, he hasn’t left Hell’s Kitchen but he’s certainly moving up in the world. His place has a concierge, visitor parking and frankly, it’s enormous. Her entire apartment would probably fit into his four times over and he pays for that in long hours and working more weekends than he doesn’t. He says he’s happy to do it, says that he feels like he’s growing, picking up skills. Learning. And that that was something he could never do at Nelson and Murdock.

He was, and still is, the better lawyer.

Better friend too.

She parks her car next to a neat flower bed of white and purple petunias and helps Luna out of the backseat. She’ll come back for the food but she grabs Luna’s dog bed... which is pale blue and has bunnies on it. And the idea of Frank walking into a pet store and choosing it is just not an image she can conjure up in her head. So that makes her try even harder.

She still can’t. But she’ll get there. She always does when it comes to Frank.

She glances up at the sky, the clouds are still rolling in dark and fast and the air feels thick and full, like it’s holding back something deep and furious and frightening and getting ready to unleash its rage on the world. It’s been threatening for a while now. It’ll happen. It has to.

_Batten down the hatches, and get inside, we’re in for a long night._

It’s an ominous thought and she shakes it away, looks at Luna who is wagging her tail so hard that her whole body is swaying from side to side. She barks sharply, happily, looks towards the street expectantly and then back at Karen as if she’s withholding treats or something. But she knows that’s not it. She can smell Frank on her clothes or her skin and she’s waiting for him. Expecting Karen to produce him out of thin air in what would be both the world’s best and lamest magic trick.

_Sorry girl, she thinks, you can’t see him yet, but soon. He’s going to be fine and we’ll come and get you and then he’s going to do what he damn well said and drive you to Jersey where you are going to live out the rest of your days in peace._

“Come on girl, put on your prettiest smile” she says grabbing her leash and maneuvering them to the front door. “We got people to impress.”
There’s a doorman, because of course there is, and he’s wearing a uniform, because of course he is. It's not the first time she's thought that Foggy’s block seems more like a hotel with its glass doors and brass trim, polished cedar wood floors, than an actual place where people live and breathe and exist. She’s genuinely happy for him, happy that he’s moved on and up, that he’s found some meaning and consistency in his life that he was losing at Nelson and Murdock. Because he was losing. They all were. In more ways than one.

The doorman - Julian, according to his name badge - seems half asleep and slightly queasy and she can see why. He’s young, maybe not even out of college yet and still spotty with a shock of red hair that seems both perfectly styled and untameable. He smells like cigarettes and booze and she’s willing to hazard a guess that his Friday night went much like hers. Well, the hanging out with friends and drinking part at least. Not the Frank Castle in your bed part.

He spends a good few seconds patting Luna on the head before realising Karen is there and asking her what apartment number she needs. And then another good few seconds trying to figure out the intercom system until Karen has to show him herself.

“I’m new,” he says apologetically and then sighs like he’s been caught out. “And hungover.”

She grins at him.

“Water and plenty of rest,” she says and he looks at her as if she’s quite mad.

He buzzes Foggy, who also sounds like he's half asleep, which considering he and he alone drank at least three-quarters of the fishbowl shouldn’t seem like much of a surprise. Except it is, because that means Josie actually used alcohol, maybe pure ethanol stolen or discarded from a school science lab, but alcohol nonetheless. It would honestly make more sense if he was puking his guts out because of food poisoning.

She says goodbye to Julian and herds Luna into the lift and no, no, it's nothing like last night. Because Luna’s a dog, and she’s sweet and amiable and it's much better than herding half dead Frank into a lift. And no, like Pickle walking in off her fire escape and staying in her life, it's not a thing. Not. A. Thing.

*God, please let it not be a thing.*

Foggy is waiting for her when the lift opens, standing half in, half out of his apartment and for a
second it makes her think of Ellison and the way he tends to lean into her office but likes to keep one foot firmly in the passage outside. For safety. Or something.

His hair is messy and he’s not wearing a shirt, grey sweatpants sitting too high at his waist and a pair of brown old man slippers on his feet. He’s blinking sleep from his eyes and she has to remind herself that it's only 9am and, even if it feels like she’s lived a full day and a night since she last slept because well, she has, to the rest of the world - in other words the people that don't have Frank Castle in their bed or in their shower depending on Claire’s corralling skills - it's still really fucking early for a weekend morning.

“Hey,” she says.

“He’s sleep is thick and rough and he clears his throat and tries again. “Hey.”

He takes a second to scan her face, frowns a little and she’s not sure why, and then peeks past her to where Luna sits, good as gold, at her side. And his eyes widen.

So, maybe she left out the bit that Luna was a pitbull and maybe she didn't exactly say Frank’s name when she asked for a favour for someone she knows. Maybe she's also a horrible person who plays her cards too close to her chest. Maybe Foggy shouldn't be her friend.

“I'm sorry,” she says and it sounds so trite, so feeble and lame and not much better when she backs it up with another truth. “I didn't know what else to do.”

He bites his lip and puts a hand to his forehead, rubs his brow. She can see he's still really fuzzy from the previous night and that concentrating is hard. She wonders how long him and Marci stayed after she left. If he finished his game of pool or if Marci managed to talk him into giving up and coming home.

He runs a hand through his hair but it only makes it stick up more.

“When you said a dog, I didn't think you meant a hellhound.”

Luna thumps her tail.
“Oh come on Foggy,” she says reaching down to touch Luna’s head. “It's only for a little while, a week, maybe two. She has a place at a sanctuary and I'll take her up as soon as I can. She's an angel. She really is.”

“Hellhound.”

But his voice is steadier now and there’s a hint of mocking in it. Luna even gets a grudging smile as he holds his knuckles out for her to sniff, which she does and then licks his hand, leaving it glistening and wet. Karen though, Karen gets his best bitch face, the one he only uses for very special circumstances … and for Matt. It’s okay though. She deserves it.

And then she hears Marci from inside.

“Are they here?”

Foggy pushes the door open a little wider and looks over his shoulder. “Yeah. Karen and her homeless hellhound have arrived. Apparently the shelters near the lake of fire are full and the ninth circle doesn’t need its demon beast army today.”

Karen rolls her eyes and Luna cocks her head, whines a little and then thumps her tail again.

Silence for a second and then Marci again, voice sterner this time. “Franklin Nelson, if you are giving Karen a hard time about some sweet puppy, I am going to kick your ass.”

He leans back into the apartment.

“Come see your sweet puppy Marci. Come see this teeny tiny innocent little baby and then we'll see about an ass kicking.”

She hears Marci coming to the door. Foggy grins, mouths something Karen can’t make out and suddenly looks both incredibly guilty and appreciative, and then Marci is pushing the door further open and standing in the passage in a short indigo satin nightie. She apparently wasn't lying about her Victoria's Secret obsession. It shows. It looks great. Apparently Foggy thinks so too.
Saying Marci barely gives Karen a second glance would be a lie. Because that would necessitate a first glance and Karen doesn't get that either. She never really pegged Marci for a dog person. She'd always seemed too perfect, too smart, too worried about getting marks on her clothes and keeping a clean house. But that's what you get for judging people before you know them.

Because apparently Marci Stahl would give Frank a run for his money in the Dog People stakes. Because in no time she is on her knees on the floor, her hands, with their perfectly manicured nails, framing Luna’s face and pulling the dog into a hug, squealing as Luna repays her in slobbery kisses.

It’s an almost comical moment, made even funnier by the easy way Marci sheds her ice-queen, career woman persona and turns into a child who’s just got her first pet.

“Who's a pretty girl? Hey? Who's the prettiest girl in the world?”

Karen glances at Foggy, catches a very warm and very content expression on his face before he notices her looking and rolls his eyes, all feigned exasperation and annoyance. He shakes his head. It's a sign of a man with more than a hand in his own defeat. In fact it's the sign of a man whose essentially causing it and racing to towards it happily.

It always is. Always.

“Okay,” he concedes. “She can stay for a few days.”

“No,” Marci chimes in from the floor, “She can stay for as long as she likes.”

“Maybe a week.”

“Or two or three.”

“Marci…”

“Franklin…”
Marci stands and Karen doesn't miss how Foggy’s gaze seems to stay at thigh level.

She looks at Karen for the first time and grins. “She can stay and we'd love to have her. I've been telling him I want a dog for ages and maybe this will get him into the idea.”

And again Karen is struck by just how much she's missed. She told Ellison that Foggy and Marci were screwing but what they actually were to one another could go either way. She realises how wrong she was. It couldn't go either way. Even if they don't know it yet. It is what it is.

And frankly, it's great.

Marci takes the dog bed from her. “She need special food or something?”

“Yeah, it’s down in the car, I couldn’t carry it all.”

Truth is she has notes about Luna’s food from Frank. He asked her to write everything down because apparently Luna’s dietary plan is Very Important. Something to do with putting on weight and helping with calcium deficiency. She realised talking to him this morning that Luna is a personal project for him. It’s not just about saving her, it’s about seeing her well looked after and healthy. It’s about giving her what he can of a good life before she eventually succumbs to her age or whatever other ailments she’s developed on account of not being cared for until now. It’s so fucking sad and so fucking noble all at the same time. And he hasn’t realised it’s either one.

“Luna? that's her name right?” Marci asks, pulling the leash out of Karen’s hands.

Karen nods.

“Luna and I are going inside for some girl talk. You can sort out Franklin’s existential angst over a sweet little puppy.”

She kisses Karen on the cheek and turns on her heel but Karen calls her back, pulls out her phone and snaps a picture of Luna. It’s a guess but she thinks Frank would like it and it would mean something to him. Or not. Doesn’t matter. It means something to her.
She leans down and gives the dog a kiss on her head. Her fur smells clean and it's soft and she realises Frank's been washing her. Of course he has. He's Frank and God, he takes care of the things he loves with an almost obsessive dedication. But even knowing what she knows, even though he's held her and touched her and been so incredibly gentle with her (and she tries not to think of the ruthlessness, she *tries*) she wonders if she could ever really make anyone else understand. He'd say it doesn't matter, that he doesn't care what anyone thinks of him. But she started this crusade in a desperate attempt to humanise him, to find out if he was worthy of forgiveness and, in turn, if she was. She thinks she has her answer. And part of it is a big slobbery dog with bad breath and enough love in her heart for the whole world.

And then Marci's gone and it's just her and Foggy and he's looking at her like he can see right through her. It's not angry. It's not even exasperated. Doesn't even fall on that spectrum. It's something else entirely. Something that looks just like concern.

“You wanna tell me why I'm looking after Frank Castle’s dog?” he says it softly. There's no hiss in his voice. It's a genuine question. And she could avoid it. She could find a way to dodge under the radar but it occurs to her that that would be doing the one thing she promised herself she never would do. She won’t be a shitty friend, when all Foggy wants is to be a good one. She won’t. Matt gets the shitty friend award, not her.

She sighs. Smiles wanly at him.

“How long do you have?”

He gives her an amused look.

“There’s a coffee shop across the street. They make a really good latte and their pastries are out of this world. Up to you.”

“Sounds great.”

He grins, reaches behind the door, pulls out a faded navy hoodie and stuffs it over his head, doesn’t bother to change his old man slippers.

He calls to Marci that he’ll be back soon and from his expression Karen deduces he’s being waved off and suddenly she realises how fucking well this all worked out. That by some cosmic interference Marci turns out to be the world’s biggest dog lover after Frank Castle and Foggy is just the best
person on the planet. Karen doesn’t consider herself religious. And definitely not in the same way that Matt is. But today she considers herself blessed. The universe might be pitching a tantrum second to none, but she thinks she that maybe she’s still winning in the Sainted Friends stakes. And that’s totally a competitive category. Totally.

Julian is nowhere to be seen when they get to the lobby and she thinks he’s either worshipping the porcelain throne or he’s gone for a smoke break. Foggy makes some comment about the hardship of having to open doors for himself, sighs about “kids these days” and she elbows him in the ribs and he grins at her. And it just feels so good to be hanging out with him again like this. That ease of being with someone who has no expectations of you at all, who takes you as the mess you are, is something she’s missed for so long. And suddenly it seems so silly to think that she couldn’t have gone to him whenever she wanted. That she couldn’t have sat him down that evening after Frank brought her home from the cabin, and spewed her guts out. That she couldn’t have called him the night he left her on the roof with blood on her dress and on her face. She wouldn’t have needed to explain more than she wanted. He would have been there. He’s always there. And sure, maybe she needed time, maybe she did need to work things out for herself but, as she hasn’t exactly been doing a stellar job on that front, it might be that she should have called in The Foggy Cavalry a little earlier than now.

The Foggy Cavalry, she likes that. He would too.

She takes his arm, smiles at him.

“What?” he asks.

“I just like your look,” she says, glancing at his slippers, his worn sweatpants.

“I live in Hell’s Kitchen Karen. Expectations here aren’t high. Besides this is half sleepwear, half slob. I call it Slapdash Chic. It’s very in around these parts.”

She laughs. God she’s missed him.

He leads her across the street into what looks like a surprisingly trendy and shiny coffee shop, all birch wood and burnished leather seating, low lighting and the smell of dark roast and freshly baked muffins. He's right about his attire though. He doesn't stick out at all. In fact, in her jeans and neat blue cardigan, she probably stands out more than he does.
He orders two lattes, eyes the apricot custard slices longingly, turns away in what seems to be a moment of immense willpower and then guiltily turns back to the barista and asks for two to stay and two to go.

They take an empty table next to the window. It's sombre outside and only getting worse, sky darkening rapidly and the smell of rain in the air. She hopes it will break soon. Hell's Kitchen has been threatening a storm for a while and all they gotten is a miserable drizzle and no relief to the weirdly thick static air that leaves them all feeling uncomfortable and sticky.

Foggy sits across from her, runs his fingers through his hair again. It doesn't help much and she leans forward to smooth what she can. That doesn't work either and she gives up, sips her coffee and watches him over the rim of the cup.

He doesn't say anything first, devotes his time to attacking his pastry and she realises he's waiting for her to start. Wherever and whenever she wants.

So she does. She tells him much what she told Claire. About the way Frank saved her life in her apartment and then seemingly squandered it in the diner. How he saved it again the night of the cabin. How that was when they found Luna. How he turned up at her building last night, half dead and more than ready to go and Claire put him back together. How he's there now.

The thing is though, Foggy knows all this already. And what he didn't he could probably infer.

He chews, swallows and washes it down with a gulp of coffee. Eyes her expectantly across the table.

“Okay, so now you gonna tell me what's really going on?”

She looks down, picks at her nails. Remembers how she had to scrape Frank's blood off her hands. How every loose flake seemed like a victory. How she watched it swirl down the plug. It's not there now. Nothing is there now.

“Karen,” his voice is soft and he reaches across the table, touches her elbow. “Karen I'm not going to tell anyone. Not even Matt. Especially not Matt.”

She looks up, smiles. It's so silly really. It's not like it should be a big secret. This isn't high school. You don't whisper about your crushes behind the bleachers, leave little love notes in lockers.
Grown ass woman. She is one.

“I think Frank Castle is falling in love with me.”

It's harder to say than she expected. And it's not because of what it means, it's not even because she's worried about Foggy’s reaction although maybe she should be. It's that it sounds so ridiculous to her ears, like it couldn't possibly be true. That she must be high or quite deranged to even entertain the idea. Because he's The Punisher. He kills. He hurts. He punishes. He doesn't love.

Except he does.

None of them would be where they are if he didn't.

And then for all the world, Foggy shrugs.

He shrugs. And it takes her a moment to realise that's what he did because it would have probably shocked her less if he slapped her and told her to go to her room without any supper.

“Foggy?”

He takes another sip of coffee, wipes his mouth with a serviette.

“I'm sorry Karen, but to quote one of my favourite movies ‘I think I'm going to have a heart attack and die from that surprise’.”

She frowns. Yes yes, Karen Page, none so blind. She derides herself for it often. Mostly when she looks at Matt and wonders how she could have missed everything. She doesn’t need anyone to remind her of this particular shortcoming. She still hasn’t forgiven herself for it and probably won’t. But this? This? Foggy acting as though she’s just told him the sky is blue or that she prefers chocolate cake to vanilla.

“Look Karen,” another gulp of coffee. “I was there at the start of this thing. He would only talk to
you. He was adamant that it could only be you. And I figured that maybe he just felt more comfortable talking his man pain through with a woman. Most of us are for better or for worse. Call it societal conditioning, call it what you like. It is what it is. Also, let's be real. You're easy on the eyes.”

“Foggy...” she huffs and looks away.

“You are,” he insists. “And sure, yes, the man was grieving. He wasn’t dead.”

That hits her a little harder than she expects. And an image of Frank standing in the moonlight, telling her that he’s already dead, comes to her. Schoonover cowering at his feet. He meant it and it’s the truth. The Punisher is a dead man. Maybe there’s hope for Frank Castle though. Maybe she has to have hope for the both of them. More coffee. She sips her own and it's good and rich.

“And I'm not saying anything was going on then,” Foggy continues through a mouthful of pastry. “He was a hot mess. He was a big fucking disaster.”

She nods.

He was. He still is.

“But it's been what? Two years now since, well you know,” he indicates vaguely at nothing.

It has. Thereabouts anyway.

“I mean I don't know how long these things take. I guess with him nothing is average. But come on Karen. It's not like this is unexpected.”

She wants to glare at him. Tell him that yes dammit, yes it is. But she can't because it seems like he's thought this through already, maybe spent as much time pondering it as she has.
“There was that night you disappeared with him. Matt and I spent hours going to every damn place we could think of that he might be hiding. We combed the streets for ages. God, he even had Elektra and that old weirdo with the stick looking for you. Matt was so close to calling Mahoney too but didn’t know how he would explain everything. And eventually - it must have been about 5am and we were drinking coffee at that all night diner on 10th - Matt seemed to have an epiphany of some kind. He said that we weren’t going to find you and that all we could really do was go back to your place and wait because Frank wouldn’t have taken you somewhere we would think to go. Because if we could find you so could someone else and there was no way Frank Castle would take that kind of a risk with you. And I don't know why but I flagged that, there was just something about that seemed … I don’t know, important or something.

“And then when you came back the next day... Maybe I was just looking for something. Maybe I just saw what I expected to see. But the way he was looking at you... And the way you looked at him. Your face when he drove off… Karen, I'm not an idiot.”

No he’s not. She knows he’s not. Matt might have sharper senses than all of them with the exception of sight, but Foggy has the advantage of not being blinded by his own hubris. He sees a lot. She’s always known this. She knew it when she got out of Frank’s truck and saw how he looked at them, how his gaze flitted back and forth between them. She knew one day it would come. She’d be asked for that truth. The whole of it. And nothing but.

And here it is. And she feels so damn grateful.

She pushes her hair out of her eyes, takes a bite of her pastry. It’s crisp and sweet and she thinks longingly of that cake she planned to eat all by herself in peaceful celebration of her birthday.

*If you want God to laugh, tell him your plans.*

“So what happened? That night?” he asks. “I'm not asking for details, although you know, if you wanna give them…”

He grins wickedly and she narrows her eyes, purses her lips. She can also do bitch face. She gives him her best one.

“Come on Karen. You sleep with him? I know you didn't do his hair.”

She snorts. Shakes her head.
“I didn't sleep with him,” and she swears she sees something like disappointment wash over his face. Because apparently Foggy loves this kind of drama. Because apparently the soap opera that her life has become is not melodramatic enough unless it can be written into an episode of *Days of our Lives*. She considers telling him she has an evil twin. Also that she’s come back from the dead four times. That she has an imposter robot for a husband. She thinks he’d get the joke. Maybe he’d even like it.

But she doesn’t. He might be jovial and candid about this and she might be pretending to be, but she’s not. It’s a disaster. There really is no way around that.

“Well I guess that’s a good thing,” he says. His voice is level but she can hear a hint of wistfulness behind it.

She sighs, looks out at the gloom. “Is it? Sometimes I think it may have been easier if I had.”

Foggy shrugs again, takes another bite of his pastry and talks to her through the crumbs. “Doubt it. You think Frank Castle could deal with a one night stand? You think you could?”

She shakes her head. He’s right. In all honesty she wouldn't and Frank wouldn't have either. He's already fighting himself over this thing because of Maria so betraying her for a fling would probably be even worse.

Still. Still she can’t get rid the image she has of him pushing her face down on that table, his fingers moving between her legs, his breath against her cheek, voice low and gravelly in her ear.

“So what did happen?”

She sighs, sits back in her chair, closes her eyes for a long moment and when she opens them she can see the first fat drops of rain against the window, a mother and her two children under a brightly coloured umbrella, rushing towards the bus stop. An old man on the opposite side of the street walking his small fluffy dog.

“Nothing.”

Foggy rolls his eyes and she rushes to explain. She’s not hedging, but this is just so fucking hard to
“Everything. Goddamn it Foggy. I don’t know. He said some stuff he probably shouldn’t have. I said some stuff I probably shouldn’t have. And then a few weeks ago he came by to my old apartment. Did some stuff we probably shouldn’t have.”

She realises how sexual the last sentence sounds. Realises that Foggy is probably picturing her with her tits out and Frank’s hands all over her and yeah, it’s not like that, but she really doesn’t have the energy to try and explain why his knee between her thighs and his hand dipping low to her ass is any different to what Foggy’s imagining. It sounds sexual because it was sexual. Because Frank was hard and she was wet and his teeth were on her throat. And then his blood was smeared on her face and he was gone and she had to find a way to wash that off too.

Out damned spot, out indeed.

Like last night with Claire, her explanations seem so lacking. So thin and feeble as if she’s deliberately leaving out the important bits. But she doesn’t know how to make what happened at the cabin translate into normal words. She could say she asked him why he came for her and his answer was ‘don’t you know’ and when you put it like that it doesn’t sound anything like how it was. And that’s before she even gets to the problem she has with spewing these details out to the world. Because at its heart, its core, it’s private. It’s intimate. It’s not something she really wants to share with anyone.

She looks away. The bus has arrived and the woman with the kids is gone. The old man and his dog are still there though and he’s been joined by a old woman in a blue dress carrying two shopping bags. They link arms, walk off into the light rain and it all seems so simple. So easy and natural.

She puts her head in her hands, breathes deeply. “This is why I didn't want to tell anyone anything. I don't know what's going on myself.”

“Okay okay,” Foggy holds up his hands and she can see they’re sticky with custard and apricot. “Karen, I'm not judging you. The world throws us curve balls. We do things we can’t explain. People come into our lives and we know we should show them the door. We know. But we don’t. It happens. And you know, honestly, it makes sense that someone like Frank falls for someone like you. It's not even that weird.”

He reaches across the table again, pries her hand away from her face, squeezes her fingers.

“Karen, you’re my friend. You are my best friend and I say that with no absolutely no exceptions or qualifiers. You are. It doesn’t matter what this is that you have going on with Frank. You could fucking marry him and have his babies and I’d still be your friend. And if he hurt you I’d like to say
I’d kick his ass but I think we both know that’s unlikely. But okay, I’d start practising at least. Take up taekwondo or something. Luckily for me, I think he’d probably chew off his own arms or set himself on fire before he did that. I know he’s not a monster.”

He takes her other hand and she looks up at him. And God, he’s so sweet and he’s so fierce and no one on Earth is good enough to deserve him as their friend. No one.

“I’m here Karen. Don’t shut me out. No matter what happens. No matter who you fall for or who you fuck or what you do, I’m here. You don’t have to be alone. I’m not great with advice and yeah, I’m not going to say this is remotely ideal. But if you want to ride out this wave with him, and I don’t think we’d be having this conversation if you didn’t, I’ll be right here beside you.”

She thought she would cry. She really did. She pictured this moment in her mind and it always ended with her sobbing into his shirt. It’s what she does. She cries when things hurt and she doesn’t think that makes her weak. Doesn’t know how it could when often it feels like she has no control of it either way. When the tears want out they will come. But they don’t this time. Because she’s *Karen Page: Holder Back Of Tears Under Extreme Duress*. She has fucking earned it. So she slides her chair around to Foggy’s side of the table and puts her arms around him, rests against his shoulder and feels his hands warm and strong on her back.

“I’m sorry,” she says softly.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” he whispers, strokes her hair and then leans his head on hers. “Besides I’m kind of proud of you.”

“You are?”

“Oh yeah,” and the old, salty Foggy is back.

She pulls away, eyes him suspiciously. He has the same look on his face that Claire did the previous night with her semi-feigned concern for the diversion of Frank’s blood, her promises not to snitch to Matt.

Karen tilts her head, narrows her eyes in what she hopes is a suitably ridiculous approximation of a warning. Apparently it is because Foggy legitimately giggles.
“You got something you wanna say to me Nelson?”

He shrugs, look away. Pretends he doesn't want to answer. Fake hedging.

She purses her lips, narrows her eyes. “Out with it.”

“Just that it’s pretty impressive that last night you left Josie's with Matt and this morning you tell me Frank Castle is in your bed. Like damn girl you move fast.”

She punches him playfully and he puts up his hands in mock surrender but they’re both laughing.

“Hey I'm just calling it like I see it.”

“Sure,” she says pulling him into another hug.

Because Karen fucking Page moves so fucking fast. Because that's how she rolls. One man to the next. A new beau every week. She has marriage proposals coming out of her ears. A lover in Paris and another in Milan, two in Madrid.

“I'm here Karen,” he says softly, suddenly serious again. “I work too much and too hard. But I'm here. I'll make time for you.”

She nods against his shoulder, turns and kisses his cheek. Holds him close again. Stays like that a while until he shifts and pulls away.

“Okay, let’s go before people think I'm the next notch on Karen Page’s belt. I have a reputation to uphold, you know.”

She snorts as she lets him go and he grins at her.

“Maneater,” he teases. "Maneater with your hellhound. Maneater that has the fucking Punisher whipped.”
She shakes her head, picks up her purse and Foggy drains his coffee and follows her to the door.

It’s drizzling lightly as they walk back to her car. They talk about Marci. He confesses he didn’t see it coming. That not only did Marci seem so out of his league, and also so incredibly awful, that the first time they slept together he wasn’t sure whether to celebrate or commiserate. He thought of it as a pity fuck but suddenly there she was again. And again. And they stopped fucking long enough to start talking and every damn thing changed. And suddenly he just stopped being intimidated by her and they haven’t looked back. She kicks his ass, he admits that. But he gives as good as he gets.

“I want it to work Karen. I didn’t realise how much I did until I thought about it ending,” he turns to her as they get to her car. “I want to make her happy.”

“You do Foggy, you do.”

He smiles, glances towards the front door of his building and she can see flecks of light rain on his face. “The hellhound can stay as long as she needs to. Her dad can come pick her up whenever he gets his lazy punishing ass out of your bed.”

*Her dad.*

She smirks at that.

He hugs her again. “You take care. And for fuck’s sake Karen, call. Anything you need.”

“I will,” she says, handing him Luna’s kibble and the note of Frank’s overly detailed instructions before sliding behind the wheel and twisting the key in the ignition. “And thanks again. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

He waves it away. “It’s fine. We’re happy to help.”

She grins at him, starts backing out of the driveway when he suddenly walks forward and put a hand on the bonnet. She stops, rolls down her window, pinpricks of rain against her skin.
He looks a little unsure, he’s chewing his lip and not quite meeting her eyes and she wonders what this could possibly be about. What new topic they could start debating that could have him this concerned.

“Karen,” he starts and then looks away.

“It’s okay, Foggy.”

He frowns and she can see he’s trying to find the right words,

“Spit it out,” she says. There’s really nothing he could say that could be that bad or delicate that he needs to stress this much about asking her.

He looks back at her.

“Karen, you said you think Frank Castle is falling in love with you,” and when she nods he barrels on. “You falling back?”

And it hurts. It hurts so much. And she wonders if she has her own little monster trying to break her ribs to climb out of her chest, pull her heart out with it, squeeze it until it bursts and watch her blood dry on the asphalt. And it shouldn’t. These things shouldn’t hurt like this. But she has no one to ease it, no one to help her feel that exhilaration, to take away the fear.

She shrugs. Once again it’s the best she has and Foggy seems to understand. He reaches into the car, touches her shoulder and she covers his hand with her own.

“Call.” It’s an instruction. It’s direct but there’s also a hint of pleading in it. Begging.

She nods.

“I love you Foggy,” and she means it. Never a truer word was spoken.

“I love you too Karen.”
The tears make their appearance at the same time as the rain stops, as she pulls into the main street, as she passes the old couple and their little dog, seemingly untouched or oblivious to the weather, but holding onto each other tightly and sharing a brown paper bag of cookies.

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“So she’s safe?” he’s asking around mouthful of pasta. “They know about her food?”

It’s quiet and uncomfortably warm in her apartment, despite the fact that the windows are wide open. Outside the late afternoon air is still heavy and charged, black clouds making less-than-idle threats of rain. She wishes it would just happen, that the storm would come to wash the mugginess away, to stop this feeling of being stifled, of the air being too thick to breathe. Or maybe that’s just her. Maybe that’s just the micro-climate in her apartment where Frank Castle is taking all the oxygen and slowly, unintentionally suffocating them both.

And that’s not really a fair comparison to make. But it is what it is.

“Ma’am?” he asks, touching her arm. “They know not to give her anything else?”

She’s tempted to say no, that Marci and Foggy have no clue. That she told them Luna can only eat chicken bones and ice cream, because of course they don’t know. So much has changed since he asked the same question three minutes ago.

The fact is though, this level of concern, although not surprising, is quite touching. And there’s something in it that gives her hope. Or something a lot like it. So no, it’s not the time for snark. Not much anyway.

She sits back on the bed, sighs, gives him an indulgent smile. “Yes, she’s fine. I saw her off myself. You should be more concerned about prying her back from Marci when you’re well. She took quite a shine to her.”

His mouth twists into a smirk and she can see that it hurts him to do it. His face is still swollen and bruised, the scabs dyed a sickly yellow from whatever Claire put on them earlier but she smiles with him anyway. And this, him in front of her, broken and bloody, but trying hard to put her at ease, to smile for her, feels so much like that night at the diner, that part of her wants to turn around and wait for a gang of gun-toting assholes to walk through her front door, open fire on everything and
everyone in sight.

But, she reminds herself, they’d have to get through Irene first. And she’s not betting on that. Not betting that Irene herself doesn’t have a Kalishnikov hidden under the front desk.

Hey, weirder things have happened.

The big bad Punisher is in her bed.

Don’t you know?

He finishes the pasta and makes to stand up but she shoves him back down against the pillows, gives him what she hopes is a withering look and takes the bowl away and sets it down on the side table. He sighs at her, tries to tell her that he’s fine, can’t she see. He can move and walk and everything and she needs to stop listening to Nurse Temple and her ludicrous notions that he needs to rest up.

She tells him to shut up. He came to her and she’s fixing this and he doesn’t get a say. To stop making things harder than they already are. And when he’s quiet and glaring at her she says she wants a “Yes Ma’am”.

She gets it. It's grudging and slightly sarcastic, even a little childish, But she gets it.

He was sleeping when she came back, Pickle attached to his side like velcro, unwilling to be moved. Claire said he'd be okay. That he's strong enough to shower himself, that his blood pressure is low but that's not unexpected. That he needs to stay put. Rest. Eat. No exertion. Also that her date wants to go out again and was apparently unfazed by the fact that she was in the shower with a naked man when he called. So all good on that front at least. You know, the important stuff.

After she left, Karen did what she could to amuse herself. She read, she watched a bad movie on her laptop, worked a little on some story ideas that Ellison was likely to sneer at, and then suggest slight variations on, before telling her to go off and write them all. She tried hard not to let the sound of Frank's breathing distract her. Not to sit at his bedside like some creepy, clingy girlfriend without knowledge of appropriate boundaries.

It was okay. Pleasant even. And then he woke up.
And that’s not to say it’s unpleasant now. Because it’s not. But then again he’s never been easy and he doesn’t like being laid up and cared for. They’ve already fought about the sleeping arrangements despite the fact that he can’t possibly bed down on the couch without firstly pulling his stitches, secondly being terribly uncomfortable with all his bashes and bruises and thirdly, bleeding all over it. And she really doesn’t want that, because she bought it new and it could well be the most expensive thing she owns.

He’s backed down now though. He always does with her.

They also fought about food because he apparently wants to pay her for his meals. He’s backed off on that point too but she suspects it’s going to come around again. And again.

She takes a moment to give him the once over. He’s still really bruised and she thinks he will be for a while. His ribs and belly marked blue and purple, his shoulders grazed and lazy, loose knife wounds across his torso. She won’t think about what that means, what they did to him.

He’s also clean, much cleaner than before and he doesn’t stink of blood or dirt anymore, his bandages only slightly discoloured. She’ll need to change them a little later - Claire left instructions - but she's pretty sure it's not rocket science. She can handle it.

Karen Page: intrepid reporter, lover of vigilantes and holder back of tears under extreme duress. Also bandage changer in training. Depending on how she does later, she might drop the “in training” part.

There’s also a stash of antibiotics and painkillers that Claire left on the bedside table with a warning not to ask how she got them. She said she can’t be a saint without being the worst kind of sinner too. She has her resources, she has means. She’s been dragged into this and there’s no point doing it if she can’t do it properly. And to do it properly she needs proper medication.

All Karen needs to know is that he’s fine. Weak but fine. He’ll live.

Don’t ask. Don’t tell.

Yeah, Claire’s a saint. They couldn’t do this without her. And it still kills Karen how much they all expect her to risk.
“Hot in here,” he says wiping at his brow and wincing as his fingers snag against a scab on his forehead.

“Yeah,” she says turning to look out the window again. This storm is going to break. It has to. You can’t threaten something this long and then just walk away. Something has to give. Anything.

He rubs at his head again and she pulls his hand away sternly. It’s going to hurt, it’s going to scar and she doesn’t know for sure yet but she still thinks pretty might be important. Still thinks it might be something he wants to hold onto. If not for himself then maybe for her. Her and whatever this thing is between them that allows them to touch and to hold and pretend that nothing crosses some invisible line in the sand.

“Here,” she says, pressing a cool cloth against his skin.

He doesn’t flinch even though he should. He really really should. It must hurt. It has to. She wonders if he's just indulging her now, pretending it's not sore, but that's even more illogical than the reality of this. He never knew how badly she was hurt that night at the cabin, that his hand rested against her bruise’s blooming center - it’s most tender part - and it didn’t hurt. That it took weeks to fade, her skin going from a stain of red and purple to a corpse-like blue and then a sickly green. That anyone or anything else that touched it - herself included - sent fiery little spasms of pain all over her body. That for weeks she couldn’t bear to wear anything even slightly tight or clingy. And yet when his whole big hand rubbed hard against it, it just felt warm and soothing.

But he never saw it. Because he never turned around. He never saw her standing there, body frozen but nipples hard, thighs quivering, his name in the back of her throat, lust in the back of her mouth.

And she needs to stop indulging this. It didn't happen. More than enough did though, more than enough to analyse and dissect, more than enough to keep her confused and lost with longing and wanting. But she can't stop her mind from wandering. And it does. Lord help her but it does.

The fantasy changes occasionally, which in some ways surprises her as she's never been given to this type of thing. Mostly though, he bends her over that table, drives into her hard and fast from behind, but there are other times, fleeting moments when he pushes her back into the wall, hikes her legs around his waist and pins her between himself and the hard wood, splinters in her back as he kisses her messily and swallows her breath. She wonders if he thinks about her this way too. She doubts he has such vivid fantasies about the cabin, but maybe the night on the roof, maybe he imagines having her there under the night sky, her dress high and her stockings laddered, his lips and teeth at her throat.
It doesn't matter though. Not a jot. Because he was a perfect gentleman. In every way. Because he didn't turn around. But oh God if he had.

*If he had.*

“Karen?”

Her eyes snap to his face. It still surprises her those rare occasions he uses her name. There's something about it that feels intimate in a way she can't really define. “Ma'am” complicates things. “Karen” hits them right out the ballpark and turns them unrecognisable and leaves her floating in the dark, feeling around for something to hold onto that isn't him and isn't his voice.

And she can't keep doing this. Not like this.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you,” his voice is low and he reaches out and touches her shoulder, his hand heavy and hot through the thin material of her shirt. “Not just for sorting out Luna, but for saving me. You didn't have to do that.”

She lets out a dry laugh. He’s insane. He must be. To imagine she could find him like she did and just leave him to die.

“Yeah I kinda did.”

She stiffens as he runs his thumb along the ridge of her collarbone, as his fingers press against her flesh. He shouldn’t be doing this. He knows he shouldn’t. Because despite the heat of the evening, despite this monstrous nightmare where the rain refuses to fall and the air refuses to let it, a shiver runs through her and her skin prickles under his hand.

She could pull away. She could look away too, but she doesn’t do that. He knows she doesn’t. She never has from him. It’s not really defiance. Sure, it may have started as a test for herself, the absurd notion that if she could outstare The Punisher then nothing on Earth could scare her. Except now she knows him and he’s not all that scary. Not to her at least. And yet ... and yet there’s still something
that keeps her eyes on his face, bruised and battered though it may be. Still something that keeps her staring at him, watching his lips, the way he clenches his jaw and grinds his teeth.

For the first time she wonders if maybe he does have a sort of power here. A type he might not even necessarily be aware of.

“After the last time…” His thumb brushes her skin again and he trails off and suddenly looks away, drops his hand back into his lap.

She’s mildly surprised he brought that up, wouldn't have thought he would. Her on the roof, his hand so close to her breast, maneuvering her so that she was bearing down hard on his knee. Almost letting her fall. Leaving her crying. She would have thought he’d want to avoid acknowledging that particular elephant in the room. After all, it seems he has a whole herd to choose from.

Thing is, in her head, despite her continued insistence that he’s both good and bad, poison and cure, calm and rage, she still has trouble seeing the dead man and the husband side by side. And while she knows they are both true, that they both exist, that they are both as much a part of Frank Castle as her warring heart and mind are part of her, she sometimes forgets that he's been down the road of love and romance before. That he would recognise a version of these feelings for what they are because he's not the emotionless warring machine the world thinks he is. That there is so much more to him than someone who kills, who murders, who punishes. There’s a man inside who is kind and sweet, who loves, who needs, who feels. And that's the side he shows her the most. That's how she knows him. That's why he's lying her bed and it's why she lets him touch her and look at her in ways she'd balk at with anyone else.

They're going to need to talk about this. Oh God, they are, because it can’t carry on like this. Like the coming storm outside, this too has to break.

“We don't need to worry about that now Frank,” she says.

He looks up at her again and it's that same suspicious look he's given her before. Like he's trying to figure out her angle, see through some subterfuge. It kills her that she might well be the person he trusts most in the world. And this is somehow still where she is.

“Besides,” she says lightly, putting the cloth down. “I wasn't going to leave you out there to die just for being a jerk. My ego isn't that fragile.”
He barks out a dry laugh.

“You should have though. Should have left me on my ass.”

She rolls her eyes and reaches up to touch his face, hesitates a moment, and then decides to hell with it, and runs her fingers through his hair. It’s smooth and clean, grown in a bit more, the buzzcut slowly disappearing under softer downier hair. He closes his eyes, tilts his head towards her hand.

“Frank,” she says softly. “Let’s stop this. I’m not going to shoot you or leave you to die or anything else. I think we've established that. I think we know you don’t want to hurt me.”

She shifts forward on the bed a little and she’s barely touched him but his skin prickles.

“And that I don’t want to hurt you,” she whispers, lets her words hang there.

They both feel it. The change of mood. How the air in the room, though still muggy, now feels charged and alive, too thick and too thin all at once. It's not that it's horrible but it's expectant, Unfinished.

“Come on Karen,” he says and his voice is low and husky and she thinks of Claire and her concern about the direction of his blood flow, the way she'd reiterated it earlier before she left. And yeah maybe it was more of a joke than anything else. But still.

“You can't want me here. The Punisher. In your home. Your bed. You can't tell me that doesn't bother you.”

She slides her hand to his cheek, his stubble rough against her palm and he opens his eyes - dark, bruised, bloodied - his pupils sucking in all the light, the same way he seems to suck in all the air.

“Yeah,” she says slowly, evenly. “I'm shaking in my boots.”

His mouth twists into a grin, which he tries to stifle by biting his lip. He's unsuccessful. And it's wonderful. And it takes some of that tension out of the air. Not much, but some.
She pulls her hand away, sits back. Not now. They don’t need to go here now. They have time.

“How are you feeling?” she asks. “Claire said she gave you a lot of painkillers.”

He sighs. “Tired. No one drilled a hole through my foot though. Guess it wasn’t that kind of party.”

And she's genuinely surprised by the ball of rage that suddenly manifests in her chest. How she has to bite her lip not to say anything. God, he's not good. Not even close by any moral scale the world uses to judge. And yet he is. He is good and he's lost and he's lonely and the world has been more than shitty to him and she wants it to pay. She wants it to atone for stealing his life from him. She once told Foggy to imagine his whole life fuelled by one single moment. To imagine that you get less than a second every morning before you realise your nightmare is real and you live in hell. Sure she may have been talking more about herself but it doesn't change anything. The universe was, and continues to be, a remorseless fucking bitch to this man. And it’s not fair.

“What happened Frank? Who did this to you?”

He frowns.

“Thought you Florence Nightingale types didn't want to know that kind of stuff.”

For some reason that pisses her off and it must show on her face because he hurries to continue.

“I went looking for your boy,” he starts and she can't help it but Matt’s name is out of her mouth before she can stop it. It’s ridiculous, of course. There’s no reason Frank would need to go looking for Matt. He knows exactly where to find him. They all do. Still, the way he talks about her and Matt, like he knows something she doesn’t and they’re a done deal, like he still believes that is where she belongs, bothers her. It's an easy enough mistake to make, considering the phrasing.

“No,” he says slowly but that suspicious look is back on his face. The one that doesn't trust her, that's searching for her lie. It's silly though. She has no doubts that he's extremely well aware of her day-to-day comings and goings. That if she had rekindled whatever it was she had with Matt - which incidentally is what he told her to do - he would know.
“Oh.”

“Smirnov,” he says that slowly too and she knows he's watching for her reaction. She’s just not sure why.

“I went back to that warehouse on tenth. You know the one.”

She nods.

It seems oddly difficult for him to talk about this and he doesn't have much in the way of details. Seems like whoever was there got the jump on him early. Asshole with the kyoketsu-shoge again, which she's sure is Nobu. Matt thinks so too. He told her as much the day she came back from Frank’s cabin. That somehow this asshole of assholes was still alive despite having no right to be. She's tried to figure out the hows and whys of it but it's not like she can waltz up to Ellison and ask him to let her launch an investigation into undead ninjas. Well, not yet at least. He does give her a lot of leeway.

Frank says there was a lot of noise, a lot of flashing light. He does remember the cages though and a lot of beds, like a hospital ward, stringy curtains dividing them. Not much more. And then he was fighting and killing and the world turned to fire. He says they snuck up on him, that they were so quiet even Red wouldn't have heard them. He killed as many as he could but it wasn't good enough and the kyoketsu-shoge cut him to pieces, left him for dead on the floor. But he wasn't. And he dragged himself across town to her. She knows the rest.

And she tries not be as horrified as she is. Forces herself to focus on the fact that he’s here. And alive. And going to be fine.

He stops talking and looks up at her, shrugs.

“Seems you can't kill a dead man.”

It’s meant to be flippant but it punches her in the gut again.

“No Frank, no. Don't say that.”
He glances at Pickle, runs a hand through her fur and she purrs loudly.

“True though.”

She shakes her head. “It’s not.”

He doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t believe her and she wonders if he ever will. Wonders how much she’ll have to fight to get him there. It’s not that he thinks he is dead, it’s that he wants to be. Has to be in order to continue his war with the world.

Because dead men don't have codes, they don't have morals. Consequences don't matter. And even she can see the irony in that. The flaw in this plan. The fact that he has to create this fantasy for himself is the very thing that means he is alive. That things like codes and morals matter. That pretty is important.

She says his name. He looks away. He always does.

“You don't get it Karen.”

He's doesn't sound angry, not even exasperated. Just resigned. Weary.

“Try me.”

He says nothing. And it occurs to her that this is a little unfair. He's laid up, wounded, high on painkillers and antibiotics. He's not his best. But then again it's not like he's been fair to her either. Not like any part of the last few months has been fair. Not the cabin, not the confession, not the lattes, not the roof and his knee between her legs, his hands pawing at her. And certainly not what came after. And then what came after that. Last night. Today. Now.

Maybe they don't hurt each other. But they wound each other. They mark each other. She's both wise and stupid enough to imagine there's a difference.

The silence stretches long and taut between them and eventually she has to break it. She shouldn’t, she knows this, but she has to.
And she breaks everything else with it too.

“Frank, it’s not like you enjoy this. It’s not like killing people is fun for you.”

She knows it’s the wrong thing to say before she's even said it. Knows that on the scale of Things Karen Page Could Say That Are Guaranteed To Be Wrong that is only marginally out ranked by insulting his wife or his children.

And she’s cursing inwardly because she realises, even as the words are coming out of her mouth, that she promised she’d never do this. Maybe it wasn’t a deal with him even, but it certainly was one with herself. She’s not sure when it happened. She could say it was the night at the cabin, that her lips on his neck and her fingers twined through his and her solemn acceptance of his confession was a turning point, the moment when she realised that she could never argue him out of this. But she thinks it was before then. Maybe when she didn’t shoot him in her apartment, maybe even the day she shoved his family photo in front of his face and demanded that he look at it. That he feel it.

She felt she owed it to him not to ask. Apparently he did too. But it’s done and it’s too late to take it back. Same way it's too late to take back everything else.

“No Karen,” and his voice is hard. Harder than he’s ever used with her before and it feels like he’s slapped her. “It’s not fun for me.”

“Frank, I…” she has no idea what she’s going to say, so she stops, doesn’t say anything.

He sighs, wipes at his brow again, grinds his teeth. It's so stifling in here and she's pretty sure it's not just the weather.

“Let's not do this,” he says. “Come on. Let's not.”

But from the look in his eyes, they already have. And they can’t go back. Can’t undo it.

He blinks rapidly, wipes at his face, swallows. Tears? She’s not sure, she can’t see.
“I’m sorry,” she says softly, “I shouldn’t have…”

“It’s okay,” he interrupts and she flags that, because it’s another lie and it feels like her heart is splitting in two.

He looks around, shifts uncomfortably and she knows he’s wishing he could leave, that there was an escape from this. From her.

“I’m going to get some more sleep,” he says and she nods. “We can sort out the bandages later.”

It’s a dismissal in its own way. Not that there’s anywhere he can send her other than out of his sight.

She stands. Outside thunder rolls again and there’s a spray of light drizzle but the air stays thick and static. Heavy.

Inside, Frank Castle turns onto his side and breathes deeply, takes the last of the little air that’s left and pulls it into oblivion with him.

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Again, she doesn’t bother to pull the couch out. She doesn’t think she’s going to sleep much tonight anyway, so she just grabs a blanket from the linen closet and drapes it over herself. Pickle, usually incredibly intrigued by laps and boobs and anything else she can make herself comfortable on, stays put at Frank’s side. And that’s okay. As long as she doesn’t climb on him she can do what she likes. And if Karen is honest, it’s no real surprise that one ball of rage and destruction has found kinship in another. Pickle walked off her balcony and into her life and oh God, but that is a thing. Pretending not to see the pattern is both delusional and unhelpful.

She switches on the dimmest light in the room, a godawful thing that she found at a yard sale a few years ago that only casts light on itself. She’s wanted to get rid of it but for some reason she can’t. So if she’s honest, and apparently tonight is the night for that (or not), she’s hoping Pickle will smash it one day and save her the trouble. Either way it’s a good light for when you don’t actually want to see much but you also don't want to sit in the dark all alone.

Even if Frank Castle is mostly naked and in her bed. And pissed as all hell at her.
Because wow universe, wow. Just how fucking sick and twisted do you need to pull shit like this?

Yeah, she was stupid. She knows this. They’ll get past it. She knows that too. But still, she doesn’t like it. She doesn’t like standing on opposite sides of the fence with him, feeling this distance lurching between them.

She sighs, rubs her eyes. She is so tired. Exhausted actually. But again she finds she’s scared to sleep.

She shifts under the blanket and her foot knocks something hard and smooth, a sharp corner digging into her skin. She leans forward, pulls Matt’s gift out from where it's become wedged between the cushions and the side of the couch. The bows are a little crumpled and the colours of the wrapping don’t shine as brightly as they did in the bar.

She turns it over, there's a card attached and she takes it out of the envelope. It’s a cartoon monkey in a party hat and she wonders how that conversation went down in the store. Wonders if Matt asked some assistant to find him a goofy card and then write it for him. He probably did. Matt is nothing if not charming. Too charming.

She glances over to where Frank sleeps. At least she doesn’t have that problem here.

No, the problems here are all in a league of their own.

The card is simple. To the point. No hidden messages, no loaded words.

Dear Karen

Wishing you a great day and all the best for the year ahead.

Love Matt

She’s grateful. She probably wouldn't have done too well if there'd been more. The gift though. The gift is something else.
She knew it was a book. Even if the shape and the weight hadn't given it away, Matt had mentioned the woman in the bookstore. But she thought it would be something simple. The latest John le Carre or Stephen King. Maybe a cookbook or some pretentious coffee table photography collection. But it's not.

It's a Bukowski collection, plain blue hardback with silver writing. Selected works apparently.

And there's a moment that she thinks it's a very weird choice for a gift and then she doesn't. She wouldn't describe herself as a fan. Poetry in general is something she finds a little fanciful. And further than the old stock favourites she had to study in school - Robert Frost and his road not taken, Sylvia Plath and her ode to mushrooms - she hasn't really revisited that part of her youth. And Bukowski, well Bukowski is all of those wonderful but also dreadful things that turn some people into believers and others into detractors. He's the clichéd hard drinking, straight talking, pining artist struggling to get his words onto the page, desperate for connection and understanding, but zealously believing no one ever can. And yeah, in that light it makes sense.

She opens the book. Inside Matt’s written *What matters most is how well you walk through the fire* .

It resonates but probably not in the way he anticipated.

It's sweet though. It is. She's not going to deny that. It's even thoughtful. She's not going to pull this apart. She's just going to enjoy it. After all, who doesn't like reading angry poetry by angry, misunderstood old men?

Frank mumbles something that she can't quite make out. He's doesn't seem distressed so she leaves it, puts the book on the coffee table and switches off the light in case that's bothering him. And then she lies there and stares at the ceiling, the dark shadows, the reflection of light from police cruisers as they supposedly protect the city from crime. And if that were true her and Matt would probably be pursuing that very ordinary relationship and Frank would be with Maria and his children and not at war with the world.

And ordinary is wonderful when your life is anything but.

She turns onto her side. In the gloom she notices the stain of Frank's hand against the wall, the way it's streaked downwards as he lost his balance. His blood on her hands, her clothes, her walls. She'll have to wash it, paint over it. But there's a part of her that thinks it won't change much, that she'll still be able to see it.
She’ll know.

And suddenly her eyes are so heavy and she feels weak and weary to her bones. She imagines the adrenalin seeping out of her pores in a sparkling silver mist, rising above her and disappearing into his blood.

She walked through this fire. She has no doubt she will walk through another.

Under his blood, in the cloying wet heat, she tries so hard to sleep.

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It doesn’t rain for for three more days. On the fourth it pours.

Chapter End Notes

"I think I'm going to have a heartattack and die from that surprise" is from Disney's Aladdin.

"What matters most is how well you walked through the fire" is the title of a Bukowski collection.
When love is a gun separating me from you

Chapter Notes

So as always this is turning out to be a little longer than expected. Initially this chapter and the next were going to be one chapter but it started to feel too bitty and all over the place and I thought it might annoy people because it was annoying the fuck out of me. So I split them at what, to me at least, seemed like a reasonable place for a division.

The next chapter, which is really the crux of this series should be up by Saturday unless something entirely unforeseen happens. It's written, it's edited, it's ready to go basically.

Also no, this is not the last part of the series, we have a way to go yet. Quite a way actually.

Also, and I suspect I will talk a little more about this on my tumblr TheVampireCat this fic has done a weird thing and started to take on a life of its own. I'm not really sure how but some freaky shit has been happening during this writing process that I do not understand myself. Things have been slipping into place without me really meaning to make them happen and the narrative has kind of looped around itself in interesting ways. I'll probably make a post about that when this part of the series concludes. I'm also probably going to sound self important. I am sorry for that.

Speaking of conclusions though, I have now entered hell month at work. It even gave me the nice surprise of coming two days early. I am hoping to finish this part before the end of September though but I can't make any promises. Actually, I can. I promise to try.

Also, in case anyone hasn't noticed I am playing a little fast and loose with the timeline.

Then a final note. I am really overwhelmed and humbled by the response to this fic and I know I have not responded to the comments on the last chapter. I will and I hope to do so soon. I am sorry I left it this long. In my defence though, I was writing these next two chapters and I figured you'd prefer me to concentrate on that when I am on a roll (yeah yeah, somebody better butter me). But thank you. I want you to know that they are all appreciated and you guys make me feel so good about this fic.

Anyway, yeah, this chapter and the next are a bit of a rollercoaster (or they were for me at least). Hope you all enjoy the ride.

Chapter title is from HIM The Funeral of Hearts. It's a very good song to get you in the right headspace for the rest of this fic also.

Wednesday. Another night spent tossing and turning on the couch. Another night that she’s lucky if she grabbed two hours sleep.

She’s read about sleep deficit. How you need to pay back the hours you lose, how after you lose too
much it stops mattering. She guesses at the end of the day it’s just another debt she owes. And she thinks the universe is going to come knocking soon.

She yawns, sits up and waits for Pickle to realise she’s awake. As usual, the cat is pressed into Frank’s side. Even in the early morning light she can see his arm is draped around her, her little furry black head resting on his bicep.

Two fiery balls of rage asleep in her bed.

A glance outside. It’s darker than it should be at this hour but that’s because those eternal stormclouds are only getting blacker, still apparently holding back the rain as best they can. She imagines them filling up and waiting, waiting, waiting before they drown everyone and everything. Matt would probably say something about Noah and arks and promises, tell her the story like she doesn’t know it already, take it further to explain cultural flood myths or something. Gilgamesh, Bergelmir, Deucalion. She doesn’t know. There are so many.

She’s not religious, at least not in the same way that Matt is, but she does wonder though if this is some form of divine punishment, this wet, stifling heat, the air too thick to breathe and the way the whole world feels heavy and sluggish. She wonders what Hell’s Kitchen is being punished for, although the answer seems obvious. Clue’s in the name and all.

She stands. Pickle seems to have zero intention of abandoning Frank’s arms and she can’t really say she blames her. If it was offered to her, she probably couldn’t give it up either. Even though she did.

They both did.

Her back aches as she stretches, hard knots in her shoulders, her spine, a tight ball of muscle in her lower back that briefly brings tears to her eyes. Sleeping on the couch honestly feels like she's torturing herself slowly to death every night. Frank's been hounding her incessantly to swap with him, swearing up and down that he'll be fine and he's slept on far worse and while she doesn't doubt that latter, she knows the former is a lie.

He can still barely make it to the bathroom and back and most of the time she thinks it's only pure stubbornness that keeps him going. That and the fear that it'll just make things weirder between them. And he's right. It probably wouldn't help. Because yeah, they're kind of over the little spat from Saturday. Kind of. It's hard to stay mad when you're living on top of one another with little room for escape. And the truth is she doesn't think he wants to stay angry with her. He might hold grudges like no one on Earth but even he knows pettiness when he sees it.
But then, on the other hand, things have been strained. He's withdrawn considerably and while he's not exactly derisive or rude, he's distant. It's as if he's desperately trying to recapture that same stoicism and willpower he used to walk off the roof and leave her crying and empty, the same stubbornness that kept him away from her for as long as it did. She can sense it breaking though, the cracks forming and she can’t tell whether that’s good or bad. Either way there are no more slip ups, no more gentle touches, no lingering gazes except for when he's sure she's not looking. And sometimes not even then. She’d know. She just would.

She glances over at him again. His bruises have started to fade very slightly, the cuts on his face healing. He’ll be pretty again. Pretty in all his murderous rage, his righteous vengeance, pretty in that way that Claire thinks impossible and would scoff at. But then again, Claire has a type. And her type isn’t Frank Castle.

Karen’s starting to wonder if anybody’s is. If anybody’s should be.

Sometimes, she feels very alone.

She puts on the coffee, showers, does her make-up, dresses, brushes her hair. Even so, she looks wan and drawn in the mirror. Older than she should, bags under her eyes.

So many things, so many things in this last year to age her.

Her colleague covered in blood and dead on her floor. James Wesley’s corpse twitching as she shot him. And then shot him again. And again. Matt and his Big Reveal.

Frank Castle in her bed.

Good things too though.

Claire and her friendship that means more than anything. Foggy and his love, his loyalty. Her job. Ellison. Pickle.

Frank Castle in her bed.
She shakes her head, looks at the closed bathroom door as if she can see through it and find him, sleeping soundly under her blankets.

No, it’s not how she pictured it inasmuch as she ever allowed herself to picture it. But she guesses that’s what happens when the person you feel most connected to in the whole world fell into your arms because he couldn’t keep standing, because his lifeblood was running out and you were the only person who could put it back.

He’s The Punisher, it was never going to be all sunshine and rainbows.

But maybe there could have been some at least. Maybe the universe didn’t need to be such a fucking bitch about this all. She could do with a break. She knows he could too.

She sighs, adds a bit of gloss to her lips. It doesn’t do much, but pretty is important and on a whim she grabs a silver necklace with a black rose pendant out of her jewellery box and puts it on. It’s not something she wears often on account of her considerable worry that she might lose it. But maybe today the risk is worth it. Maybe today she needs to act pretty to feel it.

He’s awake when she gets back into the lounge, lying on his side, staring out of the window. And again it feels like all the air has been sucked out of the room.

“Looks like another gorgeous spring day.”

She tries to sound light and nonchalant but it comes out all wrong. No doubt, he can hear it in her voice, the disappointment, the resignation. The fact that she’s not only talking about the weather. She can’t be.

He nods. Doesn’t say much, but she thinks that maybe she’s supposed to understand something from it, even though she doesn’t. She’s too tired to figure out hidden meanings and cryptic messages.

She brings him a mug of coffee, black and bitter and entirely not how she could imagine drinking it. Claire has eventually relented on the caffeine intake, initially telling him to avoid it entirely and only yesterday softening and saying he could have one small cup a day. Apparently in Punisher-speak “one small cup” means constant and consistent large doses of the stuff because when she got home the previous evening, Karen’s filter coffee supply was depleted by at least half.
She sits down on the bed next to him, a little further away than before, and sips her own, takes a moment to study him in the dim light.

Something’s up, she can see it in the hard clench of his jaw, the way he’s chugging his coffee without tasting it. He’s barely looked at Pickle and that’s unusual. He loves Pickle. Loves her with the same strange fierceness that he loves all things cute and furry and vulnerable and she’s always found something profoundly comforting in that. Something that lets her believe he can’t be all bad, hasn’t completely given himself over to the darkness.

“You okay?” she asks.

He doesn’t answer for a while. Drinks more of his coffee. Glares at the gloomy day outside.

“Yeah,” he says eventually. “I’m just tired of being laid up like this.”

And that’s another thing. He might be reserved but he talks about leaving a lot, about how he’ll be better soon and he’ll get out of her hair. She sometimes thinks he’s talking more to himself than to her. Reminding himself that this is going to come to an end and trying so hard to convince them both that that is what he wants.

It hurts though. Hurts worse than any cut or bruise. And despite the fact that she wouldn’t want to live in a world where she doesn’t know what she does, a world where he never took her away to the mountains and held her and kissed her shoulder and whispered his darkest secret into her ear, she catches herself longing for a simpler time. And when she realises that “A Simpler Time” means him throwing herself on top of her to protect her from bullets, of him dragging her to a diner at the end of the world and then shooting that very same world apart, of him murdering a man all but in front of her, she has to wonder if she’s truly starting to lose any grasp she has on reality. She thinks of Matt and how he wanted to go back to a time before this, and she thinks maybe she understands things a little better than she did when they last spoke.

Who knows though? She suspects that a world where Frank Castle doesn’t love her would be easier to exist in than the one where he does. And that in itself has nothing to do with how he is now.

“Claire said…” she starts.

“I know what Nurse Temple said,” he interrupts, but it’s not unkind, and seemingly worried that she
might think it was he rushes to continue. “I know you’re both trying to help.”

She nods, sips more coffee, notices how he seems to have slipped out of the conversation again, how he’s staring outside and grinding his teeth. There’s a lot of rage in his gaze but there always is, but there’s something else as well. Anticipation? Longing maybe? She can’t be sure.

She gets that, to a large degree, he is something of a caged beast right now. That he’d be pacing the floor and hitting his head against the walls if he were strong enough to do so.

Again she feels like there’s something she should know, something she’s missing, but she’s so exhausted that she’s honestly not sure that her mind isn’t playing tricks on her. She barely has enough brainpower to get her through the day at work, so figuring out Frank Castle’s secrets is unlikely to be something she’ll just be able to do on the fly.

“How are you feeling this morning?” she asks and he shrugs. It’s not an unusual response, especially when he’s maudlin. Or being a man baby.

(Okay, so the joke’s getting old but it makes her feel more in control of her own thoughts and emotions to keep it going. Makes this whole situation seem less frightening and more like a minor inconvenience than the slow exercise in destroying her soul that it is.)

She rolls a shoulder, reaches up to rub her neck and it feels like someone has replaced her spine with barbwire.

He frowns, gives her that halfway vulgar once over he’s so good at, cocks his head.

“Ma’am,” his voice is thick, husky. “Ma’am, I ain’t taking no for an answer anymore. You’re sleeping in the bed tonight.”

“Frank…”

“No, this is stupid. You have to,” he says and reaches out, fingers only brushing her wrist before he catches himself and withdraws like she’s burned him, hand awkwardly settling on Pickle who has yet to budge.
He looks away briefly, embarrassed and then seems to overcome that and swing back to her.

“You need to rest. Proper rest and sleep. Not whatever it is you do on that couch.”

He’s right. She knows he is. Depending on how long he’s still around (and she discards his estimate that it’ll only be another two or three days) it could be weeks before she gets a good night’s sleep. And frankly, that’s not sustainable. She has to drive, she has to write, she has to appear present and engaged enough to keep her job and the subsequent respect that comes with it, even if she doesn’t really feel she deserves it. Ellison is a decent person, but she’s not convinced even he is going to find it in himself to be forgiving if she falls asleep on the job regularly.

The problem, of course, is that she’s pretty sure the couch is going to prove as awful for Frank as it is for her. It’ll do nothing to help him heal and probably set him back even further. But then again, he can still have the bed during the day.

She shakes her head. Looks up at him.

“We can see tonight,” she says and he rolls his eyes.

“You don’t have to be a fucking martyr Karen,” he says. “Red has the Hell’s Kitchen area covered.”

Despite herself she laughs and he smiles with her. It's not that she takes any great pleasure in deriding Matt. She doesn't. At heart he is a good person, a very good person who puts himself on the line over and over again to ensure the safety of everyone around him. But there's something about Frank and his no nonsense, slightly scornful approach to Matt and his righteousness, his sermonising, and yes, his little boy pajamas that amuses her. Encourages her even to stop seeing Matt and subsequently the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen as some kind of enigma and just as a man who fucks up, makes mistakes and can be a supremely shitty friend.

“Okay,” she says lightly. “It should only take one night and you'll be begging me for the bed again.”

He purses his lips and she knows he's busy checking some internal stubbornness rating, deciding there and then that he'll stick it out for as long as she can.

“Come on,” she says putting her mug down. “Bandages. I'm going to be late.”
He grumbles a little at that but pushes the sheet down to his waist so she can see his side. She’s gotten better at not staring. Ordinarily she’s not given to this kind of thing. At the same time it’s not like she doesn’t ever look. She does. She’s human. But Frank makes it hard to keep up the facade that she’s not. And he’s making it hard now and she forces herself to look away from the chiselled lines of his ribs, the sharp crease at his hip and concentrate on the task at hand.

He makes things very unfair.

The dressing though, that’s dirty and bloodied and as she removes it she sees he’s somehow pulled two stitches in his sleep, the skin inflamed and puckered, turning a horrible purple.

“Busy night?” she asks and he snorts.

He doesn’t flinch as she applies two temporary butterfly stitches to his skin. And again, it should hurt. It should. A hiss, a sigh, anything and she'd believe it, but there's nothing. Nothing but his eyes boring into the top of her head, nothing but the stifling, strangely airless microclimate of her apartment.

She realises she truly has no fucking clue what she’s doing, what they’re doing or where any of this is headed. Nor whether it’s even possible to change it or stay the course. He’s stoic and stubborn and has seemingly decided he can will away whatever it is he's feeling - something she suspects he does a lot of - but it’s not sustainable. It can’t be. They’re going to have to deal with this. One way or another. Because right now it feels like they’re walking on a volcano, feeling the magma rolling beneath the surface and hoping like hell that it’s not going to shoot out the million and one cracks at their feet. It’s reckless and dangerous and she’s pretty sure they’re both going to get burned. Turned to ash.

She smooths a clean dressing over the stitches, changes the one at his shoulder. That’s looking better, along with the slashes on his chest, the bruises on his ribs and belly. Claire will be in later to check on him anyway. She always does before she goes to work because she’s a saint and even though he’s who and what he is, Claire has come through for him the same way she comes through for any of her patients, on or off the books.

They’re all walking a tightrope, playing a game of chicken with the universe. No wonder Mother Nature is throwing a tantrum.

She reaches for edge of the sheet to tug it back over him and there’s a moment, a split second where
all she wants to do is lean her head against his chest, breathe him in. Maybe he’d put his hands in her hair, hold her close.

She’s tired. She’s so fucking tired.

She leaves the sheet, sits back, runs a hand through her hair.

“Thanks,” he says softly and she nods.

“Ask Claire to check those stitches,” she stands, suddenly needing to be away from him, away from this room, needing air and light and anything but Frank Castle and the way he’s like a dark vortex that’s somehow centred itself in her bedroom.

“What time are you home tonight?” he says it a little too casually and she flags it. She’s not sure why. It’s not a question he’s asked before now, pretty much just accepting that she gets home when she gets home.

She narrows her eyes.

“You gonna miss me Frank?”

He looks away, small smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

“Come on,” he says but she can hear a hint of mirth in his voice. “Don’t give me a hard time. I got Nurse Temple for that.”

And for a second it feels like everything is okay again. That he didn’t leave her on the roof, that he doesn’t keep trying to push her back into Matt’s life and consequently his arms. That she didn’t fuck up and ask him the one question she swore she wouldn’t. That they’re friends, maybe something more and they can face whatever it is between them and not have to let it go like he said they should.

He asked if she knew and she does. She told him she does. And she wants to tell him again. It doesn’t matter if she doesn’t know how.
But later. Later. It can wait.

“Probably about 7:00,” she says. “Want me to bring anything?”

He shakes his head and there’s something very gentle in the way he does it, that hard look in his eyes all but disappeared and replaced by something else. Something almost sad. Wistful.

So much for looking at her like she hung the moon. And the stars.

“Stay safe ma’am.”

She nods and suddenly feels a little choked up, heart clenching just a little, her own tiny monster trying to cut off her air and halt the words in the back of her throat. She wants to make this right. She wants all these little moments again.

*His hand on her bruise, his lips against her hair, thick fingers twisting through hers.*

*Don’t you know?*

And she can’t look at him for another second, so she grabs her purse, slings it over her shoulder and heads for the door, for the air that exists on the other side of it, the air he hasn’t sucked out of the world. But just as she’s about to press down on the handle he says her name and it’s so soft and unexpected she’s not convinced she heard him and that this is not her overtired mind playing tricks on her. But then he says it again and she freezes, bites down hard on her bottom lip.

Turning back to look at him is harder than she thought it would be.

“Thank you,” he says softly and despite herself, she smiles.

“You’re welcome,” it comes out a half whisper and she’s not sure why.
“I wouldn’t be here without you,” he says, stops, pauses. “I just wanted you to know that.”

She nods again.

For some reason his words give her no comfort at all.

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“You're looking a little fragile, you all right Page?”

Ellison. Leaning again. This time into the office kitchen where she's making coffee.

She gives him a wan smile. “I just haven't been sleeping all that well.”

He cocks his head, purses his lips like he doesn't believe her.

“Not like you've been burning the midnight oil,” he says. “Your pitches were shit this week.”

She gives him a sour look. He's accepted every last pitch she made bar two. To be fair those were pretty shit but the rest he lapped up like a kitten drinking cream.

He's contrary today though. Squirrelly. Has been all week since he floated the idea on Monday morning that the paper would be willing to give her a book deal, if she’d bring a thing or two to the party. The problem was the thing or two. He wants the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen. He wants an exclusive biography. And yeah he knows Karen knows more than she lets on. He knows. And no, he's not asking for a reveal. He’s not an idiot, he’s perfectly well aware she won't do that. But he does want details. Quotes, memories, anecdotes. He wants everything the Devil is willing to give right up to and definitely not including the Frank Castle fiasco, because he's apparently not letting her near anything to do with the Punisher until she gets a little perspective, because she can't keep her head when that happens. And to be fair that's 100% true, even if it makes her glare at him and consider slipping salt into his coffee.
And she turned him down. Her contract doesn't include having to write books. And no, it didn't matter that the pay would be good. She's not exposing the Devil that way. No she won't even talk to him about it. Besides, what does he expect? Her to get an audience with Wilson Fisk? No way to get that kind of True Crime novel out there without word from the man himself. And no, she doesn't think Fisk is about to make himself available to her.

So Ellison’s been bristly. Sarcastic. Abrasive. Apparently this is the stick part of his pitch. She's waiting for the carrot. Not that it'll change anything. In the meantime though, she's got this. Him in all his sour-faced glory picking on her a little like a bully in a playground.

And yet right now that's not what he's doing.

“Seriously Karen, you're not looking great,” he holds up his hands. “And before you go reporting me to HR that's not a comment on your aesthetic. You just don't look well. Are you coming down with something?”

She shakes her head.

“I'm really just tired Mitchell,” she takes a sip of her coffee. “I haven't slept well for the past few days.”

He cocks his head. Genuine concern now. “Something bothering you?” He asks.

_Sure yes, the big bad Punisher in her bed._

She shakes her head in what he knows must be a lie.

“Just can't get to sleep.”

Ellison gives her the once over and frowns.

“Karen, do you need to take a few days off?” he asks. “I’m not actually a slave driver even if I play one on TV but I’m genuinely worried about you. And if you are getting sick I’d prefer not to get it.”
She grins, fake coughs and sees how he recoils out of the room. He’s so damn predictable. And really he deserves it after that dig at her pitches.

“Germaphobe,” she says and he glares at her.

“You probably caught something at Josie’s. They probably offer Swine Flu as a side dish there.”

She snorts. Say what you like about Ellison, his outrage is always amusing.

“Really, I’m fine,” she tells him. “Honestly, I swear I am just tired.”

He doesn’t believe her. That much is obvious and he glances down at her clothes.

“I guess the fact that you are dressed like you’re going to a funeral doesn’t help,” snark again. The old Ellison. The one that’s pissed with her because she’s not writing a book about Matt and all his shenanigans.

“Now that is something for HR,” she teases. “Definite comment on my aesthetic.”

He waves her off as he turns around. “Just get some rest Page, you’ve got a book to write.”

She rolls her eyes. “Not writing your book Ellison.”

“Yeah you are,” he says as he slips back into his office and shuts the door.

He’s right though. She does need some rest. And she is dressed like she’s going to a funeral. Apparently, like with most things, she wasn’t really thinking all that straight when she got dressed this morning, not paying attention to anything other than the man in her bed. She glances down at her tight black capri pants, the ones she swore she’d never wear to work but had to on account of her skinned knees, her black blouse loose over an equally black singlet. It’s not that she looks bad. She doesn’t. The outfit is more than smart enough, especially for an industry that seems to pride itself on being jaded and hard, unfazed by flash and fuss (and obviously that’s all lies, but they need to keep
the facade up for some reason) it’s just that it’s not her. But she guesses this has been a week of getting older and trying new things, so maybe a new look isn’t out of order.

If she can keep Frank Castle in her bed then surely an alternative wardrobe can’t be that scandalous.

Karen Page. Living on the edge.

She takes her coffee back to her desk. Outside the sky is dark and heavy. Joe, the weather guy, who she thinks is working up the courage to ask her on a date - and wouldn’t that be a thing - says today is the day. The sky is going to open, the flood is coming, the rain is going to fall and wash the city clean. Well, maybe he didn’t say all of that but he was insistent that the mugginess is about to end and the storm is going to break.

She still thinks all weathermen are liars so she’ll believe it when she sees it. She hasn’t seen it yet.

Regardless, she’s antsy to get home. Not to avoid this as of yet imagined storm, although if by some sheer stroke of luck - because she refuses to believe it could be anything else - Joe is right, she would very much like to avoid what she likes to call Hell’s Kitchen’s Panic Traffic, which seems to occur without fail at the first sign of rain. But rather because that bad feeling she’s had in her gut since this morning is still there. It’s nothing she can define really and it could well just be lack of sleep and stress and well, the man who is causing both of those things, but something just feels wrong. Off.

Really, it wasn’t like there was much out of the ordinary to make her feel this way. It’s not like her and Frank have exactly been in sync these last few days. Not like she doesn’t feel that distance gaping between them and she knows he feels it too. Despite his apparent desire to keep things that way. Despite the fact that he knows this situation is untenable and can’t deny that he dragged himself across town with the sole purpose of seeing her one last time before he died. Despite the fact that he said “Don’t you know” and she said “I know” and that means something. Despite all this, there’s still that wrongness in the air that feels like it’s punching her in the gut and screaming in her face that she’s missing something and if she’d only open her eyes she’d know.

She gets these feelings. She gets them more often now since she’s been at the paper. Ellison says the best reporters start to develop a sixth-sense for stories after they’ve been doing the job for a few years. That could be bullshit. It very likely is, like many things about this journalism gig. And yet… and yet it’s hard to deny that she does indeed have a nose for this kind of thing, and in turn a nose for danger.

But this doesn’t feel like that. Not completely anyway. This feels more like there’s something she’s forgetting, something important. And that’s very possible. After all, she’s probably had less than 12
hours sleep in the past five days. She’s not winning in the Body and Soul stakes. Not at all.

Outside thunder rolls, loud and close and Joe looks up from his desk in the direction of her office. He gives her a thumbs up and she shakes her head, smiles and looks back at her screen. Could be that he’s right. Maybe Hell’s Kitchen is finally going to see that storm tonight.

Then again, maybe not.

She yawns, rubs at her eyes. Longs for her bed. She doesn't want Frank to leave. Not only because of all the shit that's gone on between them, not only because he makes her feel safe and it's hard not being around the people you care about but also because he's not ready. He's still weak and his wounds are not healed. And while she doesn't want him out there fighting and punishing and killing period, she especially doesn't want it when he's likely to get himself killed. On the other hand it would mean she gets her bed back and right now she thinks she might be willing to risk him for that. That's how dire the sleeping situation has become. She just might hold him to that promise tonight, she just might not fight him when he insists she take the bed.

A bell rings from the production department signalling that the paper has gone to press and she hears the standard half sarcastic and half relieved cheers from the floor. She glances at the clock. 3:47. They had a grand total of 13 minutes to spare today. Ellison will be proud.

She decides to leave. Nothing more is going to happen in the next two hours that the night shift wouldn't have to cover anyway. She has nothing urgent left to do and can finish off everything else at home.

She drains her coffee, for all the good that it's done in keeping her awake and emails Ellison to let him know she's taking him up on his offer and getting the hell out of dodge to go home and recuperate.

He replies almost immediately with a surprisingly non-acerbic message to take care of herself and get well. That the paper survived long before she came along and will continue to do so if she's ill or something else, like maybe a book-writing sabbatical or something.

She ignores him. Closes her laptop and slips it into her purse. She's starting to understand how Ellison got to where he is today. He's stubborn in a way that she can't even credit Frank with. He just doesn't let go and yeah, it feels a lot like brow beating sometimes and occasionally she's had to tell him to back the fuck off in as many words but she guesses tenacity is probably one of most important requirements for his job. And he has it spades.
Still, she's not writing his damn book. She’s not.

Matt was and still is a hard limit and she's really not prepared to open that can of worms again. And definitely not now when everything is so messy and up in the air.

No, she's going home. She's going to shower and pour herself a nice glass of wine, order some pizza, watch bad TV and Frank Castle and his stoic nobility be damned. She's really too tired to give a fuck about any of it anymore. And who knows, maybe the wine and the exhaustion will finally become that perfect combination that lets her fall into oblivion.

She can always hope. Hope is, after all, apparently, a good thing.

She leaves. She drives home.

Her plans crumble.

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She sits alone in the dodgy all-night diner on 10th. The same one that Foggy and Matt went to when Frank whisked her away to the mountains and told her he loved her and changed her dreams of an ordinary life into something else entirely. Something intimately more complicated and wonderful.

No she doesn't miss the irony of the situation. Not even a little bit.

Frank's disappeared. Gone. She doesn't know where or for how long. Claire checked on him just before her shift started at 3:30 and he was there then, apparently edgy and moody, more difficult than he usually is with her, the humour part of his harsh humour completely gone and replaced by something far more abrasive that even she found it surprising. He didn’t say anything though, didn’t give any clues as to the reason for this new-found rage and she left it. She said she has better things to worry about than big babies who really should know better.

Although now it’s almost 7pm and Claire is worried. That much is obvious by her texts. He’s still weak and he’s bullheaded enough to ignore pulled stitches and weeping wounds. She makes Karen promise to call when she finds him. She also says “when” like it’s a certainty and Karen wishes she
had the same confidence.

Because he’s Frank and she can’t find him. Because, like Matt’s own realisation in this very place, she’s coming to understand the helplessness you feel when The Punisher doesn’t want to be found. Your chances come in at just less than zero.

Doesn’t mean she hasn’t been trying.

She’s checked the Vinegar Hill apartment, she’s called Foggy to ask if Frank came by for Luna - which he hasn’t - and she’s even scouted out that godforsaken warehouse on 11th on the off chance she’ll see his truck or some sign of life. She’s not quite ready to go in yet, not only because of what happened the last time, but because she really doesn’t think that’s where he is. Doesn’t think he would risk going back and getting another ass kicking so soon after the last time. Especially as it’s pretty much guaranteed he wouldn’t be coming back from it.

And for the last few hours she’s edged her way through the Panic Traffic driving around aimlessly in the hope that she’ll spot him in the early evening gloom. And she can’t believe she was doing the same damn thing just five days ago. That this is the second time he’s sent her on a wild goose chase in less than a week. She’s considering making a blanket ban on looking for him. Thinks that when she finds him, she’ll draw up a contract or something and he’ll have to solemnly swear that he won’t disappear again. She’ll get Foggy to notarise it and everything.

Friends in high places, she has them. Take that universe.

And the air is still tight and thick and, save for a few rolls of thunder, there's nothing to indicate that Joe isn't as much a liar as the rest of his weathermen ilk. And now she's drinking the worst cup of coffee in the world and she's completely out of options.

Well no, there's one. There is. It's a cold cabin up in the Catskills. But the thing is if that's where he is then she's not really sure she wants to go looking for him. It's not the drive - she'd drive all over the world for him - it's more the incredible foolishness it would show, the pure bullheaded stubbornness of it all. The journey alone could kill him… and frankly anyone else who decides to use the roads he is on. And besides she doesn't think he's there. Call it that gut feeling, that sixth sense. If he wanted to get away from her (and honestly she's not convinced that's what this little excursion is about anyway), the cabin is the last place he would go. She's too intimately tied to it.

Still though, this doesn't feel like that. It doesn’t feel like an attempt to distance himself from her. Sure, things haven't been great but she doesn't think he'd do a runner like this. He'd consider it rude. Ungrateful even. She might have fucked up but so has he and she doesn't think he's passive.
aggressive enough to consider this a kind of retribution. A punishment. He's just not like that. Even when he is.

And she still has that nagging feeling that there's something she should know. Something important that she's missing.

She closes her eyes, thinks back to the morning. Yes, he was frustrated but that's not unusual; yes, it was tense but neither is that. And none of that is going to change until they sort it out anyway. And when she really thinks about it the truth was that things had even started to feel a little better. Sure, it could be her tired, overactive imagination, some of that longing manifesting as reality in her head - she accepts all of this - but she still doesn't think so.

His strange preoccupation, that nagging feeling that there's something she should know, bothers her. And then there's the fact that he asked her when she was coming home and he has never done that. She guesses that's another reason to think this was planned, timed in some way. If he left just after he saw Claire and still thought he had a few hours before Karen got home, it seems more than likely he just planned to do whatever it is he was doing and then slip back unnoticed. No harm, no foul.

And then she decided to come home early.

She considers going home, waiting for him to come back like Matt and Foggy waited for her. Maybe she could even catch a few hours sleep in the bed and she wants to laugh out loud at that. Yes, she's dog tired but she knows she couldn't possibly sleep. Not now with him roaming the streets somewhere.

And God, where would he roam? Where the hell could he even go? What bad guys could he hope to find - to punish - in the state he’s in, if that was even the plan, which she doesn’t think it was. He didn’t even take the guns she brought back from the Vinegar Hill apartment when she went to fetch Luna. In fact, from what she can see he’s currently armed with a bowie knife and his car keys and that’s about it. It’s also entirely possible that he genuinely just wanted to go outside and lost track of the time. Her place is small and she’s no stranger to cabin fever. And with this murky, muggy weather over the last few days it isn’t much of a leap to imagine that maybe he’d just want a change of scenery, the chance to feel the wind against his skin. It’s possible. He’s still a man underneath all that monster. He still needs, he still grieves, he still loves.

And it feels like something falls into place, some clue that she’s missing, some lost puzzle pieces moving together to form outlines. Edges.

She puts her head in her hands, squeezes her eyes shut.
Think Karen Page. Think. You have lists and you have names for things and sure, you’re as blind as a fucking bat most of the time and especially when it counts, but maybe now you can redeem yourself. What could be so important that Frank would risk his stitches and his life to go and do? What could make him leave a warm bed, a place where he is cared for and relatively safe, being looked after by someone he seems to genuinely like and head out into the terrible weather and the danger that is Hell’s Kitchen. What could possibly be that important? What could he possibly love that much?

Foggy’s voice in her ear “It’s been what? Two years now?”

It hits her like a gunshot. She opens her eyes, sits up straight. Karen fucking Page. None so fucking blind.

She reaches into her purse, pulls out her phone, searches for Maria Castle’s obituary, something she did dozens of times when she was writing her first article for Ellison, something she should know off by heart, something that should be forever emblazoned into her brain, her memory.

She barely glances at the picture, Maria, on a beach in a floral sundress, looking over her shoulder as the wind lifts her hair. Frank told her about it once. Haltingly. His voice cracking messily until she told him to stop, that he didn’t need to say anything else. That she knew. She understood. It was their honeymoon. They went to Hawaii, did nothing but lie on the beach during the day and listen to the sounds of the ocean at night. Yeah, he didn't say it in those words but he told her anyway, sitting there in his orange jumpsuit, cuffed to the table like a wild animal, while a guard loomed over them so that she couldn’t even touch his hand to offer some comfort. He took the picture. Said it was the prettiest picture he ever took.

Foggy was right. He was hot mess. She’s right too. He still is.

But there’s no time for Maria’s smiling face and her windblown hair. No time for her pretty pink dress or the hibiscus tucked behind her ear. She’s seen it so many times before.

She scrolls to the date. Two years ago to the very fucking day. A mother and her two children gunned down in front of a carousel. Husband and father in critical condition, a bullet in his brain. Unlikely to survive.

Oh god.
To be sure, although she has no idea why she needs any additional confirmation, she grabs a copy of *The New York Bulletin* off the table next to her. It’s crumpled and stained with tomato sauce and coffee but she doesn’t care. Turns to page two, to their “On This Day” section. There’s no way Ellison would have left this out. No way. Which means he didn’t tell her and the probability of her slipping salt into his coffee skyrockets.

It’s there. In amongst various fluffy other sundries that also occurred on this day - the illicit publishing of Shakespeare’s sonnets and the Hubble telescope sending its first pictures from space - there’s a small picture of Frank and a tiny blurb which somehow still manages to be horribly sensationalist and ask if this was the “birth of a murderer”. And for a second she forgets about Frank completely and her rage at Ellison and this specific brand of gutter journalism is so real she can taste it. It’s not that Frank would care. He wouldn’t. Honestly. But she does. She cares that regardless of everything that she’s done, of her tireless work to show him as something more than just another monster, that Ellison is still willing to undercut her like this, print bullshit and click bait when a real person’s life has been destroyed.

No, fair enough, he didn’t write it. She’s actually pretty sure it was an intern that did, but he approved it. He let it go. And yeah, dollar signs are all important now, what with print basically disappearing faster than you can say paper costs, but still.

He’d tell her she’s in the wrong industry, that her moral backbone and media are always going to be at odds. And maybe he’s right. But that doesn’t matter because she expected more. She expected better from him.

She forces herself to focus. She can hash it out with Ellison tomorrow and, if she didn’t need the money, she might even tell him to take his job and stick it. And yes, she knows that she’s overreacting to this. Knows that her current state of mind it not the best and that she actually far too emotional to deal with this right now and things might look decidedly different in the morning, but this really fucking hurts. And only a small part of that is anger directed at herself for not knowing.

Either way, the upside (and there is an upside to this) is that feels like she’s one step closer to finding Frank, that the first part of this little mystery has been solved. It’s figuring out now what this all means.

That, fortunately, is not hard.

In fact it’s easy as falling down.
She tosses a few dollar bills onto the table, grabs her purse and heads to her car. It’s time to face the Panic Traffic again. At least this time she knows where she is going.
My head is giving me life or death but I can't choose

Chapter Notes

And here we go again.

So um, this chapter was both really easy and really hard to write. You'll see why. I kind of want to speak about it but I don't want to spoil it, so if there's anything I'm sure it'll come up in the comments. I really hope you enjoy it. After I realised this was turning into a series, this was kind of the chapter I conceived most of the rest of the story around, so I'm excited to share it with you. I'm also scared out of my mind. Please be kind and let me know what you think.

I'm not really sure what else there is to say about this other than thanks for sticking with me.

The next update may take a little longer as I'm in hell at work right now and the next bit isn't started yet. On the plus side I have a fairly solid outline for it. No, it's not the end of the series. As I said the other day there's still a way to go.

Title is from Foo Fighters Best of you. This chapter was also heavily inspired by Rob Thomas' Paper Dolls.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Graveyards: the safest place in the world because everybody’s dead.

She heard that in a movie once. A movie about one man’s vengeance against the world for taking that which he loved most dearly. He wore a long black coat and he tore the city apart. He even came back from the dead to do it. There’s no denying the comparisons any longer. No point.

The quote though, the quote is wrong. At least for now it is. Frank Castle is inside this cemetery. A dead man walking amongst the dead. And, therefore, by the very laws of nature he himself seems to have created, that means it’s no longer safe. Not even for her.

She’ll take her chances.

He came to her to die and he didn’t. She’s coming to save him and she will. She should write a fucking paper on it. A dissertation on the shit her and Frank pull on one another.

She gets out of her car. She’s parked next to his truck and in another life another Karen Page would
have been ecstatic to find it there - the visual confirmation that she was right and this was where he went and she solved the secret of his whereabouts like a good little Nancy Drew impersonator - but not now. She’s a bit beyond that.

She likes the sound of it though, the shape of it. *Karen Page and the Mystery of the Missing Mass Murderer*. Try and say that three times fast. Maybe she should pitch it to Ellison. Get him off her back about his Devil expose.

A kind of wry laughter bubbles in her throat at the thought. The kind that tells her immediately that she’s not in a good place, that her mind has started doing that thing where it plays tricks on her and forces her to ignore the gravity of the situation in front of her.

If only Ellison knew. He wants to take her away from The Punisher and get her to focus on the Devil and his plan so far, is only working backwards. Then again everything that involves Frank usually does.

*Don't you know?*

She stands in the parking lot, looks to the dim streetlights, one is broken and flickering ominously and she remembers her old science teacher banging on about the difference between lights connected in series and parallel and why it's so important that streetlights use both. They all need to work together but if one goes down it’s essential they all don't. It's apparently not an all-for-one-one-for-all kinda thing.

She shakes her head, glances at the cemetery wall, the stones grey and flat and dull, the steel gates with their sharp tips reaching high into the night sky. High enough that she imagines they might pierce the rolling clouds, hurry the storm along and wash away the filth and the badness of the city. She wonders what would happen to Frank if that were true. If he would be renewed or if he'd just disappear, dissolve into the dirt and the mud. Be at peace. If Frank Castle could ever truly be at peace. If he would even want that for himself.

She's not sure. Life doesn't work in hypotheticals. It doesn't work in metaphor either.

There’s a small neat sign attached to the wall alongside a narrow gate. It warns that the grounds close at 4:30pm, that trespassers will be prosecuted, that this is private property and God be with us all. She likes that for some reason. She might not be religious, but she likes it. Fact is though she’s pretty sure that God isn’t here right now. He can’t be. He’s not allowed. He let a mother and two children die - He’s no longer welcome.
Next to the sign, almost in a parody of itself, the gate hangs open, its lock in pieces on the ground. It looks like a confession. And in some ways it is.

He's here. The sinner, the saint, the devil, the angel of vengeance. This is, after all, hallowed ground.

Like his words earlier in the day, that gives her no comfort at all.

She looks around and all she sees is shadows. It's not just that it's night and the sky is full of storm clouds, that there's no moonlight to tinge anything silver or make the world glow. It's that the very air feels dark, as if it's been saturated with black ink. Violated somehow. And that seems fitting. The universe has pulled some pretty underhand and cruel shit of late, it seems only right it should bear some of the suffering too.

The gate squeals as she pushes it open, hinges rusted and old, and it seems at odds with the relatively well maintained grounds, the manicured lawns, the tidy flowerbeds of white and red rose bushes. She guesses the side gate doesn't get much traffic. That when you come to a place like this, there's a certain ritual about using the main entrance, something ceremonial that can't exist here now.

There's a little voice in her head telling her she can go home, that he will make it there eventually and all she has to do is wait but she knows she's not going to listen to it. Despite the wrongness in the air there's something telling her that this is where she's meant to be. That after the cabin and the roof, after he nearly died in her arms they were always going to end up here. At the start of it all. The beginning of the end.

Even so, it feels like a commitment to step inside. It shouldn't. It's just a gate but in her head it's more like a threshold, a portal to another place where somehow the world is even sadder.

She does it anyway. She's no stranger to sadness. To loss. To death. There’s no turning back now. No turning back ever. And it's not safe even though everybody is dead. Including him.

She stands a moment, breathes in the night air. It’s thick and stifling and it smells of lilies and earth, a hint of decay. And it's heavy. Worse than it’s been up to now. Something has to break soon or they’ll all suffocate. Every last one of them.

*Bring out your dead Hell's Kitchen. Bring them out for the chance of redemption.* Even if redemption is a joke.
She walks. She doesn’t know where she is going, doesn’t know where their graves are and it’s no surprise to find that she has no cellphone signal inside. It barely matters though, she knows she’ll find him - *them* - eventually.

She passes rows and rows of headstones. Some simple and square, others elaborate, marble angels and detailed crucifixes, some strewn with flowers, others with fluffy toys. She catches names and phrases. Jennifer, Shelly, Gabriel, beloved mother, daughter, son. Friend. Wife. Father.

She should have come here sooner. Not tonight, but just sooner. When she was helping him and learning him, when she was finding that rage that fuelled him, understanding his life, his history and why he was so determined to make blood and death his legacy. She realises she knows little about Maria save for what he told her, almost nothing about Lisa and Frank Jr. And she should. They’re pieces of him and he’s pieces of them and she’s wise enough to recognise that she needs to know all of them to know him, to understand what he was and what he’s become.

Maybe she’s been selfish but then he has too. Maybe they’ve both been ignoring this, pretending there’s a way to move around instead of through it. And despite the hell that’s been her afternoon she’s grateful he’s taken this step. It’s time. It feels right, even in its wrongness.

*Come what may.*

She sees him before he sees her. He’s standing in the grass near a tall oak tree. He's still, so very still that there is a moment she mistakes him for another statue, a guardian of the dead. He'd scoff at the idea, despite the fact that he'd believe it.

Shadow man in a shadow world.

There are three graves in front of him, two small crosses on either side of a marble angel, her face downcast and her wings spread wide, over all of them. No fourth. No place for him. She wonders if he wanted it that way, if he's truly okay with it, if he knew he'd never lie here, in this ground beside them. After all, Frank Castle is already dead. She said so herself. Maybe it wasn't as much of a lie as she thought it was.

She watches him, sees how he stands, shoulders hunched, head down, fingers flexing. This isn't about catharsis for him, this isn't about grief and saying goodbye. It never has been. This is about fuelling that rage, reminding himself of what they did and what the world took and what he's lost.
He takes a step back stumbling a little but he rights himself quickly. Someone else might mistake him for being drunk and the truth is turning to alcohol at a time like this and a time like before would hardly be a surprise. But he's Frank. Being drunk or substance dependent means less chance for fighting, vengeance, punishing.

He's beautiful. But the scale has tipped now. It's tipped so very far and she's not sure it's possible to bring it back, balance him out.

He reaches for his side, flinching as he touches it. She doesn’t have to get any closer to know he’s bleeding, that he’s torn his stitches again, in the drive, the walk. They’re broken just like he is and now he’s trying to stop the pain and the blood and the fear that’s running out of him.

She could do that for him. She could hold him together and make it so that it doesn't hurt. She has the power. Somehow. Somehow they both do.

She steps forward, her heels echoing on the paving and he freezes, head to the side, listening, hands suddenly balled into fists.

She's about to say his name, let him know it's her and he's safe but he beats her to it.

“You shouldn't be here Karen.”

He’s wrong. She should. She really should. There is no other place on Earth she should be right now.

His voice is level, measured. But it's also cold. And that's not something she's ever heard from him. She knows that it's part of him. Doesn't doubt that he can be a cold son of a bitch when he wants to be. It is, after all, the best way to serve vengeance. And yet … and yet he's always overflowed with barely contained heat. Rage. She's seen him fight and there's nothing cold about it. It's messy, bloody, angry. His bloodlust runs hot and fevered.

And then there's that other part of him too. The part that backed her into that cold concrete wall, that wedged his knee between her thighs and scraped his teeth down her throat. And that part runs hot too. His lust.
And it's also messy and bloody and angry.

She’s long imagined Frank as a fire and in some ways she’s found it comforting to do so. He’s destructive, ruthless, horrifying. But in his wake he leaves something clean, something new and fertile, something better than before. He sucks the poison out of Hell’s Kitchen and he swallows it.

And the thought makes her sad. The image of Frank Castle slowly destroying himself so no one else has to. So people like her can be safe. There’s a kind of nobility to it, she guesses, a code and a set of values that come together to make it work, but she’s not naive enough to believe he’s a white knight. To imagine that what he does is a form of altruism, a kindness. She’s been around him long enough to know that there’s a part of him that’s in love with this. A demon that feeds off what he does. Something deep and dark and demanding. That part of him called The Punisher.

But he’s not that fire now. Because now his voice isn’t his. There’s a mildness she finds disconcerting, a contrived affability that lies about the madness lurking below it.

And he doesn't lie to her. And she has no idea how to feel about that.

“No Frank,” she says and is surprised to hear that her voice sounds as steady as his. “I think this is exactly where I should be.”

He turns to her and his face is impassive, unreadable. It's not a matter of knowing him well enough to discern what's going on underneath the surface, to know his tells. She’s done that before, she’s done it well. But she can’t do it now. He’s closed to her, everything about him willing her away.

And then he nods and it's not a nice nod. Not nice at all.

So be it.

She can smell lillies, sweet and heady. Jasmine. Rosemary.


He looks at her for the longest time. Doesn't speak. His eyes are almost black and all she wants to do
is go to him and stand at his side. Help him find room for this pain and take what she can for him.

She loves him. The feeling comes fast and without warning. She’s known for a while now that what she feels for him is more than attraction, more than her own lust, a passing phase. A crush. But it hits her hard as she stands there, as she watches him mourning his old life, loving his wife, his children. And she’s surprised by how easy it is to put a name to it. How it doesn’t feel dramatic or overwhelming, how it just is. And it’s so simple and so difficult all at the same time.

And he loves her. And it doesn’t have to hurt.

Except it does.

“You shoulda told me Frank,” she says. “I could have brought you here. Driven you. You didn't have to come alone.”

“You've done enough for me already.” And the grit of his voice belies his words. He’s angry. He’s so very angry. “You don't need to worry about me anymore.”

“Bit late for that now Frank.”

So maybe it's the wrong thing to say. She's not sure there are any right things she could put out into the universe now.

“Ain't your place,” he says and even though a part of her was expecting it, it hurts.

She guesses there has to be a balance for them too. If she can't hurt his bruises and his wounds, if he can't hurt hers then they can hurt in other ways. Deeper, harder, worse than they should.

He sighs, takes a few steps away from her and towards the angel, head bowed and breathing heavy.

“You don't need to do this alone,” she says softly.

“Don't I?” his voice is strained. “Seems to me I managed to lose them all on my own.”
“That’s not true Frank.”

He's quiet for a long time. And the moment stretches, thin and taut between them and in her head she swears she can hear screeching, fabric on the brink of tearing, nails down a chalkboard.

It’s the loudest, most horrible silence she’s ever experienced.

“I keep telling you to stay away from me,” he says eventually and he sounds so tired, more tired than she feels and for a moment she thinks everything might be okay, that he’ll surprise her and make this easy. And then he turns to her sharply and his face is all shadows, eyes black like a demon, a devil, and she knows he won't. “I keep fucking telling you and you never fucking do.


And he's being so terribly unfair.

And even though she knows he's hurting, knows he wants to hurt, himself and everyone else, she can't let it slide.

“Yeah Frank you do. You also keep leaving and then you keep coming back,” she's surprised again by the steel in her voice. Sure, it's strained. Sure she's angry but the words come out easily, dropping into the thick air like lead.

He sucks in a breath, sways a little on his feet. She's not sure if it's his stitches or if it's just her. Either way it's something that's causing him pain, inside and out.

Roll of thunder. Flash of lightening and they both look up. She swears she catches a glimpse of the clouds rolling like black waves in the sky.

“You don't want to be around me, then stay away,” she says and her voice has that edge to it now, that wall between calm and tears starting to dissolve. “Maybe you should ask yourself why you don’t Frank. What it is that keeps you coming back over and over again.”
He glares at her. “Don’t give me that. It’s bullshit.”

“Yeah it is bullshit,” and her words are slow and hard. “Because it’s not even a higher grade question when you get down to it.”

He reels a little at that, another staggering step and he steadies himself on one of the angel’s wings, looks back at her like she's something he doesn't recognise or understand. Something dangerous.

And isn't that the biggest fucking joke you ever heard? It gets one of the top spots on Karen Page’s list of Things That Defy All Logic, which, coincidentally, is also the list that she puts this thing between her and Frank on.

“Karen…” his voice isn't loud or hard but there's a warning in it. And underneath there's something else. Something that sounds like begging. Pleading that she won’t put it out into the world.

Jokes on him, she already has. And so has he. No point in hiding it now.

“You think I don't know Frank?” she leans on the word long and hard. “You think I've forgotten? That I don't remember what you said that night?”

She takes a breath. “That I don't know what’s going on?”

“Yeah Karen?” he asks and now there's a terrible nastiness to his voice, mocking almost. Sneering. “What is it you think you know?”

Lightning flashes again and she sees his face clearly, all its hard lines, the stubborn set of his jaw, mouth cruel and pupils so huge that she can barely see the whites of his eyes, let alone his irises.

A thought comes to her and it's an awful, chilling thought. This is how he is when he kills. This is the last thing that all those people saw before they died. Not a father, husband, lover, not even a soldier but a monster.
And suddenly Matt calling himself The Devil is laughable. The Devil is here. He's standing in front of her with blood on his hands and nothing but rage in his heart.

But she won't be scared of him. She won't. She refuses. The universe won't take that from her too. He's still a man. Somewhere deep inside of himself he's still good and he's still kind. And somewhere there's that man that held her and cried with her, the man that danced with her on the roof just because she asked him to. The one that told her it wasn't safe but wanted to be with her anyway.

Even so, she takes a step back, hugs her arms around her belly, tears pricking in the corners of her eyes.

She shouldn't say it. But she does.

“You're in love with me.”

Her words drop like bombs, hard and heavy and she swears she can hear the echo of them through the graves, sinister whispers reverberating across the stones, bouncing off the marble and coming together in an unholy little cyclone of hard truth and easy lies.

And then suddenly even the rumbling clouds are quiet and what's left of the air seems to have been sucked away while the world holds its breath and waits for him.

And that's when he starts launching nukes.

He pushes himself away from the statue and advances on her like she's prey - meat - and she's sure he can smell her blood and her fear, hear her heart beating so hard in her breast that it's a wonder her ribs haven't cracked wide open to let it out.

And he's big and messy and the pain has rendered him clumsy but she has no doubt he knows this dance, how naturally it all comes to him now, how he could break her and how she knows he won't. Maybe it's stupid and maybe it's naive but she's long stopped being intimidated by him. She honestly doesn't have it in her. Maybe she did at first, maybe those first few days spent sitting at his side at the hospital. Maybe. Even then all she could see was his brokenness.

It's not like she's unaware this situation is ridiculous. That it's completely untenable and it's nothing short of madness that she feels about him like she does. That it can't end well. That it won't. She puts
things on lists and gives them stupid names and tries to pretend life isn't as scary as it is. She tries to
beat down the enormity of the fact that she has a bond with one of the most violent assholes on the
planet. That she’s fallen in love with him and he’s fallen back and there's not one fucking thing she
can do to stop it. She calls him a man baby and focuses on his sweetness, his deference, the fact that
he'd set the world on fire if she asked him to. It makes it easier. It makes it less raw and less real and
locks it away behind a perspex wall where she can see it but it can't touch her. Except it can and it
does.

He reaches out and his hand snaps around her wrist, hard and forceful, fingers pressing so tightly into
her flesh that she feels her blood rushing along her veins, blooming under his hands. And part of her
isn’t sure if that's purely about his tight grip or if it's something else.

He yanks her closer and she stumbles a little, off balance and on edge, but he reaches out with his
free hand to steady her in what must easily be the strangest thing he's done all night. And then there's
a second that he freezes and she's not sure if he's going to kiss her or shove her. Truth is she doesn't
think he knows either and she couldn't say which would be worse. But he snaps out of it almost
instantly and then he's dragging her to the graves, until she's standing in front of the marble angel
with her sad beautiful face and her delicately patterned wings. She wonders if before he started
setting the world on fire if he commissioned this. If he made the choices, the lily in her hair, the
crucifix at her breast. He must have. And that kills her a little inside. It shouldn’t hurt this much. The
universe didn't need to do this to him. Even if it needed another warrior- an attack dog it could let
loose on the world - it didn't need to do it like this.

And then his voice is in her ear. Mean and low, breath hot on her skin.

“That's my wife Karen. That’s her. Not you,” his fingers tighten on her. “Read her fucking name.”

“Frank--”

She wants to stop this. Despite the fact that she knows this had to happen, this had to come and
putting it off was only going to make it worse, she doesn't want to do this anymore. There's no use
heaping more salt on already open wounds.

She also knows it's too late.

“Think you can shove my family in my face and then expect me to forget them? Think you can fix
me? Patch me up until I'm all shiny and new? That's the plan right?” he lets go of her arm and laughs
dryly and the sound is hard and cruel. “You fix me and I'm eternally grateful. Pass some fucking
Karen Page righteousness test and then you can decide if I measure up.”
“Frank you know it's not like that,” the tears are coming, they're so close now.

“Isn't it?” he asks.

“No.”

He snorts and again it's mean, derisive in a way he's never been with her.

“I think it is,” he looks away. “I'm a little project for you. Fix me and fix yourself and then maybe you'll be able to sleep at night. Maybe you won't remember what it's like to pull that trigger, watch a man die in front of you, to know it was you who made it happen.”

It hurts. It hurts because there's a grain of truth to it. But it hurts more because he would cheapen what they have like this. It might have started with her desperately searching for her own redemption, desperately trying to find a way to live in her own skin without seeing Wesley every time she closed her eyes. But it hasn't been that for a long time.

And he knows it.

“Here's a newsflash for you. You never forget it. You never do. So maybe you need to stop looking for redemption. You crossed over Karen. Ain't no going back from that, but you know that already don't you? You're a lot smarter than Red.”

“Frank, stop it.”

But he's not stopping. Not at all. And his voice is louder now, bouncing off the marble, echoing in the thick air.

“So what is it you want? You want me to hurt you? Punish you? Will that make you feel better? If I do it instead of you?” he stops, seems for a moment to catch hold of himself, seems to understand where he's leading the conversation.
She opens her mouth to answer him but he ignores her, carries on.

“But that's too easy isn't it? Bang bang you're dead and where the fuck’s the fun in that? Where's the guilt and the suffering?” he narrows his eyes. “Want me to quote some scripture? Give you a speech about how killing is bad? How my way is best because I’m so fucking decent? Punish you for putting down that piece of shit of Fisk’s? Tell you I get it but it's still so wrong? Make you say a couple of Hail Marys? Want me to get a fucking little red suit?”

He doesn’t fight fair. She's not remotely surprised. She's never underestimated his capacity for cruelty whether that’s directed inwards or outwards. He's always been a nightmare.

A man at war with himself. A man at war with the world. And she doesn't know which one is scarier. Doesn't know which one will leave the most destruction in its wake.

And he's not done. And he's still merciless in the worst possible way.

“That what you want Karen? You want me to lie to you? Tell you everything will be okay? That holy fuck it's so fucking hard to be with someone who’s not righteous like me but I'll do my best and lower my fucking standards. Fight the city the right way, come home and fuck you the right way afterwards?”

Her palm stings and his head snaps to the side and for the tiniest moment she doesn’t realise it’s because she’s slapped him, doesn’t realise that the crack that echoes off the gravestones is not thunder or gunshots or any other fucking excuse.

It hurts. And that’s okay. It was meant to, it was meant to hurt them both.

He’s still for a few seconds, long enough for the moon to slip out from behind the clouds, throw the graveyard into a strangely stark light that makes the headstones shine like silver and turn the blood at the corner of his mouth black.

Then he reaches up, wipes at his lips, squints down at his fingers, and she finds an apology bubbling in the back of her throat. Desperate. Begging for release and she fights it back down, pushes it back into her gut, claps her hands over her mouth. Apologies don’t fit into the world now. They'll break it and make it fold into itself. It's not time.
No way out but through and she’s drawn first blood, made the first cut. His blood on his face instead of hers.

She doesn’t wait for him to say anything, process what she did, turn it over in his head and figure out an appropriate response. She shoulders ahead, moving into his space, planting her feet in front of his so that there's nowhere he can look that isn't her.

“I’m the only one who believed you. The only one. You trusted me. You trusted me with everything and I came through for you over and over again” her voice is shaking and suddenly despite the terrible cloying heat she feels cold. “You don’t get to forget that. You don’t get to pretend it’s not real because you’re afraid.”

He wipes his mouth again and she gets some kind of sick satisfaction in that, in knowing she's hurt him.

“I ain’t afraid.”

Another lie. There's fear in his every word.

“Yeah, you are,” she says, voice low. “You're a coward Frank. The big bad Punisher, what a fucking joke. The big bad Punisher scared of a little girl who can barely fucking get through the day without crumbling. Fucking pathetic.”

She rubs her face and isn't surprised when her hand comes away wet. She wonders how long she's been crying now. If it matters.

There’ll be more tears before this is over. Because she's not done.

“You stand here and you think you can tell me about my life. Think you can use Matt to hurt me. Keep trying to push me at him and then getting upset when you think I might go. Mock me for it.” She shakes her head, suddenly calm, looks away from him at the sky, the stones, the trees, swaying in the wind. “And it’s all because you’re so fucking frightened that you’re not the one-and-done man you thought you were.”

She's not particularly good at arguing, and that's okay with her. But she knows how to target weak spots, she thinks most people do. It's a skill honed from infancy.
“Fuck you Karen,” he says slowly. “Fuck you. You don’t know me.”

It doesn't even hurt, not even a little bit.

“I do know you Frank. I’m probably the only one that does.”

He rolls his eyes, pushes past her, takes a few staggering steps off the grass and onto the flagstones and there’s a second she thinks he’ll just keep on walking and she has no idea what she'll do if he does. Follow him or let him go? She thinks this has and always will be her choice. She thinks she might have to make it over and over again.

But he doesn't. He stops. Turns.

“Why are you here Karen?” he asks and his voice has regained some of that terrible coldness. “I was going to come back. Get into your little bed, listen to you not sleep on the couch. You're smart enough to know that. So why the fuck are you here?”

Because I was worried about you. Because this needed to happen. Because you need to feel this. Because I do too. Because this was the only way it ever could happen. Because I wanted to be there for you when it did. Because I'm an idiot and I love you.

She’s silent, standing there watching him. So he answers for her.

And he's so wrong but he's also so right.

“You came here to judge me? Is that who you are Karen? Judge, jury, executioner. Watch me cry over them and then tell yourself that you get it. That you know it's not fun for me but you understand it. You'd never do it, of course, because you’re perfect but you can see how someone like me would. You think you’re better than me.”

It's the same argument as before. Now it's just wrapped in slightly different packaging and suddenly she is so tired. So weary again.
“No, I don’t,” she says. “That’s why I’m here Frank. Because I don’t.”

“Stop lying.”

“I’m not lying,” Softly now, almost a whisper. “I thought we didn't do that.”

That stops him and suddenly he looks hopelessly lost. Hopelessly sad and desperate for this to all end. But they can't go back. Not now. Chaste kisses in a cold cabin and dancing on the wet roof under the stars are so very far away they may as well be forgotten.

“Fuck you Karen,” he says it again but there's no force behind it anymore. “You’re not her. You heard what I said. You’ll never be her.”

It takes a few seconds to parse his words because there’s a very long moment that she doesn't understand them and she has to turn them over and around in her mind to grasp his meaning.

“Is that really what you think I want Frank?” she doesn't even have the wherewithal to be angry, to dig deep enough for rage. It's so absurd she doesn't even think there is an answer to it.

And he knows that. He can't not know it.

He shrugs, turns away, shaking. The truth is that right now he’s not even fighting. He’s angry and he’s in pain and he’s throwing punches in the hope that something will connect. That something will hurt. He’s not making sense but then again he never needed to.

“You can’t fix this Karen,” and he sounds so lost she feels fresh tears running down her cheeks. “You can’t fix me.”

He takes a ragged breath, balls his hands into fists and she watches as the rage bleeds out of him.

She tilts her head back to look at the sky, the clouds, the darkness, that demonic hell moon that slips in and out of existence. And then she turns to him. Shadow man and frightened boy, 50% lost puppy and 50% murderous rage. A monster, a nightmare, a saint, an angel.

“I know,” she says. “Only you can.”
He looks down, shakes his head, hand grasping at his side and she refuses to even think about his stitches and his wounds and the mess they must be.

“It’s bigger than both of us.”

She nods. It is. It's so much bigger.

“I couldn’t protect them,” he says. “I couldn’t. I should have. But I couldn’t.”

She doesn’t say it’s all right. She doesn’t say anything at all. There is nothing to say. She just watches him as he looks around at the night, at the sky, the graves, at her. As he desperately searches for something to focus on, to hold onto and finds nothing. He’s shaking a little, swaying again and there’s a sheen of sweat on his brow, big dark patches staining the armpits and collar of his shirt.

And then so softly she wonders if he really said it at all. “How can I keep you safe?”

And that’s the crux of it, the heart of it all. She realises it as he says it and even though she knew - she knew - it comes as a surprise, a jolt. In amongst all his rage, all his bluster there are truths, things not meant to hurt, missiles not meant to find her.

And suddenly the world turns bright, lightning flashing and throwing the entire graveyard into a kaleidoscope of vivid colours, so intense it almost hurts to look. Grass a brilliant green, stones shining pure silver, roses like drops of blood and tears on a backdrop of emeralds. And Frank. Frank in all his darkness and all his shadows. Frank saying over and over again You’re not her, you’re not her. Frank swaying and then thunder rumbling as his knees buckle and she runs to him. Grabs him around his middle as hard and as tight as she can and he doesn’t flinch. He doesn’t. Even though she must be hurting him, pressing his stitches into his skin.

And again he’s gripping at her, hands coming up to grab at her shirt.

“You’re not her,” he says softly as he breaks. “You’re not her.”

And then he buries his head in her neck and he sobs.
And the sky opens and cries with him.

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She sits half on her knees in the wet grass, mud on her clothes, her back against Maria’s grave. The stone is cold and hard, but it’s not unpleasant and even though they’re drenched from the initial downpour the angel’s wings keep the rain off them.

Frank’s head is on her breast, his cheek pressing into her skin, stubble scraping hard enough that she knows there’ll be abrasions tomorrow, brow firm against her collarbone. He’s shaking and she’s holding him, arm around his shoulder, fingers digging into his skin, other hand cupping his head to her. She’s quiet but she’s pressing kisses into his temple, stroking his hair, rocking ever so slightly.

And he’s like a small child, both strangely spent and completely at odds with himself, moving against her in staccato shudders, twitching like he’s too big for his own skin and all he wants to do is crawl out of it and never get back in. He’s talking too, whispering things he means and others that he doesn’t.

_You’re not her. You’re not her. Fuck you. You don’t know me. I love you. You’re not her._

His one hand is hooked around her waist, resting on her hip, the other splayed across across her collarbones, fingers opening and closing around her black rose pendant, tugging at it, releasing it, going back and then starting all over again. Splay, grip, release. Splay, grip, release.

He's going to break the chain. She knows it. She doesn't care.

She can’t remember much of how they got here and she's not sure how much time has passed. How much time they spent holding one another in the rain before they did. These things seem completely inconsequential.

There are other important things though.

She can breathe again. They both can. When the rain fell it brought the air back with it, opened a window to the world and let it rush back inside.
She's no longer melting in her own skin. That's important too. She's soaked and so is he and there's a cool breeze threading its way through the downpour and blowing across them in this little cavern, this shelter under Maria’s wings.

And he's holding her tight. Not that he knows any other way to hold. But she's holding him tight as well and it feels like she's balancing him out somehow. Like maybe he doesn't feel the need to crush her because she's doing some crushing of her own. It's easier to hold on to something when you do it together.

She's so sorry he felt that alone. She never knew the full extent of it, although she should have guessed. But then there's a lot of things he's been feeling that she never knew.

*(How can I keep you safe?)*

*You're not her.*

*Don't you know?)*

“I miss her,” he says into her throat, hand still opening and closing on the pendant. “I miss her so much.”

“I know,” she presses her lips to his hairline, shifts a little so she can pull him closer.

“You don't know what it's like to miss someone that much,” hint of rage again, blood from his mouth smeared across the rise of her breast.

*God, how hard did she hit him?*

She doesn't say anything, lets him speak.

“Nothing belongs anymore, there's no place for me,” he says and his voice is calm again. “And then I'm with you and somehow it feels okay.”
She closes her eyes, leans forward and rests her forehead on his head, lets her hair cover them like a veil, a shroud.

“I don’t want it to be okay.” The words feel important, like they have a terrible gravity to them but he hasn’t stopped clutching at her necklace, letting it go, forcing his hand on it again.

“Why?” she whispers close to his ear.

_Tell me your secrets. Tell me all your secrets._

He swallows. Chokes back a sob.

“Because maybe if it’s okay it means I don’t miss her anymore.”

She rocks him gently again, tightens her arms around him.

“It doesn’t mean that Frank,” she says. “I promise you it doesn’t.”

“How do you know?” he asks and he’s like a child again.

“Because I know,” she kisses his head. “and I don’t lie to you.”

He’s quiet for a long time. He shakes and shudders and trembles against her. He tugs at her necklace. He sobs. And she wonders how many times he’s done this. Truly, really done it. Let himself feel it, let it overwhelm him. Sure, she’s seen him cry before and she knows second-hand from Matt that he fell apart the night he was arrested. But she has to wonder about this still. This sobbing that’s part relief and part hysteria. The way his breathing gets fast and hot and he makes no sense. And then how he gets slow and lets what’s left bleed out of him.

And all she can do is hold him. And that’s okay. She has a role here and she’s happy for this to be it.

“I want them back,” he whispers and she nods, runs her fingers through his hair.
“I know you do.”

There’s nothing much more she can say. There aren’t words to soothe this and there shouldn’t be. You shouldn’t be able to lose the people you love the most and get over it because someone somewhere said some pretty words. She’s a writer, words can do a lot of things, but they can’t do this. And they shouldn’t. So she holds him. Lets him sob and cry. Lets him shake and tug at her necklace, get mud in her hair and her clothes.

They’re both so filthy. Sweat. Mud. She looks at her breast. Blood.

She needs to check his stitches, she knows he’s torn them. There’s no way he hasn’t. She hopes it’s not too bad, that she won’t need to call Claire other than to say he’s back. Claire has done enough. Her and Frank need to handle their own shit now.

The rain shows no sign of letting up and it’s coming down hard and fast. Like it’s been storing every last drop it can for this very moment, holding onto it through the stifling heat until it can let everything go and wash the world clean.

He didn’t disappear, she thinks. The rain came down to wash the badness out of Hell’s Kitchen and he’s still here. Different and weak and not standing, but he’s still here. Yes, it’s a ridiculous thought and the world doesn’t work in metaphor, but it seems important. It seems right.

She kisses his head again and he tugs on her necklace even harder, chain biting into the flesh at the back of her neck. The truth is he’s probably unaware he’s doing it. It’s something small and easy to focus on in a world that feels too big and too empty. A world scarred with gunshots and missing three vital pieces of his puzzle.

Then again he’s still here. He’s not dead, despite his insistence that he is. There is life here, scarred and lost though it may be. It’s here, it exists. For both of them.

She’s not naive enough to think she can fix him, to believe it. She can’t. She’s found that in general people can’t fix one another in the way he means and she guesses that’s probably for the best. Like words, there shouldn’t people who can magically take the pain from you. There would be no point. It would cheapen the gamut of human experience if it was possible to wave all the badness away with a magic wand. But she can be here. And that will have to be enough. And looking down at him, exhausted and shaking in her arms but clinging to her like a lifeline, she thinks it is.
She strokes his head gently, fingertips trailing across his dirty scalp.

She wants to tell him that she loves him, that she’s not playing coy anymore if she ever was. She felt it fully and completely before he unleashed his rage on her and she still feels it now. She felt it in the cabin that night when he whispered secrets into her ear and she reciprocated with dangerous truths of her own.

But she holds it inside. Something like that could break him again and she thinks he’s in enough pieces for now.

So she looks up at the marble angel instead, the beautiful, intricately carved face and it doesn’t feel at all presumptuous to make a promise to her that she’ll look after him as best she can. To thank her for keeping him safe for all the years she did and that she can rest now.

The chain snaps and the pendant falls into his hand. For a second he looks at it like he has no idea what happened or why, hand still opening and closing around it.

“It’s okay,” she says before he can speak. “It needed a new chain anyway.”

He nods, closes his hand and leans back against her breast, quiet and still, save for his trembling.

When he speaks again he sounds more like himself, voice still cracked and rough, but she can hear him behind it.

“I don’t want to be here anymore.”

“Okay,” she runs a hand over his cheek. “We can go.”

And they should. She has no idea how long they’ve been here, if there’s a groundsman or some other kind of security who just by pure luck hasn’t come across them yet. And wouldn’t that be something to explain?
Karen Page, Intrepid Reporter, Lover of Vigilantes and Holder Back of Tears Under Extreme Duress, entwined with the Punisher, her lips on his skin, his blood on her breast. Nothing to see here sir, we were just leaving.

She shifts and he moves off her, disentangles himself clumsily and slowly, presses his hand to the earth below Maria’s headstone. She stands and the rain hits her with a force she didn’t expect, saturating her clothes and hair again, running down her legs and squelching into her shoes. Her clothes always end up ruined around him. She’s starting to wonder if the universe is trying to tell her something.

She holds out her hand to him.

“Come home with me,” she says.

Home.

The word lingers and she lets it. Let’s him feel its shape and its meaning. It’s gravity.

He does.

He takes her hand.

It something else that feels strangely like a commitment although when she thinks about it, maybe it’s not so strange after all. He sways a little in the rain, stumbles and she puts her arm around his waist again, lets him lean on her.

He’s not falling. Neither of them are. Not this time.

He takes a few long moments to stare at the graves and then he tilts his head to sky, lets the rain wash over his face, over the bruises and the wounds, the blood from his mouth dissolving under its force.

And then she leads him away and they leave death behind.
She drives. They leave her car. They don’t speak. He’s like a shadow in the seat next to her, hunched up and trembling and she puts the heater on even though she knows he’s not cold.

His music selection is bad. It always is. Toto and REO Speedwagon. Cutting Crew, and she figures songs about dying in your arms tonight are a little too on the nose, so she turns the radio off. And regardless, it’s better that way. The quiet, him and her and the bright city lights now dimmed by the downpour.

She’s tired and driving in the rain has never been her favourite thing, but the Panic Traffic is gone and the roads are emptier while everyone hides away inside to escape the downpour. She hopes Claire is safe, that she’ll get home without much fuss, that Matt isn’t out fighting the good fight somewhere. That Foggy and Marci are snuggled up watching bad TV, Luna asleep between them.

She likes the rain itself though. And not just because it had to happen, not just because she was secretly hoping Joe wasn’t a liar and that it would. But because she’s always found something comforting in it. It keeps the world at bay somehow. She knows it’s silly.

She reaches over and touches him every now and then, a hand on his arm, his knee. He’s quiet for the most part, resigned in a way that doesn’t feel terrible or resentful at all. He watches the road, eyes flickering between the cars and the streetlights, the poor souls still outside huddling under umbrellas or running holding newspapers over their heads as if that will guarantee them some kind of dryness or comfort in all this.

Not that they’re doing much better inside though. She can feel the water from her clothes pooling onto the seat, her shoes oozing every time she brakes or accelerates.

It’ll be okay.

When they get home, she sends Claire a text and the only concession she makes to Irene’s death stare is asking Frank to keep his head down. She holds his hand in the lift and when she closes her front door behind them she realises she has no idea what to do next. He’s standing there, under his dry bloodied handprint, dripping all over the floor and looking at her like somehow she has all the answers.

And she doesn’t. She really doesn’t.
And then he shivers and she realises she does. She has one.

If her life was a movie this is the part where she would kiss him. But it’s not and she won’t. Instead, she takes his hand again, leads him to the bathroom, doesn’t bother to turn on the light and works by the glow from the bedroom. She leans into the shower and turns on the spray, holds her hand out until the water warms against her skin.

He’s watching her, features strangely unconcerned as she reaches for the hem of his shirt and pulls it over his head, lets it fall with a wet thwack to the tiles. His bandages are a mess, stained brown with blood and black with mud, soaking and filthy against his skin, but she’ll worry about that all later. She has stitches, she has dressings, she’ll make it work.

He flinches a bit when she reaches for his belt, pushes it out of the buckle, drops that too but he bats her hands away when she reaches for his zip and undoes it himself, pushes his jeans off his hips and onto the floor, toes off his boots. She’s about to ask him for her necklace but then he’s standing there, naked save for his black boxer briefs, all hard muscle and sharp edges, and looking at her expectantly and she forgets all about it.

Somewhere she thinks she should be downplaying this. She should be putting her observations about mostly naked Frank Castle onto lists and coming up with quirky names and phrases to make this seem less important than it is. But she can’t manage that, the best she can do is tell herself that this isn’t how she imagined undressing Frank Castle for the first time, but even that loses its impact because in some ways this is better.

She kicks off her shoes, shimmies out of her wet pants, tosses them into the muddied pile of his clothes.

She hears him say her name as she pulls off her shirt and for the first time he sounds slightly confused, not concerned, not angry, just cautious, questioning. But she ignores him. They’ve done literally everything backwards as this thing raged between them, turned them inside out and upside down and hurt them and healed them and hurt them again. It only seems right that this is different too. That they share a shower before they share a kiss, that they share their hearts before they share themselves.

She reaches under her singlet and unhooks her bra, slides it down her arms, suddenly thankful for all the discreet undressing and redressing tricks she ended up learning in girls phys ed classes, and tosses that into the pile too. She thinks that’s enough. They’re so much more than friends and so much more than lovers but there has to be a line somewhere, even if it is one they keep crossing and backtracking on. It has to exist. They have to keep something for when - if, if, if, she screams at
herself in her head - the time comes.

He’s biting his lips hard now, grinding his teeth but his eyes are laser focused on her and he’s not even close to looking away. And yes, it’s lewd. It’s really fucking lewd the way his eyes are eating her up, roaming over her thighs, the curve of her hips, her breasts and finally her face. It's both exactly like she imagined it and nothing like it at all. There’s no room to say that there’s any kind of purity in it because there really isn’t. Because if she opened a window in his mind now, she knows he’s imagining her naked and his hands and mouth on her. She knows this because she’s pretty sure it’s just a mirror of her own and she doesn’t have the energy to tell herself it’s inappropriate or wrong. It just is. She wants him, she has for a very long time. He wants her too. It is what it is. They both know it.

This is what it's like when he looks at her, this is what she would have seen if he'd turned around that night.

And then just as suddenly as it was there, it’s gone and he’s the lost boy again, stumbling slightly and she’s reaching out for him, wrapping her arms tight around him and slowly, maneuvering them both into the shower, holding him to her, while the water sluices the grime and grit and rage off their skin.

And for a while they both just stand, eyes closed, her hands on his shoulders, his fluttering at her hips before he finds his courage and settles his palms against the lace of her panties.

She’s not sure how long they’re there, silent and holding each other tightly. When she looks down the water is running clear in the dim light. No dirt, no blood, no fear and shattered dreams circling the drain. It doesn’t matter. Time has lost its meaning again. That doesn’t matter either.

Somehow she ends up backed against the tiles with her head resting in the crook of his neck, his arms around her, solid and real and she wishes that she hadn’t been such a damn baby about it all and had taken her top off too.

Not like Frank Castle has never seen a pair of tits before.

But she didn’t and she’s not going to now because he’s here and he’s holding her and there’s no urgency, there’s no weirdness or even awkwardness. He still trembles, he still shakes and every now and then his sobbing still overwhelms him and she just holds on even tighter.

She doesn’t care how long this takes.
They have heat, they have one another. That’s all that counts.

And she loves him. Oh god, she loves him so much. She just wants to pull all his pain out through his skin, drag it out and crush it with her hands, break it for breaking him. His life didn’t need to be this way and she knows without a doubt, that if she was offered a choice between losing him and giving him back what he lost she wouldn’t hesitate. She loves him enough to let him go. But again, she’s thankful that life doesn’t work in hypotheticals.

She gathers him closer, adjusts so that he can move into the last remaining space between them, so that every part of her is pressed to every part of him, her arms tight around him, hands hard against his slippery skin, his scars. And she never ever wants to let go. She wonders if this is how he feels when he holds her, if this is the reason he’s always held on so tight.

She’s vaguely aware that he’s hard, vaguely aware of the steady pulse of him against her hip and thigh, the way he been trying to shift so she wouldn’t feel it and has now given it up for a lost cause.

They both ignore it. It’s entirely inconsequential.

Eventually, soap and shampoo get introduced into the equation. She’s not sure if it was him or her, but she’s running a sponge along his shoulders, down his arms, between his fingers. Dabbing gently at his neck and jaw and he tilts his head back so she can wipe at the crusted blood at the corner of his lips and the dried mud on his cheeks. And it’s like before but it’s also not. He’s letting her do this because he wants her to, because he trusts her and he feels safe. She does his back, his belly and then he takes the sponge away from her and dabs at the streak of his blood just above her breast.

He thanks her. He calls her ma’am. And it’s not complicated.

And then his fingers are combing through her hair, working shampoo that smells like strawberries and vanilla into her scalp. He’s clumsy and it pulls when his hands get caught in the snags but she doesn’t care. She didn’t expect this but that’s okay, he’s methodical and thorough and she leans her forehead against the dent of his breastbone, settles her hands against his hips, closes her eyes and just lets him. He wants this. He wants to do it for her and she’s so tired that she stops thinking and analysing and wondering what it all means. It is what it is. She thinks that will be a good motto from now on. That and “one day at a time”.

He won’t wash her like she’s done him, somehow she knows this and she realises that it crosses a line for him, although even he must see how incredibly blurred and broken that line has become.
She’s not shy around him, in fact sometimes her own brazenness (and this shower is a case in point) disconcerts her a little. But he’s still shy around her, a little wary. And while she accepts that some of that is to do with the things he told her tonight - that fear that loving her means something it shouldn’t - that’s not all of it. Because at some point this thing between them is just about them.

He finishes with her hair, he’s forgotten conditioner but she’s not about to make a thing out of that.

And while she’d like to stay there forever and just lean into him and hold him and never think about another thing for as long as she lives, she whispers that he should go and dry off and she’ll sort out those wet filthy bandages and check his stitches in a few minutes.

He nods weakly, presses his lips to her wet hair and briefly - so briefly - rests his hand against her throat, fingers flexing before he moves past her out of the shower. And despite the fact that the water is still hot, it feels like he’s taken all the warmth with him. She watches him for a few seconds, the way he fumbles for a towel, his massive shoulders and corded arms, how there’s nothing soft about him. Nothing but everything. And something about that makes her want to cry.

He wipes his hand across the glass of the shower door before he leaves, looks in at her. Nods like he’s confirmed something. And then he’s gone and she peels her top and panties off, covers her eyes and chokes back a sob.

It’s not about anything in particular and she doesn’t feel guilty not having a solid reason for it. Tonight has been a tough night. In fact this past year has been a tough year starting from the moment that Frank Castle chased her through a hospital with a shotgun and finally culminating in him falling apart in her arms tonight while Maria gave them the blessing of her shelter and Karen made another promise.

It sounds complicated. It’s really not.

She finishes washing, rinses herself off and steps out onto the bathroom mat. It feels like a repeat of Friday night except Claire isn’t here and there’s nothing to hide behind anymore, for either of them. And that’s okay. They need to stop hiding anyway.

She dries herself off, pulls on a pair of blue checked sleep shorts and a plain white tank top. She kicks their wet clothes into a corner to sort out tomorrow and runs a comb through her hair.

Pretty matters.
It matters to her.

When she finishes she goes to the bed where he’s sitting in a pair of sweatpants, the same pair she wore that night at the cabin that bagged at her knees and gaped around her waist. She doesn’t say anything and neither does he and she wonders if maybe they’ve said everything they need to tonight. If their communication has been rendered moot by an endless back and forth of “Don’t you know” and “I know”.

She pushes him down onto the bed and he goes without protest, shifts underneath her and wraps his hand around her wrist, presses his thumb into that bruise he left there.

They’ve come such a long way since this morning, since the dark clouds blotted out the light in the dim room and she fixed his bandages with butterfly stitches. Since he told her thank you and his words gave her no comfort at all. So much has changed. So much is still the same. Because she’s sitting here at his bedside again, peeling dirty, wet bandages from his skin, staring at the raw, red wounds, the broken stitches, holding dry wipes to them and not missing the fact that he doesn’t flinch at all.

She cleans him, dries him, pulls his pieces back together, covers his wounds in fresh dressings. She doesn’t miss his goosebumps, his sharp intake of breath, the erection he’s not trying to hide.

They ignore it again. It doesn’t have to matter now.

And then she’s done and she glances briefly to the window where she can see the rain beating down on the city, blurred streetlights and headlamps, dirt running down the side of the building and no doubt into the flooded sewers.

But they’re inside, they’re safe. For now, everything will be okay.

She leans forward, kisses his brow and looks towards the couch. It’s late and she’s tired and she hopes tonight is finally the night she can sleep. But when she stands he doesn’t let go of her wrist and when she tries to tug her hand out of his, he holds on tight, fingers pressing into her skin and she knows what’s coming before he’s even said anything, knew that it was always going to come to this and wonders why it has taken so long.

“Stay,” he says voice thick and broken. “Please.”
Any other man... *any* other man and it wouldn’t sound like it does. But he’s not any other man. He’s Frank and that means something.

She regards him silently, bites her lip and suddenly he looks worried and releases her.

“You don’t have to...” he starts.

“I know,” she says.

And then it’s easy. She switches off the light and he shifts over so she can slide into the warm patch his body left behind.

He offers to sleep on top of the blankets and she shakes her head. So much has happened and something like that just seems ridiculously childish. Artificial even. If she’s going to sleep with him, she wants to feel he's there. She wants his skin and his warmth, his breath. But it's so sweet of him to ask.

She turns to face him, moves close so she can rest her head on his bicep. Even in the dark she can make out the set of his jaw, the blackness of his eyes and the way they’re boring into her like he wants to see all the way inside her.

He reaches for her hand then, pulls her wrist to his mouth and kisses the bruise, lips wet and soft and he lingers, kisses it again.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

She touches the corner of his mouth, the small half-formed scab rough underneath the pad of her thumb.

“I’m sorry too.”

And it’s okay to do this now. It’s okay to put apologies out into the universe. It can take them
without folding in on itself and breaking. It’s ready. It’s time.

They went through. Not over, not under, not around, but through. She drew first blood but he smashed down the wall and sure, there are a lot of pieces of themselves they lost along the way. She’s picked up what she can but some of them scattered too far and they’re going to have to make do without them. But they made it.

And now she’s here, lying so close to him that she can feel the heat coming off his body, that she can smell her soap on his skin and if she’s really quiet and really still, she can hear his heartbeat. And it’s going to be okay.

Don’t you know?

He reaches out, touches her waist, in that space where her shorts and her top don’t meet. His hand is warm, heavy and her skin prickles and she can’t help the small sound she makes in the back of her throat, the way she arches even before she realises she’s done it. He doesn’t say anything. They don’t acknowledge that either, nor the way his thumb chases the line of her hipbone over and over.

His voice is rough when he speaks again. “I don't want to let this go,” he says. “I thought I could. But I can't.”

“Hold on then,” she turns her head, kisses his arm. “Both hands.”

He swallows loudly, blinks hard. She gets a tiny nod and his fingers tighten momentarily on her hip.

And suddenly she can barely keep her eyes open and she has to stifle a yawn.

She’s in bed with Frank Castle and all she wants to do is sleep.

And then he smiles, lifts his hand from her hip and touches her cheek.

“Go to sleep Ma'am,” he says. “You ain't gonna miss anything.”
“Gonna miss you,” she teases.

He snorts, the first genuinely humorous sound she's heard from him all night. He looks down, to the side, then back at her. He runs his thumb along her cheekbone and suddenly sobers.

“Nah, I'm not going anywhere.”

No lies. They don't lie.

She turns her head, presses her lips to his hand and rolls over to face the window, to watch the rain beat at it like it wants to break it, and it’s the most natural feeling in the world when he moves in behind her, slides his arm over her hip and rests his palm against her belly, his fingertips just beneath the elastic of her waistband.

And he’s so gentle as he tugs her back into him, as he kisses her shoulder, then her hair. He’s trembling but she’s pretty sure this has nothing to do with his rage or his pain.

“This all right?” he asks and she nods.

It’s more than just all right.

She covers his hand with her own, fingers sliding between his.

He breathes in deeply, whispers something she doesn't catch and will forever wish she did and then it's only them and the night and the rain. And then there is only sleep.

And for a while the saints and the sinners, the angels and the devils of Hell’s Kitchen forget all the ways they are different.

Chapter End Notes
The movie Karen thinks about in the beginning is *The Crow*, which I drew parallels from a few times in this fic, but really the similarities are undeniable.

Also, coming up with Frank's musical collection was a lot of fun, expect more of this.
Bear the tension of tears held at bay, it’s the main thing I do with my days

Chapter Notes

Oh hi guys. Sorry for the lengthy hiatus. Life happened, Kastle Halloween happened (which produced a 30000-word monster) and generally this chapter was just really hard to write. That was, of course, until I realised that it needed to be two chapters. Because no one should ever ever trust me when I tell them how long something should be.

Anyway, I want to say thank you to two of my wonderful friends who have helped me with this, Swiftsnowmane and Ruebella-b, your help and encouragement is always appreciated. Thank you so much.

Anyway let's see how Frank and Karen are getting on after his meltdown.

Title is from Black Lab's *Part of me*.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They don't talk about it. Not the next morning at least. In the dim light; the early, crisp air, she asks him if he wants to and he shakes his head, pulls her a little closer to him until her back is again pressed to his belly, and rests his cheek against hers. Breathes her in.

The rain is still falling outside, a downpour the likes of which is virtually unprecedented in Hell's Kitchen. Inside the room is dark and shadowed, its colours leached from the world except where she can still see the reddish-brown tinge of his handprint on the wall; the swooping lines his fingers made when he was dying and she had to will him back to life. And maybe it *should* feel ominous, maybe even a little frightening. After all, she has a dead man in her apartment, sleeping in her bed even, and his blood has marked her. Claimed her. But it doesn’t and he's warm and solid behind her. A huge, dark, comforting presence that showed her all his rage and ugliness, all his cruelty and his sorrow, and still she feels safer than ever.

He's difficult. This isn't something she's only just discovered. He's been difficult since the day she met him. And no, it's not just what he's become - it's not only the part of him that punishes, that hurts, that wreaks his vengeance on a world turned rotten; it's just the man he always was. The husband, the father, the soldier, the friend, the lover. She thinks Maria probably saw it too. Felt it deep in her heart - the fierceness with which he loves, that unbreakable loyalty. It gives him a terrible darkness that has little to do with his crusade against the world and everything to do with the kind of man he is.

It makes him hard. It makes him exasperating. It makes him dangerous.

It makes him wonderful.
She has no difficulty in reconciling these things.

So rather than talk, rather than unpack, rather than open those wounds again too soon, they lie there in the half-light, listening to the sound of the rain, the early morning traffic, Pickle’s loud purring where she's wedged into the small of Frank's back. In another life it would be uncomfortable and, even in this one, Karen can't deny that there is a mild awkwardness to it but not enough that she would want to move and give up the way his hand rests against the skin of her stomach, his warm breath against her neck. That would be asking too much, taking away something she’s earned with sweat and tears and more blood than she cares to think about.

She deserves something good too.

“Karen?” he asks eventually, his voice low like he's afraid to speak, fingers twitching.

She tilts her head, waits for him to continue.

“Will you sta-,” he clears his throat, starts again. “Will you stay with me today?”

Not “will you stay home?”, not “are you going to work?” but “will you stay with me?”.

Will you stay?

It feels like something else. Something bigger. Something that clawed its way out of his chest one night when she was cold and frightened and he was the only thing in the world left to hold on to.

It feels like “don't you know? ”.

She closes her eyes, breathes deeply, lets his words settle into her skin, finds a place for them and, as she does, a sensation almost exactly like relief floods through her. He's asking for him. For the first time he's asking her to give him something, something real, not because it's pragmatic, but because she's the only person on Earth who can. Because he needs her. Because she knows this already but he's telling her and telling himself too.
It’s a big thing, huge in fact, but it doesn’t feel overwhelming. It feels right, like this is how it’s supposed to be.

She slides her hand down his arm, slips her fingers through his, feels him press a kiss into her shoulder, whiskers scraping her neck as he keeps his mouth on her and waits. She’s not really even sure for what. Except she is.

*Don’t you know?*

Part of her thinks she should be terrified. She isn't though. She's Karen Page. *Intrepid reporter, lover of vigilantes and holder back of tears under extreme duress.* She has a fucking list for everything, she shoots mobster scumbags who threaten her friends and the big bad Punisher sleeps in her bed. Apparently she doesn't scare easily. That’s something she thinks she can make peace with, something she’ll accept in time. Eventually.

Right now though ... right now she also knows she can't refuse him and she doesn’t want to. That today she doesn't have it in her. Maybe another day. Maybe there will be times she'll say no to him just because something is mildly inconvenient to her. But when she turns over in his arms and looks at him, sees the fear in his eyes and under that the pleading - the *begging* - she knows that’s a very big maybe.

She realises that she's going to have to trust him not to use this, not to ask her for things she can't give. In this moment she feels like she can.

She touches his cheek and his beard is growing out, rough stubble giving way to softer strands.

“Yes I'll stay,” she says softly. She will.

“Yes your boss?” he asks and she shakes her head, puts a finger to his lips.

“I'll stay.”

Ellison is probably not expecting her to come in anyway after yesterday and her “aesthetic” and even so, this is the first night she's had more than a few hours of sleep and she's still exhausted. Maybe she needs to ask for something for herself too. Maybe for once Karen Page can come first.
Frank touches her waist, hand lingering and then squeezing gently, thumb sweeping along the sharp edge of her hip. And when her skin prickles and a small shiver meanders down her spine, she has to shake her head at her own predictability. At his.

They ignore it again. But it's not as inconsequential as it was last night.

The big bad Punisher in her bed. Karen Page in there with him.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

She smiles, runs a hand through his hair and it’s thick and soft, dark curls slipping through her fingers.

“You’re welcome. Besides, can’t trust you here on your own. I’m gonna need to ground you. Take away your coffee privileges or something.”

He smirks at that, seems about to offer some kind of retort and then he suddenly winces and, even in the dim light, she can see the scab at the corner of his mouth twist, the shade of a bruise next to it.

“You okay?” she asks.

It’s a stupid question. He's nowhere near okay. He's not going to be okay for a long time. But then he smiles again, mouth quirking up on one side.

“Yeah, I’m good. You just have a fucking mean right hook.”

“I'm sorry,” she says it again even though they’ve already been through it and neither of them want to dwell on it. She puts her thumb to his lips and the scab is rough and hard but he doesn't pull away. Because it doesn't hurt. She knows it doesn't.

“Ain't nothing to be sorry for. Just surprised you didn’t hit me earlier.”
She snorts and he does too but when she glances at him again he isn’t smiling and his hand on her hip is tight. He looks like he wants to say something, something important, something meaningful and for a second she thinks he's about to give up and fall into that deep and dark chasm of Things That Happened At Frank Castle’s Dead Family’s Graves In The Rain.

She braces herself for it.

(You're not her.)

(I managed to lose them all by myself.)

(What is it you think you know?)

(Come home and fuck you the right way after.)

(I love you.)

But he pulls himself back, swallows heavily and she winds an arm around his shoulders, lets him rest his head in the hollow of her neck, his breath hot and damp against her. Truthfully, she wonders if there's really anything left to say and part of her doesn't think there is. But another part hopes they won't throw this into that vastly growing pile of hard limits she seems to have. Because she wants him to know it's safe to talk about it. That they can be a safe place for one another.

She thinks it’s been a long time since Frank Castle felt safe. She thinks it may have even been longer for her.

Maybe they can be that for each other. Maybe they already are.

Will you stay?

He squeezes her hip again; harder, more deliberate this time. And for a second she indulges the fantasy of leaning into him, of putting her mouth on his and tasting him. Tasting everything, the blood, the tears. The rage. It would be so easy. Press her lips to his, lose their clothes, pull him on top of her so that he’s touching every part of her and let him take her and drive himself inside her. It
would be just like what she imagined the night at the cabin could have been and also completely different. Frank Castle having her. Fucking her. Using her. His hands on her, grabbing at her hair, her flesh. Whispering in her ear, his voice rough and harsh. Frank Castle touching her, holding her, breathing her breath, making love to her and telling her in choked, halting sentences that he loves her more than anything else in this world.

But it isn’t the time. Truth is she's not really sure when that time will be. If ever. If.

*Stay with me.*

She'll stay. She always stays.

She reaches across him to the bedside table for her phone and it feels so easy to do it. So familiar to feel the press of him under her, the way his hand doesn’t move from her hip and, if anything, grips harder. Maybe once she would have felt this was a problem, that this fire burning between her and The Punisher was only going to make her already complicated and overwrought life even worse. And it’s true; it has and will continue to burn them, to hurt them. But maybe it’ll also cleanse them, get rid of some of the rot and the decay. Rebuild them.

They’re big thoughts. Big thoughts for a small occasion. Big thoughts for the still somewhat inconsequential press of him against her thigh, for the way her top pulls low and how she doesn’t miss the way his eyes flicker to her chest.

Big thoughts. Too big for now.

She grabs her phone, slides back to her side of the bed, props herself up on her pillow and he turns into her, arm flung across her waist as he silently watches her jab at the keypad.

She doesn’t want to harp on the message. She still has every intention of giving Ellison a hard time for the “Birth of a Murderer” editorial and she’s unwilling to concede too much ground with apologies and explanations in this text. So she opts for something curt and to the point. She says she has a headache, she won’t be in, she’s staying home and in bed. At least the last part is true. But then she looks over at Frank and realises the first part is true too.

Frank Castle. A headache. A big, angry, ridiculous, wonderful headache. And he sleeps in her bed and puts his hands on her. He tells her he loves her and lets himself fall apart in her arms.
She can let it happen. She can stay.

She presses send and puts her phone down next to her.

“Thanks,” he says again.

“That’s okay. I could use a day anyway.”

“I didn’t just mean that.”

She looks down at him, runs her fingertips through his hair.

“That’s okay too.”

“Shoulda left me there,” he says. “After all that shit I said to you.”

He’s quiet for a moment and she waits for him to continue. “I didn’t mean it you know?”

“Yeah. Yeah you did.”

She lets that settle, lets him test it in his head and understand the truth of it. Accept it. She can see it hurts, that on some level he’s appalled at himself, disgusted even. That this upsets him in a way that murdering dozens of men can’t.

He gives her a grave nod, but doesn’t look away.

“But I told you,” she says lightly. “I’m not gonna let you die for being a jerk. Can’t have that on my conscience.”

“You’re a damn fool Karen Page.” There’s no malice in his voice, no force behind it. Just a statement of fact and she guesses it’s true. She is a fool. And that changes precisely nothing.
“I said I wasn’t done,” she whispers. “I’m not.”

“You were once.” Also not an accusation. Just truth. Because they don’t lie.

They don’t lie.

“I’m not now.”

He doesn’t say anything to that but his arm tightens on her and she lets herself sink back down, close her eyes.

He’s rough and hard and she hates and loves that she feels so secure. That she’s handing her safety over to this wreck of a man who stays in her apartment and sleeps in her bed; that murders and hurts and takes his rage out on the city. And somehow she knows he’ll never hurt her. That he doesn’t lie and she can trust him.

“Is there anything you want to do today?” she asks

He shakes his head. She didn't expect anything else. The world outside is still frightening and they're both still reeling from yesterday and what it means. Reassessing and regrouping is probably what they both need right now.

So she lets it be, listens to the rain, the wind, feels the gentle warmth of his skin against hers. She knows it can't always be like this but maybe today it can. And maybe tomorrow too. And maybe a bunch of todays and tomorrows after that as well. She'll take what she can get.

She's earned it.

She drifts for a while, lets her mind take over and cycle through the series of events that led her here. Matt. Foggy. Nelson and Murdock. Fisk. And when she gets to the moment she pulled the trigger and saw the bag of flesh and bones that was once James Wesley twitch and bounce in front of her, it's not as horrifying as it once was. And then she sees Frank. Frank with his dark eyes and his rough voice. The gentle half-smile when he told her about his boy and the cookies he hid in the piano. That tiny glance before he threw his trial. The way he looked at her in that diner before he destroyed it and
her and then the way he looked at her again when he took Schoonover. That doesn't seem as scary as it once was either. That darkness is part of her now too. It always was. And maybe it just needed another kind of darkness to call out to it. To rouse it.

There's no use denying it.

She shifts a little, presses her face into his neck, lips to his collarbones and he plants a sleepy kiss in her hair.

He's drifting too and something about that makes her feel very content. This isn't only the desperate need for the comfort of another body. This isn't selfish. It just is. It's what they do now somehow and she decides not to think too hard on it. Not to put it on a list.

Next to her, her phone buzzes and she ignores it. She knows it's Ellison and frankly, she doesn't want to think about him too much right now either.

She's also vaguely aware of Pickle climbing over Frank’s side and onto her belly, kneading her flesh briefly before settling down and she doesn't miss how Frank subtly moves his arm to accommodate them all.

It's a small gesture, but it feels bigger. It feels like there's a gravity to it. An acceptance of what this means and the changes it heralds. Whatever that may be.

But he’s warm and he doesn’t smell of rage and she doesn't think anymore.

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It’s Claire who eventually inadvertently gets things moving again.

She stops around at about 10 to check on Frank’s stitches and gives them both a hard time; Frank for his disappearing act which she describes as a “dick move”, and Karen because Claire’s as fucking astute as they get, and she realises almost instantly that no one’s been sleeping on the couch.

“I already told you he shouldn’t be doing that,” she says pointedly, glancing at the rumpled sheets,
the heap of wet clothes in the bathroom. And then she turns to Frank who’s already looking sheepish. “Told you too.”

Okay, so Karen didn’t expect that. She knows they talk, but she always assumed the conversation to revolve around more pragmatic things like his stitches and his overall mental health; when he plans to leave and go back to wherever it is he came from. She didn’t for one second think it would be about her and him and whatever it is they may have between them. Or however they might or might not choose to act on that.

It makes Karen wonder just how well Claire and Frank know each other; how much of a hard time Claire really does give him and if his semi-sarcastic admission of it held more truth than she thought. And she wonders that it came to that - to an acknowledgement of what potentially could happen between a man and a woman with a past and a present. Maybe even a future.

But then again, maybe not.

And then Claire is looking between the two of them, arms folded across her chest, all but tapping her foot.

Karen again tells her that it isn’t like that, it isn’t what she thinks, and Claire echoes their earlier conversation and says it’s something that looks just like that, looks so similar in fact that it’s almost impossible to tell the difference even when you’re looking closely. And she’s looking very closely. Because she’s Claire Temple and she might do shit she isn’t supposed to, she might help people she should very likely hand over the the police, but she’s not stupid. Or blind. Or wilfully blind.

And then she glares at Frank like he really is an errant child she has no idea how to control. She tells him to stop gallivanting, to stop making Karen's life hard, to stop with all the coffee and most of all to stop being a colossal cocksucker. And he doesn't say or do anything other than look at the floor because even the big bad Punisher can be chastened by the wrath of Claire Temple.

And then, her rage seemingly expended, she softens and asks if everything is really alright and if there’s anything she can do to help either of them. Because she loves Karen like family and Frank, well Frank - nightmare that he is - has grown on her in ways she didn’t foresee and she really just wants everyone to be safe and okay.

“And don’t you think that means I’m going soft on you Frank. Don’t you think that at all. I know what this is about. I’ve been around the block once or twice myself.”
She’s a saint and an angel and Karen Page is fucking blessed to have a friend like her because there aren’t many people in the world who are that lucky. In fact the odds are stacked against you a million to one.

And she doesn’t miss how Frank retreats to the bed, how his sheepishness changes to something else. Something deeper and darker. A melancholy that she’s seen all too often.

When Claire leaves she tells Karen that despite his shenanigans, and whatever other shenanigans might be going on that everyone seems to think they can cover up, Frank’s healing well. That truthfully, she doesn’t need to continue stopping by twice a day unless something happens that actually requires attention, but she will anyway because she knows Karen likes someone checking on him and frankly, Claire doesn’t trust him to not do anything absurd. And then she gives Karen a hug and says that he still looks at her like she hung the moon and the stars and this might be all kinds of insane but she thinks she gets it, that she kind of understands what this thing is between them and even she has to admit that he’s prettier than she thought. Also she’s less than a two-minute walk away if Karen ever wants to talk it through.

A angel. An absolute angel sent down from Heaven to do good works here on Earth and put the rest of the world to shame.

And then Karen closes the door behind her and again, they’re alone and again, it doesn’t feel nearly as weird as it should.

She stands there for a few seconds, eyes flickering to his bloodstain on the wall, the wet patches on the tiles where last night they left puddles of rainwater on the floor and then finally to Frank where he is sitting on the edge of the bed, staring out the window at the storm. He’s still half naked, still seemingly unconcerned about putting a shirt on; the lean muscle of his arms and back stretching tight as he reaches for his coffee mug.

He’s quiet. Thoughtful. He’s been this way since they woke up the second time and untangled their limbs in that half-embarrassed, half contented silence that seems to have become their way and, underneath that, their truth. But now there’s something else too. A resignation, or maybe more like an acceptance because it doesn’t feel loaded with doubt or sadness. It doesn’t feel like defeat.

She thinks she’d probably give everything she owns for a peek inside his head, a look at his deepest thoughts, a window into the sometimes terrifying psyche of Frank Castle, of The Punisher.

And then she realises she doesn’t have to give anything. Nothing at all. She just has to ask. Because they don’t lie.
So she goes to him, wedges herself in next to him on the bed, her thigh flush with his, and touches his arm.

He doesn’t say anything at first. He drinks his coffee in big gulps, grinds his teeth hard enough to almost drown out the sound of the rain. She knows him well enough to know something big is coming, something deep. Something that fits on the list of Things Frank Castle Says That Change Everything, a list that was filled to the fucking brim last night when he fell apart on her and she had to be strong for him, when against all odds she was strong for him. Strong enough to let him be weak. To let him breathe.

“Frank?” she says softly, hand curling around his forearm, pressing into his skin.

He looks down and she’s not sure if it’s at her fingers, her bare thighs or just the floor - if it’s a gaze at something, or at nothing.

It could go either way. Most things with Frank could.

“She’s right you know,” he says eventually, voice low and soft. “You can’t fucking tell the difference between this and…”

He sighs, trails off. Another gulp of coffee and he looks away, scans the room like he’s searching for something he knows isn’t there, something to distract him.

Something that isn’t her.

She gives him a moment to gather himself but not too long. He has a tendency towards silence and melancholy, towards leaving sentences unfinished and thoughts unsaid. And that amuses her because with everything else he sticks it out to the bitter end, no stone left unturned, no scenario unconsidered.

“And?” she urges.

“And something else.” It’s a lame finish but she understands and she doesn’t push him.
The truth is though, he’s right. It is “something else”, a big box of unexplored possibilities and unchartered territory. A vast area of no-man’s-land where the Punisher sleeps in her bed and, now, she apparently sleeps with him, held tight in arms that threaten to break her and save her all at the same time. A place where he says he loves her and even though she hasn’t said it herself, it’s pointless denying that she loves him back. Loves him so, so very much.

It should be very confusing and it is. It's also not.

She looks at him, his broad shoulders, strong arms, muscular chest. The way the gentle morning light from outside seems only to tease him and never quite touch him, rendering his skin smooth and pale even over his scars.

He's beautiful. And that scale isn't quite so tipped anymore. It was, but he's fought back and so did she and they somehow righted it again. Got rid of some of the bits that were weighing them down. Scattered them. Discarded them. And here they are. And she should be scared. She should be confused and wary. But she's not. Because she can't be. Because she won't. Not with him.

He doesn't look at her but he takes her hand off his arm brings it to his lips, scrapes his stubble against her skin and kisses her wrist, slow and hard, his mouth wet and hot on her. It sends a shiver down her spine - of course it does - and it’s another shiver that’s not nearly as inconsequential as all the shivers and arches and gooseflesh from the previous night.

And she doesn’t miss the incongruity of it all. Of the way they are with each other, the way that Claire’s words earlier and his now, are nothing but God’s honest truth. You can’t tell the difference because there is none. To say there is would be to lie. And she doesn’t lie.

But she also doesn’t care to define it. Not now at least. And she tells him as much as she lays her head against his shoulder, hears him sigh into her hair. She’s not sure that it’s what he wanted to hear, thinks maybe he was looking for some kind of safety or direction in her words, but she doesn’t have that. She can’t give him something that isn’t true. Isn’t real.

He takes another gulp of coffee. Outside the rain still beats hard against the window and the wind howls and she imagines she can feel the very building shaking against the onslaught. It’s okay though. She's weathered worse.

She's still here. She will stay.
They’re like that for a while. Not talking. Not doing much of anything. She can still smell the soap on him, that heady mix of citrus and rosemary from when she washed him last night, when they stood in that shower all caught up in one another and her own confidence surprised her.

Maybe it was too much - she wonders about that now - but she doesn't think so. You don't get Frank Castle to do anything he doesn't want to do. You can't.

“I just want you to know…” he starts slowly, cuts himself off almost immediately, and then takes another sip of coffee.

She waits. It’ll come. It always does.

He’s still refusing to look at her though. His eyes are locked on the windows and the storm, as if somehow the answer will present itself to him in the deluge, like a promise after the flood.

It doesn’t. Hell’s Kitchen doesn’t have those kind of miracles.

But it has some. Some small ones.

He swallows and when he speaks his voice is thick and cracked.

“I want you to know that I ain't fucking around with this. This ain’t some fucking rebound crap where I find a pretty girl to make me forget and then I move on when I start to feel better,” he sighs again, frustrated by his seeming lack of articulation. “It’s just... I take this seriously. I don't want you to think I don't.”

She lifts her head and looks at him, sees how he's glaring into the dregs of his coffee, how his shoulders are hunched and that trigger finger of his is tapping fast and agitated against the porcelain of his mug.

For a moment she's not sure she really understands. She gets the obvious - sure she does - that’s not the hard part. What she doesn’t get is why he’s telling her this, why he feels the need to. What big thing he’s circling and jabbing at before retreating when it gets too painful, and then regrouping, coming back for a second assault.
Frank is complicated. That much she knows. It’s a given. But part of it is because there’s a complexity to him she’s still struggling to get a hold on. His mind is razor sharp and he makes connections he more often than not assumes everyone else has already made or that should just be general knowledge. And maybe it’s the result of a bullet lodged in his brain or maybe it’s the result of the trauma of losing everything he loved or maybe it’s just like Foggy said and he’s batshit. But the end result is the same: he takes work, he takes effort. More than anything he takes love.

So she’s about to ask him to explain but he seems to have found some kind of rhythm now, some kind of flow, and he speaks first.

“What I said at the cabin that night… I meant it.”

His words fall like a stone, heavy and forceful. Sincere. And she closes her eyes briefly so that she can test the weight of them, gather herself and see if she’s strong enough to accept them and let them move through her.

It’s easier than she thinks.

She bites her lip, leans back against him, presses her mouth to the curve of his shoulder.

“I know you did,” she says softly. “I know. You told me.”

He lets out a ragged breath and something that sounds like a sob catches in the back of his throat and when she looks at him he’s squeezing his eyes shut, swallowing hard. There’s more coming. She can feel the reality of it in the air. He might not be ready to talk about last night, he might not be ready to put that out into the cold light of day but he can talk about this. Maybe it’s time.

Maybe.

Don’t you know? Will you stay.

Yes, she does and yes, she will. Always.
He shifts and she thinks he'll reach for her but he doesn't. Instead he puts his mug down, half turns to her but stays focused firmly on the floor, refusing to meet her eyes. He's never had the power to make her look away but apparently she has that over him. And she thinks that half-scares half-amuses him. Disorients him. He's Frank Castle. He's The Punisher. Decorated war hero. A soldier. He's not easily intimidated, doesn’t wither under the gaze of just anyone. There’s only a select few with that dubious honour, an elite group and somehow she made the cut. Somehow.

(My old lady... she didn’t just break my heart…)

(She’d rip it out, she’d tear it apart, she’d step on that shit, feed it to a dog)

She doesn’t want to do that. She doesn’t. But she thinks she could, he’s given her that, given her his words and his trust to let her do with it as she pleases.

Part of her realises it’s a gift. Another part knows it’s a curse.

(You’re not her. You’re not her)

It means so much more than she thought it did.

He's quiet, still, but even so, she can feel the anguish coming off him in waves washing over both of them, making the room feel small and choked. And then suddenly he’s grinding his teeth again and she can see his jaw working hard, eyes flickering to the walls, the windows, settling on the door. It's an escape, she knows enough about how his mind works to realise that is how it's registering to him. She also knows he won't take it. It's something else he'd consider rude. Uncalled for. Disrespectful even.

And she can also almost see that little monster again, the one that tries to break out of his chest and tell the world his secrets. He fights it. She can see that too, the way he searches for ways to satisfy its hunger, give it what it needs and simultaneously keep himself from falling over the edge.

Thing is though, if he fell she would catch him. If he fell he would be safe and maybe he needs to know that.

“What is it Frank?” she says. “You can tell me anything.”
He glances at her, brow furrowed and eyes dark and unreadable. There’s a second she thinks she’s lost him, that it’s too much and he’ll stand up and walk away, make some excuse about needing to shower or wanting to sleep or something. But he doesn’t. Apparently he’s sticking to this as best he can and more than anything he just needs a guide to get through it, a way out of the maze in his head.

She’s about to touch him, just put her hands to his skin and see where that leads, see if that helps him find his bearings, but suddenly he's speaking again.

“Back when I was in Iraq… actually back when I was anywhere...” he trails off, bites his lip hard and almost immediately starts up again. “Those guys, the soldiers… they can always find a lady.”

It’s not what she expected him to say. He doesn’t really talk about his time in the Middle East, not in all the months she’s known him. It seems irrelevant to him on some level, almost like the way a random Tuesday afternoon at The Bulletin or a Thursday morning at Nelson and Murdock seems irrelevant to her. She thinks it might have been different for him if not for the fact that his real trauma didn’t happen there in the heat and the sand, in the oil fires and sound of exploding grenades, but rather here, in his home - in the place he was meant to feel safe. And she thinks what happened at that carousel swallowed anything from before, washed it away and left him only with three graves and a bullet in his head.

So she waits for him to continue, to tie this back to where they are now and who he is and why he’s taken so much time out from his personal war on the world to make room for her. For Karen Page. The girl who keeps lists and calls him names and can’t really hold back tears under extreme duress even though she tells herself she can.

“It’s war. It happens. Not nearly as much as it did in Vietnam. Different war, different soldiers, different time. But it still happens. Sometimes it's nice. You got some young asshole thinking he’s fucking Rambo or something, still wet behind the ears. And he gets there and the first thing he sees is his buddy’s leg being blown off and he breaks because he fucking knows it could have been him and all he wants to do is get the fuck out of dodge but he's got another year of this hell. And before you know it he’s crying for his mother and you got to talk him down and force him to pick up his weapon and keep going. And you think he’ll never make it, that he ain’t got it in him because he doesn't. And you're pretty sure he's leaving soon in a wooden box. He's even talking like he is. Like he's made peace with it. Goes on like that for a while. The freakouts, the fear. And then one day he's different. He's calmer. Focused. Finds someone to make him forget, give him a reason to get out of bed in the morning. That's what the right woman can do.

“Sometimes they even get married, and he brings her back home. They have kids, make a life. Sometimes it’s good.”
She's tilts her head, pushes her hair back out of her face and he watches her do it, seems momentarily distracted by it even, and his fingers twitch again. And then he swallows and continues.

“Sometimes it ain't so good.” He sighs, steals another glance at her. “Happens even less, but sometimes you see guys with wives and kids pretending they don't got a life back home. That it don't matter what they do or who they fuck because it ain't like he’s gonna have it written all over his face when he gets back to his old lady.”

He pauses and she reaches out then, takes his hand in hers. He watches silently as she curls her fingers through his, as he does the same.

“But they do,” she's not sure if it's a statement or a question but he nods.

“And their wives,” he carries on. “They know. They fucking know. They also tell themselves it doesn't matter, like it's part of another life or something. But you can see it. You can see it in their eyes.”

He stops again, tightens his fingers on her. “I never wanted to see Maria look at me like that. Not even for a second. I didn't even want her to wonder.”

She wants to tell him it's okay, that he doesn't need to do this. Doesn't need to tell her these things. She gets it. She trusts him. Like Claire and Foggy, he's loyal to a fucking fault. It's his code, his honour. It might even be built into his fucking cells and he doesn't need to say it, explain it. But when he looks at her and his eyes are dark and filled with something deep and desperate, she lets him carry on.

“I never stepped out. I never even wanted to. I couldn't do that. Not to my wife, my kids.”

She nods slowly. This is starting to make some kind of twisted sense in her head. The kind of sense that only comes with understanding those fragments of Frank Castle’s inner dialogue. The way he looks at the world and how he tells himself he fits into it. The kind of understanding that only comes with seeing him wracked with guilt and falling apart in front of three grey headstones in a deserted graveyard on a night still too raw to talk about.

“Now I ain't expecting a medal for that. I don't believe you should get praise for doing what you should, what you promised you'd do. Those pricks that want a fucking prize for not cheating were almost fucking worse than the ones that did.
“But I just need you to know that this… this thing that Nurse Temple is talking about with us… it's important to me. I never thought this could happen to me and fuck, I still don't know how it's happening…”

He trails off, looks away again to where Pickle has materialised seemingly out of nowhere and is winding herself around his legs, standing on his feet, her little black paw covering the nasty scar where once upon a time he let an asshole drill through his foot and then gave it all up to save a fighting dog.

(Matt told her a lot about what happened with Frank after his Big Reveal aka Prince of Lies aka How The Fuck Did You Not See This Karen Page. In many ways it felt as if he was suddenly tasting truth for the first time and decided he liked the flavour, got high on it and couldn’t get enough. The more cynical part of her thinks it was an attempt to ingratiate himself to her after everything that happened, to see if he could get back into her good graces by answering all the questions she had and some that she didn’t. What he didn’t realise was that that was another life. And she was another Karen Page.)

She squeezes his hand, lets her thumb brush his wrist so she can feel his pulse fluttering beneath his skin.

He’s not finished but she can see he's trying to find a way to say what he needs to, that he's picking his words carefully and turning all the permutations of their meaning over and over in his head.

She reaches out, touches his face, trails her thumb along his jaw and over his lips, and then runs her hand to his neck, his shoulder.

“It’s okay Frank. You can say it.”

But he can’t. And she realises that what's happening here is he's working through parts of it, processing what doesn't hurt too much and when he gets too close to the bone he retreats, wraps himself up in the fog and waits for it to ease. Comes back for a second round. Comes back to try again.

He takes a breath. Straightens his shoulders, seemingly finds something he can say, something he wants to share that won’t break him.
“I just want you to know that I took my life before this seriously… I loved Maria more than anything in the goddamn world. I still do. But I ain’t there in that graveyard with her. I’m here. I’m here with you. And that means something too.”

He leaves the rest unsaid but she can fill in the gaps. Somewhere between the pain and the guilt, there’s something else. Something that looks so very much like love and relief and longing that there’s no point in trying to tell the difference. And if he did, he wouldn’t be able to articulate it anyway because it wouldn’t mean anything.

“Frank,” she says softly. “Look at me Frank.”

He hesitates for a second, but he does as she asks and his eyes are hard and black and he’s still the toughest, meanest son of a bitch she ever met. And he’s also the sweetest man in the world. And both of these things are true. Frank Castle, 50% mass murderer, 50% lost puppy. 100% hot mess.

She brings his hand to her lips and kisses each scabbed, raw knuckle and next to her he shivers, skin turning to gooseflesh. “I don’t think after everything that you’ve done, that anyone could doubt how seriously you take it. I just don’t think that's possible. I don’t think that’s something you need to worry about. Ever.”

He makes a dry sound in the back of his throat and when she looks up from his hand he’s still staring at her, head cocked and a sad smile playing on the corner of his lips. But his eyes are soft and some of the tension has gone from his shoulders.

He nods.

“Guess I’m not the one and done man I thought I was…” There’s no malice in it. There’s even a hint of dry humour if she’s honest.

She shakes her head. “I shouldn’t have said that. That was cruel.”

“No,” his voice is lower than before, barely more than a whisper. “You were right. Not entirely. But you were. Like I said, I’m here.”

It’s true. He is. He may have come to her to die but he didn’t. He lived and wants to continue to do so. And it isn’t just because it’s hard to punish from beyond the grave, because there’s still scum in
Hell’s Kitchen and he wants the streets to flow red with their blood. That’s some of it, but not all and she’s willing to give into the vanity that says some part of it is for her. Because he cares. Because he loves.

Don’t you know?

He touches her face, runs his knuckles along her jaw slowly and his voice is thick when he speaks.

“I’m not done either.”

It makes her heart ache. More than anything he's said up to now, more than any half confessions or subtle promises. It kills something inside her, murders it more viciously than anything or anyone he's ever gone after and she gasps at the loss, at the sudden unfamiliarity of what she's feeling. And it takes a moment for her to realise that the thing he just took from her and destroyed and punished was doubt. Doubt and fear of this and of him and of herself. A long-held truth she clung to that wasn't truth at all.

Tears. She knew there would be. They don't even surprise her with how fast they come, how her vision clouds and the wetness spills on her cheeks and onto his hand. She makes no attempt to hide them.

It's who she is. The realisation doesn’t hurt, it’s the time wasted on it. It’s how it’s so easy to let go and now there’s a wonderful empty space inside her waiting for to be filled with something else.

She looks at him: his eyes and how they're eating her up, climbing inside her, seeing everything, taking her secrets and keeping them safe; his jaw and the tension in it as he bites down hard on the inside of his cheeks. She runs a thumb along his cheekbone and then into his hair, says his name and he nods.

He gets it. He knows.

He won’t say anymore about this for now, she doesn’t need to have Matt’s bat ears or bloodhound nose to understand that. He said more than he thought he would, told her more than he ever has and it’s not hard to see that it’s hurting again, slicing away at his flesh and bones, and he needs to retreat, find himself a safe space before he tackles anymore.
She needs that too.

She opens her arms. *Come here. Let me hold you and soothe you. Let me do that for you. And you, you can do that for me too. Take that part of me you just killed away and let something else grow there instead.*

He does. And it’s easy because he somehow just fits against her, sliding into place like a puzzle piece, his arms firm and tight around her, hands pressing hard on her shoulder blades as he buries his face in her hair, breathes her in like she’s air and he’s suffocating.

And maybe he is. Maybe they both are. Maybe the rain brought the air back into the world last night but they’ve found other ways to leave each other gasping.

It’s okay though. It’s okay that he’s pressed up tight against her and all she can feel is the smoothness of his skin and the heat of his blood pumping through his veins. It’s okay for her to want this, to *need* this. And it’s okay for him too. He deserves it. He deserves some peace. They both do.

“You’re too good to me Karen Page,” his breath is hot on her and she shuts her eyes against the shiver that shoots down her spine, leaves her trembling. “Too fucking strong for me too.”

He pauses and she thinks he’s finished, that he’ll let her hold him for a while and not say anything else. But he’s Frank, he’s nothing if not unpredictable - maybe even to himself.

He’s tentative at first, butterfly kisses against her skin, fingers flexing and tracing the knobs of her spine all the way up to the nape of her neck. And she can’t help it. She arches her back and curves towards him, gripping at his shoulders, hands sliding into his hair. And then he’s dragging her closer, lips fusing to her throat while his hands move over her; one groping for the hem of her top, sliding underneath the flimsy material and covering her ribs, the other dropping to her thigh, trailing over her until his fingers brush over her scabs and curl around the back of her knee.

“Kinda woman that makes a man weak,” His voice is gravel, thick and strained and his words sound like a confession, an admission of the worst kind of sin. The kind that she feels deep in her bones when she looks at him and sees the way he looks back. The kind that isn’t asking for absolution and doesn’t want it.

And despite this - or maybe because of it - she knows she *should* send him on his way, tell him to say a hundred - no a thousand, no *ten thousand* - Hail Marys, recite the Lord’s Prayer over and over
until it’s all he knows, make him work his fingers to the bone for penance and atone for what he’s
done and doing. But then his mouth is on her again, stubble scraping against her shoulder, tongue
darting out to taste her, to lick at the lines of her collarbones, the hollows of her clavicles; the swell of
breast where just last night he smeared his blood across her and claimed her again for his own.

It does something to her, something she’s not sure she cares too much to define or analyse. Heat
blooming inside her, body quivering as she presses herself hard against the hand splayed on her side,
and he’s gripping her so tightly to hold her in place that she’s almost sure there’ll be bruises. Marks.
His marks.

It doesn’t matter. Let him carve himself into her skin, the same way he’s carved himself into her
heart. Let him stain her the way he’s stained her walls, the way he’s stained her clothes.

He’s talking. She realises it through the fog, his words still heavy and cracked and half nonsense,
half God’s honest truth.

“Bring a man to his knees, you do,” his teeth scrape along her shoulder and his palm moves up the
back of her thigh so that his fingertips rest just under the edge of her shorts.

“I don’t want to make you weak Frank,” she murmurs but even as she’s saying it she’s tugging at
him, urging him closer, tilting her head so his lips find the curve of her neck and he can press wet
kisses into her skin.

“Too late. Far too fucking late.”

And it is. Way too fucking late because his hand is moving over the bumps of her ribs, stroking her
where she was once bruised and he had his hands on her for a whole different reason. Except it was
the same. They just didn’t know it yet.

They should stop. They should. There’s a million reasons why this shouldn’t happen, why this can’t
happen. But he feels so good on her, his hands and his mouth and the way he’s subtly maneuvering
her to where he wants her to be; pressing her thighs apart and letting his thumb brush the underside
of her breast and sending a cascade of sparks through her skin and down her spine to settle hot and
demanding between her legs.

He’s still kissing her, lips working their way up to her jaw, over her pulse and she knows if he gets to
her mouth they’re done. That she won’t be able to put the brakes on, turn this around, beat it back
down into its box and its place on the list of Things Karen Page Really Wants But Shouldn’t Think About Right Now. If he kisses her, actually kisses her properly, deep and long and wet like she knows it will be, it’ll be the point of no return. And she doesn’t know why she’s created this artificial boundary in her head, why his tongue against hers gets to be the deciding factor when his one hand is almost on her naked breast and his other is dragging her into him so he can press himself, hard and pulsing, against her.

She doesn’t get it, but she doesn’t much care to either.

“Frank,” she murmurs as his teeth scrape over her chin, as his hand under her top rises an infinitesimally small distance and the pad of his thumb rests firm against her breast.

He’s not listening to her - not even a little bit - and, to be fair, she’s barely listening to herself either because her blood is pounding in her head and it’s taking every last iota of willpower not to climb into his lap and grind herself down hard against his crotch, take him and ride him and have him like she’s been imagining having him since that night she undressed behind him and hoped he’d turn around and look at her. See her. Take her.

And she hates herself for what she’s about to do. What she has to do.

“Frank,” she says again in a voice that sounds nothing like hers. “Frank, we can’t do this. Not now.”

For a second he freezes. Freezes everything. His hands on her, his lips against her. She’s not even sure he’s breathing and she realises in that moment, that he takes his army training with him everywhere. His military precision, his control, his perceptive skills and his ability to follow orders. And there’s something in that that scares her, but there’s something else, deeper and darker and wilder that thrills her and send a frisson of pleasure meandering down her spine to join the now molten heat between her thighs.

And then he releases her, shifts away slightly, hands moving out from under her clothes and to her wrists, thumbs pressing firm against her pulse. She doesn’t think he’ll look at her, thinks it’ll be another of those occasions where he can’t meet her eyes, but he does.

“Too much?” he asks.

Not with him.

“It's just…” it's her turn to trail off, her turn to suffocate. “It's just Claire said…”

He snorts, shakes his head. “Nurse Temple doesn't believe in fun does she? Best fuckin’ medic I ever met, but she really fuckin’ gives me a hard time when you’re not here.”

She grins. “Gives you a hard time when I am here too.”

“Gives me a hard time even when she’s not here.”

She chuckles and he does too and it’s easy and it’s not weird despite what just happened - and what didn’t happen. And she might not know how to feel about The Punisher sleeping in her bed and holding her hard enough to break her but she knows how to feel about this; about his strange quirked smile and the fading black bruises under his eyes, the small scab on his lip where she marked him and herself. She's happy she realises. And she hasn’t been happy for a long time. And when she looks at him she thinks there might be the seed of something like that growing inside of him too. Yes, it’s weak and there’s almost no sunlight, no nourishment because he’s dark and cold and sometimes it’s easy to think he has no soul, but it’s there. And she can nurture it, she can save it.

She touches his face again, runs a thumb along his lips and then leans in and kisses his cheek.

“It’s not Claire,” she says.

She’s not sure if she even needs to say it but they don’t lie. They don’t.

He nods, suddenly sober.

“Yeah.” He says. “I know it’s not.”

I know.
She reads to him later. He asks her to and he lies on the bed with his head in her lap, Pickle asleep on his belly, and listens to her rattle of the day’s headlines. There’s not much going on for a Thursday: some ship sank off the coast and a magician with a dancing dog looks set to win *America’s Got Talent*. Smirnov is throwing another shindig for the Hell’s Kitchen elite, whoever the fuck that might be, and some *Days of our Lives* star has been arrested for cocaine possession. All in all, it’s a slow news day, not really worth the read, but she likes the feel of Frank against her, the way he’s holding her wrist and drawing abstract patterns on her forearm so she drags it out as long as she can. But, when she gets to the latest rift in the Kardashian family, he all but begs her to stop and she laughs and runs her fingers through his hair.

“Don’t you want to know what Kanye said about Khloe’s thighs?” she asks and he glares at her in a way which tells her he has a lot of opinions about this and none of them have anything to do with Khloe’s legs, nor Mr West’s feelings on them.

She shrugs, sets her phone down. “Guess that’s it then. If you don’t care about Khloe’s thighs then I don’t know what to tell you. May as well pack it in.”

She gets a half smile.

“Read something else,” he glances at the bedside table. “Read that.”

It’s not contrived, or manipulated. It can’t be, but when she follows his gaze and it settles on the blue book of Bukowski poems that Matt gave her it feels like one of those moments when fate decided to step in and tweak the world to its design. The same cruel bitch of a universe that made Frank what he is and then sent him weak and bloodied and ready to die to her door is up to her cruel tricks again, stick her fucking nose in where it doesn’t belong.

And the irony, the great irony of it all, is that Karen Page: *intrepid reporter, lover of vigilantes and holder back of tears under extreme duress*, isn’t even sure if she does believe in fate. If, at the end of the day, all her ranting at the universe is just an excuse not to take control and responsibility. Not to accept that we’re all alone on a little blue dot zooming through an endlessly dark universe with no direction or destination in mind.

“Karen?” he asks, moving slightly so he can take her hand out of his hair and put it on his chest.

“Yeah, sure,” she says. Sure, why not take a collection of angry Bukowski nonsense given to you by one suitor and read it to another? That’s not a thing right? Not against the rules or something?
And no, he’s not her boyfriend. Neither of them are. And she hasn’t really thought about Matt since she opened the book, hasn’t spoken to him since that one phone call when Frank lay sleeping and bloodied in her bed. There’s just been too much going on and she really doesn’t want him sniffing around while Frank is here anyway. Again, not for any nefarious reason about keeping him hanging on in the hope that one day his affections will be returned, but more because he’s Matt and if he knows where Frank is he’s going to start hounding him to “do the right thing” and “give himself up” and that’s a shit show she does not want to see go down in her living room. Or anywhere else for that matter.

“Karen?” Frank asks again and she looks down at him, snaps out of it.

This she can do. This is just reading. It’s simple.

She reaches for the book, opens it on a random page and when she glances at him, he nods.

It’s tough going. Bukowski often is. There are moments though, moments of flashing insight and beautiful prose that cut hard and sharp but they are few and far between the maudlin rambles, the bitterness, the heavy drinking and crudeness in the name of “telling it like it is”. She can see Frank frowning more and more as she reads, pursing his lips as if he can’t quite figure out why someone would commit pen to paper over this. At the same time she can see he doesn’t want her to stop, that maybe lying here with her, holding her hand over his racing heart so that she has to struggle to turn the pages, is more important to him than freeing himself of poetry he doesn’t quite get and is not sure he wants to.

And it’s so silly because she will stay. She said she would.

She doesn’t need excuses.

It’s a poem entitled This Then from Love is a Dog from Hell that eventually puts an end to it.

She starts reading:
She stops. The next line is

“here's a cock
and here's a cunt
and here's trouble.”

And she's not a prude, she isn't. But she can't sit here reading about cunts and cocks to Frank Castle. It's just too much. It's overkill and she wonders again why Matt thought this gift made sense.

“I'm sorry,” she says. “This is X-rated and I don't think Pickle is old enough to hear it.”

Frank quirks an eyebrow, reaches up and pulls the book out of her hands, scans the page and when he sees it, he snaps the covers shut and tosses it to the end of the bed.

“Why did you buy that crap?”

“It was a gift.”

“For killing someone’s goldfish? Did you tell someone their baby was ugly?”

She laughs.

Fingers back in his hair, his hand trailing down her arm gently. “No, my birthday.”

He goes still, another frown, brows knitting.

“It was your birthday?” Voice gentle, tentative.
She nods. It’s not a big thing but she thinks he’s going to make it into one.

“When?”

Thumb across the line of his cheekbone, stubble rough against her skin.

“Last Friday.”

He takes a second and she can see him counting off the days in his head, thinking back to that night that seems like it was a million years ago and like they’ve climbed mountains and crossed oceans in between.

He swears under his breath as he pushes himself up, Pickle grumbling as he moves her off his belly and onto the pillow.

“It’s okay Frank.”

“No,” he shakes his head, turns to look at her. “That’s fucking awful.”

“Frank…”

“I don’t even remember most of that night,” he says.

Truth is neither does she. There are moments that stand out: finding him outside, getting him upstairs, calling Claire. His blood circling the drain, his hand in her hair and the way he breathed her in. The way his grip was weak, lax, and didn’t feel like him at all.

“It’s okay,” she says and he’s looking at her like he’s trying to catch her out in a lie. “It wasn’t a big birthday-”

“Sure it was.”
She eyes him for a moment. He still hasn’t bothered with a shirt and not for the first time she feels a pang of regret at managing to keep her head earlier, at not undressing the rest of him and climbing him like a fucking tree. She could be naked now, she realises, naked and satiated and tasting his skin.

“It really wasn’t.”

He shakes his head in a way that tells her he doesn’t think she’ll get this and he doesn’t want to waste time arguing with her about it. And suddenly she realises that her far-fetched and wholly ridiculous thoughts about how he might one day romance her, how she might tap into that part of him and spend Christmas and Thanksgiving and birthdays with him may not be so far-fetched or ridiculous at all.

He’s Frank. He’s batshit crazy and mean as fuck, but he’s also a family man. He’s the man who bought his son a remote-controlled jeep for his birthday and read his daughter a story every night. These things are meaningful to him. They matter.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“All I was going to do was eat a cake all by myself and watch bad TV,” she touches his face. “Instead I got you.”

“Not much of a consolation prize,” he says but he’s smiling too. “I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

“No need. I have what I want. It’s all good.”

And it is.

He studies her for a few long seconds before he ducks his head, lies down at her side, arm curling over her belly again.


She shrugs. It still changes precisely nothing.
Later, she tells him a secret.

The rain is still beating hard against the windows and the wind howls shrilly through the streets and she lies in her bed with him behind her, his arms engulfing her and fingers threaded through her own. They didn’t even discuss it, didn’t debate the bed or their relative claims to sleep in it. They just got in, moved close and held each other.

“You’re wrong,” she whispers.

His mood is still good and he grumbles dramatically behind her.

“I ain’t ever wrong about anything.”

She snorts and he does too.

“You are about this.”

More muttering.

“And what’s that?”

“I’m not really strong. Not at all,” she says and she feels him shift and push himself up so he can look at her, hand slipping out of hers and onto her bicep.

She turns slightly, cranes her neck so she can see him, the tight line of his jaw, the black eyes that look like holes in his head and she wonders how much of him that skull he wears has consumed, if they’re now one and the same. Indistinguishable.

But they’re not. Because he’s here and he’s kind and she’s found the goodness in him and so help
her, she will see it blossom, she will keep it safe.

He's quiet for a while and his gaze is hard, boring into her until she’s sure he’s found a way to crack her open and see her innermost thoughts, her heart.

“Bullshit.” He says eventually.

She smiles, shakes her head.

“I can be. I have my moments when I can do things I didn’t think I could. But those are just moments Frank. And maybe one day the moments will become something else, but they’re not now. When things hurt me, hurt me badly, I... I can’t let them go,” she tries not to think of Wesley’s twitching corpse, nor the number of rounds she emptied into him, but she does and she knows Frank sees it. “They carry on hurting and I don’t know how to make them stop.”

“That ain’t got nothing to do with strength,” he says and she loves him for his honesty, his goodness, his lack of artifice. “Ain’t about how much you hurt or if you hurt. It’s about what you do when it hurts.”

“I guess I just want you to know that I’m not someone anyone should be weak for.”

“That’s bullshit too.”

His fingers twitch on her.

“Not bullshit Frank. I told you yesterday, sometimes I barely get through the day without crumbling.”

“But you do.”

She shakes her head. “You don’t know how much I cry.”

He stares at her again for a long while, brow furrowed and eyes searching hers for something she's
not sure he’ll find. “You say that like you think it matters.”

“Maybe it does.”

He shrugs, presses his mouth against her shoulder. “Maybe it doesn’t. Either way it don’t mean you ain’t strong.”

He settles behind her, tugs her in close until her back is flush with his belly, and she can feel his cock, hard and throbbing, against her.

Not inconsequential, not anymore.

The big, bad Punisher in her bed. Karen Page right there with him. Neither of them going anywhere, neither of them wanting to.

But she’s here. She’s safe.

And she will stay.

Chapter End Notes

Bukowski poem is called *This Then*
Say a prayer that we might find our happy ending

Chapter Notes

So first thing’s first. I’ve decided to change the format of this slightly. Initially when I made this a series I thought I would divide the story into parts that obviously needed to be read in order but would be split up. Now I just think that is going to be confusing. Hence, from now on this story is always going to update to this fic. There’s a chance there will be one more part towards the end of the story because I am going to need Frank’s point of view but that is a while away and Frank has yet to tell me how he would like to handle that so I guess I just have to wait and see. For now Be My Saviour and I’ll Be Your Downfall is going to continue indefinitely until we are done.

Then, apologies for the long break, I was writing my Christmas Kastle Exchange Fic Love Me Back To Life, and I was on holiday. I am hoping to update a little faster than I have been and apologise for my slowness. I’m not the world’s fastest writer at the best of times, but I do have a full-time job and often the only time I get to write is on the train in the mornings and afternoon. Basically, if you have read something by me, there is a 90% chance it was mostly written on my damn phone on the tube.

And that’s it. I hope you enjoy this - I’m very excited for the next few chapters and can’t wait to share them with you.

Title is from I Am by Bon Jovi - yes, shoot me, but that song is really really appropriate for this chapter. So much so, I would recommend listening to it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday.

She calls a cab to take her to work and Frank insists on paying for it. He tells her she’d have her car if it wasn’t for him and he’ll be damned if she’s got to take the bus or walk through the rain because he couldn’t keep his ass in one place.

She tells him not to be so hard on himself but she also doesn’t refuse him. She does however turn down his offer to drive her back to the graveyard to pick up her car. And she can see something akin to relief on his face when she does. He shouldn’t be driving, he really shouldn’t. Even with his apparent progress and the fact that it looks very likely he’ll be back to his old self within a day or two, he shouldn’t be doing anything that puts too much stress on his body. But that's not really the crux of the problem. He's faced worse than a few stab wounds and some torn stitches and he'll overcome those too. No, it's that she’s pretty sure that the graveyard is the last place he needs to be right now. It’s still too real and too raw and while he seems less likely to become overwhelmed and consumed by everything again, she doesn’t really want to test fate just yet.
So she sits on the bed in the strange morning half light, holding his hands, coffee turning cold on the bedside table, and tells him to take it easy. She’ll take another cab to fetch her car after she’s finished at work - yes he can pay for that too - and then she’s coming home. They’ll order Thai or Vietnamese and she’ll figure out how she’s going to sleep with him for the next however long and not go out of her head with the deep-seated ache that’s now made its home between her legs.

She doesn’t say the last part, but it’s a pretty serious consideration and one that she thinks he’s equally concerned about.

It’s funny though. She wants him, she knows she does. And he wants her too. They’ve stopped pretending, because pretending feels almost like lying and they don’t lie. But, at the same time, the desire she feels seems to be something she’s happy to savour. Every touch, every shiver, every gentle kiss that just misses her mouth or lingers feels precious, like the thing they’re building up to is just as important as the journey to get there.

And maybe it is. There's no reason to rush and every reason not to. For both of them.

He's not ready. And, in her own way which is completely different from his, she isn't either.

“You be safe Karen,” he tells her. “Rain like this, it makes people do weird shit.”

He’s right. It does. But she’s not worried about other people, she’s worried about him.

She leans in, presses her lips to his cheek, stays like that a moment too long and doesn’t miss how he closes his eyes and his fingers grip tight against her wrist.

“You get some rest,” she says.

“All I damn well do is rest.”

“Then do it better than you have been.”

He huffs but doesn’t say anything and when she pulls back and makes to leave, he touches her jaw with his knuckles. It’s a small thing, tiny even, but it seems it’s become one of his things. The same
way “ma’am” was until they both realised he needed to move on from it. The same way “don’t you know” is and they’ll never leave that behind no matter how hard the situation calls for its absence.

“Frank, I have to go.” She’s already late and she doesn’t want the cab to sit outside and wait for too long. Irene is already as suspicious as fuck and she doesn’t want to give the damned woman more cause for concern although she really doesn’t know why she cares.

He nods, hand dropping into his lap, but he’s looking at her like he has half a mind to pull her back, hold her prisoner and whisk her away to a place where things like jobs and responsibilities and general adulting are nothing but vaguely unpleasant memories that no one spends any time thinking about.

And given the choice she just might go. She just might.

She stands, and immediately Pickle moves into her place so that her furry little body is pressed against Frank’s hip and her paws rest on his skin.

Hazard fluff indeed.

She touches Pickle’s head, grabs her purse and goes to the door. And she knows he’s going to call her even before she puts her hand on the doorknob. And maybe she should worry because the last time he did this he went missing and she spent hours looking for him, only to find a beast in his place. But it’s different now.

*They’re* different now.

“Karen,” his voice is low but there’s a cheerfulness to it, a kind of warmth he seems to reserve only for her. “What flavour was it?”

She frowns at him and he hurries to continue.

“The cake,” he says. “The one you were going to eat all by yourself.”

Oh *that*. Again it seems so long ago.
“Ginger and chocolate with a gingersnap frosting. Has to have the frosting or else it isn’t right.”

He gives her that crooked smile before looking away, hooking his fingers around Pickle’s tail and earning himself a half-hearted warning growl for his trouble. He’s biting at his bottom lip hard and she realises there’s something in this conversation that’s seemingly both entertaining and a little painful for him. And, not for the first time, it amuses her how well she can read him; how she’s come to love his face and all the stories it tells her.

So she watches him, waits for him to reveal his secrets.

“Gingersnaps eh?” he says glancing back up at her. “You were gonna eat it in the broom closet? Pretend you were in a spaceship?”

For a second she’s surprised he remembers. He was in such a bad way when she told him that. Not just bloodied and beaten, a fucking hole drilled in his foot and eyes so badly swollen she doesn’t know how much he could see out of them, but completely overwhelmed too. And then he still relived everything that happened, walked her through his home and his life and explained the truths of it to her.

So no, he shouldn’t remember inconsequential details of her childhood fantasies, but then again he’s Frank, and she thinks she’s starting to gauge the reality of him too. It’s not like Matt. It’s not that you can’t hide things from him because he’ll smell it on you or hear it in the way your blood pumps through your veins, taste your lies in the air. It’s that Frank’s mind works differently. It’s efficient and complex and analytical, constantly searching for solutions to problems; finding connections and information where other people wouldn’t even bother to look. She thinks if she got a peek inside, it would be perfectly organised, everything labeled and categorised so that he can pull it up at a second’s notice. He has lists too. She’s pretty damn sure of it now.

She grins at him. “Yeah. I’d have let you join me but you were bleeding all over my floor and it would have been a tight fit anyway.”

He barks out a laugh. “Excuses, excuses. You just didn’t want to share.”

She shrugs, fixes him with as serious a look as she can. “You don’t share gingersnaps with just anyone.”
He smiles. “And here I was kinda hoping I wasn’t just anyone.”

“Yeah, but we are talking about gingersnaps Frank.”

He laughs again and she can’t help herself when she does too. And it feels so good just to laugh with him. To forget all the bullshit, all the stuff that should keep them apart and wary of one another.

“I have to go Frank.”

She can see he wishes she wouldn’t - that she could stay and spend the day with him again, snuggled up together under the duvet and letting the world outside fuck itself over in any which way it pleases. She doesn’t have that luxury though.

And in a while, neither will he.

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Ellison’s in some meeting with the board when she gets in, so her still righteous fury needs to be put on hold until he’s done.

And that could be a while, Joe tells her as she walks to her office with him on her heels, it was an emergency meeting called yesterday and Ellison was none too pleased about it.

She finds this mildly interesting. Mildly disconcerting too. The paper is not doing too badly. Ad revenue is up and so are subscriptions. Off-the-shelf sales have suffered some attrition but nothing below normal. But when the board gets involved things tend to go downhill. Ellison’s confided to her that they will literally rather do anything than try and solve the actual problems which are understaffing and an absence of marketing drives. She gets it. These things are boring - they’re not tangible while flashy new websites and redesigns are. But they’re still the heart of the issue, and she feels a pang of sympathy for Ellison as she thinks of him sitting in that meeting trying to explain basic stuff like why the paper needs a picture editor, or how the website does not need a section for people to submit their cat pictures.

“You okay today?” asks Joe as she unlocks her office.
“Yeah, I was just a little under the weather.”

“I was right about the rain,” he says slightly smugly as he glances to her window and the black clouds outside.

“You were,” she agrees.

“Did you get caught in it? On Wednesday?”

“A little,” she says mildly.

“I hope it wasn't too bad.”

She wants to laugh. No, no it wasn't too bad. I listened to the man I love say vile things to me and then watched him fall apart over his dead wife and children. I hurt him and he hurt me back and then I held him while the rage bled out of him. And afterwards I took him home and we made love without even really touching.

It sounds very dramatic in her head and she knows it would sound worse if she actually heard the words spoken, but it's the truth.

She sits down, opens her laptop and looks pointedly at Joe who’s lingering now and making no move to get back to his desk. “Haven't you got some weather to make up?”

He makes a choked sound in the back of his throat, clutches his heart theatrically. “It's like you don't appreciate what I do at all.”

She smiles. Whatever her personal feelings on weathermen and -women and their fast and loose relationship with the truth, Joe is a good guy. Decent and sweet and some lady somewhere will be really lucky to have him. And for a moment she feels that pang in her heart, that longing for the ordinary Karen Page who'd live an ordinary life.

But, she thinks again, if Matt was talking to another Karen Page when he did his Big Reveal, then the Karen that wants ordinary to be the defining factor of her existence is so far away from who she
is now she can barely picture her anymore.

The Punisher sleeps in her bed and she happily sleeps there with him. She loves him, she wants to be with him, she wants to fuck him. And even though she knows that at heart these are normal desires, there's hardly anything ordinary about it at all.

He's a mass murderer. Nothing is going to change that. No amount of pointing out that he's also a good man makes the slightest bit of difference. And there's a big scary part of her that doesn't care.

Joe says something about needing to get back to his desk to call the meteorology department because, contrary to popular belief, his job does entail more than looking out the window. He says he’ll catch her at lunch and she nods and opens her laptop, checks her email to see if she's missed anything important.

Luckily, there's not much other than a reminder to sign up for dental, a few responses to interview requests, and a message from Ellison with a link to the paper’s sabbatical benefits ... because he won't let this book thing go and apparently he's now started the carrot part of his pitch.

For interest’s sake she skims it and, if she’s honest, she likes what she sees. The time given for writing depends on the projected size of the book as well as potential sales. The advance is worked out as a percentage of yearly salary with the remainder paid once the book has gone to press. Ellison has even said that, as this is a special case, he's happy for her to continue writing for The Bulletin during that time on a contractual basis, meaning she can still make up her salary on freelancing fees. The truth is though, with the advance and writing one or two articles per week at their standard rate, she could easily end up making more than she is now. Considerably more.

She can’t deny it, it really is a good offer … if she was in any way inclined to take him up on it. But she's not so she closes the email and gets on with catching up on some work.

And to her surprise it goes well. She’s a little slow and her prose feels awkward but on the whole she feels like she covers a lot of ground and she doesn’t think about the half-naked Punisher in her bed and how all she wants to do is go back home and climb in there with him. She doesn’t.

She manages to schedule some interviews for the following week and sub some late copy from one of the entertainment writers. It isn't her job but the copy editors are swamped and likely to throw a fit over stylesheet errors, so she helps out anyway.
She grabs lunch from the office canteen - some kind of cheese pasta thing that Joe affectionately describes as a “bowl of cardiac arrest” - and takes it to her desk, But it’s entirely too tasteless to risk a heart attack for and she ends up throwing most of it away.

Outside the rain continues to fall by the bucketload and thunder rumbles ominously in the distance and it really is the dreariest Friday in the whole world. She accepts that this is better than the stifling heat and the air too thick to breathe from the previous few days, but not by much.

It's Foggy that brings a little sunshine to her afternoon.

She's halfway through transcribing an interview with a woman who runs a homeless shelter on the outskirts of Hell's Kitchen when her phone rings and his face pops up on the screen. She takes a second to grin at his picture before answering - his hair is a mess and he's sticking out his tongue and she remembers he was attempting to do an impression of Gene Simmons sans the makeup. It was one of those nights when they drank too much and ate too little and spent too much time hoping Matt would show up until they ended up at a karaoke bar in Brooklyn where they did shots and Foggy decided he had a career in a metal band.

_I got it going on Karen, I have the hair and everything_, he told her, _I'm a natural._

She told him he was. That she'd be his manager and they'd sell out across the world.

It was a good night. A night that seems all too far away now.

She answers and he skips all formalities and launches right in.

“My guess is that since you haven't called a national emergency, you found your runaway and he's been soundly thrashed?”

She chuckles. “Yeah I did. He's home.”

“And the thrashing?”

“Left that up to Claire.”
“Nurse Temple is always happy to do the dirty work,” he pauses and she can hear traffic in the background, wonders if he’s driving. “That's the thing about stray dogs though. They need a firm hand. You gotta show them who's boss.”

She laughs again. “Yeah sure Foggy. I'm the boss of Frank Castle.”

“Jesus fucking Christ Karen, I don't need those kind of details.”

She rolls her eyes, shakes her head.

“Is he okay though? He's still my client so I should show some concern.”

She sighs. “About as okay as Frank Castle gets. It’s all relative you know.”

She hears him grunt. “Ain’t that the truth.”

She asks about Marci who’s apparently fine but going to be working late a lot as she has a big case coming up. Foggy grumbles a little that she’s more concerned about missing out on spending time with Luna than she is about not seeing him.

“It’s surprising how attached you can become to devil spawn,” Foggy says in a voice so defeated that she knows he’s been won over by Luna and her slobbery charm.

“We’re used to it though,” she says. “Friends with Matt and all.”

He's quiet for a few seconds and then she gets a grudging “Touche Karen Page. Touche.”

He pauses and when he speaks again he sounds more serious than before. “Speaking of Matt - and that's not the reason I called - he’s been asking about you… and also about why I smell like I have a dog but that's neither here nor there. Seems quite worried but doesn’t want to go and check on you himself. Says you wouldn’t like that.”
She can hear the hint of trepidation in his voice. Foggy is wonderful and loyal and everything a friend should be, which is why he's not entirely wrong when he claims he feels like a child of divorce. He holds his own though. She knows he does and he's more than capable of telling both her and Matt when to fuck off.

“I'm assuming he doesn't know you and Frank have shacked up?”

“It's hardly shacking up Foggy.”

“Sure sure Karen. Born at night and all that…”

“He’ll be out of there as soon as he's well again.”

Foggy makes a sound like he's never heard anything more ridiculous in his whole life.

“Look, talk to him, don’t talk to him. I don’t have a dog in this fight and I’m not going to tell him anything. Not because I particularly like keeping secrets from him but because this isn’t any of his business. But Karen, Matt’s smart and he knows things and you know as well as I do that if you and Frank become a thing, or are a thing, or whatever, then Matt will find out.”

He’s right. He’s so so right. But at the same time he’s also right that it’s none of Matt’s business. She doesn’t need to explain or justify herself to him. And frankly, she’s tired of the pressure to do so. They were a one-time thing and it was sweet and it was romantic and maybe it could have worked out if not for everything that came after. And maybe it’s even a little sad that it didn’t and that they never got the chance to explore who they were when they were with each other. But it is what it is and the time has passed. And Matthew Murdock is just going to have to find a way to deal with that.

“I know,” she says and when he’s quiet on the other end of the line she takes it as an opportunity to carry on. “Things with Frank aren’t straightforward though. The last thing I need is Matt getting involved.”

“Amen to that.”

She laughs.
“Anyway,” Foggy’s voice goes muffled for a few seconds and then comes back louder than before. “I know you got yourself a man friend who would probably put me on a meathook just for asking, but are you busy Wednesday?”

“What’s happening on Wednesday?”

“I’m stealing you and we’re going to an undisclosed location where I can have you all for myself.”

“Done,” she says and he snorts.

“Seriously though, I happen to have an invite to Smirnov’s latest fuck-off party and I thought you’d like to go. It’ll probably be the last one as the word at the water cooler is that we are ending our contract with them,” he sighs and she can hear car horns blaring in the background. “Full disclosure though, I’ve seen the guest list and Elektra Natchios is on there with a plus one. I’ll give you three guesses as to who my money is on for the plus one, the first two don’t count.”

She smiles, Foggy is sweet and the best friend she could ever hope for but he doesn’t need to treat her like glass.

“That’s okay,” she says. “I’ll put my big girl panties on.”

“Yeah well hopefully Matt will too,” he responds dryly.

“How chic do I need to be?”

“Chic as fuck,” He deadpans. “You’re going to be on my arm remember. I expect you to look out for my reputation.”

She chuckles and he does too before he suddenly breaks out into a string of curses. “Listen Karen, I have to go. There’s an overturned bus on seventh and the traffic is insane but we can chat later?”

“Sure, I’ll give you a call.”
She says goodbye and hangs up, stares at her phone for a few minutes, the bright screen slowly fading and eventually switching off.

Ellison will freak if he hears she’s going to the party but she doesn’t much care. He can stick his head in the sand about this all he wants but that doesn’t mean she is going to. Besides it’s on her own time and she’s not attending in any official capacity other than a plus one. But she can hear him already in the back of her head, his voice getting that slightly whingy tone as he goes through the list of good things Smirnov has done for the city. He’ll start with the improvement of the theatre and go from there like he always does. The theatre, then the sports field on 17th and finally the town hall on 5th. And when she pushes him or objects, he’ll go for the play centre near the river and soup kitchen next to the flea market. It’s always the same.

But then she’s not feeling particularly warm towards Mitchell “Gutter Journalism” Ellison right now, so she’s not exactly in a sharing mood regarding her extra-curricular activities.

And then as if by magic - or because he’s been summoned by a demonic incantation to bring forth the denizens of Hell - he’s standing at her door. And he’s leaning again. And he’s still more out than in.

“You feeling better Page?” he asks and he sounds like he’s been beaten into the ground and trying to put on a brave face. And for a second, she feels bad about how annoyed she is with him. The board is never pleasant and he looks like he’s run the gauntlet.

“Yeah,” she says.

He nods, glances back at the rest of the floor and leans in again. “You get my email?”

She sighs.

“Oh come on Karen,” and she can hear a hint of genuine frustration in his tone. “It’s a great deal. And don’t you give me that bullshit about not knowing who Daredevil is and how he won’t talk to you. You’re a crappy liar.”

She pushes her chair away from her desk, purses her lips and looks him in the eye. “Mitchell, it doesn’t matter whether I know Daredevil or not. It doesn’t matter whether he will speak to me or not. The fact is that I don’t want to do it.”
He glares back, chewing on the inside of his cheek and she can almost see the synapses firing in his brain as he tries to figure out a way to bully her into this.

“Is it the money?” he asks. “Because we can talk about that.”

It’s not the money, good as it may be. In fact, the money is the one thing that actually makes this deal tempting and gives her pause. It’s good enough that it could make her income go from survivable to decent. She could take a holiday, start a hobby. Hell, she could even move onto bigger and better watering holes than Josie’s and that’s saying something. No, the real problem is Matt and not because she thinks he won’t be on board with this. He’d probably love to tell his story and love it even more if she’s the one to write it for him. That isn’t the issue. The issue is that basically she’s just not really ready to deal with spending that amount of time with him again. The thought of days and days of interviews and talking and getting to know him on a level that she would have never gotten to know him as a girlfriend or a lover just seems wrong somehow. Out of step. Backwards. And the truth is, it frightens her and she doesn’t really know why.

“Nothing to do with money.”

“Come on Karen,” and she can see he’s at the end of his patience and she wonders just how bad the board meeting was. “Everyone has a price.”

“Well you certainly do.”

It’s not how she meant to bring it up. She really didn’t and she has to fight the urge to clap her hand over her mouth as soon as it’s out, but she doesn’t. It was bound to happen between Ellison’s pushing and wheedling and now that it’s on the table they may as well deal with it.

He stares at her for a few long seconds and then finally commits to the inside of her office and shuts the door behind him with a loud thunk.

“You got something you want to say to me?”

He doesn’t exactly sound angry, not yet at least. But he sounds like he’s preparing for it, getting himself there, his body busy gearing up. He’s itching for a fight she realises and she wonders just how badly the board meeting went. And then she wonders just how much she’s itching for it too.
She takes a breath, closes her eyes briefly. She won’t let this get out of hand. She won’t. As much as it pisses her off, she needs this gig ... and Ellison is good to her most of the time. And she should let this go. It was only a few inches of column space and it’s not like they’re giving the New York Post any competition in the sensationalist stakes. But then Frank Castle sleeps in her bed with her and tells her he loves her and she loves him too.

And Karen Page has never been good with “shoulds”.

She tosses Wednesday’s edition across her desk and Ellison adjusts his glasses, picks it up.

He sees it and when he does, he huffs, pinches the bridge of his nose and puts the paper down again.

“She shoulda known,” he says. “Frank Castle always gets your damn panties in a twist.”

“Mitchell-”

“For fuck’s sake Karen... He. Is. A. Murderer,” louder now, more force behind it. “I know there’s some anguished man pain revenge fantasy going on there and that makes it sexy or something, but the man is a murderer.”

Apparently Frank isn’t the only person in her life who doesn’t fight fair.

More than anything this last week she’s learnt that the truth cuts far deeper than any lies people tell themselves or each other. And Ellison is right. Frank is a murderer. And that changes nothing about how angry the article made her.

“I thought we were better than this,” she says. “It’s bullshit clickbait and you know it.”

“Yeah? Of course I know it Page. I just spent six hours in a fucking board meeting trying to explain that we don’t give more coverage to the Illuminati or that guy in Michigan who thinks he saw Jesus in a cauliflower because it’s all bullshit. And when that didn’t work I had to explain what the point of news coverage is and why we can’t use the website for people’s personal blogs. And then I had to hear that Monday’s issue didn’t sell well because in that picture of Daredevil that we used on page three, the trees were too green and we should have made them less green. Apparently the fact that Paul got the print run wrong and only ordered half of what he should from the printers had nothing to do with sales. And he sat there smug as a fucking mob boss and denied he made the mistake even
though the fucking order sheet was there in black and white in front of him. So yeah, I know it’s clickbait. I know it’s dirty. I also know it’s what we have to do.”

Everything he says is true. Everything. But none of it is good enough.

“Frank Castle deserves better than this,” she says. “You can’t let me write about heroes and what they mean for a place like Hell’s Kitchen and then turn around and show him as a monster. It’s not fair.”

“Not fair?” he rolls his eyes, throws his hands up in what must be the most theatrical display of frustration she’s ever seen from him. “I thought you were smarter than this Karen. You can’t honestly think that fairness comes into anything we do?”

“It’s just-”

“No. It’s not just anything. Do you think it’s fair that we shove cameras in mothers’ faces when their children die? Do you think it’s fair that last week Joan in repro sat with a picture of a 19-year-old model for four hours to make her - and I quote ‘more booby and less hippy’? Hell, do you think it’s fair that our entertainment page leads with the latest Kardashian scandal pretty much every day?” He stops, looks at her like he’s seeing her for the first time and he’s none too pleased about what he’s finding. “Jesus Christ, if you want fair go and work for the fucking Peace Corps or save puppies or something.”

“All I’m saying is that we don’t need to do unnecessary shit that makes the world less fair than it already is.”

Ellison snorts, shakes his head like he literally can’t believe what he’s hearing. And maybe he can’t. Maybe this game really does taint you after you’ve done it for a few years.

“Let’s cut the bullshit Page. You’re not going to come in here bitching at me the next time I run a piece on Fisk and whatever agony I can dig up from his past. Hell, I could probably run an expose on his ex lovers talking about the size of his dick and you wouldn’t blink an eye. This has got nothing to do with integrity. This is all about Frank Castle. We wouldn’t be having this conversation if it wasn’t for him.”

He’s mostly right. And it hurts that he is, even though it’s not all about Frank. It’s about her too. It’s about how he’s letting the paper flip flop on its stance towards the Punisher. A stance she created
when she wrote her first piece. And for some reason that kills her a little bit and she can’t let it go.

“It’s not about Frank Castle, it’s-”

“Bullcrap. It is all about him. Did he put you up to this? Send you in to do his dirty work?”

For a second the question floors her and she has no idea what to say. It’s ludicrous and even Ellison has to know that Frank wouldn’t waste his time worrying about what some medium-level paper thinks of him. Even so, all she can do is stammer out a few garbled words about how this is her own personal issue which has nothing to do with Frank and give Ellison an exasperated look. And there’s something on his face that tells her she’s fallen into a trap, that even in his anger he’s manipulated the situation so he can get something out of it and she has no idea what it is that she’s just given up.

But apparently he files that away for later and carries on.

“The fact is Karen that I have been really patient with you. I put up with a lot of your crap and I give you opportunities that I wouldn’t give to anyone else. You sneer at this book deal but do you have any idea how big it could be? Today it's Daredevil, tomorrow it's that guy who’s bulletproof or that little detective round the corner. And then we move into the big leagues. Imagine if we could get an exclusive with Tony Stark? Just imagine…”

There’s a moment he almost sounds wistful and she hates that they’re conflating these arguments now, that Frank Castle and her career prospects seem to have become one and the same thing. But then Ellison seemingly collects himself along with his righteous indignation, and starts all over again.

“There are twenty other journalists sitting outside that would jump at the book deal I’ve offered-”

“Ask one of them then.”

He gives her a sour look.

“You know full well none of them have the contacts you do, that Daredevil would never speak to any one of them. But all that aside, I’ve let you run with this Smirnov obsession, I’ve let you paint Frank Castle as a sweet and cuddly pussycat that only uses his claws when he has to. I give you a hell of a lot of leeway and all I ask is that you don’t tell me how to run my damn paper. I get enough of that shit from the top, I don’t need it to come from underneath too.”
He makes sense and she wishes he didn’t. Regardless she can’t just let it drop.

“I just thought we wanted to be something better, that we could be the paper that doesn’t need to rely on cheap tricks and sensationalism to be read, that we could have more integrity than that.”

And that’s when she realises she’s overstepped the mark. Ellison is a lot of things: stubborn, acerbic, petulant. But he’s also proud and she’s just taken a knife to that.

“Integrity?” his voice wavers and she can hear him trying to bite back the anger and failing miserably. And she knows whatever is coming next isn’t going to be something she likes. It probably won’t be something he likes either. But he works with words and he’s been doing it a hell of a lot longer than she has and he knows how to hurt with them.

“You want to lecture me about integrity? You really want to do that? Because the only reason we are having this conversation about a few square inches of column space has fuck all to do with integrity and everything to do with that goddamn lady boner you’ve been nursing for Frank Castle since the day you decided being shot at by a psychopath got you hot.”

He spits out the last word like it tastes bad in his mouth, like he’s been chewing on it too long and suddenly realises he doesn’t like it at all and wishes he’d never started. But it’s too late and she can see by the look on his face that he knows it. He crossed a line and she’s not sure there’s a way back.

For a good few moments he just blinks at her, chest heaving and belly straining against those ill-fitting pants, which make him look awkward and bigger than he is. She stares back. Again it’s amateur hour and she doesn’t scare easily. Not when her last argument involved a man who has killed people by the dozen and who could have broken her in half if he felt so inclined. And she won’t back down, she won’t give him the satisfaction of letting him see he’s got to her, even though he has.

And God, he really has.

It seems like it’s hours before he speaks and, in that time, even the storm outside has decided to stop and wait it out until it’s safe to breathe again.

“Karen, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that,” his voice is soft and he sounds a little shocked. “That was … I’m sorry, that was uncalled for.”
She doesn’t say anything, just watches him from behind her desk. He glances out of the window, takes a breath, looks a little bewildered.

“Look,” he says, pinching the bridge of his nose again. “Why don’t you take the afternoon? We can talk about this on Monday when you’re really better and my settings have been changed from insufferable dick to just insufferable.”

“Is that what we do now Mitchell?” she asks. “The minute I say something you don’t like you send me home? What is that? Your idea of a reset?”

“Well maybe I could use a reset right now,” he says. “I’m sorry, that was terrible of me and I get that somewhere in all of this you do actually care about the integrity of this paper. I just don’t think either you or I are ready to talk about that yet, and we’re not going to get anywhere this afternoon.”

She looks at him for a long time, eyes hard and lips pursed and she realises that while he’s not exactly countering her and staring back, he’s left it up to her to do whatever she wants. He’s genuinely sorry. He’s also genuinely right. Crude but right. This is more about Frank Castle and less about integrity even if they do dovetail together quite nicely.

She stands, closes her laptop, tries to ignore the taut silence and how loud it is in her ears as she grabs her purse.

“Page,” he says as she gets to her door. “You need to work on your game face. Not only are you a crappy liar, you can’t keep secrets for shit.”

His voice is firm but not unkind and she turns to look at him, cocks her head, waits for his explanation.

“You just told me Frank Castle is still alive and that you know where he is,” he leans back on her desk, tugs at his shirt. “I suspected it, but you just confirmed it. Didn’t even take much.”

She doesn’t have anything to say to that so she just gives him a hard look before turning on her heel and leaving, letting her office door slam behind her and paying no attention to Joe’s curious looks as she punches the number for the cab company into her phone and heads for the lifts.
She doesn’t cry and that’s a win. After all, one of her titles isn’t “Holder Back of Tears Under Extreme Duress” for nothing. But jokes aside, she doesn’t feel the need to cry over Ellison. She’s had what she could easily describe as two of the toughest years of her life, give or take. Between being kidnapped twice, killing a man, being taken hostage, being shot at by a vigilante and then being saved by that same vigilante when someone else shot at her and then falling in love with said vigilante, she’s learnt that there are more important things to waste tears on than a crotchety old boss and their penchant for making people feel three feet tall. All in all it’s not worth it.

So no, sitting in the back of the cab heading towards the final resting place of Maria Castle and her children for the second time in as many days, she doesn't cry. But that doesn't mean that this doesn't sadden her, leave an uncomfortable feeling in her belly. Because despite his sharp tongue and his overall abrasiveness, Ellison has indeed been as good to her as he says he has. He respects her and she him, and he's served as a mentor to her over the past year and she doesn't want to lose that. Especially not for something that is - she has to admit - as inconsequential as this. Something Frank himself probably wouldn’t give a fuck about. He’s been given far worse treatment elsewhere, so much so that she doesn’t think he bothers to follow the news on himself anymore.

Even so, she's hurt and angry but mainly with herself for giving Ellison what he wanted regarding the general state of Frank Castle’s existence ... and then the pesky matter of him being at least somewhat right about the so-called “lady boner”. Because yes, that's part of it and she’s given up trying to deny that she’s wanted Frank since she imagined how he might have had her at the cabin.

But that’s not all. Frustration and desire aside, Frank Castle has managed to carve himself a place in her heart. And, for the first time in her entire life, it feels like there’s someone in the world who gets her, who understands. This isn’t a matter of taking her on and dealing with her baggage too. This is about finding a person who wants to know all of her, who will love her not despite the bad parts but because of them.

She closes her eyes and doesn’t flinch when the image of James Wesley’s twitching corpse appears in her head. It’s part of her now. Part of this new Karen Page and that’s okay. Not everything about her has to be pure and perfect. She can have some ugliness too, some darkness. She has as much right to it as the next person.

“You need me to wait?” The cabbie asks as he draws to a stop next to her car. He’s grizzly and old but his eyes are bright and friendly and she can’t help but give him a tight-lipped smile.

She glances out the window. There’s a forklift parked at the side of the road and she can see two men fixing the broken street light. They’re arguing and she imagines it’s got something to do with the weather even though the rain seems to have let up slightly for now. But then again the sky is grey
and she can see some darker clouds approaching from the east. It’s going to storm again and she’s not upset about that. Hell’s Kitchen needed to be clean. She needed it. And, more than all of them, Frank needed it.

She wonders what he’s doing, if he’s asleep or if he’s pacing her apartment like a restless animal. She hopes it’s the former although she strongly suspects the latter.

“No, thank you,” she says, grabbing her purse, groping for her wallet which somehow always ends up lost at the bottom.

“Nasty day to visit a graveyard,” the cabbie says inclining his head towards the open gate and a few people under black umbrellas heading towards their cars.

“I’m not staying.”

He grins. “Yeah, we’re all going to spend enough time in there anyway one day. No use jumping the gun.”

She nods as she hands him some money and he tells her to have a good day, to call if she does need a lift home. And then she’s out of the car and he’s gone and it’s just her and a few mourners standing outside the gates.

And suddenly she has to go in. She has. It wasn’t the plan. The plan was to come here, get her car and then go home. Tell Frank she’s got the rest of the afternoon off and they can do whatever they want with it. And she knows that means they’d probably order take-out and maybe even a bottle of wine now that he’s feeling better. And then they’d talk or they wouldn’t and maybe watch something bad on TV. He’d hold her hand and they’d touch one another in ways they shouldn’t and pull back at the last second and wait until the time is right. Because she knows it’ll only happen then. And she knows they’ll both know when that is.

But now she’s not doing that. Now she’s walking through the gates and along the neat little cobblestone paths, the rose bushes twitching under the weight of the drizzle and the cold wind making them sway. The ground is slippery and she walks slowly, hugging herself as she does. She’s not going to stay long. She thinks almost everything that needed to happen here already has, that there isn’t much more Maria could give her and truthfully, not much more that she wants either. She needs to figure out Frank Castle on her own, she doesn’t want anything to change that, to hasten the process. It needs to be earned and she is earning it. She has.
There’s a groundsman in a yellow raincoat tending to the plants and she wonders at his commitment to be out here in the cold wind when it’s a task that could easily wait for tomorrow. But he doesn’t seem to mind and she catches him whistling a little tune, which she almost recognises but can’t quite remember.

It'll come to her though. It's just a matter of time.

She doesn’t lose her way, although she suspects that if she needed it, she’d find a strong enough cellphone signal to pull up a map now. On Wednesday she had to find him herself, it was the only way. But today isn’t a trial. Today is different. Easier.

The graves look different in the daylight, weak and dim though it may be. They seem smaller somehow, less imposing. They aren’t tinged silver, they don’t shine or sparkle. The clouds make them look a flat slate grey ... except for the angel. If anything she looks even more ethereal, otherworldly, the marble gleaming like ivory despite the lack of sun. Her face is still beautiful and her wings delicate, outstretched like a guardian over her children. His children.

And Karen has to draw a breath, let it out slow and easy and then choke back a sob. This place is sacred but it’s also a place of great suffering, of misery. She can still see the indent in the mud of where they sat under the wings, where she held him and he told her he hated and loved her; told her to leave and asked her to stay and the warring parts of himself came together to create something new. Something neither of them know yet.

**It's going to be okay,** she tells herself, *it has to be*. She’s strong, she can handle this. It doesn’t have to hurt and she knows he doesn’t want it to either. But she also knows that just because something doesn’t have to be hard, doesn’t mean it won’t be.

She looks at the angel’s face again and somehow it seems sadder than before, the light rain collecting in the corners of her eyes and dripping down like tears.

**I’ll look after him,** she thinks, **I promise I will. I’ll do everything I can to keep him safe.**

She doesn’t know why she feels the need to do this again, to remake this promise. Maybe because on Wednesday it felt like she was making it to Maria, but now she has to make it to herself and Maria is there just to bear witness.

The wind howls and she wraps her arms around herself, shivers. She’s not dressed for this, not at all;
simple grey pencil skirt that breaks just below her scabbed knees, scoop neck black top and a matching cardigan. But she’s not going to be long. She wants to get home to him. She wants to be with him and feel his warmth and his strength. His love.

Because that’s what it is. Love. No use pretending otherwise.

She glances at the two small crosses on either side of the statue - Lisa to the left, Frank Jr to the right. Their graves are empty, no flowers, no toys and she wonders if they have anyone visiting here. Grandparents, uncles and aunts. Frank hasn’t mentioned family other than Maria so she doesn’t know if they are alive or estranged, or if, right now, they just think he’s dead. No matter though, Frank has enough love for all of them. They don’t need anything else.

Either way she touches them both, bows her head. She’s not religious and she doesn’t have words to say other than she’s sorry and she wishes the world wasn’t a place where somehow she’s here and she sleeps with their father and there’s nothing wrong with either of those things. She wishes it wasn’t so. But it is. And the world doesn’t work in hypotheticals. There isn’t a choice to be made here. There never was.

The rain is starting to come down harder again and she thinks they’re in for that downpour soon. Hell’s Kitchen has a lot of sins, and the heavens are going to need to work hard to finish washing the stains away. And she really should get going before it sets in but this is important somehow. Frank would tell her she was being stupid, standing out here in the middle of a graveyard in front of the tombstones of three people she never met. And maybe she is being stupid but it feels right. It’s such a big part of who and what he is and she thinks that everything she knows about him, all the big things - his rage, his pain, his capacity for both the cruellest violence and fiercest love, his gentleness - come from here. This is the source, his origin story, and if there’s something she knows, it’s that origin stories are always painful, they’re always dark and his might be the darkest yet.

She catches herself blinking back tears. She wants to go to him now, go to him and put her arms around him and hold him as tight as he holds her; listen to all the different ways he says he loves her and when that’s enough, all the ways he shows her too.

Don’t you know?

I know.

I know. I know. I know. I know. I know. I know. I know. I know. I know.
She turns to leave but as she does a weak ray of sunlight cuts briefly through the clouds and she sees something small and shiny glinting in the mud in front of Maria’s grave. She doesn’t have to wonder - she knows what it is. Remembers how she held him to her breast and he grabbed at it over and over again like a small child, until it broke off in his hand and he looked at her like he had no idea why. And then she was going to ask him for it but she didn’t because they were getting into the shower and he was holding onto her like she was the only thing left in the world he was allowed to hold onto. And nothing was more important than that.

But here it is and it’s twinkling at her like it knows something, like it’s just dying for her to ask and she closes her eyes, pushes the thoughts away.

She can’t keep thinking like this. She *can’t*. If she does she’s really going to need a list of Reasons Why Karen Page Is Off Her Head.

And it would be full in no time at all.

Regardless she ducks under the statue and grabs at the chain, twisting her hand so the pendant doesn’t fall back into the mud. The black rose is dirty but she wipes it off with some tissues from her purse and holds it out in front of her, watching as it spins lazily in the wind. It’s really pretty and only a few days ago, she would have been heartbroken over the thought of losing it. Not because it was expensive, not because it has any great significant sentimental value but because it was hers and it was beautiful and something a little excessive that she didn’t need a reason to keep. Today though it feels like different. Not lesser - not at all - just like it has a different purpose. No longer just something sparkly that she - crowlike - would steal and hide in her nest with all her other useless treasures. Because it isn’t useless. It means something. It means more than before.

She pulls the broken pieces of chain together and ties them in a sturdy double knot and moves to drape it through the angel’s outstretched fingers. It’s not perfect but it’ll do

“It’s a damn shame you know,” the voice comes from behind her and she turns to see the groundsman standing there, the hood of his raincoat pushed back to his shoulders and his white hair sticking out like candyfloss under his cap. He’s old, well into his seventies and she thinks that with a beard and a moustache he might look just like Santa Claus.

“It’s a tragedy when the Lord takes them so young. I know it’s not for us to wonder but sometimes you have to. Sometimes it seems wrong not to.”

She nods and follows his gaze to the angel’s face again, the gentle rainwater tears running down her cheeks.
“Did you know them?” he asks and she says no, adds something innocuous about being a friend of someone who did.

“Mother and two children… Their father went off the rails after,” he carries on and part of her wonders if he’s talking to himself more than to her, if he’s had so many thoughts about these three graves in the two years they’ve been here and now he sees her presence as an opportunity to voice them. “He lost himself, killed people.”

“The Punisher,” she says softly and he ducks his head but doesn’t look at her.

“Guess if you live anywhere near Hell’s Kitchen then you know the story. Can’t say I blame him. Others do, but when the world takes everything away from you, you gotta find some way to take it back. I don’t think we’re made to deal with that kind of loss. I don’t think the good Lord intends for us to.”

She’s quiet for a few minutes and then he tips his hat to her. “Have a good day ma’am. Graveyard’s gonna close in a couple of minutes.”

“I know,” she says. “I just wanted to leave this.”

She gestures at the necklace hanging between the angel’s fingers and the old man sighs.

“Ma’am that’ll be stolen before the day is done. I hate to say it but kids come in here at night and do heaven knows what on these grounds. Happened again just this week. Yesterday morning I arrived to see the side gate busted open. Luckily whoever that was didn’t leave any mess behind but that’s not always the case.”

She finds she doesn’t feel as guilty as she should. “I still want to leave it though.”

He huffs and she can see he’s thinking she’s crazy and that the dead don’t appreciate gifts or trinkets. But by his own words he didn’t see what happened to the living in this very spot two nights ago. He didn’t see how they fought back the darkness and found a way to keep going with each other. He thinks she wants to leave a gift for the dead but he can’t see that it’s actually a promise for those still alive.
“If I get my stepladder, you can hang it around her neck,” he says. “It will get stolen eventually but it’ll be harder to get to and less noticeable.”

She smiles. “Yeah sure, that sounds great.”

So he fetches the ladder and he holds it steady while she climbs the three steps to the top in her heels and fixes the rose over the angel’s head, adjusts it so that it hangs between her breasts before moving back down to the ground.

She thanks the old man and he smiles at her.

“You should get on home ma’am,” he says. “There’s another storm coming.”

As if to punctuate his words thunder rumbles in the distance and fat drops of rain fall heavily against her skin, seeping through her cardigan and into her blouse.

“Yeah,” she says. “I’m going. I just needed to do this.”

He stares at her for a few long seconds and then he grins. He’s not as toothy as she expected and there’s a warmth to him she hasn’t seen in anyone in a while.

“It’s all good and well caring for the dead,” he says cheerfully as he moves the stepladder back to the rose bushes. “But you have to care for yourself too.”

He’s right, even if his words have a slightly ominous edge to them. She says goodbye and he waves to her as she heads down the path towards the gate.

She doesn’t look back.

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Frank isn’t in bed when she arrives. Instead it's neatly made and Pickle is reclining in the middle of the pillows. She gives Karen a disinterested look and rolls onto her back, stretches.
He's in the kitchen, she can hear him messing with the coffee machine and she shakes her head. She wonders exactly how angry Claire would be if she knew even half the amount he consumes daily. But the man survived a bullet to the brain and multiple beatings, Karen doesn't think that he's going to be foiled with an excess of caffeine … or maybe he will. And the writer in her appreciates the delicious irony in that, if not the actual subject matter itself.

She says his name and isn’t surprised when her voice sounds husky and low, barely more than a whisper. But he hears her and the noise from the kitchen stops and a second later he's out in the bedroom, dressed in jeans and a plain black t-shirt and looking at her like she's pretty much the answer to every question he's asked in the last two years.

He's smiling too and it's genuine and infectious and he looks so damn proud of himself and godfuckingdamnit she just adores him and she just can't help it or make any excuses. She doesn’t want to.

But then he narrows his eyes, cocks his head and he’s looking at her like he sees everything.

“You okay?” he asks.

It's not a loaded question but it feels like it should be. With the exception of Ellison it hasn't truly been a horrible day but that weighs heavily on her mind. And then there's the graveyard and Maria and the fact that she's keeping a criminal in her apartment. It's exhausting. This whole week has been exhausting since the second she stepped out of her office and walked with Ellison to Josie’s. So much has happened, so much is different and for a second she's a little overwhelmed and she feels the threat of tears. But she holds them back. There's no reason for them.

She swallows.

“Yeah, just a long day is all.”

She can see he doesn’t really believe her and the concerned look on his face stays in place.

“What are you doing in there?” she asks.
He grins again and takes her hand, pulls her into the kitchen. It looks the same as before, silly bright curtains and tiles, more like something out of a 1970s sitcom than a modern no-frills working woman's home.

And then she sees the white cardboard box on the counter, some embossed writing on the top that she can't make out.

She clears her throat, looks at him.

“Coulda sworn I told you to rest when I left this morning.”

It comes out wrong, not nearly as stern as she hoped, but he’s still smiling like a kid in a candy store and again it hits her again how beautiful he is. In every way. Even the bad parts.

He may not be pretty like a picture. He’s not Matt with his boyish good looks and easy charm, but there’s something in those black eyes and that hard jaw, the way his mouth moves, that makes her just want to look at him forever. Makes her want to study his face and the lines of it, his body too; the taut muscles and the way they move under his skin, the bruises and the scars that she can’t hurt even if she wanted to.

“Did you?” he teases. “Can’t say I remember that.”

“No, I’m pretty sure I did.”

He shrugs. “Sue me. Ain’t a judge in the world that’ll side with me over you anyway.”

“Yeah and remember I’ve got Foggy on speed dial if I need a lawyer.”

“Fuck,” he says. “Does that mean I get Murdock? We tried that once, it didn’t work out too well.”

It's her turn to shrug now. “You do the crime, you do the time.”

And somehow it’s easy to joke about this even though it shouldn't be. Jail time. Trials. Matt. All the
tough stuff, all the issues - and none of them seem all that important right now.

Still, she doesn't want to push it too hard so she squeezes his fingers and inclines her head to the box.

“What is this Frank?”

The truth is she thinks she already knows. Because she knows him. And she knows that as vicious and cruel as he is, he's equally sweet and kind - it just has to work that way with him. Apparently the universe is more insistent than ever about those checks and balances and the thought leaves a feeling of lingering dread in her bones and she's not sure why.

But she doesn't worry on it too long because he's talking again and he sounds like something that could be approaching happy.

“You said all you wanted to do was eat a cake by yourself and damn the consequences,” he says. “Here it is. Better late than never.”

“Chocolate?”

“And ginger. With gingersnap frosting.”

And it's like someone sticks their hands inside her ribcage and wraps their fingers around her heart; her own little monster trying to fight it's way out of her chest.

For a second she doesn't know what to say so she turns and does what she's been waiting the whole day to do: wraps her arms around his waist and rests her cheek on his shoulder, takes a deep breath of him as he tugs her close, weaves his fingers into her hair and cups the back of her head; presses his mouth to her shoulder.

She's not really sure how it happens but it feels like part of her fades. The over-thinking, over-analysing part that makes lists and calls herself names, the part that makes her anxious and shaky even when she shouldn't be. It's not that it's gone. She's not sure it ever will truly be gone but it's resting. Because she doesn't need it around him. He's shown her that.
He asks again if she's alright and she nods against his shirt.

She's fine, she really is. Tired and overwhelmed and a little older than she was when all this started but she's fine.

All the same she pulls him closer, holds him tighter. And she's not sure how long they do that for nor does she much care. He's warm and strong and exactly what she needs and she's spent long enough holding him up. And he knows it too.

Eventually his hands drop to her waist and he pulls away slightly, eyes dark and pupils so blown that she almost feels dizzy.

“‘You sit,’” he says gently, jerking his chin in the direction of the couch. “I'll bring it to you.”

And she can't help it - can't stop herself before she does it - she turns her head and kisses the corner of his mouth. It's quick and it's chaste, and it shouldn't make her breathless, leave her belly fluttering and turn the blood in her veins thick and hot. But it does all these things. And suddenly she feels unsteady on her legs, like the weight of the day has been bearing down on her too long and his hands on her are the only thing keeping her standing. Like that tiny gentle kiss was all she had left and it's drained her of everything.

It shouldn’t. Shouldn’t because truthfully it's nothing. Nothing, but the gentle brush of her lips on his skin, the subtle taste and smell of him filling her up. Nothing, even though it lingers a moment too long and his fingers twitch on her hips and he sucks in a deep breath. Nothing, even though for the first time she feels shy to look him in the eye.

Nothing, even though it feels like everything.

Because somehow she can exercise the self control of a fucking saint when he's semi-naked and pressed, hard and pulsing against her back. She can find it in herself to think about his stitches and general mental state when he has his hands under her clothes or when they’re both in their underwear in a shower. But apparently the thought behind a chocolate cake with ginger frosting for a belated birthday is enough to push her over the edge and forget all that.

She guesses her standards might not be that high. Or maybe they are. Birthday cake, after all, is important business.
She swallows heavily, takes the smallest step backwards and his eyes snap to her face. His brow is furrowed and he’s staring at her like he did that night in the diner, when he was sweet and focused and before he shot holes in the world and in her heart.

For a long moment he does nothing. And then his gaze rakes over her and if her kiss was chaste and innocent, then the look in his eyes is anything but. It’s hard and deep and wonderfully unsettling and she feels that magma her blood has become pounding between her legs, clogging her heart and making it hard to think or breathe.

He makes a sound in the back of his throat, a rumble that seems to start in his gut, work its way through his belly and lungs and choke him. And then he’s using one hand to pull her closer, press her hips to his and he’s lifting the other to her face, sliding his fingers between her hair and her neck thumb sweeping across her lips and then her cheek.

She doesn’t look away, but it’s hard. Because if up until now he’s been able to cultivate that glare that is both lewd and somehow not, the ability has been lost and she doubts he’ll get it back. There’s literally nothing innocent in his eyes, the way they’re flickering over her face, nothing that isn’t white-hot lust that wants to devour her from the inside out and outside in.

There’s something wonderfully frightening in it, something that sets her on edge and twists wickedly around her spine; something that takes her back to the cabin and all the fantasies she’s had about the different ways he might have her and her him.

She knows they can’t wait much longer, that they don’t want to.

When he says her name his voice is thick and low and he has to clear his throat, swallow hard before he says it again.

“Go,” he whispers and it seems to take immense effort for him to say it. “Sit.”

And all she can do is nod and force herself to step back, to give up the warmth of him, take a deep breath and turn away; collect herself.

This is a problem. This is a huge fucking ridiculous problem that they’ve seemingly created for reasons that now escape her, reasons that seem inconsequential even if she knows they’re not.
He needs to rest. He needs to heal. It’ll happen when the time is right. Not that she thinks there could be a wrong time for it to happen. Not that that seems remotely possible.

In the bedroom she gives Pickle a scratch behind the ears and heads to the couch, throws herself against the cushions and kicks off her shoes, pulls her legs up underneath her. Her clothes are still damp but she doesn't have the energy to change them just yet.

*Do your worst pneumonia. Karen Page fucking dares you.*

He brings their coffee - he’s acquainted himself with the milk frother specifically to make it how she likes it - and puts a slice of cake on the side table, sits down next to her, hands folded between his legs.

“None for you?” she asks.

“Said you wanted to eat it all by yourself,”

“Changed my mind,” she takes a sip of coffee. “Don’t need to hide in the broom closet anymore. Happy to share.”

He gives her a half smile. “Maybe later.”

She ducks her head. There’s a whole lot of laters going on right now and she finds she’s fine with that. Not everything has to be a rush, not everything has to be urgent.

She picks up the cake, carves off a forkful of it and shoves it in her mouth, smears icing on her fingers. It’s fresh and rich and probably better than anything she could have found in Hell’s Kitchen. And she wonders where he got it from, how he knew which bakery would have it. And then she remembers that he’s who he is and cakes and birthday parties were things he likely just did before he went off to war. The soldier and The Punisher always comes second to the husband and the father. Even now.

*Especially now.*
“Where’d you go?” he asks, voice low and thick. “When you were in your broom closet spaceship?”


He frowns at that. She knew he would. They both know there are things she hasn’t told him. Terrible things. Dark secrets.

But he doesn’t push. He never does.

“What about now?”

She shakes her head, takes another bite of the cake.

“Now there’s nowhere I want to fly away to.”

She wonders briefly if the weight of that statement is too much, if it’s too raw and real for him. For them. But then he grins.

“Good, because I’m pretty sure those FBI fuckers have me on a no-fly list anyway.”

She snorts. “Federal law doesn’t apply on my spaceship, so you can still fly with me.”

“Nah, your spaceship is just a broom closet powered on gingersnaps. I need something a little more advanced than that.”

She laughs and pokes him with her toe and he grabs her ankle, twists his fingers around it and pulls her feet into his lap, covers them with his hands.

For a while neither of them say anything. She eats her cake and he sips his coffee and they listen to the sound of the rain outside, Pickle’s purring inside. And she wishes it could always be like this. Gentle, relaxed, quiet. No bullets and exploding gunfire. No sirens or screaming. No children lying dead in pools of their own blood. No husbands crying for their wives. No frightened young women having to make terrible choices that either make them murderers or liars.
And no Punisher in her bed.

The thought leaves her cold. Because in her heart she knows that’s the balance, the final debt. The steep price tag on that good and ordinary life. And she doesn’t want to pay it even though she knows she would. That she would *have* to.

But she also knows that none of that matters because all the willingness in the world won’t change the past. They need to look forward now, see what’s still left and what they can do with it.

*Don’t you know?*

His hands are gentle on her calves, absently kneading at her flesh as he works his way up to her knees and then light and almost ticklish as he runs his fingertips back down to her ankles and starts again. He doesn’t say anything when she trembles, when her skin prickles. She thinks they’ve both given up on trying to hide and ignore these things. It is what it is. It was never going to be anything else.

“I need to go away next week,” his voice is steady and firm but she knows him well enough to detect the tremble, the hint of reluctance and disappointment in it.

He lets her digest that for a while. Lets it settle and he’s lost in thought too, almost like he’s pulling apart the very concept of leaving her, and he’s unsure of whether it has a place in the world.

And she doesn’t think it does, because the idea of him going away so soon after she saved him and then saved him again sits like a hard, ugly stone in her belly. The thought of coming home to an empty apartment, of waking up to find herself alone leaves her feeling cold and sad, longing for something she hasn’t even lost yet. Maybe for something she’s never really had.

She swallows hard and looks at his hands against her skin, how they’re big and strong and how he’s still massaging her and hasn’t missed a beat while he spoke. And suddenly that throbbing between her thighs is back and she has to shift her ass on the couch just to stand it.

He doesn’t seem to notice though. Or, if he does, he pays no attention.
“It won’t be for long,” he says. “It ain’t…”

He cuts himself off and she wonders what he was going to say. Work? Business? Murder? Punishing? She thinks they’re probably all the same.

“I need to take Luna to Jersey,” he says and with the way he grits the words out it sounds like this might have been more difficult to verbalise than anything else. “I called the shelter today and they’ve kept a place for her, but I want to take her up myself, check it out first.”

She’s surprised by how hard that hits her. She knew that it was going to happen - he told her as much the night they danced on the roof and the sky was on fire above them. And yet, somewhere in that place where he romances her, where he remembers birthdays and anniversaries and they go on dates and he courts her in that way that a man courts a woman, Luna was always there. She laid at their feet while they watched TV. They walked her in the park and held hands and threw balls for her that she lost interest in after the second time. She wore a Santa hat at Christmas and Pickle eventually warmed up to her and they slept together in a big dog bed.

And yeah, it was all fantasy. It was all silly, because that’s never going to happen. They’re never going to have playdates in the park or walk her like a normal couple do. That’s all part of that ordinary life with ordinary husbands and ordinary children. And looking at them now and where they are, Karen knows they’re nothing but ordinary. Neither of them. And that’s okay.

Still hurts though. The idea that Luna won’t be part of their lives anymore. And she realises that however she feels, what Frank must be feeling is a hundred times worse. She’s seen Luna twice whereas Frank’s lived with her and cared for her for the past six months. He’s fed her and washed her, taken her to the vet and bought her things. He’s become Luna’s world and Karen suspects the opposite is true as well.

“Nelson has been great with everything but she can’t just be passed around like this anymore. She’s old and she needs…” he stops and she puts her cake down, leans forward and touches his shoulder. “She needs a home.”

He says it like it’s something he understands, something fundamental. And he’s right. Luna does need a home and it isn’t fair.

He lifts a hand from her shins and squeezes her fingers gently before continuing to rub her legs. He’s good at this, even when he’s not thinking about it and just doing it by instinct.
“I just want to check the place out first,” he says. “I know it’s some kind of farm that’s partly a sanctuary and partly some kind of weekend getaway destination. And I know Kat - that’s the owner - and she’s good, but I don’t just wanna dump Luna there without seeing it first.”

“It’s okay Frank. I get it.”

“Yeah,” he runs a hand down her leg and circles her ankle with his thumb and forefinger. “I know you do.”

“I’ve got to call Foggy a bit later. I’ll ask him to bring her round on Monday? Tuesday?”

He gives no indication he’s heard her even though she knows he has. And his fingers dig sharply into the meat of her calves so that she gasps before he starts his gentle rubbing again.

“I’ll be back soon,” he tells her. “It’ll only be a few days.”

And she hears what he’s saying underneath that, a promise that this isn’t him disappearing again, that he won’t leave her wondering where he is for months. That even if Luna doesn’t have a home, he does and he’s coming back to it. To her.

For a wild moment she has the most insane, irrational hope that maybe, just maybe somehow, this could all work out. That by some miracle, the universe will twist and turn on itself and find a way to give them a happy ending; that there’s something she hasn’t thought of, some plan she hasn’t made and everything is going to be okay. She knows it’s stupid and she needs to get her head out of the clouds, confine it to her list of Things That Don’t Happen, but she can’t help it and for a second she lets herself believe it. Lets herself live in it.

And it’s wonderful and frightening and exciting and everything that he is. And then it’s gone. Shut off like a switch, her brain protecting itself and pulling her back to reality.

She closes her eyes briefly, lets the feelings ebb and when she looks at him again he’s still focused on her legs and her skin and seemingly the moment passed him by. As much as she hates to admit it that’s probably for the best too.

“Claire’s gonna give you a hard time,” she says shakily, and his fingertips slide up the back of her leg and rest behind her knee.
He snorts. “What else is news? Claire’s day isn’t complete until she’s annihilated me at least once.”

Karen laughs and his hand moves infinitesimally higher to her thigh, fingers drawing small circles into flesh that make her shiver.

“Luna’s a good dog. I need to do right by her,” he bites his lip. “She got me through some shit. I’m gonna miss the fuck out of her.”

And suddenly she remembers what she did when she took Luna to Foggy and she wants to curse herself for leaving it for so long. For forgetting. And sure, it’s been a long week and things weren’t their best from the time she dropped Luna off until yesterday morning when he seemingly started to come to terms with the shambles that his life is. But it doesn’t feel like an excuse.

She pulls her legs out of his lap, leaving his one hand lingering in midair and he looks at her confused and slightly concerned. But she grabs her phone out of her purse and swipes to the picture gallery, pulls up the picture of Luna sitting in front of Foggy’s front door, goofy drooly grin on her face, head cocked to the side.

“Here,” she says, handing him her phone. “I meant to show you this… before, but I forgot.”

There’s a moment he seems genuinely overcome, eyes crinkling in the corners and some rapid blinking and then he smiles sadly.

“Face only a mother could love,” he says and she knows he’s lying through his teeth, knows that Luna’s one of the most important things in his life and he thinks she’s beautiful.

She reaches for her plate while he looks at her phone.

“She deserves a good place and good people,” his voice is low and has an edge to it.

“She has all those things Frank.”
He nods without looking at her and puts her phone down between them.

“Thanks,” he slides a hand on her knee over the scab. “Thanks for doing that for me. Thanks for everything you’ve done for me.”

She knows that to tell him it was nothing or it doesn't matter would be insulting and also a lie. And they don't lie. They don't.

So she doesn't say anything. It's been hard and it hasn't always been pleasant but she wouldn't have it any other way, wouldn't change it.

But now she doesn't want to lose him to his dark thoughts, to his melancholy, so she pokes his with her foot again.

“Cake?” she asks, holding up her plate and he nods so she hands him a forkful and he chews it thoughtfully.

“It's good,” he says as if it surprises him that he likes it.

“Yeah,” she says. “Not everything has to be dark and bitter. You can love yourself occasionally.”

He gives her a sly look and takes her hand, tugs it towards him and presses a kiss to her knuckles. And then in a move she hadn't anticipated he pulls the tips of her fingers into his mouth and runs his tongue over them, licking the stickiness of the icing off.

And he's looking at her with those heavy black eyes again and she wonders how she ever withstood it before. It's not like she didn't notice the set of his jaw and the curve of his lips during those hours she spent with him at the hospital or the prison. Not that she didn't see the corded muscle of his arms and the fierce strength in his hands while he sat next to her in the courtroom. Not that she missed how piercing his eyes were the night of the diner nor the night he died again in the forest. It was always there, sinking into her bones, her blood; him fitting himself neatly into the little empty places in her heart.

He says she makes him weak, but the truth is she thinks what they do to each other can’t be explained away by words as simple and “weakness” or “strength”. Because yes, she does feel weak around him, she does feel her resistance crumbling, but she also feels like she can do anything, like
she’s safe. And there’s no telling what you can do when you know someone’s got your back.

And she is being strong now. Because somehow, even though his mouth is hot and wet, she’s resisting the urge to push her fingers further inside, resisting the urge to replace them with her tongue.

Resisting the urge to climb him like a fucking tree.

That’s got to be strength. It has to.

And when his teeth drag across her skin she even finds it in herself to pull away. But it’s hard and her mind is spiralling out of control and all she can think about is the cabin and the roof and the way he touched yesterday, his mouth on her throat, hand almost at her breast.

She wants to ask him. Ask him where his mind goes when he thinks of her that way. It’s not the cabin, of that she’s sure - the cabin is her own personal cross to bear - but maybe the roof, maybe the shower. Definitely yesterday in her bed.

Definitely.

She looks up at him, wonders if she might see the answer on his face but she doesn’t.

“I know,” he says. “I know.”

And then maybe because she can’t trust herself to outstare him anymore, maybe because she can’t trust herself to keep her ass on the couch and not jump into his lap, or maybe just because she can’t deal with the heaviness of the tension in the room anymore, she bumps his shoulder playfully with her own. And he doesn’t miss a beat and bumps back, snorts at her.

And then it’s light-hearted again. This is the Frank who was sings Shining Star and who was going to shoot ants on the roof. The one that bought her coffee nearly every morning and yes, the one who’s going to fly away with her in her spaceship.

And they’re going to be okay. They can do better than survive. They can make it work, even if she doesn’t know how just yet.
A promise in a graveyard in the dead of night, a promise made with blood and tears. Another made today under the cloudy sky. No tears this time, only rain.

It was nothing. It was everything.

“You scare the fuck out of me Karen Page,” he says. It’s not heavy or solemn, just matter of fact and maybe a little resigned.

“Thought you were the big bad Punisher,” she answers. “I’m gonna start spreading rumours that you aren’t nearly as scary as they say.”

He rolls his eyes, pulls her feet back into his lap.

“Eat your cake,” he says sternly but his smile belies his tone. “You know that spaceship ain’t gonna go do much without the proper prep.”

“You have no idea how high-tech my spaceship is,” she tells him.

“Well you’re just gonna have to show me around one of these days.”

And she laughs, and outside thunder rumbles long and loud and the rain beats hard against the windows until they shake. But inside it’s warm and it’s safe and he’s here and sometimes birthday wishes do come true.

_Sometimes._

Chapter End Notes

Just an aside, Ellison's complaints about the paper, i.e. the bit about the trees being too green and the the model being made "more booby and less hippy" are all things I have experienced first hand when I worked in media, so that's easily the most probable thing about this whole story.
Just one more kiss and I'll rise from the dead for you

Chapter Notes

So I have been looking forward to writing certain events in this chapter for a while now, even though Frank continues to blindside me and make things happen on his terms.

I hope you all enjoy it too.

Just a note, that we are getting to a very tricky part now so I am hoping I won't fuck up and if I do that you'll forgive me.

Not much more to say really other than thanks to everyone who has been sending their support. I really appreciate every review, kudos, and screamy message I get regarding this fic. It's become very close to my heart in some strange ways.

Song title is from *Swoon (Reprise)* by The Mission.

Monday comes too fast for her.

Too fast for Foggy as well judging by the look on his face as he pulls up outside her building and helps Luna out of the backseat of his car.

He's sad. Subdued. And even from where she's standing across the road under one of the ground-floor awnings, she can see the red rims around his eyes; the strangely pained expression on his face as he rubs Luna’s ears and clips a purple lead onto her collar.

It's cold and grey out. Misty. And there's still a miserable drizzle in the air and she wonders what the hell they're doing outside at this hour when they could all still be snuggled up under their respective covers in one way or another. But Frank wanted to get an early start and when Claire grudgingly said that he might be able to be a little more active in a week or two he took that to mean he could drive to Jersey, Monday morning first thing.

So he is.

He's standing next to her, absently rubbing circles into the small of her back. And she's leaning into him so that she can feel his breath against her neck; the heat of his skin blooming through her clothes and teasing her own chilled flesh like a lover.
It's been like this the whole weekend. Slow, gentle. Easy. Sometimes not so easy. They didn't talk a lot after Friday. There wasn't much need. They read. They touched. They watched some bad TV until Frank declared that he was becoming stupider by the second and turned it off. She did some work and Claire came round to check on him and dish out some stern advice ... which was all a little weird because Frank took it upon himself to serve them all coffee and cake which made them seem more like an old married couple than ever. And it didn't go unnoticed.

But that aside, things were okay. Quiet. Confined. The difficult part came when they went to sleep, the way his hand rested on her naked hip, burning through her flesh and turning her whole body into a fiery nest of nerve endings. The way his whiskers brushed against her shoulders, lips pressed to her skin and white-hot sparks shot down her spine and settled low in her belly.

He struggled too. She knows this. She'd turn over in the night, rest her head on his bicep and wouldn't miss the way he'd shift his pelvis slightly away from her. Nor the way his fingers would twitch and he'd grapple between pulling her closer or leaving her where she was and letting the miniscule space between them turn fevered and frightening. And maybe not so frightening. Maybe more exciting and anticipatory. Maybe something closer to a kind of torture he's not wholly aware he dishes out.

She thinks it's best that he goes away for a while even though she's already missing him and his absence feels like a hole in her heart. It's been a hell of a week, even if she could ignore his initial injuries and the fact that he dragged himself to her to die. Which she can't.

And that's not even where the biggest wounds lie, where the healing needs to happen. Has happened. The emotional toll alone should have left them reeling. And in many ways it did. So maybe a few days apart will give them time to reassess, regroup.

Doesn't mean she likes it. Doesn't mean that at all. Doesn't mean she hasn't got used to sharing her bed with him. Her home. Her life. And she arches against his hand a little, moves so that his rubbing becomes harder and more focused and her legs become weaker and less steady. And it's distracting and frustrating but the last thing she wants him to do is stop.

Foggy looks very dapper in a grey three-piece suit as he makes his way across the street towards them. Being a lawyer - a real honest-to-God actual practicing lawyer - is good for him in so many ways and, not for the first time, it hits her how wasted he was at Nelson and Murdock, how much better he deserved. And it's not just the name of a big firm to put on his resumé, it's the tangible things too. A good salary, a decent place to live, not having to worry about making ends meet because you've been paid in frozen chickens and not cold, hard cash.

She guesses like many things with Matt, there was an idealism attached to Nelson and Murdock, an idea that somehow they could help the underdog and didn't need to worry about themselves. If they
did the right thing the universe will take care of the rest. But the universe doesn't do that. Karen
knows it all too well. The universe looks out for number one and nine times out of ten that's not you,
no matter how good your intentions might be. And sometimes idealism has to give way to
pragmatism - something she's not sure Matt is ready to entertain, let alone accept.

But it doesn’t matter. Not really anyway. Nelson and Murdock’s doors are closed. Foggy has a real
job and so does she. And Matt, well Matt must be doing all right considering he still seems to have
the means to buy loaded birthday gifts and attend parties with the rich and not-so-famous. It’s not
really a thought worth her time.

Especially not now. Especially with the melancholy she's sure is about to unfold.

She's not sure if Luna sees or smells Frank first but suddenly she's yelping and tugging on her lead,
tail wagging so hard and so fast it's turning to a blur. And then Frank is dropping down on one knee
and he's grinning from ear to ear, cupping Luna’s face and pressing his forehead to hers. She hears
him whispering but can't make out what he's saying, can only watch as his lips move and Luna gives
him slobbery kisses, her whole body shaking with excitement.

“Guess I'm chopped liver,” Foggy says glancing at the lead in his hand, but there's no real hurt in his
tone.

Karen looks at Frank. “Guess I am too.”

“Think we should give them some space?” Foggy asks. “Their own place or something?”

She laughs and pulls him into a hug, squeezes him tight because she realises that she’s never not
missing him; that even though their lives are insane, somehow he’s always in her thoughts and she
imagines the same could be said of him. And he’s good. He’s just so fucking good in every way.
There’s no moral ambiguity, no grey areas, no crusades that keep her up at night and worrying.

He gives her a quick kiss on the cheek, and asks softly if everything is okay and she nods. Because it
is. It really is.

“You look good with a dog,” she says. “It suits you.”

“Yeah. A little too well,” he sighs as he lets her go, rubs the back of his neck. “Marci is a wreck.
Honestly. I had no idea at all how attached she was going to get, or how quickly.”

She tilts her head, waits for him to continue.

“She cried all night and wouldn't come with me this morning. Probably best though. Not sure how that introduction would have gone.” He glances at Frank who still seems oblivious to anything but Luna, even though Karen knows that's not the case.

He’s quiet for a second and she tries to imagine what it would be like if Marci and Frank were to ever meet.

“Hmmm, I think Marci could take him.”

Foggy huffs. “She’d probably bring him home, tell me he needs a place to stay. Next thing you know, he’s got his own bed and a place on the couch and she’s taking him out to meet her friends.”

He trails off and for a second it seems like he’ll keep his spirits up. But he doesn’t and she sees some of the light go out of his eyes as he remembers why he’s here.

“Cry when he gets a place of his own and moves out.”

“I'm sorry.”

He shakes his head. “It's alright. We knew we couldn't keep her. Our place is more suited to something like a spaniel or a beagle, although Marci is talking about a pavement special. Either way it was never going to be permanent.”

She bites her lip. He makes sense but she can still see he's sad, that saying goodbye is going to be hard on him. That even though he was a godsend and she's still pushing him for sainthood this has been unfair on him and it's going to take its toll one way or another.

Probably on all of them.
“He okay to drive?” Foggy asks turning his attention back to Frank. There’s a certain wariness in his eyes which has nothing to do with Frank’s motor skills and everything to do with the fact that Foggy’s seeing The Punisher for the first time in months. And his opinion of Frank isn’t as high or understanding as hers.

She can’t really blame him. Almost no one gets to see the side of Frank that she does and that’s how he likes it. No one gets to see the sweetness and the goofiness, the fierceness that isn’t violent and bloodthirsty but steadfast and honourable. And because of that almost no one gets further than his bloodlust, his rage, his PTSD that he doesn’t think he has.

Foggy trusts her though. It might be grudging, it might be wary, it might be all of those things but he trusts her and, by extension, her assessment of Frank, even if it’s not one he wholeheartedly shares. And she has to admit that there’s another layer to all this - one none of them has ever mentioned. And that is that Frank could be the most wonderful man in the world and treat her as well as any decent man should, but it’s not going to change the fact that he’s still on the wrong side of the law even though everyone with the exception of Mitchell “Gutter Journalism” Ellison thinks he’s dead.

She’s harbouring a fugitive, she’s an accomplice no matter how anyone tries to look at it and being in love with him isn’t an excuse or a reason.

And these thoughts are too heavy for an already heavy day and she shakes them away, forces a smile onto her face.

“Claire seems to think he’ll be okay,” she says and Foggy nods, looks down the street and glances back to his car.

“Well she would know.”

And then he huffs again. Goes quiet. And for a while no one says anything.

They make an odd grouping standing there on the sidewalk in the early morning light. Two men, one dressed head to toe in black, the other in a suit, her standing between them in a slate blue dress and a grey cardigan, and a silly, slobbery dog staring at Frank like he’s the whole world and everything in it.

But it’s not like there’s anyone to see them really. The streets are empty and it’s quiet too except for the faint pitter-patter of the rain on the tar, some cars in the distance.
She looks down at Frank. He’s still on his knees, still stroking Luna’s face and ears, still talking to her low and gentle and she’s listening intently, head cocked to one side, tail wagging. And Karen's heart breaks a little for all of them. This is going to be tougher on Frank than she imagined. He doesn't have friends. Not really anyway. There's his contacts and then there's the rest of the world which he divides into people deserving of protection and people deserving of punishment. So basically that leaves her… but then he's also in love with her and that adds an extra complication for all of them. She guesses that means that Luna is essentially his easiest and most dependable company and taking her away is going to take away another part of him that he can't really afford to lose.

And it may seem silly or clichéd to those who don't have pets or don't get it but there's no denying the comfort they bring, nor the things people will do to keep them. She thinks of Pickle, how her life didn’t really allow for a cat and how it still doesn’t. And how Pickle isn’t particularly concerned about how much inconvenience she causes.

And the fact is neither is she. The crazy little ball of Hazard Fluff is worth it. She's worth it every damn time. And so is Luna and it kills her a little inside that Frank’s having to give that up. That he doesn’t have a choice.

She leans down and puts a hand on his shoulder and for a second he stops talking to Luna and reaches up and squeezes her fingers before she lets him go.

He knows. He's thinking the exact same thing she is.

“Is she going to be well cared for?” Foggy blurts out next to her and she can hear the tension in his voice, a mixture of sadness and bravado and something else too. Something like discomfort.

And Frank goes still next to her, every muscle freezing the same way they did when he was going to kiss her and she told him to stop.

And then slowly he cocks his head to look at Foggy.

There’s a second when she thinks he might be taken aback, that she can almost hear him wondering how anyone could ask something like that of him, how anyone could think - even for a second - that he wouldn’t look after everything he has in the best way he can. That he wouldn’t lay down his life for the things he loves.
Foggy seems to think so too and he swallows audibly and takes a step back as Frank stands, turns towards him.

And then slowly Frank holds out his hand, fingers outstretched and head slightly bowed, waiting. There’s a beat, a short moment that seems to last forever, when the wind whirls around her thighs and the rain falls but the world itself is silent, holding its breath. And Foggy looks at Frank long and hard and she can see him frowning in that adorable way he does when he’s conflicted or confused. She knows it must be hard for him - they can joke about Frank all they like and pretend that he’s an exasperating friend or a errant man child but the fact remains that other than that brief moment when Frank brought her down from the mountains, the last time Foggy saw him he was shooting people to bits in Hell’s Kitchen. And it would be ridiculous to think he’s forgotten all the old evidence; the photos of the shootouts, the meathooks, the severed hands and Grotto’s dead body. It’s hard to push that aside, it’s hard to see the goodness in it.

But Foggy reaches out and takes Frank’s hand, gives it a firm shake and nods sharply before letting it go.

They’re both quiet for a while and then Frank speaks and his voice is heavy but not unkind.

“’I want to thank you and your lady for everything. I dunno what I would have done if you hadn’t stepped up.”

Foggy shifts, clears his throat. “Karen’s a good friend. We’ll always help her out.”

“Yeah,” Frank bites his lip thoughtfully as if he’s digesting Foggy’s words and their meaning. “I really appreciate this Nelson. Luna’s a great dog and just knowing she was with good people...”

Foggy cuts him off. “It’s fine, she was no trouble.”

Frank looks away, blinks and there’s a moment when his eyes look almost glassy. Foggy sees it too and suddenly he loses all his standoffishness and asks what they’ve all been thinking.

“Can’t she stay? Marci and I don't mind keeping her a little longer until you guys...” he pauses clearly unsure how to phrase the rest of his sentence. “... sort things out.”

But Frank shakes his head. “Ain't about us. About what's best for her.”
He's right. He's so right but he sounds so sad, so resigned that Karen takes his hand, threads their fingers together and when he looks at her she gets a small tight grimace which she's come to know as a smile.

Foggy sighs dejectedly, glances up and down the street.

“You'll tell us how she is though? How she's getting on?”

And Karen's not sure if he's talking to her or Frank but she guesses it doesn't matter, even if the idea of Frank calling Marci every few days to update her on Luna is an amusing one.


“Yeah, sure,” Frank's voice is low and cracked and his fingers tighten on hers.

“Okay,” says Foggy slowly and she realises he's buying time, trying hard to stave off the moment he has to get in his car and drive away. “Well that's all then.”

He stands for a moment, staring into the distance like he’s trying to gather his courage and then he goes down on his knees too, seemingly not caring about the wet, dirty ground and his pants or the scuffs on his shoes, and puts his arms around Luna’s neck, buries his nose in her fur. And Luna gives him a long wet kiss from his chin all way up to his forehead and beats her tail heavily on the sidewalk.

There’s a second Karen thinks her heart might break right then and there, that it might not be Frank that eventually does it. That it might not be her own guilt or pain. And it might just be a junkyard dog rescued from a life of abuse and suffering one night while the world turned in on itself and threw her a curveball she still hasn't quite got a handle on.

“You be a good girl Luna, you be the best girl. You show them that hellhounds have just got a bad rap and…”

He trails off, voice choked and tight. And Luna licks him again - this time straight across the mouth.
and into his ear - and he laughs sadly before pressing his lips to her head and giving her one last stroke from her shoulders to her tail.

When he stands his eyes are red and puffy and he doesn't look down again, doesn't seem to have it in himself to do so.

There are wet stains on the knees of his pants and his jacket is covered in fur but he barely seems to notice and if he does, he doesn’t care.

“I'll see you Wednesday Karen. Pick you up around 7:30?”

“Yeah.”

He gives her a brief hug goodbye but his heart isn't in it and even though his hands feel weak against her, she can feel him trembling.

Next to her Luna whines softly and lets out a small yelp but Foggy ignores it. And then he inclines his head to Frank sternly and goes to his car and drives off.

And then it's just them and Luna and their broken hearts standing on the cold sidewalk in the early hours of the morning in Hell’s Kitchen.

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It takes a long while before they move again. There's something about the quiet, and how it feels like it's just the three of them in the whole world, that's oddly comforting. And they relish it. They let the moment fill them until it seems like everything else just fades behind a gauzy screen and the only things left are the way they're touching each other and the strange bond that was formed one hellish night millennia ago.

She finds she feels strangely out of time as well, like she's watching this happen to someone else. Like the whole last week hasn't really been her and him but rather a different woman capable of going toe to toe with the Punisher. A woman strong enough to hold him and comfort him and kick him out when he gets too much. A woman that could tear out his heart and stamp on it…
Feed that shit to a dog

A woman strong enough for him to love.

And somehow that doesn't seem like her, even though she knows it is.

Even though he knows it too.

It doesn't make it any easier though. She still feels overwhelmed and out of place and like all these things have been happening to another version of her. That the real Karen Page - the actual flesh and bones one - is upstairs asleep and the last time she saw Frank Castle was on the roof of broken building when he looked at her with such sadness in his eyes she thought she might fall apart there and then.

But despite the tricks her mind is playing on her, she isn't that Karen Page. She's standing here at his side, holding his hand and he's about to leave her again. And it has to be true, it has to be happening because the hole in her heart is real and so are the tears she can feel pricking in her eyes. And she's going to have to fight her way back through that gauze, that fog, and reclaim herself.

And then far in the distance she sees a woman round the corner at the top of the road and the spell is broken; there are other people here now and the world isn't just theirs anymore.

Frank feels it too and he moves next to her. He doesn't go far, just steps back slightly and pulls her and Luna with him.

“Come on,” he says but there's no urgency in his tone. “I need to get going.”

She nods, tries not to look at Luna as they walk around the building to his truck in the visitor’s parking, tries hard not to think about what happened the last time she drove it.

She's decided how she's going to do this. Planned it out in her head because she's found that if she breaks tough things down into the smallest steps she can - and she does them one at a time - it might not be easier, but she stands less chance of losing her way. She has a plan, a blueprint, and that's comforting. The worst fear is that of the unknown after all.
So she's going to say goodbye to Luna. She's going to make a fuss and talk to her in that doggy voice she likes so much. She’ll ruffle her ears and accept slobbery kisses. And then she's going to put that behind her as best she can and she’ll to hug Frank goodbye and try and hold onto what it feels like to be in his arms.

And then she's going to let him go.

And that's going to be it.

Simple steps that are very hard. Simple steps that will break her heart.

But it’s a plan. It’s her plan.

*If you want God to laugh…*

She does follow him to the truck and while he's busy unlocking it she, like Foggy, drops to her knees in front of Luna and talks low and soft to her. Later she won't remember exactly what she said. A lot of it didn't matter because it's just really the sound of her voice that Luna responded to anyway. But she tells her that she's good, she's the best, that they'll check in on her and she deserves all the good things. And then she tells her sternly to look after Frank, to make sure he doesn't get up to any nonsense, and he behaves. And Luna barks happily and she gets a face full of dog breath but she doesn't care.

And then she ruffles her ears and rubs her snout and steels herself to start the next phase of her goodbye - the one that's both harder and easier. But she doesn't get a chance because as she shifting to stand up, Frank's already pulling her into his arms, holding her tight as he can, hands digging into her back and face buried in her hair.

It’s hard to breathe. And not just because of the force with which he’s holding her but it doesn’t matter. She has her whole life to breathe, and right now it’s not important. Right now, nothing is important except the feel of him pressed to her, the way her lips are against his throat and how again there’s no one in the whole world except them.

He’s not saying anything, he’s not whispering confessions to her, not making promises and she’s grateful for that. She doesn’t want to have to think about that just yet - the whys and the hows and everything in between. She just wants to hold him as tight as he’s holding her. She just wants to let herself choke on the way he’s making her feel and not think about anything else. Not think about
moving on or taking the next step in her plan. He’s here and she’s here and the moment they have to let go seems so very far away.

So she lets him crush her, lets his mouth roam the cold skin of her shoulder, his fingertips trail up and down the nape of her neck. He’s shivering a little and he breathes out a choked groan into her hair and she pulls him closer.

He’s hers. She’s known it since the night in the graveyard, watched him as he fell over the edge and into the great unknown below, but part of her has been waiting for him to start fighting it again. To build up his strength and take a step back. Reassess and find reasons to run. But he hasn’t. And she realises he doesn’t want to. He needs to belong, even if it’s only to her. Even if it’s only for these small moments they can carve out of time for themselves.

She has no doubt it will come to an end. But she really doesn’t want to think about that right now.

Instead she tightens her grip on him, breathes in his warmth, the smell of soap and coffee, and underneath that gunmetal scent that seems to just be a part of his flesh and bones.

“I don’t want to leave you,” he says low and close to ear and she’s not sure if it’s his words or the way his breath tickles her skin that turns her whole body to gooseflesh.

It’s irrelevant though. She’s not going with him, no matter how much both of them want her to. No matter how appealing the idea of running off together to the countryside might sound. He needs to do this himself - he said as much and even if she doesn’t really understand his reasons, she respects them.

They do need time.

And she knows this is the point in her blueprint, in her million step plan when she is supposed to move away, where she’s got to say her goodbyes and turn her back on him and trust the universe and Frank’s own words that he’ll come home. She isn’t worried about the latter - he doesn’t lie to her - but the former… the universe and the fucking bitch she can be where Frank Castle is concerned gives her more than just pause. But then again he’s has given the fucking cosmos the finger more than once and she thinks if he has the right incentive he can do it again. And maybe, just maybe she - Karen Page - is enough.

For now.
She presses her lips to his jaw, his beard tickling her face. She suddenly has the overwhelming desire to tell him she loves him, to say the actual words. To give them form and put them out there. See if they really can change the world. Shatter it. Fix it. She doesn't know.

But then he’s patting her back gently.

“Come on,” he whispers. “We’re making a scene.”

And it's okay, because she can tell him later. He said he would come back and he will and they’ll have all the time in the world.

So she nods against him, opens her eyes and, over his shoulder, sees the woman still heading down the road, something almost familiar about her gait.

But she doesn’t think about it, because she’s looking at Frank and the way he’s breaking her in half with his eyes.

“You be safe,” she says and he ducks his head, brings a hand up from her waist and touches her jaw with his knuckles.

“You too.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“Be back with you soon.”

It sounds like a promise. So she makes one of her own.

“I’ll be waiting.”

And then she’s at that moment, that last step where she has to leave, where she has to move her
hands off him and his off her, take a step back and let him go. Walk away.

She's Karen Page. She can do this.

But he's Frank Castle. And he can't.

She does take her hands off him and she does step back, her heels making a hard sound on the sidewalk. And she does start to turn.

She does.

But then his hand trails down her arm, over her elbow and her wrist and his fingers thread through hers; she thinks they'll just slip through, a small lingering last touch before all his warmth is gone.

But that's not what happens. That's not what happens at all.

Instead his hand closes over hers, tight and firm and he doesn’t hesitate as he tugs her back sharply so that her chest is flush with his and his breath is warm against her lips.

And he's looking at her, looking through her, searching her face for something. Something that makes him weak. Something that makes her strong.

She sees the exact moment that he finds it. Hears it in the way his voice catches in his throat, feels it in the way he moves against her.

She doesn't look away.

She won't.

He doesn't get to control that.
So she swallows, lays a gentle hand over his heart and watches him watch her.

His breathing is heavy and his pupils are blown but she can still see flecks of gold in his eyes, the faintest hints of greens and ambers as the dim light catches them, the long lashes that most women would chop off their arms for.

It hits her again that there's something beautiful about him, something as dangerous and broken as it is sweet and gentle. Something as profound and destructive as it is loyal and lost.

And she loves him.

She loves all of him. The same way he loves all of her.

It's time. It's right. They've waited long enough.

His gaze flickers over her face, her hair, her forehead and finally drops to her lips and without thinking she licks them, parts them.

And then it's all him. His hand sliding down to her cheek and neck to cup the back of her head, the other pressing her firmly against him so she can feel his heartbeat through his chest; his smell filling her up, his heat starting at the place where their bodies are joined and blooming outwards down her arms and legs anchoring her to the ground. To the world. To him.

And then his mouth. Oh god his mouth. Hot and heavy on her, his lips nudging hers apart and his tongue sliding inside, licking at her, tasting her. Letting her taste him, letting her swallow him.

Letting her drown in him.

And she does. She gives herself over to it. To him. To his hands, his mouth. And it's easy. Easy as falling down. And she does fall. She falls so damn far and he catches her. Holds her. Keeps her safe.

And then it's just them kissing in the rain, in the cold, the wind whipping at her legs and lifting her dress like it did one night a million years ago when she danced on the roof under a sky made of fire.
Just them. Kissing in the rain. The Punisher - the big bad Punisher - and the girl that loves him more than she's ever loved anyone in her whole life.

It's true that there are lots of things she could wonder about - she's played variations of this moment over in her head thousands of times since the night in the Catskills. What this means for her, for them. How much it complicates things or alternatively if it complicates them at all. What this says about where he is mentally and emotionally. What it says about her.

But she doesn't. She doesn't think about anything other than the heady masculine taste of him, the firm press of his lips, the roughness of his fingers against her skin, the way he's making her body feel like a pillar of flame despite the chill of the day and the shivers running down her back.

She wants this. She wants him. And it doesn't matter that he's a little messy, a little wet and overeager as their teeth knock together and his tongue slides roughly along hers. It's him and it's her and his mouth is on her and that's all that counts, the only thing in the world worth having.

And then her hands are running up his arms, over the broad lines of his shoulders to the back of his neck and into his hair where it's long and thick and she can angle him towards her, tilt her head so he can kiss her harder and deeper and with more rage and fury and tenderness than he has done up until now.

And he does. Twisting her around so her back is against the truck door, the cold metal doing nothing to cool the fire in her skin, his body pressing against her and his knee slipping between her thighs.

She remembers how he did this before, how he pushed her up against the wall on the roof, how she tried not to bear down on his leg too hard because she was nervous and hesitant and how he shifted so that she had to.

And then he almost let her fall.

And she knows he won't do that now. They've put too much blood on each other. It's not an excuse anymore.

He is moving her again, one hand gripping her waist, thumb rubbing along her hipbone pressing into her skin hard enough to bruise. And then he's urging her closer, bracing her on his leg and shifting himself into that warm space they've created together so that he's almost crushing her between his
chest and the door of his truck.

And it doesn’t hurt. Because he could never hurt her. Not like this. Not with his hands and his mouth. His arms. He might think he’s been changed and his body sculpted and honed to bring pain, to bring death and suffering into the world and maybe he has - maybe that isn’t altogether wrong - but that all stops when it comes to her. Because with her he’s gentle, kind, his body bringing only tenderness and desire. And she doesn’t really know what she ever did to deserve that. Why, ultimately, he seems to have chosen her to become his respite, his sanctuary; the place he comes to forget about the rest of the world and how he’s killing it until it makes sense again.

He’s not The Punisher now. He’s just a man. And she’s just a woman. And no matter what happens after nothing can take this away from them.

Slower now, his hand on her hip easing slightly, the fingers in her hair coming to rest gently against the nape of her neck, to draw little patterns into her flesh. He still kissing her though, his tongue hot and wet in her mouth. And he’s sweet. So very sweet as he seems to find some of that control he wears like armour, some of that training, that discipline that he falls back on when things get overwhelming.

And the truth is she can’t wait to take that away from him again. Take it all. Strip him - not only of his clothes but also his restraint until he’s lost himself with her.

She doesn’t know why - it’s not like she considers herself a highly experienced or confident lover, quite the contrary in fact - but she thinks she can do it. And she doesn’t think it will be hard.

Doesn’t think it will be at all.

But not now. Not now, even though it feels like they’re on a knife edge and it wouldn’t take more than a whisper to get him back into her apartment, into her bed.

He has to go. He has to do this and then he can come back to her. Because he will. Because he said he will and they don’t lie.

(Don’t you know?)

(I know)
She’s lingering though, unwilling to face him just yet, see the lust in his eyes and deal with the aftermath of this. So when he pulls back, she lets him take his time kissing her face, his lips gentle on her skin and in her hair, fingertips running over her cheekbones and the hard line of her jaw, before he takes a ragged breath and puts his forehead to hers.

She keeps her eyes closed, tries to stretch the moment and the warm place they’ve made for each other a little longer, a little further. And, for a while, she does. They do. For a while the whole world is her breathing his breath and touching his skin. The whole world is the heat of his palm on her hip and the small uneven stroke of his thumb against her face.

And then after a while it isn’t.

It happens slowly though - the coming down, the reconnecting. She becomes aware of little things: the drizzle that’s now turned to harder rain, the sound of cars going past, the cold wind against her legs even though his knee is still between them.

And then he kisses her lips again and pulls back slightly and she knows she has to walk away again. She has to go back to her blueprint and it’s going to be so much harder than it was before.

She opens her eyes and he’s already looking at her. She knew he would be. And she can only describe his expression as awe, wonder. And even though that should be unbelievable, it should be impossible and ridiculous because he’s the fucking Punisher and she’s just Karen Page, and she shouldn’t have this effect on him, she knows she does. She accepts it. And it’s easy. It’s right.

And then he snorts, mouth twisting into that half smile as he shakes his head and looks down at the ground, at Luna, at the place where his knee is still wedged between her thighs. She knows what he’s thinking. That they’re insane, that they’re idiots, that they shouldn’t have made this as big a deal as they did. That they’re two hopeless fools.

He’s right about it all. Every last bit and she snorts too, waits for him to look back at her.

“I really have to get going now.”

He sounds ragged and breathless and a little on edge.
And she nods. She can walk away now. She can do it.

So she kisses him again, lingers long and gentle and he touches her jaw with his knuckles, lets his hand settle on her throat.

“Hold that thought,” he whispers and she knows he’s trying to be nonchalant and he’s failing wonderfully.

But she will hold it. She’ll hold it until he’s back and she doesn’t need to hold it anymore.

She steps away from him, knows he’s watching her as she does. Can feel his eyes boring right through her and she doesn’t need to wonder what he’s thinking because she’s thinking it too.

She touches Luna’s head one more time, takes a breath.

The air tastes different and the world looks new, brighter despite the rain and the clouds. And yet everything is still the same - the cars, the smog, the woman she saw earlier now hurrying away so that Karen can see her dark ponytail bouncing in the wind.

She turns, walks to her car. She doesn’t watch him drive away.

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She spends the rest of the morning in a bit of a daydream. She catches herself staring out of the window on more than one occasion before lunch, absently running her fingers over her lips whenever her hands aren’t occupied. And she can’t help it, but she imagines more. Her body under his as he pins her to her bed, his mouth on her neck, her breasts, her belly, her thighs.

*Idle hands are the devil’s workshop indeed.* And judging by the quality of her thoughts the devil has come to collect.

Ellison isn’t there and there’s nothing from him in her inbox either so she decides to let sleeping dogs lie and wait for him to come to her. There’s really not all that much to say anyway.
Joe tries to ask her about Friday’s altercation but she brushes him off, tells him it was a professional disagreement and isn’t there any weather he needs to lie about. He flashes a grin at her and asks if she wants to go out with a group of the production people tonight for drinks. It’s just down at Josie’s, he says, and maybe afterwards they could grab some takeout, just the two of them?

And she knows this is how it starts. That he’s found that courage he’s been looking for for months now to ask her out and has done it in the most innocuous way possible. And she doesn’t want to dash his hopes. She’s not cruel like that. But at the same time Frank Castle sleeps in her bed and even if what happened this morning hadn’t happened, and sleeping was all they did with no chance of it ever going further, she can’t go on dates and come home to slide between the sheets with him and let his hands turn her skin fevered and his lips send shivers down her spine. She’s not willing to give that up, doesn’t think she ever will be.

Come what may.

She declines and she can see the disappointment on Joe’s face, the joy going out of his eyes but he recovers quickly, plasters on another grin.

“Maybe another time then,” he says cheerfully but she can hear the catch in his voice, the resignation. There isn’t going to be another time and he knows it. But she smiles at him and shrugs and he walks out of her office before she can say anything.

She sighs, leans back in her chair and closes her eyes, pinches the bridge of her nose between two fingers and stops when she remembers that it’s a habit she’s picked up from Ellison and she doesn’t want to be picking up anything from him right about now.

She lets her mind wander for a while, thinks about Foggy and the upcoming party and the little black dress she wants to wear; thinks about Pickle and how now that Frank’s gone she’s going to have to find somewhere new to sleep and not pressed up against the small of his back like a fucking barnacle on a steamship. And then her thoughts segue right back to this morning and Frank’s mouth on hers, his hand pressing hard into her hip.

She thought a kiss would change everything and maybe it did. Maybe everything is different. But she’s still here and she’s fine and she’s still Karen Page: Intrepid Reporter, Lover of Vigilantes and Holder Back of Tears under Extreme Duress. And he’s going to come home soon and they’re going to work all of this out.
He’s not going to let her fall. She’s going to do the same for him.

And suddenly again she has that irrational idea that somewhere they can find a solution, a happy ending, that maybe things could work out. Even though things have literally never worked out for Karen Page. Ever. That’s just not on the cards. It’s just not part of the fucking bitch of a universe’s plan. She has her Punisher and she’s going to hold onto him. Two hands. And never let go. And Karen knows what happens when you go up against the world, when you fight enemies that aren’t real. When you stop being like Frank and taking out the bad guys one by bloody one and instead you aim high and hard.

It never works. And it’s not going to work this time.

But for now she can dream. For now she doesn’t need to think too far ahead.

She touches her lips again, runs her fingers over them. He must be in Jersey by now - the drive isn’t long and she wonders if he’s thinking about her. If he’s also remembering how she felt, what her kisses tasted like. Or if he’s just being Frank and pushing all of that to the back of his mind and focusing on Luna and whether this place - whatever it is - is right for her.

He hasn’t said when he’ll be back and she didn’t push him. This is about him giving up something he loves desperately and dearly. This is about doing the right thing even if it is hard. And, as she suspects, it’s about reconnecting with this woman she knows only as Kat and whatever reason it is that she owes him the favour she does.

And no, she didn’t ask and he didn’t tell. Not because he wants to keep secrets but maybe because she’s not ready to deal with that aspect of his life just yet. She’s glad though, glad that there are people other than her to look out for him, glad that others can see the goodness in him as well. Even if there are times that he can’t.

“Buy you a cup of coffee Page?”

It's like a needle scratching across a record, a horrible jolt out of her own head as she turns to look at her door.

Ellison. Leaning. Ill-fitting pants and his beard looks terrible. So not much has changed. Except he looks sheepish, contrite in a way she hasn’t really seen before. And his smile is hopeful. Fake, but hopeful nonetheless.
“You can say no. I'm not pulling rank,” he says and his humour is also fake. “But I really hope you say yes. It'll do us some good to get out anyway.”

“Not like I've spent much time here over the last couple of days,” she says pointedly and he shrugs.

“You'll make it up. You always do.” He stands for a while waiting for her to say something and when she doesn't he starts again. “Come on. It's just coffee. And I know a place where the mugs are clean and they don't use instant.”

Despite herself she smiles.

“I should only agree if it's Josie’s,” she says and his smile falters. “You deserve a mug that used to be home to a cockroach.”

He recoils a little at that and his expression is enough to tell her that imagining a roach is as bad for him as actually seeing one, like the very thought dirtied his mind.

“You want Josie’s, we’ll go to Josie’s,” he sighs. “Do they even serve coffee there?”

“Uh-huh,” she nods. “Salmonella’s on the side though.”

He makes a face like he can't believe she would even joke about this.

She lets him ponder that a while and then she relents. “Okay, let's go see your fancy coffee shop. We’ll see how it compares.”

The relief on his face is almost comical and she finds that she is struggling to stay angry at him. It doesn't help that he was 90% right in pretty much everything he said on Friday. And not just the stuff about Frank but the fact that he does look out for her and he does give her a hell of a lot of leeway. And it is patently ridiculous that Karen Page who was an unqualified legal secretary who is now technically an unqualified journalist, despite her actual skill, has an office of her own and the freedom to write almost anything she pleases on account of Ellison’s belief and defence of her.
And his mentoring. She can't forget that.

He is good to her. She can be good back.

She grabs her purse and they head out.

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It's not as awkward as she expects. Still though it's a hell of a thing to realise that, simply on account of his absence, Matthew Murdock is just about the only man in her life who has not given her some kind of trouble today. The bar is apparently very low.

Very, very low.

But Ellison is reserved and kind and the mugs are indeed clean and the coffee shop cosy.

He apologises first and foremost. Tells her he was out of line and insufferable and if she wants to go the HR he won't contest it and is happy to go on whatever people skills training they think he needs. Or alternatively, join a chain gang, because he thinks that will have much the same effect on his personality.

And she snorts. Tells him she agrees there's no cure for being a jerk and he purses his lips at her and sips his caramel latte frappe with extra cream and chocolate sprinkles.

“You do know where he is though,”

He isn't asking. And it doesn't seem like he's trying to ferret any information out of her but she's been here before and she doesn't trust him. Not that much anyway.

“You've made up your mind Mitchell. It doesn't matter what I say.”

He looks at her over the top of his glasses.
“Evasive. I like that. It's clever. And you're better at that than lying. But your game face Karen…”

She doesn't answer. Sips her coffee too; he's right about it, it's good. Deep and rich.

“Okay look,” he says. “I'm going to be straight with you. The board is a bunch of dicks. They have no idea how news works and all they can do is lament the death of print.

“Now I'm not saying print isn't dying. It is. And maybe that isn't the worst thing in the world. We need the goddamn trees. And technically loss of paper shouldn't mean loss of news. We still have to populate the website and the app. Just because people don't want to hold a paper doesn't mean they don't want to read the news. But the board is still desperate for that big splash. They want the print edition to do better because we can sell the space for more…”

He trails off and she knows this grates him. He told her once how he hates that in its most cynical definition a reporter's job is putting words on a page so that readers will see the advert next to it. She's loathe to admit it, but it's true.

“Anyway, what I'm saying here is that if we could position ourselves as the paper that can get the exclusives... if we can interview Daredevil, if we can start talking to these people who apparently are, well, a little larger than life, I could get the board off my back. A book itself could come later but we could start building hype now. And, like I said on Friday, Daredevil could just be the beginning.”

He makes sense, more than she wants him to. And the truth is while she can turn down the book, getting a directive from her boss to interview Daredevil is a little less cut and dry. She's a reporter and that's a story.

“Look I'm not gonna force you,” he says. “And I'm sorry I can't ask you to do this for Frank Castle.”

She snorts. “Like Frank Castle would agree if I asked.”

He doesn't laugh though. Instead he looks at her long and hard.

“I think we both know he would Karen,” He's dead serious. “If you asked he would. Even if it would mean exposing himself.”
She doesn't know how to answer that and she can feel her cheeks turning pink under his gaze.

“Seems to me a while ago you were convinced Frank Castle was trying to kill me.”

He inclines his head and takes another sip of coffee, cream catching in his moustache.

“And I was wrong. Look I'm not saying I like Frank or what he does. He's unhinged and even you know that, no matter what else is going on there. But he's saved your life at least twice that I know of and I'd say that's probably about a third to half of the actual total.”

He's right again. And she realises how much she underestimates him. He's annoying and curmudgeonly and he can be a bully but he's also smart and not just because she sucks at lying and he can catch her out.

“Anyway, enough about Frank Castle. Right now the world thinks he's dead and I'm guessing I'd lose you if I did anything to change its mind.”

She gives him a sharp look and he holds up his hands. “Sorry. Sorry. Look I'm not going to say anything. Even if I was stupid enough I have no proof and Page, despite what happened on Friday, I care about you. I don't want to jeopardise that.”

Okay …

“So what are you asking me Mitchell? Why are we here?”

He puts his empty mug down and wipes his mouth with a serviette, looks at it like it's now infected and puts it on his saucer, pushes it slightly further away than he needs to.

“Honestly, right now I don't know. I want to say I'm sorry. I was wrong…” he trails off and she knows that he's not admitting to being wrong in his assessment of the situation, but rather his execution. “And I would very much like to continue working with you and I would like it if you felt the same.”

He grins and sits back in his chair, pulls off his glasses and starts cleaning them on his shirt.

“I guess, I just wanted to put our heads together. You get this journalism gig. You're young and idealistic…” he gives her a long and pointed look. “But you get it. You're good.

“The board was harsh Karen and I need something. Something to get those numbers up, some exclusive. I’m asking you because you can get people to talk, to tell you things,” he huffs, looks to the side and wipes some imaginary crumbs off his shirt. “I want the book. I'm not letting that go. I want it because I think it's an opportunity. I think it could be big and I think you're the person to kick it off. But that's a little far into the future. We can put a pin in it until you’re ready, but I need something and I need it soon, before the next board review which is in August. Because if we don’t get it, the board is going to start overruling me and they’re going to insist on retrenchments and cuts or worse.”

“Worse?”

“Yeah… cat blogs…”

She chuckles and he smiles with her. And she’s not angry with him anymore. She can’t be. Not about the clickbait, not about Friday either. She doesn’t even hate the book idea as much as she used to, although she’s not going to say anything about that just yet. Ellison is difficult and used to getting his own way but when he’s honest and aboveboard she finds it hard to turn him down.

“Okay,” she says and he looks up at her like he must have heard her wrong. “Give me some time and I'll find your exclusive.”

He nods and she continues.

“Does it have to be Daredevil though? Could it be something else?”

He shakes his head. “No, just something big. What were you thinking?”
She looks at him pointedly and it doesn't take long before he sighs exasperatedly and bangs his hands on the table.

“Oh god Page, not Smirnov again.”

He rolls his eyes and she gives him an annoyed look. And fair enough, it's not that she has anything concrete but it feels like there's something coming. Something in the air that'll deliver him into her lap, a false move that'll expose him. And she'll be ready.

“Give me a little leeway with it. Just a few more days and if it doesn’t work out, I’ll ask Daredevil for the interview. I’ll get you something one way or another, just don’t force my hand on this.”

He starts. She knew he would. The theatre. The sports field. The town hall. She waits him out. Sometimes he's like a child with this. A lot of bluster and then he wears himself out.

But then again he's also smart. Too smart for his own damn good. And when he's eventually gotten through his rant he gives her a knowing look.

“What is it with you and Daredevil? I know you and Castle have some kind of history, which I'm putting down to you wanting to save rabid dogs or something, but the man in the red suit? Why are you so dead set on avoiding him? So dead set that you'd rather go on this wild goose chase instead of just giving him a call?”

The question catches her off guard. And that in itself is stupid because it's not really unexpected that Ellison would ask it. It's also not unexpected that it doesn't take him long to figure out the answer.

“Jesus Christ Karen,” he says as understanding dawns on his face. “The Punisher and Daredevil? Really? Do you have a death wish or do you just wear eau de vigilante on your days off?”

“It's really not like that. It was a one-time thing … it wasn't really even a thing,” she says and he gives her a look that tells her he doesn't believe her for one millisecond.

“How can you be so anti-clickbait when you're basically delivering that shit right into my lap?” he asks. “‘Area woman reveals seven-point plan to nabbing your own crime fighter. Number four will blow your mind!’”
She can’t help it and she giggles and seemingly encouraged he continues.

“Have you got what it takes to stand up to the Punisher? Find out with this one easy quiz.

“Daredevil saves woman from ninja kidnapper. You won’t believe what happens next.”

She knows he’ll carry on as long as he can, and while he's amusing, that could easily be the rest of the day, so she takes charge of the conversation, steers him away from both his amusement at his own ingenuity and his interest in her love life. She knows it won't deter him but at least they can get through this coffee without another bust up about lady boners.

“Tell you what. Let me worry about my social life and getting you something big. You worry about clean crockery and evading the cat blogs.”

His smile falters and he narrows his eyes at her and for a second she thinks he's going to push. Ask her for details, demand a blow by blow account of her love life, such as it may be. But he doesn't.

Suddenly sober, he sighs, runs a hand through his hair and looks away, calls the waitress for the check.

“Karen, be careful. I'm not saying this as a boss or whatever. I was wrong about Castle and I own that. But these people you know, him, Daredevil. They're dangerous even if they are not trying to kill you. Hell, even if Castle’s protecting you it's still not safe. In fact him caring for you could make things even more dangerous for you.”

It's sweet. It's so sweet of him and she reaches across the table and squeezes his hand briefly.

“You and your patriarchal bullshit,” she says lightly and he purses his lips.

“You can't embarrass me with that Page. I said what I said and I'm sticking with it.”

He's good to her and it means something knowing he cares. But she's not ready to let him off the
hook that easy.

She narrows her eyes. “Local reporter investigates sexism in the workplace. What she finds shocks the nation.”

“Yeah, yeah. Come on,” he says, grinning despite himself. “You have time to make up.”

And she nods.

She does.

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Later that night lying in an empty bed with Pickle pressed into her side she doesn't think about any of this. Smirnov, Daredevil, Ellison. No stories or interviews or exclusives. She leaves her work at work for once, where it belongs.

Instead, she touches her lips again, imagines Frank kissing her, his mouth hot and fevered on hers, little butterfly kisses against her jaw, her throat, scattered over her shoulders and breasts.

Lower maybe. Her belly, her thighs and that burning space between.

The bed smells of him. Heavy and warm. Soap and gunpowder and coffee. And she holds his pillow to her nose, breathes him in; imagines him lying beside her, hot as a blast furnace as he pulls her closer and his hands brush lightly over her skin, turning it to gooseflesh and making her arch against him. She thinks of him at the cabin and what would have happened if he turned around, if he saw her standing there naked… naked save for a small pair of translucent panties that showed off more than they covered. If he would have taken her.

*How* he would have taken her.

She closes her eyes, thinks of his gaze and the way it eats her up, the hunger on his face and how he doesn't even try to hide it. Not that he could. Not anymore. Not with the way she felt him pressing hard against her today, not with the way he put his mouth on hers and swallowed her whole.
A breathy moan in the back of her throat and she lets her hand travel down over her breasts, her stomach, her hip, under her shorts and nestle between her thighs.

She's hot and wet. Soaking *soaking* wet. And her skin is swollen. She's not surprised. She's done nothing but think about him like this for the longest time and today they took another step closer to making it a reality. Today she touched him and tasted him and felt the desire in him. Today they crossed that point of no return, that line in the sand.

There's no going back. They both know it. And that's okay. She doesn't want that option on the table anymore. And, despite everything he's lost and all his rage and pain and confusion, he doesn't either.

She runs her fingers over the crease of her thigh where her skin is hot and slippery. And then up her soft, smooth flesh to the hard little bead at the apex of her lips. She sighs, lets out a little moan and rubs downwards in a firm stroke. Her hands aren't like his. Not nearly as rough and demanding as she imagines they would be on her, but still, it feels good. It feels really good and she chokes back a sob, does it again, lifts her hips to her palm, slips a finger inside herself, then another. Gently she presses upwards, gasps hard as she finds the right spot even if the angle feels awkward.

She hasn't done this in a while. A long while. Not with him here but also not for a long time before that too. And she wonders why. Why she's neglected this part of herself, why she's deemed it inconsequential until now.

Another small sound pushes itself out of her throat and she imagines him lying next to her, curled around her, mouth to her throat, hands in her hair, whispering in her ear. His voice like gravel as he tells her things. Things like he loves her and she's beautiful and then things like how to touch herself, what to show him.

She presses hard inside herself again, takes a breath, another stroke on her clit.

And she's about to give herself over to it. Let this happen, even if part of her wants to wait for it, for him. But this waiting has gone on for so long now that she's not even sure when it became “waiting” as such, when it morphed from her everyday life into expectation, anticipation. So no, she wants it. She wants him but she wants *it* too.

And then she hears her phone ring and when she opens her eyes she can see its light burning brightly
and throwing blue shadows across the room.

She sighs and pushes herself up onto her elbows, leans across Pickle to grab at it, but as her hand
 closes around it, it goes dead and the light starts to fade.

She doesn't recognise the number. There's no voice message either and when she calls back all she
gets is a generic answering service which gives no indication of who the caller is. She wonders if it's
Frank but something tells her it's not. He's unlikely not to have a private number and either way he'd
leave a message. But she doesn't let it bother her. Wrong number, ass dial, cold calling to sell her
insurance she doesn't need, she has bigger things to worry about.

Much much bigger things. Like the fact that she doesn't have the man she loves' cell number and the
fact that she doesn't know how to get hold of him, that he could just disappear and she'd never ever
know where he went.

Except he promised he'd come home. He promised. And she said she'd be waiting for him.

And they don't lie.

She rolls back onto her side and buries her face in his pillow.

*They don't lie.*
Everyone here knows everyone here is thinking about somebody else

Chapter Summary

Frank might be out of town for a few days but it seems Karen has more than enough to keep her occupied.

Chapter Notes

Okay so... I know it's been a while but that is because I was trying to get this chapter and the next one written before I posted. The reason is two-fold. Firstly because I get that this chapter is light on Frank and heavy on plot and I'm missing him a lot and I wanted to be able to post the following chapter within a few days, which currently seems more than possible - so look out for it. The second reason is because there's a lot of set up in this chapter and I wanted to see if I could make it accessible and understandable. I'm hoping it makes sense. And I am hoping I don't mess this up. Or if I do that you'd all forgive me.

Other than that I am really excited about this chapter because I'm getting to finally bring in a character I have been wanting to write for a while. And I am so happy with the way that turned out.

Anyway, let's go see what Karen gets up to while Frank is out of town.

Song title is from Matchbox 20's Back 2 Good

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She tries not to think about him too much.

_Tries._

Fails.

Keeping him out of her thoughts was never going to be a roaring success anyway. And the truth is it’s not like he’s unpleasant to think about. Not like the set of his jaw and the pout of his lips, the hard dark eyes, aren’t good things to spend her time remembering.

So she does. That and the taste of his lips, the warmth of his hands. The way he stopped being afraid to say what he was feeling.
To feel what he was feeling.

And then of course his desire for her. His need.

He’ll consume her and she can’t wait.

But not tonight. And probably not tomorrow either. He didn't say when he'd be back and she didn't ask. He might make her world better, but he doesn't make it right. That she has to do by herself.

She realises it's a very fine line she's walking; missing him terribly and at the same time needing this space away from him without actually wanting it. It's confusing and it messes with her head and she's almost grateful for the distraction of Smirnov’s party - the fact that she has something else to think about.

She picks up her phone, checks the time. Foggy will be here soon and she's not going to keep him waiting. Honest to God though she hopes he doesn't come to the door because Irene is on duty tonight (and yes she wants to laugh about that because it feels like Irene is on duty every night) and she can just imagine the steely-eyed looks she's going to get when yet another man comes calling.

Irene really would have done better as a matron in a ladies residence. With curfews. And room inspections. In 1945. But apparently she's stuck in the wrong decade and taking that out on every woman who dares accept any of the newfound freedoms of modern society. Such as they may be.

Karen sighs. Nothing to be done for it. Nothing at all.

She finishes her make up, applies a little lipstick and starts on her hair. She's decided on loose curls, a few sparkly hairpins. Nothing fancy. She wants to look pretty but innocuous at the same time, more arm candy than not. Someone to be seen but not really remembered.

It's a demeanour she realises she cultivated well for a while now, often without knowing it. A nervous disposition worn like armour so no one would pay attention to her, so that no one would really see her. And then somebody did. And he cut through the bullshit she didn't even know she was putting out into the world. So she stopped living it. She stopped pretending she wasn't the woman who shot James Wesley or the girl who had stars in her eyes for Matthew Murdock. She can be all these things and she can be none of them at all.
It's allowed. *She's* allowed.

Naked, save for short robe, she goes into the bedroom, sits on the bed and nudges Pickle away gently when she tries to climb onto her lap.

She pulls on a pair of panties, rolls her stockings up her legs, fixes the garter ties, tightens her bra and then for a moment she just sits there looking down at the floor.

She wonders if Frank would like this. Her, decked out like a clichéd *Victoria's Secret* advert. The black lace, the satin, the pale tops of her thighs where they peek out next to the sheerness of her stockings.

On the one hand she thinks it's almost *too* obvious. It's *too* expected. On the other, she did see the flare in his eyes when the wind lifted her skirt on the roof that night, the way he watched the lace and her legs and how she dismissed it with a nonchalant “Not like he's never seen legs before.”

But maybe that was wrong. He hasn't seen *her* legs. He hasn't seen *her* tits. And maybe that is the difference.

Maybe.

Regardless, she has no way of knowing until she does. *If* she does. And she wonders how much of a question that still is. She doesn't want to be presumptuous and she sure as shit doesn't want to tempt fate by making plans, especially *those* kind of plans. But she also doesn't want to be stupid. Naive.

It's another fine line. Another balancing act. And she's getting so tired of those that it's inevitable that she’ll fall down. Crash. Break. But until then she’ll let herself wonder about these things - the little things that aren't little at all.

He does like the dress she’s picked for tonight though - of that at least she’s sure. He didn't say as much but it was easy to see on his face when she pulled it out of her wardrobe, the way his eyes roamed over the black satin, the silvery beaded detail on the bodice.

She can feel her thighs going loose as she thinks on it, the warmth between her legs, that gentle
flutter in the pit of her belly.

And no, no she doesn’t have time for this. She's not going to start something which she has no hope of finishing. But, as she rests a hand on the silky skin of her thigh, she really wants to. She really really does. But maybe she wants him to do it more. And again those images come to her. Him looming over her in her bed, his mouth hot on her skin, sparks shooting down her spine one by one and then all at once, faster and harder, until it makes her crack, makes her *shatter*, and then the same for him.

She wonders if he's thinking of her. *How* he's thinking of her. If she's naked and ready and wet for him; or alternatively, if he's managed to exert some of that ridiculous self-control and pushed all that away. Maybe in his thoughts she's just the sweet girl waiting at home for him.

Or maybe he also knows she can be both.

She tells herself to get it together, to stop this nonsense. There’ll be time to think about all these things later. But not now with the clock ticking and Foggy on his way.

She stands, reaches for her dress and slides it over her head, smooths a hand over the beadwork.

Her black rose necklace would have been perfect for this. Just dark enough to match, just formal enough to sparkle. Perfect for *this*. Not perfect for her. Not who she is. And she doesn't think too long on it further than to hope it's still around Maria’s neck, keeping her safe, keeping her promise.

Instead she opts for small crystal earrings and a cuff bracelet and she's just about to spray some perfume and step into what she considers some ill-advised silver high heels when her buzzer goes and Irene tells her she has a “gentleman caller”, in pretty much the same tone Karen imagines she would have said “pimp” or “john”.

*Fancy man.*

She says she’s on her way and Irene makes a sound that could be surprise or also very possibly disappointment but Karen's already grabbing her coat and purse and she doesn't get to hear the rest of Irene’s repertoire of disapproving noises.

She has no doubt there's enough to keep her going for the next few weeks.
Foggy is leaning on Irene’s desk when she gets downstairs and it's possible he looks even more dapper than he did on Monday. His suit is charcoal and she thinks it might be tailor-made because it hugs him just right, covering the belly he's constantly bemoaning and making him look sleek and suave. His shoes are shiny and his hair tied back neatly and he looks the very picture of a high-profile city lawyer.

He sucks in a breath when he sees her too, makes absolutely no effort to hide the fact that he's checking her out from her too high-heels to her too low bodice and the pretty pins in her hair.

And just when it's gone on long enough to be a little awkward he pulls a face, sticks his tongue out at her, and her goofy best friend is back. She does the same and he chuckles, holds out his arm dramatically and gives Irene a wink over his shoulder, adds some finger guns for effect.

“Do I make the cut? Am I chic enough?” she asks and he pretends to ponder this, expression overly conflicted as he takes the opportunity to fake leer at her again.

“You'll do,” he says opening the door for her.

“I'll do?”

“It was a toss up between you and your building security, but I thought she might kill me.”

“Astute…”

“Oh thanks. Your ass is cute too.”

She gives him a gentle punch on the arm and he chuckles.

She's glad to see him in a better mood than he was on Monday and she decides not to bring up Luna unless he does, and for now he seems content to leave that topic alone.

“Come on,” he says as he unlocks his car, glances around at the wet sidewalks, the droplets covering
his windscreen. “The rain isn't going to stay away for long.”

He's right. It isn't.

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The party is everything she expects, and everything rubbing shoulders with the glitterati should be. Except there isn't too much in the way of glitterati. Maybe a few low-level celebrities and some even lower-level politicians at best.

It's in one of Smirnov’s hotels in Manhattan; big and ostentatious, all sparkling crystal chandeliers and too bright lights, stuffy looking waiters in penguin suits serving up canapés on silver trays - and Foggy’s arm tightens on hers when he sees some Iberico ham parcels heading their way.

“These little Spanish pigs only eat acorns and olives Karen,” he whispers like it's a state secret. “And you can taste it.”

She grins at him, asks him how much time he spent googling that and the sheepish look on his face tells her everything she needs to know.

The only truly questionable choice Smirnov seems to have made is a band - complete with a long-haired stubbly front man - playing some classic rock and other less classic rock songs which they slowed down so the 80s and 90s cheese is not immediately recognisable, although if Frank were here he would claim that that is a bug and not a feature.

And she doesn’t imagine him standing by her side, his hand resting on her back and his body so close to hers she can feel the heat of his skin through his clothes. She doesn’t imagine what it would be like to see him in a suit again, nor how it would be to dance with him here, hold him close and have his fingers digging into her hips, his lips pressed to her ear. She doesn’t imagine any of that.

And Karen Page is a shitty liar, even to herself.

Next to her Foggy grabs a handful of his ham parcels and tries very hard not to stuff them all into his mouth at once. He almost succeeds.
And when she sniggers at him he gives her an attempt at a filthy look and starts pointing out a few people he knows: work colleagues, bosses, others he recognises from the guest list. Finally he nods to Smirnov’s people: four tall men doing a bad job at hiding the fact that they’re bodyguards, a petite brunette who is apparently Smirnov’s main squeeze and some old man who is an adviser.

There's also a silent partner, Foggy says, but no one has seen or met her, which was partly one of the reasons for his firm politely deciding to disentangle themselves from this specific client.

He says he doesn't know too much of what actually went down as he dealt with a lot of the low-level stuff and wasn't really involved in client meetings. But through the grapevine it seems the powers that be were concerned about this secret woman for some reason and weren't too comfortable with the situation.

She flags that away. It's an interesting twist and one she thinks worth looking into. Silent partners in and of themselves are not weird. But for a firm like Foggy’s to give up a client like Smirnov just because of that is unusual. Which means someone somewhere either knows who she is and doesn’t like it or doesn’t know who she is and thinks that’s too big a risk for the firm to take.

Foggy says they also found evidence in the last few days that Smirnov got a hell of a cash boost a few months ago but no one could trace the source, which was another point of concern. The odd thing was that didn't seem to be related to the silent partner.

“Heroin?” she asks. “Trafficking?”

Foggy shrugs. “If it was, it was so well laundered the Lord himself may have performed a miracle to clean it. Or that germaphobe boss of yours.”

Another flag and she grabs a lonely Iberico ham parcel as a waiter walks by and pops it in her mouth before Foggy can make a claim on it - he's right, you can taste the fucking acorns - and he glares at her, narrows his eyes and hands her a glass of red wine.

“What's the agenda for tonight?” she asks.

He shrugs.

“I think we schmooze for now, then we probably have to hear some speeches about how wonderful
Smirnov is for Hell’s Kitchen. He’s going to talk about the theatre and the soup kitchen and the park. We will probably need to clap. Then he’s going to tell us what part of the city he plans to buy and bulldoze next and then we get to eat. I don’t think there’s fireworks but there is some acrobatic *cirque de soleil* shit during dinner. Afterwards there’s dancing.” He nods to the band. “All your favourite hits played so slow as to make them unidentifiable.”

She laughs, sips her wine as he waves at some coworkers who she vaguely recalls from the last do of this kind - the night that ended on the roof with fire in the sky and Frank Castle solidifying his place in her heart… right before he broke it.

But that seems like it was decades ago and he won’t do it again. He *won’t*.

And briefly she can feel herself falling into one of those spirals, one of those Frank Castle fugues where he’s too present in her thoughts and he distracts her with arbitrary musings when Foggy nudges her and inclines his head to one of the archways.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” he says in her ear.

But she doesn’t have to even look to know it's Matt. She’s developed a kind of intuition where he’s concerned and again she thinks that maybe he's not the only one with diluted superpowers, maybe she has some of her own - secrets he can’t tell just by the smell of her skin or cadence of her voice.

She turns, sees him handing his coat to the concierge, his movements smooth, practiced and not for the first time she marvels at him and everything he can do, everything he shouldn’t do. They could have been something once, once upon a time when he made her heart beat faster and her legs weak. But not now. Not anymore.

Matt looks good though; very, very good in a fitted black suit, crisp white shirt and slightly obnoxious cravat. But it’s Elektra who steals the moment. Petite and yet somehow also statuesque, she stands at his side in a dress the colour of blood. It’s long down to her ankles with a slit up the side to mid-thigh and gathered into a tight halter with rubies at her throat.

She looks amazing. They both do.

“I’m still winning in the suit stakes tonight,” Foggy grumbles defensively and she nods. He is. He definitely is.
And even though she knows he can't see them she feels Matt’s attention settle on her and Foggy, watches how he leans in close to say something to Elektra and how, in turn, her gaze also flickers to them.

To her. Very specifically to her.

She expects scrutiny - she knows what it feels like to be sized up, evaluated. Found lacking. But there’s actually very little of that in the way Elektra is looking at her. Maybe some, maybe only a touch. Mostly there’s something that looks a bit like relief and even more like opportunity. Something that isn't remotely malicious but instead almost knowing. And she can't shake the feeling that she's missed something. That if she just had a few minutes to think hard enough a piece of this strange puzzle would click into place. But whatever it is, it’s evasive and slippery and moves just out of reach every time she thinks she has a handle on it.

And then Elektra looks away and it almost feels like being dismissed, if it were possible to be dismissed by someone who never admitted you into their presence in the first place. She turns to Matt and for a few seconds they talk, some nodding from him, a little frowning from her and then she links her arm through his and they start heading across the room to where Karen and Foggy are standing.

And next to her, under his breath, but loud enough for someone with bat ears like Matt to hear, Foggy starts to sing.

“You walked into to the party like you were walking onto a yacht,
Your hat strategically dipped below one eye,
Your scarf it was apricot...”

She elbows him gently in the ribs.

“Hush. He’ll hear you.”

He gives her a sour, almost exasperated look and carries on.

“You had one eye in the mirror as you watched yourself gavotte
And all the girls dreamed that they'd be your partner, they'd be your partner...”
She elbows him again and tells him to stop but he ignores her, and, if anything, gets louder as Matt and Elektra approach.

“You’re so vain
You probably think this song is about you…”

“Don’t know about being able to watch myself gavotte,” Matt says good-naturedly as he draws close, nods to his cane. “Not even sure anyone gavottes anymore either. We'd all look a little weird.”

Foggy shrugs. “I’ll have to work on it, change it up. Maybe something like ‘you insist on wearing tight leather and that gets us all distraught’.”

There’s a moment when they’re both so quiet she thinks she’d be able to hear a pin drop inside their little circle and then they each grin stupidly and clap each other on the back and it’s not nearly as godawful as she thought it would be.

Elektra gives her a mild smile and she nods, gives her an equally mild one in return. It’s ridiculous in the extreme but the two of them haven’t actually ever officially been introduced despite the fact that they’ve somehow ended up in strangely intimate situations together a few times. Matt didn’t seem too interested in explaining why she found Elektra in his bed, preferring to adopt the attitude that she should trust him because he is who he is. And maybe that would have made sense if he hadn’t been lying about almost everything else but that wasn’t really how things shook out. On some level she thinks maybe his feelings are still hurt by her reaction and truthfully she accepts she didn’t handle things well, but neither did he and here they all are pretending they don’t know each other but also that they kind of do and it just feels really fucked up.

Either way, Elektra doesn’t seem too concerned about unfucking it - not that Karen thinks she should be - and whispers something to Matt before removing her arm from his and heading off in the direction of the bar. He barely seems to notice and Karen finds that disconcerting somehow.

But she doesn’t have time to consider it because his attention is on her and suddenly he's moving in, filling her space and kissing her gently on each cheek. He smells of cologne, something fresh and clean, a hint of sandalwood and cinnamon. He doesn't linger but says her name softly and touches her elbow with a familiarity she’s not really sure they have anymore.

“It's been a while,” he says.
It hasn't. Not really. It's not like they saw each other much after his Big Reveal, whether by fate or design or both, but seeing each other twice in ten days is hardly “a while” by any reasonable standards.

“Not that long,” she says but he ignores it.

“Is everything alright with you Karen? I wanted to call after...” He trails off and she knows he's talking about the Friday before last - the night he smelled the blood in her car and she made him go home so she could save Frank Castle’s life. The night she did save Frank Castle’s life.

“I’m fine. Everything is fine,” she says and she thinks that she could even be telling the truth. Everything really is as close to an approximation of “fine” as it's been in a while.

“Are you sure?” he asks and he still hasn't let go of her arm. “If you need me… anything...”

There’s a hint of something in his voice. Something that belies his smoothness, something that's almost begging her to allow him to be included, not be frozen out anymore. And part of her genuinely wants to give him that; give them that chance. Not to find out what they could have had - that ship sailed a long time ago - but maybe to recapture some of that gentle friendship they once shared.

But she looks at him, at his face, at the place where he’s holding her arm, and she’s not sure he can do that. Not sure he wants to.

“Karen…”

“I know where you are. Thank you Matt,” she interrupts and he looks at her like she’s slapped him. But then he nods and seemingly lets it go, even if she doesn’t believe it will be for long.

And suddenly the atmosphere is almost unbearably strained and she has to fight the desire to look down at her shoes, to walk away. It kills her a little that things are like this now - that the water is still flowing toxic and polluted under the bridge between them all - and she realises she has no idea how they’re going to get through another five minutes of this, let alone an entire night. And then Elektra appears again at Matt’s side with two glasses of wine and she takes a long look at the three of them: Foggy’s worried face, Karen's frown and finally Matt’s hand where it rests on her arm.
“Oh come on,” she says and her voice is low, sultry, and Karen can't help but see the way Matt responds to it - a quick jerk of the head and a small smile on his lips, the way he releases her suddenly and almost guiltily. “We all know this is awkward as fuck, let's not get ourselves down on something as ridiculous as some shared saliva.”

For a second there's shocked silence as they all look at her and she thinks Matt will say something, try and smooth it over. But Foggy beats him to it and starts to sing again.

“Well I heard you went up to Saratoga and your horse naturally won,
Then you flew your lear jet up to Nova Scotia to see the total eclipse of the sun,
You're where you should be all the time and when you're not you're with some underworld spy or the wife of a good friend…”

Elektra laughs and Karen snorts and the horrible mood breaks and briefly Karen lets herself hope this could one day be easier. That maybe there's a chance that they could all let bygones be bygones and find some kind of camaraderie again. In whatever form it might take.

And after that they talk. Reasonably. About important things. No petty jealousies and past mistakes. They talk about Smirnov and how this feels no different from Fisk, how he's managed to step smoothly and easily into the void that was left. And how he's put a more charming veneer on it. He's handsome and amenable, friendly in a way Fisk didn't have in him. He's not awkward and no one can dig up any dirt on him. And even this silent partner might not be anything. It's not a crime to be private, not a crime to hide all your contacts and business dealings.

That's when she notices a flicker in Elektra's eyes - it's fleeting but it's there and Karen tilts her head, watches her. And Elektra catches her gaze, nods almost imperceptibly and immediately looks away, laughs at one of Foggy's jokes and no one is any the wiser.

And then Matt is tapping her arm, asking her if the invitation was extended to the press too and if Ellison is somewhere here and she doesn't like the way he asks - as if him and “Mitchell” go way back when in fact the number of times they've met could be counted on one hand. It's not a big thing, not at all but she finds it presumptuous. Awkward.

“No,” she says. “Ellison thinks Alexei is the best thing to happen to Hell’s Kitchen since antibacterial handwash and no amount of talking will change his mind until he sees cold, hard proof that he’s up to no good.”

Matt nods thoughtfully, fiddles with his cane.
“I’m working on it. Elektra too. We’ve almost got something.” he says softly. “As soon as I do I’ll let you know, tell you everything. You can break the story Karen.”

He makes it sound like he’s her little personal servant. Like she’s sent him on this mission and he’s doing it to please her. To help her. And she doesn't like it. She doesn't like it at all.

She’s about to tell him he's doesn't need to do that - not for her, not for whatever misguided reason he might have - when she notices the shadow over Elektra’s face, a sudden flare of something that could be disappointment, but looks more like fear.

And then the bell rings indicating that they all need to sit for the meal and it’s not without some relief that Karen finds herself and Foggy sitting at a table with his colleagues and not with Matt and Elektra, who seem to be with some corporate suits on the far side of the room.

“Why is Elektra here again?” she asks as Foggy adjusts his serviette across his lap, takes a swig of wine.

He shrugs. “Just saw her name on the guest list is all, figured she has some ties to the rich and famous. Or just the rich.”

“But why Smirnov?”

“I don't know what kind of circles rich people move in Karen. Maybe they all have a dollar sign on their heads that you can only see when your bank balance hits a certain number and when you do you get to join the secret club.”

“Don't you think it's just a little odd though?” she pushes and he shrugs again.

“She's a socialite. She's got a big trust fund from daddy and she looks great in Chanel. I don't think it's all that weird.”

He looks over to a beautiful but random redhead in a clingy navy dress.
“Why is she here? She doesn't work for us or him. She the face of some kind of superfood diet and she's had her picture in the papers a few times and lives in a penthouse in Manhattan.” He reaches for his wine again, chugs it and indicates to a passing waiter he wants another. “Smirnov likes rich, beautiful people Karen. Elektra ticks both boxes.”

She huffs. She guesses he has a point but then she has that sixth sense that Ellison is always banging on about and something tells her there's more to this. Something tells her that despite his apparent appreciation of Smirnov’s work, Ellison would feel it too.

She's going to trust her gut. It hasn't failed her yet.

“Frank back yet?” Foggy asks suddenly and it takes a few seconds to parse his words, claw her way out of her thoughts and back into the world.

“No, no not yet.”

“Stupid question,” he says. “If he was you'd be home, fucking like bunnies.”

“Oh come on Foggy,” she says but she can feel her face turning hot and a slick surge between her thighs at the very thought.

“No, it's not me that needs to come on,” he says. “It's you… seriously. Have you slept with him yet?”

He says every word very clearly and slowly as if he's placing a full point after each one and she's doubly relieved Matt and Elektra are on the other side of the room.

“No,” she says and she hates that she doesn't care that it's none of his business. And that she doesn't mind sharing with him.

“Well get on that. You're wasting daylight here.”

“Foggy…”
“No, Jesus. I saw him on Monday - the way he looked at you. I'm not gonna say I don't have my reservations but fucking hell, it'll do you both good. I mean it's a disaster in the long run, but seriously... You. Need. To. Get. Laid.” He stops, considers for a moment. “He does too.”

She kicks him under the table, spiky heel connecting hard with his shin and he yelps and then chuckles.

“You are terrible.” She tries to inject some mock anger into her voice but she can't even do that. There's very little Foggy could do or say that she'd consider out of line and he knows it too.

“Hey, I'm just looking out for everyone. More orgasms mean happier people. Actually, I'm pretty sure the mobster community would send you a personal thank you if you gave Frank a few. Could put him in a better mood…”

She kicks him again, is about to tell him he's being an ass, when the lights dim and the room goes quiet.

There's a few minutes when nothing happens, save for a few whispers and some strange lighting changes and then Smirnov walks up to stand next to the band at the podium.

Again she's struck by how disgustingly good looking he is. Hair wavy and blond, eyes ridiculously green. Square jaw, designer stubble and a body honed by hours in the gym. He scores an easy eleven on the Prince Charming radar, maybe a twelve. He would have been the type that her teenage self would have swooned over, stapled his pictures over her wall. Now all she feels is uncertain and slightly disconcerted, his good looks doing nothing to offset the doubts she has about him.

The crowd claps and he waves, flashes his perfect teeth. He doesn't go as far as pointing out individuals like some kind of has been rockstar but the effect is much the same. He waits a few minutes for quiet, grinning and looking away every time a new round of applause starts. It's a cultivated shyness. It's meant to appeal, make him seem human, affable. And when he speaks eventually his voice is as fake as the rest of him; slight accent, but not nearly enough for someone who apparently never left Moscow before the age of 30.

He starts by thanking everyone for coming. He talks about the honour of being here and the amazing support he has, how he couldn't have done it without the good people of Hell’s Kitchen and New York and how he's looking forward to continuing his work with them. He thanks a few people by name, even some of the lawyers at Foggy’s firm and talks briefly about how sorry he is that they're
parting ways.

Then he starts outlining his future plans and she's not surprised to hear few of them include any community involvement. He's done the soup kitchen and the sports field and he's moving onto the bigger things. And none of this surprises her. Of course he doesn't say it like that. He couches it in terms of growth and trickle-down economics. He talks about office blocks replacing the rundown apartments on 27th and a shopping mall to replace the failing school on 14th. And, when a small nervous titter runs through the crowd, he holds up his hands and smiles and assures everyone that the children there will be looked after and placed in better, safer schools. And he does it with such conviction that for a second even she believes him.

He's clever. He's so very clever and this is all so very calculated. Buy up the city piece by piece. Start small and helpful. Give people the things they need. Fix what's broken and then when they're lulled into a false sense of security, ask for more. Take that, change it too. In the end people will be begging to give their lives away.

And he's so much better at it than Fisk. So incredibly smooth. None of the anxiety and latent rage that people can sense even if they can't see. None of the overcompensation for a lack of looks or charm. It's like he's been specifically groomed for the part.

And that's something else she flags even though she's not sure why.

He finishes with a few well-placed jokes, some self-deprecating humour and invites anyone to share any concerns they may have over social media or a comments box in the lobby. And finally he thanks his investors, waxes a bit lyrical about how he couldn't have done it without their generosity and his gaze flickers to the far side of the room before he tells everyone to enjoy the evening and goes to take his place at the main table.

And then the band starts playing again and the waiters start bringing out the entrees and it’s not long before everyone has seemingly forgotten the speech and why they’re here and is distracted by taleggio cheese and bresaola that probably costs more than her and Foggy’s combined rent. And as she tastes it, she has to admit is probably worth it.

They make small talk with some of Foggy’s colleagues, an animated woman from Spain called Vicky and a dour old man who seems overly concerned about the state of garbage collection in the Kitchen. And Foggy tells her later that that is Brent and they think he's about 300 years old and you don't want to bump into him at the water cooler unless you have a lot of time to debate council services and ways to improve them.
The acrobats start as the main course is being served. They're amazing and excessive and despite herself Karen finds she's enjoying them, holding her breath as they fly through the air, as they somersault and tumble and balance in ways no human was made to do.

“That's how Marci and I wake up in the morning,” Foggy comments dryly as they watch a woman get spun on one finger high above her partner’s head. “Couple of rounds of that and you're ready for the day. What about you and Frank?”

She kicks him again but she laughs all the same and he does too.

“Great for the joints,” he adds as he takes a bite of some sesame-encrusted tuna and makes a face like he's died and gone to heaven. “But then I guess so is braining drug dealers.”

“Come on Foggy.”

He huffs. “It's just hilarious that we’re sitting here with so many reservations about someone who is at first glance a philanthropist and yet we've ascribed a “Frank will be Frank” status to well, Frank.”

“You sound like Ellison now.”

He shrugs. “Maybe I do. You have to admit he has a point.”

Yeah she does.

“Will Ellison actually publish something if anything turns up here?” Foggy indicates vaguely around the room.

“He’ll publish. It just needs to be airtight,” She pushes her fork into the middle of her plate. “Or else I need to interview Daredevil.”

Foggy nearly chokes on his tuna. “What?”

“Yeah,” she says. “He wants an exclusive to put on the front page. I've countered with this.”
“Well I'm sure Daredevil will be very disappointed to hear that…”

She purses her lips, rolls her eyes and glances over to Matt’s table.

But he's not there, the seat next to Elektra empty. She's not alone though. Smirnov is standing with his hands on the back of her chair, leaning down low and talking in her ear and she’s playing with her hair, a little knowing smile on her face.

And for the life of her Karen can't figure this out. Sure it's possible that Elektra knows him from way back when but that's highly unlikely, and sure it's possible Foggy is right and Smirnov just likes rich, beautiful socialites and that’s all there is to it but that seems like a stretch.

No, she's pretty sure there's more to this than meets the eye, that Elektra is holding some trump cards and it's very possible that finding out what's going on with her is half the battle won.

And all she needs to do is figure out a way to get Elektra to show them to her.

It turns out she doesn't have to.

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She’s alone in the ladies bathroom, retouching her lipstick by the dim light of tea candles - because apparently it makes total sense to add a romantic atmosphere to semi-public bathrooms - when the door swings open and Elektra walks in; a swish of shadowed red cloth and glittering jewels, eyes that are deep and intense, worried even, and totally at odds with the amused smile on her face.

This is not a coincidence, not at all and she looks Karen up and down for a good few seconds before she glances to the toilet stalls, tilting her head to see if she can see any feet sticking out from under the doors.

There’s nobody here though. Nobody but them, because it was always going to come to this. It almost feels like it had to.
“We haven’t been formally introduced,” Elektra’s accent is heavy but her tone is dangerously light and she doesn’t look at Karen, instead choosing to scrutinise the elaborate tigerlily arrangements hanging from the walls and ceilings.

Karen slides her lipstick into her purse, straightens. “We haven’t.”

Elektra makes a small dry sound in the back of her throat like she’s amused by this. And maybe she should be. They’re adults. They both know it’s ridiculous.

“They’re probably worried we’re going to scratch each other’s eyes out. Ripped clothes, pulled hair. They wouldn’t know whether to stop us or watch,” Elektra sighs, touches one of the lower lilies, rubs the pollen between her fingers. “That’s the problem with men. They never know if they’re fantasising about rescues or revenge. Can't tell the difference.”

Karen regards her for a moment. “Maybe you should start hanging out with better men.”

And Elektra laughs, maybe a little too long and a little too loud for the admittedly low level comeback.

“Have you Karen?” she asks. “Have you started hanging out with better men?”

Her voice is airy but the question is solid, demanding and Karen stays quiet. She might be a crappy liar and Ellison might be right about her game face, but filling uncomfortable silences has never been among the things she's felt compelled to do.

So she doesn't. She waits and she listens to the sounds of the party outside. The ooohs and ahhs as the acrobats continue their performance, the steady thud of the bass, the sound of the waiters’ voices as they walk by.

If she doesn't look away for Frank Castle it borders on ludicrous that she'd do it for Elektra Natchios. And somehow Elektra seems to know it and doesn't push.

Instead she sighs dramatically and leans back against the tiles and even though this is a farce, a cultivated persona, there's an infinitesimally small moment when Karen sees her guard go down. It's in the way her shoulders sag, the way she closes her eyes and swallows briefly before she opens them again. She looks so incredibly vulnerable - so incredibly different from the flirtatious woman
she just saw with Smirnov, the sultry femme fatale she saw earlier with Matt, that Karen almost feels blindsided.

And then it's gone.

“This party is so dull.” And there she is again. The poor little rich girl. The snob. The act.

She pushes herself away from the wall, takes a step closer to Karen and then just when it seems she’s about to get right up in her face, she turns, looks at herself in the mirror, runs a finger along the bottom of her mouth as she gets rid of some imaginary lipstick.

“Did you want something?” Karen asks.

Elektra tilts her head without looking away from her reflection and seems to consider the question.

“We all want something…” She grabs a tissue and blots underneath her eye at an equally imaginary smudge of mascara, and then turns slowly to look over her shoulder, ruby earrings catching the candlelight, making them glitter like blood under the full moon. “I want him. He wants you… and you… what do you want Karen?”

Her tone isn't harsh. There's an edge to it, yes, a lilt that sounds like baiting, daring, but it's mild. Gentle. Dangerously friendly.

And Karen realises she has two options. She can stand here and indulge this and be swatted around like a wounded moth having a bad encounter with a bored cat or she can call Elektra’s bluff and leave. She’s pretty sure she knows which way it’ll go but even if she misjudges this horribly it means she gets to go back to her table and her dessert before the longing in Foggy’s eye gets too much and her cheesecake disappears. So she tucks a piece of hair behind her ear and takes a step towards the door.

She didn’t misjudge. She didn’t misjudge at all.

Because Elektra straightens, quick as a flash, and blocks her way, one hand pushing firmly against the door handle, the other on her own hip like she’s pissed Karen would dare think of leaving before she’s said what she needs to say.
And then she narrows her eyes like she’s looking for something - looking for something she’s not really convinced she’s going to find. It could just be the standard mean girl cliché, the nonsensical and largely exaggerated rivalry of women measure each other up and ask the unanswerable question: what does she have that I don't?

And yet… and yet Karen doesn't think so. As much as Elektra's playing a part, Karen is doubtful she feels any true sense of competition. Which means it's something else.

Something more important. Something more dangerous.

And maybe she should be a little concerned, maybe even scared. Elektra gets what she wants - she always gets what she wants - and it's a solid bet she has a sai or two in her garters. But she finds she’s calm, maybe even too calm, maybe even a little tired of the antics and the shenanigans, the affected vapidity.

“Thought we weren't gonna have that cat fight?” she says but Elektra's not smiling. She's not exactly scowling either though. In fact she looks unsure, reticent. Almost like she thought this was a good idea and is now wishing she could take it back. And that strange vulnerability is there again and this time it stays.

“I…,” she stops, bites her lip and takes a deep breath, a look on her face like she's hating every second of this. “I tried to call you… but then I heard you were going to be here…”

She cuts herself off, looks away, lifting her fingers from the door handle, before taking a deep breath. “I… I need your help.”

Okay...

Okay so this is unexpected. This is entirely not how Karen anticipated this, or any, conversation with Elektra going. Sure, it wasn’t hard to see that something was up and sure, she let her brain explore the various possibilities in the brief time she’s had to think on it. And sure, it seemed likely that Elektra knew more than any of them, that she had some inroads with Smirnov, that she was playing a game. But there was also the possibility that it was none of these things and everything could be explained away innocently and succinctly.

But this? This doesn’t make any sense. It doesn’t make sense as a trap or as a genuine request.
Because even if Elektra genuinely has no ulterior motives and everything she is saying is on the level then she has no idea how she, Karen Page - underqualified reporter with little cash to spare and even fewer skills - could possibly help anyone. Let alone Elektra Natchios.

Because she can’t. And it’s nothing short of insane to think she can.

And then Elektra kind of crumbles a bit. The daddy’s girl act suddenly becoming too hard to maintain, the haughty snob just too much effort, and her face softens as she steps out of Karen’s way, leans against the wall again and pinches the bridge of her nose. She looks lost, overwhelmed. Defeated.

It’s weird and it’s disconcerting and Karen has no idea what to do or if doing something is even a requirement at this point. So she waits, lets her gaze flicker over the gleaming marble tiles, the small powder room off to the side, the sweet smelling arrangements of lilies.

And when Elektra eventually speaks her voice is cracked and so low that Karen has to strain to hear.

“Matthew ... he’s in over his head. Way over his head. And...” she pauses and looks around the room as if she searching for something to distract her before taking a deep breath, grinding her teeth. “And I can’t save him.”

Her words have a horrible pulse to them and for a moment Karen does nothing but feel the weight of the them in the air; their sounds and shapes, from the faintest outlines to the grit of their centre. And then, before she even realises she’s doing it, she starts to pick them apart, formulate thoughts, vague questions, counters. Because her brain won’t let her accept it. Because Elektra must be wrong. Because she has to be.

Except she isn’t. Something in her tone makes that clear as day. Something in how hard this is for her to say, how the words seem to have to fight their way out of her mouth and into the world. How Karen doesn’t need to even wonder if this is the first time Elektra’s voiced them and consequently the first time she’s admitted them - to herself or anyone else.

There’s no point arguing or debating this. It’s God’s honest truth and doing anything but accepting it is a waste of time and they both know it.

“He’s up in Smirnov’s suite now, sniffing around for something. He doesn’t even have a real plan, but he’s there…” Elektra sighs, runs a hand through her hair. “Fighting the good fight.”
“What’s he looking for?” Karen asks and she rolls her eyes.

“Oh I don’t know. Who the silent partner is, who the investors are,” she glances at Karen and her eyes flash dangerously. “True love.”

Karen ignores the dig. “But you do know don’t you? You know what he would find.”

And that smug smile suddenly makes a brief reappearance. “I do. And it would make all the papers.”

It’s another taunt and also a dangled carrot but she’s not going to rise to either. Elektra will tell her what she wants to know - they wouldn’t be here otherwise.

“Matthew’s sweet and perceptive but he doesn’t really get people. He’s idealistic and sometimes a little naive and he’s been obsessed with this thing since that night you were taken, the night the Punisher…” She pauses meaningfully and looks Karen straight in the eye. “... showed up at that warehouse and you disappeared with him.”

She seems to consider this for a second and then her tone changes and that little smile is back. “Had us up all night searching for the two of you. Heard you only got back the next day. Him, you… a dog. Heard you were wearing his clothes too.”

No looking away. She won't do it, even if the mention of Frank and that night and all the things that happened after make her want to. Let Elektra think whatever she wants. It couldn't be more intimate than the truth anyway.

But Elektra doesn't linger, apparently deciding her story is more important than making Karen uncomfortable.

“Matthew’s been running the city raw trying to find out what's going on. Got himself so hopelessly beat up about a little while ago I'm not sure how he's still alive… but you knew about that didn’t you? You were there.”

She nods. It's not like it needs to be a secret. She was there. And she held him while Claire stitched him up. And he was delirious and saying things he didn't mean.
And others he did.

She still doesn’t know which category is easier to accept.

“He took it easy for a while after but he didn't stop. I don't know if this is a personal crusade, if it's more about Smirnov and less about you or what. I don't know. But he's going to kill himself trying to solve it. Trying to end it.”

She stops, takes a breath. “And I can't ... I won't let that happen. Not for Hell’s Kitchen and not for you.”

And that's fair enough. More than fair enough. And suddenly despite everything she wonders if she's seeing a glimpse of her own future with Frank. Endless worrying that his obsession is going to drive him too far and that one day she's not going to be able to save him and it really will be goodbye. One day it will be the end and she won't be able to save him. Claire won't be able to pull him back together.

They might not lie to each other but that doesn't mean she always likes the truth.

But that’s another worry for another day.

“So why don't you tell Matt what you know?” Karen asks. “Save him some of the trouble?”

Elektra eyes her suspiciously for a good few seconds and then shrugs as if Karen's opinion is of little consequence. And truthfully, it probably is.

“You know the difference between work and busy work?” she asks but doesn't wait for an answer. “While he's searching for shitty information like who's funding this and why the Yakuza are involved, he's not out there going up against them. I'm trying to keep him busy while I figure this damn mess out.”

It's a good answer but it's also not the whole answer, not the whole truth either. And she wasn't lying when she told Ellison she has a knack for getting people to tell her things they weren't planning on divulging.
“What else?”

For a second Elektra almost looks impressed, like she didn't expect that level of shrewdness or insight.

“If he knew who the silent partner is, it would only make things worse. It would only intensify his desire to end it.” She glances around the bathroom again. “I'm stalling but I can’t do this for long. He’s impatient and what we saw at the warehouse the night you were taken was bad enough even after Frank thinned out the crowd and half of them started chasing after you. He can't go up against those odds alone. Not again. Not even with me and Stick to back him up. He will die Karen.”

She says it with such finality Karen almost thinks it's a done deal, that there's simply no way to change the course of fate and one day in the not too distant future she's going to be crying over Matthew Murdock’s grave. And she wants to fight it, to find a place she can put that information where it doesn't seem so overwhelming, or so true. But there is nowhere for it to go. It just is and it sits like a cold hard stone in the pit of her stomach.

She's not surprised by how fragile her voice is when she speaks and the look in Elektra's eyes tells her that they've found some middle ground, that for this at least they're on the same side.

“What can I do?” she asks. “I'll talk to him but he won't listen to me. You know that.”

Elektra nods. “He doesn't listen to me and I've been there. I've seen the manpower they have. And it's no good trying to put out that torch he's carrying for you. Believe me, I've tried.”

And there's a part of her that feels genuinely ashamed at this even if she doesn't know why. She's never honestly sat down and thought about how Matt feels about her and she resents that she needs to do it now. It's not her responsibility. And yet somehow it is.

Somehow both him and Elektra are forcing it to be.

“So what do you want me to do? If he won't listen to me and he won't listen to you…”

“You know where Frank Castle is.” Elektra interrupts and her mouth quirks on the one side, that
little knowing smile reappearing. “No matter how sweet and innocent you look with those Bambi eyes, there's something very dark about you, something that would keep a man like Frank … close.”

There’s a lot of meaning behind Elektra’s words but she pushes that aside for now, focuses on the easy bits.

“What does Frank have to do with this?”

“Oh nothing,” Elektra says airily, slipping back into her heiress act again before giving Karen a long, hard look. “Everything.”

And Karen rolls her eyes, exasperated “Elektra, I don't have time for this shit.”

Another amused smile and then she talks.

“Frank's been involved in this from the start. The second he decided to turn up at that warehouse for you he made his stance on the whole affair known. I know that. Matthew knows that. And they know that. In fact they were counting on that,” She smiles. “Kidnap Karen Page and all the vigilantes come running. Like shooting fish in a barrel.”

“Elektra…”

“Okay, okay. I know Frank must have done some investigating of his own too. Maybe he knows something we don't. Or knows someone who does.”

Karen almost blurts out that he doesn't, that she asked and nothing came of it except some wounded feelings and the cold shoulder for a few days, but she stays quiet.

“Either way I think Matthew will listen to him. He's against everything Frank stands for but he respects him. He gets it. It might sound insane but Matthew trusts him. And maybe Frank can talk some sense into him, maybe they can come up with a plan that doesn't involve taking on the Yakuza and the Russian mafia all at once with nothing but a couple of roundhouse kicks and two Japanese blades I'm not allowed to use.”
And Karen has to laugh.

“I never thought I'd see the day when anyone would ask Frank to bring temperance to a situation.”

But Elektra doesn't smile.

“Despite this fantasy the media created around Frank Castle being unhinged and out of control, I don't think he does anything half...,” she pauses, and Karen doesn't miss the flash in her eyes. “...cocked.”

Another long, calculated silence and then she continues.

“If he can't talk some sense into Matthew then at least he will have back up. Better than what I can provide anyway. And Frank might be trigger happy but I'd trust him to have a better strategy than to go in all guns blazing which is basically what Matthew's doing, just without the guns. Either way I'd feel better just knowing he was there, just having input from someone who knows the score and isn't afraid to make the hard choices.”

She almost looks relieved as she stops talking - now that the worst part is over and her feelings and shortcomings are out there in the world. And, like a freight train, it hits Karen that Elektra is lonely. Lonely and scared and frustrated - and, more than anything, worried about the man she loves. And maybe they aren't all that different. Maybe they're not different at all. And she knows this isn't what she should be taking away from this conversation. It isn't what she should be focusing on and Elektra would probably be incredibly scornful of it if she were to say anything, but she can't help it. This is the girl who has everything. Everything but everything. And it's destroying her.

She’ll help. She’ll do any damn thing she can to make sure Matt is safe and unharmed. Not just for him but for all the people he has who care about him even when it's hard. Even when he doesn't deserve it.

“Frank's out of town right now. I don't know when he'll be back,” she says gently. “But when he is I'll speak to him, ask him to come and see you.

“But Elektra, he's just recovered from some really bad injuries … I don't want him getting any more.”
Elektra nods, closes her eyes briefly. “Makes two of us. Two of us in exactly the same situation.”

And this isn't a dig. In fact she doesn't even think Elektra fully comprehends what she just said. Still she's right. Even if she doesn't know how right.

They're both quiet for a while and the air is heavy, the smell of the lilies too sickly sweet and worse when mixed with the melting candle wax. It's dark and oppressive and she wants to leave but she knows this conversation isn't over.

“Matthew wants to go and investigate a lead on Monday - he thinks something is going down at that warehouse on eleventh, but that's because I gave him the wrong day.” Elektra pauses. “I just can't have him going in there when pretty much the entire mob is waiting. It's suicide.”

“What’s supposed to be happening?”

Elektra answers with a frustrated sigh. “I don't know yet. It's some delivery for the Yakuza. But it's actually happening on Sunday when Matthew will be far away from any warehouses in Hell’s Kitchen. So really, it’s not urgent just yet but still anytime before that would be great.”

“I'll tell Frank when I see him.”

And when she says thank you, Elektra sounds like she genuinely means it, the haughty daddy's girl is gone and all that's left is her. Stripped. Vulnerable.

And then she smiles wryly.

“It kills me to ask you this you know? To ask you.”

“Why?”

Elektra blinks, looks away.

“Because you're you. And you're everything he wants. The pretty blonde lady with the Disney eyes
that he needs to protect and show off,” she swallows heavily. “And the funny thing is that's not you at all. And he doesn't know it.”

And Karen has an overwhelming desire to tell her about Frank, confess that there's someone else and her and Matt are nothing more than friends, if that. But it's not hard to see that isn't what Elektra needs or wants to hear. She doesn't want Matt on Karen's terms. She wants him on her own. No victory by default, even if no one else is playing the game.

So she stays quiet, leaves Elektra with her thoughts, considers some of her own: how they all got here; how intertwined their lives are; how this back and forth needs to stop.

And finally, whether she can trust what Elektra is saying. So she decides to test it.

“How do you know all this? How do you know Smirnov?”

Elektra laughs. “I'm an investor. A big investor. The big investor.”

“Why?”

“Because I have a lot of money and I'm bored and this is the kind of shit bored rich girls do.” And she's hedging and Karen wonders why, what she's so loathe to admit to. She's about to press but Elektra takes a breath and starts to speak again.

“I invested under the sole condition of having all the financials released to me. All of them. Not this shit they give their lawyers. If they get a cent off Russian caviar I know about it, if a little old lady with blue-tinted hair donates a dollar I know about it. If Alexei picks up a dime off the sidewalk I know about it.

“And just FYI, that school… no plans to actually move the kids anywhere. In fact there are plans to close three more he didn't mention. Those apartment blocks… there's no rehoming scheme. Oh and if Frank needs any convincing, he's buying up that animal shelter on 8th too. So some stray dogs are gonna be out of a place to sleep too.”

Karen nods. This isn't surprising really. The scale maybe and the ambition, but the bare bones facts - someone coming in and creating their own little empire out of Hell’s Kitchen at the expense of the poorest members of the community - is no real shock.
“And if you want to know how they fund it,” Elektra continues. “Well drug trafficking, human trafficking. The Yakuza is still looking for the Black Sky and is willing to pay a lot for any information on it.”

“So if you know all this, how come you don't know what's going on at the warehouse on Sunday?”

Elektra shrugs. “I'm working on it - I only found out a few days ago. But that's the Yakuza. And they keep their finances separate. Right now it's sitting on the balance sheet as “goods for delivery” but I have yet to find out what those goods are, although I can imagine. So it's something but not something I can really demand to know without setting off a whole bunch of alarms… besides that's not why I invested.”

“No…” and it seems so clear now. “You invested to find out who the silent partner is. You did that for Matt.”

And for a second Elektra looks almost embarrassed.

“Sad isn't it?” She says. “But yes. I did. I paid a lot of money for information I'm hiding from him… so I could stay one step ahead and not watch him crash and burn.”

“So who is the silent partner?”

“You keep saying that Karen, like you haven't realised that Smirnov is about as important in this whole thing as any one of those stuffed shirts outside. He's a pretty face - a pretty face propped up on someone else's money.”

Elektra waits a few seconds before continuing.

“It's Vanessa Marianna, Karen. Buying back the city for the man she loves and if she does we're all going to pay dearly.”

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When she gets back to the table the acrobats are gone, along with her cheesecake and all that's left are couples tentatively taking to the dance floor and Foggy’s guilty expression.

“They were clearing everything away,” he says defensively. “It would be in the bottom of a garbage chute by now.”

She grins at him. “That's okay.”

“What the hell were you doing in there anyway? You were gone for ages.”

He looks so good and he’s so sweet and she can see that the idea of any real trouble hasn’t even entered his head and the last thing she wants to do is worry him, ruin the evening for him. But she can’t lie to him. She won’t be another of his friends to keep the truth from him, to cast him adrift and pretend it’s for his own good. She knows how much she hates it when people do that to her. She won’t do it to him.

She glances at the table; Vicky and Brent are still there and Brent seems to have roped the superfood woman into some conversation on recycling collections.

“Dance with me,” she says and Foggy nods wordlessly and follows her to the floor, takes her hand.

The band is playing some inordinately slow version of Unchain My Heart, which is already slow to start off with, so Karen leans in close and gives Foggy an abridged version of her conversation with Elektra. He listens mostly, asks one or two questions and she can see the wheels in his head turning as things fall into place and this whole stupid mess starts making sense. When she tells him about Frank she’s surprised that he nods, says it’s a good idea, that he hopes Frank gets back soon and can help out. And she hates what this is doing to him, how she can see how disturbed he is. And she also hates how he tries to be strong about it, not show her how he’s really feeling.

“I want to say it’s all going to be okay,” she says. “I do, but I don’t want to lie to you.”

He smiles at her, tightens his arm at her waist.

“I appreciate that Karen,” he sighs deeply. “Matt’s bitten off more than he can chew and he doesn’t even know.”
“Yeah.”

“I think I’m going to have a heart attack and die from that surprise.”

He deadpans it again and even though she knows how worried he is, she appreciates the attempt at
levity.

She snorts, shakes her head. “After two slices of that cheesecake, you just might.”

He looks sheepish. “Three. Brent didn't want his and I thought since my date deserted me and left me
to listen to the wonders of waste disposal I could treat myself.”

She chuckles, and then on a whim or just because he's the best fucking person on Earth she pulls him
into a hug. And she hopes that he gets it, that he realises this isn't just about her loving his goofy side
or finding him amusing. This is also to let him know that whatever happens, she'll be there for him.
That somehow, the two of them will hold it together no matter what this bitch-universe throws at
either of them. She loves him so much that sometimes she wonders at how empty her life before she
knew him, before she had a friend like him.

And she knows what it was like and it isn't worth thinking about.

“You should always treat yourself,” she tells him, trying to keep the mood up.

“It was good cheesecake,” he says sagely and she nods.

“It was.”

“Yes and speaking of cheesecake…”

The song has stopped and the next is yet to start and Foggy’s voice is loud, louder than it should be
and she looks up to see Matt approaching them across the dance floor.
“Are you dead set on spending the night trying to get a rise out of him?” she asks.

“Nah, I think you do that all on your own,” he says cheekily and when she glares at him he holds up his hands in mock surrender. “Come on Karen. The food is gourmet, the wine is French and for tonight I look almost as good as Frank Castle in a suit.”

“As good,” she assures him.

“Either way,” he says and she can almost see him preening. “I'm on fire.”

“Yeah, I might need to extinguish you. Get your clothes covered in that white foam.”

“Don’t joke about the suit Karen.”

And then Matt is there, asking Foggy if he can cut in, just for a moment, just because he hasn’t spoken to Karen in so long. And Foggy defers to her, gives her a long, hard look and she loves him for it.

“It's okay,” she says although she's not sure if that's a lie or not because part of this doesn't feel okay, doesn't feel right. But then she sees the way Matt’s face lights up and she knows there's no going back. Foggy sees it too and his expression is dubious but she gives him a quick nod and he touches her elbow, tells her they’ll finish talking later and walks away.

Then it's just her and Matt and he slips his arm around her, takes her hand and leads her expertly around the dance floor while the band does its best at some approximation of Who’s Gonna Ride Your Wild Horses?

And she can't help but think of the last time she danced. On the roof with fire in the sky, spinning spinning spinning until she got giddy and Frank Castle’s laugh ringing in her ears as he caught her around the waist and dragged her close. The smell of him ... the feel of him steadfast and solid against her. The gooseflesh that covered her body and had nothing to do with the cold.

What she said after.
Because oh god, she does. She *does*.

“I told you I wanted to call,” Matt is saying and she has to force herself back into the present. “But I didn't want to intrude… after your birthday...”

She doesn't say anything. She's not one for secrets even if sometimes it feels like she has too many to bear, even if it feels like the enormous parts of her life that shaped and moulded her all need to be kept hidden. Still she hates them. But then again, this isn't a secret as such. It's something that is not Matt’s business.

“I guess I just want to be sure you're okay.”

And she smiles, softens a little and lifts her hand from his shoulder to his chin, tilts his face towards her.

“I'm here Matt. I'm fine. Honestly.”

He nods slowly and his hand on her back twitches slightly and presses into her skin.

“There was blood in your car.”

“And it's gone now.”

And she can see he's dying to ask more, that he's fighting with himself to stay quiet about it, that every second since that night has been torture for him. But he bites it back down.

“Karen you know you can talk to me. You can come to me. With anything. It doesn't matter what it is. I won't judge.”

She wonders if it's still a lie when you don't know you're lying. Because he is. It's probably the biggest lie he's ever told her. And he has no idea.
“There’s nothing Matt, really.”

He looks dubious and she guesses he probably has every right to suspect that she’s not being completely honest with him but he doesn’t comment on it.

“I’m going to find out what’s going on with Smirnov,” he says. “and I’ll tell you first. As soon as I do you’ll have the story.”

“You don’t need to do that Matt.”

But he does. She knows he does. It’s part of that idealism that drives him. While it would be incorrect to say Frank is solely motivated by making every scumbag in Hell’s Kitchen pay for their very existence in blood and pain, his drive isn’t an abstract one. It’s tangible. Real. One less rapist means one less rapist. One less mobster means one less mobster. It’s a step-by-step process that he works through on a case-by-case basis and is happy if in the end all his work just adds up to the sum of its parts.

Matt on the other hand wants it to be more. He wants to send messages, make gestures that inspire hope. Give people faith in themselves and each other.

It’s noble. She can’t deny that. She also has to wonder how pragmatic it is. Fighting the universe on its terms never worked out well for anyone.

“Maybe when this is all over, we can grab a drink…”

She stiffens in his arms. “Matt…”

“Coffee then,” he rushes to continue. “Maybe we can just talk. I miss how we used to talk Karen. You, me, Foggy. Playing pool at Josie’s. Are you ready for that? It doesn’t have to be weird.”

And this is so hard. It's so so hard. Because like with Elektra she wants so much to put her cards on the table. Tell him she doesn't feel that way about him anymore. That she did once - she really did and she doesn’t want to pretend otherwise but it's over now and she's moved on, there's someone else.
But that in turn opens up so many other problematic avenues.

Because Frank is The Punisher. He's not going to take her out and romance her. There are no walks in the park and lazy Sundays. No holidays with the family. And that's okay. She's accepted that even when there are still other aspects of their relationship she hasn't quite got her head around.

She realises she's also going to have to keep a big part of her life from almost everyone. That to the world she's going to be Karen Page, eternal spinster showing no interest in meeting anyone or sharing her life. And she hasn't quite worked that one out yet, hasn't quite come to terms with the reality of that. Hasn't thought about the bigger ramifications. And that's okay. It's early days yet. Still though. Still.

“It's just coffee Karen. It's not even a date. Look I know I messed up. I do. And not telling you the truth wasn't even the worst part.”

And he leans in close so that he can talk into her ear and she can feel his breath on her neck.

“I hung you and Foggy out to dry with the Frank Castle trial…”

And then you used him as a platform for self-aggrandisement when you did show up, she thinks but she doesn't say it.

“My headspace was bad and I'm sorry and I want to make up for it…”

He turns them suddenly and she catches sight of Elektra across the floor, dancing with Smirnov. And the look on her face is pure resignation.

(I want him, he wants you…)

And suddenly nothing Matt is saying makes the slightest bit of difference. None of the apologies or the frustration with her or with himself are of any consequence.
And she knows what she has to do.

So she stops him. Not just his talking, but the dancing as well.

“Matt,” she says and he lifts his head, inclines it towards her and if she could see his eyes she's sure there would be hope in them.

And she's not heartless, she's not completely uncaring about what this is going to do to him, how much it will hurt. But she does it anyway.

Because it's the right thing to do. For all of them.

“You need to go and dance with your date. She's here and she's waiting for you.”

And he's about to say something, she can already see the way his jaw is working hard as he tries to formulate a response so she tries to head him off, give him a quick kiss on the cheek and turns to go to Foggy. But he won't let her and he catches her fingers, tightens his grip on her. He doesn't drag her back though. He just holds her hand for a few seconds, chewing on the inside of his mouth and she waits for him to say what he needs to. To get it off his chest.

“There's something different about you Karen,” he says. “Something has changed.”

“No,” she answers as she pulls away. “No. I'm still the same.”

And it's God’s honest truth.

Chapter End Notes

Foggy is again quoting Aladdin with his "I think I'm going to have a heartattack and die from that surprise line".

The song he sings when Matt and Elektra arrive is Carly Simon's You're so vain. I personally quite enjoy the Marilyn Manson version but that's neither here nor there.
Tell me what you're needing, give into your bleeding

Chapter Summary

It's a beautiful day in Hell's Kitchen, there's only one thing that could make it better.

Chapter Notes

I promised to update quickly and I did! The next update won't be as quick, even though I do have certain chunks of the next chapter done already. I actually sometimes can't believe where we are in this story, how many of the "big events" we have covered and how many we still have to go - I'd say we are almost halfway now, but you never know. It's really heartening to be honest and also lovely to see that people are enjoying reading this as much as I am enjoying writing it. Can you believe this series is almost 140K words? Because I can't.

Anyway, thanks for sticking with me through this and I apologise for being so terrible with replying to comments. I will try and get on that ASAP.

Also you will notice I've played a bit fast and loose with the geography of New York state, I hope that isn't too jarring.

Anyway, so here we go - I've been looking forward to this chapter for a long long time and I hope you guys like it as much as I do.

Chapter title is from Pieces by Rob Thomas, which I think I have mentioned is a huge influence on this fic as is a bunch of other Matchbox Twenty songs for some reason.

Hope you enjoy and please let me know what you think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Frank doesn't come back on Thursday and the rain still falls heavily. The drains overflow on ninth, fourteenth and twenty-seventh, buses are cancelled and the subway has severe delays on some of the lines.

One of the underpasses gets flooded too and the homeless shelter is overwhelmed by the afternoon until Smirnov turns up with a truckload of supplies. The paper runs a story on his generosity and while Ellison doesn't say anything he does give Karen a long, meaningful look, which conveys all the gravitas his words would have. Likely more.

It's not all bad though.
Joe, seemingly bearing no ill will from her gentle rebuff on Monday, tells her the weather should start clearing on Friday but there's another storm expected by Sunday and he doesn't know how long that one will last nor how much miserable weather is destined to follow it. And when she purses her lips and gives him an exasperated look he hastily adds that, since he's been so incredibly accurate in his predictions since last week, there's really no reason to doubt him now.

She tells him good-naturedly that even a stopped clock is right twice a day and he makes a face.

But stopped clock or not, he's right. By Friday afternoon the rain is all but gone and the sun is shining weakly behind the clouds and, as she's heading home, she suddenly stops and thinks how pretty and vibrant the city looks. It's clean and it smells fresh, of petrichor and sunlight and no longer of blood and gunsmoke, chemicals and decay.

She knows it's fake. She knows that the seedy underbelly is still there even if it's just camouflaged for the time being. That said, she can't help the way her heart lifts when she sees the puddles sparkling and the hint of a rainbow's vivid colours against the blue-tinged sky. And she chuckles when a little girl with bright red wellington boots splashes her shoes and runs off shrieking to her mother.

It doesn't matter what Joe says. She's choosing to believe that summer is coming, that there'll be a little sunshine in her life. That Frank will come home and for a while they can just rest, figure this thing out between them, find a way to make it work. And maybe that's not possible, maybe she's living in a fantasy world, but, as she watches the sunlight glitter across the wet streets and sees the last of the dirt washing away in a storm water drain, she finds she can hope.

She can also hope that this thing with Matt is sorted soon, that there is some plan to be made, some way to expose this farce and let everyone move on with their lives. To put Vanessa and the rest of them behind bars where they belong.

Just a break, all she wants is just a fucking break.

And she can't deny she's getting edgy about Frank too. It's not that she spends all her time pining for him. Apparently that is another hold he doesn't get to have over her. But she worries and she misses him and she wonders if she'd ever know if something were to happen to him. Something bad. Something tragic. Something like if she hadn't found him in time that horrible night two weeks ago.

It's not like she couldn't see herself taking a trip to Jersey if the need arose - the shelter itself shouldn't be very hard to find - and retracing his footsteps in this instance shouldn't be difficult either. But the thought of even having to make that decision fills her with dread. And she realises that for as long as this thing between them lasts, she’ll probably have some lingering part of that anxiety with her
whenever he's gone.

It's not like he even went to Jersey to punish, to kill. It's not like he was even putting himself in any danger really. But when she thinks of her luck and she thinks of how the fucking universe has been treating her and everyone in her considerably small circle of late, she wonders if it wouldn't be a fucking sick cosmic joke for Frank to get taken out by a car accident on the way back. The Punisher ended by a drunk driver or someone texting and not looking at the road.

And that thought fills her with more foreboding than if she knew he was destined to go out fighting. She thinks she could live with it if he died punishing, if he died doing something he believed in, even if she's not sure how to feel about that. But going out in something as mundane as a car crash, something so ordinary, so regular, seems wrong somehow - a bad tagline to a terrible joke.

And she has to push the thought away. Because she knows she doesn't have the fortitude to think on it now. The city is bright and beautiful and she's not going to let wholly unfounded fears get the better of her. She guesses when you love someone, regardless of who they are and what they do, it's always served up with a side dish of fear, of hurt.

He said he'd be back and he doesn't lie to her. He doesn't. And she believes him.

But he doesn't come home on Friday and she goes to Claire’s place with a bottle of wine and some overpriced sushi takeaways and they spend the night chatting and laughing and playing with their food.

They don't talk much about Frank or Matt or Claire’s love life such as it may be right now. Instead Claire tells her about work, that they lost three of the victims of the bus crash from the previous week. Says she doesn’t know why as they all seemed to be doing so well but as a nurse she's seen just about everything. She says it's sad though - their families are all devastated and delivering hard news like that never gets easier, especially as in all three cases the deceased was the main breadwinner. There's some good news too though. She’s being promoted to head nurse at the hospital and she's started yoga and feels great about it. She’s also thinking of taking a holiday at the end of the year if the goddamn vigilante population of Hell’s Kitchen will take a fucking break and let her have a week or two off. She wants to see Argentina in their summer. Wants to spend her days tasting wine and riding a bike through the vineyards, lying in the sun in the afternoons and going to sleep with the windows open. And it sounds wonderful. And Karen tells her she’ll do her damndest to make sure that happens. She’ll lock the whole sorry lot of them in an underground hole, station some knucklehead guards at the door if she has to. Because if she can’t get Claire Temple’s goddamn likeness into the Vatican she’s going to find another way to sanctify her - even if the best she can do is give her a long, lazy and carefree holiday. Because dammit, she deserves it more than any of them.
Claire laughs, says she’ll hold her to it.

And then Karen goes home to her empty apartment and her bed that feels too big and she curls around herself and tries not to think of all the reasons he’s still not there with her.

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Joe is right about the weather.

When she wakes up on Saturday, the sky is clear and clean, a gentle blue that makes her feel better just looking at it. She stands at her window and stares down at the street below and she can feel how the mood of the city has changed, how it’s lighter and happier and there’s a spark of something close to hope in the air.

And suddenly she wants to be out there stealing the sunshine. Not cooped up in her apartment with a moody little black cat who's stretched out on Frank's side of the bed, paws over her eyes, like she's had a hard night and isn't even remotely close to recovering.

“'You better not be a vigilante too,” Karen says sternly to her. “No secret cat identities. Claire is not going to be patching you up.”

Pickle rolls over, kicks a little at the pillows and ignores her, which is to be expected. She's missing Frank too and Karen thinks again it's not a surprise that they've formed this kind of bond. In his own way Frank's been a stray since Maria died and well, Pickle has a lot of rage. And they both gravitate towards her, like she’s some kind answer to their questions, a treatment for their condition. She wouldn't have known how to feel about that before, but she does now and it's a good feeling.

It's the best feeling.

She showers and gets dressed: a short flower print wrap skirt and a sleeveless button down black shirt, wedge sandals that are a little high but she doesn't care about that. Not at all.

Pretty matters.
She checks her phone as she gets to the door. There’s a message from Claire complaining about a hangover even though they didn’t drink much at all, and another from Foggy, which doesn’t say anything but is just an endless block of poop emojis. Finally, there’s a reminder from Elektra to call when Frank is back and ordinarily that kind of thing would annoy her - it does when Ellison does it, when he gets himself tied up in knots that she's going to forget the obvious things - but this doesn't. And she's not sure if it's more because she's also worried about Matt or if it's because she understands some of the anxiety that Elektra is feeling.

She feels a kind of kinship with her; an understanding that doesn't really require them to like each other or be friends but exists nonetheless.

For now at least.

But she's not going to spend her day dwelling on that. The truth is she's not sure what she's going to spend her day doing. But she’s determined it's not going to be in here. It's going to be out in the sunshine because, if what Joe says is true and they can expect another storm tomorrow, she doesn't want to miss a second of this.

So she grabs a light cardigan, stuffs it into her purse and heads out, and not even Irene's judgy look at her short skirt and bare legs can sour her mood.

Outside it's just as pretty and warm as she hoped. The puddles have mostly evaporated and the light is clean and bright and the colours seem a little more saturated and vibrant than usual.

Hell’s Kitchen can be beautiful when it wants. Not gaudy like the night of the fireworks, not the cathouse madam. But something else. Something pure and innocent, something good. And she wants to revel in it, live in it and never let it go and maybe keep a part of this for herself.

And yes, she knows she's waxing lyrical and no doubt in a few days time some shit will have gone down and it'll be as seedy as it's ever been, and she'll find more reasons to hate it and want no part of it. But not today. Because today is perfect.

Or at least it has the potential to be once she’s got some caffeine in her system.

So she heads around the corner and down the street to her local haunt, a small patisserie she often stops at in the morning on the way to work. It doesn't even compare to the one near Foggy - it's completely without chic decor and there's nothing artisanal about its coffee - but it's still good and its
eclairs would give even Foggy’s apricot slices some stiff competition.

It's busy and noisy inside and the baristas look frazzled but they still wave to her and she waves back.

It seems like the whole street is here demanding iced frappuccinos and various over-the-top milkshakes for their kids. But she finds even the queue and the yelling children can't destroy her mood. Today is going to be a good day. It just can't not be. And it doesn't matter if she's alone or if she has no plan, she can make her own happiness.

And she is.

At the counter she orders a latte and when she pulls out her card to pay, the cashier, a young college student who could well be related to Foggy’s doorman judging by his red hair and general state of inebriation, narrows his eyes at her, turns away and has a brief discussion with one of the baristas.

“You're Karen right?” he asks.

She frowns. “Yes.”

He grins wanly at her, puts a hand to his head like the noise is painful and to be fair, it probably is. “It's on the house.”

And she guesses this isn't that uncommon. She knows they get a certain number of free coffees to give away every month for the faces they recognise. But this feels different if only because he asked her name first.

She smiles, cocks her head. “Why?”

“Well okay, it's not exactly on the house,” he says it like she's caught him and his fuzzy brain out. “Guy in here a couple of minutes ago paid for it. Big. Dark hair. Spoke like he'd be happy to kill me if I asked him too many questions...”

He stops, frowns for a second like he's considering something. “...or if I fucked up his order.”
And then he covers his mouth. “Sorry Ma'am, I didn't…”

But she shakes her head quickly and he seemingly leaps at the opportunity to smooth over his language and change the subject.

“Sound like anyone you know?”

Yes. Yes it does. And it hasn't been that long since this happened but it feels like it has. Feels like it's been decades since she's arrived here to find her coffee paid for, compliments of the man dressed in black.

And truthfully it's only been six weeks, and she's had him in her home for two of those give or take a few days. But she's missed this and she's missed him and she's missed the bullets on her windowsill and *Shining Star* in her car. She's missed all the little ways he let her know he was thinking about her, that he cared. And sure, she's got something better now. She knows she does. But this… *this* is them. This is *their* origin story as opposed to his or hers separately. This is what stemmed from all those fateful days and nights. This is how he makes it real.

“You okay Karen … I mean ma'am… miss?”

She nods, blinking rapidly and she doesn't know why she wants to cry all of a sudden, doesn't know why she wants to fall to her knees and sob. It's just coffee. It's just a fucking latte.

But it isn't. It isn't just *anything* . It means he's back and he's here and he's waiting for her. It means the universe didn't use her wild card and she didn't let the nightmares come true. She has her Punisher and maybe, just maybe that means Karen can have her Frank.

Maybe.

The possibility is slim but she'll take it.

“Yeah, yeah, I'm fine,” she says. “I'm good.”
“You sure?”

He's still watching her and seemingly unconcerned about the growing line behind her.

“Yeah I'm sure. Do you know where he went?”

“Oh yeah,” he turns and points towards the side of the building. “He took his coffee and went to the tables at the back. Couldn't be more than 10 minutes ago. You could probably still catch him if you want.”

And she does. She does want. She wants so much.

She doesn't remember if she says goodbye or if she thanks him, but she does remember thinking the queue is too long and too stoic and struggling to get through the people to the outside. She does remember a kid nearly wiping chocolate fingers on her skirt and she does remember having to push her way out the door and the wonderful feeling of sunshine on her face as she does.

And she walks, she walks fast as she can even though her legs feel like jelly and her chest is tight and she's telling herself not to expect any damn thing, not to get her hopes up. But she does. She does because what else could it be? What else other than him could it possibly possibly be? So she heads round the corner and down the alley that runs behind the coffee shop into a small open area where there are a few rickety outside tables and a couple of unkempt plants which seem to be both the responsibility of the shop and the council, which means no one really gives a fuck about them. And she doesn't know why she's registering that, why something as inconsequential as the overgrown inner city foliage is even beeping her radar. She ignores it. She ignores everything.

He's there.

*Oh god, he's really there.*

Sitting alone at one of the tables, reading the paper, a half full coffee cup next to him.

There's a moment when she doesn't believe he's real. A moment her fucked up brain won't let her accept it and she's convinced she's seeing things and he isn't actually here. That this is a dream or a fantasy and he's dead on the highway somewhere and she's going to go home and see it on the news.
But it isn't true. It's not. And she hates that she convinced herself otherwise, that she's so goddamned dramatic about it.

They're just people. There's no cosmic conspiracy against them.

He looks up then, tilts his head towards her.

His hair is slightly shorter than it was and his beard is gone and it makes him seem harder, angular. He looks good but it's not just that his bruises have faded and he's not frowning. It's something else, something that completely overshadows pretty much every other thing about him. And it takes her a second to define it, to name it and when she does, it almost floors her.

He's happy.

And no, it's not a word she ever thought she'd use to describe him. Frank Castle and happiness seem too juxtaposed, nonsensical almost.

And yet...

And yet she's 100% sure she's correct. He is genuinely and unapologetically happy. Maybe it's just the sunshine or maybe it's because he's back or maybe it's her, but the look on his face is almost joyful. And again it's one of those moments when she sees him. The real him. The person he is in his bones. Frank Castle. The husband and the father and the man who makes bad jokes and loves dogs.

There's no destruction, there's no war, there's not even rage. There's no Punisher either. He's just a man, a good man, a decent man, reading the paper on a Saturday morning.

And then he stands and his movements are deliberate and graceful, and she likes the way the light glints in his eyes and how she can see he's trying so hard not to grin at her like an idiot.

But he does.

And it's that joy that gets her walking again, moving faster than she should in her heels, not caring that she's slopping her coffee or that it's burning her hand, barely registering as she dumps the cup on
one of the empty tables and promptly forgets she ever had it.

He closes the distance between them in a few short strides and he's already reaching for her, hands sliding over her hips, thumbs tracing the line of them and then he's pulling her tight against him, burying his nose in her hair and kissing her cheek and her jaw, that tender spot on her throat he's found before but hasn't really concentrated on. Hasn't had the chance to until now.

Oh god. Until now.

“My girl,” he says softly and she winds her arms around his neck, and tucks her face into his shoulder, pulls him closer and presses some kisses of her own into his flesh.

And he smells so good. Soap and coffee and some cedarwood aftershave she wants to drown in. That hint of gunmetal so faint she barely notices it.

“Missed you,” he growls, lips ghosting over her cheek, nipping at her earlobe, and she feels her knees go weak, goosebumps flaring on her skin despite the sunshine “Missed you every fucking second. Couldn’t stop thinking about you.”

“Missed you too,” she whispers and he rubs her back, hands huge and warm and moving slowly over her, fingertips trailing down her side, missing her breast by a fraction of a millimetre.

She wants to take him home. The idea enters her head and pushes every other damn thought out like it was never there. Fuck the sunshine and the gorgeous day and how the air is warm and comforting and seems to hold them in place. Fuck the happy people and the fact that today of all days they should be outside. She thought that was what she wanted - it was what she wanted. But now she has this. Now she has him. And she wants something else. She wants him in her apartment, in her bed, the lights dim and the windows open. She wants his hands on her, his mouth. She wants him naked and needy and a little bit overwhelmed. And she wants to be the one overwhelming him.

And maybe a month ago she would have laughed at herself for even entertaining the idea but not today. Because today she could.

She knows she could.

Hands in his hair now and she's angling his face to hers. Gentle kisses on his lips and cheeks, and his
fingers tremble on her, dig into her hips and ass, and he groans softly in the back of his throat.

And when he pulls away, just enough to look at her, just enough so she can see the flare in his eyes, the set of his jaw as he chews on the inside of his cheek. And she stares back. And she sees it too. Sees that he wants exactly what she does - to go back to her place, take the day and have her any goddamn way he wants.

And he teeters on the edge a little, there's a moment she thinks he'll throw himself off and just let her decide how she wants this to play out. Absolve himself of making decisions and let her lead, but then he catches himself, lifts his hands from the small of her back and rests them on her naked arms, rubs firmly like he's trying to keep her warm even though he must know part of her is already on fire.

“Come away with me,” he says touching his knuckles to her jaw. “Just for today. Please.”

He doesn't have to ask. She’ll go with him anywhere. And earlier she might have worried about that, might have found herself irresponsible and love drunk but right now she doesn't care. She can be responsible, salt-of-the-earth Karen Page tomorrow. Today she's not. Today she's the woman that loves Frank Castle more than anything and today she's going to go wherever that takes her.

So yes, yes, she’ll go anywhere with him. All he needs to do is name the place. And he grins at her, tells her to get her coffee, and then he leads her to his truck where it's parked down the street.

And again, he looks happy. She can't even begin to describe what it does to him, how it transforms him. He’s always been attractive to her with his dark eyes and square jaw, but looking at him now and seeing that at least some of the pain is not present gives him something else, a calmness she doesn’t expect, a genuine playfulness that’s not hidden behind sarcasm and despair.

He holds the door for her and she climbs up, slides across the seat so she's sitting close to him when he gets in, doesn't miss a beat when he leans over and plants a kiss on her lips.

“Ready?”

She nods.

More than ready.
He smiles again and turns the key, pulls into the traffic and heads north out of Hell’s Kitchen; out of New York and into the world beyond where she hopes for a while they can forget who they are and the things they need to do.

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They don’t talk much and she doesn’t ask where they’re going and he turns up the radio and hums along to Bruce Springsteen who’s waiting on a sunny day.

*It’s rainin’ but there ain’t a cloud in the sky*
*Must’ve been a tear from your eye*
*Everythin’ will be okay*
*Funny, thought I felt a sweet summer breeze*
*Mus’s been you sighin’ so deep*
*Don’t worry we’re gonna find a way*

She laughs and he shoots her a mock warning look and then his mouth twists into a smile and he gives her a gentle shove with his shoulder. And she wonders if this was the Frank Castle from before. The one who romanced Maria with a box of kittens, the one who bought his kids noisy toys and read them bedtime stories. The man oblivious to the torture the world had in store for him.

Except that’s not quite right. Because that man doesn’t exist anymore. He can't. This - what she's seeing now - is an approximation of it, an outline. Maybe as close as she’ll ever get.

And it's enough.

She loves him. She loves him so much.

*(Don’t you know?)*

She does. She knows.

He does too.
She opens the window, leans back in the seat and watches the world rush past, listens to Bruce chasing some clouds away. And when she feels Frank’s hand come to rest tentatively on her knee and then rise more decisively up to her thigh, fingers pressing into her flesh, she shivers and she doesn't bother to hold back a gasp.

She's not going to hide how much she wants him. And she's not going to debate the merits of this. He sleeps in her bed, he kisses her and he touches her and a good solid portion of her thoughts involve fucking him.

She's in too deep. She couldn't pull back even if she wanted to.

And she doesn't want to.

“You look nice Karen,” he says and his voice is thick and she shifts deliberately against his palm so that his hand slides hot and smooth further up her leg.

He gives her a knowing look, a little smug, a little lewd. He doesn't push it though. Doesn't move too high even though she's convinced he can already feel her damp heat in the air; that there's no way he couldn't know what he's doing nor how she's not even going to bother feeling shy about it.

It's not like his hand is having anything but the absolute desired effect anyway. Not like this isn't the final stretch of something that started one night in a cold cabin when she was naked and he didn't look at her and she wished he had.

Frank Castle has a way and this is a tease, but then again so does she and she can tease right back. She can move against him so that her skirt rides up her legs and when she speaks she doesn't even have to add a huskiness to voice.

He notices. He notices every goddamn thing.

Even when he pretends he doesn’t.

The city eventually starts giving way to the countryside. The bigger houses in the suburbs slowly disappearing to open land, bright little cerise and yellow flower buds already pushing through the
earth after the rain; an incomplete yet still spectacular floral carpet and she hopes Joe is wrong and they're not in for another storm so soon. That these buds can blossom and grow and have a few days to lift their faces to the sun and cover the ground with their bright colours.

And Frank’s hand stays where it is, a warm pressure on her already flushed skin, rubbing tiny circles into her, venturing slightly higher so that her skirt folds over the tops of her thighs, ruching up against her underwear.

It's not like he's unaffected by this either. Whether it's the shortness of her skirt or the smoothness of her skin or just her and the fact that she's here with him, she can't be sure. But she catches him staring at her more than once, has to tell him to keep his eyes on the damn road, that she doesn't want this day to end in the emergency ward on account of her legs.

“Shouldn't be showing off legs like that then,” he tosses back, fingertips sweeping along the soft flesh on the inside of her thigh, from her knee almost all the way up and back again. “Ain't remotely fair.”

And no, maybe it isn't. But she's not here to play fair.

He does, however, keep his eyes on the road. And she has to remind herself to breathe, to draw in some of that sweet sun-drenched air. Not lose herself to gasps and sighs. It's okay though. And she realises as she's sitting there with his hand on her and her skin flushed that maybe not caring if he sees or knows is the wrong phrase. Because she does care. Because she wants him to know. She wants him to see.

And he does. There isn't much you can hide from Frank Castle anyway.

“You been this way before?” he asks as they pass a sign for Poughkeepsie and she shakes her head.

“Oh yeah, you haven't lived in New York for all that long have you?”

“No.”

He doesn't say anything to that. He seems to have realised on some level that this is one of those things she doesn’t really want to talk about.
There's a place I wanna show you,” he says. “We took the kids there once or twice…”

And even though he sounds okay and his excitement is genuine, she can't help it, she has to ask.

“You want to take me there?” she whispers and his hand goes still on her leg and when she looks at him he's frowning, chewing on his lip.

(I want them back)

But when he speaks his voice is warm. A little cracked, but warm.

“Yeah I want to take you there.” He glances at her briefly and she recognises the shadow crossing over his features, the sudden flash in his eyes.

And he sighs, runs his thumb over her knee. “Karen, no matter where I go or what I do there's always gonna be something to remind me of them. If it ain't a place then it's gonna be a smell or a feeling or the fact that Lisa's favourite colour was purple or Frank Jr had a thing for black fluffy cats and they seemed to have a thing for him too, no matter how bad tempered they were.”

He looks pointedly at her then and she swallows. She didn't know. She knew about Lisa and the grey tabby she wanted, but she didn't know about Frank Jr.

“If I look hard enough there's always gonna be something to remind me. Hell, I look in the fucking mirror and that's a reminder. They were my life. They were everything. And maybe the only thing that I had separate from them was the military. And well…”

He trails off. She gets it. The things he can do now, the things he was trained to do - they might have been separate as they could be from his family back then, but now he's the Punisher and it's all become muddied and grey.

“I can't avoid everything because there'll always be something. People with their kids, men with their wives, children’s stories, black cats, grey cats, girls in pretty dresses …” he goes quiet again for a second before glancing at her, “being with a woman…”
She can’t help the little sound she makes in the back of her throat, the almost involuntary way her leg splays outwards.

“And it’s hard. Course it is. But it ain’t gonna go away, there ain’t some cure for it,” he shrugs. “Maybe that’s a good thing.”

They come to a stop at a lonely intersection, the road empty except for an enormous truck laden with logs pulling out in front of them and he takes the moment to look at her again, long and hard - and she puts her hand over his, slides her fingers between his.

“I’m here now. I’m here. With you.” His voice is low, earnest.

And she leans over to him, touches his jaw and plants a kiss on his lips that’s gentle and chaste but still lingers longer than it should, that still makes him dig his fingers into her flesh.

He takes a deep, ragged breath, shakes his head and turns his attention back to the empty road, starts driving again.

“I ain't some asshole who's gonna try and keep all this bullshit separate - like you need to be kept away from all the stuff that happened before, like somehow that was real and this isn't. I already told you, this means something to me.”

That’s true too. And for a second she doesn't really know how to answer. Whether there are words for it.

But there are. She's a writer and there are always words, even if they're small, even if they don't seem to hold the full weight of what she wants to convey.

“She too,” she says softly and he swallows heavily, bobs his head and doesn't look at her, keeps his eyes firmly on the road.

And it's not awkward. Not even a little bit.
The landscape changes from fields to forest and back again. They pass some small towns, either occupied by those too poor to live in New York or those too rich to want to, but they're soon swallowed up by the countryside again, the speckles of bright colour, the blue skies and the dramatic clouds.

She fiddles with the radio once and he gives her a mock warning look so she laughs and she leaves it, lets Bruce sing his heartland heart out and watches Frank’s hand tap on the steering wheel in time. And she doesn't think about anything - not any of the conversations they need to have about any of the drama going on, not the fact that, in its basest form, something is happening that she never thought possible and she's on a honest-to-God date with The Punisher. Frank Castle: Scourge of Hell’s Kitchen, Meathook Connoisseur and Hopeless Romantic at Heart. It doesn't make sense. But it also doesn't have to.

So instead of worrying she just sits back and enjoys the scenery, the feel of his flesh pressing hers and yes, even the sound of Bruce dancing in the dark on the radio.

Eventually Frank takes a turn off, which leads them past a few meadows and forests and winds back around so she can see some open fields, the river shimmering in the distance and some brightly coloured tents dotted along the promenade, people like little dark specks gathering in groups and clusters nearby.

“What is this?” she asks and he grins, squeezes her thigh hard again as he pulls off the road and into a stone parking area.

“This,” he says, “is lunch. And it's really fucking good stuff they've got here.”

She glances over at him and he looks so fucking happy, so excited to be here with her and show her this. And it's like he doesn't have a care in the world, like he's taken the Punisher and packed him away in a box and completely forgotten about the existence of that part of his life.

And she finds she doesn't know what to do with that. Because she wants to give into it too, throw herself into it and let him do this. Let him take her on the dates she thought impossible. The birthdays, the anniversaries. Pretend for just a few hours that they can have this. That it's not destined for disaster.

She wants to. She really wants to. But she knows how hard the journey back to reality will be. She knows how hard and how far they'll have to come down.
Fuck it.

If he can do it, so can she.

She leans over to kiss his cheek as he stops the truck, moves to his jaw and lets him feel the hint of her teeth against his skin, just enough to make him swallow hard and tighten his grip on her leg.

“Well come on then,” she says moving away and pushing her door open, leaving him with his hand stuttering in the air where her thigh used to be. “Don't stand between me and good food, I could take you if I needed to.”

He doesn't even bother with a mock withering look, doesn't even try. Instead he nods his head as he climbs out of the truck.

“I don't doubt it,” he says and he's not even remotely close to lying or indulging her. He honestly believes it. And again she's struck by the fact that she could be the one to overwhelm him, that he's the big bad Punisher but the power here is hers, that somehow she is the woman strong enough for him to love.

The only thing that remains to be seen is if she's strong enough to love him back.

But that's not a question for now, so she won’t think about it. Instead she lets him take her hand, press his lips to her temple and lead her to the promenade where people are forming messy lines near the food stalls and children are chasing each other through the grass.

She takes a moment to just absorb everything: him at her side, the fresh smell of the sunshine, obnoxious seagulls cawing overhead, the way the light reflects off the river turning it blue and shiny instead of the dull khaki she knows it to be.

It's beautiful. It's beautiful in a way she didn't realise.

She read once that the Danube looks grey and drab until the moment you fall in love. And then it becomes a mix of cerulean and teal, bright aquamarines. She wonders now if that's true of all rivers, wonders if this is the reason she's only ever seen the Hudson as uninteresting and, if she's honest, something of an eyesore in the wrong light.
And then Frank slings an arm around her shoulders and draws her close, brushes his lips against her neck and she's sure it's true.

Not even an iota of doubt.

She's in love and the sun is shining and the water is blue. And everything is wrong but nothing on Earth can ruin this moment. She won't let it.

“It's so pretty,” she says and next to her he nods, drops a hand to her hip, fingers almost absently tracing the thin line of her underwear through her skirt.

“Heaven't seen it like this in a long time.”

The big bad Punisher … the big bad Punisher and the girl that loves him.

So they walk for a while, dodging the families with their kids, couples with stars in their eyes, the brightly coloured tents and the delicious smell of the street food. They watch jet skis on the river, the gentle lapping of the waves and Frank snorts when he sees a fluffy Maltese walking past with pink polka dot bows in its fur.

And it just feels so fucking normal. It just feels so damn ordinary, even though it’s the most out-of-the-ordinary thing to happen to her in a long time. He’s a murderer, a mass murderer. He’s angry and frightened and, if she’s honest, probably not 100% in his right mind. And the only reason he’s not on any wanted lists is because only a select few people know he’s alive - a number which seems to be steadily increasing. And no, that hasn’t escaped her notice either.

But here they are. Here they are like any other couple, couples that have homes and jobs and pets and lives, and anyone who saw them wouldn’t think any different. They’d believe the fantasy.

Fuck, she believes the damn fantasy.

He tugs her a little closer and she wonders how dearly they’ll need to pay for this. What they’ll need to give up or give back because she doesn’t think they get to have this for free. She just doesn’t think it works like that.
Then again, today is so beautiful that she thinks if they ever had a chance it’s now. So she doesn’t hold back. She won’t. She holds him tight, touches him, lets her fingers creep under the edges of his shirt so that her fingers can brush his skin, make it prickle. Watches him out of the corner of her eye and sees his jaw get tight, feels how he moves closer to her, presses against her hands.

He tells her to pay attention to the scenery. She tells him she is.

“How is Luna? How did everything go?” she asks eventually, and he flashes her a smile which is equal parts happiness and anguish.

“She's great,” he says, voice soft and low like he's worried he’ll jinx it if he talks too loudly. “She's going to be so happy there. The kennels, they ain't that sad shit you see on TV. They're big and clean and fucking amazing. Kat's even got aircon and heaters and shit in there.”

She cocks her head, and seemingly encouraged he carries on.

He tells her about the farm, how big it is, how pretty it is, how Kat has a really good thing going on there. And again she wonders about this woman, wonders what happened and how Frank came to know her. What he did and who he killed that she’ll take his dog in no questions asked, let him stay for a week. But she doesn't ask. She doesn't think she's ready for the story that'll bring up, doesn't want to taint the day. So she lets him talk, tightens her grip around him when he tells her about leaving Luna there, when she hears the tremble in his voice.

“I took her walking in the woods there, along some of the trails. She loved it… she's a great dog. She's a really great dog.”

His voice is measured, and she can hear how hard she's trying to keep it that way.

“They ain't gonna adopt her out,” he says. “She's too old and she needs medication. And people don't really go for pitbulls especially when their history is… like hers.”

He lets her go then, leans his forearms on the railing and looks out into the river, watches the sunlight glitter across the surface, making it sparkle and shimmer. She moves next to him, touches his hair and then trails her hand down his back to rest between his shoulder blades, rubs gently, slowly.
And he closes his eyes, arches slightly.

“It's not a bad thing,” he says, more to himself than to her. “Means she has a home forever now with Kat. Don't have to worry about other people not treating her right.”

She runs her hand downwards and then under his shirt. The small of his back is hot, slightly sweaty but she doesn't care and she trails her fingers over him, feels the hard muscle and the smooth lines, the fact that there are fewer knots than she anticipated.

Again the desire to abandon this excursion flares within her. In her head, in her belly. Between her legs. But she pushes it away because it's not real. It's nothing but blind lust and this is important. She wants it. She wants the romance that she knows he can't give much of. It's got to be right. He showed her that.

“We can go see her sometime then,” she says and he nods, opens his eyes, stares at the water for a few long seconds. “It's not far. You can show me everything.”

She's making plans. She realises this. And they might seem small. They might seem insignificant but they're plans nonetheless. They're workable ideas that involve the two of them in the not too near future. There's history to be made here. There's the admission of something more.

He feels it too. She doesn't have to ask him to be sure.

But he doesn't say anything, and she's not really sure he's even mulling over the implications of it. And then he pushes himself upright, pulls her close and kisses her lips gently.

“Let's go eat.”

They do.

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They find a bench in the shade a bit away from all the people where they can see the river and eat. And like he promised it's good. Really good. He's got himself some kind of duck burger and she's
eating a shish kebab - a bowl of cardiac arrest which might just worth it.

She tells him about the party, Smirnov and his new plans for the city, about Elektra. About Vanessa - and his eyes flare at that but he doesn't interrupt. He lets her speak, waits her out. Listens.

She also tells him about Matt, how determined he is to find something, how Elektra is equally determined to keep him out of harm’s way. How those two things are looking increasingly incompatible. The lengths she's going to.

“She wants to know if you can't go around there? Speak to him,” she licks some mayonnaise off her thumb. “Keep him out of trouble. I think basically she wants a plan that doesn't involve taking on every mobster in Hell’s Kitchen all at once.”

He rolls his eyes. “For fuck’s sake Red…”

She shrugs. “I'd feel better if you did too Frank. So would Foggy.”

It's true. She's not going to pretend that Matt is of no consequence to her. That he doesn't matter. Because he does. And maybe he doesn't matter to her in the way he wants. Maybe he wants more and maybe he won't get over that. But she does care about him. She does want him safe. She doesn't want to be the one writing about his downfall or worse, his demise because he's over eager, reckless.

Frank looks away, chewing thoughtfully, eyes on the river where a couple is kayaking.

“I wasn't wrong - what I said before,” There's a catch in his voice but it's not jealousy. It's not really even concern. But it’s something, something she hasn’t heard before, something she’s not sure she likes. “He still loves you.”

She nods. She doesn't have the energy to fight it and it would be pointless too. It is what it is.

So she nods. “He does.”

He looks back at her and his eyes are dark, unreadable. “How does that make you feel?”
Any other man, even a boyfriend, and she'd tell him to fuck off, tell him it has nothing to do with him. But this is Frank. This isn't any other man.


“Ain't your responsibility.”

“I know but that doesn't change anything,” she glances at the kayak too. “I want him to be safe.

“Matt helped me when no one else would. He believed me when no one else did. He's idealistic and righteous but he's a good person - you know that.”

He takes another bite of his food, nods. This is the first time since that night at the diner that they've ever discussed Matt openly and honestly. He's not being used as a taunt or a weapon. He's not being used as a way for Frank to justify deflecting his own feelings. He just is. And even though there's something a little disconcerting in Frank’s tone, it feels good and mature and almost like they've overcome a hurdle to talk about him like this - as someone they both know and care for. It doesn't have to be weird. And it almost isn't.

“I'll go round there later tonight. Find out what the hell is going on. Talk to Elektra too and see whether there is something we can do. Sounds like anything is a better plan than the one he's got.”

He's quiet for a moment, like he's trying to figure something out. But then he looks back at her.

“This thing has gone on long enough anyway. If they're trafficking people like Elektra says we need to end it and we need to do it properly.”

She knows his idea of “properly” differs vastly from Matt’s. And she hates how this makes her feel because a few minutes ago she was making plans to go and see Luna and now he's making plans he might not survive. At the same time she gets it and she hopes that somehow between him and Matt and him and her they can find something that works. Mahoney is still a good cop. And he knows other good cops and maybe they don't need to fight this alone. Even Frank would see the value in that if the stakes are too high.
She touches the back of his hand.

“Thanks, I'll send Elektra a message now.”

He nods. “One condition though.”

“Name it.”

“We don’t talk about Murdock for the rest of the day.”

She grins. “Fine by me.”

And they don’t.

They eat and when they're done, she leans into him and he puts his arm around her shoulders, rests his chin on her head, hand back on her knee. They don't talk, there's no need, and for a while it's just peaceful. The sun, the water gleaming in front of them and the gentle breeze lifting her hair, the strangely removed buzz of the crowd further away.


She concentrates on the little things: the way his trigger finger taps her knee in a gentle but broken rhythm; a scar that cuts across his knuckles, the line of it turning silver in the bright light; the soft smoothness of the skin on his neck and how he shivers when she presses her lips to it - how that just makes her want to do it even more.

So she does, all the way along his collarbones - not kisses, not in the truest sense of the word, but brief fluttering touches with her mouth, touches that make him hiss and swallow hard. And he eventually stops tapping on her knee and just covers it with his hand, squeezes, and her skin feels hot and flushed beneath it.

She can overwhelm him. It's not a question anymore. There aren't doubts. And when he turns his head to her, nuzzles her jaw and then her throat she knows he can do it too. And again she feels that liquid heat between her legs and she has to press her thighs together, shift on the bench to get
comfortable again.

He notices. He notices every damn thing. And she wants him to. He deserves it. He deserves something other than pain and suffering, whether it's the type he's inflicting or the type he carries deep inside. He deserves any peace he'll allow himself.

(And then I'm with you and somehow it feels okay)

She brings a hand up to his chest, then higher to his shoulder, slips it into the front his his shirt and he breathes deeply, angles his body towards her, watches silently as she undoes a button, then another so she can rest her palm flat against his skin and feel his heartbeat hard and heavy against her. It's not racing, not yet, but soon.

Soon.

He shivers and his teeth scrape along the skin of her neck, nipping at the juncture of her shoulder. She thinks of Monday night when she lay in her bed with her fingers inside her, how she thought of him and his kisses, his hands on her and how then it seemed almost abstract and incorporeal. How even though she'd just kissed him and touched him, imagining it happening again seemed both beyond her capabilities and also something she didn't really want to do.

And she still doesn't really want to do it. She doesn't want to imagine the tangible aspects of fucking Frank Castle, because she wants to be surprised, she wants to be taken.

He wants to take her too. It isn't even a question.

His tongue is on her now, hot and wet and yet still tentative as he tastes her skin, presses kisses into her and he smiles against her as she shivers, bites down again gently, slowly, and she's glad they've chosen this spot away from the crowd.

But then he seems to get a hold of himself again and he shifts back a little so he can see her, frowning and worrying his lip with his teeth like he has something to say and isn't sure how.

He lifts his hand from her knee and touches her face with his knuckles, thumb sweeping along her cheekbone.
“I did some thinking while I was in Jersey,” he says slowly and his voice is low and thick. “About you and me. This thing between us…”

(We have to let it go)

*Fireworks in the sky and Frank Castle’s blood on her. The wall against her back and how he nearly let her fall.*

But no, he doesn't say that. He's not going to say that again, won't let her fall. He's here now with her. He made promises. He doesn't break them.

He sighs, fingers moving into her hair, sliding along her scalp.

“Well, I don't know where this is gonna go. I don't. And maybe one day you're gonna come to your goddamn senses and kick my ass out.”

She wonders what he could do to make that happen, what horror he could visit on her that she hasn't already seen. Because she's seen him at his worst and she's still here, her body and her heart and her mind all tangled up in him, all part of him as he is of her.

“Frank…”

“No,” he says and glances down, to the side, biting his lip. And when he looks back at her he meets her eyes, stares at her long and hard for a good few seconds.

“You… you stayed. And I don't know why the fuck you did that. After the graveyard … after that shit I said. Shoulda sent me packing. But you didn't. You stood there and you took it and then you kicked my ass and let me cry it out like a fucking baby and you didn't judge me for any of it. Ain't anyone but Maria who ever did that before. Ain't anyone but her who could fucking grind me into the dust like that and then make me carry on going… make me want to…”

“That's okay Frank. You needed…”
“But that's just it,” he interrupts. “I needed, I wanted. Every goddamn thing is about me and fixing me.”

This is hard for him. So she's going to let him take his time and say it, get it right. So she waits. She rubs her thumb in small circles against his chest, feels his skin prickling under her palm and hears him suck in a hard, ragged breath.

“We don't get to pick the things that fix us. We don't. I told Red that once and I'm telling you now.

“But it ain't your job to fix me. It ain't right for a man to put that on his girl…” Hand back on her face now. “It's my job to be fixed for you.”

He says it with such certainty, such utter belief that she almost feels her heart break right open. It's that little monster again, the one from the cabin that had to eat its way out of his chest so that it could speak to her, so that he could say the words. And yet… and yet, it seems easier this time. Almost like he’s helping it, like he’s stopped fighting it.

He's done some bad things. Some terrible awful things, she just never realised he thought he did them to her.

“And I don't know when that's gonna be Karen,” he continues. “I don't know when I'm gonna be right again. I told you I thought I could let this go, I wanted to let it go. But I can’t and I'm not gonna give this up because of bad timing or some lame ass shit that people say when they're looking for a story to tell themselves.”

And all of a sudden he looks away from her, squeezes his eyes shut and like this hurts, like it causes him actual physical pain.

And that’s when she realises that he's asking her if she’ll have him. Fundamentally, underneath all the bullshit, underneath the rage and the suffering and every horrific thing he's ever done that is his ultimate question.

But it isn’t a question. It isn’t a question at all.

(Don't you know?)
So she slides her hand up his neck into his hair, tilts his face to her and when he opens his eyes she can see the fear in them.

He's begging. Without saying a damn word, he's on his fucking knees and asking her to let him try.

“T'm here,” she says. “I'm here with you after all this. After everything. And that's real. That's important.”

She's not sure what she expected. Relief, tears, maybe even more rage - at himself, at the world. But Frank Castle never does what anyone expects. Until he does.

He looks at her for a long time, his thumb tracing the contours of her cheek, her brow, fingers gentle on her jaw like he's trying to learn her lines, learn the shape and feel of her. And he's frowning like he's not sure what any of this means and he's trying to find an answer that's just not there. That'll never be there.

He's very close to her, so close she can see the flecks of gold in his eyes, the sheen of saliva on his lips. He wants to kiss her. She knows this. It doesn't take much to figure it out. He wants to kiss her long and hard and deep like he did before he left. He wants to touch her and taste her and drown in her. And she wants that too. She wants it so much that she doesn't know if she'll be able to stop when it happens.

Doesn't know if that's a bad thing either.

It seems like ages before his speaks, like they've been sitting there for decades staring at one another, his hands on her head, hers on his heart.

“This is about you from now on,” he says solemnly. “Know that.”

He doesn't lie to her. He doesn't lie to her ever. And she believes this with as much faith as she's believed everything else he's told her.

And then he nods. Short and sharp. Like he trusts that she’s got it, accepts it. That it's right. It’s the same look her gave her in the shower that night, when he wiped the mist off the door with his hand
and looked in on her like he needed to confirm something. And even though she knows she couldn’t live with herself if she wasn’t there for him, if she wasn’t his first port of call when he hurts or when he’s distressed, she realises that this is a need for him too. That he wants to be there for her. That he wants to stop hurting all the time.

So she leans in and brushes her lips against the corner of his mouth, lingers. Once she broke the skin there with her hand and now she can heal it, turn it into something good.

“Us,” she says softly as she pulls back. “No you or me. Us.”

There’s a second that he doesn’t do anything. Doesn’t talk, doesn’t move. He just watches her, deep and intense, eyes flickering over her face, her hair. She stays still too, staring back, feeling a gentle breeze blowing against her back, ruffling her top.

She gets it. She’s done it again. Made plans, spoken about them as if there’s a future for them. And maybe that’s presumptuous. The man is, after all, still mourning his wife, his one and done, the love of his life. But she doesn’t feel worried or guilty, doesn’t feel concerned because they both know that there’s a part of him that will always be grief. She can accept that. One day, maybe he will too.


And then he releases her, stands, and for a moment he blocks out the sun, casts a shadow over her. She thinks that’s fitting somehow - part of them always in shadow, never fully being in the light. But she doesn’t think on it long because he’s holding out his hand, palm upwards, and she doesn’t hesitate as she takes it, lets him pull her up and lead her to the stone railings so they can look at the river.

It’s still blue, that hasn’t changed. And if she keeps the sun behind her, she can almost believe they’re the only two people here. It’s beautiful and he’s beautiful and she loves him so much and she realises that it doesn’t matter if the rain is coming back, if the storm isn’t done with them yet. They’ve beaten worse odds.

And she hopes the universe won’t take that as a challenge.

“Penny for your thoughts?” she asks after a while, bumps his shoulder teasingly with her own and he snorts, glances at her and then back at the river without saying anything.
He has that way of his. And that’s about 90% of the problem.

But right now he’s preoccupied, watching intently as the surface of the river ripples and swirls, as the kayakers come back and their bright orange boat stands out starkly against the gentle blues. He’s working up to something, she realises, gathering courage.

It’ll come. Whatever it is he’s planning or thinking. It’ll come. It always does.

He’s like a rock next to her, solid and unmoving and she leans into him, lets herself enjoy the press of his shoulder against hers, his hip, thick and hard in the curve of her waist. She could stay here, she realises, stay here forever, with him. She doesn’t need much else. For the first time in ages, she, Karen Page, Intrepid Reporter, Lover of Vigilantes and Holder Back of Tears Under Extreme Duress, is content. There’s a mass murderer at her side who thinks she hung the moon and the stars, a mass murderer who she loves more than life itself and she’s never felt safer.

She rests her head on his shoulder, feels him shift to accommodate her. He’s tense but at the same time, there’s also a strange calm anticipation in the air. She’ll wait. They have time.

She’s not remotely cold, but she shivers anyway, and his fingers tighten on hers.

And then she swears she feels him change next to her, transform in a movement she can only describe as “unfolding”. And suddenly he’s standing up straighter, taller letting whatever magic he was hoping for fill him, those few seconds of courage he so desperately needs.

“Frank?” she says softly as he turns his head to look at her.

He smiles. And it’s sweet and slightly uncertain.

“I’m sorry,” he says and his voice is thick and warm, moving over her like a wave and lighting her up from the inside. “I can't stand here anymore pretending I'm not thinking about kissing you.”

He turns fully to look at her and his fingers twitch as he brings a hand to her face, the other to her elbow, tugs her close so that she can feel the heat of his breath on her, see smallest hint of crows’ feet around his eyes.
Thumb running along her cheekbone, then her jaw, across her bottom lip.

She looks him dead in the eye and there’s a moment that this newfound confidence fails him and he glances away quickly, briefly, bites his lip and seems to almost laugh at himself, shake his head in some private joke.

She knows what it is though.

*The big bad Punisher shy in front of a girl.*

And it’s so ridiculous. He’s kissed her before and hours ago his hand was high on her thigh, under her skirt. They’ve slept in the same bed and at night he holds her so tight she can hardly breathe, he buries his face in her hair and presses kisses into her shoulders and yet now, now he’s nervous as a schoolboy with a girl behind the bleachers for the first time.

But then he regains his composure, stares at her for a second and it feels like he’s looking through her, seeing all her secrets. And she wants to show him. She doesn’t want to hide them anymore. She won’t. He can have them, take them and keep them and discard all the bad, hold onto all the good.

“Can I?” he asks softly. He's not asking about kissing her, not truly.

She swallows heavily, meets his gaze, black eyes boring into her.

“You don’t have to ask Frank,” she whispers surprised by how husky her voice sounds. “You never had to ask.”

His mouth twists into a smile.

“Just this once then,” he says and she nods.

“Just this once.”

She catches a glimpse of his eyes, dark, pupils blown, the ruddiness of his skin, the faintest hint of
his bruises, the slight stubble that scrapes against her cheek and then his lips are on hers and that’s all she knows.

She’s had so many fantasies about this. Not just since Monday when she found out what it was like, but since the cabin, maybe even before. But, like before, the reality of him always surprises her. Everything screams that he should be hard and demanding, desperate and rough. And even though she can feel the hints of all these things - the outlines and the promises, his kiss is soft, chaste even, except for the slightest hint of wetness on his lips, smearing onto hers.

He lingers though, hand fluttering at her cheek, fingers flexing in her hair, before he pulls back ever so slightly, takes a breath and then angles his head to kiss her again. He’s harder the second time, hand sliding from her jaw to her throat and settling there like a subtle demand, a question even, mouth heavier on hers but not nearly heavy enough.

He retreats again and that’s when something unfurls inside of her too - something that’s been lying inside her benign and waiting, something that’s slowly been stirring, making itself known, waiting. Waiting for him.

She surges forward, hands gripping his arms like claws, then sliding up to his shoulders, his neck, and dragging him back down, mouth arching hard against his. There’s a moment, infinitesimally small, when he hesitates. It could be surprise, it could be something else but it’s so brief she’s not even sure he registers it. And then she parts her lips under his and he groans as his tongue slips into her mouth, licks at her teeth. Tastes her lipgloss, sugar sweet and then something more, something that’s all her judging by the strangled sound he makes in the back of his throat. And it’s like something inside him snaps too and his hands move together down her arms, thumbs brushing firmly and deliberately along the sides of her breasts, over her ribs and settling on the flare of her hips, fingers bunching the fabric of her skirt.

And then he’s moving her, walking her backwards into the barricade of the river, the cold stone hitting hard against her ass, before he slides his hands down over her hips, to her thighs so he can lift her up onto the railing. He hesitates briefly and then puts his hands on her knees, pushes her legs apart and moves between them.

She thinks she hears him say sorry into her mouth but she ignores it and pulls him closer, wraps her arms around his neck and hooks her ankle behind his knee. The truth is she has no idea what the fuck she is doing - she’s not vastly experienced and she’s out of practice and there must be some part of him that knows that - but she doesn’t care and he doesn’t either. It doesn’t matter. All that matters is his mouth on hers, the taste of his tongue, the way his hands are dropping low on her back and he’s pressing into the cradle of her hips and she can feel him hard and throbbing against her.

He told her to hold that thought and she did. She held it all through the week, through Monday with
Ellison and his nonsense, Wednesday at the party - speaking with Elektra, dancing with Matt - he was always there. The taste of his mouth, the feel of his hands and the fantasy of the rest of him. And she almost can't believe the reality of it. That they're here in the sunlight and the fresh air and it's the most beautiful day this year has given them yet and it seems like the world has stopped just for them.

So she kisses him. She kisses him hard and firm, rough and tough. She lets him see and hear and taste how much she wants him, how desperately she needs him and he does the same for her. He holds on, he holds on tight and she lets herself go loose in his arms, let him move her and adjust her how he wants, hands groping at her the undersides of her thighs as he tugs her closer so that she’s teetering on the railing and her hair falls over them like a veil. A shield.

She can give him this. She can give him a safe place. She can let him be hers like he asked.

It isn’t even a question.

None of his questions truly are.

(Don’t you know?)

They stay like that. They stay like that for a long time. Fierce kisses followed by gentle ones, his hands on her running down her arms, her legs, back to her waist, like he can't decide where he wants to touch her first; hers on him, acting much the same.

And when he eventually stops he does it slowly, gently, like he's winding down and he leans his forehead against hers and his hands move to her hips, massaging circles into her flesh, his breath is coming out fast and hard.

If he let her go now she'd fall. Not only a few centimetres and catch herself on a stupid ledge but really fall, maybe even into the river depending on how he moved. But he won't let go now, she knows he won't. He won't drop her. He doesn’t lie to her and she trusts him with everything.

He loves her. He does. She doesn’t know why and she doesn’t know how he’s finding room for it inside him, somewhere in between all that hate and rage and pain. But he is. Somewhere in his suffering, there’s a reprieve, a respite.

(And then I'm with you and somehow it feels okay)
He looks up at her and wipes his saliva off her lips with his thumb, touches her jaw again, her cheekbones, leans in and presses his lips to her brow, her temple, moves down to her throat and scrapes his teeth along her skin.

And she shivers under his hands, says his name, buries her face in his shoulder.

It’s just like she thought: she doesn’t want to stop. She doesn’t want to stop for one second.

“Take me home,” she whispers into crook of his neck, hears him groan at her words. “Take me home now.”

(No you and me. Us.)

He pulls away, looks her up and down and then takes her hand, kisses her knuckles gently, one by one, and leads her back to his truck.

Chapter End Notes

Probably don’t need to say this but the Bruce Springsteen song that they're listening to is Waiting on a Sunny Day.
Hanging on your words, living on your breath, feeling with your skin

Chapter Notes

So I am back. I am sorry this has taken a longish time to get here. I’ve had a horrible few weeks both professionally and personally and have been dealing with some pretty nasty stuff. And of course then my brain has been yelling at me that I do not know any words or how to use them. I am hoping this is just a big lie and what I have written here is not just nonsense.

Anyway, I don't have much to say about this other than I am going to go hide now. Please note the rating change - that is a thing - and the additional tags.

Chapter title is from Depeche Mode's *In your room*.

They don’t speak on the way home and she’s grateful for that. He doesn’t touch her either and when she looks at him his brow is furrowed and he’s biting down hard on his bottom lip, sucking it into his mouth and popping it out again; his knuckles white on the steering wheel and eyes intent on the road ahead. There’s been no subtle and not-so-subtle glances at her legs, no unnecessary stops just so he can take a moment to see her, to kiss her. This is different, this is a kind of understated determination. She’s given him a task, a job to do, and he’s doing it. He’s taking her home like she asked and to hell with everything else.

She finds that in many ways it feels like that day he drove her down from the mountains - the way he didn’t speak and neither did she and when they wanted to it was too late. But that was important all on its own and she doesn’t want to pretend that it wasn’t. They both needed time, they both needed to digest everything that had happened and understand the magnitude of what he had admitted to her.

*(Don’t you know?)*

She does.

She never doubted it.

She lost him that day too. Lost him when Matt pulled her out of the truck and held her tight and she could see the grim satisfaction in Frank’s eyes as he did. Sure, it wasn’t the same as the night he left her on the roof and it wasn’t the same as the things he said in the graveyard that cut her right to the bone. But it was a loss. She did mourn. She might not have realised it at the time but she grieved over every free coffee, every bullet on her windowsill… Every goddamn time she heard that stupid fucking song on her car radio.
He didn’t believe himself to be deserving but he wanted to be - he wanted to be so much.

He breaks her heart.

He always has.

It’s not like that now though. As much as she can’t help but see the similarities, the differences are stark as well. Matt isn’t waiting for her, at least not in the same way he was before, and Frank’s not fighting her. He’s not fighting himself either. He’s letting himself believe that there’s a chance he can have this, that they can have this. And maybe she’s not too convinced of the wisdom of that - she still has her doubts, and it’s not like one day in the sun changes the fundamental problems she knows they’re going to need to face - but for now she’s willing to let it be.

It’s not raining after all. They’ve been promised sunshine.

For today.

So she decides she’s not going to think. She’s not going to speculate or pick at it. Tomorrow they can deal with the consequences as and when they present themselves.

If they present themselves. There’s always a chance they won’t.

A chance. Always.

It feels like they get home in no time at all, pulling up outside her building, and she barely remembers any of the scenery from the drive. She knows it was there but none of it sticks with her the way the journey to the river did: the trees, the flowers, his hands strong and scarred on the steering wheel. Bruce Springsteen singing about sunny days and pretty girls.

She’s doesn’t think she’ll ever be able to recall any of it clearly. There was Frank and his kisses and the sunlight glinting off the water and then there was here. Whatever happened between is mostly lost.
She glances at him and immediately his eyes are on her. He has a lot of questions. A *lot* of questions and a lot of concerns and she knows she isn’t capable of answering any of them. Not yet. Not with words.

So she doesn’t. She doesn’t need to either.

“Come on,” she says softly and her voice cracks hard as she does. “Let’s go.”

He stares at her for a good few moments and then he nods, unclips his seatbelt and climbs out of the car, takes her hand and lets her lead him inside.

It’s dark and cool in the foyer of her building and there’s a young, pretty girl wearing enormous headphones on door duty. She doesn’t even look up when they come in and Karen wonders briefly where Irene is. If she’s also out and enjoying the weather, giving up her grim demeanour just for the day and taking a walk in the park. Maybe tomorrow she’ll even be in a better mood for it. And wouldn’t that be a thing? Irene with her imagined kalashnikov feeling refreshed and topped up with sunshine, making all their lives better.

It's a silly thought and, for a second, she finds it hilariously funny and has to stifle a laugh. And she knows it's not really about Irene. It's that she herself is a little silly. A little dizzy - the world tumbling by in bright rainbow colours that make her happy and disoriented at the same time.

But then Frank’s hand closes warm and firm around her elbow and he steers her silently towards the lifts and she doesn’t think about Irene and her sourness anymore.

Again, they don’t speak as they walk down the corridor to her front door. He stays close though, so close that she can feel his heat through her clothes; so close she’s sure he can see her legs shaking and hear her heart beating against her ribs, rattling her bones. And his hand on her elbow feels like flames on her skin.

She fumbles with her keys when she pulls them out of her purse and they slip through her fingers and onto the floor; the sound of metal hitting the cheap linoleum tiles echoing loudly off the walls and down the passage.

*Karen Page, lover of vigilantes and disturber of the peace.*
“Sorry,” she whispers and starts to bend to retrieve them but his fingers tighten on her arm and he holds her still, presses a kiss into her hair before grabbing the little leather keyring himself. He moves in close then, so that his belly is almost flush with her back, and unlocks the door, holds it open for her; nods once when she glances at him.

“Go inside,” he says, voice low and husky.

She does.

And it feels like she’s stepped into a new world.

It’s not that anything has changed from the morning. Everything, including Pickle, is still exactly where she left it and yet somehow the room has a different quality to it - something mysterious and anticipatory. Something almost expectant, like it’s used the time she’s been away to prepare itself, to get ready.

To the left, the couch and the coffee table, the feeble lamp, sit in the shadows, cool and dark and completely inconsequential, while the curtains billow in the breeze. To the right she can see the rays of the afternoon sun streaming in through the window, throwing dappled light onto the bed, soaking the sheets; dustmotes, gold as the flecks in Frank’s eyes, dancing in the glow.

And suddenly she feels overwhelmed, overcome, overwrought - over every goddamn fucking thing.

It’s not that she’s scared. She couldn’t be scared of him. No matter what he did or who he killed she could never actually be frightened of him - she doesn’t have it in her. He loves her. He would set the world on fire if she asked him to - if he thought it would make her happy for even a moment. He would burn everything down to the ground and then come to her like a dog on his knees looking for a kind word, a pat on the head, a place to sleep that’s somewhere in the same realm of existence as her.

So no, it’s not him. Frank Castle might be the toughest, meanest son of a bitch she’s ever met, but it’s not him she’s afraid of. It never was.

But maybe she’s afraid of this. Of taking this step into the unknown. Giving all of herself to him and getting all of him - his rage, his suffering, his love - in return.
She tells herself that she is strong enough - he wouldn't be here if she wasn’t.

She looks at him over her shoulder and he’s still standing in the doorway, hands on the frame and body not yet inside. He’s watching her, eyes fixed on her face and she realises he’s feeling some of that same trepidation that she is. That he knows when he crosses the threshold that he’s starting something that has to be finished, that demands to be finished.

So she watches him, takes another deliberate step towards the bed, sees the flash in his eyes, the way his nostrils flare and his hands twitch.

He’s scared too. She’s not even surprised. Because of course he’s scared. He has to be. She probably wouldn’t trust it if he claimed otherwise.

He’s hiding it well though, superficially at least. She wouldn’t know it if she wasn’t looking for it, but it’s there in his eyes, in his jaw - in the fact that he has yet to pluck up the courage to walk through her fucking door.

Maybe she was always the brave one, maybe he isn’t so wrong when he says she makes him weak.

Another step, smaller this time and it’s like she’s daring him to follow - again like he’s a stray dog and she’s trying to be strong for him, not let her anxiety show and scare him off.

She glances up to see that she’s standing under the place where his blood stains her wall - a rusty brown handprint, finger marks swooping down in thick smooth lines. She should have cleaned it - she knows this. Rubbed it away. And yet now it seems like it belongs here. Like she’d miss it if it were gone. It’s a sign that he is real and alive and he came to her in his darkest hour.

And she is not done.

Because she’s not.

Because she’s holding on. She’s holding on with two hands and she’s not letting go.

Because she has everything.
Everything but everything.

She swallows, searches for something to concentrate on, something to distract her while she waits for him to catch up - gather his own courage from wherever place he does - and step the fuck inside. But there’s nothing to look at, nothing to see but the swaying curtains and open windows, the bed lit up like a sacrificial altar in front of her.

And yes, maybe she should stop being so fucking dramatic and no, she doesn’t give a fuck.

And then she hears the door close. It’s not loud, but it slams into every last cell in her body, moving through her veins like magma and pinning her to the spot. And she’s so fucking grateful because it feels like otherwise she’d just float away, out of the window and up into the spring air, never to be seen again. Not even he could catch her. Not even The Punisher could bring her back.

He’s behind her now. She senses it more than anything else - the slight change in temperature, the hint of gunmetal in the air and his damp breath across the back of her neck as he sweeps her hair over one shoulder, lets it fall long and loose and messy over her breast.

He says her name, deep and guttural in the back of his throat, like it hurts him - and maybe it does. Maybe it really does hurt that he’s here with her like this - that she isn’t his wife, she isn’t the mother of his children. Maybe it breaks his heart and cracks him wide open again, leaves him feeling lost and empty. Reeling. But then again, he’s always been reeling. Has been doing it since the day his whole world died. Maybe now is the time to stop the staggering, to bring him back and even out the odds. Right that tipped scale once and for all.

She closes her eyes. Waits. Leaves him to muster up his own courage, find just a little of that arrogance, of that bravado she knows he has, and use it as best he can.

Again she can’t give it to him. Again he has to do this alone.

And he does.

The hairs on the back of her neck stand on end and her skin feels like it’s on fire when he touches her; big hands closing firmly over her upper arms and making her shiver even as he burns her. She draws in a sharp breath, holds it, as his thumbs brush across her shoulders and he shifts in behind her.
He’s less gentle than he was earlier - not rough by any means. But his hands are solid, a little demanding even, and he’s not hesitant like he was seconds ago when he was outside her door and waiting like a vampire to be invited in.

He could break her. That’s simply fact - it’s not even up for debate. She can feel the strength in his fingers and more than that, the knowledge - twenty different ways to kill a man before he even knows what’s coming. He’d never be any the wiser. Not unless Frank wanted him to be.

And she guesses that depends on Frank’s state of mind and level of rage on any given day.

Today though… today he’s not punishing. Not himself or anyone else. Today she knows that’s the farthest thing from his mind, can feel it as his hands slide down her arms and settle on her hips, as his mouth comes down hot and wet on her neck and his teeth scrape across her skin, leaving a rash of gooseflesh behind.

Today he doesn’t want to punish, but he does want her to feel it. Today he wants her to know.

And she does.

She knows.

He does it again, slower this time, harder, and she’s sure he’s left marks on her; faint red lines that will swell on her pale skin, stand out like a brand so that the world knows she’s his.

His.

Oh god. His.

It should be a scary thought. It should be - this idea of being part of the Punisher, of him being part of her should terrify her. But Karen Page has never been good with “shoulds”.

Mouth on the juncture of her shoulder again, tongue smooth and gentle now - soothing even - and
his fingers twitch again, pulling her into him so that her back is against his torso and his hands cover her belly.

“Karen Page,” his voice is gravel in her ear, his breath cooling the wet patches he’s left on her skin. She makes a small sound in the back of her throat, leans into him and tilts her head so he can kiss her.

And he does. Heavy messy kisses running from her shoulder to her neck, her jaw, sucking little dark marks into her, teeth nipping at her. His hands are moving too, sliding across her stomach and up to her waist, higher still over her ribs and settling under her breasts, kneading her flesh and making her gasp.

She’s almost certain her legs are going to give out. Certain that if he wasn’t so strong and solid behind her, if he wasn’t holding her so tight, she’d slip right down, melt into the goddamn floor, stain it red like he’s stained her wall and disappear forever. But he’s not going to let that happen. He’s not going to let her fall. Not again. He promised and she believes him. He’ll keep her standing. She’ll do the same for him.

Come what may.

“You alright?” Voice low, barely more than a whisper.

She nods because she doesn’t trust herself to speak, doesn’t trust whatever sounds are coming out of her mouth not to be some garbled nonsense that means nothing.

Or everything.

*Everything*...

More kisses, slow and warm, across her jaw. She opens her eyes, looks down at his hands on her body, the way the fabric of her blouse bunches between his knuckles and how his thumbs circle her nipples slowly and deliberately. And she legitimately wonders how she’s going to make it through the next few hours - how if a few gentle and not-so-gentle neck kisses can leave her feeling like she’s about to turn inside out, how she can possibly even entertain the idea of more.

How she could even *think* it.
And then she looks at the bed again. Their bed. Because it is theirs. It’s still luminous - oblique sun rays hitting it just right as the curtains balloon inwards, crisp linen turning silver in the glow.

And suddenly it doesn’t matter anymore. None of the nerves, none of the anxiety makes even the slightest bit of difference because she wants him in there - out of the shadows and in the light. She wants to be naked with him, chilly sheets at her back and him ... him hot as a blast furnace over her, his mouth on hers and his fingers twitching and desperate on her breasts, her legs. Her cunt. She wants him and he wants her and nothing else in this sorry fucking excuse for an existence makes the slightest bit of difference.

He’s here. He’s here with her. And that means something.

Another small sound in her throat, head tipping back to rest against his shoulder and then his hand rises from her breast and cups her cheek, turns her face towards him. Even in the dim light his pupils are blown, big and black, and consuming her, eating her up from the inside out and the outside in.

She sees him then: who he was and what he’s become. It’s in his eyes, the set of his jaw. It bleeds out through his skin. He’s the Punisher, the murderer, the torturer, but he’s also Frank Castle, the husband, the lover, the gentleman who’s good and kind and chivalrous. He’s a finely tuned and perfect balance of both and she wants it all, every last bit of it, the good and the bad.

He swallows when she touches his neck, blinks hard when she says his name, and for a second nothing happens - the room is quiet and the curtains are suddenly still. Even the dustmotes seem suspended in time. And then he’s on her, spinning her around, his mouth frantic and hard as grabs at her and backs her into the wall with enough force to make her gasp.

Hands in her hair, fingers hard on her scalp and he holds her tight and still, licking at her teeth and biting at her lips, tongue sliding along hers and all she can do - all she wants to do - is cling to him and let him do this to her. Let him have her and kiss her and need her, lose himself in her.

And he does.

He does.

He’s hard and hot. Throbbing. And neither of them are remotely interested in hiding it, in ignoring it. It was inconsequential once. Truly it was. That night in the shower, the first night they slept together
in her bed, it wasn't important. But it is now. The same way the slick pulsing between her thighs and that insistent simmer in her belly is important.

He’s kissing her neck again, still wet, still messy, fingers tugging a little at her hair and teeth scraping across her collarbones. There'll be more marks, more welts before they're done. More wounds in need of soothing and she guesses most of them won't even be hers. Guesses that what they're doing and what they're going to do is one big exercise in healing when they get right down to it.

“How you,” he rasps. “Want you so much.”

She might crumble. She knows it sounds cliché and cheesy but she thinks it's probably the most realistic thing that she could do right now. Just fall apart and leave him to pick up the pieces. She's not really sure there are other options at this point.

But then his hands are back on her hips, pulling a little at her skirt and then abandoning that and instead sliding underneath the hem of her top. His palm settles heavily on her ribs before moving to her back, fingernails digging into her skin and dragging downwards over her ass to her thighs. And he's kissing her again, hard scattered kisses across her face and her throat, her shoulders. He's eager and sloppy, a little unfocused, like he wants to taste and touch every part of her at once.

He's also talking again. Little nonsense words into her skin between licks and bites. She catches snatches of it, bits and pieces coming together to sound like prayers or maybe praises and suddenly it is too much. His mouth, his hands, his words. And yes, his cock throbbing against her.

She didn't think she would, but she needs a moment - just a second to get used to the idea of him like this: desperate, demanding.

Overwhelming.

He’s always been overwhelming in everything else - there’s no reason this should be different.

But she wants to be overwhelming too. She really really does.

So she says his name, pushes gently at him to get his attention, lifts his face to hers when she does, and kisses his lips softly, runs a hand through his hair and down to the back of his neck until he looks at her.
He's beautiful. She's thought it before and now she thinks it again. Every part of him. His rage, his suffering, his love which glitters through everything he is and turns him into something he isn't now but one day could be again.

Maybe.

She accepts that the chances are slim.

It's another bridge for another day and they’ve crossed so many and come so far already that their luck has to run out soon.

(And then I'm with you and somehow it feels okay)

“Karen?” his voice is low and thick. He glances down to where his hands have all but moved back to her breasts and his knee has made its way between her thighs. And when he looks back at her, his eyes are worried - fearful even - like he's done something wrong and is getting ready to atone. And she knows that's ridiculous. She's seen Frank Castle dare a fucking jury to put him away. She's seen him throw himself headlong into an army to save a junkyard dog. He's taken on an entire fucking cell block of hardened criminals and lived to tell the tale. He doesn't atone and he doesn't get scared.

Except he does. And he is now. And he doesn’t need to be. This is the one moment, the one time he needs to know there is absolutely nothing to fear. There's nothing to feel guilty for, nothing here that can hurt him or wound him or take the things he loves away.

So she kisses him softly as his hands loosen on her, lips gentle on his.

“I just…” she trails off. “I just need a second…”

And it sounds so lame, so trite and silly. She’s a grown woman for fuck’s sake and she’s about to get the very thing she’s been wanting for the past six months, maybe even longer. And for a second she’s almost angry at herself.

But then his hand is on her face, knuckles brushing her jaw. And he doesn’t even sound disappointed when he speaks.
"You take as much time as you need. We don't have to..."

But they do. They do have to and she doesn’t want him to say the words. Doesn’t want him to put them out there into the world, to even give it the smallest consideration.

So she puts her fingers to his lips, shakes her head.

“No, we do,” she says. “We really do.”

She kisses him again, fierce and fiery, and then slips out of his arms, dodges Pickle who's finally roused herself, and forces herself to walk to the bathroom. She shuts the door firmly behind her and takes a second to lean against it, pinch the bridge of her nose.

She's doesn’t know what she hoped to gain from this little intermission. If her life was some ridiculous rom com she'd be frantically touching up her make-up and tousling her hair just right. But none of that is necessary.

She goes to the mirror anyway, rests her hands on the cool porcelain of the sink, closes her eyes for a second before glancing at herself.

She looks the same as she always does: thin, blonde, pretty - the fucking Bambi eyes Elektra was giving her shit about. But there's something else too. The pupils in her Bambi eyes are huge and her lips are red and swollen. And, like she thought, there are marks and welts from his teeth and mouth on her neck and shoulders.

She pulls the collar of her top to the side, traces the line of one of them and then another. It stings a little but it's not sore and she feels a little frisson of pleasure coursing down her spine and settling deep and heavy between her legs.

And that's something else too. The pounding inside her, the way she knows that if she looked now her panties - already sheer and diaphanous - would be wet and translucent.

She finds she doesn't care about that. It's the point after all.
She takes a breath, looks at herself again. She feels high, giddy even… that brightly coloured world fading into something deeper and more beautiful, moving in slow motion around her. Frank’s kisses and touches lighting up her nerve endings one by one. His words making her weak and strong all at the same time.

“You’re about to fuck the Punisher Karen Page,” she whispers to herself. “You’re about to do that.”

_Do you think you're ready for that?_

Matt’s voice…

_Matt’s voice. Like a devil on her shoulder. Or maybe, depending on your interpretation, an angel._

Fuck it.

She nods. Yes, yes she is ready.

_Then get on that. You're wasting daylight._

Foggy.

And he's right. She is.

Glance in the mirror, hand lifted to her hair and then she drops it back to her side. She doesn't want to change a goddamn thing.

There's a man who loves her and he's waiting for her.

She goes.
He's sitting on the couch when she comes back, absently scratching Pickle’s ears.

He's also hunched over, staring at the floor like he wants to kill it, punish it maybe for the misdeed of being in her apartment and bearing witness to his frantic kisses and whispered confessions. But he's there and so is she and that's all that matters.

As always his gaze gives away almost nothing. Nothing for those who don't know where to look. But she does. She spent long enough studying him while he sleeps, while he talks. While he kills. The tightness in his jaw, the way he grinds his teeth, blown pupils, hands balled into fists. So maybe he isn't as enigmatic as he likes to think. Maybe not even as much as she thinks.

He wants this, he wants her, she's sure of it now and no hard gaze or semi-unreadable expression can hide what that means.

"Frank," she says and his eyes snap to her face. Like the night at the cabin, it's more to do with hoping to be given a job - a task to please her - than anything else.

Unlike then, she has one for him now.

"You alright?" he asks again.

“Yes,” and her voice is less shaky than she expected. “Yes I’m good.”

He nods. Slow. But there's a gleam in his eyes. Something poised in anticipation, waiting to pounce.

She looks down, to the side, giving herself a moment to calm her nerves, to take a breath. She can still feel the imprint of his lips on her neck, his fingers digging into her waist, the way he all but engulfed her…

The way he always has.
"Frank, this is..." she trails off, looks back at him. Doesn't need to force herself to keep her gaze steady; meets him head on. And to his credit, he doesn't waver either. Not that she thought he would. Not that Frank Castle would look away. Not at a time like this at least.

"Yeah," he says and his voice makes her feel weak, her knees buckling slightly as she steps out of her heels to hide how much she's trembling.

She thinks again that it might have been easier if they'd just done it that first night. If he'd fucked her through that hard formica table and used his body to warm her cold, wet skin. If he'd taken her there and then, while she was naked and they were alone at the end of the world. If they hadn't had this thing burning between them for months now. For months since he said the words and she didn't say them back.

She still hasn't said them back.

But they didn't do it then and here they are almost six months later. And he's looking at her like he's simultaneously terrified and also wants to consume her and, if she's honest - which she always is - there's no other way she'd rather have him looking at her.

She reaches for the buttons of her top, fingers shaking as she pushes the first one through its hole, taking care not to rush, not to let her nerves betray her.

This time when she looks at him he glances away, eyes dropping to the floor, to her legs and then back again. He's biting his lip and she wonders if he'll taste like blood when he kisses her again, if she'll get it in her mouth and keep that part of him inside her too.

"Don't be nervous," she whispers as she manages to undo the second button.

"I look nervous to you?" he asks, all fake bravado and half smirks.

She grins back, gets the third button free.

"Yeah," she says. "Yeah you kinda do."
He snorts, face breaking into a smile as he looks away. He's amused. Genuinely. And she loves that she's done that. That even now she can make him laugh. That has, after all, always been their thing.

*One* of their things.

They have a lot, she realises. Probably more than they have with any other living soul.

It's too much. Too much to think about for now and she goes back to undressing, struggling a bit to work at the last buttons, fingers still trembling and suddenly he's in front of her, literally looming over her, casting a shadow across her and blocking out the sunlight.

He reaches for her, hands settling on her hips, thumbs almost touching at her belly and she stops fiddling with her blouse and looks up at him. And yes, still 50% murderous rage and 50% lost puppy, and she knows she'll get both. One way or another.

She always does. She can't divide them anymore. Wouldn't want to either.

He leans in close, so close that she can feel his breath on her again, his lips millimetres from her ear.

"Let me," he says, voice thick and hard as he tugs at her top. "Let me."

So she does. And it's easy to just give herself over to this, to let him have his way. It's a relief actually.

"Been thinkin' about this for so fuckin' long," his voice is thick as he works the final button free. "And you been thinkin' about it too…"

She has. No use denying it. True, she didn’t see it going like this. She didn’t see him being like this. Soft, slow, humble in a way that she would have once claimed was unlike him. And now can’t imagine any other way for him to be.

He pushes at her blouse, not enough to send it off her shoulders, but enough to open it and he swears under his breath.
And she can’t do anything but swallow heavily, let him look, shiver as he lays his palms flat on her sides and his thumbs trace the bumps of her ribs and eventually the undersides of her breasts.

She follows his gaze, sees her nipples standing up stiff and pink through the fabric of her bra, watches him take a deep breath, lick his lips.

For a second it’s almost like he forgets himself but then he glances at her, eyes deep and dark, and slides a hand into her hair, leans in close and brushes his lips against hers.

He does taste like blood - copper and the metallic tang of gunmetal. It’s what she expected. She couldn’t think of another way that he would taste. These things: murder, rage, sorrow - they’re all in his bones, his cells, and they come together to make him who he is. But there’s something else too. Something that tastes like sunshine and goodness, something sweet and heady and she knows what it is. She doesn’t need to wonder anymore.

It's love. It's devotion. It's every part of what's left of him. And she feels something in herself she can only describe as humility.

He trusts her with that. He's giving her the last part of Frank Castle he has left to give. And it murders her all over again, breaks her heart and breaks her bones and beats her to the ground where it leaves her in pieces. Shattered. Ruined. She doesn't miss the irony - this man who kills and destroys with his hands and his rage now ravaging her with his goodness, his dog-like loyalty.

She wants him to know that she gets it. That she understands and that she's honoured.

So she lifts her hands to his face, palms flat on his cheeks and pulls back to look at him. As always she struggles to find the words to describe him. He's too many things in one man, too many contradictions.

He's good, he's bad. He's fucked up. He’s wonderful. He's the most beautiful dream and also the most terrifying nightmare.

And he's hers. He's all hers.
She drags him close, scattering kisses on his cheeks and jaw, hands coming to rest on his biceps, digging into him like little claws. She can feel the power in him, the strength and brutality that barely hides just under the surface of his skin. He vibrates with it and she swears she almost feels it moving through his veins. Again she thinks that he could break her, split her clean in half if he wanted to. And that doesn’t frighten her - if anything it makes her tremble even more, sends another wave of heat spinning down her spine to nestle between her legs.

And then he’s gripping the edges of her top, pushing it off her like it’s in the way and has no right to be, and winding his arms tight around her, pulling her close.

“Want you so much,” he says again into her hair.

Her knees don’t buckle this time - she’s not sure how, but they don’t. And then she’s reaching for the buttons on his shirt while he’s tugging at the tie on her skirt, his fingers struggling with the small knots and there’s a second she thinks he’ll break it, that the fabric will just tear in his hands. But he doesn’t and she’s not even a little embarrassed as the skirt pools around her feet, nor when his hand slips down her back to squeeze her ass and his mouth finds hers again.

He doesn’t linger though. He's hard and rough, teeth knocking hers before he moves to bury his face in her throat, nuzzle her jaw and press his tongue, hot and wet, into the space between her clavicles.

“I wanna look at you,” he says into her skin. “Please.”

Begging.

And that sends a wave of something hot and sharp through her, makes her shudder so that she has to hold onto his arms or risk falling to the floor there in front of him. She doesn't think he'd mind if she did though. He's probably not that far from falling himself.

And suddenly she feels like she's back in that cabin, watching his head, her nipples hard and her panties wet and a bruise so big it covers her whole side. And she wants him to turn around. She wants him to see her with her bruises and her scrapes. She wants him to take her and fuck her through that table and his hands wouldn't hurt her because they can’t. And now… now he’s asking for it. He’s asking her to let him do what she wanted him to do all those months ago and she almost can’t believe that they’ve got here.

She’s not scared anymore. She can’t be. Not with him. This is what she wants. This is what he wants.
So she straightens and takes a step back and out of his arms, into the sunlight so that it makes
dappled patterns on her skin, turns her hair white gold and her eyes to the colour of ice.

She's not going to play coy anymore.

So she stands and she watches as his eyes eat her up, as his gaze drops from her face to her neck, her
breasts and hard nipples that rub almost painfully against the thin fabric of her bra. And then to
her belly, the flare of her hips, and finally to her panties. They're wet and transparent, but for entirely
different reasons from the last time she stood mostly naked in the same space as him. No one's been
dousing her in cold water, no one's been dragging her through the snow.

There's him. There's only him and his hands and his mouth and how he's making her feel.

*(Kinda woman that makes a man weak)*

But he’s the kind of man who makes a woman strong.

His gaze lingers on the juncture of her thighs. She knew it would - her underwear hides little and,
more than that, it’s clinging to her, outlining her lips, her creases, the small bump of her clit.

And then she reaches behind herself for the catch of her bra. And somewhere inside her head a voice
that sounds surprisingly like Matt’s is screaming *What are you doing Karen Page? What the fuck are
you doing? This isn’t you. This isn’t the nervous, awkward woman who cries over tough days at
work and crumbles when someone raises their voice to her. This. Isn’t. You.*

But it is.

Oh god it is. This *is* her and the voice is a lie. This is Karen Page and she’s undressing in front of the
Punisher and she’s not scared at all.

She thinks he says her name but she can’t be sure. The blood is pounding in her head, scorching
through her veins and all she can think of is how stiff and clumsy her fingers feel and how it's
ridiculous that now, for the first time since she was 13, she's going to end up struggling with a bra.
But somehow that works out too and she doesn't struggle, the hooks come apart easily and the satin
loosens around her.

She glances at him, more to make sure he's watching than anything else, but all the same she sees a tiny nod and the flash in his eyes.

Yes.

That voice in her head crying No.

She ignores it. It’s an annoyance, nothing more than an angry remnant of who she once was. It has no place here.

Many things have no place here.

And then her bra is off, sliding down her arms. She watches it fall and it seems to take a while to get to the floor and join the rest of her clothes, seems almost to twist in on itself as it does. Or maybe that’s just her.

She thinks it’s just her.

Most things are.

And then she raises her head to look at him again, meets his black eyes dead on, doesn’t even bother to wait or build up the moment. It’s come to this now, it was always going to and she’s not going to pretend it wasn’t. She cocks her head, gives him a small smile and lets him look, lets him gaze, lets him do any fucking thing he wants because now - right now - she’s his. She’s his to look at, his to touch, his to kiss.

His to fuck.

All his. All in. No turning back. Ever.

And oddly, for all his half lewd staring and barely disguised lust from before - from the roof and the
morning after the graveyard, hours ago at the river - the way his gaze rakes over her doesn't feel lascivious. It doesn’t feel crude. It feels almost the opposite. There’s a kind of purity to it.

Reverence.

Her brain rejects the word at first, tells her she’s being overindulgent, maybe even a little conceited but she looks at his face again, the longing in his eyes, the way he’s biting down so hard on his lip she knows he’s broken the skin, and she knows she’s right. She knows it’s true. It is reverence. It can’t be anything else.

She’s not sure how long they stand there - her almost naked in the sunlight, him fully clothed in the shadow. Him watching her and her watching him do it. She’s not sure, she probably never will be, but it does seem to take a long time before he’s willing to meet her eyes again, before he can tear his gaze from her flesh. And when he does his dark look turns her inside out and upside down, makes her want to fall to her knees.

Except she doesn’t have to because somehow he is. Somehow he’s back in her space and his hands are warm and rough on her, lips planting kisses down her throat, between her breasts, across her ribs and stomach and then he’s settling himself onto floor in front of her, his mouth inches away from her hips, her thighs.

Her cunt.

This doesn’t scare her either.

She touches his hair again, runs her fingers through it. It’s thick and soft and she smiles to herself when she thinks about how it grows out curly and full. How it probably annoys him.

And then she doesn’t think about it anymore because he’s resting his forehead on her belly, wrapping his hands around the back of her knees and whispering her name into her skin.

Karen.

He’s quiet when he says it, quiet like he’s nervous to even put it into the world but even so it’s like the sound of his voice fills the whole room and she can’t hear anything else. Not the cars outside, not the people down the hall or the strange city buzz that you can ignore until you can’t. She can’t even
hear her own breathing or his, the sound of her blood rushing through her veins. There’s only his voice and only her name and for a moment she wonders if that might be the only sound in the whole world, if the very universe rings with it.

Karen.

It sounds like gospel, like praise, adoration.

It also sounds like begging.

It’s always sounded like begging.

Kisses on her belly. Soft. Slow. Gentle scraping of his stubble across her skin. His mouth hot and wet and she can see the shining lines of his saliva glistening in the light.

Her name again, louder this time. More kisses. His hands firm around her legs like he knows she’ll fall if he lets her go, and then his lips graze her panties, a flash of scorching heat on skin that’s already burning.

He must be able to smell her. Ripe. Heady. She knows this because she can smell herself: musk mingled with sunshine, wet heat in the first hint of the evening chill. He must also know how much she wants him, must know that her thighs are slick with it, that she can’t hide it any more than he can hide the hard bulge behind the zipper of his jeans. He must know.

Another kiss through the sheer teal fabric; teeth nipping at it and deliberately catching the smooth skin beneath, making her hiss and groan. It’s not a sound she’s ever made before. It’s sharp and hard and not quite human - a cat bearing its fangs, a snake ready to strike. And she wonders how many other animal sounds they’re going to pull out of each other today, how they’re ever going to find a way back to using words.

He does it again, slower this time, and she can’t help it - she tries to roll her hips towards him but his hands on her are firm and solid and he holds her in place, glances up at her very briefly and shakes his head.

No. Not yet.
She curses under her breath - she's not sure what she says, only that it's crude and blasphemous, and she can feel him grin into her skin. But she doesn't try to move again.

More kisses through her underwear. Teasing. Light. Gentle nipping, never venturing too low or too close. And, seemingly, when he’s sure she’s got the message to stay still, he slides his hand up her legs, traces the muscle and the bones, the curve of her ass and the smooth space between her thighs.

She closes her eyes, head tipping back and the grip on his hair loosening. And he stays where he is. On his knees. Kissing her, running his tongue across her belly, tasting her and touching her, teeth scraping over her hip bones, leaving the same faint red welts there as he has on her neck and shoulders; fingers digging into her as she sighs and moans and says his name.

He's patient she realises, patient and slow and maybe a little bit scared, even if she isn't. Even if her fear has slowly but surely ebbed out of her and evaporated in the sunlight. But then again she doesn’t have years of guilt and loss and rage to work through. She's got baggage sure, but she doesn't have his.

So she lets wave after wave of gooseflesh cover her skin, lets her legs tremble and trusts him to keep her standing. And he does. He always does. He won’t let her fall. Not ever. And his hands are solid and firm, strong as he moves his mouth over her.

When she opens her eyes again, the room looks different, darker now as the afternoon light fades. The dustmotes are still shining like tiny flames though, and the bed is still golden and glittering - but she hardly notices any of it. The only thing she can see - the only thing that matters - is Frank Castle - the big bad Punisher - crouched on the floor between her legs.

And it might well be the single most erotic experience she’s ever had in her life but she doesn’t want him there anymore. She wants him up and with her, his arms around her and his mouth rough on hers.

So she reaches out, touches his jaw, tilts his head up to look at her, and his hands slide up to rest on her hips.

And then he’s looking at her, eyes dark and hooded, completely black, the flecks of gold engulfed by his blown pupils.
She doesn't have to wonder what it is anymore.

It’s not praise. It’s not adoration either.

It’s what she thought. It’s reverence.

She wasn’t wrong.

She's brought Frank Castle to his knees.

Her.

Karen Page.

She did that.

She dares to think that maybe she's given him his faith back too. Because he's done that for her.

(Don’t you know?)

Fingers through his hair again.

“I love you,” he says and even though he's said variations of it before it feels different this time. It's not coming from a place of rage or loss; emotions that are running high and overflowing and forcing words out of his mouth. It feels careful and considered, nothing but truth. And that in itself makes it real and raw. Visceral.

(I did some thinking while I was in Jersey. About you and me. This thing between us.)

Lump in the back of her throat and suddenly she can't speak, words being cut off even as they form on her lips.
She loves him too. She's never said it but she does. So much. So very very much.

Tears prick in her eyes and she wants to blink them away but doing that feels wrong somehow. Like lying or hiding and she doesn't want to do either. Not to him.

“Get off your knees Frank,” she whispers. “You don't belong there.”

A beat. Silence again. No cars, no voices. No city buzz. And then he's surging, standing and picking her up in one fluid movement, hands underneath her ass, mouth on hers. And he's fast, so fast she's hardly able to get her legs around his waist before he's manoeuvring them to the bed, landing heavily on top of her as her back hits the pillows and his lips crush hers.

“Goddamn you Karen Page,” he breathes, sliding a hand into her hair, and tilting her face to his. He bites at her bottom lip and she can still taste blood when his tongue slips into her mouth and he licks at her teeth.

It’s him. It’s him broken down, being pulled apart into pieces. She did it once before in front of the graves of the people he loved most in the world. She did it then and afterwards she helped him rebuild. She can do it here too. She can do it again.

He kisses her roughly, hand fisting in her hair, sending a cascade of sparks down her spine.

It's the Punisher. This is how the Punisher loves. This is his version of gentleness.

And it hurts. Oh god it hurts so much.

But she’s strong. She’s strong enough to love him back.

She arches up to him, pushing at him with her whole body, mouth hard on his and hands grasping at the edge of his shirt, dragging it up his back so she can touch his skin; leave some of her own marks on him, little red welts that match hers and don’t hurt because she could never hurt him.
He’s grabbing at her too, hands running up her thighs, hiking them over his ass and then pressing himself into her, rocking slightly so she can feel him pulsing and hard through the rough fabric of his jeans.

She swears again - this time she’s pretty sure she just says *fuck* and he smiles into her mouth, kisses her wet and messy and a little bit desperate before wrenching himself backwards so that he’s kneeling between her splayed legs. She tries to follow him, but he shakes his head, pushes her back down with a firm hand between her breasts before hooking his fingers into her panties and pulling them off, discarding them on the floor with as much care as he has everything else she was wearing.

His eyes flicker from her face, to her breasts, her stomach and then finally down to where he’s wedged between her thighs. She's aware of the imbalance here and yet she’s not embarrassed, not even slightly. Maybe once she would have been, maybe she would have worried about her long coltish legs, the faint beauty marks speckling her belly, whether her breasts were too big or small… But not now. She feels safe. He’ll take care of her. He won’t hurt her.

He’ll *stay*. And she will too.

He reaches out with both hands, fingers stuttering centimetres from her skin, eyes locking on hers for a moment before he snorts - more at himself than anything else - and looks to the side, down at the patterned light on the sheets.

_The Punisher, shy in front of a girl._

It’s not unusual anymore, she’s seen this side of him often enough and there’s still something so incongruous about it, something so perfectly right and also perfectly wrong it only makes her love him more. Makes her want to uncover all these little secrets, all his hidden facets.

And then he’s back with her, leaning forward briefly to kiss her again, fingers trailing across her collarbones, down over her breasts; her nipples pebbling hard and pink as he does. And then down further over her ribs, her belly, one hand settling on her hip and the other sliding over her thigh and dropping low to press at the smooth, wet cleft between her legs.

He groans as he touches her and her skin prickles, little ripples washing through her, making her burn and shiver all at the same time. It’s not that it’s too much but at the same time it is. It’s much too much. It’s him and his hands and his mouth. It’s him and he’s in her bed.
It’s all she’s ever wanted.

And it’s overwhelming. He’s overwhelming.

It almost feels involuntary as she shifts upwards to the headboard to give him more access to her - space he quickly uses to move his hand in a long sweeping stroke from her clит to her cunt and back again. And when she looks down she sees her wetness shining on his fingers, glinting and glossy in the dying sun. He sees it too and his eyes flicker to her and he looks at her like he’s about to eat her alive. And if he was, she doesn’t think she’d have the wherewithal to object.

She has no idea how she’s going to get through this. None. And worse… she doesn’t care.

He can do what he wants to her - whatever he wants - and if he leaves her as nothing more than a wreck of marked skin and weakened bones by the end of this, unable to speak or move or think - and she admits this is a serious possibility - she’ll accept it.

And then she doesn’t think anymore because his fingers are sliding inside her, moving in long, slick strokes between her legs, and making her gasp and shudder into his hand.

This is so much better than when she did it, so much more careful and considered, precise and attentive in a way she isn’t and couldn’t be. And even though there’s a desperation to this, a need to join, to mate, he’s finding the time to explore her, to open her folds with his thumb, to rub her wet flesh and push against that spot deep inside which makes her whimper and writhe under him.

He’s a quick study too - not that she ever doubted it. He’s too fucking smart and analytical for his own good and it’s not long before his hand is moving in an excruciating rhythm that’s hitting her in all right places, making her fight to lift her hips off the bed while he holds her firmly in place.

She bares her teeth at him, swears low and filthy under her breath, as she feels herself trickling hot and wet into his palm. And for all the world he smiles, one of those genuine heartfelt smiles he’s always reserved for her. And then he’s leaning forward, moving his hand off her hip to plant it in the pillow next to her head so that his lips are inches from hers. And he’s whispering. Nonsense words that don’t feel like nonsense at all. She catches little pieces of it, phrases. She’s beautiful. She’s amazing. She’s perfect. He loves her. He wants her. She wants him too. She wants him so much. He can feel how much. He knows. He knows. And she does too. She does. She does.

She does.
It doesn’t take long. It doesn’t take long at all. One second he’s working his hand between her legs, thumb rubbing ever tightening circles into her clit, winding her up like a spring and holding her there for a brief and agonising moment... And the next he’s letting her go, pushing hard into her and rubbing her wet flesh in harsh, rough strokes as she uncoils beneath him; as a white hot wave slams into her with such force that she feels herself spasming around his fingers, clenching so hard that for a second he’s absolutely still inside her before he carries on fucking her through it with forceful thrusts.

And he's hard and rough and practiced in exactly the way she thought he would be - brutal and relentless and demanding with his hand. The Punisher - her Punisher - breaking her and changing her and then, just when she thinks there's nothing left, pulling her back together to start it all over again.

But then he lowers his mouth to hers and he kisses her so softly she almost can't believe he's the same man. He's sweet and he lingers exquisitely over her lips, tasting her and learning her and when it's too much and she pushes at his hand, he pulls away, hushing her quietly and then finally shifting out from between her legs to run his damp fingers down to her cheek.

“Been wanting to do that for such a long time,” he says. “Make you do that…”

She whimpers at his words because she's been wanting it too. She wants to tell him what she did the night he left - how she put her fingers inside herself and imagined it was him - so she does. It's not even hard to find the words, because she’s not trying to do anything other than let him know. The point isn’t seduction - they're a bit beyond that now - the point is him understanding how much she wanted him and missed him, how much she needs him. And it's not even a little bit embarrassing but he makes a sound like she's punched him in the guts and pulled his heart out through his mouth.

And then he's kissing her again. Not her lips but her jaw and her cheeks, her throat and shoulders. Kissing her like he can’t stand to just listen to her speak and needs to give himself something else to focus on. And when she finishes she has to put her hands on his cheeks and make him look at her again.

The Punisher - shy in front of a girl.

But she’s looking at something else now, eyes drifting from his to his hard jaw, his lips, down to his shirt and chest where so far she's managed to get two buttons open before abandoning herself to him.
She glances down at herself too - her pale breasts, her splayed legs, him fully clothed between them. There’s something about it that thrills her. She can't deny it. She's completely naked and vulnerable and he's completely not.

Except he is.

And she's never felt safer.

His mouth covers her nipple, sucking gently, swirling his tongue over her before moving lower to catch the skin on the underside of her breast between his teeth.

“Frank,” she says softly and he lifts his head to look at her, eyes dark and blown and boring into her skull.

She looks pointedly at his shirt, his jeans.

“Come on Frank.”

She gets another shy smile as he pushes himself back up to his knees and she wants to laugh. Here she is, naked as the day she was born, breasts still heaving from her climax and the flesh between her legs swollen and drenched with her juices, and somehow he still has that old-fashioned bashfulness; an endearing shyness that she’s seen fighting with that other half of him, the slightly lewd side that betrays him every now and then.

But again, he's been living in her apartment for almost two weeks now and he's spent most of that time in various states of undress, sometimes to the point that he was so inadvertently distracting she wanted to ask him to put something on. She never did though.

She guesses there was a reason for that.

“Come on,” she says again pushing herself up on her elbows, taking his hand and pulling his fingers to her mouth so she can taste herself. “I wanna look at you too.”

And then he's not shy anymore and he's grabbing at the neck of his shirt with one hand, pulling it
over his head and tossing it to the floor before lowering himself back down on her. His skin is smooth and feverish on hers, warm and heavy and, as she wraps her arms around him, mouth on his neck, she wonders how she managed to sleep by his side for all those nights. How she didn't jump him right then and there when they were both desperate and needy and he was in her bed.

He wasn't ready, she tells herself. He really wasn't. Not then. Not when all this started. Not at the cabin, not on the roof and not here in her bed while he tried to scrape the bits of himself together that he'd managed to salvage from the graveyard.

He wasn't ready.

He is now.

Lips on her breasts again.

*Oh god he is now.*

He's pressing himself against her, pressing hard and it doesn't take much to know she's soaking his jeans; that if he moved away now she'd be able to see a dark mark of herself seeping into his crotch. He doesn't seem to care though, rolling his hips slow and deliberate and wedging himself firmly up into the cradle of her hips, into that space she's made for him.

“Love you,” he says between kisses and licks. “Love you so fucking much.”

And she's overwhelmed again. Completely and utterly. Every single sense she has is filled with him, suffocated with him. And briefly she wonders how much of a problem this is going to be; how - for all the wonderful things he is - she going to deal with everything else he brings to the table.

But then he's nudging her lips open with his, and his hands are impatient on her as he lifts her legs around his waist. And she loses herself to him again; to his hands and his mouth, his smell and his taste, the hard throbbing pressure of him between her thighs.

She arches into it, rolling up to him, one hand on his shoulder, the other in his hair.
He hisses, sucking the breath out of her mouth and into his, shuddering hard and suddenly she doesn't want to wait anymore. She wants him naked and vulnerable. She wants his skin on hers, no more rough denim and broken promises between them. No more hiding. She wants to touch him and taste him and feel him move inside her.

So she pushes at him. There's no way she could flip him over. He's far too strong for that and even if he wasn't she could never get the drop on him long enough. So she's left twisting beneath him, shifting her hips sideways and rocking upwards.

For a second he ignores her and she thinks he'll keep her pinned under him. But then all at once he's moving with her, rolling them over so that he's on his back and dragging her up so that she's straddling him and her hair is falling forward into his face.

And he doesn't care, pulling her close again to kiss her hard and deep and wet, one hand coming to rest heavily between her shoulder blades, the other sliding down to palm her ass.

She shivers a little but when he pulls away to ask if she's cold she shakes her head. She's not. Not at all. Even in the dying sunlight and the onset of the evening chill, she's not remotely cold.

And she doesn't want to do this under the blankets either. It seems wrong somehow to cover up. She wants him to see her, wants to show him she's not afraid of this or of him. She wants to give him that.

And, in return, she wants the same from him too.

She demands it.

So she takes a few seconds to kiss him, to run her fingers along his lips, nuzzle his neck and whisper in his ear that she wants him. She wants him so much. More than she's ever wanted anyone and that's not just pillow talk because dear god they don't lie. And definitely not about this.

And then she sits back, thighs clamped over his hips and gives herself a moment to look at him.

He's mostly in shadow now, what little sun is left of the day clinging rather to her skin than his. It leaves him looking smooth and dark beneath her, an unintended but natural chiaroscuro that will soon fade with the light so she can join him. A tableau they'll make once and probably not again. no
matter how many times they do this.

It's beautiful.

He's beautiful.

They can be beautiful together.

It's time.

It really is.

He knows it too.

She touches his cheek and he turns his head to kiss her palm, before threading his fingers through hers, scraping his teeth over the nexus of veins at her wrist.

And then he nods at her and it's like the final ray of sunlight meant for the day settles on her skin, covering her and then pushing into her blood, travelling like fire through her until it all nests in the small space where his lips are touching her.

She says his name, low and strangled, and his hand tightens, teeth sharp and hard but not yet biting, not hurting even though she knows he never could.

And then the moment ends and she’s undoing his belt buckle, reaching for the button and the zipper of his jeans and he doesn’t bat her away this time. He’s throbbing under her hands as he lifts his hips to help her undress him. And she does notice the wet stain of herself on his crotch. She doesn’t think much of it though because he’s kicking his boots off and the rest of his clothes are following and, before she’s even had a chance to look at him, he’s sitting up to meet her, pulling her tight into his lap so her cunt is wedged hard against his cock.

Both hands in her hair now and he’s kissing her again. He’s reckless and rough but she is too and then she’s reaching between them, wrapping her fingers around him and lifting herself up on her knees, one hand on his shoulder to steady herself, the other lining him up.
And she can barely believe she’s doing this, barely believe her own brazenness and impatience.

*You’re Karen Page. You’re not meant to be like this.*

Except she is. She really fucking is.

He breaks away from her mouth to choke out something that sounds like a question. Is she sure? Is she okay? Is *this* okay? Like *this*? And *yes* *yes* *yes* to all of those questions. The answer is always *yes*.

Always.

Forever.

Gasping: *Don’t you know?*

He nods. *I know.*

The last of the sunlight disappears as she lowers herself onto him, as she wraps her arms around his shoulders and presses her lips to his. It seems fitting to her that when they’ve finally joined they’ve done it in the half-light, the shadows, a liminal space where they can hide from the world but not from each other.

And she takes a moment to feel that, to close her eyes and kiss him soft and slow; get used to the unfamiliar sensation of him stretching her, the throbbing ache of him between her thighs.

He needs it too. He’s trembling, gasping into her mouth, his hands leaving her hair and pushing down hard into her hips - not to move her but rather to keep her still.

And it's okay because for now she has no desire to do anything else. She just wants to hold him and press her face into his throat, concentrate on all the places he’s touching her, the way his chest heaves against hers and his breath cools on her skin; the little words he’s whispering into her ear and how
she doesn’t need to hear them to know their quality, their gravity.

It’s more than she ever thought it could be, more than she ever imagined. No half-fantasised quick rutting on a formica table in a cold cabin could ever come close to what this is, how this feels.

She says his name - low, deep - and he groans and drags her into him, scattering kisses on her throat and shoulders. His hands move from her hips to her ass and then up her back, fingertips trailing along her arms so that her skin prickles, and then he cups her breasts, thumbing hard and firm over her nipples and making her suck in a breath, gasp so loud the sound fills the room.

He does it again, a little kinder this time, almost teasing, his teeth sharp against her throat.

“Karen Page.”

Strangled words. Words that don’t even sound like her name and yet somehow are. “Make a man weak…”

And that’s when she decides to move.

Gradual roll of her hips, slight arch of her back just to give him more room to touch her. He instantly drops a hand back to her waist, tightens his grip on her and she knows he’s trying to keep her still again, feels it with the not-so-gentle warning bite he presses into her skin.

But she’s not inclined to listen to him so easily anymore, not inclined to view this burgeoning roughness as a bad thing - it was always a feature rather than a bug anyway - and she shifts again, grinds her hips into his, waits for him to catch up.

He does. He’s always been too damn fast for his own good.

Growling. Something animal and alien, something she’d expect from a starved, half-feral dog, and when she looks at him his eyes shine like polished onyx in the shadows, teeth bared and glinting. She stares back. He should know this by now - that she won’t flinch, she won’t look away, he doesn’t get to control that no matter how much wildness she sees in him, no matter how much rage or suffering or hurt.
She’s Karen Page and he’s her Punisher.

Hers. Only hers.

He makes the sound again, deep and guttural and she swears she can feel it starting in his belly and working its way slowly up his trachea, vibrating against her skin, threatening to burst out of his mouth if it doesn’t claw its way out of his chest before it gets there. And when it does…

*Oh god, when it does*…

But she can control this too. She *can*.

She has a beast in her bed and she’s not remotely afraid.

She waits.

She *waits*.

And then slowly - ever so slowly - without breaking eye contact until the very last second when she bears down heavily on his cock, she arches her neck, exposes her throat to him.

A beat. A fraction of a millisecond.

And then he’s surging, his whole body rolling forward into hers, mouth fusing to her skin, and arms locking around her middle so hard that for a second she can’t breathe. She’s crashing into him too, manoeuvring herself so that she can press down on him in slow smooth strokes, clenching hard so that her cunt can hold him as tight as he’s holding her, so she can feel his throbbing inside, his trembling outside.

She rises up on her knees, bears down again, hears him whisper *Jesus Christ* into her breast.

*Jesus Christ Karen. Jesus Christ.*
She does it again, hand twisting into his hair to tilt his head back so she can kiss him, gentle and deep but also firm and forceful. And his fingers flutter on her skin, moving over her almost randomly like he doesn't know where to touch her first.

Another roll of her hips and even as she's kissing him she hears that strangled growl bubbling up in his chest again.

He breaks away to let it out, couples it with some more low swearing, her name.

Blasphemy.

Praise.

Reverence.

She's overwhelming him, she realises. It's what she wanted for so long, what she needed, what she thought about and never quite figured how she was going to make it real. Never thought she could bring out his wildness like this and then take it, make it her own and give it back to him.

But she is.

Oh god she is.

And that's when he wraps his arm around her waist, lifts her and shifts on the covers so that he's on his knees and her legs are still draped over his.

His movements are smooth, almost effortless, but for a second she loses her rhythm, clings to his shoulders so she doesn't pitch backwards onto the bed.

Except she wouldn't. He wouldn't let her because he'll never let her fall. Not again.
And then he's forcing a hand between them, fingers sliding downwards between her smooth lips, resting briefly on the hard and swollen nub of her clit and then stroking firm and slow, in synch with his thrusts inside her.

“Frank… I…”

She has no idea how she planned on finishing the sentence. No idea what words she was going to use. She knows she wants to tell him she can't. Not again. Not so soon after the last time. That she's still riding the high he brought her earlier and there's no need. But he just gazes at her, mouth slightly open, but jaw firm and tight and the same hard determination in his eyes she’s seen when he makes promises; when he confesses his secrets to her.

“For me Karen,” he says. “For me.”

For him.

She can never say no to him anyway.

His other hand rises from her back and rests on her throat for an infinitesimally small moment, just long enough really for her to register that it's deliberate that it's there. And then he slides it upwards to cup the back of her head, fingers hard on her scalp as pulls her to kiss him.

They rise together, his body angling itself upwards so that when she comes down, it feels like he crashes into every part of her. Her mouth, her cunt. Her soul. He does it again, edging her up and then bringing them back down hard. And the simmer in her belly turns to something thick and molten, that magma collecting in her core again and filling her up, making it hard to talk and hard to breathe. Choking her.

The curtains billow inwards once more, brief flash from outside - lightning, she registers with some surprise - and then the shadows reclaim them almost instantly. And she grits his name out as his fingers twist on her wet flesh and his whole body rolls under her.

He's saying her name too, and she can feel him shuddering, see a brief hint of fear - panic even - in his eyes and she finds it within herself, within this red fog and the feel of him inside her, to touch his face, to reassure him as best she can.
“For me now Frank,” she says. “For me as well.”

He breaks. She does too. It's not fast. Not at first. A slow yet relentless build up of that heat, pulling itself together in her belly, hardening into something heavy and dense and brittle and holding itself there; spinning faster and faster, small bits of it eroding in tickling sparks before shattering outwards, ripping down her spine in a glittering rush of heat.

They both cry out and she's bending like a bow in his arms, head thrown back, breasts thrust forward. He moves with her, somehow keeping her steady and secure and simultaneously letting her curve and spasm as her climax ebbs through her. And then he’s leaning into her, lips at her breast, fingers flexing hard into her flesh and she feels him pulsing inside her, hears his groan filling the room and overwhelming them both as he rolls his hips and his pelvis wrenches against her. Once. Twice. And then a half sob, half growl out of his mouth as he pumps all his rage and all his sorrow and whatever love he has left into her.

His hands are everywhere: her shoulders, her neck, her back, her breasts, pulling at her and clawing at her like he's trying to hold on but can't. And he doesn't need to. He doesn't because she's got him.

He's hers and she's not going to let him go.

She winds her arms around his neck, pulls him as close as she can, hips still moving deliberately on his until she feels his own thrusts between her legs slow and weaken.

“Stay with me,” she whispers. “Stay. It’ll be alright.”

(You have everything)

(Hold on. Use two hands and never let go)

(No you or me, only us)

Only us.

Forever.
In time he stops trembling and looks up at her long enough to brush his lips on hers, run a hand
down her cheek and over her mouth, across her jaw, before resting his head back against her breasts.

“I love you,” he whispers into her skin.

She leans forward, kisses his head.

“I know.”

He doesn’t ask for more and it seems wrong to give it now even if she can’t say why. So they stay
like that, breathing hard, hands running gently over each other. Quiet and soft. Still. Even the
curtains have stopped swaying.

Eventually he shifts, moving them both so that he can lower her down onto the pillows, slipping out
of her as he does and she can feel his orgasm cooling slick and chilly on her thighs. She feels
weightless and languid, boneless even. Sated.

Looming over her in the half-light, he kisses her hair, her forehead, her cheeks. He’s still
overwhelmed. She can see it in his eyes - that hint of panic hasn’t fully disappeared.

And then he lies next to her, pulling her close and burying his face in her hair as she watches the
shadows dance on the wall and listens to the sound of city bleed back into the world.

And for the moment she doesn’t wonder or worry about anything. There’s him and there’s her and
there’s the glow they made together. Nothing else matters. Nothing ever could.

No you and me. Only us.

Only us.
And then he kisses the back of her neck, hand sliding down over her belly to rest between her legs.

Only us.

Forever.
The blood gets thick at the end of the night, you in my sheets like a sodium light

Chapter Notes

And I'm back. This chapter was actually easier than I expected - mainly because I think Frank and Karen decided they weren't done and put the brakes on the next part of the story.

Having said that we are entering some very tricky territory now. I'm conscious of my audience and the need to not be left in the dark for too long after a cliffhanger, so there are some things coming up which are probably going to make it necessary for me to have two chapters ready to go in quick succession - that means things might take a little longer. Unfortunately I can't quite predict when this will happen (I am generally pretty awful at judging things like this). It might be the next chapter or it could be the one after that.

Anyway, thank you so much for commenting and leaving kudos - I am overwhelmed by the response to this story and I am really humbled to see your reviews, even if I don't always respond. I read every single one and it really is what keeps me going, especially as life has been kicking me in the teeth lately. I'm not joking when I say it's helped me get through some really nasty stuff and I truly appreciate you taking the time to let me know what you think.

Enough about me. Let's check up on Karen and Frank.

Chapter title is from Black Lab's Remember.

He lies with his head on her shoulder, his arm slung across her belly. He's quiet, hasn't said a word since she wrenched his heart out through his teeth and he told her he loved her. She's not sure if it's because he's still overwhelmed and just needs a moment to reflect on what they've done, or if it's something else.

Either way, the silence isn't uncomfortable and he presses slow kisses into her skin, hand rubbing her hip, glancing over her thighs where she’s sticky from earlier. From him. From her. From what they made together.

She has an arm around him too and she's stroking his hair, nails scratching lightly against his scalp.

Somewhere in the apartment she can hear Pickle purring very loudly - *like a fucking outboard motor* according to Frank - and behind that the gentle hum of the city.
She almost wants to laugh. It’s Saturday night in Hell’s Kitchen and she's at home in bed... and it's not even 8 o'clock. It's okay though. Her night was still wild. It's also not over yet. Not even close.

It's dark already, the shadows deep and thick and she can barely make out anything beyond Frank and the messy sheets. Not that there’s much else worth seeing. Not that she couldn't spend forever here in his arms.

Outside lightning flashes again. There's no rain yet but it seems Joe was right and they are in for another storm. And she wonders if she can just wait it out here with Frank. In her bed. Kissing and touching and fucking. Him whispering over and over that he loves her. Her finding it in herself to say it back. To admit to it and what it means.

She'd tell Ellison she’s off finding his exclusive. His clickbait that's sure to get the traffic he needs.

*Bring the Punisher to his knees with this one quick and dirty trick.*

*Seven ways Frank Castle is an animal in the bedroom. Number four will shock you.*

*Glutton for punishment: area woman finds love in the arms of a mass murderer.*

She hates it. She hates it all.

She hates the way he's been characterised, because it's not him. He's kind and good.

Until he's not.

*Yeah, until he's not.*

He nuzzles her neck and his fingers twitch on her hip. He’ll want her again tonight. She knows this because she already wants him, can feel the outlines of that ache between her legs starting to form. But not right now. For now she's content to stroke his hair, lie here with him in the dark, in the shadows, where they have all the time in the world.
Even if they don't.

“Maria used to do that.”

His voice cuts through the gloom. It's steady now but soft, little more than a whisper. But he's never needed to be loud to get attention. To make people listen.

She doesn't stop. She could, and maybe before she would have...

(You're not her. You're not her)

...but not now.

He doesn't sound like he wants her to either. Doesn't sound like this is tearing him apart. Quite the opposite really.

And then as if he suddenly realises how she might have misconstrued his words he tightens his hands on her, nuzzles her again.

“Feels nice,” he whispers.

It does.

It all feels nice. Much more than just nice. It still feels overwhelming, but a good overwhelming, a safe place where they can go together and nothing can hurt them.

She wonders if he even knows what he does to her, if he even has a clue how he’s turned her inside out and upside down. If he knows he can do that.

“I see her sometimes, hear her voice,” he chuckles dryly. “Don't worry I know it ain't real. I'm not going crazy.”
Somehow this doesn't surprise her. It doesn't seem strange at all really.

She's wondered before how he was with Maria. It's not something she cares to know about in any particular detail and she doubts he would ever offer much up. In any case she thinks she's gotten a taste of it. Thinks that sex is one of those weird things where you find someone you like and you kind of show them the way you do this really intimate thing and they show you the same and you come out on the other side and try and figure out if you want to do it again. And it's wholly ridiculous in those terms but that's not the bit she wonders about.

No, she doesn't need guidance in that sense. Instead she wants to know if he overwhelmed Maria in the same way he does her. If she too had the same almost visceral reaction to him. And, if she did, how she ever managed to be apart from him, how she didn't fall to pieces when he went to war, how she stayed strong. If Lisa and Frank Jr tempered the loss of him somehow. Or if maybe Maria was just tougher, stronger, more pragmatic than Karen Page.

Now that she's had him, she's not sure she has it in her to be without him. Not sure what it means for them that she doesn't.

Again it's too much for this one little moment they have, too much to comprehend, and she rolls onto her side to face him, presses her lips to his. He's easy and pliant, his mouth yielding under hers and his hands pulling her close but not holding her so tight she thinks her bones will break.

He's lazy she realises. Lazy and sated. Content. It's not that he couldn't be on his feet in a split second, not that he'd complain if he needed to get up. But he's revelling in this - in being here with her, kissing her soft and slow, taking his time.

She lays a hand on his chest, and immediately he lifts his from her hip and threads his fingers through hers, holds it there. She can feel his heart beating just below the skin, maybe a little harder than it should be; a steady thump that she can almost hear if she strains.

His hand tightens on hers and he looks up at her, eyes heavy and glinting in the dark.

He doesn't need to say anything.

She gets it.
For you Karen, for you.

She kisses him again, slightly tougher than before, throws a little more force into it, and he smiles into her mouth, gives her hand another squeeze and then lets go to cup her head, shifts onto his back so that she’s leaning over him.

He’s gentle and wet, but less messy than earlier and she grips his hair with both hands, strokes her tongue along his, tastes him again. No blood now. No sharp copper or jagged metal, not even that hint of gunmetal. It’s just him, just the goodness she tasted earlier - that heady thing that reminded her of sunshine and sweetness.

He bites at her bottom lip, hands sliding downwards to cup her ass, massage her flesh, and she muses idly that this has the potential to get out of hand. Doesn’t really care if it does as her own fingers slide down over his nipples and then to his stomach, lower to his abdomen.

But that doesn’t seem to be what’s on his mind right now and he pulls back, brings a hand up to frame her face.

“I wanna take you away from here Karen Page,” he says.

She kisses him again. “You already did.”

He groans. “Away from all this.”

And god she wants that too. She really, really does. She wants to be somewhere where she doesn’t want to think about anything other than him, anything but the way he touches her and kisses her and makes her feel like she’s the only person in the whole world.

Because he does.

And he’s doing it now.

“Go get Luna and just go away somewhere.”
And he sounds so hopeful it breaks her heart. Because this is him. This is the man the city destroyed. This is the person the world lost when Reyes decided that collateral damage was acceptable in her obsession with finding The Blacksmith.

“I’d like that,” she says softly and he gives her a small smile.

“Girl like you . . .” he trails off and doesn’t need to say more. She's not even sure he had a way to end that sentence, if he was even planning on it.

She kisses him again, and settles against his side and he takes her hand where it's ventured low to his cock, twines his fingers through hers, pulls it up to rest on his chest.

“And that's fine too. She tells herself they have tonight and all the nights after it - that there's no rush. It's been two years since he lost everything and before that he’d been away, without love, without human contact. And, when he came back, the world gave him a day. One day to make up for that. To get it all back. And it wasn't enough. It wasn't near enough. It was cruel and senseless and not only did a terrible violence to his family but to his own soul as well.

Fathers shouldn't bury their children.

Husbands shouldn't be apart from their wives.

There's a lot of shouldn'ts going on here.

But he's kissing her hair and his hand is massaging the small of her back and that's good. That's something that should happen. And she's pulling him close and telling him how safe he makes her feel, how cherished, and he's saying he loves her and he can't walk away.

She kisses his jaw and tells him he doesn't have to and he looks at her like it's a lie even though it isn't.
And outside thunder rolls and lightning flashes through the sky.

Later he's asleep when she slips out of his arms and heads to the bathroom. She cleans herself off, wipes their combined stickiness off her thighs; his seed, her desire. She’s sensitive there, hot and stretched and aching exquisitely, and the warm water feels like heaven against her skin.

She looks in the mirror again. She still looks the same save for the marks he's left on her with his lips and teeth - some hard and dark, others faint and red. She loves all of them. Even if it means she's going to need to wear a high collar or polo neck come Monday. She doesn't care. He's stained her, first with blood and now with love and she doesn't want to lose either.

And she knows it's silly. She knows that valuing these outward signs of him is an exercise in futility. They'll fade soon, they'll leave her skin as clear and pale as it always was. What matters is the scar he's carved into her heart, the fire he's put in her blood. These are the things she gets to keep forever.

Forever.

Only us.

She closes her eyes briefly. This is going to be so hard. So very hard. She has no idea what happens after this. If he goes back to killing and punishing. If she waits night after night worrying he won't come home, worrying about what he's doing. Fighting him and his brand of justice. If he’ll see this himself and, when he comes to his senses, leave her anyway. Tell her it's for her own good.

So many questions and no answers to any of them.

She doesn't want to be a downer. She decides she won't. They've just shared something deep and intimate and life changing together. They'll find a way. Even if it kills them.

She washes her face, rakes a hand through her hair and pulls her robe off the back of the door, slips it over her shoulders.
There's no pointed questions from Matt and Foggy in her head. No words of wisdom. And that's okay. She can do this on her own.

She’s strong enough.

She's Karen Page: intrepid reporter, lover of vigilantes and holder back of tears under extreme duress. Disturber of the peace.

(Don't you know?)

He's still asleep when she gets back to the bedroom, lying on his side, clutching at the sheets where she slept.

He’ll wake up soon, realise she's gone. He always does. Last week when she'd get up in the night to go to the bathroom or get water he was always awake when she came back, waiting for her. She thinks it’s part his training and part panic at losing something else - her, the safety she brings. Both.

She goes to the kitchen, Pickle suddenly materialising seemingly out of thin air and glaring at her bowl. It's not empty - there's more than enough kibble to last one small cat the night - but it’s not full and apparently in Pickle’s mind that's as good as worthless. So she fills it, gives her fresh water too and smiles as the cat’s angry demeanour vanishes instantly and she winds herself around Karen's legs, miaows softly.

Take a stray in, give them food and love and a safe place to sleep and they’re loyal for life. Even if they’re in love with war as much as they’re in love with you.

She looks over to him again, the linen bunched in his fingers and the glint of his gun on the side table, but despite these outward signs of his violence, his face is calm and content, his sleep peaceful and uninterrupted by worries or nightmares.

She knows when she gets back into bed it’ll wake him and she finds she doesn’t really want to do that just yet. She wants to let him rest and dream and lie there in the aftermath of what they've just given one another.

His seed, her desire. Sluiced off her thighs with warm water. Ready to start all over again.
She goes to the kettle, boils it and makes herself a cup of tea - something that smells of berries and rose petals, the slightest hint of tannin beneath it. It’s warm and comforting, gentle like the atmosphere in the room, completely at odds with the strange weather outside, the crash of thunder, the lightning that’s flashing through the room like a badly timed strobe light.

She can’t deny that it bothers her. It’s not even like before when Hell’s Kitchen was horribly uncomfortable with it’s cloying humidity and they were all waiting for the storm to break. This feels different, like there’s been no real build up, like the coming storm itself is unearned and undeserved. There’s no pent-up heat in the air, no desire for cleansing. This feels like something that’s rising from the depths of city sewers, something that’s bubbling up from beneath the streets and overflowing into homes and lives, something that’s meant to dirty, to put that layer of filth back rather than clean it off.

She shakes her head. She’s being silly. Storms don’t have agendas, storms don’t have intent. This will happen and it will be tough and then they’ll carry on. They’ll survive it. Hell’s Kitchen will survive it because that’s what it does. That’s what they all do.

Regardless she goes to the window, pushes the curtain to the side and peers out into the night, watches the cars on the street lighting up the dark with hazy halogen headlights. It gives the city a sickly yellow hue and she looks away. It’s ugly and she doesn’t like it, especially not because only hours ago she was admiring the hidden beauty Hell’s Kitchen has to offer. She glances at the sky - it’s dark and gloomy, a faint and nasty red glow shining through the clouds, making it look heavy and thick.

Like it’s hiding something…

She pushes the thought away.

Skies don’t hide things any more than storms conspire against people. But she can’t shake the feeling as she stands there sipping her tea that this storm is going to hurt. That payback has already started.

And then he’s moving behind her. He’s quiet and deft, but she hears the sheets sliding over his skin, the light thump of his feet touching the floor, the way his bones crack as he stretches.

She can feel his eyes on her too. Drilling holes into her and drinking her up. She wonders what he’s thinking. If he likes the way the robe clings to her, how it ends just under the curve of her ass. Or if his mind is elsewhere - on what they did, on what he said, on the promises they made without words. The glow they created.
It could also be something else entirely. Something she can’t fathom, some secret she doesn’t know now but will learn over time.

And god, oh god, she’s making plans again.

Either way, she doesn’t turn. He’ll come to her. She doesn’t need to wonder, she doesn’t need to wait. So she keeps her eyes fixed on the unsettling sky, feels a strangely cold and unpleasant breeze against her skin and then he’s there and his arms are sliding around her waist and he’s burying his face in her neck, stubble rough against her.

She puts her empty cup on the windowsill, leans back into him and covers his arms with her own.

He feels good. Hard and solid, corded muscle and raised scars and she trails her fingers along his skin, making it prickle and sending a little shiver down his spine. He’s naked, apparently unconcerned with her knowing that, or just being here like that with her. She guesses it’s no real surprise - he walked around her apartment for more than a week without a shirt - it seems only right that he’d use this newfound intimacy to his full advantage.

“What are you doing?” he asks, lips ghosting over her ear. It's not really a question he wants an answer to - it's more about knowing why she isn't in bed with him, why she left him clutching at sheets and not at her - but she tells him anyway.

“Just thinking.”

He nuzzles her neck.

“‘Bout what?”

She shrugs and his hands find the tie of her robe, tug at the knot and it comes apart easily.

“This. Us.” she makes a vague gesture at the window. “The weather.”
He snorts into her skin and lets go of her for a second to pull at the curtain, looks outside, before dropping it dismissively and sliding his hands over her belly, burying his face back in her hair.

“Ugly out there.”

He's right. It’s all sickly yellows and harsh cold reds.

She nods. “Yeah it is.”

But it's not ugly in here. Not ugly in the shadows, the half light. Not ugly as his hand slides down to cup her between the thighs. Not ugly as his his tongue draws hot patterns on her shoulder and his cock, hard and throbbing, presses against her ass.

“Feels so good,” he says.

It does. It feels more than good as he ignites her blood again, turns it thick in her veins.

And then two fingers are sliding into her wet flesh, down over her clit and curling inside her. She hisses - brief flash of discomfort as he presses against her, and then it disappears instantly and that sensitivity gives way to something else. Something dark and deep. Something a little bit dangerous.

She gasps and he raises his free hand to rest against her throat, whispers in her ear between kisses that he's got her, he’ll always have her. To trust him.

And she does. Oh god she does. She’s never trusted anyone so much in her whole life. Not like this, not with everything.

“Keep you safe,” he says into her ear. “That's the only thing that matters.”

It's not true. It isn't the only thing that matters but as his fingers glide inside her again, thick and hard and it feels like he's lighting her up from the inside she can believe it. She wants to.

He's surprisingly undemanding as he starts to move, much of his earlier desperation slaked. It's not
that it won't be back - she can already feel the heat of it, the way it's settling softly into her skin like a warm mist - but for now he's content to pump his fingers in and out of her in a lazy slow rhythm, gentle kisses on her neck and shoulders. And she's equally content to lean back against him, feel his cock throbbing against her ass and his heart against her back. Let him take his time winding her up.

And then he throws her a curveball.

Teeth against her earlobe, fingers twitching on her throat a little harder than they should.

“This what you did when I was away? Like this?”

For a second she freezes. She didn't expect this. He could barely look her in the eye when she told him earlier, choosing rather to throw himself into kissing and touching her than listening to her.

She guesses she shouldn't be surprised. Frank tends to retreat when things overwhelm him. He regroups and comes back with a plan, stronger than before.

There's no reason this should be different.

And, as her skin prickles and that warm mist settles hot and sharp into her veins, she has no idea what to say, how to answer. And she wishes now that she could throw herself into exploring him rather than listening, wishes she had that option. But she doesn't. He's got her pinned and there's no escape. And the truth is she doesn't want one.

His fingers move harder inside her, scissoring and pressing at her walls, making her gasp. She’s so wet already, she can feel it coating his palm. She can fucking hear it with each pump of his fingers. And she knows he can too.

She also knows if he were to move his hand now it would run down her thighs, make her skin glisten and shine.

“Frank…”

He shifts slightly so that his thumb presses her clit and she hisses again.
“Like this?” he asks, voice thick but steady.

And suddenly a wave of something that feels a lot like shame wells up inside her. She's not sure why but it's there, heavy and dark and mean. That last remnant of that little voice that tells her this is not her. That this is some other woman that wears her face and lives in her home and fucks Frank Castle so good he can barely speak afterwards.

But it's a lie. She knows it is. She was telling the truth when she told Matt she's still the same. Because she is. She hasn't changed. If anything she's found the strength she always hoped was there but never truly dared to imagine really existed. It took Frank Castle murdering three men in front of her and then dozens more, and then coming to her like a dog on his knees and asking her if he could stay to realise it. It took her telling him he could and finding that she wanted him to, to make it true.

So no, this is her. This is Karen Page. And she's mostly naked with the Punisher’s fingers between her legs and his voice hot and filthy in her ear. And that's exactly where she should be. And he’s whispering nonsense into her skin, telling her how much he wants her, how much he wants to fuck her and make her come. And, as easily as it arrived, that toxic wave ebbs out of her and into the terrible night sky where it belongs.

And then there's only him and only her.

(Only us.)

And only his fingers fucking her in long deep strokes.

She grinds her ass against him and it's his turn to hiss as his cock twitches on her. His turn to groan as she slides her hand down over his, grips his fingers and guides his thrusts into her, pushing at him so that he hits that place deep inside and makes her tremble and shudder.

“Show me what you do Karen,” he says.

And god, she doesn't do anything. Hadn't really considered this for months before Monday night. Sure there was some passionate kisses with Matt at her old apartment building and she'd wanted more, but she'd figured it would come, that she wouldn't need to do it for herself. And then after that there was Frank. There was Frank and his case and Matt and his lies and Karen Page trying to atone for something that didn't need redemption.
And she admits she forgot about herself. Neglected it. Pushed these feelings far away and threw herself into her work. Threw herself into forgetting Matthew Murdock and James Wesley and finding a way to get through each day.

And she did. She did so well. And then Frank Castle shattered that. He said don't you know and later she said I know and somehow one thing led to another and here they are, in her shadowy bedroom, a hellscape sky outside and something close to both divine holiness and unforgivable sin going on between her legs.

She staggers forwards but his hand slips from her throat to cup her breasts and he holds her tight, tight as he always has. Tight like those times when she thought he was going to crush her bones and break her into pieces and there wasn't even a small part of her that didn't want him to.

A little faster now. Not much though. Just enough to tease her really, to make her roll her hips to his hand so that he tightens his arms around her and holds her still, makes her grit her teeth and swear low and filthy.

“Show me,” he says voice firm and low. “*Show me.*”

It's more than a request. It's an instruction. And her hand tightens on his again, pushes his fingers deeper inside her, another wet sound filling the room and she's not even slightly ashamed about it anymore. And when she turns her head to look at him, even in the shadows she can see he's delighted.

He presses his lips to hers, his kiss surprising chaste, mouth still tender against hers... And then he twists his fingers, pushes hard and deep and strokes his thumb over her clit at the same time.

“Frank…”

She bites hard at his bottom lip. Hard enough to make him yelp and then he's smiling smugly at her, drawing her close, bending her a little so that she's very deliberately off balance, forcing her to bear down heavily on his fingers, her legs straining as she tightens her grip on his hand, pushes at it.

He's good, he's so *so* good. It’s not even that he knows her that well. He doesn't. He *couldn’t*. It’s that he's precise and efficient, strangely analytical. And more than that, it’s that he cares. He wants this for her. He’s whispering in her ear just how much he does.
And then his fingers speed up inside her and his voice drops somewhere low and filthy, forcing another wave of gooseflesh down her body, making her tremble.

“Goddamnit Frank,” she grits out and she can feel him grin against her shoulder.

“Show me,” he says again.

And she does.

Hand releasing his and pushing between his fingers and her flesh, finding the hard and swollen nub of her clit easily. She's damp and slick there too and it's easy to create a rhythm that matches his strokes inside her, that feeling of being wonderfully stretched and opened as he firmly adds a third finger.

She sucks in a breath and swears. It's not that it hurts - he couldn't do that, has never been able to do that with his hands - it's just new and unfamiliar, being touched in a way she hasn't been before; little scorching needles trying to push their way out of her skin and beads of sweat appearing on her top lip.

Outside lightning flashes and thunder rolls again. Inside Frank's fingers work her relentlessly and she stands on her tiptoes, body straining even as he pushes at her.

“Come on,” he says. “Show me what you do. Show me.”

And she can feel it - she can almost see it - as it comes hurtling towards her. It's not a slow build like it was the last time. Not something that starts in her belly and spins outwards. It's hard and sharp, slamming into her like a bullet, knocking her back into him so he has to tighten his grip on her, shift to keep them both standing.

More thunder and the room explodes in bright brilliant light at the same moment she does. White flashes turning the shadows darker and nothing - nothing - but the demanding pumping of his fingers, the stroking of hers, the sound of his groans in her ear, deep and filthy as his cock throbs hard against her ass and her hips buck into his hand.
She's making a sound too, something that's a moan but also a whimper and suddenly it's all too much - his voice, the obscene wet noises of his fingers inside her, the press of her own against her clit and the white lightning which burns at her retinas and makes her feel giddy and high and a little out of control.

She shuts her eyes tightly. Starbursts of colour replacing the stark monochrome of her apartment. Glittering crimsons and deep purples, brilliant whites that darken to yellows and greens, blues and browns before fading.

*Like a bruise,* she thinks and she has no idea where the thought came from or why it's there.

It just is.

Like him. Like her.

Like them standing here and defying the fucking universe with what they can do together.

What they *will* do together.

A beat. A moment to catch her breath. She's vaguely aware that his fingers are sliding out of her he's raising them to his mouth, sucking them off, while she leans heavily against him, limp and breathless. And then he's turning her around, pushing her robe onto the floor and dragging her close, arms tight and heavy around her. He's saying something too but she doesn't know what. Doesn't much care either. Can't focus on anything but that wonderful terrible ache his hand left, the new one that's replacing it as his lips brush hers and she feels it all the way down to her toes.

He tastes of her, sweet and hot, something that makes her think of roses and lilies. Of love and the little death.

And then he’s lifting her, moving them both towards the bed, pushing her down into the pillows, wrenching her thighs apart and insinuating himself between them, kissing her lips and neck, her shoulders.

She's shaking still, hard little shudders that feel like they start inside her and end outside with the thunder and he gives her a small smile, sits back on his heels, gentle hand on her leg and she swears she can feel him trembling too. And then he leans forward, touches his knuckles to her jaw, rakes his
fingers through her hair.

“You alright?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

He nods but he's not smiling anymore. Instead he's looking at her. And his face is such a mixture of emotions: lust, guilt, despair, joy … love - more than anything there's love... Even in the dark it's unmissable.

That night they danced on the roof, he told her it wasn't safe for him to be around her. It had nothing to do with mobsters and ninjas, demonic armies. And now? Now it's still not safe. They've just made it less safe than ever. And she wouldn't change it.

She wouldn't change it for anything.

She touches his hand, gives it a small squeeze and he shakes his head, snaps out of it. And then he's leaning forward again, lips against her breasts, tongue flicking her nipples before moving lower to her belly, the crease of her hip. And then he's hoisting her knees over his shoulders, scattering kisses over her thighs, nuzzling at her so that his stubble scrapes along her bare flesh until his mouth is hovering above her and even in the dark she can see the flash in his eyes.

There's a second she panics, a moment she wants nothing more than to get out of the bed and hide. But then whatever it was that chased her earlier shame away rises up within her again. There's no reason to be scared, no reason for embarrassment. He loves her. He wants this for her.

“What are you doing Frank?” she asks lightly, her mouth dry and voice cracking.

He glances up at her, gaze hard, but there's the ghost of a smile on his lips again.

“You know what I'm doing ma'am,” he says. “You know.”

She does. She knows.
And then it's easy. His mouth on her, tongue delving deep into the cleft between her legs, long heavy strokes from her cunt to her clit and back again.

He's not fast, not at all. It could be because she's still shaking and he knows she's still ridiculously sensitive, but she doesn't think so. He wants to taste her and tease her, lap her up and drown in her. It's for him. It's all for him.

Except it's not.

And it doesn't matter either way.

He's thorough too, sliding his hands under her ass and lifting her up to him, mouth trailing kisses along her folds, up her lips to the tiny bead between them before suckling gently at her, building a slow heavy rhythm with the stroke of his tongue.

And she genuinely wonders if she might lose her mind. If he could turn her into something useless and boneless, a rag doll that can do nothing but lie there and let him do whatever he wants.

She knows the answer. He does too.

She lets out a low groan, rolls her hips towards his mouth as his teeth nip at her, tug at her quivering, wet skin, but he holds her still, slides his hands to her hips, presses his fingers hard into her.

“Stay down,” he says and when she looks at him she can see the gleam of his eyes and the sheen of herself on his lips before he buries his head between her legs again.

He's no faster than before. If anything he seems to have slowed a little, changed things up to explore further and deeper. Kisses and gentle licks, drawing her clit into his mouth and rolling it between his lips, working her up slowly and almost methodically, never quite giving her what she needs and knowing it too.

She gets it. The point isn't to make her come even if he's going to do that anyway. And she's fine with that. More than fine.
So when he reaches up and puts a hand between her breasts and presses her back down in the sheets, she goes easily. Lies back and listens to the imminent storm outside, the other storm in her bones; the scrape of him, his teeth, his stubble, his tongue when he makes it hard and firm and uses it in long swipes across her wet flesh.

She's not sure how long they stay like that. All that matters is him and the way he's lapping at her, tasting every inch of her, sucking pieces of her psyche out and swallowing them whole.

In time, she's aware that she's started to move again, to writhe. And he's not telling her to stay still any longer. His cheek is pressed against her thigh and his hand is around her ankle like a shackle but he's letting her move to meet his strokes.

He's still teasing though. Not much, but enough to make her swear at him under her breath, feel him smile and press a kiss into her before he starts again, tongue flat and firm on her clit, fingertips pushing gently at her opening before sliding inside her; finding that place that makes her squirm and moan and tighten around him.

“That good? That right?” He asks and she makes a sound that she hopes is something close to a yes.

“You gotta tell me Karen,” he says and she forces herself to focus on him, his wet mouth twisted into a low smile, his gleaming eyes.

She frowns and reaches out, fingers gripping his hair and pushing his head back down between her legs. And god’s honest truth - something she’d swear on a stack of fucking bibles after drinking holy water - it seems to be exactly what he wants.

And then he's licking her again, hard and fast, devouring her with feral, hungry noises. She pushes herself up on her elbows to watch, sees him dark and deadly between her thighs, the way his hands press into her skin, the bruises she knows he will leave on her, the way he looks like he's drowning in her. Because maybe he is. Maybe he truly truly is.

She can feel it now, the deliberate measured strokes, the way his fingers and his mouth are now moving to meet her, the way something warm and wet and heavy is blooming deep in her belly.

A groan and then his name, her thighs shaking around his head and then without missing a beat, his eyes meet hers.
He nods once, short and sharp as his fingers press hard and deep inside her and his tongue draws spirals on her clit, and she doesn't remember much after that.

Flash of lightning, roll of thunder, her hips riding up to meet his face and her hand back in his hair like a vice. And then that slow molten wave that seems to start from every cell in her body at the same time, makes her bend and spasm and cry out, fracturing her and rattling her bones and stealing her breath.

“Oh god,” she whispers as she lets go of him, draws her knees up to her middle, arches her back so her breasts stand out full and firm and her hair covers her face. It’s too much, too hard, too real, too everything and she feels impossibly stretched - taut - like that wave is too big to fit inside her and it’s going to shatter her as it leaves.

And it does.

It does.

And then she’s curling around herself, burying her face in the pillow to get away from it, half-crying, half whimpering as it swells inside her again and again before slowly, agonisingly, starting to recede, leaving her shaking and breathless and ready to take on the world if that’s what needs to happen.

She’s Karen Page.

And she can do any goddamn thing she wants.

Any goddamn thing.

Somewhere she realises he’s holding her hand and that he's watching her, crouched over her and ready to pounce, ready to take her again.

And even though what he did is still coursing through her, she doesn't want to wait.
Not for him. Not anymore.

She's not sure she's actually stopped coming, that wave in her blood still ebbing and flowing through her, still making her roll her hips and grit her teeth and throw her head back. But somehow she's also grabbing at him, pulling him upwards so she can kiss him, feel his wet stubble scraping her skin and taste herself and him mingled together in her mouth.

In his.

It's instinctive to reach low for his cock, take a second to appreciate the weight of it in her hand, squeeze it and rub it, swipe her thumb over the head and feel his own viscous wetness welling out of him.

It's also instinctive what she does next.

"Fuck me," she says, voice surprisingly steady, throaty.

"You sure?" he asks. "I don't wanna hurt you."

"You can't," she says as she tugs at him, spreads her legs wide beneath him. "You know you can't."

And she can't either. Not in the slightest.

"God Karen," he groans.

And then she's hauling him upwards, ankles hooking over the backs of his knees.

"You sure you're sure?" he asks again and inside she's screaming at him. Screaming loudly that yes, she's fucking sure, she's been nothing but sure for weeks now. Screaming at him to check his goddamn chivalry in at the door, to stop being such a goddamn gentleman, to take her and fuck her and make her feel it.

Screaming that she loves all these things about him and wouldn't change any of them.
“Do it Frank,” And her actual voice is barely more than a strained, desperate whisper. “Do it.”

He does.

He rises up above her, one hand planted in the bed next to her head, the other reaching between them and covering hers where she's holding him, helping her to guide his cock deep inside her.

And as he does, he lets out a sigh, something that sounds like relief and joy and love and rage all at the same time. Something she feels too as she presses kisses into his neck, bites down hard on his skin and he fills her up and takes her.

Claims her.

She's his now. He's hers.

That's all there really is to it.

And that flutter between her legs is still there, still beating at her like panicked butterfly wings. And she’s not sure whether it’s the end of her last climax or the start of a new one.

She doesn’t care either.

It’s not about that. It never was.

She knows it's unlikely she’ll come again so soon but that doesn’t matter. What matters is feeling his body moving inside hers, his face looming over her in the dark, his desperate words and his feverish kisses as he falls apart.

As she makes him fall apart.

He touches her jaw, knuckles on her cheek, kisses her gently and she realises he's giving her a
moment to get used to him again, to adjust to how he’s stretching her, let her decide completely whether she wants him like this.

It’s unnecessary. Wholly completely unnecessary but she’s so fucking grateful. And he’s so fucking sweet, and she barely knows what to do with all of this because it’s more than just sensory overload, it’s more than just him taking over every single aspect of what she can see and feel. It’s inside too. It’s him in her heart and her head. It’s him in her soul and her in his if she could find it in herself to truly believe either of them have one.

Too much again. Too much for now.

So she wraps her arms around him tight, pulls him down so his torso is pressed hard against her breasts.

“You...” she whispers. “You mess me up.”

He does. In the best and worst way.

“Guess we’re somewhere close to even then,” he says.

Maybe. She’s not sure.

But then he’s rolling his hips experimentally and when they both moan, he lowers himself to his elbows, and kisses her deep and sweet, and she doesn’t worry about anything else.

He’s slow at first and even though she can feel his desperation as he moves - as he touches her, as his goddamn hand rests on her throat again and for a second he forgets himself and squeezes before sliding his fingers into her hair - she knows he’s holding back. He’s still a little scared he’s going to hurt her or break her.

But he won’t. And even if he could she’s not so sure that would be a bad thing.

So she kisses him, messy and wet and long and she can feel his saliva coating her lips and her chin, feel the way he surges when she drags her nails down his back and huskily tells him to fuck her.
Do it Frank. Do it. I want you to come in me. I wanna feel it. I wanna feel you.

It’s all true. Every goddamn word. But she still can’t believe she’s saying it, that somehow she’s found that part of herself that’s both filthy and saccharine. Scary and dark but also good and kind.

Just like him.

Just like him.

And then he’s slamming into her in long hard strokes, saying some kind of equally sweet and dirty nonsense in her ear, nipping at her and kissing her and twisting his fingers in her hair so he can bury his head in her neck.

She feels it too - that flutter from earlier increasing in intensity if not speed, building up to something almost dreamy and romantic as she clenches her muscles around him as hard as she can. And she feels tendrils of something twisting out from her belly, meandering through her veins, under her skin, little starbursts of pleasure and delirium that uncoil at every thrust until it feels like she’s floating away into the storm outside even as she’s pinned under him.

It’s not an orgasm, not for her at least. But it's something almost as good. Something about being touched and cherished and needed like this that leaves her spinning, leaves her clawing at him, arching her hips to meet him, to give him the safe place he needs. That place where nothing matters as much as everything does and he can do this - where he can be the man he once was.

“Come for me Frank, come for me.”

And then he’s swearing into her skin, groaning loud and long as he convulses forcefully against her, sucking in a hard breath as his fingers spasm in her hair and his tongue finds hers and she lets him drown inside her.

And it really feels like he does. Like he spends a few seconds gasping and fighting and trying to escape her and then in an instant turns himself over to it and let’s whatever it is that he’s feeling envelop him. And her. And whatever it is they’ve made together.
He collapses on top of her, his full body weight bearing down. He’s not even trying to use his arms and knees to save her from that. And even though it pushes the air out of her lungs and his hips jut into hers, there’s nowhere else she wants to be. Him and her here, his cock inside her and her whole body being cocooned by his and she doesn’t think she’s experienced a moment quite this perfect in her whole life. Isn’t sure if she ever will again.

So she lies there, feeling him breathe in time with her, his tentative kisses on her skin. He’s still holding her head, his fingers snagging in her hair when he moves, sending sharp little pinpricks along her scalp. She doesn’t care. It doesn’t hurt. Nothing can.

“Make me weak,” he says into her neck. “Make me weak and then make me thank you for it.”

And maybe it’s true what he said earlier and they’re not exactly even on this. Not by any count. Because he makes her strong. And she guesses there’s nothing wrong with either of these things. The Punisher needs moments of fragility. Karen Page needs moments of resilience.

It feels like she loses something when he moves off her, but then he rolls her onto her side, hand settling on her ass as he moves in close so that her legs are twined with his and his head is tucked under her chin.

Lightning flashes again, and she closes her eyes, draws him in so she can run her hands over his shoulders and back, feel her own little red welts raised on his skin. Her own marks to show he’s hers.

And that’s not nearly as scary as it once was.

~~~

Later, half-asleep, he cups her cheek and plants a kiss on her lips. And when she opens her eyes, he’s looking at her like he’s found some answer to a question no one ever asked out loud.

And she waits, lets him work up the courage to find the words and say them. It’ll come. It always does.

“This …” he says. “This is what I want. Waking up with you. I didn’t think I could have that. I still don’t think… a girl like you…”
She frowns and he sighs, looks away briefly.

“I want the other thing too… the fighting, the… I need the…”

She puts a finger to his lips. “I know.”

*Just don’t say it, please dear god don’t say it.*

It’s hard enough being with a man still caught in his dead wife’s shadow. It’s hard enough loving a man who is only at peace when he’s at war. He might love her, he might be devoted to her, but his mistress is dark and she won’t let him go easily.

“Do you?” he asks.

She nods.

“We’re gonna need to talk though. More than we did today.”

“‘Bout what?”

He touches her hair, rakes his fingers over her cheek.

“Come on, let’s not do that.”

“Okay,” she turns her head and kisses his palm, runs her hand down his arm to his bicep. “But later…”

“Yeah,” he says tilting her face towards him and pressing his lips to hers. “Yeah, it can wait.”
She’s lying on her belly when she hears him stirring next to her, pushing back the covers and heading to the bathroom. She’s half dozing too, her body heavy but loose. Lethargic. And the last thing she wants to do is get up.

It’s late. Really late judging by the lack of noise from outside or music from the neighbours.

She hears the toilet flushing and water running, the gentle bang of the medicine cabinet and the click of a glass on porcelain. And then he’s back in the bedroom, hunting for his clothes on the floor, pulling them on seemingly in the order he finds them.

She sighs inwardly, suddenly wishing that he wasn’t so damn responsible and that he’d wait until morning to go and see Matt and Elektra. But she knows that’s wrong and she knows that’s selfish. There are people’s lives at stake. Not just Matt’s. And even though Frank would be the first to tell anyone and everyone that he’s not some white knight and he’s not in the business of saving people, she knows stuff like this gets him. Innocent lives being taken and used and exploited… it’s not something any of them can stomach on any acceptable level. And she wouldn’t want to either.

Still, she wonders if this is partly redemption for him too. She wonders if he has checks and balances in place whereby he weighs up those he can save against those he punishes. She thinks he probably does. Thinks it wouldn’t make sense otherwise. He’s a good as he is bad. As cruel as he is kind.

As happy as he is melancholy.

The room is quiet all of a sudden and she can feel him watching her in the semi-darkness, eyes settling on the place where the sheet barely covers her ass. And then the bed dips next to her and his fingers are running down her back, leaving little trails of fire against her skin.

“I’m going to find Red now.”

She groans sleepily, pushes a little into his hand.

“No,” she says. “Stay.”
He snorts, leans in and kisses the nape of her neck, lips lingering as his hand continues to work it’s way up and down her flesh.

“I'll be back soon. You won't even know I was gone.”

She whimpers as his fingers press against her hips, as his grip tightens on her just enough to tell her he wants her to turn over.

“I'll know,” she says and he chuckles, applies a little more pressure and she capitulates and rolls onto her back, and even in the dim light she can see the hungry look on his face, clenched jaw, pupils so dilated that his eyes are almost completely black.

He looks down. It's not a glance. It's a full-on stare as his eyes drift from her lips to her neck, her breasts, her belly. Lower. It’s lewd again this time. There are no buts or qualifiers. It's unadulterated lust that he's not even trying to hide. Not even a little bit.

She cocks her head, watches him through sleepy eyes, and when he lets out a strangled sound in the back of his throat she reaches up and pulls him close.

“Stay.”

Another groan, louder this time and then his tongue is in her mouth and his hand is on her ribs and she can all but taste his surrender.

“I won't be long,” he rasps. “I ain't staying for Red’s sermon.”

“Maybe after all this you should,” she teases. “Cleanse your soul or something”

He barks out a laugh, looks to the side.

“Waste of time, I'm just gonna come back here and carry on sinning.” His lips find her throat and she arches against him.
“All the more reason to listen then.”

“Sounds to me like you want me to come back not wanting to sin...” he says, groans as she tilts her head, covers her pulse with his mouth and sucks at her skin. “Thought you were having a good time.”

She grins, kisses him again. His tongue is hot and his hand moves to her breast, rolls her nipple between his thumb and forefinger and she gasps.

“I'll be an hour. Two at the most.” His hand hasn’t moved though and if anything he's more in the bed than out.

But she knows he's going to go - that this is just delaying the inevitable. He knows it too.

He kisses her again. “You keep the bed warm.”

She laughs dryly in the back of her throat. “Okay.”

“Don't start without me.”

She gives him a disappointed look and he rolls his eyes.

“Okay then don't finish without me,”

“We’ve only had one night and you’re already bossing me around.”

He chuckles, rakes his fingers through her hair, presses his forehead to hers.

“Those fuckin’ blue eyes,” he rasps. “Fuckin’ shoulda known I'd be in trouble.”

“You'll be in trouble if you keep me waiting,”
“Yes ma'am.”

He kisses her once more - sweet and gentle - and then he's gone, tucking his gun into the back of his jeans and pulling on a dark hoodie, before heading for the door, dodging Pickle as he goes.

And then she's all alone with the thunder crashing just outside.

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Later she makes herself more tea, listens to the sounds of the storm. The rain still hasn't started but the air feels electric and it makes the fine hairs on her arms stand up, sends a nasty shiver down her spine. It seemingly has much the same effect on Pickle, who's restless and difficult.

She slips her robe back on, calls the cat onto the bed and tries to calm her but to no avail. She tries not to watch the clock - for all that it would help anyway as she didn't check the time when Frank left - but still finds herself glancing at her phone every few seconds.

She reads a little but can't focus and the book isn't all that good anyway. She checks Twitter and Facebook, sees some people making use of Alexei's offer to contact him about any concerns they have over his developments. There a few people asking about the schools, one soul worried about the animal shelter, but on the whole the good people of Hell's Kitchen seem to have a very short memory with this kind of thing. They seem happy to let someone come in and seemingly sort out their problems - both real and imagined - without much thought to the consequences.

She closes her laptop, sets it down next to the bed and leans back against the pillows. He'll be home soon - he has to be, it's been almost two hours since she first started looking at the clock and he must have been gone for at least 15 minutes before that.

And he said he'd be back soon. And he doesn't lie. He wouldn't do that to her.

She glances at his side of the bed, thinks of how she's going to wake up next to him tomorrow. How she'd like to have another round with him tonight. Slow or fast, it doesn't matter. She also knows if he comes back to find her sleeping he won't wake her, no matter how much he wants to. But maybe that's also not the end of the world. They've had tonight and there's always tomorrow, and all the nights after that.
Somehow it'll work.

Somehow it has to.

And that’s when she hears a tentative rap against her window. It’s so soft that at first she thinks it’s just the start of the rain, some heavy drops hitting the glass. But then it comes again. Three taps in quick succession, louder this time. Loud enough to send Pickle careening off the bed and under it.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

She gathers her robe around her, ties it tight at her waist and steps out of bed, glances to the window but she can’t see anything, not even an outline of someone and again she thinks that maybe it’s just rain, or a bird or a branch … because there are so many branches and birds five storeys up knocking on her window. *So very many.*

She takes a step towards the sound, moving quietly as she can. Her purse is on the couch with her .38 and she wonders if she can get to it or if whoever is outside will notice, cut her off...

She shakes her head. This is madness. No one who’s trying to kill her is going to be rapping at her window in the middle of the night. *Oh say Hello Karen Page, I’m here to murder you. Let me in if you don’t mind.*

Besides, she really hasn’t pissed anyone off lately with the possible exception of Ellison and well, rocking up to kill her isn’t exactly his management style - if only because it means he might come into contact with blood.

*Fuck it.*

She heads for the couch anyway, shoves her hand into her purse, fingers closing around the grip of the gun.

She’s not sure what she expected. Maybe some smashing glass, ninjas swinging in through the windows, smoke bombs. But nothing happens. Nothing at all.
And then…

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

She tells herself again that she’s being stupid, that it’s probably Frank and he’s probably forgotten his keys and a little voice asks her if she’s ever known Frank to forget a goddamn thing since she met him. If she could please show everyone the list of Things Frank Castle Has Forgotten because there’s a hundred to one bet it’s empty.

Still though… still.

She moves quietly towards the window, the curtains billowing slightly, but it’s too dark to see outside... And then a sudden flash of lightning and briefly she sees the shadow of a man standing on her fire escape before he disappears back into the darkness.

She cocks her gun, the click louder than she would have liked, filling the room and echoing off the walls.

He had to have heard it too. Whoever the hell he is, he had to. It’s just not possible that he didn’t, and she braces herself for it. She’s oddly calm about it too. Oddly at ease with the fact that she might have to put a man down tonight, might need to stain her hands with more blood.

And then for a second there’s nothing. Not even lightning or thunder.

Not even the sound of the city or the thin hollow moan of the wind.

Silence.

Silence loud and deafening.

And then her name.
“Karen? Karen are you…”

He doesn’t get to finish his sentence because she’s ripping the curtain aside and glaring up at him - for all the good her glare would do - his silhouette dark against the horrible blood red sky behind him.

Matt.

Matthew Murdock, or maybe she should say Daredevil. The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen. Whatever name he wants to go by these days.

He’s got his suit on, red leather from head to toe, even though right now it looks black as pitch. To his right she can see Elektra, standing on the steps, also masked, but neither that nor the storm can hide the worry in her eyes. The fear. And something else too. Something Karen needs to look at a little longer and harder before she can figure out what it is.

She blinks, gun in her hand pointed at the floor.

“Karen, have you…” Matt starts again and his voice sounds tight and worried and angry but she cuts him off anyway.

“What are you doing here?” She’s not sure how she expected it to come out. All she knows is that she sounds confused and frustrated and weirdly disconcerted, which is exactly how she feels. And not just because she’s semi-naked with a gun in her hands, standing in front of a man she might once have loved.

“Karen, I’m sorry, I know it’s late and this is stupid but Elektra said you might…”

She glances at Elektra who’s taken another step towards her, her long ponytail bouncing in the wind and for a second Karen wonders why that seems so familiar, why this feels like déjà vu. But before she can figure it out Matt is talking again.

“Elektra said you might know where Frank is,” he finishes.
It takes a few seconds to parse his words and even then they make no sense.

“What do you mean ‘where Frank is’?” She asks. “He told me he was coming to see you.”

Something passes between Matt and Elektra then. Something weird and unpleasant. Anger, blame, shame even. She can’t begin to decipher all this and she finds she doesn’t much care either because there’s something building in her belly. Something horrible and heavy, dropping into her like a stone, making her skin prickle like a thousand cockroaches are running over her.

The lightning flashes again and all she can see are the whites of Elektra’s eyes and that look she couldn’t identify is still there, clear as day.

It’s guilt. It's remorse.

It’s not something she’s ever thought she’d see on Elektra.

“He did,” Matt is saying. “He came by more than two hours ago and…”

Oh god… she can feel her grip on her gun loosening, her legs turning to weak.

“I told him everything,” Elektra interrupts seemingly having finally found her voice. “He said he’d take care of it… didn’t say all that much else.”

She doesn’t want to hear any more. She doesn’t. It’s lies and half-truths and someone is mistaken and this is all a big misunderstanding and Frank is going to walk through the fucking door right now. He is. Because he has to. Because she demands that he does. Because he’s not allowed to be anywhere else.

But Elektra is still talking and Karen doesn’t want her words to make sense but they do.

“He said he’d report back in half an hour. That was almost two hours ago…” she trails off. “I thought he might be here…”
“He’s not,” her voice is strained, an ugly whisper she doesn’t think they’ll hear but of course they do.

“Yeah…” Elektra says and she looks so hopeless that Karen wants to jump up onto the fire escape and shake her. Shake both of them. Tell them that this is Frank and he’ll be fine because he’s Frank. And bullets to the head can’t bring him down and he’s the meanest toughest son of a bitch she’s ever met.

“I guess he’s at the warehouse then,” Elektra says to Matt and his shoulders sag and his mouth tightens into a thin line.

“Elektra, I told you not to say…”

“Oh goddamnit Matthew,” she says. “He’s her… friend. She has a right…”

But Karen doesn’t care about friends or rights or whatever the hell it is going on between Matt and Elektra here. She doesn’t care about any of that.

“The warehouse? You mean the one on tenth?”

_The one where I got kidnapped. The one where Frank got beat up. The one where all the bad things happen and I can only make them good by clawing my life back from the goddamn universe? The one that’s supposed to be crawling with every goddamn gangster in Hell’s Kitchen._

“Yes,” Elektra says. “The one on tenth…”

“The delivery you were talking about on Wednesday…? That’s only tomorrow? Monday?” She’s aware she sounds desperate, that her voice is almost pleading, but she finds it hard to care, hard to give it a second thought really. “Elektra you said it was tomorrow… you did.”

Elektra looks up like she’s searching for something and if Karen thought for one second she was religious, she’d think she was praying. But he doesn’t and she isn’t and the state of Elektra Natchios’ soul isn’t something she’s particularly concerned with right now.

And then she locks eyes again and Karen knows what she’s going to say.
“They changed the schedule Karen. I only found out after he’d left. They changed it and it’s tonight and if Frank’s there, it means he’s there with most of the Yakuza and the Russian mob too…”

“Elektra…” Matt’s voice is low, a heavy warning attached to it but she ignores him and keeps on talking.

“And he’s alone.”

Behind her thunder rumbles and the sky flashes that sickly red again.
Love's a violent word, don't you forget it

Chapter Notes

Okay so...

The last time I said that I was aware that something was going to happen that people probably wouldn't want to wait too long to be concluded. That hasn't happened yet which is why I am posting this chapter.

However, this chapter also has something of a cliffhanger, which I kind of did not anticipate as I wrote this and kind of threw itself at me towards the end. Then I realised if I were to be kind I would need three chapters up and ready to go if I were to conclude everything and well, I just can't work like that and you'd be waiting a hell of a long time for any updates.

Hence I decided to post now. The next chapter is weirdly far ahead in terms of writing, so hopefully there won't be a hugely long break between this and that. But just remember that was the one I was actually worried about.

Another thing: I can't write action. Like I can't. Like I honestly wish I could just write "and then Matt did some high kicks and the bad guys were defeated" but I realise that's not trying very hard. So yeah, be kind about that. I tried. I really did.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this and thank you all for your support.

Song title is from John Morland's *Old Wounds*. It's a good song - you should listen to it.

P.S. Tags have been updated as this chapter is a little violent. If you're at all worried about the conclusion, please note that I have NOT ticked any archive warnings.

There's a few moments when nothing happens. The sky is dark and forbidding, Elektra and Matt stand stock still and the jumbled mess of fear and grief inside her is hard and solid, and she has no idea how to even begin to untangle it.

But it's only a few seconds and then she becomes aware of little things: Matt's heavy breathing; Elektra’s goddamn ponytail bouncing in the wind; the fact that she's suddenly cold and it doesn't have anything at all to do with the weather nor the thin robe she's wearing.

And then that ball of emotions starts to unravel and she takes a shuddering breath, chokes on it, and pushes it back down into her belly.

Dimly she realises she has two choices. They don't manifest as that though. No clear paths reaching in opposite directions. But she knows they're there, can understand their destinations if not their
journeys.

It's simple really: she could break down and cry or she could get dressed and do something. And right now getting dressed seems to be the more useful option. It's a step. And all she needs is another one after it and another one after that. Plan things out piece by piece and they seem less overwhelming. Not that that's worked out for her before.

Not ever.

She turns, puts her gun on the coffee table and heads to her closet.

Behind her she can hear Matt asking her something but she doesn't know what and she doesn't care either.

She also doesn't care when she pulls on a pair of panties and her jeans, drops her robe onto the floor while she digs out a bra and a tank top, a dark sweater.

Matt can't see her anyway and judging by the fact that her clothes are still strewn across the floor from earlier, Elektra would also have to be blind not to know what happened here. She's a bit beyond faked modesty now.

“Karen…”

Elektra this time, and she doesn't look up as she pulls on a pair of socks.

“Karen, what are you doing?”

There's oddly no judgement in Elektra’s voice. She's genuinely curious. In fact there's a hint of something that sounds close to admiration too.

She glances up. Elektra has moved closer to Matt and she doesn't have to crane her neck to see her anymore.
She grabs a pair of soft boots, struggles a bit with the laces.

“I’m going to find him.” It comes out strong and steady and she had no idea she was going to say it until she did. Until the next part of the plan somehow showed itself to her.


She ignores him. She's not willing to have this fight. It's a waste of time.

It's a huge fucking waste of time.

She stands, goes to her side draw. Every bullet Frank ever left on her windowsill is there, every last one stacked neatly in little cardboard boxes. She fills two spare magazines - she figures if she needs more than that and what's already in her gun, she's not coming back anyway.

“Karen,” Matt again. “Karen - Elektra and I will go. We’ll find him.”

She stops, looks at the two of them standing on her fire escape, masked and suited up like superheroes. Both as impressive as they are ridiculous.

“Seems to me you're the ones that lost him.”

“Karen, come on that's not true. This whole thing is stupid,” he purses his lips. “Frank didn’t need to get involved in the first place and…”

“Matt,” she interrupts. “How is this helping anyone?”

She waits a fraction of a second and then attaches her gun to her belt, grabs her keys and cell phone.

“Look, we’ll go. I've already called Stick. We’ll sort everything out later,” he vaguely indicates Elektra. “But just stay here…”
“Frank came for me,” she says. “He came for me when he didn't need to…”

“But Karen…”

And then Elektra puts a hand on his arm and he goes quiet and still almost despite himself.

“And then Elektra puts a hand on his arm and he goes quiet and still almost despite himself.

“Matthew,” she says and behind them thunder rumbles and the sky turns a darker shade of red. “Matthew, she's coming.”

She can see that for a second he doesn't understand, that he can't fathom firstly why Elektra would be siding with her and secondly, how he's suddenly been outmaneuvered.

And then he kind of seems to do what she can only describe as implode. It's not a random angry outburst - Matt’s always been able to hold his temper and rather resorts to low blows and a good dose of righteousness when confronted with things he doesn't like. It's more like he breaks down inside. Like he catches the frustration he's feeling, grapples with it and turns it in on himself.

“She's not,” he says but his voice is cracked and there's a part of her that wants to tell him to just let it all the fuck out. Scream. Shout. Rage. She doesn't care. He needs to be real. Upfront.

“No,” Elektra says. “She is.”

“I won’t…”

“Matthew, you can't see her,” her voice is harder now. “You can't see her eyes. She's coming. With or without us.”

She pauses and something that looks like understanding flickers across her face. “My guess is with us is preferable.”

And somehow that settles it.
She gets fragments of the story as they drive, not that it makes the slightest bit of difference either way. Frank came round like he said he would. Elektra ‘fessed up to everything including how she has the information she does and why - Matt almost flinches when they get to that part. And then Frank told them they needed to play it smart, that there were too many moving parts to just go in bouncing around and hoping to take out a couple of ninjas in the process. He said he had a plan, that he was going to set up cameras around the warehouse, inside if he could, see if he could find anything incriminating before the fact; that as much as he’d like to take down some mobsters, they need to do this right - it's not like they're going to get Smimov or Vanessa behind bars with a couple of high kicks and back flips.

Elektra seems to have taken that well and there's a wry smile on her lips when she repeats it.

Matt, not so much.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to work out that he’s pissed off although Karen can't quite decide whether it's because of Elektra’s involvement or if it's because she correctly assessed he was in over his head. Regardless he's sitting in the passenger seat of Elektra’s ridiculously flashy sports car with a look on his face that could sour milk.

There’s a moment Karen feels wildly sorry for him. Matt is a lot of things and a lot of those things are infuriating. But fundamentally he is a good person, a person who believes in an ultimate goal, who goes out of his way to make the world better. He's not like Frank. Their paths might cross and meet, run parallel at times, but mostly making the world a nicer place is an occasional happy side effect of what Frank does. It's not the end game. It never will be.

Still, it doesn't change the fact that Matt’s biggest disadvantage is blindness and no, she doesn't mean his physical inability to see. It's not that at all. In fact she's pretty sure he “sees” better than most people with 20/20 vision.

Rather, it's a lack of self awareness, an idealism which he perceives as reality; the undying belief that his friends’ loyalty and support is unconditional.

It's hubris.

And now… well now this realisation that the people he's closest to don't think he's infallible, that they think he's out of his depth and need to call in the reinforcements is a bitter pill to swallow.
It's sad. But she can't worry about that, can't dwell. Frank is out there somewhere and he's in trouble. She can feel it in her bones.

It's 3:43 according to the dashboard clock. He should have been back an hour ago. Back to carry on sinning with her, back so that he could wake up with her in the morning, bring her coffee and shut the world away for another day.

She knows there's no chance of that happening now.

She glances out the window. The night is growing more hideous by the second. The sky like blood, interspersed with horrible black blue patches, the hazy street lights giving the city a sickly yellow hue.

“Karen?”

Elektra.

She's not looking at her, instead focusing on the road.

“Karen, I'm sorry. I would have never ever let him go if I'd known the delivery was tonight.”

It's true. It’s also true that no one “lets” Frank do anything.

“I know I promised you…”

Matt sucks in a breath at that.

“It doesn't matter,” Karen says.

Elektra turns briefly to look at her and Karen has the distinct impression she wants to say more. But then she's concentrating on the road again.
Hell’s Kitchen is mostly empty and she can't help but think of that first night. The first night when this all started and she drove through the empty streets with Frank shooting a fucking Kalashnikov out the sunroof.

Full circle now.

She looks at Matt, at Elektra. Both quiet and stony.

*The more things change, the more they stay the same.*

Despite the lack of traffic it seems to take forever to near the warehouse and, when they do, she can't help but feel that everything was leading to this moment. It started here, no reason it shouldn't end here too.

She shakes the thought away. She tells herself she's being dramatic, that she's just letting her imagination run wild, that things are going to be fine.

She doesn't believe it for one second. Not one.

They park a few blocks away but she can still see the chainlink fence, the way it glints coldly in the darkness. Not for the first time she wonders who that woman was - the one in her slip in the snow. Maybe she’ll find out tonight but more likely she’ll never know.

“Stay here,” Matt says as he's releasing his seatbelt.

“Matthew…”

“I said stay,” his voice is hard and tight and even in the gloomy darkness and the red hell sky she can see he's shaking. Rage, fear, humiliation. A combination of all three.

“No,” he pushes the door open. “You stay here with her. When I find Stick and figure out what's happening I'll come and get you…” he turns to Karen. “And then I’ll figure out what to do with
you.”

Once upon a time his tone might have got to her. Not now.

“Matthew, you can't go in there alone…”

He ignores Elektra, steps out of the car. Karen knows he can't see anything but he's looking towards the warehouse anyway.

And when he talks his voice is harder and harsher than she’s ever heard it before.

“You both stay here. After everything it's the least you can do,” he bites his lip, looks like he's found the words he has to say next but doesn't actually want to put them out there. “Elektra, if anything happens to her, I'll never forgive you. Never.”

He doesn't wait for an answer and then he's gone, leaving her and Elektra alone for the second time in almost as many days.

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She waits a couple of seconds, long enough so that she can't see Matt anymore, and then she reaches for the door handle. Somewhere her mind has assigned his warning to Elektra as an inconsequential problem - one that's easily overcome - so when Elektra all but slams into her from the front seat, it's completely unexpected.

“Elek…”

“He told us to stay.”

There's a moment she's almost confused. This is ridiculous. Frank is inside and they're out here and she's somehow being thwarted by both misguided loyalty and unrequited affections.

“Frank’s in there Elektra. He's in there and he's in trouble…”
But Elektra doesn't move and her face is very close. Close enough to see the fear in her eyes, the
guilt, the hard determination of her mouth. There's no haughty heiress, no bored poor little rich girl.
There's no act. And suddenly Karen can almost see herself. Almost.

The man Elektra loves has also thrown himself headlong into danger. It's everything she tried to
prevent, every scheme coming undone and she's terrified.

“Matthew told me to keep you here.”

And this doesn't seem like a remotely good reason for anything. Certainly not to stay.

“What are you gonna do Elektra? Fight me? Stab me with one of those blades?”

“If I have to.”

“Why?”

“Because he asked me to. And I've done nothing but deceive him and hurt him and I can do this one
damn thing right … even if it won't get him what he thinks it will…”

“And what's that?”

And Elektra relents a little, takes some of the pressure off Karen's torso.

She knows the answer. It was obvious from the start.

“You Karen. It's always you.”

And then she kneels back in the front seat and for a moment there's absolute silence. No lightning, no
thunder, even that city hum is gone.
It's not even that she didn't know it, not that Elektra didn't make it obvious at Smirnov’s party...

*(I want him. He wants you. And you... what do you want Karen?)*

… it's that she's sitting here while the man she loves puts himself in danger for the man she doesn't. And Elektra could say exactly the same thing about the situation.

“He doesn't know does he? About me and Frank?”

Elektra shakes her head.

“But you do.”

“God Karen I'd have to be an idiot not to figure out why your clothes were all over your goddamn floor and you were wearing nothing but, excuse me, the kind of robe a woman only wears for one reason.”

“You knew before tonight though.”

Elektra’s eyes flash and she looks away.

“I saw you,” she says and she sounds almost guilty. “Last Monday morning. I was coming to talk to you then. Thought I could get you before the party…”

She pauses, looks at Karen long and hard but there's a small smile on her lips.

“You were otherwise occupied… didn’t think you'd want to be disturbed.”

And it all clicks into place. The bouncing ponytail, the familiar gait. Frank’s lips on hers and his body pressing her into the car door. Luna at their feet, patiently waiting for them to say goodbye.
Hold that thought.

“I suspected it before,” she says. “I just didn’t expect such … graphic confirmation.”

“Why didn’t you say anything? To Matt?”

Elektra shakes her head.

“What would the point be? Nothing to gain but a lot of hassle for you… and I don't want to do that. I know the cliche is we should be at each others’ throats. You and I should be fighting over a man… but I'm not like that and despite the way you flounced out of Matthew’s apartment that day you found me in his bed... I don't think you are either.” She pauses. “Besides, you love Frank. Only a blind man couldn't see that.”

She wants to laugh at Elektra’s choice of words until she realises it was deliberate. Matt doesn’t know. He won’t until he allows himself to.

“He loves you too…” she sighs. “When have you ever heard of Frank choosing not to go in all guns blazing? When have you heard of him not wanting to take out every mobster under the sun as slowly and cruelly as he can? I asked him why. He said he had too much to lose.”

She takes a moment to let that sink in. To understand the commitment behind it, the gravity. He not only loves her, he's devoted to her. For a second she feels almost unbearably guilty.

“That’s why you can’t say it doesn’t matter,” Elektra says. “It does.”

“Yeah. Yeah it does.”

Elektra sighs and then gives her a dark look. “Matthew is so angry with me. I knew he would be. I knew it since from the second I started keeping things from him. I expected it. It's so hard though. You think you're prepared. You're not.”
It's true. That night in the graveyard she knew Frank was going to be enraged. She could feel it pouring out of the air and into her bones. She wasn't prepared though. Wasn't prepared for the full force of his fury, how his words splintered deep inside her.

Matt’s not the same and yet… and yet he is.

“I’d do it again though,” Elektra says. “I wouldn't do much differently. Even if it got us right back here… You can hate me for that too.”

But she’s doesn't. She can't.

“Frank’s in there because I asked him to help Matt,” she says. “Because he'll do anything for me. It's not your fault.”

Elektra runs a hand through her hair, looks towards the warehouse. Not much to see other than red sky and hazy halogen light. So much ugliness. So much pain. So much death.

“Let me go Elektra,” she says. “He needs me.”

Elektra closes her eyes, takes a deep breath.

“Matthew…”

“Matt needs you too…”

“He will never forgive me if you get hurt.”

Karen nods. This is true. It also seems like a small sacrifice.

“At least he’ll be alive not to forgive you. That was always the plan wasn't it? Above everything else?”
Elektra nods.

“Let's go then.”

For a second she doesn't move but it's not even like she's debating with herself. It's more like she's getting used to the idea, feeling it out.

She sighs. “Might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb.”

And then she nods, pulls her scarf up over her face, glances at Karen’s waist where her .38 sits snugly against her hip.

“I'm assuming you know how to use that thing you've got in your pants.”

And the old Elektra is back. The one with the twinkle in her eye and razor sharp tongue.

Karen grins.

“Both of them, yes.”

A dry humourless chuckle. “Too much to lose indeed.”

She unlocks the doors and they step out into the hellscape of the city.

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The warehouse is eerily quiet as they approach, its grey walls looming black and ugly against the bruise of the sky.

It's different from the last time. There's no snow, there no woman in a slip and one shoe. There's no sorry excuse for a junkyard dog.
It's also the same.

It's the sameness that bothers her. All of them here again, one of them missing.

She wonders how it's going to end. If they'll all live. If she can take Frank away this time, repay the favour. She doesn't think so. The universe doesn't give that kind of perfection more than once. She's out of credit. In the red. There's no reserve.

Doesn't mean she's not going to try. Doesn't mean she won't put up a fight.

The holes in the chainlink fence are still there. Obviously Smirnov or Vanessa or even Fisk himself doesn't care too much about maintenance. Or maybe they just don't want to draw attention. From the outside it's just like any of the abandoned and rundown Fisk properties. No reason to give anyone cause to think otherwise.

She slips through and Elektra follows, the moonlight glancing off the Sai on her hip.

“You willing to use those?”

Elektra merely nods but the true answer was obvious. She'll do whatever it takes to save Matt, even when that means betraying him.

They head along the perimeter of the fence, staying low. There's no obvious security lights but that doesn't mean there aren't any at all, doesn't mean they're not being picked up on some infrared view somewhere or in the crosshairs of a sniper rifle.

Karen pushes the thought away. They either make it out or they don’t. There's no place for what ifs.

Still though, still she hopes if they are targeted, if someone’s trigger finger is getting hot and itchy that they're nowhere near as good a shot as Frank, even if that means she's starting from a very high bar.
But no one shoots them and no lights come on. The building stays in shadows and the thunder rumbles ominously. It’s so dark that Matt isn't even really at any kind of disadvantage here, if he ever really is.

“We’re going in blind,” Elektra says echoing her thoughts and she nods, but she grits her teeth and keeps moving, that small side door that Frank dragged her out of so long ago coming into view.

She can't believe she's here, can't believe that after everything, after her being taken, after Frank being hacked to pieces that she came back.

And yet she also can. Because it's Frank and she refuses to give him back to the universe. He's hers now. He said he was and he is and no one and nothing is going to take that away.

She takes out her gun, pulls back the hammer - the click doesn't feel loud this time - and nods to Elektra who’s got a hand on the door knob.

One, two and the door swings open and they step into the shadows.

For a second there's nothing. It's just dark and murky and her eyes strain to make out anything at all. But then Elektra's hand is on her arm and she's dragging her into a small alcove, pressing into the limited space and craning her neck to look out and down the passageway.

Karen chances a look too, the shadows slowly receding so she can make out vague shapes of boxes, some abandoned and unidentifiable junk scattered against the walls. To the left she can see a set of double doors hanging open to what she imagines is the the main delivery area at the very front of the building, a faint light from inside shimmering on the floor of the passage.

It occurs to her she has no idea where to go. This place is a maze and has a couple of floors underground, as well as three storeys up.

She remembers the last time, running with Frank. Running running running. His arm around her and his body hot against hers. How it seemed like they were never going to see the outside again, like they were stuck in an endless loop of staircases, destined to die on them.

But they didn't.
She has to believe they can do it again. She has to believe there's a chance he's fine and just stuck where he is, that they'll find him and get him out. Get all of them out.

She holds out her hands, shrugs and Elektra puts a finger to her lips, closes her eyes and stands still, the shadows curling around her like black mist.

There's a moment when she's not sure what's going on. And then she remembers Matt telling her about Elektra's training. Stick's training. How he can only do what he does because of Stick being the most relentless bastard he's ever met, how he's who he is because of months and months of what can only truly be described as torture to hone him, to teach him. And Elektra might not be blind, she might not have had the history Matt does but Stick was her mentor too. And if Matt is to be believed she was his favourite. His girl. His surrogate daughter. If he could teach Matt what he did, Karen's almost scared to imagine what he could have taught Elektra with his added devotion and temperance and time.

She opens her eyes and even in the dark they shine and glitter. She indicates the ceiling.

*Noise. Up. We go up.*

“Frank?” Karen mouths. “Matt?”

Elektra shrugs, shakes her head. She didn't really expect much more and she guess “up” is as good a place to start as any.

*Sai* blades out and Elektra brushes past her into the passage, footsteps virtually inaudible as she clings to the dark, graceful movements as she sidesteps the debris.

Karen tries to do the same but her steps feel loud and no matter how much she attempts to stay in the shadows, she feels exposed. Clumsy.

It's not hard to see why Matt can't get Elektra out of his system. She's mysterious and unconventional, a strange combination of vulnerability and lethal grace that's as beautiful as a comet and just as destructive. She's someone he can try to fix and even when he fails he still wins.
She's not even jealous. She wonders if she ever truly was.

She takes a breath, the air is heavy and thick with dust, that whiff of kerosene this place has always held. She can hear something dripping down the walls, the occasional reverberation of old leaky pipes and beneath that the gentle, almost inaudible hum of a generator.

A few more steps and she can see the end of the passage, a concrete staircase comes into view, a chipped and rusted metal handrail lying broken to one side. Outside the sky rumbles and suddenly a thin line of moonlight hits the wall next to her. Red graffiti.

WELCOME TO HELL

There's a fragment of a scroll that could have once been an “S” and then another word scratched out which she assumes was KITCHEN but she thinks it might be more appropriate the way it is.

This is hell. Hours ago it was heaven but it isn't anymore.

And there's nowhere else to go.

Another soft step and then the sound of a door slamming in the delivery area. Then voices. Loud. Male. And Elektra flattens herself against the wall, taking Karen with her in one smooth movement.

They're speaking Russian. They're laughing. She hears glass smash and more laughing. And then a static sound of a walkie-talkie with bad reception.

Some white noise, a couple of gruff sounding words and then quiet.

Next to her Elektra lowers herself into a squat, edges closer, indicates that she should do the same.

She does, hand tightening around the grip of her gun, her trigger finger itchy in a way she finds as comforting as it is disconcerting. She thinks briefly of Frank and the way his fingers twitch, the way he drums them when they miss that touch of cool steel. Gunmetal.

Elektra is edging around the doors, staying low and when she catches Karen’s eye she holds up three fingers, gestures wide as if to say they’re on the other side of the room and then indicates to stay low and in the shadows.

In front of her a moth the size of her palm flies into the pool of light shining in the doorway and she can hear the pitter patter of rats in the walls. For a ridiculous, wild moment she thinks of Ellison and what he'd make of this. How he'd claim no good can come out of a place where vermin lives. How she's starting to think the same. How her skin is crawling and the hair on the back of her neck is standing up and she has to fight the desire to start scratching. How she has to press her fingers into the grip of her .38 and grit her teeth, force herself to focus.

Frank is here, Matt is here. They need to find them both. They need to get out. Literally nothing else matters. The police can sort out the rest, whatever that may be.

And then Elektra is peering into the room and waving her past, mouthing at her to go. And she does. One quick low move and she's over the moth and on the other side of the doorway, pressing herself against the wall again.

Elektra takes another look and then slowly, tentatively, lifts her foot to move.

And that's when the room explodes in LED light. It's bright and disorienting, burning her retinas and making her squeeze her eyes shut. She's vaguely aware of Elektra melting back against the wall, of the terrible screeching sound of the rolling garage doors opening, their metal chains in desperate need of oil and objecting to being used. Then more light, headlights this time, brighter than before turning everything stark and white and dazzling her.

She can hear more voices, different ones, some laughing, others gruff and annoyed and then the sound of a truck, loud and heavy and vibrating, drowning out almost everything else.

She doesn't need Elektra to tell her it's that goddamn delivery - the one that had everyone nervous, the one Matt and Frank were going to sort out after the fact when it was quieter, safer. When every goddamn mobster in Hell’s Kitchen wasn't involved.

Not that it matters now. They're all here. Somehow. Somehow they're all back to the same fucking place they started.
The more things change…

Gun firm in her hand, aimed at the dusty concrete floor, at the damn moth which seems in no rush to move, to chase the light, to do any damn thing but sit there big and yellow and ugly, and she cranes her neck and chances a look inside. The doors are open and she can see the gravel, the chainlink fence, the post Luna was tied to a million years ago when she didn't think life could ever get better and she was doomed to die cold and hungry and sick and alone.

And then a truck, a black and battered 18-wheeler pulling into the service area, a man with a bushy beard and a gun at his hip giving some hugely ineffectual directions as he waves it further into the warehouse.

She can make out accents now. Some Russian, some Japanese, some American. More footsteps, doors opening as people head onto the floor.

She glances at Elektra who shakes her head.

Stay.

She does.

One of the overhead lights is flickering and even though it does nothing for the relevant visibility in the room it's distracting and disconcerting and she has an overwhelming desire to shield her eyes from it.

She finds she doesn't feel scared as before even though she knows she is. Her hands are shaking and her heart is beating so hard she sure it's loud enough for the whole of Hell's Kitchen to hear. But she feels oddly calm and focused. Like she's been waiting for this to happen and she's relieved it finally has. Because somehow this seems better than shuffling around in the dark waiting for the shadows to get her.

The truck driver kills the engine at the same time as the rolling doors shut, the sudden silence filling the room like a wave, choking out the world and pressing against the dirty windows and walls and then hurtling through the shadows where her and Elektra wait.
For a moment it feels like a living thing, like she can feel its touch and its beat, like it's looking for her. She shakes the thought away. Silence, like a storm, does not have an agenda, even if sometimes it really does.

The moth seems to feel it too, rousing its fat body from the dirty floor, sitting still long enough for her to notice the death head on its thorax and then flying hell for leather into the room, directly for the flickering light. It hits the cylinder with an audible thwack, followed by a fizzle and then lands back on the floor, wings outstretched and legs spasming.

No one seems to notice though.

No one but her.

And then four burly men with guns step forward to stand behind the truck, positioning themselves on either side of the doors.

She glances at Elektra who shakes her head again, sidles into the space where the door meets the wall, squints through the gap. Karen can see she can't move. Not yet at least. It's not that anyone's looking at them, not that anyone seems particularly interested in the passage, but any movement, any sound, could give them away.

She stays put. She doesn't want to - not with Frank somewhere here, somewhere lost, needing her. But she does.

And then the sound of keys and a lock clicking open, chains being unwound and discarded on the floor, and slowly - ever so slowly - the rear doors of the truck grinding open.

She never had much interest in this delivery, not in its content. She was more concerned with what it meant. For Matt. For Elektra. For Hell’s Kitchen. More concerned with the stranglehold it would give Smirnov or Vanessa and ultimately Fisk. More concerned in an idealistic sense than a practical one.

She realises now she was wrong. Short-sighted. Blinded.

It's not that she didn't know about some of the seedier ways Hell’s Kitchen and it's retinue of mob bosses and well now, oligarchs make their money. Pain is currency. Hurting people is big business. It
is now and it has been since the dawn of time. Since Cain picked up that rock and smote his brother - if you believe in that. Which she doesn’t.

Still though. Still...

Seeing it... Seeing the frightened faces of crying women and bewildered children as they're marched out of the truck; seeing their hands bound and their faces bruised; gagging at the smell of shit and sweat and unwashed bodies - it turns it into something else. Something no longer abstract and distant, no longer existing only on the flat two-dimensional pages of a newspaper.

She remembers thinking that words shouldn’t be able to heal, they shouldn’t have that kind of blanket power. It’s not right if they do. And now she realises that they sometimes words shouldn’t be able to encompass the many levels of hurt and rage and disgust either. That words are one thing but truth is quite another and the entire gamut of human emotions can’t exist as symbols on a computer screen.

It’s just not right.

It’ll never be right.

Across from her Elektra sucks in a breath, cranes her neck again to see inside the room. She wonders if she has any other knowledge of what’s happening that makes it cut deeper. She’s heard rumours of the Black Sky, of how it's something Elektra is or isn’t, depending on who’s telling the story. She doesn’t know. But she can see Elektra’s shoulders shaking and her fingers are twitching on her blades and she knows something is about to break, some dam about to burst. They can’t carry on. Not like this.

There’s a second when she still believes she has options, when she still believes her and Elektra can hatch a plan that will get everyone out alive and well, and put the rest of this sorry mess behind bars. That somehow, this could still go smoothly without bloodshed. She could call the cops, she could find Frank and Matt and that old man with the stick. They could get out. Watch from a safe distance as the blue and red sirens light up the streets and change this night of hell into something better. They could watch as this mess is sorted and say some tired words. Go home. She could tell Matt she’s sorry - sorry for everything, sorry she doesn’t love him, sorry she’s not the person he thought she was, sorry she’s been freezing him out. She could lie in her bed with Frank curled around her. She could hold him and keep him. She could tell him she loves him. She could trace the ragged lines of his face and press her body to his, have him hard and fast and then soft and slow. He could stay.

In her head these things happen and a plan forms. In her head, the people filing out of the truck step-by-step are saved and able to start over. In her head she finds Frank and he’s fine. In her head the
good guys win and the bad guys lose.

But that’s in her head.

And sometimes things work out better in her head.

And then all hell breaks loose.

She’s not sure how it happened or what exactly set it off. One second she’s watching the pale, drawn faces of human cargo being marched out into the warehouse; she’s watching that goddamn moth still twitching on the floor; she’s watching more and more men with guns fill the room; she’s watching Hell’s Kitchen show its true ugliness, a facade more hideous than she’s dared to imagine… And the next she’s watching Matt … no, Daredevil, leaping through the air, arms raised over his face, legs outstretched as he twists and turns like a giant red bird of prey in mid-flight, taking down four men with one maneuver and a fifth with a well-placed punch to the groin before he even hits the ground.

He’s spectacular.

She registers that before she truly registers him and what he’s doing. Graceful and fast, stronger than she ever imagined and she realises she’s never truly seen him like this before, never seen him fighting for what he believes in, what he truly truly wants. Idealistic or not, it makes him beautiful.

Breathtaking.

She’s almost sorry she didn’t notice before. Almost.

Another man downed with a swift kick to the ankle, the crack of breaking bone audible, and it feels like Matt rises to his feet in slow motion, casually elbows the truck driver in the face, sends him sprawling backwards into a rickety table, which splinters beneath him.

No sound. No movement for a beat, a fraction of a moment that she’ll never get back and doesn’t want to … and then confusion rippling through the room like a wave as everyone seems to unfreeze at once.
And then like a singular monster the crowd surges. Screams, shots, wailing, a brief glimpse of Matt grabbing at the discarded chain on the floor, spinning it like some kind of nightmare superhero, hitting men in the face, the limbs, noses bursting and jets of bright red blood shooting out onto the floor, the walls, disappearing into the leather of his suit. Out of the corner of her eye she sees a man raising his gun only to have his head bashed in by Stick wielding his cane like a fucking Bō, which she guesses is exactly what it is. And then Stick’s moving too, throwing himself into the scuffle, somehow missing Matt and the swinging chain and battling his way through bodies and blood with a grace and precision a man of his age should have long since lost.

And suddenly she’s unstuck too, her brain screaming at her to stand, to move, to do some fucking thing other than stay where she is waiting for the fucking cavalry to save her. She rises, looks over at Elektra.

She knows what’s going to happen already though, knows that this is the only way it could - the way it was meant to.

“Go!” Elektra yells. “Call the police. Find Frank and get the fuck out of here!”

“Matt…”

But Elektra’s gone. She hurtles into the room like a whirlwind, Sai blades out and shining in the harsh light as she carves through the crowd like they’re inconsequential; blood spattering on her face, on the floor, over her hands. Briefly Karen wonders if Elektra is being careful not to kill anyone, if she’s adhering to Matt’s code, or if she’s beyond that now. If - like she said - saving him is more important than loving him.

*Might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb.*

And then she’s running too. She doesn’t remember making the decision to do it - to move. She doesn’t remember telling her legs to work but she is and they are. She’s digging in her pocket for her phone, punching 911 into the keypad, half snarling and screaming as she hears a cheery automated voice promising that her call is important, telling her to stay on the line.

She takes the stairs two at a time - the noises from below already fading into the background and it hits her that they’ve tried to soundproof this place as much as possible. For some reason that chills her almost as much as anything else that’s gone on here.
The automated voice is still apologising for the inconvenience, telling her to get to a safe place if she is able and it takes every last ounce of her willpower not to hurl her phone at the wall. Not to smash it.

She disconnects the call. And then she does what she always does when she’s in a situation she can’t get out of.

She calls Foggy.

He’s half asleep and his voice is tight and worried when he answers. But he doesn’t ask a lot of questions, doesn’t even try and persuade her when she tells him where she is and what she’s doing.

She doesn’t remember much of the conversation. She tells him to call Mahoney, to get every last police officer and medic in this city down the warehouse. She shouts something about the mob and human trafficking and then tells him Matt and Frank and Elektra are in trouble and that they’re all dead if no one gets here soon. She doesn’t hear what he says as she shoves her phone back into her jeans. She trusts him. He’ll come through. He always does. He always fucking does.

And then she’s running again. She has no idea where she’s going. She has no idea where to even start to look for Frank. Elektra said "up" and, while that’s literally the only thing she has to go on, Karen fully accepts she could have been wrong; that despite everything maybe her senses are not as finely tuned as Matt’s, that maybe actual blindness is as much a blessing as it is a curse. But she doesn’t have the time or the willpower to think on that now. She can’t worry about anything other than finding Frank and getting the hell out of dodge before the police arrive. Before someone catches her.

It’s all she has. It’ll have to be enough.

The first floor is empty - there’s not even actual rooms, but more of an open storage area with nothing in it other than some discarded boxes and what looks like bats hanging from the ceiling. But as she nears the stairs to the second floor she can hear movement, footsteps against concrete and again she flattens herself against the wall, holds her breath as dozens of figures clad head to toe in black and wielding wickedly sharp blades race down the steps. And all she can hope is that Matt and Elektra can hear them, that they know what’s coming and are somehow on top of the group of goons already there.

She can’t worry about that now either. There’s nothing more she can do to help them, nothing she can do that won’t make this worse.
So she goes up.

The second floor looks like it was once used for offices, there's pieces of prefabricated walls and doors hanging off their hinges, smashed glass and other debris on the floor, plastic sheets hanging from the ceiling, obscuring her view.

She waits, listens. The sounds from downstairs are virtually non-existent now, even the red sky she can see through a small broken window is quiet - roiling and ugly but silent and cold. Waiting.

_Oh god. Oh god. Skies don't wait._

Except when they do.

Somewhere to her right she hears a sound, the scrape of a boot, a bottle rolling. It sends a shiver down her spine and she moves into the shadows, crouches down next to torn cardboard box. She can still hear rats in the walls. She can still hear her heart hammering in her throat and her breathing sounds louder than thunder.

A terrible, wonderful thought hits her. Maybe Frank isn’t even here. Maybe he's back at their apartment, wondering where the fuck she got herself to, wondering why she isn't keeping the bed warm like he said. Maybe all she needs to do is find a way out and leave.

And that's a lot of maybes. And she knows none of them stand a chance of being reality.

So she waits, gun in her hands, strains to hear footsteps. Strains to hear the sound of fabric brushing against itself, strains to hear another set of lungs drawing in air.

And she does. She hears all of these things.

And she knows it's not Frank. None of it is.

She inches around the box, further into the gloom. One of the plastic sheets billows inwards and she
dodges behind it, pushes herself against the wall.

Whoever it is sharing this space with her is still on her right, she can sense them more than hear them and she knows if she can make her way around the room, there's a chance she could get behind them. Either leave them there and head up to the third floor or…

*Or what?* It's Matt's voice again. *Or what Karen? Kill them? Shoot them in cold blood? You have that in you?*

And then Frank's voice. *You do. You do my girl. You do what needs to be done.*

She stands, edges her way forward, ducking down when she gets to the window so she doesn't linger in the moonlight.

Still, she can't help but look outside, the smoky, yellow city, the bruised sky, that hit of cold air and the awful smell of decay it brings with it.

She's still not sure it's better than being in here. Still not sure it's better than whatever is in the shadows.

She steps over some glass, an overturned table. She can see black blots on it, smell blood over the decay.

It's Frank's blood. Something deep in her bones tells her it is.

There's no way to know. Not truly. But she knows.

She *knows*.

The tinkle of another glass bottle rolling across the floor. It's deliberate. Controlled. It's being done to scare her. There's no way anyone could be that clumsy. Not at a time like this.

She adjusts her grip on her gun. It's weight feels comforting and solid. She remembers Frank telling
her it was a good choice but even then she didn't need his approval. She knew it already.

She takes another step over a metal pipe and a rat runs over her foot. She doesn’t scream. She doesn’t yelp. But that doesn't mean her skin doesn't crawl, that a wave of revulsion doesn't rise in her belly and threaten to burst all over the floor.

She holds it in. Takes a breath, listens to another bottle rolling across glass, watches incredulously as it comes into view and knocks gently against the toe of her boot.

The room turns stark and white with lightning, the sound of thunder filling the world and the bats nesting in the rafters breaking free, screeching as they torpedo through the air, confused and disoriented.

And that's when she sees Frank. He's slumped forward in a chair, blood dripping from his mouth into a viscous puddle on the floor.

He's not moving.

*Oh god, he's not moving.*

She's been here before. She's back on her fire escape and he's dying and her world is falling apart and there's no Claire to put it back together. He’s saying goodbye. He's leaving her.

She's at his side and she's whispering his name, touching his cheek, his neck and then miraculously he's lifting his head, looking at her like she's some kind of guardian angel.

“*You're here,*” he says and she could cry at the steadiness in his voice.

“Yes,” she says. “I'm here and I'm going to save you.”

His voice is hoarse and low but there’s a hint of something in it. Something close to levity. “Thought we agreed that's supposed to be my job.”
Her mouth twists into a wan smile. “Yeah, okay. You can owe me a latte.”

He smirks and he's so bruised and battered and there's blood on the side of his face but he's still beautiful. In every way. Even his ugliness.

Her fingers feel big and clumsy as she unties the knots on his wrists, tries to avoid looking at the rope burn, the blood on his hands, his nails.

“You need to get out of here,” he says quietly. “We’re not alone.”

“I'm not going without you.”

When she frees his arms, he reaches down for the ties at his legs and suddenly there’s another flash of lightning, more screeching bats and the chair is hurtling to its side with Frank still attached to it, a cloud of dust rising from the floor.

She’s not even surprised when she feels hands close on her arms, not remotely shocked as she feels herself being hauled backwards, legs dragging along the floor, jeans snagging on glass and rusted nails.

And then she’s kicking and twisting, the fear inside her erupting into panic as she fights against her captor, shrieking along with the bats overhead, swearing and punching, feeling something sharp slice her calf, something else slam against her shoulder so hard that she loses her grip on her gun, watches it fall out of her hand as if it’s happening to someone else. She tries to roll, manages to get an arm out of his grasp and twists to kick at his legs, feels something connect and a loud oomph as he loses his footing.

And suddenly she's free, and she lurches across the floor, hands coming down on glass shards and pain lancing up her arm as she grapples for her gun, fingertips brushing the grip.

Outside the thunder rolls again and inside the bats scream and somewhere in the chaos she feels her ankle being seized and, even though the gun is all but in her hands, she loses her momentum and it slips out of her reach.

She can see the chair though. She can see it lying on its side, Frank's blood coating it. She can see it's empty.
And then she's being flipped over onto her back, the impact knocking the air from her lungs, a sudden flash of lightning dazzling her as she lies there in the glass and the filth trying to catch her breath.

And then the click of a hammer, a hand extending out of the darkness, big fingers grasping the intricately patterned grip of a revolver, all gold inlays and Florentine swirls.

Somewhere in the fog she registers that it’s a custom Smith & Wesson Model 500, shining and fucking enormous and who the fucking fuck needs a fucking gun like that? In what universe is that kind of firepower necessary? In what universe is that even practical?

“Stay still Miss Page.”

The accent is Russian, the voice smooth like some kind of syrupy treacle.

She sees his flashing green eyes before he even steps into view, the blond perfectly styled hair.

Alexei.

Alexei finally taking on his actual role. Not benefactor, not even white collar criminal. Certainly nothing close to mob boss. Just Alexei, a pretty faced enforcer, a goon not much different from those Elektra and Matt are dealing with downstairs. And not even a particularly good one at that.

It never really was him. It couldn't ever truly have been and she hates herself for not seeing it sooner.

Karen Page. None so blind.

“Okay, now get up,” he shakes the gun at her almost dismissively. “Up up. Quickly now.”

He's not looking at her, instead glancing at the shadows, eyes flickering to the darkest hidden spots, lines of worry on his brow. He's also moving, trying to get his back to a wall and keep his gun trained on her at the same time.
“He’ll kill you,” she says.

He looks at her like he's forgotten she's there.

“Get up.”

“You shoot me and you've got nothing.”

He rolls his eyes. “Or we could see how Mr Castle feels about you without a leg. I've seen one of these take a man’s arm clean off. Spectacular really. It doesn't break bone, it shatters it. Looks like someone took a hammer to you, worked you over for hours.”

He adjust his grip so he's aiming at her kneecap.


She does, empty lungs screaming and bruised, bloodied hands and legs spasming as she pushes herself to her feet.

She looks longingly at her .38 lying there in the glass but she knows it's futile. He wants her alive for now but he will kill her if he has to. And if she dies, so does Frank.

It's not hubris, it's not vanity. It just is.

No you and me. Only us.

She can feel him. Sense him somewhere in this space, waiting like a nightmare ready to pounce. She knows on some level she might not get out of here alive, but it gives her a kind of grim satisfaction that Alexei won't either.

Alexei knows it too. She can see by the way his eyes are darting around the room, the sheen of sweat
covering his skin, the twitch of his hands.

He doesn't know what he's doing. He's no true criminal, just icing on a cake, a little eye candy to soften people up. To flirt with the rich, lonely women and con them out of their money.

He’s not cut out for this. And that makes him dangerous. Unpredictable.

She's hoping it makes him stupid too.

He reaches out, grabs her arm and pulls her against his chest. He smells a little of cedarwood and spices. He smells more of sweat and fear.

“I've got her Castle. Come out and she might get to keep her brains in her head.”

His voice drops to a whisper as he presses the barrel of the gun to her temple.

“What is it with you?” he asks. “Like a bitch in heat for vigilantes. Got them sniffing around you, humping your legs…”

It's true. She is. Maybe the phrasing she'd use is less crude but the substance is there. She knows it. Ellison has seen it and so have Claire and Elektra. It's not something she's proud of but she's not going to apologise. It just is. She doesn't know the whys and hows. They don't matter anyway.

“Come on Castle, I know you're here. Come back and we can finish up what we started.”

He wrenches her closer, arm tightening around her neck and she has to claw at him to stop him choking her.

The bats seem quieter now, no more swarming and screeching, just the occasional straggler flying into the beams. She can still hear rats in the walls though and, if she strains, the distant sound of gunfire. And outside the sky is still ugly and dark, the smell of something like sulphur in the air.

“I got your bitch here Castle. Let’s see if you can save this one.”
He steps on glass, seems to frighten himself as it cracks, pulls them deeper into the darkness as he presses the barrel harder into her skull.

It makes her eyes water and she has to grit her teeth not to cry out.

To the left she hears the sound of something scuttling along the floor, the same to the right. And Alexei’s shaking as he moves, the gun twitching against her skin.

“Watch that thing you asshole.”

He's not paying attention though, jumping at shadows and pulling them further into the room.

And then thunder.

And then lightning.

And then Frank.

He seems to flash into existence with the light. Materialise from the static alone.

Blood dripping down the side of his face and off his chin, running down his hands. He's favouring his left leg too but only if you know where to look - how to look - which she does.

But he's there and despite everything he's okay. And even her gun in his hand pointed directly at them can't stop the wave of relief that floods through her bones, can't stop her letting out a breath, nor the tears springing into her eyes.

He doesn't tell Alexei to let her go. He doesn't make any pleas, offer up any deals. She knows he'd think it was action-hero bullshit anyway. That there's only one way this is going to end and it's not going to be achieved through talking.
Instead he looks at her and even in the dark she can see his love shining in his eyes.

“You shouldn't have come,” he says, but his voice is gentle and he can't hide the awe, the gratitude, in it.

“Shut the fuck up!” Alexei’s arm tightens around her throat and her vision swims.

He's inconsequential though. A buzzing fly to be swatted. An annoyance. His big fucking firearm doesn't change that.

“You remember what I told you the first day we met?” Frank’s voice is still soft.

She does. She remembers everything. Everything he's ever said. Everything he's ever done. Every time he's ever touched her. All the different ways he's shown her he loves her even before he really did.

“You're safe,” he says. “I want you to know that.”

She does. She does know it. She's known it since she saw him. Since she's known him.

The hammer of her gun clicks and he hasn't taken his eyes off hers. She knows what it means. She knows what he's asking.

You stay. Please.

“You shoot me, you shoot her.” Alexei, panicked, almost screaming now and for the first time Frank looks at him.

“You sure about that?”

You got any idea what a scout sniper is?
Alexei’s head explodes like an overripe melon, spraying her with blood and brains, fragments of bone. It hits her like a storm, hot and wet, runs into her hair, down her top, leaking into her clothes, her mouth. That’s inconsequential too. It all is except Frank reaching for her, stopping Alexei’s dead weight from dragging her down, pulling her out of his grip as his corpse sinks to the floor, and drawing her near.

Not letting her fall.

He looks down, lowers his weapon.

“Fucking asshole with your fucking asshole gun.”

And then his arms are around her and she’s burying her bloodied face in his shoulder, holding him tight until she swears she can almost feel his bones creaking underneath his skin. She’s whispering his name over and over and forcing herself to accept that he is there, that he’s alive. That somehow she found him and he found her and she’s more than halfway to fixing what she broke. That the cops will be here soon and the people downstairs can be saved and her and Frank can get out and get away. That maybe they can go home, wash each other off in the shower, finish what they started there almost two weeks ago. Take him into her bed and finish what they started there only hours ago.

It’s so close she can taste its flavour over the blood in her mouth. Feel it through the fear and the rage and grief.

He can too. He’s wiping her face with his hands, her hair with the sleeves of his top, smearing the blood off her skin, finding her underneath.

“You shouldn’t have come,” he says again.

“I had to.”

He frames her face with his hands.

“I know.”
She touches the blood on his cheek, runs her thumb over his skin.

“You alright?”

He glances at the overturned chair and then turns his face, kisses her palm.

“I am now.”

She doesn't need to be told, she’s seen enough. There was a reason those men in black were upstairs and not waiting for the truck with the others. There's a reason Frank’s limping and his face is bruised. There's a reason his hands are dirty and she can see blood welling up under his fingernails.

And she wants to stay here with him like this, wants to be selfish, wants to have this moment in the eye of the storm where they can just be. But they can’t.


He nods grimly, hands her her gun, bends down and takes Alexei’s as well, lip curling in distaste. He has a knife too, some long shiny blade that Frank attaches to his belt. And then before she's ready, before she's made peace with any of this, they’re running again, her hand tight in his, his limp barely noticeable as they retrace her steps back down to the ground floor.

She’s been here before, been exactly here. The two of them together running through this warehouse, hell in their eyes, hell in their heads. It’s the same, it’s different. It’s everything that it was and wasn’t the first time and he’s by her side. He’s making her strong and she knows she’s doing the same for him. No more weakness. No more bringing him to his knees. She knows now that that’s just a different type of strength anyway.

She can see the double doors, scattered bodies littering the passage, forcing them to pick their way through the tangled limbs of semi-conscious men.

The fighting isn't over though, she can hear the whoosh of Stick’s cane, the sound of Matt’s fists slamming into bodies, Elektra’s blades whistling through the air.
“We need to get out,” she says. “We need to get everyone out of here now.”

*We need to save them, we need to give them a chance, we need to give ourselves a chance, we need to go home. We’re so close. We’re almost there. We’re almost there.*

*If you want God to laugh…*

The explosion throws them both backwards, ripping Frank's hand out of hers, knocking the wind out of her for the second time tonight, sending her sprawling into the darkness. She lands hard against the wall, hitting her head on the concrete.

For a moment she's dazed - bright flashes of colour in front of her eyes and her ears ringing. She sees the bodies on the floor next to her twitching, trying to move; an orange yellow plume of flame unfolding in front of her, flowing up the walls to the ceiling; Elektra on the other side of it screaming at someone but everything is murky and muffled and she can't see who. Somewhere she thinks it might be her but that seems far-fetched. Silly even.

She wonders if she's in a dream - the ebb and flow of non-logic, the bright patterns, and how nothing seems to make sense or need to. She'll wake up soon she thinks. She'll wake up and Frank will be next to her with Pickle somewhere between them.

He'll make coffee, they'll read the news, moan about the sorry state of affairs in Hell’s Kitchen and the world at large.

They'll make love and then make love again. He'll stutter inside her and find a way to loosen the words she wants to say out of her throat.

*I love you. I love you so much.*

It's so very dreamy, so hazy, so warm here next to the fire.

And then suddenly he's in front of her and she wonders why there's blood dripping off his chin, if he cut himself shaving and why he hasn't cleaned it off, bandaged himself up.
He's going to get blood on her again. On her wall, her floor, her clothes.

He's *always* ruining her clothes.

He's shouting too. She can't hear what he's saying over the drumming in her ears but it disconcerts her that he is. He *doesn't* shout at her - his voice always drops to a low hum when she's near.

*He doesn't shout.*

But he is.

She wonders why he's angry, racks her brain for reasons. She wonders why his hands are so rough on her and why he's hauling her to her feet, why he let the flames get out of control and why Irene hasn't hit the fire alarm yet.


Too many questions. No answers.

She’s standing now and he's wrapping a hand around the back of her neck, shaking her and yelling something. Shaking her again. She doesn’t know why he’s doing that either. He’s never manhandled her before.

She never realised his eyes could be so dark.

She likes them.

She likes his jaw too. She likes that his hair has grown out a little.

She puts out her hand to touch it.
Something roars a few feet away and another wave of heat hits her face.

She turns. There's another pillar of flame next to her rolling upwards, its colours changing from deep oranges and umbers to sapphire blues and white light.

It's beautiful.

She looks back at him.

He’s beautiful too.

And then he's pulling her to the stairs, back the way they came and she wants to tell him no, no they can't go back because Alexei is there and Alexei wants to kill them. But if she's saying anything he's not listening to her and she glances back over her shoulder to see Matt and Elektra herding the people from the truck towards the rolling doors, Matt holding a small child, a thin woman resting against him.

He looked spectacular, she remembers. He really did.

She could have loved him once. Once when she had stars in her eyes.

And then Frank is dragging her upwards and she's gulping mouthfuls of rancid air and her vision is clearing and her ears aren’t pounding so loudly anymore. And she’s suddenly acutely aware of a spasming pain in her shoulder, a strange and unpleasant throbbing in her legs.

“Come on, we need to get to the roof!”

She knows he’s shouting, can see it by the way his mouth is moving and his face is contorting but somehow she’s still straining to hear him.

It doesn’t matter. She gets it. There’s nothing to breathe but smoke. They get out or they die.

And she really doesn’t want to die.
So they run. And the stairs seem endless and hard to navigate even though she knows they’re not, even though she’s realised she’s slow and clumsy and the lack of air and blows to the head have made her stupid. But he doesn’t let her falter, doesn’t let her slow to catch her breath, if there even was breath to catch.

Another explosion from below and they careen into the wall as some rubble shakes loose from the ceiling, covering them both in a fine dust, matting with the blood in her hair. She hits her shoulder again and it feels like she’s been stabbed with a dull knife.

They don't stop.

They can't.

He doesn’t let them.

And then suddenly he's pushing open a door and forcing her out into the night and it feels like she's stepping into a new world, one with light and air and freedom so near she can taste it.

She coughs, wipes at her eyes. Her hand comes away covered in blood and soot. Next to her Frank is doubled over, hands on his knees. He’s coughing too, spitting blood onto the ground. She catches sight of his fingernails again, the dark bruises underneath them, the redness welling at their corners.

She bites back a wave of nausea. She’s so sick and tired of people hurting him.

She’s so sick and tired of him hurting himself.

She’s about to go to him, put her arms around him and help him to stand, let him lean on her for a while, when she hears the sound of gunfire. It’s loud and near enough to block out the rolling thunder, the roar of the flames inside.

It’s two men - two men that aren’t much of anything other than low-level mobsters. They’re standing right on the edge of the roof, shooting into the courtyard below, and she realises with horror that they're aiming at the people running from the building, taking them out; stopping any strong or quick enough to try and escape.
But then Frank is pushing past her, rushing them like a force of nature.

He's spectacular too. He might not have Matt's gymnast grace, but he has a deadly elegance, a bloodied and awful precision.

He moves like a wolf and he kills like one too.

He reaches around the first man, grabs his gun, and in one slick movement twists his shoulders and sends him flying over the edge. He doesn’t even get a chance to scream.

It goes much the same for the second shooter: a moment of quiet surprise in his eyes as Frank pulls his rifle out of his hands and knocks his legs out from under him. And then a violent shove and he’s gone too.

She follows him, puts a hand on his arm and looks down. It’s chaos below them. Smoke and fire and people screaming. Elektra, Matt and Stick hopelessly trying to guide everyone away from the flames. An unholy alliance of Yakuza and Russian mafia and just plain standard mobster following, seemingly unconcerned with the death trap behind them and wanting to take as many of their prisoners down with them as they can. There are women and children on their knees, trying to cover their heads, their thin wails barely audible over the sound of the wind.

She looks at Frank and he nods, raises the rifle as she raises her .38.

She leaves the trickier shots to him, opting rather to aim at the men who aren't near anyone.

She's not sure how many she hits. She knows it's some, knows she isn't deadly like Frank is - is almost grateful for that as she sees men falling, grabbing at their legs and arms; some just running away.

It's okay though. Killing isn’t the point.

Frank however has no such qualms. He takes them down. He takes them out and they don't get to get up again. They don’t get to run.
She hears Matt shouting at them, can see him trying to wave them off but she also knows Elektra was right. He’s in over his head - they all are.

The last man falls, his weapon clattering onto the tarmac, his body slumped against Luna’s post and for a few blissful seconds everything is quiet. Truly quiet. Not the way sound was slow and muffled in her head earlier, but simple untempered silence. Stillness.

_The universe taking a breath…_

She shuts the thought out.

_No._

It's done. It's over. They can go home. The rest is up to the police.

And then as if by some hive consciousness people slowly start raising their heads, looking around, covering their mouths and coughing. Some start calling - she can’t make out what they are saying but she assumes it’s for friends and children. Loved ones. She sees Elektra pushing herself to her feet, looking around desperately for a second, and then throwing herself at Stick who’s crouched down in the dirt. Briefly she glances at Matt who is already moving among the wounded, helping them stand, find their families. There's smoke pouring through the shattered windows of the warehouse and she can hear the roar of fire and below that the first sound of sirens in the distance.

Frank’s hand finds hers and he pulls her close, seemingly to let her lean against him but in reality it's more like he's holding on to her just to stay standing.

_Both hands._

_Never let go._

She has everything.
On the ground Elektra has an arm around Stick and she raises her hand, nods at them, ponytail bouncing again, and then she turns, reaches out to help a child.

There’s a flash of lightning, thunder ringing in the distance.

“I love you,” Frank says softly, burying his head in her neck. “I love you so fucking much. I don’t ever wanna come that close to losing you again.”

She doesn’t know what to say to that. Realises with a start how this is another facet of loving him she never considered. The responsibility of it. The responsibility of him loving her back.

(We’re gonna need to talk though. More than we did today)

They can. They can go and do it right now. They can go down. They can go down and go home. Never leave the fucking apartment again. Talk about it all night and all day. She doesn’t want to think about how close she came to losing him, what happened in that goddamn chair before she arrived. What could have happened. But she will. For him she will. For this reprieve. She owes him. She owes herself too.

The storm didn't get them this time.

They made it.

His hands in her hair, his body trembling on hers and they both stink of blood and sweat and smoke. They’re both filthy. It doesn’t matter. Nothing else matters.

I love you too.

Pain blooms in her hip as something sharp and jagged bites into her skin, slices through muscle, and then rips out of her in much the same way. There’s a second she thinks she’s imagining it, that it’s psychosomatic or just the inevitable crash after the adrenalin high she’s been running on since Matt and Elektra turned up at her apartment and told her that her life was falling apart. It doesn’t feel real, doesn’t feel real at all until it buckles her knees and shoots through her like hot nails drilling into her flesh. And then a hot, sticky wave of blood soaking through her clothes, running down her side.
She gasps as she drops her hands from Frank’s shoulders, reaches down almost curiously to touch the place where her life is pumping out of her.

She registers that this should feel worse than it does, that somehow the adrenalin and endorphins are shielding her.

She holds out her hand and it’s slick with blood, shining black like tar underneath the hell moon.

“Frank…?”

He lifts his head from where it’s buried in her neck, looks almost confused as she starts to slide out of his grip to the ground.

His eyes are very black. She never realised how much.

His jaw is very strong.

She likes it. She likes his hair too.

*They'll go home now. Go home and find each other again.*

*If you want God to laugh…*
And here we are again.

This chapter was rough - I'm not even going to pretend it wasn't. You'll see why. Oh god, I don't really even know what to say about it and I am not sure there is something to say.

Since it was tough on me, I suspect if you are reading this and at all invested it will be tough on you too. I apologise for that. HOWEVER, once again, please remember that we are only halfway through this story (maybe 2/3), I have not changed the tags (and I would have if necessary), and um, trust me I guess. I don't write mean things for the sake of being mean. I write mean things to serve a larger story. Also the next chapter is about 90% complete and by that I mean the whole thing is written but it needs quite a severe edit because it's a little clunky.

Thank you all so much for commenting. Again I feel bad for not replying and I have no excuses for that other than to say that when I write this story it consumes me and I hope that me being able to give you regular updates on it is a big enough sign of my gratitude to all of you for your support.

Truly I appreciate it and I love you all.

So without further waffling from me, please um... enjoy.

Title is from Ryan Adams' Dirty Rain

He doesn't let her fall.

Later, when it feels like her world has been turned upside down and torn apart, that's something she clings to.

Instead he kind of crumbles with her, following her down to his knees, cushioning her from the unforgiving concrete, blocking out the equally unforgiving sky.

There's a moment when there's no pain and she can see everything in his eyes: grief, shock, love and, beneath that, shame and resignation; a kind of grim knowledge of finding an old feeling he’d hoped he’d forgotten.
“Frank?” she says again.

“You're okay,” he tells her laying a hand against her cheek. “You're okay.”

“You're not supposed to lie to me.”

“I'm not.” And he sounds so sincere she almost believes him.

She thinks he almost believes himself.

Almost.

And then he's tearing the sleeve off her sweater and pressing the material into her wound. Pain shoots up her side - hot and rigid and unforgiving - and she shudders into it. Into him. Hands gripping at him like little claws.

It hurts. She thinks it's the first time he's physically caused her pain, and it burns like a million fucking rusty needles are being pushed into her skin. She cries out, feels tears falling down her cheeks, sees the way he's looking at her and she can't quite decide whether it's hopefulness or helplessness.

She loves him so much. He loves her too.

Sometimes love isn't enough.

But sometimes it is.

Dimly, she's aware she's forgotten something important - that there's something terrifying happening that's bigger and more urgent than her wound and her pain, than the worry in his eyes.

And when she sees a shadow move in behind him and a silver chain arcing through the smoky air, it comes flooding back.
“Frank,” she whispers and she’s surprised by how steady her voice sounds. “Frank!”

Later she’ll think he already knew, was already aware of what was happening behind him and that he was ignoring it right up until the last minute just to be with her. Just to spend whatever snatched seconds he could with her. Her last moments or his. She’s not sure. She’ll never be sure. It doesn’t matter.

Later.

He turns smoothly, almost casually, hand outstretched and catches the chain of the kyoketsu-shoge firmly in his fist. She sees the way it shines against the dirt on his skin, how it blinks almost red under the hell sky and the hell moon, how his blood drips onto it, thick and black.

And then he's leaving her and on his feet, using both hands to tug hard and pull Nobu into her line of sight.

As always he's dressed completely in black - he even has a mask but there's no doubt it's him. He moves the same. He hurts the same. He’s not alone either. Men, standing behind him in a semi-circle. She can't make them out as clearly, can't see if they're yakuza, mafia or just plain run-of-the-mill bad guys looking for a quick buck.

It doesn't truly matter. There's one of Frank, there's at least ten of them. And he's weak and wounded, still coughing from the smoke, hands still shaking from whatever the fuck happened in that goddamn chair.

He's also angry.

She wonders if that might make all the difference. If maybe after losing Maria, after losing Lisa, after losing Frank Junior, that it’s her - Karen Page, and the love he feels for her - that might change all of this.

She doesn’t know if it will. Doesn’t know if it’s vanity to even imagine it.

But then he's moving and she can hear him shouting too. No words, just sound. Just rage. It's
horrible and animalistic, barbaric and completely inhuman. It feels like it fills the night, louder than the thunder, bouncing off the clouds and the sky until the whole world shakes with it.

There’s no Frank Castle. Not anymore.

Frank Castle is dead, just like he told her the night he killed Schoonover. He’s dead so The Punisher can live.

And he does.

He does live.

He cuts his way out of Frank’s body, mauls him from the inside and emerges like a nightmare in blood and gunsmoke and death.

He's a monster. Even through the haze and the new bright pain in her side, she can see that. He’s not like a force of nature anymore, not something fine tuned with a destructive deadly elegance. He’s something else entirely. Something man made and savage, a self-inflicted apocalypse carving its way through whatever life is left on Earth.

He's hideous. He’s the most hideous thing she’s ever seen. He’s something right out of her nightmares.

Even so, this part of him loves her too. Maybe it loves her even more.

And she loves it. There’s no point in denying it.

He doesn't use Alexei’s gun - it might be that it's just too big and impractical but she thinks the truth is it's just too clean. It's too impersonal. It doesn't let him feel it deep in his bones. In his blood.

It doesn't punish.

Instead he uses the blade he picked up earlier - oversized and shining - and he stabs and he beats and
he screams as he carves flesh off their bones and their blood spurts over his skin, into his mouth, soaking his clothes and clotting in his hair. He washes over them like a wave. He drowns in them as much as they do in him.

It’s nothing short of a massacre, and she realises that despite what she knows about him in her heart, about the savagery that exists within him, that ultimately she’s been naive. No, she’s not completely innocent; she’s seen what Frank can do, seen a hint of it - a preview, a teaser - when she hid with a frightened waitress under a fucking kitchen sink in a dive of a coffee shop.

But that wasn’t like this. It wasn’t even close.

It doesn't matter though because nothing on Earth could have prepared her.

And maybe that’s a good thing.

He's vicious in a way she's chosen to ignore, has managed to push to the back of her mind while he's been with her - while he's shown her his sweetness, his vulnerability. But seeing him now she can't deny it anymore. There's an evil in him, a rotting badness that needs this, a part that's never more at peace when he's at war.

And it doesn't make the slightest bit of difference.

Not even for a second.

He’s hers. He always will be until the day she decides she’s done. Truly done. Not just some empty words she said when she was cold and scared and he was murdering a man in front of her in the woods one night. And she’s not there yet. She’s nowhere near that. She doesn’t know if she ever could be.

He's hers. All of him. The best parts and the worst. And she doesn't know that there's that much difference between them anymore.

The pain in her side is starting to ebb. She's not sure if that's good or bad but she takes the moment of clarity to push herself up on one hand, roll to the side and spit a mouthful of blood onto the concrete. It splashes thick and black on the ground and she hopes that doesn't mean there's something wrong inside her, that something important hasn’t been pierced or broken. But she can’t worry about that
now. She needs to move. She needs to get out of the way. For his sake and for hers.

So she does. Pushing herself across the ground, each movement agony as her body screams at her to stop, to just lie here and accept whatever is coming. To let her blood drain out of her and say her final goodbyes here, in the filth and the fire, the smoke, while the man she loves fights for both of their lives.

She looks up into the dark sky.

*Fuck you universe. Fuck you.*

She's not done. She's not, and neither is he.

She won't die on him. She *refuses*.

So she moves.

She *moves*.

Above her, he's still killing, slicing through the crowd, using them as human shields against Nobu, letting the *kyoketsu-shoge* hit them, cut them, and then stabbing them with his own weapon, throwing those close enough to the edge off the roof. Others he leaves dying in pools of their own blood, stamping on their heads as he goes, gore coating his boots.

They weren't prepared either. She doesn't know why, how they couldn't have known what he could do, how brutal he could be.

It's the ugliest thing she's ever seen. And yet there's a morbid beauty to it too. A kind of intriguing fascination in watching blood flow rich and red from the shadows, in watching his pain and rage made real against the yellowed backdrop of the city, that bruise that pretends to be the sky.

She's not sure how long it takes, how long he fights and kills, how loud he shouts, but by the time it's down to him and Nobu she's managed to get her back to the wall, managed to get her gun out and cocked, managed to somehow take aim through the fog and the shadows.
And God, oh God the shadows are so deep.

The pain is back. Hard and fast and excruciating, and that doesn't bother her very much. Somehow it feels like it's telling her she's alive rather than she's dying. But she's cold and her vision is swimming and she doesn't need to be Claire fucking Temple to know there's a good chance she could go into shock. She knows she doesn't have much longer. She might be able to force the agony away but her body is still failing her, her blood still drenching her clothes.

But she can save him. She can.

She will.

Frank and Nobu are circling each other slowly, blood black on the ground, blades white against the night. Frank is limping heavily, worse than before, but Nobu is wounded too, his left arm pulled in tight against his body, his mask off and a nasty gash across his cheek.

Neither of them seem to notice these little inconveniences. Neither of them seem to care.

It's a fight to the death, no more second chances now. No more coming back from the dead, not for either of them. It was always going to happen this way. It was inevitable from the moment Frank turned up at her apartment, bloodied and bruised and desperate to say goodbye.

And then Nobu swings, and the blade makes a startling silver gash against the sky. She can hear it singing loudly over the sound of thunder, see it forming an almost perfect circle as Frank ducks to the left.

He misses the brunt of the blow but doesn’t quite escape it and the steel drags along his side, slicing his skin in almost the exact same place where he's still bandaged from his previous wound.

He cries out and for a second the world stops. There's no roar of fire, no sirens. There's no voices or smoke, there's nothing but her watching Frank, seeing how he wavers and how his legs tremble, seeing his face and an uncertainty on it she doesn't think she's ever seen before.

And then he falls to one knee, grabs at the cut with both hands, dark blood running through his
fingers.

She wants to scream but her voice is gone and the fog at the edges of her vision roils like the night sky.

But no. No. She is not done.

Not now. Not ever.

Her hands are sticky. Sticky and slippery with her own blood, but somehow she finds the hammer of her gun, pulls it back. It takes more effort than it should, it takes longer too and she can see Nobu advancing, slow and sure, keeping the chain short but swinging it furiously.

He's going to shred Frank, she can almost see it. He's going to use that fucking thing to tear him apart, finish what he started weeks ago. And this time there's no chance of finding her, of asking her to save him even as he says goodbye. There's no Shining Star, no Claire to stitch him up.

There's nothing. Nothing but this short time they've been given. The eye of the storm.

No.

No.

For a second she forgets what she's doing and why. She can't think of why they're even here. What possessed them to come to this place in the middle of the night, why they're fighting.

But she knows what has to happen. She knows what she has to do before she loses everything.

The first bullet hits Nobu in the shoulder, knocking him backwards, the second goes high because she's too weak to control the recoil. The third hits him in the leg. In the fucking kneecap. She had no idea she could make a shot like that. She's pretty sure she couldn't do it again.

There’s a moment Nobu just stands there, the chain spinning slower and slower above his head
before it clatters to the ground. Useless. Impotent. Ineffectual. And then he falls to his knees and she can see the utter shock in his eyes, the confusion. She doesn't know why. Can't believe that he thought to face off against Frank again and not be in for a fight. Can't believe there wasn't some consideration that he might lose. The Punisher’s reputation precedes him after all. He had to have known. He had to have known that she wouldn't make Frank weak - even if he says she does.

And then Frank’s eyes flicker to her for an infinitesimally small moment and, even though she’s seen him look at her this way before, for the first time she believes she deserves it.

It's awe. It’s reverence. It’s every way she’s ever wanted him to look at her.

*Show me what you do Karen. Show me.*

*I kill bad guys. I save the people I love. I'm brave. I'm strong. You told me that but only I could make myself see it. I see it now.*

*I see you Frank.*

Nobu touches his shoulder and Frank rises to his feet. He’s shaking and limping but she can’t help but think of a wolf or a feral dog stalking its prey. He’s slow, almost predatory, as he advances, his movements calculated and cold.

It’s funny how easy it is to forget how dangerous he is. How she had a brutal mass murderer in her bed with his head between her legs and his hands hot and demanding on her skin. How his gentleness can be replaced with his brutality, his kindness with menace. How he’s all of these things and none of them. How he loves her with all of them at once and she's not sure she understands it nor if she even needs to.

The sky rumbles loudly again and lightning flashes bright enough to make her want to cover her eyes.

But she doesn’t.

She watches.
It’s over fast, although later she’ll remember every detail: his uneven walk; the tear in his jeans and how it fluttered in the wind; the blood on his clothes and the veins in his hands as he reached for Nobu’s head; the crack that rang through the night as he snapped his neck and let his body fall to the ground. And then the moment he took to just breathe before turning back to her, seeing her trying to stand, holding onto the wall for support. And then his eyes - oh god his eyes - pitch black and hard for a second before Frank Castle fought his way back into control of his own body and they softened.

It could have been an illusion but it’ll be emblazoned into her memory forever.

It’ll be another of those things she’ll cling to.

“Karen…”

He looks at her like she’s a fucking gift and she’s stupid enough to believe it’s all over now. Stupid enough to start thinking about getting them patched up, imagining the earful she’s going to get from Claire Temple. She doesn’t know how bad her wound is, only that the pain is exquisite and she’ll need stitches, that maybe she’s going to have a few days of being cared for by him this time. Maybe she’s going to get a lecture about the direction of her blood flow and maybe she’ll listen.

A joke. A fucking joke.

He’s limping towards her, holding out his hands. She thinks she sees tears in his eyes, knows there are more in hers.

*It's going to be okay.*

And then he’s with her and catching her as she slides towards the ground. And he’s lifting her up into his arms like she’s a fucking bride and he’s her dark monster husband and he’s carrying her across the threshold where their worlds meet so he can ravage her in his home. On her terms.

But he already did. And she did too.

Above her the wind howls and the moon shines down on her face. But all she can see is him and even though his one arm is under her knees and his other hand is pressed hard and firm against her side, it doesn’t hurt this time.
Because it never hurts when it’s just him.

No matter what.

“You’re okay,” he says and she believes him now. He doesn’t lie. He never lies.

He’s going to take her home, patch her up, keep her safe like he promised.

It is the only thing that matters. He wasn't wrong when he said it before.

He turns and her legs swing limply, and she presses her head into his chest and breathes in the smoke and the gunmetal, the coppery smell of his blood. She doesn’t want to see any more of this. She doesn’t want to see the death and the destruction, the smoke and the flames. She just wants to go home and be with him.

He kisses her forehead, lets his lips linger there.

“My girl,” he whispers. “I’ve got you.”

“Hold on.”

He smiles wanly. “Both hands.”

And then howling wind whipping at her matted hair and another rumble from the sky, and she sees the exact moment his gaze flicks to the left, how it’s not even there long enough for her to decipher what she sees in his eyes.

But she knows.

She knows.
She’s naive and the world hates them.

Click of a hammer so loud it blocks out every other sound, and he doesn’t hesitate. He turns around, barreling into the wall and wedging her between himself and the door, banging her wounded hip as his arms come up to cover her head and his body weight forces her down and presses the smoky air out of her lungs. The pain is excruciating, completely unlike anything she’s ever felt before. It’s slow enough to sink into every goddamn cell, saturate her blood and her skin and her muscle with every single type of agony she’s ever known. And, at the same time, it’s also fast enough to make it feel like she’s on fire, that it’s consuming her all at once, that there’s no part of her that’s being spared for a second.

And then she hears the gunshots and none of that matters.

Each one is very precise, very loud, with its own special nuance and purpose.

There’s four of them.

One. Two. Three.

Four.

She counts them off in her head.


She sees him spasm with each one, sees the fear in his eyes as they slam into his back, the shock and despair and she crumbles under him and blood wells out of his mouth and onto her face.

He's crushing her, limp like a rag doll on top of her and she can't breathe and she can't move and all she wants is to get him upright, to get herself upright because somehow that'll sort everything out. That’ll save them. Because this isn’t happening.

His blood *isn’t* soaking her clothes and his mouth *isn’t* opening and closing and he *isn’t* shaking like he’s going into shock. Neither is she.

None of it is true.

None of it.

Not one tiny inconsequential aspect of this fuck up is real.

They’re going home. They’re going home because this is done now and it’s over. Because they don’t have anything else left to give.

Except they do. They *do*.

And whatever cosmic force it is that hates them so much is going to take it until they have nothing.

They’re not going home. There’s a good chance they never will.

Distantly, she can sense movement somewhere above her, someone approaching. She doesn’t care. She doesn’t give a fuck. All she cares about is the sound of his ragged breathing, that horrible whistling wheeze that’s simultaneously the most wonderful and terrible thing she’s ever heard. All she cares about is forcing herself into some kind of half-sitting, half-lying position so that he’s resting against her and not choking on his own blood.

“You’re okay,” she tells him.

It’s a lie.

It wasn’t when he said it to her but it is now.
Oh god it’s such a lie.

She promised she wouldn’t. She promised she would always tell him the truth, but she can’t. She can’t now. She can’t even tell it to herself.

“Karen,” his voice is choked, and she finds a way to move his head so he can vomit more blood down her clothes.

“Shhhh…” she whispers, cradling him against her shoulder, trying hard not to look at the pool of blood flowing out of his back, the way it’s coursing over her hands like a river. “Shhhh…”

“Stay,” he says weakly and it sounds like begging.

She does. She will. She won’t leave. She’ll never leave.

Not even when Vanessa Marianna comes into her line of sight, not even when she sees the moonlight dance on the barrel of her pistol or when she lowers it so that it’s aimed at Frank’s head against her breast.

She won’t leave. She won’t go. She won’t plead either. They don’t deserve it. None of these people do.

Vanessa takes a second to watch them and then sighs, looks to the side. “Why can’t you mind your own goddamn business? First you and that jackass in the red suit, now you and The Punisher. Why couldn’t you just leave well enough alone? Now you’ve ruined everything again. Everything I built for him. Everything he built for me.”

In another lifetime when Elektra first told her about Vanessa, Karen was surprised. Not because it didn’t seem possible but simply because she’d written her off when Fisk went to prison. She thought she was in the wind and nothing would bring her back to Hell’s Kitchen where details of her entanglement in the whole Fisk affair had been splashed all over the news, where she was as recognisable as the same vigilantes the city has come to know and love.

And now… well now she finds she doesn’t care.
She doesn’t care about speeches. She doesn’t care about explanations. She has bigger things to worry about and she’s not going to spend these few precious moments she - they - have left listening to Vanessa pontificate about her actions, justify the violence and cruelty that happened here tonight and all the nights before.

It doesn't matter. They're both dead anyway.

She touches Frank’s lips, they’re wet and hot and she remembers what it was like to kiss him. To just kiss him and kiss him and kiss him and never stop. Until she did.

She should never have stopped. He should never have left. He should have stayed at home and sinned with her where the world couldn’t see them. They shouldn't have shown it what they had, spat in the face of fate.

He's strong. She's strong too. But what they had is too new, too delicate. Too frightening to be left alone.

“It’s going to be okay,” she tells him as he breathing gets low and shallow, panicked even.

Another lie. It’s alright. She has enough. She’s spending them well.

“It would have been if you'd only stopped sticking your nose where it doesn't belong, getting these lovestruck fools all riled up to try and impress you…” Vanessa again, voice still calm, just resigned, even faintly amused.

“If you’re gonna shoot me, just fucking do it.”

The sirens are closer now, she can hear the screech of tires on gravel and the sound of doors slamming. And there’s a certain grim satisfaction in seeing Vanessa glance behind her, seeing how her eyes widen as she sees the ambulances and police arriving.

And then her composure is back - most of it anyway - and she raises her gun.

“If you insist Karen…”
She drags Frank closer, closes her eyes and presses her lips to his brow. She’s rocking him slightly and is surprised to find she feels almost no pain at all. Again she’s not sure if that’s good or bad, but it doesn’t seem to matter anymore.

“It’s okay. It’s okay. It’s okay.”

_I love you. I love you. I love you._

_I know. I know. I know._

She waits for the crack, waits for the sharp agony that will end it all. She doesn’t know if that is how it’s supposed to happen. Doesn’t know if you get that moment of clarity, that second when your life flashes before your eyes. She hopes not. She doesn’t want to see her life with all its fuck ups and dramas, all its hurt and unnecessary cruelty. She just wants to see him. She just wants to see him and what he’s given her, what he’s shown her, the world he’s tried to give them both.

_Don’t you know?_

_I know._

She _still_ has everything.

The shot doesn’t come, the bullet never fires. Instead she hears a woman’s voice, something whistling through the air, a shocked _oomph_ as hard steel connects with something soft and spongy. And then the clattering of metal on concrete and the thud of a body falling.

She almost doesn’t dare look. She almost keeps her face on Frank’s, listening to his laboured breathing, feeling the way his hands are weakly grasping at her.

But she does.

She does because she’s Karen Page: Intrepid Reporter, Lover Of Vigilantes And Holder Back Of
Tears Under Extreme Duress.

She does because she is not done. And neither is he. And fuck anyone who thinks otherwise.

Vanessa is sprawled on the ground, the tip of a sai blade protruding from her forehead, keeping her head angled so that her face is still visible, her eyes still open. There’s barely any blood, just a drop shimmering on the point of the baton and she watches fixated as it grows long and fat before it falls to the ground in a perfectly round splash.

It’s gruesome and yet somehow beautiful too. Fascinating in a way that makes a wave of nausea rise in her throat and she presses her face into Frank’s hair, begs him to stay with her.

Stay, please. You stay, please.

And then there’s Elektra - Matt and Stick on her heels - and she’s nimbly jumping over the bodies and debris, covering her face against the smoke.

“Karen?” she says as she draws near. “Karen is he…?”

And Karen wants to scream at her that no he’s not. Whatever the fuck Elektra was going to say - and she knows exactly what it was - it’s just not fucking true. He’s not. He’s here and he’s hurt and he’s struggling to breathe and his blood is running down her hands and arms and sticking him to her. But he’s not. He’s not that. He’s not whatever they think he is.

“Oh my god.” Matt now and he’s bending down next to her. He smells of smoke and sweat too, of blood and something else. Something that isn’t really a smell but more like a feeling. Shock. Anger. Grief. She isn’t sure.

“Get someone,” she says. “Please get someone. Tell them we’re here. Please.”

He nods and she can see how disturbed he is. That even though him and Frank have clashed over their varied interpretations of morality and ethics, he’s never once considered Frank to be anything but invincible. Bulletproof even. She wonders if somehow she thought the same thing. If she got caught up in the legend of him as much as everyone else.
“Please, he was trying to save me,” she says. “Please.”

For a moment they all just stand still, three masked figures against the sky, smoke rising around them and the moon peeking out from the clouds to give them a ghostly glow. And then Elektra moves, runs to the edge of the roof and starts waving her hands, shouting as loud as she can for them to get on up here, that’s there’s an emergency and they need paramedics, to bring every fucking piece of equipment they have.

And all Karen can do is hope they hear her, hope they come quickly, hope for the best and expect the worst. And make the best of the time they have.

She looks down at Frank, his closed eyes, his swollen lips, his blood pouring down her chest - he’s left more than just a streak of blood on her breast this time, more than just a cut from his lip.

“I’m going to save you,” she says.

Another lie. She still has a reserve. She may not be in credit with favours but she is with untruths and she wraps an arm around his head, rests her cheek on his temple, tries not to feel the weak stuttering of his fingers against her.

“It'll be alright. We can still make plans. We can go see Luna. We can...”

And then Matt is pulling at her, grabbing her arm and trying to haul her up, the pain in her hip searing sharp and almost crippling up her side as he does.

Her vision swims again but she finds the strength to wrench away, push feebly at him.

“Karen, you have to come with us,” he’s saying. “You have to. You can’t stay here.”

He’s quite mad. He must be. There’s no other explanation. He’s lost his mind in the smoke and the fire, banged his head one too many times and now he’s fuzzy like she was earlier.

“I’m not going anywhere with you.” She shakes him off again, arm back around Frank’s shoulders.
“Karen, we can get you to Claire, she can fix you up, but if you stay here with him, they’ll know you were here. Think of the trouble and the questions…”

“Do you think I care about that?” she asks. “Do you think I give a fuck Matt?”

“You can’t…”

“I am not leaving him. I’m not. You can do whatever the fuck you want but I am not leaving him. “

He sighs, tilts his head up to the sky and she can imagine him rolling his eyes under his mask. “Karen…”

A truth. It’s time for a truth.

“I’m not letting him die alone.”

She chokes on the words, spits them out, let’s them land at Matt’s feet with a glob of blood and all her rage. “He deserves better than that. He deserves more.”

It's hard to talk, she can feel how she's fading in and out, how slurred and slow she sounds. She doesn't want to waste words on this. What she has left she wants to give to Frank.

“Karen, it’s not about what he deserves. If they find you here they’ll arrest you, they’ll want to know everything…”

She looks up at him. He’s tall and regal. Magnificent. Red suit against the red sky.

She could have loved him once.

“I know a couple of really good lawyers,” she says.
He opens his mouth to say something but suddenly the old man with the stick is there and he’s putting his hand on Matt’s arm.

“She’s not coming with you son…”

His voice is old, strained with time and very possibly cigarettes.

“Stick…”

“This…,” he interrupts. “This is something you’re going to need to accept before you understand any of it. She’s not coming with you.”

“No…”

Stick shrugs. “For the best anyway.”

“He’s right Matthew,” Elektra now, standing to his side, the wind dragging through her hair. “We need to go. We need to go now and she’s not coming with us.”

“I’m not leaving her,” his voice has a tiny waver in it though. He sounds confused and uncertain, blindsided again.

“Yeah. You are,” says Stick.

She doesn’t care. She can’t fight this anymore. Go. Stay. She’s not leaving Frank alone on the roof discarded like a piece of trash and left to die by himself.

She glances up and Matt’s jaw clenches and he does that same imploding thing he did earlier, the biting back of his frustration, the control that’s both impressive and a little ridiculous.

She thinks he’s probably gearing up for some righteousness and passive aggression, but she’s
beyond that now too. Frank is here and he’s dying in her arms and she knows - she knows - that if he stands a chance - any at all - then she needs to stay with him. That, right now, for better or for worse, she is the only thing he’s got left to hold on to. And she’ll be damned if she takes that away.

“Go,” she says. “Go please.”

“Karen…” Elektra. Lingering now.

She looks up at her. “It’s okay. It’s okay. You go.”

Elektra nods and then tugs at Matt’s arm.

She doesn’t watch them leave. She knows they do but she doesn’t watch.

Instead she tilts Frank’s head back so she can see his face. He’s ghostly pale and the moon is shining in his eyes. She remembers how only hours earlier they were glistening black orbs, tracking her every movement in their bedroom, how she could feel him watching her and wanting her. How they told her he loved her even before he could say the words.

They’re glassy now, unfocused, and he’s shivering and she gathers him tight to her. He’s leaning hard against her wounded hip but it doesn’t hurt. He never hurts.

“Frank,” she whispers coughing up blood. “Stay with me Frank. Stay with me.”

He lifts his hand from where it lies at his side. It’s ashen like the rest of him except for the dark blooms of blood under his nails. Clumsily he touches her face, fingers stuttering on her skin.

“You breaking Murdock’s heart again?”

“Don’t try to talk,” she whispers. “They’re coming.”

He swallows, chokes back blood.
“Fucking cruel you are…”

“Shhhh,” she says but he doesn’t listen and his thumb runs along the line of her jaw and she shuts her eyes against tears, turns her face away.

“No,” his voice is strained and thick. “Let me look at you.”

She can’t say no. She can never say no to him.

Back again. Forcing herself to focus on him, on all his blood and his wounds, those eyes that are deep brown and warm, flecks of gold glinting in the moonlight.

“I didn’t think I could have something like this again,” he says and his voice is so weak she has to strain to hear it.

“Frank no.”

“Most men are lucky if they get this once. I got it twice.”

“Please…”

He’s smiling. He’s fucking smiling and she wants to scream.

“You can too…”

It’s a lie. It’s a lie because she can’t. She can’t. She can never have this again. And he’s not allowed to lie. She’s in credit for untruths, she’s in the black. Not him.

Never him.
“You don’t think about me too much,” he says. “You don’t let this - us - define you…”

Her tears fall on his face - they slide through his blood like little clear rivers, cleaning him, cleaning them.

“Please stop,” she says, looking away, looking up at the moon and the clouds. “Please.”


She won’t. She isn’t.

More choking on blood and her hand on his back is wet with it. She can almost feel the pumping of his heart weaken in the flow.

“Sorry we never talked like we said we would,” his fingers slide down her face to her neck and she imagines dark red rivers covering the faint teeth marks he left there earlier. “I want you to know I’d have given it all up if you asked.”

“I wouldn’t have asked.”

It’s a terrible truth, one she’s barely willing to admit to herself. But it’s a truth. And he deserves it.

He snorts. It’s a grotesque sound. Rough and harsh and it feels like he’s using all the air he has left to make it.

She cradles his head again, rocks him despite the pain in her hip, kisses his brow.

If she can love him, he can live. She’s done it before. She’s done it so many times. Loved him back to life.

And then somehow, he smiles again. It’s hideous and his teeth are coated in blood, but like so many things tonight there’s a horrific beauty to it, a violence that’s breathtaking.
The Punisher.

*Her* Punisher.

“I did it,” his voice is soft and low, maybe even a hint of pride. “I did it. I got it right. I did my job.”

She shakes her head.

“You…” he says. “I saved you. You have to live and then maybe they can forgive me now.”

He’s speech is thick and slurred and he’s starting to sound delirious and just how fucking long does it take for a bunch of EMT’s to climb a goddamn fire escape? How fucking long?


And it’s selfish and callous and awful. But it’s true. It’s one of those terrible truths. They - Maria, Lisa, Junior - are in the ground. They are gone. They are not coming back and wherever they are - if that’s what he believes - they don’t need him now. But she does.

*Oh god she does.*

He snorts again. “I ain't going to the same place as them.”

He heaves then, body convulsing and her vision blurs.

A wave of dizziness hits her and she has to fight to stay conscious, push the blackness away.

She doesn't want to die. Only seconds ago she thought that she wasn’t, but now that he’s been brought down, she isn’t so sure anymore. But, if she has to, then here with him like this doesn’t seem like the worst way to go. Maybe they can hold on.
Two hands.

They still have everything.

And that's when the rain starts to fall. There's no lightning, no roll of thunder to herald its arrival. One second it's dry and awful, and the next it just comes down, soaking her and him, washing blood down her face and onto his, seeping into the ground, dousing the flames, steam rising alongside the smoke, both grey. Both terrible.

It's dirty, and it feels like a final insult.

She remembers being really scared that he'd die before he came back to her. That there's be some kind of freak accident and end it all - Frank Castle dead on the side of the road, losing his own life after dropping his dog off so she could have a better one. That seems so stupid now, so naive.

So incredibly unimaginative.

She wasn't scared for this - couldn't even truly conceive of it. She doesn't even bother to cut herself any slack, doesn't tell herself that no one could have ever foreseen this. She should have. She’s been around the block a time or two, seen what the city can do to anything good, to anything that dares to shine and defy the darkness even for a moment.

Whoever controls the goddamn shit show called Earth and more specifically that pimple on its ass called Hell’s Kitchen really has a fucking sick sense of humour.

Today they went on a date. They laughed, the touched, She took him into her bed and her body.

The rain gave them a day.

“Goddamnit Frank, I can't fix this.”
He touches her face again and for a second he looks lucid and she can see under the cuts and the bruises, see how beautiful he is, how much he loves her.

“You already did.”

Her tears mix with the rain and then his blood with hers, running into big watery pink puddles on the ground, running with the filth.

She touches her lips to his. Soft. Gentle. She can still taste a hint of herself, sweet and musky.

This is their taste. It always was. Love and death. Sex and blood.

_I love you Frank. I love you so much._

They can make those plans. They can see Luna. They can do more things like they did today. It doesn't matter if it shouldn't work, they can make it work, they can find a way. As long as they're together. As long as he doesn't leave nothing can stop them. And she wants to scream at him that he can't go. Scream _Please Frank please_. But he's slipping through her fingers one drop of blood at a time and she can't hold on.

All she can do is beg.

All she can do is beg.

_You stay._

_You stay._

_Please._
Hands. There's a lot of hands. None of them gentle. None of them kind. She can hear loud voices, sirens and strange beeping noises. They're pulling at her and pulling at him and someone is screaming. Screaming loud.

Something tells her it's her.

*Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. He needs me.*

She's being lifted and she can see his body slumping to the concrete and she's telling them *no, no*, they can't take her away.

Someone is clamping a blood pressure monitor on her arm and someone else is filling a syringe with something blue and cloudy.

*Ma'am, calm down*

*Ma'am, let us do our job*

*Ma'am, we can't help you if you don't let us*

*Ma'am...*

He calls her ma'am. *He* does. It complicates things, but it also doesn't.

*He* calls her ma'am. Not them. They're not allowed.

She lashes out. It's a powerful punch, strong enough to send the man looming over her off his feet. And yet somehow he's still there and he's standing and it's like he didn't feel a goddamn thing. His face is worried but he's not paying attention to her.

She's trying to tell him to save Frank, that he survived bullets before so if they keep trying he can do
it again. He's not listening but he is sliding the needle into her arm and almost immediately a black chasm is opening in front of her, a gaping maw and all she wants to do is dive into it. Lose herself in this dark dimension that offers respite from pain and death and hurt.

She spirals forward, imagines herself as a bullet in slow motion, feels the grooves carved into her from the barrel of the gun.

She thinks she can see colours now, pictures even. A cold cabin and Frank on the floor, holding her tight and crying into her hair. Bright plumes of fireworks as he pressed himself against her on the roof and nearly kissed her. And then more: him in her bed, him clutching her under his dead wife’s wings, her pendant dangling from an angel’s neck and an old man with a twinkle in his eyes whistling Amazing Grace. Frank Castle naked, crouched between her thighs, taking everything he wanted from her and offering himself in return.

Distantly she can hear someone shouting Clear! followed by a harsh mechanical thumping, the whirring of something electronic. And then again and again.

Clear!

Clear!

We’re losing him!

Clear!

And she's trying so hard to fight it off, keep the grogginess at bay and tell them they're not losing him. She's not losing him.

She starts shouting his name again. Loud. And her voice is so strong. It's so strong she's sure it's ringing across Hell’s Kitchen. But no one is looking at her. The man at her side is doing something near her hip but she can't feel anything.

And she's begging them to listen to her, pleading. But it's like she's not even there and it's all going to shit. Every last damn thing in her life is going to shit and no one is trying to stop it. No one is helping and she's losing him and she's losing herself and oh god, the pictures in the void are so bright. They're so bright and so vivid and Frank’s in all of them. Every single one and he's looking at her
like she’s the only goddamn thing worth looking at.


That long extended beeping sound and someone shouting *Clear!* again.

And she can't hear. She can't see. The darkness closes in and it suffocates her and she knows she's going to lose him.

She knows she's going to die too.

And she really doesn't want to do either of those things.

But the pictures. The *pictures*.

He’s laughing with her about gingersnaps and remote-controlled jeeps.

He’s looking at her across a courtroom and she can see the shame in his eyes.

He hushing her, he’s knocking her gun out of her hands and his body is pressing her to the floor. His weight is warm and comforting and she can't believe she didn't notice it then.

They're in the diner and he's telling her she loves Matt but he's looking at her like he means something else.

He's murdering Schoonover and she hates him. She *hates* him. She wishes they'd never met.

And then he's looking down at her from the roof and she's so glad that they did. And she's not trying to force that strange heavy feeling in her belly away, the heat that's rushing through her, the butterflies she shouldn't be feeling but is.
Karen Page has never been good with “shouldn’ts”.

“Karen?”

It’s his voice, not cracked or choked or thick with blood. Just deep and low.

It still feels like she's spiralling but somehow she wills herself to slow down, to come to a halt. To float in the blackness and focus.

He's there. He’s coalescing in front of her, in front of the fog and the pictures are fading. He's not wounded, no bruises, no cuts. Just him. Big and kind and so far away from any definition of bad she can't even cling to the word. Can barely remember it.

He holds out his hand.

“It's gonna be alright.”

He doesn’t lie. Even in her dreams he doesn't lie. And even though she knows it's not really him, she trusts whatever part of her has conjured him up not to lie either.

“Karen,” he says again. “Come on, you've done enough.”

She reaches out, can almost feel his fingers twining with hers and he gives her a small, firm tug and starts leading her further into the fog.

She glances back once before the darkness takes her and the last thing she sees through the rain and the chaos is a moth, big and fat, it's ugly wings beating hard as it flies through the rain, the death’s head on its thorax shining white under the moon.
Down from the edge I can see you where we end

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the overwhelming response for the last chapter. You guys have made me SO happy and so inspired to keep writing this damn thing which was never meant to be this vast. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Do you realise this series is now approaching 200K words? I never would have thought I could have written that much. I love this ship, I love this fandom, I love all you guys for inspiring me and giving me the space to write this. It's become so important to me and so close to my heart.

It's a strange experience writing this because it feels like I am both a consumer and creator of this work and I have never really felt that way before. Even though I know where this story is going it's kind of like I am feeling the pain and the angst and the drama along with everyone and right now I am dying for Frank and Karen too. I am sorry if that sounds pretentious but it is what it is.

Anyway, let me stop waxing lyrical about this. You guys wanna know who lived and who died and what happened, so here it is.

Chapter title is from Can't Let You Go by Matchbox 20. It really is the perfect song for this chapter if I do say so myself.

The curtains are very clean.

On some level she realises that’s a really fucking bizarre thing for her to notice. Really fucking out there and stupid. Really fucking inconsequential when you get right down to it. When you realise that you’re somehow being pushed kicking and screaming out of that dreamy black vortex where nothing makes sense - and back into the harsh reality of life on Earth when the world’s gone to shit and bullet holes ripped through pretty much everything that was holding it together.

It’s a really fucking useless piece of information.

But they really are clean. Ridiculously clean. There's not a spot, not a crease, not even a wayward thread hanging off the hem. They’re so fucking white she can’t even see the exact line where the curtains end and the wall starts.

It's also bright. Very bright. The whiteness of the fabric amplifies the harsh LED lights, reflecting them around the room and letting them bounce off the walls, the floor, the ceiling, the equally pristine bedding she's lying on.
It burns her retinas and she shuts her eyes tightly but they're already watering and she has to bite her lip against the sting.

She wants to fall back into that darkness again. That secret place where Frank took her and she was safe and it didn't hurt. She scrambles to find it. The void. The pictures. Him holding out his hand and her taking it.

But she can't. The doors are closed and bolted and whatever it was that took her there doesn't want her back. She tries to imagine herself as that bullet again, spiralling into space, Frank catching her and leading her away gently.

The taste of his lips. Love and death. Sex and blood.

It won't let her in. It doesn't want her anymore.

She opens her eyes. She announces her presence with a huge ragged breath that seems to start individually from every cell in her body and fight its way out of her lungs like fire following a line of gunpowder.

The curtains are very clean.

Foggy is saying something. His face swims into view and she wonders how he got here, wonders what he's even doing, if they had a date booked.

*Oh god, was she meant to dress up?* She had her little black dress all picked out - the one with the low bodice and the short skirt. She doesn't think she's wearing it now, there's no tight satin against her skin, no brush of lace.

There is something tight though. Something soft but still uncomfortable. But she can't quite pinpoint it, can't quite figure out what it is.

She wants to tell Foggy she's sorry she forgot - she doesn't know how but she did - and she can change if he'll just give her a minute. But then he's cupping the side of her face and his brow is knitting together. He's calling for someone too but she can't hear what he's saying.
And suddenly Matt is there too. He's also looming over her and she can see some monster with wild, filthy hair and a wan face reflected in the lenses of his glasses as the light catches them.

He's also saying something but he's talking lower than Foggy and she can't hear him either. She wonders if she got it wrong and this isn't the party and she doesn't need the dress, if they all just decided to hang out together. She doesn't know why she would have agreed to that though. *Nelson and Murdock* fell apart and Matt told her he was Daredevil and they went their separate ways. They don't really speak much now.

She's so damn tired of the fucking vigilante population and how they…

*Oh god.*

She takes a breath.

*Frank Castle lying her arms, blood running out of his mouth.*

Four bullets.

Four.

She counted them off in her head.

One. Two. Three.

*Four.*

She tries to sit up and pain explodes in her side, arcing up her spine and down her legs like a hot blade peeling skin back from bone.

She convulses, retches, and is vaguely aware of Matt holding back her hair even though she has
nothing in her stomach to vomit out. Nothing but dry heaves of fear and grief and loss.

Oh god.

She's trying to say Frank’s name but her throat is parched and her lips are cracked and she remembers breathing in fire and smoke - the smell of blood and charred flesh and kerosene. Dust. That place was like fucking kindling.

She retches again and this time something spills out of her mouth, some grey opaque liquid, hint of blood in it. It splashes on Foggy’s shoes but they're just sneakers and she thinks it'll be okay. He barely seems to notice, let alone care.

“Fra… Fra…”

Her voice isn't working and his name is almost impossible to say and then Matt is leaning over her and holding her down while a nurse - a nurse who fucking dares not to be Claire Temple - rushes in with a syringe and no no she doesn't want that. No not again. She doesn't want the fantasy, that non-real Frank that takes her away and hides the world from her. She doesn’t want more gogginess and cotton wool in her head. She needs to be sharp and clear and ready to deal with the shitstorm she knows went down but can’t quite remember.

She lashes out and her elbow connects with Matt’s chest, catching him off guard and knocking him back into the curtain.

It doesn’t look that pristine anymore. It looks blandly deceptive and she’s pretty sure there’s a storm behind it.

“Noooooo ,” she's saying and her voice is dry and harsh but strong enough to cut through the fog.

And suddenly her ears unblock and she can hear again as sound rushes back into the world with a hard whoosh .

Wind howling and thunder crashing, phones ringing, the electronic beeping of machines and someone somewhere has a TV on and she can swear she hears the theme tune of Days of our Lives .
And that is another really fucking ridiculous thing to waste her limited clarity on.

The nurse is saying something and pushing her down onto the bed, holding her there while Matt finds his feet and grabs her arm.

“It's just a painkiller ma'am. Just for your side. That's all.”

But she doesn't believe her. She doesn't. She doesn't believe her because she dares - she fucking dares - not to be Claire Temple, not to be sanctified and sainted and a fucking angel living among the Hell’s Kitchen scum. And she wants to know where Frank is, wants to know that he's fine, that they're not going to send her off into some lalaland where she can befriend the shadows and lose time.

Lose herself.

Lose Frank.

Oh god. Frank.

“Karen!”

Foggy.

His voice loud and stern, sharper than she's ever heard it. Especially with her.

“Karen! Stop it!”

Still hard. Still sharp.

He hasn't slept. She can see by his tousled hair and the bags under his eyes. He looks wan and unkempt, in need of a shower and something to eat.
Oh god, how long has she been here? How long ago was Saturday night with its gunsmoke and its bleeding sky? How long ago since Frank took four bullets?

Four.

One. Two. Three.

*Four.*

How long since she held him in her arms and let him live and breathe inside her? How long since she held him in her arms and he died?

How long till she gets him back?

( *You don't think about me too much* )

No.

( *You find someone good. You find someone who treats you right. You hold on. Both hands. You never let go.* )

No.

( *Most men are lucky if they get this once. I got it twice.* )

No.

( *You can too…* )

No! No! No!
She thinks she said it out loud. Thinks she yelled it and Foggy’s going to yell something back, but he
doesn’t. And she didn’t either.

And the pain in her side is now rattling through the rest of her, coursing through her blood and
setting off little explosions of agony as it bursts through her cells, keeps cycling through her blood in
ever increasing spirals until she’s sure she’s going to vomit it out again.

She barely feels the prick of the needle as it finds a vein, slides into her arm.

And then a moment of pure torture, followed by a rush of untempered nothingness.

It feels almost like some twisted kind of coming. A terrible climax and then a drop off the edge of a
cliff into a grotesque blandness that never ends.

She thinks she might pass out. She just might.

The curtains are very clean.

She sinks back down. Somewhere someone has adjusted the bed so it doesn’t feel like it’s far to go
and she’s still halfway sitting up, able to look at the striped robe she’s wearing, the paleness of her
skin under a layer of blood and dirt. Someone tried to clean her up, but not all that well.

They don’t keep her nearly as clean as the curtains and, for some reason that seems funny, but she
doesn’t try to laugh.

“It's Tuesday,” Foggy is saying. “You’re at Metro-General Hospital. They found you on the roof of
the warehouse on 10th in the early hours of Sunday morning. There was an explosion, a fire… God
knows what else...

“Do you remember?”

She looks at him for a while before she realises he's asked her a question and he's expecting
something in return.

She nods. Yes she does remember. It's murky and she finds it hard to concentrate on any one specific thing but she does remember. She remembers the people, their frightened faces, Elektra and her *sai* blades, Stick and his cane.

Matt.

Matt looking like a giant bird of prey.

She glances over at him where he's standing with his back to the wall.

He was magnificent. She could have loved him once.

She remembers Alexei. His stupid ass gun with its Florentine swirls. Frank tied to a chair. She remembers the explosion and the roof. The fire.

She remembers a big fat moth lying on its back, legs twitching. She remembers that later it flew away through the rain.

The nurse picks it up. “You had a severe wound to your left side. A cut almost all the way to your hip bone. You'd lost a lot of blood and we had to take you into emergency surgery. You're also suffering from a blow to the head and smoke inhalation. You've been in and out - but mostly out - for all of Sunday and yesterday, most of today.”

She says it sternly like Karen should have known better than to get hurt like that, like she's personally exasperated by it.

It doesn't seem like that much to think about though, doesn't even sound all that serious. It feels like it happened to someone else who isn't her. Someone unfortunate and prone to accidents, someone with a lot of drama in their life. Not her. Not the boring *Bulletin* journalist with a shoebox apartment and a bad-tempered cat for company.

The nurse - Lena according to her badge - is handing her a half-full glass and telling her to drink it
and it takes a moment to parse her words. She does though and she does drink and even though it's just water she finds herself coughing and spluttering, spilling big drops on the bed and letting rivulets of it run off her chin.

Her throat is on fire and every breath seems to rattle around painfully in her tight lungs.

But she doesn't care about that. She doesn't care about her throat or her lungs or that now dull muted ache in her side. She doesn't care about the bruises on her arms and legs or that she's finding new pangs and pains every time she moves. She doesn’t care that she's pretty sure most of her skin is purple and blue.

Bruised.

She cares about Frank. That's all. She cares about the whirring sound of that defibrillator, the high pitched whine and the person shouting *Clear!* over and over again.

*Clear! Clear! Clear!*

*How many times? How many?*

“Frank?” she asks and her voice does sound steadier, firmer.

Lena frowns, purses her lips, and there's a moment Karen sees a shade of Irene in her face.

“I'm not permitted to discuss…

She's ready to jump out of the bed and throttle her, throttle this woman playing at being a nurse, this one who isn't Claire and is some ridiculous facsimile of her.

But Foggy’s there again and he’s her lifeline, her rock, the only thing that stops her from losing it like an angry toddler in a sweet shop - and he's telling Lena he’ll take it from here. He’s got this. It'll be okay. And Lena’s saying she's going to get a doctor and to stay calm, and a whole bunch of medical jargon about Karen's various conditions that she's convinced no one cares about or ever will.
And then she's walking out the door, shaking her head and muttering something, and they're alone.


Just like the good old days - the ones that weren't even that good.

For a few seconds no one talks and she has a moment to take everything in beyond the startling whiteness of the room. She’s not in ICU, but she is in a private ward. The sheets are as white as the curtains and so are the chairs where Foggy and Matt have apparently been sitting waiting for her to wake up.

There's a door with a bathroom to the right and a small TV which is on but with the sound turned all the way down. She has a drip in her arm and she can feel a very thick bandage around her middle.

Matt is standing at her side and he's frowning. He doesn't look as dishevelled as Foggy. His clothes aren't crumpled and he's clean shaven - his shirt even looks crisp and new. He has bags under his eyes though. Big dark semicircles that his tinted lenses can't hide, and she wonders if either of them have slept at all or if they've just been sitting here for almost three days waiting for her to wake up.

“Karen, calm down…” Foggy is taking her hand in his and squeezing gently, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles and she can see how filthy her nails are. She remembers the blood underneath Frank's nails too and what they must have done to him in that chair.

“No…” she clears her throat and it feels like pieces of charcoal are coming loose from her oesophagus, falling into her gut. “Just tell me if he's alive.”

And even as she says it she feels a darkness settling into her bones, a twist in her empty stomach, and she wishes she could turn back the clock and unask the question. She knows there's no way she's going to like the answer. Something good came of this on Saturday night when her and Frank made love and now there's nothing left but badness and hurt. Everything gone up in smoke and coated in blood and death.

He's gone.
She knows this as an unassailable truth. She knows this like she does her own name.

And yet…

And yet she doesn't.

“He's alive,” Foggy says, and for a second she has no idea what to do with that information. It feels too vast to fit into this little room; words too important with too much gravity to just be said like they’re any old thing. They feel like they're suffocating her, drowning her, climbing inside her and restitching every fibre of who she is.

She takes a long, deep breath and even that feels new and unfamiliar, like she's a tiny baby and having to relearn everything, navigate a brand new world. Even the pain in her side and her head feels different to before. Not better or worse, just different. Like she’s broken through some membrane and found a new dimension that feels like it can be ripped away at any moment.

She's vaguely aware of Matt laying a hand on her back, rubbing gently and then squeezing her shoulder.

“But… there's something you should know,” Foggy continues with a stern glance at Matt. “Actually there's a lot of things you should know.”

There's a small part of her - her little lizard brain - that wants to tell him to shut up. Nothing else is important and all she needs to know is that Frank is alive. She doesn't need details, she doesn't need explanations. She can just exist in the comfort his words created.

But she also knows she doesn't have that luxury.

She nods. “Okay.”

Her voice is steady and she doesn't choke off her words. It's a start.

It's something.
Another pointed look at Matt and Foggy continues.

“Frank flatlined twice. Once on the roof and then again on the operating table…”

A kind of slow shiver runs down her spine, one that turns her skin cold and makes her scalp prickle. And Matt’s hand is big and warm and she's profoundly grateful that he's there.

“He had emergency surgery on Sunday morning, a blood transfusion. They managed to get three of the bullets out of him, but it's unlikely they’ll get the fourth. It's wedged behind his spine but unless it moves they don't think it'll do any real harm right now.”

She coughs again and Matt holds the water to her mouth so she can take a sip. This time it goes down a little easier, a little smoother.

“But he's alive?”

“Yeah…” Foggy pauses and she knows she's not going to like what he says next. “They don't know the full extent of the damage yet.”

“Why not?”

He takes a deep breath and looks like he's gearing himself up to make a confession - which maybe he is.

But before he can say anything Matt’s hand tightens on her shoulder and he speaks.

“Frank’s in a coma Karen,” and she can hear by the way he says it that this is upsetting him too. “He hasn't woken up since Sunday.”

Foggy again. “They have no idea when he's going to come out. And if he does they're placing him back under arrest.”
Foggy’s words drop like a stone, heavy and solid, and for a few seconds they just look at each other. His eyes are bloodshot and he’s unshaven, and if she had to hazard a guess he hasn't left her side since she arrived. Probably hasn't been home either and has been existing on canteen food and vending-machine coffee.

She wants to ask him why. Suddenly that’s feels very important. Why he would do this for her, why somehow she always comes first, always takes priority over everything else. Why there's no better man than him on Earth and why the fuck they broke the goddamn mold when he made him. What the fuck she's ever done to deserve him.

But he's squeezing her fingers and pushing her filthy hair away from her face and Matt’s hand is still warm and comforting on her back. And even though she can sense he has a million things he wants to say and a million questions he's going to want her to answer, he’s quiet and undemanding and she reaches up and touches his fingers gently.

It's a miracle he's alive too. Alive and relatively unharmed from what she can see.

She doesn't know how much he knows, what's been discussed in the time both her and Frank have been unconscious and, while it's not his business, she's unwilling to turn this into some kind of dirty secret she has to hide from him.

But that's not high on her list of priorities now. In fact that List of Karen Page’s Priorities is so full with so many things vying for first place she has no idea what to do, what to even ask.

And then she thinks of the first time she spoke to Frank, of him lying in that hospital bed with tubes and pipes coming out of him, handcuffed to the railing, the red square on the floor, the policemen posted outside.

The doctors and nurses who needed special clearance to see him.

Fuck.

“Foggy?” she whispers and he looks up from their linked hands. “Foggy, who is looking after him? There are people who are still going to want him dead… Fisk...”
It's Matt that answers. “There are only two nurses with access to him. Claire and one other who she trusts. And then of course there’s his doctor. Mahoney’s outside his door most of the time.”

It's a small mercy. So very small. But she's so wildly grateful for it. In the grander scheme of things it's not perfect. In the grander scheme of things neither Mahoney nor Claire can work 24 hours a day.

Still, it's something.

“When can I see him?”

He looks at her sadly. “You can't. He's in police custody.”

She knew this. She knew it but she hoped it wasn't true.

“Karen, there's something else,” Foggy’s voice is grave and she braces herself for whatever is coming. “No charges have been filed but you're a person of interest in this. Obviously. You're the only one who was there who is able to talk and not part of whatever the hell Smirnov was up to.”

He glances pointedly at Matt who seems to sense it and turns his head away, sighs. She imagines they’ve been having variations of this conversation for the last few days.

“Foggy, come on…” he says.

Foggy shakes his head and purses his lips.

“Matt, can you give us a minute?”

She can see by the look on Matt’s face that this is unexpected.

“Foggy…”
“Matt, don't make me pull attorney client privilege… because I’ll do it. You know I will.”

She looks between them. “Wait, what?”

“Come on, five minutes.”

Foggy’s face might be kind and sweet but his eyes are hard and she realises again how much he’s grown and changed; how good this time away from Nelson and Murdock has been for him and consequently, how bad it’s been for the friendship him and Matt once had.

And it used to be so good. So easy.

Before Nelson and Murdock.

Before Frank.

Before her.

There's something about her that ruins everything no matter how hard she tries not to. Something about her that tears people apart. Destroys them.

She’ll deal with her own demons later.

She touches Matt’s arm.

“Please.”

He sighs again.

“I would really like someone to tell me what's going on,” he says. “After everything, I think you can give me that.”
He’s right. He’s more than right. And yet there’s part of her that almost can’t believe he doesn’t know, that neither Elektra nor Foggy told him during the time she was out. But Foggy’s always been good with her secrets and Elektra is conspicuous by her absence and she files that away as something she needs to ask someone about.

Sometime.

Sometime when this is over and she doesn’t feel like the world is pounding in her head and she’s falling apart under it.

“I will,” she tells him and she really does mean it. “Just let me talk to Foggy.”

He doesn’t object. He does a version of that imploding thing where his back tenses and his jaw sets in a straight line and she can almost smell the anger coming off him. But Matthew Murdock is nothing if not self-controlled and he keeps it in as he heads out the door, muttering something about getting coffee.

Foggy looks back at her. “Let's hope he's not using his dog hearing.”

She nods. She doesn't really care all that much. This doesn't seem all that important and she wants to know about Frank but she thinks Foggy is circling around to it anyway so she lets him talk.

“They're still trying to piece together everything that happened on Sunday morning. It's a mess. They have dozens of people to interview and they need to find accommodation for all those families. And then they've got to comb through the wreckage, identify all the bodies and then launch an investigation into Smirnov’s company and backers… there’s a lot going on, a lot that you missed and I’ll take you through everything when you’re feeling better… some of it I’m sure you can explain, other stuff is downright weird, but we can get to all that.

“Fact is though they're probably going to be up to their ears in evidence for the next few weeks and it's unlikely they're going to be able to press ahead for at least the next little while. But they do have The Punisher who they thought was dead, and they are under a lot of pressure to sort this out. It isn’t inconceivable that the city might give the precinct a cash injection or find resources somewhere to help them. They're going to want a statement from you. They're going to want to know why you were there, how you're related to all of this. Basically like I said, they're counting on you as a star witness.”
He stops. Sighs.

“I think we can explain away a lot… you work for a newspaper, this isn't the most uncommon thing for a journalist to get involved in. You were investigating it all anyway. I'm assuming Ellison won't have an issue attesting to that. Frankly, they've maybe got you on trespassing and probably firing a gun in public but that can all get pushed away with some kind of self defence plea if it comes to that - which is won’t. These guys were trafficking kids, they were the scum of the earth and you helped save lives. I don't see the DA wasting its time trying to get you convicted after that… the PR would be terrible. And they don’t need more bad PR.”

He trails off and she knows more is coming.

“Which leads me to Frank and more specifically you and Frank. If they go for aiding and abetting, they’d have a case. Not a huge one but they'd have one. We’re not going to convince anyone you just happened to be in the same warehouse as Frank Castle, that you didn't know he was alive… I'm guessing if they went to speak to your building security she'd have a lot to say… It's going to come out Karen. It has to.”

She knew this too. Even with her fuzzy brain and the throbbing pain in her side, even on Sunday when they fog was closing in and she was losing Frank over and over again she knew that this was it. That no matter what happened, the best she could hope for was Frank alive and incarcerated, and Karen Page’s dirty little secret making front page news.

It doesn’t matter.

She'd rather have him alive and not with her - with no chance of being with her - than the other way around. She thinks of how trite she was with Elektra about pretty much the same thing and she feels no shame. It's the truth. It's all there is.

And she just wants him to be okay. None of this matters. None of it counts if he's not.

“Look they're not after you. There's not really any interest in putting the pretty Bulletin reporter away, but we need to be prepared. You can't speak to anyone alone…”

“Wait Foggy, what's this “we”? What's this attorney client privilege you told Matt about?”
He stops. Frowns.

“I thought… I thought you'd want me to be your lawyer…”

And he looks so sweet and so hopeful and so every goddamn thing that Foggy Nelson is, and she just wants to take him away, wrap him in cotton wool and never let another shitty thing happen to him ever again. Let him do whatever the fuck he wants for the rest of his life because he's fucking earned it.

Except this.

She can't give him this. Even in her weakened and groggy state she knows it.

“Foggy, no. Everything I know about law I learned from my time at Nelson and Murdock. And that wasn't much and it wasn't long. But I'm pretty sure you can't represent me and Frank. That has conflict of interest written all over it. And if not, I don't think you're going to have much time to worry about me.”

He looks sheepish. Guilty even.

“I wasn’t going to take Frank’s case again. I thought it was more important to take yours … if you have one.”

She's not sure whether to hug him or punch him. He's so wrong, so wonderfully wrong. So completely devoutly wrong. His loyalty is limitless and she thinks she might love him more than she loves anyone else on Earth. And that might just include Frank Castle. But he can't do this for her. He can't. He has to do his job.

He has to be Frank's lawyer.

“I was thinking Matt could pick up Frank's case…”
“No Foggy,” she shakes her head, shifts so she’s sitting upright, even though it makes the room swim. “He can’t. Not after the last time.”

Not after the disaster that was *The People v. Frank Castle*. Not after what Matt did when Frank was in the witness stand. Not after what Frank did either.

It’s not that she doesn’t get it. Frank was going to throw his case anyway - there was never going to be another outcome. He was in too far. But it doesn't change what Matt did. It doesn't change how he couldn't see his responsibility as a lawyer clearly enough to do his job. He deserted them, he abandoned Frank and when he came back he couldn’t think further than using it as an opportunity to boast about Daredevil. And she's not sure she can ever forgive him for that. It’s a side of him she can’t quite square away. It’s ugly and insincere and underhand and maybe that makes her a hypocrite but she can live with that. Loving someone doesn’t mean ignoring their faults.

She knows this better than anyone.

“Karen, Frank technically was a client of *Nelson and Murdock* …”

“Which no longer exists,” she pushes her hair out of her face and suddenly she's grateful for this distraction - that it feels like she's doing something rather than worrying about Frank and the bullets inside his body. Rather than giving into the pain in her side and her head. It keeps the hysteria at bay. It keeps the world from falling apart because it feels like she's being productive and useful, like she's making plans and organising and putting together a list of Things Karen Page Needs to do to Ensure Frank Castle doesn't Spend the Rest of his Life in Jail.

It's a fucking long list and at least 80% of it she can file away under “Impossible” (the other 20% split equally between “Improbable” and “Are You Fucking Kidding Me?”) but it's a thing and she can do it.

“Foggy, you said yourself that they're not after me, so I don't need Hell’s Kitchen’s finest lawyer…”

And almost despite himself he smiles shyly.

“I wouldn't say ‘finest’...”

She smiles back and it isn't difficult.
“I would,” she squeezes his fingers. “Foggy they're going to throw everything at him. He needs someone in his corner he can rely on.”

“Karen…”

“That's you Foggy. I trust you.”

He sighs again. Straightens. She knows he’ll do what she asks. He always comes through. The fucking Foggy Cavalry never lets her down. Never lets anyone down.

“This is a fucking mess…”

She nods. It is.

“At least let me be there when the cops talk to you though. I can be as obstructive as fuck and if they decide to formally charge you, I’ll advise you to get a new lawyer - it doesn't have to be Matt. Just let me get you over this so we’re not doing damage control later on.”

He's a gift. A fucking gift. There's no universe in which she deserves him.

“Okay. Thank you Foggy.”

And then he takes a deep breath and looks at her long and hard.

“Don't you ever fucking scare me like that again Karen Page. I can't lose you. I won't.”

He leans down, kisses her temple through her dirty hair, presses his forehead to hers for a second and then glances to the door.

“God, a fucking year ago I was fighting *The People v. Frank Castle* and here I am again. The more things change…”
She nods and it just feels like too much. It's overwhelming and painful and she has no idea how she's going to carry on. It's not just the wound in her side - that'll heal. It's everything. It's what she saw and what she did. It's seeing Frank offer himself up and take bullets for her, die for her. It’s watching the blood bubble out between his teeth and hearing his rasping breath.

She doesn't know how she's going to ever go back to any kind of normality after this, how she is somehow simultaneously going to be some young reporter who does normal things like work and shop and read trashy detective novels, and also the woman who fucked Frank Castle the same night as he died in her arms.

Because he did die. Whether he lives now doesn't change that.

It's too much and she feels choked, suffocated.

“Is there anything I can do for you? Anything you need?”

Foggy. Foggy being the godsend he always is.

She looks up at him. Even in his scruffy state he's a wonderful burst of colour against the bland whiteness of the room and she doesn't want to ask him for this. Doesn't want to make his life harder. But she has to.

So she does.

“I need to see Frank. I need you to make that happen.”

“Karen you know I can't…”

“Please Foggy. Please. Anything you can do.”

He rolls his eyes and then pinches the bridge of his nose, makes a noise that sounds more like an industrial steamer malfunctioning than a sigh.
“I guess I can promise to stop giving Mahoney’s mom cigarettes…”

She snorts and it hurts but somehow it’s worth it.

“You should do that anyway.”

He purses his lips.

“You ever tried to say no to that woman?”

She shakes her head.

“Never met Mama Mahoney.”

“‘Bout as hard as saying no to you.”

“Foggy…”

“Let me go see what I can do. But you do me a solid too. You listen to your goddamn doctor. You get well. You don’t go running off into the night to save batshit mass murderers. You get better boyfriends. No vigilantes.”

She nods. She’ll do it all.

Except for the last part, and he already knows that.

~~~

Whatever the nurse gave her makes her feel stupid and sluggish, liking she’s viewing the world
through murky glass. Or that could just be her. That could just be what existing in the world feels like now. She has, after all, just had a Traumatic Experience. Her brain is still processing and trying to find comfortable places to store everything.

She doesn't think those places exist. No matter what happens, she's different now. Changed. She's not the person she was on Saturday anymore and she's not sure if that's good or bad, hasn't spent enough time with herself to find out.

Matt sits with her while they wait for her doctor. He's also quiet but seemingly in a better mood than earlier. She thinks he's more worried about her than anything else, shocked really. Maybe he needs to process too. Maybe this is the first time he could do it without worrying about her. It's not even vanity to think that way.

He said he was owed an explanation and he is, but now it's almost like he doesn't want to say the words to take him to the place where he can get one.

His anger and humiliation is justified - she won't take that from him and try and convince him of something else. But, like Elektra, she would make the same decision again.

And she tells him as much.

She doesn't realise she's doing it until the words are out of her mouth, and then it's too late to take them back.

“Matt, I’m sorry.”

He lifts his head from his hands and she's almost sure he can see her. That he'd know her lines and curves perfectly if asked. He loves her - she knows that too. She knows Frank was right even when he was wrong. She was breaking Matt’s heart. She's been doing it for a while now.

Sometimes love is enough.

Most of the time it's not.
“For what?”

She can hear the muted sounds of the *Days of our Lives* theme tune again, some nurses erupting into peals of laughter in the hall, a gurney being wheeled past. It all seems so far away. So unfamiliar.

She glances in the direction of the door and then back to Matt.

“Everything.”

It's a copout and they both know it. And she decides she doesn't want to leave it like that so she pushes herself up against the pillows, ignores the flare of pain as she does.

“I don't expect you to understand, but we were worried about you. Elektra and I were worried you were going to get hurt. We would have done anything to make sure that didn't happen, and Frank could help…”

He shakes his head.

“Karen, you don't need to worry about me…”

“But I do. We all do.”

It’s the truth. It’s the one thing that binds them all - her, Foggy, Claire, Elektra and Frank. Whatever their reasons and however close the rest of them may or may not be, they’re all bound by Matt’s secret and a mutual worry for what might happen when he’s eventually found out.

He sighs, leans back in the chair. He's tired too. Outwardly he might not look as bad as Foggy but she has no doubt he's probably covered in bruises - that Claire has been working overtime.

There’s silence for a moment and then she carries on and she tells him what he needs and deserves to hear.

“What you've done ... it's so good Matt. Those people you saved, the kids. This city needs you so
much. We all do. You make things better.”

He runs a hand through his hair. He's frustrated and confused and she thinks he might just leave it at that, just withdraw into himself while he tries to work through everything alone.

But he doesn't.

His jaw is tight and when he speaks it seems like every word he says is punching him in the gut, turning him inside out and tearing itself from his voicebox. But regardless he speaks. He speaks and she listens.

“I never wanted this to happen. I wanted to protect people, stop a repeat of Fisk and let Hell’s Kitchen shine for longer than a second…” he trails off like he's not sure he should continue.

A part of her doesn't want him to either. Part of her wants to live in her ignorance as much as he lives in his. But the other part of her just wants him to be real. Truthful. Just put it out there and let them deal with this like adults.

And he does. In his own way he comes through for them both too.

He faces her and even though he can't see her, she truly believes he can.

“Some of that's a lie…”

He says it like she's caught him out even though she would never have known.

“Matt?”

And suddenly it's like his control breaks and everything he's been keeping inside can’t be held back any longer. “Damnit Karen, I just wanted to show you I could do some good. I wanted to make it up to you. I wanted you to believe in me again. I wanted you to remember what we were like. I wanted…”
He stops abruptly and she can see it written all over his face. He doesn't have to say it. He never did.

_I wanted you…_

Heavy silent words hanging painfully between them, making the air thick and toxic, pulling them both apart for different reasons that really - at the end of the day - are the same. Her lying here, dirty and sore and desperately worried about the man she loves more than she thinks she's ever loved anyone her whole life. Him handsome and kind and in love with her in a way that she doesn't really think she deserves.

She can't take it on though. Can't take on the responsibility for Matt as well. It's too much and she didn't ask for it.

And sometimes love isn't enough. It can't be. It shouldn't be.

And he knows that.

But he's not done and he's got his head back in his hands and he's facing the floor.

“You and I… we’re so off track Karen. I don’t even know you anymore. I just want to go back to when we hadn’t met Frank and I never thought I'd see Elektra again. When _Nelson and Murdock_ was falling apart but we were holding it together. I want you by my side. I want to take you out and show you everything I love about this city. I want to stop feeling like this… missing you like this. We didn't even give it a chance. We could have been so good together…and now, now it's gone and…”

“And what?

“And you…” he pauses and the fight seems to evaporate out of him. “You are so damn hard to get over.”

He's said most of this before. He told her much the same thing the night Frank exploded back into her life, covered in blood and dying, looking for a reason to live even if he didn't know it. Matt’s just more direct, more truthful now, but it's the same even if it hurts in a different way.
And like before she has nothing new to tell him. They can't go back. Anything they had or might have had is over. It's dead and buried.

And her heart breaks a little. And she’s not sure if it’s guilt or if it’s love or if those two things will forever be entwined when it comes to her. But for a second it crushes her and in its own way it’s more intense than the flaring agony in her side, the steady drumbeat in her head.

She used to think Matt wanted to be a hero, she just didn't realise that he wanted to be her hero too.

And it's so hard to be apart from the people you love.

“I'm sorry,” she says again and she wishes he would come closer so she could touch him. But he stays put and leaves her to watch his shoulders sag and see the sadness on his face.

And she is sorry. She truly is. Not because she doesn't feel the same way, not because she feels she owes him anything, not because of any guilt or shame. But because ultimately he is her friend and it's sad when your friends’ dreams are being dashed and their lives falling apart.

He gives her a wan, defeated smile, scratches at something stuck on the arm of the chair before glancing in her direction.

“You were amazing back there with Frank, staying with him like that,” he says. “You're so goddamn loyal…”

“Matt, I'm not…”

“You are. You see the good in everyone. Even someone like Frank - someone who has done the things he's done. And somehow I was enough of an ass that I managed to throw that away. I managed to stop you believing in me.”

“It isn't like that, you don't understand…”

“Then tell me how it is,” and his voice is gentle. “Please Karen, tell me what you want.”
She looks at him and he's so handsome, he's so lost and so good and part of her wishes she loved him. Part of her even imagines it would have been easier, kinder to both of them if she just did.

She knows that's not true though.

It's time.

She can't leave him in the dark anymore. Even if he suspects already, she needs to say the words to him, take away the doubt. Take away the hope.

“Matt, there's something you don't know.”

He lifts his head and she hates the gentle, wary optimism on his face. She hates it. She hates that she has to snuff it out, that somehow he's made this her problem - even though it isn't and shouldn't have been.

But he was her friend once. He was. And maybe you let friends get away with more than they should. Fuck knows, Foggy does it with her.

“Frank and I…”

She has no idea where to go with it.

*Frank and I are in love. Frank and I are fucking. Frank and I are a thing. Frank and I want to be together. Frank and I…*

It turns out she doesn't have to.

Her doctor walks in. She's short and plump with curly hair and a surprising and infectious smile on her face.
And it's both a relief and a disappointment.

“Okay,” she says, scanning her chart briefly, gaze flickering between them. “If your name isn't Karen Page, you need to get your ass out of this room.”

She pauses, glances at Matt. “I’m guessing that’s your ass Loverboy.”

He nods, standing up and taking his cane. “Let's talk about this a bit later Karen. I'd really like to finish this conversation.”

(Later, it can wait…)

For a second she wants to call him back, tell him that didn't work out too well the last time someone said that to her. But her voice chokes in the back of her throat and she sees Frank lying bleeding in her arms and she can’t make herself think about anything else.

So she nods even though Matt can’t see it, and she feels a profound sense of relief as the doctor draws the curtains around her bed.

Those are very clean too.

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The examination passes without incident. The doctor - Georgina Chase - is oddly bubbly for her line of work and she doesn't press for details further than what she needs to know. And Karen suspects she knows a lot already. It's not every day the big bad Punisher and the plucky paralegal that sat beside him during his trial end up in your hospital sporting similar wounds.

They go through medication, healing time, things to look out for, potential complications. Apparently she was on oxygen when she arrived and the doctor is particularly concerned about keeping her lungs smoke free. The wound in her side is bad. Very bad. She's on antibiotics to reduce the chances of infection but it needs to be watched and kept clean and a whole host of things Claire explained when Frank had a similar wound. Despite her grogginess and how it’s pure agony to move every time the doctor asks her for anything, she listens.
It’s okay, she’ll be alright. Rest, pain meds, no smoking, no exertion.

“So keep the late nights and the naked rodeos to a minimum,” the doctor says, shutting her notes.

Despite herself, Karen snorts.

“And bed rest. Seriously find yourself a hobby that keeps you in bed…I hear Days of our Lives is really exciting lately, although there ain’t nothing that’s gonna ever top the demon possession storyline. Or if Keeping up with the Kardashians is more to your style, I don’t think Khloe and Kanye are over that little spat about her thighs.”

“I’ll be sure to catch up on that then.”

Georgina chuckles. “A nurse will be in here soon to help you shower.”

“Thanks.”

“But seriously, stay in bed. Let those boys who wouldn't leave your side do the heavy lifting for a while.”

The second part is easy. The first, not so much.

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Foggy comes through. He always does. He gets her five minutes with Frank. Unsupervised except for him.

Mahoney isn’t happy. In fact, she doesn’t think she’s ever seen him look further from any working definition of “happy”.

“This is totally against protocol,” he says for what must be the millionth time as they wait outside Frank’s room. “I’m breaking so many rules right now, I can’t even keep track.”
“Come on,” Foggy says good-naturedly. “I'm his lawyer.”

Mahoney gives him a dark look, eyes flickering to Karen. “She's not. And God, look at her. She shouldn't be out of bed.”

He's right. She shouldn't. But somehow she is. In a fucking wheelchair she doesn't fucking need wearing a scratchy robe that thankfully does not leave her ass hanging out and slippers that look like they were both made for and by someone who is 107. But she's finally clean and her bandages are fresh and as long as Foggy doesn't make good on his wheelchair sledding threat she can ignore the dull ache in her side and the surprisingly less dull throbbing in her head. She knows there's not much that can cheer her up right now, - no real antidote for the worry and frankly, terror she's feeling - but the fact that he is still willing to try, despite his own worries and reservations, means so much.

“She's my assistant,” Foggy says.

“She's not.”

“Well she was.”

“‘Was’ is not the same as ‘is’.”

“Ugh, details details. To-may-to, to-mah-to.”

“I swear to god Franklin Nelson if my mama gets her hands on one more cigarette, I don't care where it comes from… if I so much as smell a whiff of smoke anywhere near her I'm locking you up and throwing away the key. You and Fisk can share a cell for all I care.”

Foggy opens his mouth to say something and she knows how much he likes this kind of banter but also how sometimes he can misread the situation, so she cuts him off.

“Thank you,” she says to Mahoney. “I know you could get into trouble for this…”
Mahoney rolls his eyes as if she’s nowhere near grasping the reality of the situation, nor the definition of “trouble”.

“Look, just make it quick. And stay outside the red lines around his bed. Don’t touch him, don’t even think about it. And once you’re done I never ever want to hear about this again.”

He doesn’t say anything else. He also looks tired and drawn and she imagines he’d probably prefer being back at the precinct doing some actual police work rather than babysitting Frank. But she’s wildly grateful he’s here - that at least there is someone they can trust not to put poison in his drip, not to shut off whatever machine is keeping him alive.

And God, she wishes that weren’t true.

But, as she enters his room, she knows it is.

The ward is darker than hers, no LED lights, no TVs. The curtains are even a kind of dove grey colour and she can hear the storm outside, the still rolling thunder, the way the lightning flickers against the walls.

The door closes behind her and suddenly she has an overwhelming desire to shut her eyes and beg Foggy to wheel her away. She doesn’t want to see him. Not like this. Not again. She doesn’t want to remember him this way with tubes coming out of him, laid up and feeble in a bed that looks enormous around him.

She wants to remember him big and strong. She wants to remember him flipping off the world with his smug disdain for the laws of nature regarding what should and what shouldn’t kill a man.

She wants to remember him kissing her in front of the Hudson while it shimmered and turned blue in the sunlight.

She wants to remember him in her bed, his hands on her body.

She wants to hold that thought, like he asked her.
But she can’t. She can’t do any of these things. She can’t because the person she’s looking at is nothing like that man she remembers. He’s frail and fragile. Weak. There’s no indication he’s alive save for the occasional choked breath and the sound of the heart monitor; the little brightly coloured green patterns on its screen showing that somehow, somewhere that powerhouse in his chest is still desperately trying to do its job.

Like he did his.

Like he died protecting her.

Because he did die.

She wants to cry. She feels the tears pricking in the corners of her eyes, wipes at them angrily. She can’t be weak now. She can’t. She has to show him that she can be strong for him. That she can be strong without him too.

She pushes herself out of the wheelchair and Foggy takes her arm to steady her, and she loves him all the more that he doesn’t object, doesn’t try and force her to stay sitting.

The rush of pain up her side is expected and exquisite and she has to bite her lip to stop herself crying out. As it is she needs a few seconds to just stand there and wait for it to recede, let her own exhausted endorphins fight back the agony, push it down to where it belongs. She knows it won’t stay and she’ll pay for it later.

She doesn’t care. She might not get this chance again.

She takes an unsteady step towards the bed, then another. Again Foggy doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t even try to keep her out of the red square on the floor. And when she grasps the rail and forces herself to look down at Frank, he releases her and takes a step back and she knows he’s looking away, trying to give her what privacy he can.

He’s such a good friend. She has no words for the level of goodness he possesses. It’s not that she doesn’t deserve him, it’s that the world itself doesn’t either.

But she can worry about making that up to him later.
Instead she takes a moment to just look at Frank, to just see him and study him and not worry about the emotions that come with it, let them happen as they do.

If they do.

His skin is pale and his face drawn and wan, lips chapped and she tells herself that Claire must have seen that, that she must be doing everything she can to ease his levels of discomfort, no matter how small or inconsequential. The covers are pulled up to his torso but even so he looks small and lost in the bed, like it could drown him if it wanted to, just absorb him into the stuffing and take him away.

His face is bruised, eyes purple and swollen shut, a severe cut along his cheek and another on his forehead, crusted blood at the corner of his mouth and she resists the urge to lick her thumb and wipe at it.

She glances at his drip, the thin translucent tube that runs into his the crook of his elbow. She follows the line of it under his skin and then down his arm to his wrist where it’s cuffed to the bed; the silver handcuffs somehow glistening despite the overall dimness of the room.

Somehow that’s what does it. That’s what makes her tears fall.

Those goddamn cuffs holding him prisoner, keeping him in place - they feel worse than anything else. He’s so weak and he’s so fragile and he’s basically standing at death’s doorstep and she’s not convinced he isn’t yelling hard to be let in; to just be allowed to let go and rest for once. And yet… and yet, they still have him chained like an animal. They still think he could hurt someone, that he could punish, that he’s a threat that needs to be watched and accounted for.

And it’s too much and she takes his hand, tries not to look at the bandages covering each finger, tries not feel how dry and cold his skin is.

Her tears land on his arm and she bends down, leans her forehead against his knuckles and her shoulders shake.

She’s aware of how the pain in her side has found new purpose and is ricocheting up her spine and she doesn’t care. She welcomes it. She needs it.
She’s kissing his fingers, whispering to him, telling him to get well, telling him she needs him. The words flow out of her with no real coherence, no real purpose other than to do something. Anything. To let him know that she won’t give up. She’s holding on with two hands and fuck him if he wants her to let go because she fucking won’t.

Because she loves him.

You hear that Frank Castle, I love you. I love you so fucking much and I don’t want to lose you when I only just found you. And sure, sure, you’ve been waiting for me to say it. You’ve been wanting me to. You think I don’t know that? You think I didn’t see it every single fucking time you said it to me. You think I didn’t hear it that night at the cabin, that moment you begged for it without saying the words. You think I didn’t know during that moment we had under Maria’s grave? You think I didn’t hear what you were asking? I did. Fuck you but I fucking did. And I’m saying it now and maybe it’s too fucking late and maybe I’m going to regret this for fucking ever. But if you get through this - if you fucking make it like I know you can because I’ve seen you do it before - I’m gonna tell you this every goddamn day we have left.

She’s aware that she’s crying hard now, choking sobs being wrenched from her gut, their combined hands wet from her tears.

“Come on Frank,” she whispers. “Come on. You’ve got to make it. For me. You’ve got to.”

She thinks if there was any sense to this universe - any cosmic creator that hears prayers and guides the world according to His will - this would be the moment when Frank wakes up. He’d open his eyes and see her there and his fingers would tighten on hers.

In her head she lifts her face to see him and he’s still battered and bruised, he’s still a mess, but she can see the glint of his eyes and that strange little curve of his mouth. In her head his fingers feel stronger on her and he rubs his thumb across the inside of her wrist. In her head he has no handcuffs and he reaches up, cups the back of her neck and leans his forehead against hers, takes in deep breaths of relief. In her head he sits up and gathers her into his arms, kisses her face and tells her everything is going to be okay and they can leave this place behind. In her head he tells her he loves her too.

Sometimes things are easier in her head.

He does none of these things and there isn’t any sense to this universe.
He lies there, more dead than not, the sound of his heart monitor filling the space and bouncing off the walls and ceiling much like the light in her room. He doesn’t move. He stinks of blood and something medicinal. The smell of gunsmoke clings to him like it lives inside him.

The only sound he makes is a low and desperate wheezing as his breath whistles out between his teeth and she half expects that to stop at any second.

He’s not going to make it. She knows this. They might have some hope now. They might be able to fool themselves into believing that these machines are doing some good and keeping him alive. They might be able to trust in the science and keep the faith in their hearts, but she knows his time is limited, his days numbered. He’s going to die. And she can’t save him.

“I love you Frank … so much,” she says, kissing his fingers again and then touching his cheekbone with her thumb. “Know that.”

It's tempting fate - she shouldn't actually voice it, but she can't bottle it up inside anymore. If he's going to get taken away from her she wants her cards on the table. She wants the world to know what it's stealing from her. To answer for it.

And then she just can’t anymore and the tears flow and she sobs like a baby, loud and long. And she doesn’t object as Foggy leads her back to the chair, nor as he pushes her out of the door and down the corridor back to her ward.

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The curtains are very clean.

Foggy helps her back into bed, covers her. She’s managed to swallow some of her tears, others still defy her and creep out of the corners of her eyes.

He hands her tissues, water. There’s some congealed looking hospital food on her tray but the thought makes her stomach heave.

“The police will be here tomorrow,” he says. “I’ll brief you in the morning before they arrive, talk this through a little.”
She nods. She doesn’t really care. She feels resigned and defeated and if they want to charge her, put her behind bars, she’s not convinced she has the strength to object. She thinks she was right that night she told Frank she wasn’t strong, that she can barely get through the day without falling apart.

(You say that like you think it matters)

But it does matter. She’s nowhere near as strong as she hoped, as she once might have believed.

Foggy stands awkwardly next to her bed. She wants him to go home, to eat, to rest, to see Marci, but she doesn’t have it in herself to ask him to. She’s just too scared of being alone and she loves that he seems to know it and she doesn’t have to say it. That he doesn’t expect anything from her.

Outside she can hear the rain spraying hard against the window and she just wants to lose herself in it. She knows this storm is different. It’s dirty and nasty and it’s flowing upwards from the sewers and she wonders if that might not be where she belongs anyway.

The world feels empty, strangely devoid of everything that gave it colour, that kept it robust and alive. It feels like a shell now, hollow and hard. Chitinous. She's rolling around in it alone, looking for a place to rest and sleep, a place where she can feel something that isn't this anymore. If fear and grief are supposed to feel the same she wonders if experiencing them both at once is just too much, if anyone gets out of it unscathed.

She thinks she knows the answer.

“I love him Foggy,” she says and he looks at her sadly. “You asked me once if I was falling in love with him and I didn't answer. But I was and I am.”

He nods, purses his lips.

“I know. I knew then too.”

She lets out a humourless laugh. It sounds more like a bark - dry and self-deprecating. Of course he knew. Of course he did. She’s been such a fool.
“He survived bullets before,” Foggy says softly and she knows he’s not convinced either.

“Not four of them.”

She counts them off in her head.

One. Two. Three.

Four.

One for Maria. One for Lisa. One for Frank Junior.

One for her.

“They got three of them out already. Fourth one isn’t doing any damage.”

“Yeah,” she nods as she closes her eyes, gives into the that murky darkness of painkillers and dirty rain.

That’s the one that’ll kill him though. Of that she has little doubt.
Now and then there's a light in the darkness, feel around till you find where your heart went

Chapter Notes

Okay I am sorry this has taken so long, but this part of the story is so tricky. Also I needed to cover a lot of ground and attempt to keep the pacing right. Hopefully the next update won't take too long.

Again, I am so grateful for the wonderful reaction I have had to this fic. Thank you all for the messages and the reviews. They really are what keeps me going and stops me just throwing in the towel when things get a bit tough or tricky like this chapter has been.

So thank you and I love you all.

Also bear in mind my knowledge of the US legal system is really limited to courtroom dramas, but as far as I could tell and judging by Frank's trial in the show itself, this is also true for the showrunner. Hence I am not going to beat myself up regarding the poetic licence I plan on using.

Title is from *Pieces* by Rob Thomas (yes, again and no, not that remix version).

Foggy’s been feeding Pickle. He tells her that as he’s sitting on the edge of her bed the next morning waiting for the cops to arrive.

She feels wildly guilty for not asking earlier, but he waves her off. Tells her it's no bother, devil cats are low maintenance after all. Food, water, souls. Easy-peasy lemon squeezy.

He's looking better too. She sent him home, told him to shower, get some rest. Told him that the staff are 90% sure she's not gonna die and they're only allowed a 50% margin for error. He'd glared at her but he'd eventually gone, taken Matt with him and stopped any chance of them continuing their conversation.

She thinks on some level Matt was probably grateful. She knows she was. She needed a reprieve after seeing Frank like that. She needed time to process, time to think. And even though she didn't want to admit it, she needed time to grieve too.

She’s not really sure for what yet. She tells herself it’s not for his life, because that’s not over. She tells herself it’s for what they had and what they lost and what they might never have again.
She tells herself a lot of things.

But the fact is she’s not sure how much of any of that she could have done if she needed to tell Matt everything there and then, if she needed to relive it in any way other than something cold and clinical. And then of course there’s the other problem. The problem of whether she should even talk about them - about him and what it is they have together. It seems reckless somehow, tempting fate again to try and explain what is that they share - and she knows fate doesn’t need tempting. Not now. The bitch is willing strike at even the most trivial and imagined slight.

She shifts on the bed - the mattress is hard and unforgiving but it's oddly not all that uncomfortable - she's definitely slept in worse. It's just not hers.

Nothing here is hers. Not anymore.

Foggy touches her knee through the blankets, asks how she is and she shrugs. She guesses she's okay. They won't give her coffee and it makes her feel more at odds with the world than she should be. Other than that she's still sore. The painkillers dull her mind as much as they dull her body and make her feel like she could float away. She hates it but it's a good thing. She’s not really sure how much she can take, knows that letting herself feel the full weight of her helplessness and frustration, her fear, would probably cripple her. She's given up deriding herself for that. She doesn’t always have to be strong. She doesn’t always need to hold back tears - extreme duress or not.

She asks if he's heard any more about Frank and he shakes his head, says there's no change.

Truthfully she didn't expect anything else but it still stings and she closes her eyes, tries just for a second to imagine a world without him, a time and place utterly devoid of his presence. It seems weirdly familiar, like a more intense version of what she's feeling now. Something she almost thinks she could slip into, get used to without even noticing it.

That seems worse than anything else and she chokes back a sob.

“Hey,” Foggy takes her hand, squeezes it. “Don't write him off that easy. Don't do that.”

He sounds more confident than he did last night and she doesn't know if he's just better at faking now or if he's genuinely decided Frank’s chances are better than he thought. But he can't disguise that hint of something else in his voice. Worry. Desperation maybe.
Begging.

He wants Frank to be okay too. She’s not sure how much of that desire is for her sake or because Foggy’s decided that Frank is not as bad as he initially thought, but it makes her feel less alone. It makes her feel like there’s someone else who gets it. Who understands. Even if he doesn’t. Even if he can’t.

“I’ll let you know if I hear anything,” he says. “I doubt Mahoney is going to let you in again.”

She nods. He’s right, and it kills her a little that Frank’s here under the same roof and she can’t see him, can’t sit by his side the way she did when he was at her apartment. Can’t speak to him and bring him things. Help him. It feels so unfair, so unspeakably cruel, but she guesses that’s just the way things are.

Unfair.

Cruel.

She realises with a start that this is a glimmer of what happened to Frank when he came home from Iraq. Not quite the same, but similar enough to make her believe in curses and destiny and the cruel irony of the Fate, should such a being exist. Frank also got a day, one day for all the good things, one day that wasn’t nearly enough for everything he wanted to do. And then he lost it all. He lost every last thing that made him happy.

The only difference is that she's the one left trying to put all the pieces back together, trying to force the world back into making some kind of sense.

She gets it now. She gets him in a way she could only play lip service to before. She gets that need to go out there and find some kind of peace in revenge.

In punishment.

She gets why that beautiful day in front of the Hudson with his hand tight in hers - the night that came after - is something she needs to keep. To preserve. She realises why she'd want to kill anything that threatened it.
The more things change…

“Anyway,” Foggy voice cuts through her thoughts. “Apparently they're sending Delaney over…”

She doesn't know Delaney but it doesn't surprise her that Foggy does. He knows all the detectives at the precinct by now. He's doing so much and he's come so far.

They all have really. In their own ways.

“... he's alright. I haven't really worked with him before.” Foggy continues. “Just remember they are here because they need your help. Not the other way around. Right now you don't owe them anything. So just tell them what they want to know - I’ll jump in if they start pulling any shit.”

“Everything? About me and Frank too?”

He nods. “If it comes up. They can't arrest you for screwing Frank Castle… I’m assuming that's happened by now?”

She bites her lip. “Yeah.”

“Okay,” he gives her a wan smile. “This is going to be okay. They're not interested in arresting you. Just remember that.”

And that's a joke too. It's not that she's worried about herself. She finds she doesn't care all that much. Maybe she will when the painkillers wear off and she doesn't feel so goddamn dull anymore, but right now the only real things she cares about is Frank and keeping her friends safe.

“They’ve been really sketchy on the details,” Foggy says and he sighs and picks at a thread on the duvet. “I don’t like it if I’m honest, feels like they’re planning something. They haven't released any names, except for Frank’s of course, and most of the public information has been about an “incident” at a warehouse and they're investigating possible connections to the mob. There's been zero mention of Smirnov, less of Vanessa. They've even managed to keep the fact that there was human trafficking going on out of the papers.
“Dunno how they're doing it. That department is as leaky as an old rusty boat.”

She nods. She doesn't need the papers to tell her what happened though. She sees it every time she closes her eyes. Her hair is still singed and the smoke in her lungs still poisonous. Frank is still more dead than not. There's no article that can put that into words. No article that should be able to.

Still, Foggy is right. It is weird.

“I wonder what's going on?”

He shrugs. “Could be they don't want to say anything too soon. Could be the department itself is implicated. I think if there's one thing both Fisk and Frank showed us it's that you can't really trust the justice system in Hell’s Kitchen.”

“They must know though,” she says. “They must know it's Smirnov. They can't keep that hidden forever. The whole damn city knew who he was.”

Foggy shrugs. “Let's just see how this shakes out first.”

She purses her lips. She doesn't like it. Not one little bit. And that sixth sense that Ellison seems so enamoured with is fighting through the blandness of the meds and weighing in heavily, whispering to her that there's something else going on, that they're biding their time, creating a narrative, a story.

She says as much to Foggy and he nods.

“They're always telling a story. And today they start telling us what that story is.”

He gives up on the thread, stands, walks to the window, pulls the curtain back a little. It's dark outside, that kind of gloomy day that can only be made better by comforters and hot chocolate, woolly socks and snuggling in front of the TV… Reading bad prose by angry old men and watching another angry man’s face wrinkle in disgust.
You tell someone their baby was ugly?

She's not going to get any of that and it feels like a lost chance, a missed opportunity.

Grey days for grey moods.

“It's going to be okay Karen,” Foggy says again. “You're going to be okay.”

She sighs, pushes her hair out of her face. “I don't care about me.”

“Well I do,” his voice is firm and slightly harsh and she looks up at him - him standing there in his smart suit, his lovely lovely face. “I do. And Matt does. And Claire does. And Frank does. And Ellison does. So stop making this hard.”

It's a little shake, a little jolt, some old-fashioned tough love designed to break her out of her melancholy. And the worst part is he's right. He's always right, but she can't help but feel this is all pointless, that nothing will change. Nothing but everything. Because Frank is still walking a fine line between life and death and even if he somehow comes back to her, they have miles to go before they can find their way back to one another.

And she accepts that might not happen either.

She had everything.

She lost it.

She didn't hold on.

She let go.

And she feels those tears welling up thick and heavy beneath her eyelids, burning and then trickling down her cheeks.
“Hey come on,” Foggy walks back to the bed, hands her a wad of tissues. “I didn't mean…”

“No, it's okay,” she sniffs, wipes at her eyes. “I'm just…”

“It's okay,” he touches her shoulder, squeezes. “I know.”

Thunder rolls outside long and loud and they both look to the window again, the pristine curtains, horribly clinical and white. Ugly in their purity.

Somewhere she imagines them shot with holes and streaked with blood. Tainted. Stained. Marked. Like she was. She doesn't know why but the idea comforts her. It makes her feel less out of place, more a part of her own skin.

Hell’s Kitchen really is hell. And once it's gets inside you, settles into your bones and becomes part of you, it never gets out.

And she can't help but think it's going to get worse before it gets better. That they're going to have to travel all the way down to Dante’s ninth circle before they're left to claw their way up again.

That's going to stay with her too.

“Karen Page?”

She turns to the door.

There's a man there. He's tall and dark, his eyes an intense yellow green. He’s holding a shabby fake leather bag and he has the kind of bewildered expression that comes with overwork and lack of sleep. His hat and coat are wet and he's dripping dirty puddles onto the floor.

She almost feels sorry for him. Almost. That precinct may be chaos.
“Delaney,” says Foggy and holds out his hand.

“Mr Nelson.”

It’s a grudging handshake which both of them drop sooner than they should. She guesses it’s fair to say there’s no love lost between them but there’s no true animosity either. Two men both doing their jobs and hopefully staying within the parameters of the law.

Maybe it'll be okay.

*Maybe.*

She tells herself a lot of things.

“You didn't need a lawyer Miss Page,” Delaney says as he dumps his bag on the floor, pulls up a chair. “We're just talking.”

Foggy shrugs, takes a step back towards the bed. “I like to talk too.”

Delaney gives him a dark look but he doesn't say anything as he takes off his hat, settles into the seat, and pulls a tape recorder and a notebook out of his bag.

He moves a lot. Fidgets. He shuffles papers, opens files and closes them without really seeing what's in them, hunts through every coat pocket for something he can’t find. His leg bounces too, and his hair seems to bother him because he runs his hand through it a few times before touching his chin and is seemingly surprised by the stubble he finds there.

“Alright,” he says eventually and he turns on the recorder and places it at the foot of the bed, it's little red light flashing annoyingly.

He says the time and date, lists his name, hers and Foggy’s, and then pulls out a pen with a chewed cap and scratches a few things into his book.
She looks at Foggy and he shrugs, shakes his head.

And then Delaney is watching her and despite all his shuffling, she can see his cat eyes are bright and sharp, boring into her with an intensity that tells her there’s something very specific he wants out of this. She’s just not sure yet if he’s the kind of man who gets what he wants. He might not seem like it but she’s learned not to judge people by their appearances.

Either way she waits, braces herself for whatever it is he plans to start with.

He clears his throat, glances dismissively at Foggy. “How are you Miss Page?”

The question catches her off guard and she thinks that was the intention. Soften her up. Reel her in. Build trust. She’s seen this before. If she falls for it he’d probably be able to get her to confess to every unsolved crime in Hell’s Kitchen and then some.

She’s not that stupid.

Maybe once. Not now.

(Maybe it's not your first rodeo)

(Maybe it isn't)

“Let’s not do this,” she says. “Ask me what you want to ask.”

He looks at her long and hard, eyes narrowed and mouth drawn into a straight line and she can almost believe they’ve taken a step towards understanding one another.

“Okay,” he says pinching the bridge of his nose. “No bullshit.”

“No bullshit.”
“Let’s start at the beginning then.”

He glances at his notes, shuffles some more papers and when he speaks his voice is harder, more professional. “At approximately 5am on Sunday morning Detective Mahoney found you on the roof of the warehouse on 11th and 44th. The building was on fire, there were numerous bodies from well-known cartels and other criminal elements in Hell’s Kitchen, and Frank Castle - also known as The Punisher and thought to be deceased - was with you. You were both severely injured - you were going into shock from blood loss because of a stab wound and Mr Castle had been shot four times in the back.

“Does that sound accurate?”

“Yes.”

“So Miss Page, I’d like you to walk me through the events that led up to that moment ... in your own words.”

Foggy puts a comforting hand on her shoulder and he nods. “It’s okay.”

She thinks of Matt and Elektra, Claire. She thinks of Frank. She thinks of the people that mean the most to her in the world and she knows without a doubt that she can do this for them. She can protect them and she can protect this city.

After all this, it’s the least she can do.

She won’t fail again.

Another glance at that hideous pristine curtain, a slight shift so she’s sitting up properly in the bed and doesn’t feel so vulnerable, and then she takes a breath and starts to speak.

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She tells him the truth. Most of it at least. As much as she can say with a clear conscience.
She starts with how she’s had a bad feeling about Smirnov for a really long time. How she couldn’t put her finger on it but when something seems too good to be true it usually is. She tells him how she started investigating without much help from the paper because her boss thought she was being paranoid - they can ask him if they want. She tells him she eventually found out that Daredevil and his masked lady friend were interested as well. They had the same bad feeling, said it felt like Wilson Fisk all over again.

She talks in broad strokes and she’s mildly surprised that he doesn't press her for details and mostly just lets her speak. She expected him to drill down, demand exact information, times, dates, descriptions, but he doesn’t. And she isn’t sure whether to be grateful or wary.

The first time he interrupts is when she says that the masked woman became worried Daredevil was in over his head and asked her if she could contact Frank Castle for backup.

“So you knew Frank Castle was alive?”

She glowers at him. “I think anyone who was paying attention knew that.”

“Karen…” Foggy's voice is soft, a hint of warning in it.

“Yes, yes I knew he was alive.”

“And you never bothered to report it?” Delaney asks.

“My client isn't required to do the precinct’s job for them,” Foggy again, and she wants to kiss him for his fierceness.

“Aside from that, can I ask why you didn't?”

Delaney’s sounds amiable and she knows this is another calculated move, a fake gentleness to keep her talking, make her want to give out more information than she should.
It doesn’t matter either way.

She sighs, rubs her eyes. “Frank Castle isn’t the bogeyman. Frank Castle is a man who served his country and his country turned around and kicked him in the teeth for it. The city took his wife and his children. You’d think that somewhere someone would have a little sympathy for that.”

“And that person was you? Of all the people Frank Castle knew - his extended family, his friends, his military buddies - he chooses you as his emotional sounding board. You don’t find that a little suspicious?”

She’s mildly surprised by the sudden flare of anger in her gut, that hint of rage that strangles her and makes her voice low and dangerous.

“Don’t try to pretend I’m some naive fool Detective.” She stops, bites her lip, thinks of Frank lying only a few hundred metres away, maybe dying. “I write about what happens in this city every day. I know evil and he's not it. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him. The least I could do is not betray him after that.”

Delaney narrows his eyes and then hunches over to write in his notebook.

She takes the moment to glance at Foggy and there's something on his face that she can't quite interpret. Something almost calculating. He catches her eye and when she quirks an eyebrow he shakes his head almost imperceptibly.

Delaney looks up again, chews on the cap of his pen. “When you say the city took his wife and his children what do you mean?”

She's about to answer but Foggy jumps in. “That's privileged information that Ms Page is only aware of due to her employment at Nelson and Murdock. You'd need a court order for it.”

Delaney purses his lips.

“This…” he indicates the two of them. “It's a little unorthodox.”
“Only if you plan on arresting Miss Page. I thought we were just talking,” Foggy also sounds amiable, pleasant. Completely menacing.

A sigh and Delaney shuffles his notes again, seemingly abandons his initial line of questioning.

“So it’s your statement that Frank Castle wasn't caught up in this whole mess from the start?”

She frowns. “Wait, what?”

“He wasn't involved in Smirnov’s organisation? He wasn’t involved with the money laundering or any of the organisation’s other criminal activities? He wasn't trafficking people?”

There's a moment she doesn't know what to say. It's the most ridiculous thing anyone has ever suggested to her. It's not just wrong, it’s an anathema to everything Frank Castle is.

“No Foggy.” She shakes him off and somehow the anger makes her feel better than she has since she woke up. It makes her feel like she’s doing something instead of just waiting for all the bad things to happen, like she’s taking back some kind of control.

She leans forward and she doesn’t care as the pain shoots up her side and the bandage presses uncomfortably against her. It doesn’t matter.

None of it matters.

And when she speaks her voice is tight, controlled, simmering with anger that threatens to explode into screaming rage at any second.

“Frank Castle might be brutal. He might be like a fucking pitbull when he's onto something. But he has a code. If you think he’d ever be involved with trafficking or hurting innocent people you need to
fire your fucking profilers because they don't know shit about Frank Castle. That man is a lot of things; a lot of things that you want to put him away for, a lot of things I don’t like much either. You all think of him as this soldier who cracked, a man that spent too much time at war until he couldn’t ever find peace again, and maybe you’re right. But you forget what he was first. You forget that he was a husband and a father. You forget that we wouldn’t be sitting here like this having this conversation if he was nothing but some mindless psychopath. So if that’s your starting point - if that’s what you really think is going on here - then this conversation is pointless.”

She holds his gaze for a long time before she settles back into the bed. For the first time since the interview started she doesn’t feel like she’s in a position of weakness. In fact she feels stronger than she has since she woke up. Even Delaney’s dubious stare can’t take that away.

For a few very long seconds there’s silence, but eventually he takes a breath, glances at his notes again, and the mood breaks.

“You say he saved your life. Tell me about that.”

She does. She tells him how Frank saved her from a hail of bullets in her apartment. She tells him about the diner too, stops to explain that yes, she knows she said he kidnapped her, and yes she knows how serious it is to lie to a police officer. She knows all these things but the fact is Frank saved her life then and he saved it again the night she was kidnapped by the Yakuza all those months ago and then yes, again on Sunday morning.

Foggy helps out with some of the details, dates, times.

“So you're asking me to believe that six months ago you were kidnapped at the warehouse on 11th and Mr Castle happened to save your life. This convinced you he could be trusted? This “mystery incident” you never reported and of which we have almost no records?”

“I'm not asking you to believe anything…” she starts but Foggy cuts her off.

“Don't answer that. Come on Detective, you're better than this.”

Delaney shakes his head. “Okay so getting back to the original question: when this friend of Daredevil’s asked for help, you went to Frank Castle instead of taking what you knew to the police?”
She nods.

“How did you get hold of Frank Castle? You know where he lives?”

“I have ways of contacting him.”

“You care to share them?”

“No she doesn’t,” Foggy again. “My client is a reporter. She has to protect her sources.”

Delaney rolls his eyes. “We’ll see about that.”

He looks at his papers again, jots a few things down.

“So, what I have here so far, is that contrary to the evidence that you saw in that courtroom and contrary to everything you know about Frank Castle, you decided to reach out to him for help. You didn’t think that maybe that was a bad idea, that maybe it was going to backfire?”

“My client isn’t on trial Delaney,” Foggy sounds almost bored as he pulls up a chair, flings himself into it. “This isn’t a cross-examination.”

Delaney sighs. “Okay, let’s forget about why you did what you did for now. What happened on Saturday night?”

Foggy nods gently, tells her to answer.

It’s going to be okay. It has to be.

“Daredevil and his friend came to see me early on Sunday morning about 3:15. Frank Castle had gone to see them but had disappeared,” she pauses. “They thought I might know where he was.”
“And did you?”

“Not at the time, no.”

Delaney indicates for her to continue.

“We figured he would be at the warehouse on 11th because that’s where Daredevil and his friend seemed to think something was happening.”

“Something to do with Smirnov?”

“Yes. They had uncovered information that there was a delivery that was important but they didn’t know what it was or when it was going to arrive.”

“Okay,” Delaney opens a folder and then closes it again. “What happened next?”

“We went to the warehouse.”

“Now this was the same one Frank Castle saved you from on…” he consults his notes. “December 14th?”

He turns to Foggy for confirmation instead of her. It’s just as well. The actual date doesn’t mean much to her. It isn’t emblazoned into her memory like everything else about Frank and her… and this thing between them that she doesn’t understand but somehow fits like a glove. Somehow that night seems both integral and separate to everything they are. It’s the start, the origin, the beginning of everything. It’s also both the nexus and the outline; everything that is them is somehow both in- and outside of it. The night she was kidnapped, the night she nearly died.

The night Frank Castle told her he was falling in love with her and she couldn’t help but fall back.

She shakes her head. She can’t. She can’t think of it now. Frank’s here and he’s dying and she needs to get this over with. She needs to save him even if she doesn’t know how to yet.
“Yeah,” she says glancing at Foggy. “December 14th. The mystery incident.”

Delaney ignores the jibe. “Okay so what happened next?”

She tells him about how they went into warehouse after Daredevil, how the “delivery” turned out to be people they’d trafficked seemingly from everywhere it’s possible to traffic people. She tells him about Matt swooping down from the ceiling, how Elektra threw herself headlong into the fray and she went upstairs to see if she could find Frank.

“And did you?”

She bites her lip, forces herself to say the words; to describe how he’d been tortured, how she saved him. How she owed it to him because of all the times he saved her.

In more ways than one.

“So Mr Castle shot Mr Smirnov?”

“He was defending me. Smirnov would have killed me. He would have killed him too.”

“You sure about that?”

“Absolutely.”

It bothers her that they’re playing this game. Foggy would tell her Delaney is just doing his job. And that is true. But she’s had encounters with the cops before and she’s not stupid. There’s a reason they’re not pointing fingers at Smirnov’s organisation even though they know it isn’t sustainable. There’s a reason she’s not being asked any hard questions.

“To your knowledge had Mr Castle met Mr Smirnov before?”

She shakes her head.
“So as far as you know Mr Castle had no dealings with Mr Smirnov or his organisation?”

“No. He did not,” she glances at Foggy again. He’s not looking at her but his face is doing that thing again and she knows he’s seeing something she isn't. But she can’t worry about that now.

“Why were you on the roof with Mr Castle?”

She sighs, closes her eyes. She can picture it. The explosion, the fire, how Matt and Elektra managed to get everyone out the building and how even then the goddamn mob wouldn’t let them go.

Everything that happened after.

She tells him the truth. There's no reason not to.

He takes notes. Copious notes because apparently the tape recorder isn’t good enough. He’s old school she realises. Old school without being all that old. And she has no idea what to make of any of this.

He doesn’t push. Again he seldom asks for details and she wonders if this is just round one and they’re going to go back to all the missing bits and pieces, all the ridiculous holes in her story.

But he doesn’t. He lets her finish and doesn’t say anything for a long time after she stops talking.

She can hear rain beating against the window and, if she strains, the sound of the Hell’s Kitchen morning Panic Traffic. She imagines she can hear the beeping of the machine keeping Frank alive, the steady hum of it. His ragged breath whistling through his teeth.

“Okay Miss Page, just a few final questions,” Delaney puts his pen into his coat pocket. “Who is Daredevil and who is his friend?”

She’s surprised by how easy the lie comes, how convincing it sounds even to herself.
“I don’t know.”

“No idea? You seem to spend a lot of time with him and his friend. You write about him a lot. He knows where you live. He seems awfully worried about you, but you don't have a clue who he is?”

She barks out a humourless laugh, one that sounds surprisingly similar to Frank’s.

“You don’t think if I knew who he was I’d have splashed it over the front page of the Bulletin. You don't think my boss would have loved me for that?”

Lie number two.

“Again Delaney, it's not my client's job to do yours,” Foggy’s eyes are bright, glittering and for a moment she almost doesn’t recognise him. He might be wonderfully humble in the courtroom, he might project this sweet affable persona completely at odds with the sleazy cutthroat cliche of the law profession, but he's never been able to hide from her. His mind is sharp and she can almost see the wheels turning in his head.

“Alright, so Vanessa Marianna shot Mr Castle?”

“Yes, she was involved with Wilson Fisk…”

“I know who she is,” he says gravely. “Where is she now?”

“You should try the morgue.”

Delaney stares at her for a few moments and she has the distinct impression she's undergoing some invisible lie-detector test. That they're playing some game of chicken and he's waiting for her to break, tell him she was joking, ‘fess up to some deep dark secret.

She doesn't. She doesn't look away for anyone anymore.

“Okay, so you’re wounded after this Nobu stabbed you with his swinging blade?”
“Kyoketsu-Shoge.”

“I'm sorry?”

“His ‘swinging blade’ is called a Kyoketsu-Shoge.”

“Okay, he stabs you with this ‘Kyoketsu-Shoge’ and then him and Mr Castle get into a fight.”

“He was protecting me.”

“Yes,” says Delaney and there's a hint of derision in his tone. “Again.”

“Again,” she agrees.

“And then what?”

“Nobu managed to wound Frank and he was going to kill him, so I shot him.”

“You were protecting him this time?”

She nods.

“Like you went to save him from Smirnov.”

“Yes.”

“So again?”
“Yes.”

“So then he picks you up and then he’s heading for the fire escape and when he sees the shooter he turns around to shield you from the bullets?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why?”

“Why would he do that? Saving your life is one thing, but sacrificing his own is quite another”

She shakes her head. “Why are you so determined not to hear what I’m saying? Frank Castle will sacrifice himself for the people he cares about. He’s a good man and your information on him is incomplete.”

“Complete it for me then.”

Foggy rolls his eyes and makes a show of crossing his legs. “Again…”

“Yes okay. Not Miss Page’s job to do mine.”

Delaney rolls his eyes too and Foggy purses his lips.

“You catch on quick…”

Delaney ignores him, puts his notebook back into his bag, along with his papers and files. He glances at the tape recorder still blinking at the end of the bed and then he straightens in his chair.

For a while he says nothing but she can see a muscle jumping in his jaw and his leg still
bouncing.

And then he speaks.

“Okay then, let me do my job, let me tell you what I think… since we’re just talking and all. I haven’t read the full profile on Mr Castle, but I can tell you this much. Most of this story is predicated on Mr Castle saving your life often at great risk to himself. The rest of it is you returning the favour. He’s taken bullets for you. My guess is that you’d do the same for him.

“You don’t do that for just anyone.”

She blinks tears out of her eyes.

“But he does it for you and you do it for him because he’s in love with you.”

Heavy swallow and she looks at Foggy and he gives her another tight nod.

“Frank and I… we’re close.”

Delaney cocks his head as she hesitates and she knows it’s written all over her face. Every kiss, every touch, every word.

“I see…” he doesn't sound surprised. If anything she detects a hint of relief in his voice.

She refuses to flinch though. She *refuses*. The media is going to make enough of a circus out of this when it comes out. She can already imagine the headlines - *Glutton for Punishment, Lady of the Castle, Sleeping with the Enemy*. She won't start grovelling now. She isn't sorry. She never could be.

So she holds his gaze and stares him down.

Let him judge. She’s going to need to get used to it anyway.
He rubs a hand through his hair.

“How long?”

And that’s such an obvious question but it’s impossible to answer because she has no idea what he’s asking. How long what? How long has it been since Frank fell in love with her? Since she fell back? Since she realised he would die for her? And she would do anything not to let him? Since he’s been sleeping in her bed? Since he’s been making her feel safe? Since he’s been fucking her?

All of these things are important and they all have different answers and she doesn’t know which one he wants.

“Not long,” she says. “A few weeks.”

“So basically you'd say anything to keep him from being implicated?” He sounds genuinely curious.

“No, that's not it at all…”

“Alright,” says Foggy, standing up and straightening his jacket. “Miss Page has been more than helpful.”

“Just a few more…”

“No. In case you hadn't noticed my client has been severely injured investigating something your department should have been investigating and saving people your department should have been saving. She's suffered great trauma and loss. She's been more than candid, done more of your job for you than she should. Enough is enough.”

“We’re just going to come back.”

“Come back then. We’ll put out the good china.”
She can see Delaney isn’t really done, but he doesn’t argue. She’s not convinced it has much to do with Foggy either.

He stands, picks up his bag, grabs the tape recorder off the bed. His coat is still dripping and she can see a small puddle of water on the floor next to his feet. He seems even more tired than when they started.

Again, she almost feels sorry for him.

“Okay Miss Page,” he shoves his hat onto his head. “That's all for now. But don't leave town. We are going to have more questions when you feel better.”

She shrugs. “Where would I go?”

He looks at her again and she thinks that maybe underneath all that grit, all that cynicism, she sees a hint of sympathy, a moment of genuine softness.

And then he nods and heads for the door but she calls him back.

“Detective?”

“Yes?”

“Detective where are all those people now?”

“I also have to protect my privileged information,” he says but there’s no malice in his words. It’s just a statement of fact.

“Okay.”

And then he seemingly relents a little. “We’re doing everything we can for them Miss Page but it’s not easy. Our resources are limited and some don’t speak English at all. Most of them aren’t even related to one another.”
She nods, tries not to see their frightened faces, tries to block it out but she can’t.

“Good luck,” she says.

He tips his hat. “Thank you.”

And then he’s gone and again it’s her and Foggy and the terrible storm outside.

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For a few seconds after he leaves they’re both silent and so is the storm and all she can hear is phones ringing and the muffled sounds of morning TV.

And then Foggy pulls out his phone and starts dialling, jams it between his ear and his shoulder as he goes to his briefcase and pulls out a slim folder and starts paging through it.

“Hi Charlie, yeah I’m good thanks. I’m still at the hospital,” he pauses and pulls out a piece of paper. “Charlie, I’m going to be in in a couple of hours. I need you to pull everything we have on the People v Londono. Also Ritchie and St John. I need you to summarise the judges’ comments on exclusion of evidence. Yes okay throw in the People v Collins too.”

He gives her a serious nod but his eyes are shining and in that moment she knows he’ll come through. It’s not a feeling based on any real fact or even on faith in his ability even though she has that. It’s more like a sense, a knowledge that seems to come from something outside rather than in. A whisper in her ear, a ghostly hand on her shoulder, a prophecy. For an instant it lifts her spirits in a way she hasn’t felt since she saw Frank sitting at that rickety table drinking coffee and waiting for her.

And then it’s gone and Foggy is off the phone.

“Do you know where Frank’s files are from Nelson & Murdock?” he asks as he slips the folder back into his briefcase.
“Matt has them. He took everything when we closed down. I still have copies though if he doesn’t.”

“That’s okay, I need to go see him anyway now.”

She pushes herself up and tries to fold her legs under her but a warning flare of pain makes her decide against it.

“What’s going on Foggy?”

He looks at her and she can see he's torn between running off on whatever this new mission of his is and sharing it with her. And god, she's torn too. But the prospect of being here alone all day with nothing to hold onto, with just the thought of Frank and his machines and the fate that waits for him after is just too much.

He sees it too.

And he always was the best friend anyone could ever ask for.

He takes a breath and she can see the barely contained excitement in his eyes.

“Karen that wasn't an interview. That was bullshit. He didn't push you, he didn't ask any hard questions. He let you get away without giving much in the way of detail at all. I thought I was going to need to do a lot more than I did.”

“So? Maybe he's just a crap cop. Maybe he's just tired and overworked.”

“Maybe… probably. Or he's a patsy. It doesn't matter. All he was interested in was seeing if he could implicate Frank in this in a more sinister way than he is, see how much you know and how easy it would be to discredit you. They don’t give a fuck about what you had to say about anything else,” he pauses, almost breathless. “Why the angle?”

She’s not following and she doesn't think she can blame the painkillers for how dull she's being.
And then it's like a lightbulb goes off over her head.

“They already have their story.”

“Yes. They do.”

“And that story is Frank. And that story is that I’m not trustworthy because of how I feel about him.”

Foggy nods but somehow he's still smiling.

“How is this a good thing Foggy?”

“Because they shouldn't need to construct this narrative. His initial charges are still standing. There’s enough there to put him away for the rest of his life.”

She frowns. “Still not hearing the positive in this Foggy.”

And then he grins and he looks so excited she almost can't bear to keep him here and explain things when he so obviously wants to be off researching and lawyering and doing all those things he does so well.

“There’s enough to put him away forever and yet they’re being over cautious on this. They’re trying to pin anything on him even if they know he didn’t do it. They haven’t released anyone’s name but his. They’re starting this case now before we even see the inside of a courtroom. Why?”

Again, it’s not the painkillers, it’s not the fog, it’s not anything but her trying to play catch up and she wishes Foggy would just spit it out.

And then it hits her. It’s hard and a little frightening but it’s also like a puzzle piece dropping into place and it fits so snugly she almost can’t believe she didn’t see it before.

“They don’t think the charges from before will hold.”
He comes to her and takes her hands in his, squeezes and she loves how warm and solid he feels, how his chubby fingers engulf hers.

“No, they don’t.”

“But why?”

He shakes his head. “I have a few ideas but I need to go talk to Matt. Let him earn his keep.”

He takes a breath, lets her go and just stands there for a second.

“Foggy…”

“Trust me Karen, I got this.”

She does. He does too.

He kisses her cheek. “I really need to go now though because they have a head start on this. I’ll call you later. You need anything before I go?”

A kind of hysterical giggle bubbles up inside her. Sure, sure she does. She needs her life back, she needs the man she loves to live, she needs to know it's all going to be okay. She needs so many things. But she's about to tell him no, thank him, and remind him to take care and then suddenly instead of doing that she's asking him if he can get her some lip balm before he leaves. Just some from the gift shop. Doesn't matter if it's a chapstick or the type in a little pot.

He gives her a strange look but he nods.

“Sure,” he says. “That's probably the easiest thing I'm gonna do all day.”

He's right. It probably is.
Ellison comes to see her during afternoon visiting hours. She’s dozing and the ache in her side has been muted to a steady, slow thumping when she senses someone watching her from the door.

And there he is.

Leaning.

He's standing sideways this time, his upper body inside but his legs firmly still in the corridor.

She lifts an eyebrow.

“You gonna commit, or am I going to have to come over there and fetch you?”

For a few seconds he just watches her and she can see the way his eyebrows bristle and how his jaw tightens under his beard, and then he takes a step into the room, holds out an arrangement of sad-looking carnations and then, seemingly at a loss of what to do with it, dumps it unceremoniously on one of the chairs.

He turns, stares at her for a long time like he’s finding it hard to believe his own eyes and she’s not sure whether she’s about to be scolded or celebrated. It could go either way.

The moment stretches long and taut and there’s a few seconds when she thinks he's expecting her to break it, but then he speaks.


There’s no malice in his voice. Exasperation, anger, worry. But no malice.

She shrugs and his expression softens, shoulders sagging. Suddenly he’s not the angry, demanding boss anymore and instead, the mentor, the man who took her under his wing when she had nowhere else to go. The patriarch; bullshit optional.
“I’ve come every day,” he says as he pulls up the spare chair, dumps himself into it. “Every single day since Sunday.”

He sounds like he’s trying to reassure her, like he needs her to know this is true and that he hasn’t been shirking.

“You shouldn't have…”

“No I wanted to brave superbugs and bedpans,” he sounds affronted and she's not entirely convinced it's put on. “Hope you realise how special that means you are Page.”

She makes a dry sound.

“You don't give me that. I'm in a hospital. With sick people.”

Sometimes she'd happily spit in his coffee. Sometimes she truly thinks she's never met a bigger asshole but lying here battered and bruised and seeing him smiling at her is like some kind of gift. Her social group is small and she prefers it that way. They cause each other enough trouble as is. But she's glad he's part of it.

“Dammit,” he says again rubbing his head. “I asked you to write a front-page exclusive, not be a front-page exclusive. Surely interviewing Daredevil would have been easier than all this?”

He indicates vaguely at her and then out the door.

She smiles and she knows he can see it doesn't go all the way to her eyes.

“Never have been good at doing what I was told,” she says grimly.

He snorts. “Go big or go home?”
“Pretty much.”

“You have to go this big though?”

“I have this slave driver of a boss and I wanted to impress him.”

“Your boss is an asshole.”

“You're not the first person to tell me that.”

He looks at her sharply when she says that and for a second she’s almost sorry she did. He’s difficult and squirrelly and he can be one of the most obnoxious men she’s ever met, but he cares about her and he cares about the paper and she hates that she’s made those two things feel mutually exclusive right now. The fact is he could be here to fire her. She wouldn’t blame him if he was. She knows she’s gone from asset to liability basically overnight.

But he doesn’t seem to want to get into that yet.

“How are you Karen?” His voice is warm, genuinely caring.


He nods. “How is Castle?”

“You asking me that as a friend or as a newspaper editor who’ll splash whatever I say over the front page with some clickbaity headline.”

“'Punisher punished’. ‘This man once shot up a hospital, you won’t believe what happened next’.”

When she doesn’t laugh he gives her a wannish smile, one that’s equal parts guilt and resignation.
“A friend.”

She takes a good few seconds just to watch him. To see if she really can divide the confidant from the boss, from the hard-nosed reporter who got to where he is because he knows how to use people, how to wring information out of them and leave them dry. The man who has the power of her livelihood in his hands.

She decides to trust him. She decides to give him that.

“He saved my life. He was shot. Four times in the back.” The words are still hard to say, no matter how many times she has to force them off her tongue. “He’s in a coma. They don’t know when he’s going to wake up. If he’s going to wake up.”

Ellison looks at her for a long time and she knows he’s trying to analyse her, see how deep this hurts, how much of it is pulling her apart and consequently how deep her feelings for Frank truly are.

He finds it. He must do because he closes his eyes briefly and pinches the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger.

“I’m so fucking sorry Page.”

And he is. He really is. She can hear it in his voice, see it in the way demeanour changes and the lines around his eyes soften.

“Thanks,” she whispers and he nods distractedly.

“Smirnov?” he asks. “I’m assuming him at least. The police have let next to nothing leak.”

“Yeah.”

He sits back in the chair and then seemingly remembers that other people have probably sat in it before him and leans forward again.
“I never got your thing with Frank,” he says. “I always thought that was your weakness - you’re one of the best damn reporters I’ve ever met but when it comes to the bad boys, you’re 16 again with more stars in your eyes than sense in your head.”

She grimaces. “Maybe you weren’t wrong.”

He inclines his head towards her. “Maybe not. But I’ve always said your instincts are good. The best really. I should have trusted you more. I should have trusted you about Frank Castle too.”

“You couldn’t have known…”

“You told me, so I could have. Don’t make excuses for me Page.”

“He’s The Punisher. Most people don’t bother to look further than that. You can’t blame yourself.”

“I can and I will. It’s my job to look further than that,” he says. “And it doesn’t matter. He saved you. You’re here because of him. I’m always going to be grateful to him for that no matter what else he does.”

She cocks her head.

“You are going soft on me Mitchell.”

“Mea Culpa,” he holds up his hands. “Also, I don’t care.”

He’s a good man. Underneath all his bullshit, all his fucking hard-ass nonsense, he’s a genuinely good man. And he cares about her a lot more than most bosses care for their employees.

For however long that lasts.

She decides to treat that like a bandaid. Pull it off fast and hard. It’s not like things could really get much worse.
“So do I still have a job?”

He frowns. “What kind of a question is that Page?”

“Come on,” she reaches for a glass of water off her side table, takes sip and her throat doesn’t burn as much anymore. “You can’t tell me this isn’t going to be a problem for the board.”

“What? That you seem to have blown the biggest story Hell’s Kitchen has seen in a year out of the water?”

She sighs, looks away. “No, that I’m…”

“…involved with Frank Castle?”

“Yeah, I guess you can call it that.”

He sighs too and in that moment the sun comes out from behind a cloud and illuminates his face. He’s also tired. She can see the black bags under his eyes, the way he looks a little greyer than before. And suddenly she's overwhelmed by the number of people who genuinely care for her, the people who would drop anything to get her out of a scrape. The people who will risk themselves to save Frank Castle just because she loves him.

“I'm not firing you,” Ellison says solemnly. “The board doesn't get to make those kind of decisions.”

She didn’t realise the level of her anxiety until now, until he took it away and his words bring on a fresh wave of tears.

“Come on Page. Don't be gross.”

And despite herself she feels a laugh bubbling out of her. It's ugly and wet and even she can detect a hint of hysteria in it but it's a laugh.
And Ellison smiles too.

“I’d be a fool to let you go and I’ve decided it’s time to stop being foolish.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“You gotta work harder then Page because you are seriously fucking that up.”

He’s right, she is. She doesn’t care though.

“Anyway,” he dusts something imaginary off his shirt. “There is just one thing…”

“Yeah.”

“You can't cover this for the paper.”

“Mitchell…”

“No. When the dust has settled you can do another column or an exclusive, behind the scenes if you must... But you can't cover the day-to-day reports.”

This isn't unexpected and she gets it. Columns and opinion pieces are expected to have a bias but the paper can't put itself in a position where it can be accused of playing favourites. And she knows that is exactly what will happen if she heads this up. Besides if a miracle happens and Frank pulls through she imagines a lot of her immediate future will be in a courtroom as a witness and it would be completely inappropriate for her to be writing on that anyway.

It stings though. She thinks of all the time she spent investigating this only for it to be taken away at the last second.

“You gonna do it?” she asks. “Or you too busy with your cat blog?”
He gives her a sour look. “I'll oversee it but I thought Joe could handle it.”

Another time she would have climbed out of the bed and smacked him. Another time she would have pointed out that Joe’s only experience of investigative reporting involves looking out the goddamn window. And even then he still needs to call someone to confirm that the sky is indeed blue or that clouds do exist.

But that's another time and right now she's dull and sad and part of her is grateful that she won't have to cover the inevitable “Frank Castle dies in hospital” story that no doubt is going to be front page news in a few days.

So she nods, looks out the window at the grey sky.

“Not that I don't want your story Page. I still want the book, I still want the exclusive. I just think we need to treat this carefully.”

He's right. They do. They'll probably be the only paper that might get it right.

“The police are trying to pin this all on Frank,” she says.

“I figured as much,” he says. “I've never seen them being so goddamn cagey about something like this.”

“I think it's easy for them,” she says. “The big threats are gone, so pin this on Frank and make him go away too.”

“You wanna change that?” Ellison asks. “I could come back later with Joe, let you tell your story.”

She shakes her head. “Not yet. I don't want to say anything that could fuck this up even more. I need to protect Frank…”

She pauses and thinks of what Foggy said this morning about all the people that care about her, all the people who are looking out for her and need her to be okay.
“... I need to protect myself.”

He looks disappointed and she gets it. But he does too.

“Alright,” he stands and glances around awkwardly. “I'm not going to stay. We can talk about this when you're feeling better. I'm not going to press you right now for details, but please when you talk, come to us first.”

She's wildly grateful for that and she tells him.


He's right. She will.

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She sits in the shadows at his bedside. He fights to breathe. She listens to the heart monitor tracking his moments between life and death. She waits for it to stop.

He still seems small and frail. Fragile.

She can't believe this was the same man who picked her up as if she was nothing, the same man who fucked her until she was nothing but a over emotional mess of whimpers and shattered nerves.

This is what it looks like when someone dies for you Karen Page. This is what you do.

This is what you do.

You don't help the people you love. You don't hurt bad guys. You don't save the day.
You destroy the people who love you. You let them die for you.

This is what you do.

No. No.

They've cleaned the blood around his mouth but his face is still beaten and swollen and if he wakes up he will struggle to see. It's okay. She doesn't think there'd be much worth seeing anyway. Doesn't think his future looks very bright.

And also that’s a really big “if”.

She touches his hand, runs her fingers along his palm to his wrist, stops when she hits the cold metal of the handcuffs.

They didn't make her cry this time. Maybe she's over that. Or maybe she knows that she needs to reserve her tears for the more important things to come… Because no matter what happens there will be tears. Lots of them. She's not going to be able to hold them back, duress or not.

She hears footsteps in the hall. They stop outside the room and she can just make out the shadows of boots under the door before they move on. She lets out a breath, glances at the time. She’s still okay. It’s going to be okay.

She shouldn't be here. She knows if she's caught there's going to be hell to pay. She could be arrested. She could be charged. A million things could happen and none of them good. But she's okay with the odds. She's paid hell before. She's still here. They can't take anything more from her. They've taken so much already.

And people have given so much too. Their time. Their love. Their trust.

She saw Claire earlier. They couldn't talk for long or say too much but when she tried to give the lip balm to her to put on Frank’s mouth, Claire accidently on purpose let slip that Mahoney’s routine has been quite slack so long as Frank is in a coma. He gets coffee every night at 10pm, doesn't check on Frank until midnight after he gets his next one. Even when he goes he just asks Claire to stay by the door. Says he may as well enjoy the freedom while he can because when that sonofabitch wakes up his life is going to be hell.
“When…” Karen said.

And Claire pulled her into a hug.

“When,” she said firmly. “You think that man is going to let something as stupid as four bullets take him away from you? Come on Karen. You're smarter than that.”

It was an oddly sentimental moment and a strangely unpragmatic thing for Claire to say.

“He looks at you like you hung the moon remember. A man like him doesn't give that up easily.”

Still strange. Still sentimental.

She wonders if Claire is in love.

But not now. Now she's here and somehow she has this reprieve, this moment to be with him even if he might never know. Even if it means nothing.

He'd tell her she's wrong. He'd tell her it means something.

(I'm here with you and that means something)

She hopes they have the chance. She does. But that seems more like a fantasy with every passing minute, with every beep of the machine.

There is a horrible moment when she realises she doesn't believe in him. She doesn't believe in them either. She has to face the fact that she's already grieving and she hates herself for it. She hates that she can't stay positive, that she can't find it in herself to even consider for a second that he’ll pull through.

It’s silly and history doesn’t bear it out. After all he already pulled through so he could come back
and wreak his revenge on the world for what it did to his family, he risked himself to save her over and over again, to avenge the wound Nobu left in her side. It only seems logical that he’d do it again. But she can’t see it, can’t even begin to imagine it as a possibility. She just doesn’t know if there is a way he could come back to her for love, for what they shared, what they had.

What they could have.

And what's that?

Matt's voice and she reminds herself she needs to see him, come clean. Stop keeping secrets. But for now she’ll take the imagined version of him. The one that asks the questions that cut to the bone.

And what’s that Karen? What is it?

It's everything. It's a life. It's peace. It's love. It's a world where they can rest. It's Luna growing old with them. It's her holding on with two hands and never letting go.

Is it though Karen? Even if he wakes up he's going to jail. And then what? You gonna be one of those sad women sending sexy letters to your criminal lover? You and the dozens of others that think he’ll love them and only them.

She shakes her head. The difference is he will love her and only her. That part isn't up for debate. It never was.

And what about the rest? You're going to give everything up, give up the rest of the life: love, marriage, children - those very ordinary children - for the day he gets out, when he's old and grey and beaten down? Angrier than he ever was before. That's not a life Karen. That's not what you deserve.

It's true. But she gave up on ordinary a long time ago. Ordinary isn't in the cards for Karen Page: that was made clear years and years ago and everything that's happened since - Fisk, Wesley, Matt … Frank - has only reinforced that.

She opens the pot of lip balm. It smells sweet, milky, and she wonders how Frank would feel about replacing blood and rage and gunmetal with vanilla.
(I'd have given it all up if you'd asked)

(I wouldn't have asked)

She's asking now.

A tear slips down her cheek and she dips her finger into the pot, gets a blob of the balm on her fingertip. It's thick and gelatinous and she rubs it between her thumb and forefinger.

She stands, ignores the pain in her side and shuffles to the bed. His face and body are still a mess. His lips still red and chapped... dry and flaked with pieces of skin fluttering in time to his choked breath as it whistles out between his teeth.

She says his name. It's drowned out by the beeping of the machine, the heavy silence. But maybe it doesn't need to be loud. Maybe softness is better, maybe gentleness is what he needs now.

She runs her thumb over his bottom lip, then the top, leaves a sheen of balm behind.

His mouth is hot, feverish, his lips rough and ragged. So much like it felt against her skin and yet horribly different too. Twisted. Ugly.

Diseased.

She loves him so much and this whole thing has made such a mockery of what they could be. Who they could be.

And it kills her that there she is - at the centre of it all. That it was her maneuvering them all into place - intentionally or not - and they're here now and Frank's there. Dying for her sins.

This is what you do.
Foggy tells her not to blame herself but she can't help it. She brought Frank into this, she asked him to fix it, she let him take bullets for her. If not for her he'd be alive. Maybe not with her, maybe not in her life, her bed. But alive. And she'll still choose him being alive over him loving her.

It's not even a question

Another layer of lip balm. She doesn’t know when she’ll be able to return - if she’ll be able to return - and she wants to make sure she’s thorough. It's the least she can do after everything he’s done for her.

“You come back to me Frank,” she says. “I know you can. I know you're strong enough. I know you want to. Don't break my heart again. You don't get to do that. You said it was about me now. Don't make that a lie.”

Outside the wind howls and rain beats hard at the window. This awful storm hasn’t stopped and she doesn’t think it’s going to. Not for a long time. And even when it does, even when the rain clears and the water runs down into sewers where it came from, she thinks that somehow it will find a way to carry on.

Storms always do.

She touches his face, runs her knuckles along his jaw like he always does to her, lets her fingers slide across his stubble, remembers the feel of it against her cheek, her breasts, the insides of her thighs. The scrape of it and the way it left marks on her. Marks that are slowly fading.

All his marks are fading.

She has others now. They both do.

She leans forward, pushes the hair back from her face, presses her lips to one of the few unmarked places on his cheek, lingers there.

If she closes her eyes and blocks out the sound of the heart monitor she can almost believe they’re back in her apartment, the wind and rain outside and Pickle purring somewhere in the gloom. His fingers will close around her wrist and he’ll turn his face to hers, brush her lips with his and pull her close. Hold her tight. Tighter than he ever has until she feels like her lungs will burst but still won’t
But they're not in her apartment. They're in a hospital and he's under arrest and Claire will be knocking on the door soon, letting her know Mahoney has gone for his next caffeine injection and she'll have to leave. She'll have to scurry back to her bed and hope that she can do this again tomorrow and the next day and the next until she's discharged.

Until he wakes up.

Whichever comes first.

And despite her doubts she hopes it's the latter.

He still smells of blood, blood and medicine. Chemicals. And then that new hint of vanilla. Her doesn't have her scent on him anymore, not on his lips or his fingers. She doesn't have his on her either and it bothers her that she doesn't remember it, that she knows it was musky and heavy and masculine. That she washed him off her thighs. It doesn't matter that she had him again after.

Another kiss on his cheek and she lowers her head to his chest. Her side screams in protest at the angle but she doesn't care. Let it scream, let the pain flood her and the stitches tear. It's not even a real price to pay for what he's going through. And she can't help but think that she deserves it.

His heartbeat is faint but steady; a gentle *dun-dun dun-dun* that is the best sound she's ever heard. Better than the sound of his voice in her ear, his heavy breathing as he loomed over her in the darkness. The way he called her “ma'am” - how it complicated things even though she didn't know why.

She does now. *Oh god she does now.* The universe has ways of showing you the things you don't want to see.

*Dun-dun, dun-dun.*

It's almost peaceful, comforting and it's all she can do not to lower the bed rail and climb up next to him. Hold him until he rises from the dead.
This isn't how it's supposed to be.

It never was.

There's a light knock on the door and she lifts her head. It's Claire letting her know Mahoney has gone to the vending machine and she needs to get back to her own ward.

She glances back at Frank, at the tubes and the machines and their horrible beeping and the crash of thunder outside.

No. This isn't how it was supposed to be.

“'I'm waiting for you Frank,” she says. “I'm here. This is what I do.”

Brush of her knuckles across his jaw again and she heads out the door, takes a moment to let Claire pull her into a warm tight hug.

“You keep your chin up,” Claire says sternly when she lets go. “Don't underestimate the power of that man's bull-headedness.”

She nods, give her a watery smile, whispers a thank you, and heads down the darkened corridor and tries to ignore how much it looks like a tomb.
I still chase you into heartache every time you take a step

Chapter Notes

So I had incredibly lofty goals of posting this chapter and the next one in quick succession but my life has not worked out that way. I am entering an extremely busy time at work right now and well, it means I might not get much writing done for the next three weeks or so. So it kind of meant either post this now or wait at least three weeks for this one and the next one and I didn't want you to forget about me, so now seemed like the best option.

This chapter was remarkably hard for me to write because I didn't expect to feel the way I do about what happens in it. Let's just say this fic has given me an interesting appreciation for characters that did not really resonate with me very much in the series, such as Elektra and Matt. So this kind of beat me up in a way I didn't truly expect. It made me sad to have to write some of this stuff.

Anyway, I am going to try and update again soon despite work taking over my life. Sometimes I find when things get stressful for me I do write more so who knows.

I am also going to be updating my other fic Losing Sleep Tonight alongside this but it shouldn't take too much focus away from this. I just needed something else to be happening at the same time.

Anyway, here it is. The title is from John Moreland's Break my Heart Sweetly.

Friday.

She's at his bedside again. She's putting lip balm on his mouth.

Her side isn't that painful anymore but she doesn't think all too much about the hows and whys of that. Painkillers, healing. Cosmic interference. She doesn't care.

She being discharged tomorrow - she gets to go home. Back to her empty little apartment, back to her empty little life that's going nowhere fast. A life she never quite clicked with in the first place.

Back.

And away from him.
Not that they've really been together while he wages war on his demons in this hospital bed. While he loses. While she does too.

Because she is losing. She’s losing so much.

But it does mean there are no more stolen late night visits. No more secret moments, no more hours spent at his side begging him to wake up.

To come back to her.

To come home.

With each passing second that seems like less of a possibility. She has less hope. Less courage. Less will.

Less of everything.

Foggy’s been conspicuous by his absence, calling a few times a day to check in, coming around once, but otherwise working on whatever it is that he seems to think is going to give them the edge they need. He apologises profusely but she's not upset. They all need their distractions.

Matt hasn't come around either and she finds that strange. Not that she thinks he should be champing at the bit to see her but mainly because they left things up in the air and she thought he'd be interested in finishing whatever it was that they started. But apparently he isn't. He texts though. Often. Asks her how she is, tells her he's thinking about her. Asks her if she needs anything. He’s amenable, considerate. And every now and then he makes her chuckle and she remembers how easy it felt when they were falling in love.

Claire sits with her when she can, when she has a break or just before she leaves in the morning. She doesn't ordinarily pull so many night shifts but she is now and Karen wonders if it's for her. So that she can come here and do this. Sit with Frank. Be with him.

They don't talk about it. They don't talk about him. Not much anyway. Instead Claire talks about her vacation - this wonderful and heady trip to the wine regions of Argentina. She's booked her ticket.
Paid for it too. No one's allowed to get beat up while she's away. No crime bosses are allowed to take over the Kitchen.

Their conversations are easy and gentle and it lets Karen escape the waking hours somehow, that time when she can't sleep and she can't sit with Frank.

After all convalescence is boring.

She looks at Frank.

Well it's boring when the outcome is guaranteed. When it's not it's a little too much.

She has no idea how she's going to cope at home. No idea how she's going to get through the daylight hours with no reprieve.

It's all so horribly unfair but she's stopped railing against that. It's been sucked out of her and she's not sure she wants it back. Anger means she still has fire. And fire means she hasn't given up. That she still has something to lose.

His breath rattles in his chest.

Oh god, she has so much to lose.

She doesn't talk to him much anymore. There's nothing to say. If he can hear her whatever it is that she's saying isn't enough to bring him back, so either he can't hear her and all those saccharine medical dramas are bullshit. Or he doesn't want to come back - and all those saccharine rom coms are bullshit.

She wonders though if she should tell him she's going home, that if he wants to see her again he's going to need to wake the fuck up. That those are his choices. Love me or leave me. Step up or step out.

But she doesn't.
She holds his hand and tries to forget how limp it feels, how paper dry his skin is. She tries not to see the bandages on his fingers. She kisses his knuckles. She wipes his face.

His bruises are slowly fading. He still looks awful but there's some Frank under the mottled purples and blues, some of that dark beauty she fell in love with.

Tentative knock on the door, and she doesn't bother to look as she stands.

Instead she touches his jaw again, runs a thumb along the ridge of his brow.

This is it, she realises. This might be the last time she sees him. If they decide to pull the plug on him they might let her come back, watch him die. But this is the last guaranteed time they'll be in the same room.

She decides she won't make it a thing. She can't have the weight of this on her. She can't keep coming back to it and trying to figure out if she did the right thing, if she should have done more.

It's a moot point anyway.

So she leans down and brushes her lips against his. Lingers.

She tells herself this means something. Kisses mean something. They have power.

“Goodbye Frank,” she whispers.

Knuckles against his jaw, and then she’s walking out into the passage with its stark lights and pristine floors; the bleak expression on Claire’s face.

“I'm sorry you didn't have more time,” she says.

“Me too.”
“I promise I'll let you know the second Sleeping Beauty wakes up.”

Despite herself Karen snorts.

“Thanks.”

“Go home Karen. Get well. Things have a way of working out.”

It's an empty platitude and again she's surprised that Claire would say it and even more surprised that she sounds like she means it.

Again she wonders if Claire's in love.

And then she hears Mahoney’s boots against the tiles and Claire gives her a small shove and she heads back to her bed.

She doesn't sleep.

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Foggy’s there bright and early to fetch her on Saturday morning. He’s given up the lawyer look for the day and his jeans are fashionably torn and his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

He looks better than he did before but not nearly as good as he should if he was getting a solid eight hours and taking care of himself.

“Burning the midnight oil?” she asks and he nods.

“Been listening to them too…” and when she looks at him she knows what's coming.
He clears his throat. “How can we dance while the world's still turning, how can we sleep while our beds are burning?”

She smiles. It doesn't go all the way to her eyes but she does smile and he grins back.

“Okay enough of that,” he chides himself. “You seen your doctor?”

She nods. “She just left. I'm doing well and other than a nasty scar, it's apparently like it never happened.”

She spits the words out and Foggy’s expression clouds.

“I'm sorry Karen,” he says.

She waves him away. Nothing to be done for it now.

“I'm just going to get dressed. You wanna go to the waiting room or can I just pull the curtain?”

“I won't peek,” he says. “Scouts honour.”

This time the smile does go all the way to her eyes. She doesn't deserve him. No one does.

He settles into one of the chairs, digs the remote out and turns the TV on.

She half expects to hear the morning soaps, mainly because that seems to be the only thing that's ever on in this hospital, but she hears him clicking through the channels until he finds the news.

She draws the curtain, eases her robe off and grabs her bra and panties. She's not great with bending yet, and getting dressed is more of a challenge than she expects but she listens to the TV chatter and lets it distract her. It's everything she would expect: some outrageous legislation is passing somewhere; some angry woman calling in to simultaneously complain about teen pregnancy rates and also the more comprehensive sex education program being tabled for next semester’s school curriculum; and Twitter is aflutter because someone posed with a dead elephant at some canned
hunting reserve in South Africa.

It's nothing new. Nothing to write home about… even if there was someone waiting at home to write letters to.

Dressing takes a while. It's not just the the warning flares of pain in her side but her fingers feel thick and clumsy too and she has to wonder if there’s some part of her that’s delaying this. If she’s hoping for some last minute miracle when Claire comes running into the room to tell her that Frank’s awake and he's asking for her and for some reason the alternative universe police force is more than happy to let her in.

But she knows as well as anyone that those kind of miracles don't happen to Karen Page.

Not those. But maybe others.

She's zipping a sweater up when she hears the newscaster interrupting some scintillating debate about GMOs with a breaking story from Hell’s Kitchen.

And then Foggy’s shouting at her.

“Karen! Karen! Come here!”

He pulls at the curtain and shoves his head inside. His eyes are huge and she doesn't think he even notices her bare belly and the undersides of her breasts.

“You need to see this! Come on.”

He grabs her arm and all but drags her out into the room.

He looks around flustered for a second and spots the remote in his chair and hits the volume button until the TV is decidedly too loud. She's about to ask him if Midnight Oil broke his hearing but the words die on her tongue.
“We now cross live to Gus Bailey in Hell’s Kitchen for Breaking News,” says a preppy looking presenter with a platinum blonde pageboy haircut and dramatic make-up.

On the screen a shot of the warehouse comes into view. It looks decidedly worse than it did before. The walls are black and the grounds singed and ugly. Luna’s post lies on its side and the sky is dark and grey. Most of it is cordoned off by red and white police tape which dances like sad looking candy canes in the wind.

The camera pans to a scorched alcove and a tall man holding a microphone. He’s wearing a dark blue suit which may have once been smart but now because of the howling winds and intermittent showers he looks like he was quite literally blown in on a hurricane. Behind him there’s a smallish crowd of TV reporters and cameramen, all fighting the elements as they get their equipment up and ready.

Gus looks at the camera for a few seconds, not realising it’s on and then seemingly jumpstarts himself and starts talking.

“Hi Susan,” he says. “I’m standing here in front of the Fisk warehouse on 44th. As you’ll recall last Sunday there was an incident here involving Frank Castle and a fire. Frank Castle was thought to be dead, killed in a fire at the docks last year. As of today the police have not issued any statements nor have they confirmed what kind of an investigation they are pursuing.”

He pauses dramatically while they play some exceptionally low quality camera phone footage of the blaze and then run a picture of Frank standing in court in his orange jumpsuit with his hands cuffed.

“So Gus, what’s going on down there?”

“Well Susan, we’ve just received information that there was in fact a human trafficking ring being run out of this warehouse by none other than Alexei Smirnov and Vanessa Marianna, who you’ll remember was involved with Wilson Fisk.”

“I’m sorry Gus, say that again?”

“Yes, you heard me right,” Gus positively beams at the camera, which seems completely at odds with pretty much everything else about this insert. “I’m actually standing here with CNN and NBC waiting for a full statement from one of the investors. Details are scarce at the moment but I can tell you that it seems initial reports of this just being another act of criminal mischief by Frank Castle
seem premature. We're just waiting for a statement from one of the Smirnov organisation’s investors.”

“Oh my god,” Karen whispers as the camera pans back to the crowd and Gus walks off to join them. “Oh my fucking god.”

It’s Elektra, standing on a podium getting ready to address the crowd. There’s an old man standing next to her holding a transparent umbrella above her head which seems wholly unnecessary because the weather itself seems to be avoiding doing any damage to her perfectly sculpted make-up, her coiffed hair.

She taps the microphone and clears her throat.

“Many of you will have heard about the incident here last Sunday morning,” she says and even the howling wind and the thunder stops to let her speak.

“What the fuck is she doing?” Karen asks.

Foggy doesn’t answer but he takes her hand, squeezes it.

On the screen Elektra continues. “Like you, all I heard was Frank Castle’s name bandied about and I didn’t think much more of it. And then earlier this week I was told that all my assets in Smirnov Holdings had been frozen and are currently under investigation. My brokers tell me that this organisation which has done so much for Hell’s Kitchen with projects I personally funded, was in fact a front for human trafficking, money laundering and drugs. More than that it was also a dummy corporation working with the express intent of buying up the city and giving it back to Wilson Fisk.”

She waits while a flutter of excited noises pass through the crowd.

“My lawyers advised against me saying anything. They said it would look bad,” she stops again and her eyes are steely as she surveys the people in front of her. “But I don’t care about looking bad. I am appalled that my money was being used to fund any of this. I am disgusted that funds I thought were going to help people have been used in this way.”

It’s not a lie. It’s not. It’s God’s honest truth. Karen can see it in her eyes, hear it in the tremor in her voice. No one is that good an actress. Not even Elektra Natchios.
“And furthermore, I am horrified by our police service.”

Another sound runs through the crowd. Louder this time. Angrier.

“Do the citizens of Hell’s Kitchen not deserve to know what is happening in their own city? Don’t they deserve the truth? Because I am sure we all remember what happened the last time the police force got a little too greedy.”

“Oh my god,” Karen says again. “What is she doing?”

“Buying us time,” Foggy says. “Loosening the stranglehold they have on the media and on Frank.”

There’s a moment she finds it too hard to accept, that her brain and her mind and pretty much her entire being rebels against it. Sure, sure there’s a soft side to Elektra, a side so hopelessly in love with Matt that she will pretty much throw the rest of the world in front of a bus to save him. She’s also an opportunist and that never came as much of a surprise. She was trained by Stick, she was taught to hone in on weakness, seize opportunities from those too naive or stupid to use them for themselves. But this… this is different. This is her putting herself in the firing line for little to no gain. It certainly isn’t going to endear her to Matt. It certainly isn’t going to see a windfall in her bank account. And sure, sure, she can play the poor, little rich girl, the naive investor who bought into some twisted American Dream. She’ll get away with it too. There’s no way she’s ever going to be accused of conspiracy now. Not after this. But still… the hassle alone this will bring is enormous.

And yet… and yet there she is. On the goddamn news.

Karen has no doubt that this is because she knows it’s the right thing to do. She saw those children, she saw the terror in their eyes. She saw what her money was funding, even if that was not the intention and all she did was - as she said - pay a huge amount of money for information on how to keep Matt safe. She saw where it went and why and she saw the string of broken bodies it left behind.

But that’s not all.

Because the other side of this is Frank.
On the screen, Elektra is quiet for a few seconds. Karen's not surprised that no one tries to interrupt her. She has the kind of presence that says she's done when she's done. And it's not yet.

“I for one am tired of being lied to. I'm tired of the police finding the easiest suspect and going with whoever that is instead of doing the hard work. The heavy lifting.

“So I'm calling on you. I'm calling on you who have dedicated your lives to uncovering the truth to do exactly that. You're being lied to, you're being duped. Change that.”

And that's when the crowd erupts into questions and the camera pans back to Gus.

“Gus Bailey, reporting live from Hell’s Kitchen.”

Back in the studio, Susan is shaking her head. “More information on this story as it comes.”

Foggy switches the TV off and turns to her. If it's possible he looks even more excited than he did when she saw him on Wednesday and Delaney fucked up the interview and gave him some insight into what New York’s finest were up to.

“Elektra may have just given us the opening we need to save your man-friend’s ass.”

She nods, her mind racing with all the implications and outcomes of this, predicting the path of this and coming to dead ends and then starting again. It's a lot to digest, a lot to understand and she’s acutely aware that she’s not working with all the information.

But it doesn't matter because she knows what come a next.

She grabs her phone off the side table. She looks at it for a good ten seconds before it starts to ring.

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She spends most of the drive home on a conference call with Joe and Ellison. Ellison talks more than both of them, running his mouth with a list of demands and requests and a mixture of the two which
are mostly impossible. Joe is surprisingly quiet and she's not sure if he's just overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task being set for him or if it's something else. He doesn't ask how she is. He doesn't ask a number of questions that any halfway decent journalist would ask and she wonders if Ellison already filled him in on everything or if he's struggling with the fact that his work buddy had a side to her he never anticipated. A side that went home and got into bed with the Punisher every night.

She doesn't have time to worry about it. Not with Ellison shouting in her ear and simultaneously demanding and begging her for Elektra Natchios’ contact details.

She gives them both a brief update on what actually happened that night. Less than what she gave Delaney and most of it about Alexei and the kind of shit he was into. She tells them she’ll speak to Elektra, get her to agree to an interview with Joe.

Ellison asks if she's happy to proof and fact check the article once it's done and she says she is. Then he calls her a martyr, which is only partly true - she's tried not to think about the prospect of being laid up in her apartment alone for however long the healing takes with nothing to do and only Pickle for company and the truth is, this is a distraction. Not a welcome one but a distraction nonetheless.

“You know you are entitled to sick leave,” Foggy says as she ends the call and types a text to Elektra.

He doesn't look at her as they wind their way towards her building. The roads are busy but it's not normal morning traffic busy when everyone's trying hard to keep it together before they have to face another nine hours of the daily grind. Rather it's that strangely frenetic energy that comes with having a weekend and feeling the need to cram everything you've needed to do for the past five days into a few hours before you can relax. And of course added to that is the disappointing weather, the grey clouds, the rain. It's so different from last week.

Everything is so different from last week.

“I know,” she says. “But I don't have anything else to do other than worry my ass off.”

Foggy chews on the inside of his cheek and then honks at someone idling at a green light.

“I guess,” he says. “And we need that ass slamming and banging by the time Frank wakes up.”
She wants to laugh. She really does. He's so good and so funny and his optimism in all this is both a relief and terrifying at the same time. But she doesn't share it. Never has.

“You really believe it, don’t you?” she asks. “You really think he's going to come out of this?”

“He’d better,” Foggy answers dryly. “With the defence I'm preparing it would be a crying shame if no one ever got to hear it.”

She snorts.

“That good huh?”

“You have no idea.”

“You could always write a screenplay,” she offers and he smiles.

“Only if Viggo Mortensen plays me. The likeness is uncanny... We can get a poorly behaved pitbull to play Frank.”

Another snort and she leans her head against the window.

She's quiet for a while, watching people on the sidewalks under their umbrellas. She thinks she sees the old couple from outside Foggy’s coffee shop walking their dog again. They're holding hands and sharing a bear claw and something about them simultaneously makes her feel Frank's absence even harder and gives her hope.

It's not something she can really explain, but then again hope seldom is.

“Don’t be surprised if Matt stops around,” Foggy says. “He knows you're coming home today and he's been muttering about seeing you.”

“Really? What's he been saying?”
Foggy shrugs, takes a left off the main drag and drives past an empty park that she sometimes likes to jog in.

“Not much really. Just that you guys need to talk.”

She nods. He's not wrong.

“Any advice?”

Foggy sighs, comes to a stop sign and let's a woman with a pram cross the road in front of them.

“Just tell the truth,” he says. “It’s none of his business who you're with or if you're not with anyone at all. But he still has a lot of hope Karen and he needs to stop that.”

Yeah, hope...

“I never wanted to lead him on,” she says.

“You didn't... you didn't have to.”

He's right. He really is and yet somehow that evening of her birthday when they walked home arm in arm seems a million years ago and her secret feels just as old. Part of her wonders if it's because this thing with Frank feels like it was somehow always there. Even when it wasn't.

She can’t define it. It's a familiar weight in her bones, a rush in her blood. A feeling that speaks of something deeper and darker than she can comprehend.

Or maybe it's just the pain meds.

She goes with that for now. It's easier.
At her building, Foggy helps her inside. She's not surprised to get a hard, glittering stare from Irene but she can't be sure if it's because her name has finally been leaked along with Frank’s to the press, or if it's just standard issue Irene death stare for any woman who gets herself stabbed and then needs a “gentleman caller” to help her up to her apartment.

She ignores it - she has bigger fish to fry - but she doesn't miss Foggy and his finger guns nor the way Irene rolls her eyes as they get to the lift.

“You good?” Foggy asks as he punches the button for her floor.

She nods. She is. It just wasn't meant to be this way. She loves Foggy. She loves him fiercely. But it wasn't meant to be him caring for her, him supporting her. It was meant to be her and Frank. The two of them sorting themselves out together. The Punisher and his muse. The bride and her beast husband.

Death and the maiden.

She's being dramatic. She knows. But it's too much for her now and she holds Foggy’s hand tightly, wills the tears to stay away.

They do.

For once they do.

“You want me to come inside?” he asks when they get to her door. “I can make you some tea, get you your comfy slippers.”

He's only half joking. Only half trying to make light of all this. He'd do it if she asked. In a heartbeat.

But she shakes her head. She needs to figure out what it feels like to be alone after all this. She needs to accept the emptiness and the sooner she does the better.
Him staying will only prolong the inevitable. Five minutes will become an hour and an hour will become two and then three. And before she knows it it'll be dark and he’ll have to leave and she'll have to get used to that too.

No, it's best that he goes. Best that he goes and does whatever lawyering needs doing.

She might not have faith in Frank waking up but she has faith in Foggy fixing everything after if he does.

“Alright then,” he says. “You call if you need anything. We’re all here for you. You don’t need to do this alone.”


And then she hugs him long and hard. buries her head in his shoulder and lets him squeeze her far too tight for her stitches.

“It’s gonna be okay,” he says.

“You don’t know that.”

“Yeah I do.”

She kisses his cheek, then on a whim kisses it again and he chuckles.

“Okay, enough of this,” he says. “No more canoodling for now. I’ve got to go and be a Big Important New York Lawyer Man and you have to go work on that banging ass and get it into bed.”

Another snort. She loves him for his devotion, for the way he will do almost anything to stop her falling back into that melancholy that comes so easy.

She decides she won’t show it to him. She won’t worry him with it even though she can feel it closing in around her. She needs to do this alone. She needs to grieve.
She tells herself it will be easier this way.

She doesn’t tell him anything at all.

“Call me later?” she asks.

He nods. “Yeah of course.”

And then he heads back to the lift. She hears it ping as it opens and again as it closes and then he’s gone and she’s all alone. And she knows it’s only been three weeks since Frank exploded into her life and made her time into his. She knows she lived alone long before any of this happened and somehow the loneliness and the emptiness didn’t feel too bad. It didn’t feel like she was gasping for air even though there was too much of it. It didn’t feel like there was too much room to move but not enough energy to do it. It didn’t feel like fear.

It does now.

She stands there for a moment at her door, looking down the corridor, the harsh lights, the linoleum tiles. The last time she was here she was shaking so much she dropped her keys. She remembers the echo, remembers how silly she was thinking everyone in the block would know she was bringing Frank Castle back here and taking him into her bed. They were both so full of life. Nervous and anxious but in love and desperate. And now she just feels like a husk. Sore and worried and empty.

She puts a hand against her door. Pickle’s on the other side of it. Pickle and everything else. What’s left of her life.

She tells herself she’s better than this. She’s stronger than anyone thinks.

Including herself.

Key in the lock and she pushes open the door, steps inside.
The apartment looks just like she left it. Dark blue shadows, some gentle highlights from the grey day. Her eyes flick to the bed. The sheets are still rumpled from their lovemaking, still pulled down at the one side where she sat in that small diaphanous robe waiting for him to come home. His pillow has the imprint of his head on it.

Her clothes are still on the floor. Her bra, blouse and skirt lying on her side of the bed, her panties discarded on the other.

She realises Foggy must have seen this all when he came to feed Pickle. She feels less embarrassed than she imagines she should.

And then as if summoned by the thought alone Pickle shoots out of the gloom, a little black furry monster charging across the distance between them, letting out a high pitched squeal as she does. And Karen can’t help it. She laughs - for the first time in what seems like a very long time. And then she bends down and scoops the little cat into her arms, holds her close and buries her face in her fur.

She thinks Pickle will object like she usually does. That she’ll let her cuddle for a few seconds and then suddenly become all sharp edges and rage again. But she doesn’t. She ducks her head into the hollow of Karen’s neck, purring loudly, and going soft and limp against her. And for a few moments all she needs to do is stand there, in her home, holding the one part of her life that’s still fully hers.

She closes her eyes, strokes Pickle’s head, breathes in that warm cat smell.

“I’m so sorry girl,” she whispers. “I left you alone too long.”

She did. She knows how Pickle hates being alone. How she’s been spoiled over the past few weeks having Frank for constant company and how incredibly cruel it’s been that she’s gone from that to once a day visits with Foggy.

“I’m here now.”

Pickle makes a low squeaking sound in response and Karen kisses her ears and nose, her cheeks.
She thinks about Luna. Thinks how she’s somewhere warm and safe and how even though she knows it’s for the best, she wishes she was here too. How they would have made a plan to get her past Irene day after day and the three of them could sit here together and wait for news. Wait for Frank to come back to them.

If only it were that easy.

When she opens her eyes she’s looking at the bloodstain on her wall. His palm print and then the swooping lines of his fingers. She knows now why she never cleaned it. Why she could never bring herself to do it. She knows now why he didn’t either. It’s a sign. A reminder. He nearly died and she brought him back.

There’s a small chance it’ll happen again.

But it’s only small.

She sighs. She’s not going to think on it too much now. It can stay there until he comes back, or until he decides not to.

She puts Pickle down, watches as she saunters off with her tail in the air and pretends like her recent moment of neediness never happened.

She tells herself to keep moving. She tells herself she can’t afford to break yet.

In the kitchen she makes herself some herbal tea that smells of blood oranges and cranberries. She’s not hungry and even though Foggy thought ahead and bought her some fresh bread and milk and stocked her fridge with a few microwave meals, the very idea of food turns her stomach.

She hasn’t been eating much the last little while and the doctor has been lamenting it, even if she agreed that the hospital’s menu leaves a lot to be desired. She knows she needs to. She knows she needs to get her strength back and give her body something to sustain it but she’s a stress eater not a grief eater and right now she can still tell herself that there’s a dividing line between the two.

She guesses everyone needs their lies and she can have this considering how hard she’s forcing herself to face reality in the rest of her life.
Back in the bedroom, she sits on the bed, glances around the room. It feels big and empty and very much a fixture set away from the real world.

It feels like somebody died here. She thinks that's not that far from the truth.

She kicks off her shoes and her phone vibrates in her back pocket.

It's Elektra. A single line

I'll talk

Short. To the point. Much like Elektra on any given day. She's about to text back to thank her when another message arrives.

I'm so sorry.

She looks at her screen for a long time. There's a nasty part of her that feels a wave of resentment simmering just below the surface of her grief. She doesn't want to hold on to it. She doesn't want to be that person. This isn't Elektra's fault. This isn't anyone but Alexei and Vanessa and Fisk's fault. Still, she can't help but think of Frank in that hospital bed and how he breathes like every single breath is his last. How he wouldn't be there if it wasn't for Elektra. For Matt.

For her.

She's as much to blame as any of them. It's nothing new though.

Her and her crippling guilt are constant companions.

She sends a message to Ellison and Joe with Elektra's details, tells them to make the necessary arrangements. Surprisingly Joe texts her back almost immediately to ask if there's anything special he should know about Elektra and she can almost hear his panic through the phone.
She tells him it'll be fine, that Elektra is difficult and testy and might bat him around like a bad-tempered cat playing with a wingless moth for a while but she will give them what they want.

She nearly says something about not being intimidated by beautiful women but she doesn't. Her and Joe aren't on even footing just yet and while it's not anything to lose sleep over, she doesn't want to test it just yet.

Instead she tells him to send it through as soon as it's done. Ellison’s looking for a Monday morning show stopper so if he can get it written up by tomorrow they'll have plenty of time.

He doesn't reply and she doesn't really expect him to.

And then she just sits for a few minutes. The apartment is still her space but it feels so empty and alien, so incredibly unwelcoming. And the pain in her side flares and ebbs and flares and ebbs again.

She reaches out and runs a hand over the sheets. They're chilly and soft, and she should change them. They've been like this for a little over a week and she knows they're still stained from the two of them and if she looked she could easily find their marks.

And for exactly that reason, she doesn't. She lies back, closes her eyes and imagines him lying next to her. Watching her. His eyes boring into her skull as his fingers play on her skin. She can almost feel it. Almost smell him.

She drifts for a while. She's vaguely aware of Pickle lying down next to her, vibrating softly.

Later she sleeps and she dreams of him. She dreams he takes her hands and takes her away. He takes her somewhere safe and he doesn't feel the need to kill anybody and set the world on fire anymore.

He holds her. He kisses her. They make love over and over again. He tells her he loves her.

They're together.

They're safe.
That's all that matters.

~

Joe’s story arrives early on Sunday morning. He emails her personal address and asks if she can look over it. He adds that she was right about Elektra and he feels chewed up and spat out. But apparently in a good way.

Whatever that means.

So she reads it through before she even gets up and she's not sure if that's because the thought of getting out of bed is just too frightening for her or if it's because she wants to show Ellison that despite everything she's still valuable. She can still do her goddamn job.

She thinks it might be a bit of both.

The story itself is good. There's not much need for fact checking and Elektra’s been very specific in retelling only what she should know.

The story does mention Frank but Joe’s been careful to say the nature of his involvement is unconfirmed and looking increasingly like he was there to help rather than exploit the situation. Her name is there too and she's not sure how she feels about that. She can’t expect that she will keep it out of the papers and she knows how bad it'll make Ellison look if someone else breaks the story of her involvement first.

She guesses it's one of those things that only has bad outcomes no matter what you do. If it has to happen - and it does - then this is the way to do it.

She emails Joe back, suggests some minor adjustments and CCs in Ellison. And then she lies in her bed, in her sheets that still smell like him and her, and watches the morning shadows play on the ceiling.

Outside she can hear cars and voices. The sounds of happy people doing happy things. There's no more frenetic energy, no more rushing just to carve out a few hours to relax. It’s Sunday after all.
The Day of Rest.

There's also no more rain and for a second she thinks her ears are deceiving her. The rain has been constant and relentless and it's started to just feel like a backdrop to the disaster movie that is her life. But now it's not there. And she can't decide if that makes her feel better or worse.

She stands, walks to the window. Her mug from last week is still there on the sill, the dregs of her tea gone dry and dark. She put it down so he could touch her, so he could fuck her with his fingers and she could show him what she does.

*(Show me what you do. Show me.)*

She shakes her head. Pulls back the curtain.

The sky is still overcast and dark but she can see patches of blue breaking through the clouds and even as she stands there a weak ray of sunlight hits the window, a brief hint of warmth against her skin.

She looks down. The ground is still wet, still dirty, but there's the smallest sparkle of light in puddles - the tiniest hint that maybe the world isn't all dreary. She's not sure whether she feels hopeful or mocked.

Somewhere in the building someone is playing Sunday hymns very loudly. She hears the first few bars of *Morning has Broken* and tries to picture a morning shattered like glass lying dying on cold concrete in Hell’s Kitchen.

It's surprisingly easy.

She shakes her head. She can't lose it now. She needs to be strong and prepared for anything. And everything.

Including the worst.
She's grieving already.

Pickle rubs up against her leg and she reaches down, scratches her behind the ears.

She should shower. She should check her dressing. She should comb her hair and brush her teeth.

Change the sheets.

So she does. She does all of it and she doesn't even try and fight the memories as she moves from task to task. She showers and she lets herself remember how they were with each other in the shower the night she found him falling apart in the graveyard. She dresses in yoga pants and one of his T-shirts and she remembers how he watched her picking out her dress for Alexei’s party, how he bit his lip and told her he wished he could be there. She pulls off the dirty sheets and she remembers how he felt lying next to her at night, his body hot like a blast furnace. She felt safe. She felt loved.

She hopes he felt the same way. That maybe she took some of the pain away. That if this is goodbye she gave him some peace in his final days before he goes to join his family.

_I tried Maria. So hard._

There's a voice message from Foggy on her phone and she listens to it as she makes herself a slice of toast, grinds some beans for coffee.

He doesn't have much to say. He's just checking in. She can call him for anything. He's thinking about her and please to call back when she can.

He's a fucking saint. There's no room for doubt.

She catches herself taking two mugs out of the cupboard for the coffee, stares at the second one for a full minute before putting it back.

It's ridiculous how easily her life adapted to having Frank in it. How natural it seemed to just open herself to him and everything that came with him. She doesn't know if it could ever happen again.
(Most men don't get this once. I got it twice. You can too.)

She shakes her head. Tells herself to stop. She's not doing anyone any favours like this.

She closes the cupboard firmly, pours her own coffee and wanders back into the lounge. She has nothing planned for today. The news is still running yesterday’s footage of Elektra and her statement… and Frank still might die.

The more things change…

And that's when the buzzer for downstairs rings. It's not a loud sound but Pickle immediately goes stiff and disappears under the bed where she melts into the shadows.

Karen shakes her head. Balls of rage apparently get spooked too. It makes sense.

She goes to the intercom, presses the button to talk. It's Irene, because it’s always Irene, and she wonders again how much that woman actually works. Night and day she's there throwing her sourness at everybody and anybody who stands in her presence long enough to receive it.

And yet… today she doesn't sound sour. Harsh yes, her voice dry and cracked by too many cigarettes, but there's something decidedly upbeat in her tone. Something almost bordering on giggly.

She tells Karen she has a visitor, “a young man by the name of Matthew”. She doesn't sound judgemental. She doesn't make the words “young man” sound like “client” or “john” like she did with Foggy.

Karen asks her to send him up and for a moment she's so surprised by the change in Irene’s tone that she almost forgets what this means.

Almost but not quite.
Matt is here. And he's here for one reason: to finish what they started.

She glances around the room. It's tidy enough, her underwear no longer strewn over the floor. Frank's toothbrush and toiletry bag are both still in the bathroom but she's not going to go and hide it now. Not that it matters with Matt anyway. Hiding things doesn't stop him from knowing they're there.

Except when it does.

He seems to take a long time to get to her apartment. She manages to brew a fresh pot of coffee and recheck the news before she hears him knocking on the door. Pickle even comes out of hiding for a few minutes and promptly goes back as Karen undoes the chain and twists the lock.

And there he is. Handsome and suave. Wearing one of those Henleys that fit a little too well, jeans that do much the same.

He's holding an arrangement of sunflowers in one arm and a brown paper bag of groceries in the other. And he's smiling. A big genuine smile that goes all the way to his eyes and beyond.

Part of her is so happy to see him. There's so much goodness in him. In them. There's so much she loves about him. So many mistakes and missteps between them that she wishes never happened. She wants it not to matter and she realises with a start that, like Matt, she also wishes they could go back.

Unlike him she knows they can't.

She takes the flowers and he puts the groceries down, hugs her awkwardly around her bandages. He smells like cinnamon and sandalwood. Clean. Fresh. All the gentleness in the world. And for a long moment she just lets him hold her.

She has good people and he's one of her people.

“How are you?” he asks when he let's her go.

“I'm okay,” she says and it's not even all a lie.
He nods and she invites him inside, shuts the door behind him.

“I thought you might need some stuff,” he gives her the groceries. “I didn't know what you liked so I just got a few things.”

“You didn't have to…”

“I know. I wanted to.”

She smiles at him and she's pretty sure he knows it because he smiles back.

“I made some coffee while I was waiting for you,” she says. “Would you like some?”

He nods. “Yeah, sorry about that. I was talking to your door lady. She's really nice. I don't know why Claire is always moaning about her.”

She nearly laughs out loud. She wants to. Of all the ways she saw this conversation starting it certainly wasn't with debating Irene’s charms.

But she decides to let him have this. She's going to be dashing a lot of illusions today, this doesn't need to be one of them.

She brings him coffee, sits down on the bed while he finds his way to the couch.

“I'm glad you're here Matt,” she says and he smiles again.

“I didn't want to bother you while you were in hospital. I figured you were going through enough…” he pauses. “I know I stress you out sometimes.”

It's true. He does. She's grateful he hasn't chosen to interpret her elevated heart rate as anything else.
He glances around. She knows he's taking everything in even if he can't see it and she wonders what that's like for him. What it is that he sees.

“Foggy says you have a cat?” he takes a sip of his coffee.

She chuckles. “Yeah. She's black and angry and apparently very shy right now.”

He shakes his head. “That’s all right. She doesn't know me.”

Neither of them says anything for a moment and a kind of tightening silence descends over them. It's not exactly uncomfortable but there's an awkwardness to it, an anticipation she wishes wasn't there.

Foggy was right. He does still have hope. A lot of it. Even if he doesn't know it.

“I'm so glad you're okay,” he says eventually. “Leaving you there on the roof like that… it was the hardest thing I ever did… I shouldn't have…”

“No,” she says. “I wasn't going to go with you.”

He sighs, leans forward so his elbows are resting on his knees.

“I told Elektra not to bring you inside.”

“It's not her fault. You know that.”

“You nearly died.”

“That's not her fault either.”
He huffs and turns his face to her window and a weak ray of sunlight touches his skin turning it white like bone.

“She loves you. You love her too. You know you do.”

“Karen…”

But she shakes her head, assumes he knows because he always just knows.

“She cares about you more than anything.”

“That she does.”

“Hold onto her Matt,” she says. “Don’t let this ruin it for the two of you.”

“Karen…”

“You have everything Matt. You do.”

He shakes his head.

“Maybe once… things are different now.”

“Are they?”

“Yes. Yes they are,” he's exasperated and she can't help but feel for him. “Now there's you.”

He falls back against the couch and for a second she catches a glimpse of the man underneath the fresh aftershave and the fitted clothes.
He's tired. Exhausted even. And this is tearing him apart.

She doesn't know what to say. She doesn't want to keep doing this with him. She wants her friend back, the man he was before she kissed him under the fairy lights, before they decided to see if they could make whatever it is they thought they had into something else.

She's about to just say it. It shouldn't be hard. It's just words. *I'm sleeping with Frank Castle. We're together in whatever sense of the word we can be. He's mine and I'm his.*

But Matt cuts her off.

“I guess we’re here again,” he says wryly. “ Took longer than I expected.”

He's right. They are. And it's not a bad thing. The air needs to be cleared. They both know the current situation isn't sustainable.

“I guess we are,” she says.

“Funny how we always end up back here with…”

It's not though. It's not funny and his unsaid words hang between them like a fucking sword of Damocles.

...*with each other...*

“I spent so much time trying to show you what I can do Karen. So much time trying to convince you that Daredevil was good for this city. It wasn't the only reason - I believe in it, I believe in making this city better. But I wanted to be your hero and now…”

“And now?”

He purses his lips, takes another sip of his coffee.
“Now I know you don't need a hero because you are one.”

She lets his words settle. They do, but uneasily. It's not a mantle she wants to accept. It's not one she even believes. She did what you do for the people you love. No less. No more.

“You stayed,” he says. “You stayed with Frank and you didn't care what that meant for you. You protected him. Despite everything you know he's done you still think he has goodness in him. And you're right. There is goodness in him. You believed it even when no one else did.

“That's amazing Karen. Everything you did is amazing.”

“No. Matt…”

“Maybe I've been wrong. Maybe this city doesn't need a hero. Maybe it needs hope.”

He's waxing lyrical now, like he does sometimes but it doesn't feel trite or cheesy. He believes it. She does too.

Mostly.

And that's the part that kills her.

“You can't stop being a hero Matt,” she says softly. “This city will die without you.”

He smiles wanly, rubs a hand through his hair.

“Maybe I don't have a choice.”

She wishes she didn't but she knows what he means. She can hear the gravitas in his words. She can hear the subtext too. He's offering himself to her. He's telling her that if it came down to it, if she made him choose he would choose her. He would choose her over Daredevil. Over Hell’s Kitchen.
Over himself

(“I would have given it all up if you asked.”)

“I wouldn't have asked.”

“Matt, I slept with Frank.”

She didn't realise she was going to say it right then until the words were out of her mouth. But she did. And they are.

And they sit heavy and pregnant in the air between them, sucking the life out of the room and growing and expanding until there's no sound, no smell, no anything but them and a kind of suffocating nothingness to go with it.

She doesn't look away from him - it seems silly and pointless - and more than that she needs to see and accept what she's done, what she continues to do.

She's breaking his heart. There's a lot of responsibility that comes with that.

He sits, frozen, for what seems like ages. She's not sure how long it is because her words have seemingly blocked out time too.

She has power. She has more power than she ever wanted.

She watches his face, the way he furrows his brow, the way his jaw clenches and unclenches and the flutter of his pulse in his neck, the vein in his forehead. She realises that he’s open and exposed to her in a way she's never truly experienced before. She can see it all, sense what she can't see. His anger, his disappointment, his grief. The way they all mingle together to form something else entirely. Something bigger than the sum of its parts.

She wonders if this is how he sees the world, if he still has any concept of colour and whether he
sees washes of it when emotions run high.

They're running high now. He's trying to hide it but he can't.

And then he nods slowly and when he speaks his voice is tight and cracked and she knows there's an avalanche behind it, and one wrong move could break it.

“Yeah…,” he clears his throat. “Yeah I mean I guess that makes sense.”

From his face she knows he doesn't believe one word of what he's saying.

“I mean… I mean I can understand…”

He trails off, stands, and walks to the window, leaves her sitting there on the bed watching him.

He's shaking. She sees it in the way he puts his hands on the sill, his knuckles turning white, and his head hanging between his shoulders.

She wants to say she's sorry but she realises that will come across like she's sorry she did it and not that she's sorry for the pain she's causing. It'll sound like a lie because it will be one.

She's not sorry. She's a lot of things but she's not that.

“Matt?” she says gently and she stands. “Matt are you okay?”

“Yeah yeah I'm fine.”

He doesn't look at her and she knows it's another lie.

He's not fine. He's nowhere near fine.
“Matt…”

“No, really,” he turns to face her. “I guess it’s not a surprise. These things happen… I mean they do… and you and him… I mean he did save your life…”

She feels a flare of anger at that. It's small and it dissipates quickly but the disappointment lingers. Maybe it's because of how incredibly protective she is over what her and Frank have or maybe it's just because she expected more from Matt. She thinks it's a combination of both.

But it's out there. And like the things Frank said to her in the graveyard he can't take it back.

Neither can she.

And his face is so pained and so desperate she almost backs out of what she knows she needs to do next.

Almost.

But she doesn't.

She can’t. It's for the best and he has to know.

“It didn't just happen Matt. That's not how it is… and it's not because I was grateful to him… Jesus,” she hugs herself, pulls Frank’s T-shirt against her skin. It's clean and crisp and it doesn't smell of him but it still makes her feel safe. Grounded.

“Karen…”

“No,” she tries to also keep her voice even. “No, you need to know. There can't be any room for doubt anymore. We can't do that to each other.”
“Karen, please…”

He's begging. He breaks her heart and he's begging.

“I love him Matt.”

It's like she slapped him. He actually reels and reaches back for the wall to steady himself.

If anything those words are heavier and darker than the previous ones. They make the air roil and turn it grey. Poisonous.

And suddenly despite the gentle sun and how it warmed the room, she feels cold and uncomfortable. Unwelcome.

He lets out a pained laugh. She's not sure if he means it to sound derisive but it doesn't. It's dry and hollow and underneath all that it's frightened.

Terrified.

“You love him,” he repeats and it might be a question but he also seems to just be sounding the concept out, seeing if he can catch a lie.

She waits, let's him listen to the sound of his own voice until he realises there's no subterfuge or deception. There's truth. There's no room for anything else.

“How?”

They both recognise the inherent silliness in the question but she answers anyway.

The truth. Always the truth.
She tells him that Frank has been staying with her, that she's been looking after him while he goes through what he goes through. That she's been trying to help him heal, physically and emotionally. That he has.

She doesn't dwell on the details. It would be too cruel and she so desperately doesn't want to be cruel.

But then she tells him about the cabin, about how he protected her and what he told her.

“He loves me too,” she says.

And that's when his guard goes down, when she sees a crack in the dam wall. It's small and she wouldn't know if she wasn't watching for it. Clench of the jaw, a flash in his eyes she can see even through the tinted glasses.

He reigns it in fast, but it's too late. She knows it's coming. It's inevitable. He's hurting too much for it not to be.

He turns away from her again, back at the window, staring down at the world he can't see. Trying to escape the one he can.

She goes to him, lays a hand on his shoulder but he shakes her off.

“Matt?”

He sighs deeply, tilts his head back as if he's looking for some kind of divine intervention.

“Karen there are just so many things I'm struggling to understand now.”

And there’s that edge. That meanness he tries so hard to keep a hold on. And sometimes fails. Like at Frank's trial, like when he told her and can't look after herself.

Like now.
She can hardly blame him. It hurts to lose the people you love.

“It's not something to understand,” she says.

“You sound like Stick.”

She shrugs. Maybe she does.

“It's just… Frank… I mean I know he's not what they say in the papers. I know that. But he is The Punisher. He kills people… he…”

“I know.”

He looks at her like he doesn’t know her at all and it hurts worse than she thought it would. She’s not in love with him, not really, but she does love him. She loves him so much and she never wanted it to be like this for them. She wanted him to accept the real her - something she’s had to try so hard to do for so long - she just never thought that the real her might be someone he would throw aside.

And now she’s not so sure.

Still, he’s trying. He’s trying so hard to keep his voice even and low. He’s trying so hard to hold that avalanche in and not give into his own little monster. She knows. She can see it. She's seen it so many times before, in so many people.

“I just don’t understand Karen,” he says again. “I always thought it was the Daredevil stuff that kept you away. But now… Frank....he does what I do. Only worse.”

“He doesn’t lie to me… I don't lie to him.”

He nods slowly and she can almost see how he’s frantically looking for places to put this information. That he’s setting up walls and compartments where he can hide it and it doesn’t have to hurt.
“I don’t know what to say to you,” he says.

“You don’t have to say anything.”

She rubs her eyes. Her hand comes away wet and she wonders how long she’s been crying, how many more tears she’ll shed tonight.

His mildness isn’t going to hold out for much longer. It can’t.

And then it doesn’t.

“How’s this going to work Karen?” he asks and suddenly his voice is hard and firm.

He turns away from the window but the sun is still reflected in his glasses and it makes him hard to look at.

“What do you…”

“You and him. How is it going to work? You going to sit here all day and night waiting for him to come home. You’re not going to talk about the blood on his clothes and hands. The guns…”

And there it is. The avalanche. The ice and snow cracking and tumbling down the mountainside.

“Matt…”

“No, really. I want to know. You gonna ignore it? Tell yourself a story about how this is okay and he only kills the people who deserve it? Let him come home and make him dinner, watch a movie?”

( And fuck you the right way afterwards. )

“That’s not something…”
He shakes his head and she stops talking. This isn’t about answers. He doesn’t want them.

“You know, for those months that I didn’t see you I told myself it was okay. I told myself that it was for the best because inevitably you deserved better than me. You deserved someone who could give you everything you ever wanted. That was my consolation whenever I started feeling sorry for myself.”

“That’s not your…”

He cuts her off.

“I thought I wasn’t good enough.”

“It was never about that. You know it wasn’t.”

There are tears in his eyes too. She can see them leaking out from under his glasses, rolling down his cheeks. He’s not even trying to hide them and all she wants to do is hold him. Let him cry into her the same way Frank did, take the pain away as best she can.

But she can’t. Not this time.

She can break his heart. Or she can soothe it. She can’t do both. It doesn’t work like that.

But he’s talking again and his voice is trembling and she can see he’s fighting with himself to keep it together. And she doesn’t want to tumble after him. She doesn’t want this to turn into something they can’t come back from.

She promises herself she’s going to stay calm, that no matter what happens now she won’t let it change her. She won’t hurt them anymore than she already has.

She finds out way too soon it’s not a promise she can keep.
He's not vicious. Not like Frank was. He's not all angry bluster and seething rage. He's too good for that. But he can hurt. He has his own kind of cruelty even if he doesn't know it.

“Let’s say you can get past all that. Let’s say somehow that what he does and who he is is something you can pretend doesn’t exist. Let’s pretend that’s who you are Karen just for a moment… I still don’t get why you would do this to yourself”

“Matt, don’t do this. Please don’t do this.”

It’s still too real. Too raw. Frank is still in the hospital and his dead wife and children still hang over them like a shadow.

“Is your guilt so bad that you’re looking for punishment? Or is it some kind of redemption? That you don’t think you deserve better? That you’re willing to be second best for the rest of your life? Or his?”

“That’s not fair.”

“No it’s not,” he runs a hand through his hair again. “He loves his wife Karen. He loves her more than anything in the whole world. He started a war in her name and he’s still fighting it even though he already won. She’s the mother of his children. She will always be his one and only. You know that. So why would you do that to yourself? Have you even thought about what it’s going to be like?”

She breaks.

She can’t help it.

She didn’t even realise it was there building inside her. She didn’t realise she had her own avalanche.

“Have I thought what it was going to be like?” her voice isn’t steady, not like his, but she doesn’t care. It doesn’t matter. “You think I don’t think about it every day? You think I don’t have those moments when I imagine her walking through my door and I know deep in my heart that if that were to happen he’d leave me in a split second? That I don’t know he loves her in a way he doesn’t love me? You think I don’t play those kind of mind games with myself?”
“Karen…”

“No. Don’t. You asked.”

He looks pained again and she forces her voice to come back down to a normal level, to sound anything but as hysterical as she feels.

“Maria is so much of what he is. Without her he doesn’t exist. You think I don’t understand how important that is? You think I don’t wonder if I measure up? That there isn’t a day that goes by when I don’t feel like a terrible person for doing it? Like I don’t trust him enough. You think I want to compare myself to whatever ideal of her he has in his head. Because it is an ideal. It has to be. These things always are.

“So believe me Matt, anything you can throw at me, anything you can tell me about why this is a bad idea, I’ve already thought about. I’ve already been there. And I’m still here. I’m still here because I love him and I believe in him.”

She’s crying again. Harder now. The tears coursing down her cheeks. It’s not even about Matt. It’s not anything he’s said because she’s telling the truth and there isn’t anything he could say she hasn’t thought of. It’s just the reality of it - the clusterfuck that is her life. She’s losing everything no matter how hard she tries to hold on.

Both hands are not enough.

She leaves him standing at her window and she walks away. There’s nowhere to go but she needs to put some distance between them, find some breathing room where there isn’t any.

It’s not a conscious choice but she stops under Frank’s handprint, his blood - the same place that she stood and waited for him to find his courage and come inside. Make love to her.

It feels so long ago.

She pinches the bridge of her nose, closes her eyes. She can hear Matt’s breathing and she’s almost sure she can hear his heartbeat too. Fast and frantic like a little bird caught in a cage.
He wants to leave. She’s sure of it. He can’t want to stay here and go through this with her. He can’t want to have this conversation. She didn’t want to hurt him. She didn’t want to make this worse.

But he's not leaving. He's standing there angry and lost and probably more afraid than she's ever seen him.

And she hates that she's done that. That he gave her that power and she used it like this.

For a long time neither of them say anything. The silence stretches long and taut between them, reaches breaking point and then ebbs away, starts all over again. An endless cycle, a wheel that never breaks.

It could be minutes, it could be hours. Part of her - the part that doesn't know better - would even believe it's days.

Even so, after a while, she can feel reality slowly is seeping back into her life too. She can hear cars and music again, smell the coffee going cold in the kitchen.

It's not being crowded out by the weight of her words.

The weight of his.

When she opens her eyes she swears the sun has moved and the light in the room looks different. There’s a glow she hasn’t seen before. It’s muted and dim but it’s casting weak rays onto the bed and if she reaches out her hand it can touch her and turn her skin golden.

And then Matt.

He’s quiet and still, and his shaking has stopped but his hands are curled into fists.

He takes a breath and she thinks he will say something but he doesn’t. He just stands and does whatever it is he does when she thinks he’s watching her.
It feels like decades before he moves again. Decades as he walks across the room to the front door.

“I think I should go,” he says softly. “This isn't helping.”

He's right. It's not.

She opens her mouth to speak but he interrupts.

“I came here thinking we were facing one thing, I didn't realise it was something else.”

He reaches out, seems to think the better of it and pulls his arm back.

“I’m sorry.”

He sounds like he means it. He really does.

She wipes a hand across her face, blinks.

“I just didn’t want you to wonder Matt,” she says. “We can’t go back, but I wanted us to move on. Be friends again.”

He grips the door handle and the lock squeaks a little as it opens. He sighs.

His face is drawn, his cheeks wet and when he speaks there's a tremble in his voice she's never heard before.

“I know. I'm just not sure I can do that Karen,” he pauses. “I'm not sure I want to.”

It's a final punch in the guts, a final twist of the knife.
He lingers for a moment, one foot inside and one out. And then he’s gone, the door clicking shut behind him and his footsteps and the tap of his cane echoing loudly against the cold tiles of the corridor. And it feels like another part of her life crumbles and floats away in the wind.

She stares at the closed door for a good few minutes and then slides down the wall, sinks to the floor. Her side screams in protest, pain ricocheting through her blood and her bones and twisting hard and sharp deep inside her.

She’s stopped ignoring it now. She welcomes it.

It feels right. It feels deserved.

It feels like punishment.

There's no redemption. She doesn't get that.

She puts her head in her hands and she sobs.

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It's the sound of her phone ringing for at least the tenth time in as many minutes that gets her off the floor. It’s almost dark outside and she realises in a strangely divorced and almost bemused way that she must have been there for hours. She's stiff and sore and somewhere in between now and her meltdown Pickle has come out from under the bed and climbed into her lap. Karen pushes her off, stands and makes her away across the shadowed room to where her phone is lighting up the dark with it’s bright blue glow.

She picks it up, sees Foggy’s face on the screen, and even that can’t cheer her up. The other calls are a mixture of him and Claire and there's a few text messages too. She wipes at her eyes quickly, clears her throat and answers. Her voice still sounds like sandpaper when she says hello and she has to try again just so he can hear her.

“Karen? Karen are you okay?”
“Yeah, yeah I’m fine.” It’s a lie but she’s not going to burden him with this. He does enough and she promised herself she would never come between him and Matt. She would never force a ultimatum and in many ways this feels too much like that.

“Man, I have been trying to call you for ages,” he says.

“Yeah I just… I just wasn’t feeling too well.”

“You sure you’re okay?” he asks again.

“Yeah. What’s up?”

He’s quiet for a moment.

“Karen it’s Frank…”

He doesn’t pause. He really doesn’t. But it feels like he does and somehow there’s enough time for her stomach to drop into her shoes, her skin to burn and a fresh wave of tears to build up behind her eyes.

But he doesn’t pause. She knows he wouldn’t do that to her.

Still though. Still.

“... he’s awake Karen. He’s awake and he’s stable.”
I always had the words but they don't quite know where to go

Chapter Notes

This chapter was oddly difficult to write. I think it was one of those things when you're looking forward to something for a long time and then it arrives and you don't really know what to do with it. I spent so much time building this up in my head but I didn't actually think about the execution of it. Regardless, I think it works and I hope you like it too. I'm really excited to have Frank back in this story and I am sure you guys are too.

Also, once again my legal knowledge literally comes from watching courtroom dramas so expect about that level of legal precision and accuracy. I'm comforted by the fact that the show operates at that level too.

Again, thank you for all your lovely reviews. I honestly appreciate every single one and it really is what inspires me to keep writing this thing. Your enjoyment of this means so much to me.

Anyway, I am not going to say much else other than I hope you enjoy it.

(Also, I think this chapter has one of my favourite pieces of dialogue of all time in it.)

Title from John Moreland's (again!) 3:59 am.

“Technically they never convicted him,” Foggy takes a bite of his chocolate croissant and talks through the crumbs. “And now it's almost a year later, so technically this is a mistrial.”

She looks at her rapidly cooling coffee, the untouched muffin on her plate. “So where does that leave us?”

“Right now? In limbo. They're holding him as if he's just awaiting a verdict - sort of like a return to his last official legal status before everything went to shit. The judge has to call a mistrial though. There's no way the case can just continue after all this time,” he slurps his coffee, looks at the papers in front of him. “When she does, it's likely the DA will file the same charges again possibly alongside anything else they can think of that happened in the interim. That includes whatever they want to pin on him from the warehouse.”

They're sitting in the coffee shop near Foggy’s apartment with its dark wood and leather seats; the coffee and pastries that smell like heaven.

“So we start the whole goddamn process again?” she says. “Just worse. With more charges?”
He nods and chews. “We do.”

She glances outside. The weather is holding again and there are children playing in the park across the road. There's also a man in a trenchcoat sitting by himself on one of the benches and, on any other day, she'd wonder about men in trenchcoats hanging around parks full of children. But not today. Because she knows him. His name is Stephen Wyatt and he's a journalist… in the loosest sense of the word. And he's been following her since Foggy picked her up from home this morning. He’s been following her most days before now too.

“Don't worry Karen,” Foggy wipes his fingers on a napkin as she turns back to him. “I've got this.”

She sighs. “You keep saying that but I still don't know what it is that you've got.”

She's testy. She knows this. They haven't let her see Frank. She's tried. She's tried every day for the last week since the call from Foggy. In between hiding from the reporters who are camping outside her building and dodging the ones who follow her further afield, she's done nothing but try and get into the hospital to see him.

And she's just so goddamn tired. Tired of worrying, tired of stressing, tired of watching things fall apart. And tired of waiting too.

It feels like she's trying to live without water or air. Without her heart.

“Hey,” says Foggy. “You know I can't discuss his defence. You know.”

She sits back in her chair, closes her eyes briefly. “Yeah I know. I'm sorry.”

“It's okay.”

“I just want to see him is all.”

He checks his watch. “And in about an hour you'll be able to do that.”
She sighs again. Visiting times for those in custody are for one hour on Sundays. She's waited a week. She's waited a goddamn week to see the man she loves and now that it's almost time she's fidgety and stressed and angry at the world.

“He's asked about you,” Foggy says. “Every day he asks me if you're okay. It's killing him. He's more interested in that than any defence I have.”

She doesn't say anything. She doesn't trust herself to speak.

“When he woke up his first words were your name.”

She knows this too. Claire told her. Claire told her so many times.

But this isn't helping today because all she can feel is the massive unfairness that people like Foggy and Claire can see him and she can’t. Like somehow her love for him doesn't count.

Get used to it… Matt's voice in her head again. It's been there often since they talked, telling her hard truths she already knows.

She pulls a tissue out of her purse, wipes her eyes.

“Karen, this is going to be tough. It is. I'm not going to lie to you.”

“It's already tough.”

She glances at a copy of The New York Post lying discarded on one of the tables.

Her face is on the front cover and she looks drawn and exhausted. They caught her while she was out getting cat food and rushed her. She remembers the flashes going off in her face and some dude with the personality of an orc shoving a pen and paper under her nose and demanding to know why she's lying about Smirnov Holdings to protect her married lover.

The headline reads Glutton for Punishment. Because of course it does.
She called it. She fucking called it.

Still, it's not as bad as one of the other tabloids that dug up a picture of her from Smirnov’s party, zoomed in on her crotch and thighs, and splashed the headline *Keys to the Castle?* across it.

If she weren't so pissed off, she'd appreciate the brazenness.

The fact is she knew it had to happen - the minute Joe’s story hit the shelves with her name on it she became one of Hell’s Kitchen’s most wanted. But it's been worse than she expected: phone calls all through the night - not only for her but for Ellison too; the paparazzi literally everywhere; emails to her personal account first asking for comments and then threatening her with a bunch of things she doesn't want to think about.

She's never been so damn grateful that Irene is who she is and has managed somehow to keep them out of the building. She's pretty sure it has something to do with that suspected Kalashnikov she keeps under her desk.

“It's going to get worse,” Foggy says. “I'm going to need you to testify.”

She nods. She's been expecting this too.

“As soon as the mistrial is called and the charges are reinstated I can let you know more.”

“Yeah,” she says distractedly.

“Come on,” he reaches across the table for her hand. “You're gonna see Frank. You're gonna talk to him. It's a good day Karen.”

He's right. It's the best day she's had in two weeks but somehow it just makes her feel worse. More frustrated.

More scared.
She's had so much time this past week to do nothing but catalogue her thoughts and feelings, to think of him and her and remember all the reasons the two of them together are a terrible idea. She doesn't feel like she has any clarity yet. She doesn't feel like she knows how to handle this any better than she did before.

And oddly it's not the fact that he is who he is and he does what he does that bothers her. It's not the fact that he's insane and should be in jail. Instead it's how he keeps walking away one way or another, intentional or not. It's how he seems to think he can and she'll move on and it'll just be any other soured relationship to her. In her more cynical self-loathing moments she wonders if the answer isn't her, if it isn't because she hasn't told him how she feels, that she's kept herself and her truth a step away from his.

Maybe, like everything, it's her fault. She can't say it would surprise her.

Foggy takes another sip of coffee, follows her gaze out of the window.

"Take it things aren't better with Matt."

She shakes her head. She hasn't seen or spoken to him since last Sunday. To be fair she hasn't tried and isn't sure she wants to. Not yet at least.

"He'll come around."

"Will he?" her voice is sharper than she intends.

Foggy flinches a little and she immediately feels terrible.

He's done nothing wrong. He's been nothing but good to all of them and he's completely undeserving of her ire. But she feels like her entire being is too big for her skin. Every little thing annoys her and she has had to bite her tongue so many times this week that she thinks the frustration might just overflow and boil out of her like hot lava.

If she could she would go running or failing that join a fucking fight club or something because she's just about ready to break. She has nothing to do and nowhere she can go and there isn't a book or TV show in the world that can hold her attention for longer than a few minutes. She's not allowed to drive yet and considering her status as number one priority for the tabloids, walking in Hell’s Kitchen
brings its own set of problems.

“I'm sorry,” she says. “I'm just…”

“Yeah, I know.”

He's quiet for a few minutes and then he asks if he can have her muffin and she finds it in herself to grin.

“Sure,” she says and she pushes her plate across the table to him.

“Thanks,” he takes a bite. “Now talk.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you're angry and frustrated. Just let it out.”

She sits back and looks at him suspiciously. It's not that she thinks he has any ulterior motives but there's something in her that rebels against this kind of pseudo head-shrinking mumbo jumbo. She wants to be above it even if she knows she's not.

“Come on, you've had the shittiest two weeks. You've been in the hospital. You're in love with a psycho murderer…” he pauses dramatically to watch her scowl. “And you got some home truths from the last person you wanted them from. You're allowed to feel it. You're allowed to be angry.”

He's right. Goddamned him but he's right.

She huffs, glares out of the window.

“I just… I'm just going out of my mind here a little Foggy,”
“Yeah I know. I understand.”

“This last week has been hell. I just want to see him you know. With my own eyes.”

“He wants that too.”

“I just can't believe they won’t let me in,” she runs a hand through her hair. “I mean I get it even though I'm angry about it. He's in custody and well, I'm nothing. I'm just some dumb girl he fucked…”

“Come on Karen, don't do that.”

“It's true though. So I get it. But I feel like if they only knew how much it hurts. If they only understood what it's doing to me then they couldn't possibly be that cruel… I know they can but still… God, listen to me. I'm talking about him like an alcoholic talks about the drink they can't have.”

He watches her as he chews his muffin, gives her a few minutes to breathe before he talks.

“Karen, this is going to get harder. I have what I honestly believe to be one of the best defences ever but there's a chance it won't be enough. It's going to be a long, hard road ahead…”

“Yeah so stop feeling sorry for myself,” she interrupts.

“No,” he says and he takes her fingers again. “You have every right to feel sorry for yourself. Wallow in it if that helps. But stop hating yourself for being sad. This is sad and stressful. And it's fine if you find that's how you feel. But don't pretend you don't have a right to that.

“I can deal with you being sad and frustrated and angry at the world. I can't deal with you beating yourself up for feeling it. That's just a waste of time and it doesn't help anyone.

“Don't do it. If we're going to get through this, you can't.”
He's right. He always is.

She looks at their hands for a long time, wonders why she has never in her life made the right
decision and ended up with the Foggys of the world.

The universe offers her the saints and she wants the sinners.

“Come on,” he says draining his coffee. “Let's give your friend outside something to do.”

She glances at the man in the trenchcoat again. He's not even pretending not to stare. She flips him off and then turns away before he can snap a photo.

Foggy snorts and despite herself she grins.

“Remind me never to get on your bad side,” he says as he grabs his briefcase and takes her arm. “Come on, we can go out the back.”

The sun is shining when they step onto the street. It's not exactly warm and a chilly wind whips at the skirt of her dress, but it's not sombre and the sky doesn't seem to be stuck on grey anymore.

“You look nice,” Foggy says as he opens the car door for her.

She glances down. Her dress is dark blue and ends just above the knee, small buttons up the front.

She tries not to think about how long it took her to pick it out this morning. It wasn't even about Frank and looking pretty. Pretty might matter but even she knows that today it's low on the list of Karen Page's Priorities. But it was more her own frustration with the world getting in the way.

“Thanks,” she says and she gets into the car.

“He's going to be so happy to see you,” Foggy says as he heads down a side road to avoid the Wyatt. “As happy as Frank gets that is.”
She smiles wanly.

“I'm nervous,” she confesses and he gives her a quick look before focusing back on the road.

“Karen, this is Frank, there's no need.”

“I know. It's just we had just…” she stops.

“Yeah I figured,” Foggy says. “Karen, it's going to be okay. It will. Don't overthink this. He's waiting for you.”

“Yeah…”

The truth is she's done nothing but overthink things for the last week, from the second she put the phone down from Foggy until now. Every single morning when she had managed to snatch a few hours sleep she would crash out of some terrible nightmare convinced that things were still the same. Or worse.

And when she wasn't thinking about that, when she wasn't worrying about Frank and what was happening to him, she was deriding herself for her lack of faith.

Foggy’s right. She fucking needs to let herself off the hook. This is going to be the worst couple of months of her life and she's not even sure they're all going to make it through. Beating herself up for it is only going to rub salt in already agonising wounds.

Foggy puts the radio on as they drive and it's another news report about Smirnov Holdings. They talk about Frank a little and raise the question about what his relationship is with Karen Page, The Bulletin's star reporter. A caller to the show seems to think everyone has forgotten that Karen was part of the defence team at his trial and gleefully tells them that even back then it was obvious they were sleeping together.

She changes the station only to find there's some kind of tribute to Earth, Wind and Fire going on and they're playing Shining Star.
She rolls her eyes and tries again until she finds a station playing bro-country and leaves it there.

Foggy scrunches up his face but she ignores him even though she hates it too.

“When do you think the judge is going to call a mistrial?”

He shrugs.

“Probably early next week. She’ll come down to the hospital with the DA. You can be there too because it's basically a hearing. Word is she'll want to start jury selection as soon as possible too.”

“So who is the DA?”

He grins. “Oh that's the best part… it's Blake Tower.”

“Reyes’ second chair?”

“The very same.”

“Why is that good news?”

“Because he doesn't have Reyes with him now for protection or to push him. And he knows things...”

“One blow and he’ll cave for the rest of the trial.”

She nods. She doesn't ask him what kind of a blow he has. He can't tell her anyway.

There’s a few reporters hanging around the entrance to the hospital when they arrive. She’s not surprised. It's easy enough to work out when visiting hours would be and they're right to expect her.
She would have done the same goddamn thing and she can't help but think about Ellison and his integrity and fairness speech from all those weeks ago.

“Karen, do me a favour,” Foggy says as he pulls into an empty parking bay and turns the engine off.

“Yeah?”

“Don't flip anyone off. You don't have to say anything or answer any questions. But we need to remind everyone that you believe in Frank. You, a pillar of this community. The person they see on the front page every day, fighting the good fight for them. If you see goodness in him, then maybe there's something to it. We can't have pictures of you that sell any other kind of story.”

He's right. Again he’s right.

“Yeah, okay.”

“Now come on. There's a man in there and if he doesn't get to see you today I think he might die of a broken heart.”

She huffs, looks at him for a few seconds.

“Frank Castle doesn't die of broken hearts Foggy,” she says.

He holds her gaze for a long time.

“Yes Karen, he does.”

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Foggy steers her through the swarm and she wonders if he's gotten used to this already. If they're always here waiting for him when he comes to discuss the case with Frank.
She does as he asks.

She doesn't answer any questions, she doesn't rise to any bait, not even when they ask her if she's Frank Castle's lover. But she lets them see her face, her bloodshot eyes. None of it is an act anyway.

They don't follow her into the hospital and she thinks it has something to do with the two burly security guards standing at the entrance as well as the police presence in the lobby.

They're taking no chances. She hates it but she can't blame them. This is a big game they're playing and Frank Castle is a remarkably big prize.

There's a young woman sitting at the reception desk and when Karen says she's here to see Frank, she stops and stares for a few moments before seemingly shaking herself awake and calling up to his ward.

*Yeah, it's me,* she wants to say, *in the flesh. Karen Page: glutton for punishment, keys to the goddamn Castle.*

“They’ve beefed up security there,” Foggy says unnecessarily. “No more late night rendezvous. You need a special pass and a police escort to get into that wing now.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, costing a fucking fortune… and he’s cuffed to the bed anyway.”

He doesn’t mean it to but his words hurt all over again, and she can’t help but think of Frank lying in the bed dying - breath whistling out between his teeth - and those godawful cuffs around his wrists, keeping his hands away from anything and everything.

It’s a silly thing but it kills her a little inside because she knows how terrible his hands can be. She’s seen it with her own eyes. He’s ripped people apart, he’s broken bones, he’s taken knives to flesh and slashed veins open.

But she’s felt their gentleness too. She’s seen how precise and deft he can be with them. He used
them for killing and he uses them for love and she knows she should find it hard to accept that he does both, but she doesn’t.

He’s good, he’s bad. He’s everything in between and she loves him.

“Sorry,” says Foggy and she shakes her head.

“It’s fine, I just…”

“It’s okay if you cry Karen,” he says softly.

“All I damn well do is cry.”

“That’s okay too.”

Saint Foggy. Saint of straight talk and sunshine.

She’ll fucking fight anyone who says different.

Somewhere she hears the receptionist saying that the escort will be down soon and they just need to wait.

So they do.

And she wants to say it feels like the longest five minutes she’s ever had but that isn’t true. She’s lived an entire week’s worth of five minute intervals, most of them angry and frustrated. This doesn’t even make the top 100.

Foggy holds her hand and his shoulder rests against hers. He’s angled them away from the foyer but if she cranes her neck she can see the reporters outside trying to sneak a glance. She wonders what the headlines would be tomorrow if they saw her here with Foggy like this… the scandal they’d create. Not only is her crotch the “keys to the Castle” but she’s carrying on with his lawyer too.
Cuckold Castle.

Judge, Jury, Jezebel.

P*ssy of punishment.

She could do this all day. She really could. She doesn’t even need Ellison’s help.

“Karen Page?”

She twists in her seat. There’s a cop standing behind her, a tall woman with big, dark eyes and her hair pulled back into a tight French roll.

“Yes.”

“I’m Detective Eloise d’Argento, could you come with me please?”

She stands, looks at Foggy and he nods.

“Go ahead.”

“You’re not coming?”

“No. I’ve seen his ugly mug enough this week. I’ll skip today.”

“I’ll try not to be too long.”

“No you be long. Be as long as you like,” he says and taps his briefcase. “I have more than enough to keep me out of mischief.”
“Thanks.”

“Go see him Karen. He’s waiting for you.”

He is. And she’s waiting for him. It feels like she’s been waiting forever.

She turns to the detective who gives her a smile that that could almost be sympathetic and hands her a plastic pass on a lanyard.

“If you’ll follow me Miss Page.”

She does.

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She has to sign an indemnity form when she gets to the his wing and the detective marks her name off against what seems to be an approved list of people who are allowed to see Frank. She can’t see the other names but she can see that the list is short. Very short. It doesn’t surprise her. It’s not like Frank has a million friends who are all dying to be associated with him.

He's very alone. It makes her feel very alone too.

There is a man there though. He’s tall and dark and wearing sunglasses and a suit. He's arguing loudly with Mahoney about visitor restrictions, demanding he be added to the list and then bottling up when Mahoney asks why.

She flags it. Flags him and reminds herself to ask Foggy if he knows who he is. But she can't worry about it much now. It's not nearly as important as what she's doing. Not at all.

They take her purse, tell her she can get it back when she’s done and then usher her behind a screen for a body search. It’s thorough if thankfully quick and while d’Argento seems dubious about the bandage that’s still wrapped around most of her middle, she doesn’t make a big deal out of it.
“I’ll be there the whole time,” she says. “Please stay outside the red square around the bed. Please do not touch Mr Castle or approach him. Also, I am required to inform you that this visit is not privileged.”

Foggy told her as much. She knows not to talk about the case, not to say too much about that night and Smirnov and the whole fuck up. Not that it’s going to make any difference. There isn’t really all that much to hide after all.

She nods as she buttons up her dress, slips her shoes back on.

“Ready?” d’Argento asks.

She wants to shake her head. She isn’t ready. She’s nowhere near any definition of “ready”. She spent the week waiting for this and now that it’s here she has no idea what to do with herself. She’s nervous and anxious and she knows she shouldn’t be. This is Frank. This is the man that’s given himself to her over and over and over again. The man that loves her as much as he can love anything still left alive in this world. She might play those mind games with herself that she told Matt about, she might feel his loss in his every word but she doesn’t doubt his love for her. He’s never truly allowed her to do that even when he’s wanted to.

And yet…

And yet the last time they spoke he was telling her to move on, to not think about him too much. That she could find someone else. And she knows a lot of it was his way of saying goodbye … again. No one should survive four bullets to the spine - especially when he’s still fighting one in his brain. Still, it scares her. It scares her how easy he thinks it all is.

It scares her how bad things got so quickly.

There’s a terribly symmetry to all this. He loves her and he tells her to leave. He loves her and asks her to stay. And then he tells her to leave again. Over and over.

Die. Live. Die again.
“Miss Page? Karen?”

Eloise again, and she looks up at her, nods firmly and lets the detective lead her into his room.

~~~

Later she’ll ponder over the connection between hope and doubt, how they exist as two sides of the same coin, feeding off one another piece by piece until they become some kind of metaphysical ouroboros that kills itself in the process of creation.

It’s a nice metaphor and she’ll use it often in the future.

But not now. Because, as she steps into his ward and the gentle sunlight streaming through the blinds touches her skin, all she can see is him and all she can feel is an incredible explosion of hope and relief in her chest. It forces away the doubt like dirty water circling a drain.

He's there. He’s really there and he’s sitting up in his bed and looking at her like he can barely believe she's here and she’s real and alive.

She guesses his face is just a mirror of hers.

After all, it’s one thing to be told - to be assured by people you trust - that someone you love is alive and well. It's quite another to see it for yourself.

The reality of it floors her and there's a moment that all she can do is stare.

All she wants to do is stare.

He's beautiful. Even through his paleness and his bruises; even under that beard that's started to grow dark and thick again; beneath that terrible guilt she somehow knew would be there, he's the most beautiful man she's ever seen.

It's almost too much. She almost looks away, almost lets his gaze defeat her. But she doesn’t. She
won't.

Not now.

And then he says her name, soft and low, and it feels like his cracked voice blasts through every cell in her body.

Before she knows it she's walking to him. She's vaguely aware of her heels clicking on the floor and of Eloise saying something sternly behind her. She doesn't care. She needs to touch him and hold him and make sure this isn't some cruel dream like the one she had the night he was shot. That this isn't some fantasy version of him that's going to take her away and build a lie out of his truth for her.

But then he’s shaking his head and telling her no.

No.

“Please Karen, please sit down.”

Don’t fuck this up. Don’t give them an excuse to take it away.

It feels like an incredibly cruel way to drag her back into reality.

She stops - for him she stops - the toe of her shoe resting on the red tape around his bed, her body just outside.

She feels like Ellison now, half-in half-out, unable to commit.

And yet she has committed.

She has.
“Sorry,” she says, partly to him, mostly to d’Argento.

For a moment nobody speaks and then he nods to the chair next to her.

She doesn’t realise she’s shaking until she sits down and she sees her hands and legs trembling, feels her heart beating like a drum in her throat.

He’s here. He’s really here.

It’s still difficult for her to accept.

She glances behind her. Eloise watches her sternly for a second and then moves to stand next to the door, staring resolutely out of the window and purposely not looking at them. It’s a small mercy, a tiny acknowledgement of the awkwardness of the situation and she feels a wave of gratitude towards Eloise for it.

“Karen?”

She turns back to him. To his eyes and his face. His hands. To all those things she thought she'd lost.

He says her name again softly and it sounds like he's testing it out more than anything else. Seeing if it's real, if she's here and that she won't disappear.

She won't. He has to know it.

“Frank…”

She can barely speak. Her voice feels strained and breathless, like she's been running hard and fast for a long time.

“You alright?”
His eyes are huge, worried, shot through with something she wishes she didn't recognise but does.

It's guilt. Absolute and abject guilt. And suddenly despite the elation she's feeling she dies a little inside.

She takes a breath, chokes on it.

“I'm fine,” she says. “Really I am.”

She knows both Claire and Foggy must have told him this. She also knows it doesn't matter.

He frowns like he's wondering if he can believe her, and she sighs, sits forward in the chair.

“I had a concussion… And I've got a side full of stitches… but I'm fine. I really am. I just can't wear a bikini anymore.”

She tries to make her voice sound wry. Self-deprecating. Maybe once she would have succeeded. Maybe a long time ago before her world was blown to pieces by four bullets. Now it just comes out as resigned. Melancholy.

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “Of course you can. You can wear whatever the fuck you want.”

She smiles wanly. She doesn't want to have this conversation and she doesn't know why they are. It's trivial and silly. Her scar might be ugly but it's also not important. It'll fade in time and turn silver and she doesn't want to give herself over to that kind of vanity. Not yet anyway.

She doesn't want sadness. She wants to hold onto something of that feeling she had when she walked through the door. Just the tiniest little bit.

There are so many good things here.

So many.
She runs a hand through her hair, teeth pressing hard into her bottom lip.

He's alive and awake. *Oh god,* he's alive and awake and he's not going to die here for her.

She still can't really believe it.

“I tried to come every day,” she says softly. “I begged them to let me.”

“You're here now.”

She drops her voice to a whisper. “I came every day before they discharged me.”

He nods, touches his lips which are pink and smooth. “Claire told me.”

And for a moment it seems like there's nothing to say. It's not an uncomfortable silence but somehow it seems to stretch as if it were. It feels fraught and frayed, like it's holding back a deluge - another avalanche like the one Matt tried and failed to keep inside.

It’s different … even if it's really the same. Because they’re all the same.

She finds she wants to laugh and cry and scream and do all those things at once. She wants to yell at him and fight him and kiss him and love him; do everything a person can do to someone - *something* - that is alive. Let all the crazy out so that the last two weeks fade into oblivion where they belong.

She doesn't do any of these things.

Instead she studies him, watches him like he did her. His eyes are bright and his body is getting its thickness back. Even the bandages are off his fingers. And suddenly her heart feels so full that she thinks she's going to shatter, burst outwards in a wave of tears.

This is a good thing. This is one of those very very good things.
“Karen?” he asks.

She rubs her eyes and she knows she's smudging her make up. She also doesn't care. It doesn't matter. None of it does.

Blubbering mess or not, he loves her.

“I'm just so glad you're okay,” she says. “I just can't believe… I never thought…”

She doesn't want to tell him this, doesn't want to confess her lack of faith in him. She breaks off and when she looks at him his eyes are shimmering too.

It breaks her heart and mends it at the same time.

Tears. Life. Him. Her. It's all the same anyway.

Bullets can't take him away. Death can't have him. Because he's hers and she's his.

Always. Always if she can believe it. If he can.

She thinks he knows it too because he glances pointedly over at d’Argento and then at his cuffs, opens his hand and stretches his fingers out, gives her the tiniest nod.

She doesn't even bother to look herself. She angles her body so that it obscures part of the bed and reaches out to him as well.

There's a terrible moment when she thinks she's not going to make it and there'll be a gaping hole in the space between their hands, their fingers lingering somewhere in the limbo dividing them.

But the truth is she doesn't even need to stretch to touch him. It’s easy. One of the few easy things that’s ever happened for them. For him.
Always for him.

In that movie they're making of her life - the one where Frank is played by that poorly behaved pitbull and Foggy by Viggo Mortensen - she thinks that this first miniscule bit of contact would feel like an electric shock. She'd feel it all the way down to her toes and it would give her goosebumps, turn her inside out and upside down. It would be a terrible kindness, a kind of sweet cruelty that left her feeling emptier and more fulfilled than ever.

And it is these things. It is.

But it's something else too.

It's a promise. It's a vow. And as his fingers dance over hers, tracing the outlines of her nails, her knuckles, and a little shiver goes through both of them, more than anything she feels safe.

He didn't leave. Not truly. He came back and he doesn't need to tell her he did it for her. He chose her. Despite everything, despite his death wish and his despair, he chose life over death and she knows what that means and she knows she should just be grateful for it. She shouldn't question it. But god, oh god, she wants him to feel safe too.

“Thank you,” he says.

“For what?”

It’s that guilt again. That pleading under his skin, the way his eyes somehow become both more intense and cloudier at the same time.

“You saved my life.”

She has the distinct impression he's not talking about the warehouse or the fire. He's not talking about the night he came to her half dead either.
“You saved mine.”

“It's my job.”

He runs his thumb across her palm and she shivers. His hand is warm and full again. Not that horrible paper flesh that felt like it was dead already when she last touched him.

“My job too.”

He sucks in a breath as she traces the scars slashed across his knuckles.

“Don't say that,” he whispers.

“No I will. It's true. You don't get a say in that.”

He looks like he might object, that he’s about to start one of his Frank Castle Hard Truths speeches but he doesn't.

Instead he smiles wanly. “You bossing me around ma’am?”

“Get used to it. I'm not going anywhere.”

He doesn't say anything to that but he gives her a long hard stare and squeezes her ring finger tightly.

A little shiver meanders its way down her spine. It just feels so good to touch him. To have him touch her. To feel him moving against her and that tiny muted spark between their fingertips.

“Does it hurt a lot?” she asks and he shakes his head.

“Nah. I've had worse.”
She doesn't doubt him. She knows. She's seen it. The real wounds are the ones she can't see… even if she can.

“She shot you four times.”

He shrugs. “Nurse Temple is already making me walk, bringing in a physiotherapist tomorrow too. It ain't nothing.”

“Was something,” she whispers. “I thought I'd lost you.”

You thought you'd lost you too.

(I had it twice. You can too)

No. Stop. Not now.

Her fingers trace their way to his wrist, where she can feel his pulse beating in his veins. It's stronger now. Not that weak tapping she heard when she put her head to his chest centuries ago. Now it feels full and forceful. Like him.

Like her.

“Ain't gonna get rid of me that easy,” he says.

She wants to kiss him. She wants to leap across this horrible empty space between them and cradle his bruised head to her breast. Put her lips to his hair and his forehead, his eyes, his nose.

His mouth.

The thought makes her shiver and when she speaks her voice is cracked. Husky.
“I've missed you.”

Another frown and he looks away from her face and studies their hands.

“It wasn't meant to be like this,” she says. “None of this was supposed to happen.”

“It did though.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Ain't nothing for you to be sorry for.”

But there is. There really is. She's tried to save everyone, spare the ones she can't save and all she’s done is leave a trail of destruction in her wake.

Frank. Matt. Claire even.

Foggy now too while he scrambles to pull off a defence that should take years to build.

She's not worth it. Not even worth the tiniest amount of pain and hurt she's caused. And yet… and yet she looks at him and there's no anger in him. Not about this. There's acceptance and there's love and below all that there's something that looks just like gratitude. Something else that's nothing but guilt.

For a while neither of them say anything. He runs his fingers over her hand, the veins in her wrist and she does the same to him, watches as a feeble ray of light from outside shines on where they're touching.

“You seen Murdock and Elektra?” he asks eventually.

“Not Elektra, I'm sure Foggy told you what she did though … for the case.”
He nods and he doesn't need to look at Eloise to make her steer the conversation back to Matt.

“I told Matt about… you know,” she says.

“He hadn't figured it out?”

His fingers thread through hers and squeeze.

She shakes her head. “He didn't want to know.”

“How'd he take it?”

She blinks, swallows, looks at the ceiling for a second.

“Badly.”

He nods again.

“Makes sense. Don't underestimate how hard you are to walk away from Karen.”

She shakes her head firmly. It's the one thing he not allowed to say. It’s too heavy and he doesn’t understand the gravity of it. Not after the warehouse, not after everything else.

(You carry on. You find someone good. You find someone who treats you right.)

And also she's just so damn sick and tired of being “special” like this. So tired of seemingly having some strange power over the vigilantes of the world, specifically the ones with more angst and rage than sense.
It's exhausting and it's far too much responsibility she never asked for.

“I don't want to be that person.”

He looks at her sadly. She knows what he's thinking. She is that person. Whether she wants to be or not, she is the girl who has it in her power to break hearts. And the hearts she breaks are big and full and destroying them should be a crime.

She's a punisher too. She just wields different weapons. She destroys people in different ways.

More tears and she scrubs a hand angrily across her face. It comes away wet and stained with her mascara.

“You're always going to be in Murdock’s system,” he says. “When someone like you gets inside you don't just leave. Believe me, I fucking know.”

She snorts.

“Kind of a shitty super power.”

He gives her a half smile.

“Yeah, it's not great.”

She laughs dryly.

He watches her for a while and he's all soft eyes and warm smiles and there's a moment when she can almost believe this is just like any other relationship. A devoted girlfriend coming to visit a lover that's sick or laid up, worrying about bills and schedules and whatever it is normal people worry about when the person they love is incapacitated.

She wants that. She's spent so much time resigning herself to the fact that ordinary Karen Page doesn't exist, that she stands no chance of making it in the hell that is Hell’s Kitchen, that she's
convinced herself it isn't what she wants.

But it is.

And she has no idea what to do with that information. She knows she’s not going to get it here. Not with Frank. Not with Matt. Not with any vigilante that offers himself to her the way they both have.

It doesn't make a difference though. It really doesn't. If her choice is Frank or ordinary, she would always choose him. She just wishes there was at least some ordinary built in there too.

“You been sleeping?”

She shakes her head. She guesses he won't count a few ten-minute intervals of rest throughout the week as sleep.

“You're not eating either.”

It's a statement, not a question but she nods anyway.

He doesn't lecture her. She's pretty sure he could though. Pretty sure he knows all about this kind of stuff.

Still, he looks sad. Stricken. And the guilt is there again and she wants to take that away from him. Promise him that none of this is his fault. Like he said he did his job. He saved her. She saved him. Anything else is just background noise.

She knows with him it'll never be that easy.

He doesn't have it in him.

Neither does she.
“Get well,” he says. “For you… for me.”

It's heavier than it should be. He's begging. He's always begging.

“Okay,” she says and she means it. “I will.”

He's quiet for a minute and she presses her fingers into the back of his hand and his thumb swipes featherlight across her palm. It makes her shiver, a little frisson of pleasure coursing down her spine to nestle low in her belly.

He feels it too.

His skin prickles again and he tightens his grip on her.

And that look which was innocent and easy turns harder, more intense.

It should feel inappropriate. It should. But neither of them have been very good with shoulds. Not for a long time.

So she lets herself feel it - the blooming heat at the juncture of her thighs, the blood rising in her chest, the tremble in her voice.

They had so little time for any of this and if she's honest this is about more than just the pleasure of having his skin on hers. That's the easy bit, the less important part. It's more about what it means. It's like that second time he fucked her and whatever it was he did while he was inside her felt as good as coming.

She can't explain it. She doesn't want to. It just is.

They just are.

They made love and then they almost died. The little death as a prelude to the larger far more real one.
“You gotta get well too,” she says softly, voice broken. “Kick your goddamn ass myself if you don’t.”

He snorts, looks away for a moment and then back at her.

“The last time I was in hospital I had a pretty lady come in here and threaten to kick my goddamn ass. It's a year later and things ain't changed much.”

She gives him a sad smile. He's right and he's also so wrong.

Things have changed so much. They've changed so much.

Because a year ago her and Matt were trying to make it work. They were both so full of hope and anticipation. Life. And it took a man who thought he was dead to change that. To show her what was real and what wasn't. She should hate him for it, for shattering her illusions. But she doesn’t.

She had to lose to win.

And now she's thinks she could be losing again.

A moment in time was theirs. A split second that was put aside just for them. And now… and now this.

Now Frank in a hospital bed on his way to jail. Matt hurt and alone and betrayed. Claire having to cover her trail of crimes with a mixture of lies and good luck. The tabloids salivating over Karen Page and the illicit affair she had with the monster who wears the face of man, turning it filthy and obscene. Her life being pulled back together for a second as she looked into his eyes and he moved dangerously inside her, and then fragmenting in much the same way.

It’s like another even sicker form of coming than the rush of endorphins after Nobu’s blade slashed her to the bone.
She wipes her eyes again and she sees how he’s searching her face for answers.

“I'm alright,” she says. “I'm just…”

Fucked up. *On an emotional rollercoaster. Ridiculous. Take your goddamn pick.*

“Strong girl,” he says.

“What?”

“Been strong too long. It's okay. You can stop now.”

“It's not that,” she shakes her head and she knows either way she can't stop now.

He cocks his head, looks at her again like she's the whole world and everything in it too. It feels like too much and too little all at the same time.

“We had such a good day Frank,” she says. “By the river…”

She doesn't know why she's saying this now, why it feels as difficult as it does.

He tightens his grip on her.

“It was a good day…”

He doesn't say there’ll be more and part of her hates the brutal honesty of his silence.

He doesn't make promises he can't keep.
“It was just one day.”

He nods.

She doesn't mean to sound ungrateful and she knows that maybe to someone else she would. But he knows her. He knows it's not that.

“It was…”

And suddenly she's telling him about the week he was away. How she was sure he wasn't coming back, how she had these terrible visions that something would happen to him on the way home. A freak accident. A moment of carelessness.

How it was the first time she was really afraid for them. And how she didn’t know how she would carry on without him.

And she doesn't know why she needs to tell him this, why it’s important but he seems to get it. He grips her fingers in his; he does it tight and hard so she can almost feel her bones grinding against his.

_I'm here. I'm alive. I'm holding on. I won’t let go._

So different from everything she's done. So different from everything he's told her to do.

“And then you came back and I could have had everything…”

“You do…”

She shakes her head.

She doesn't. She lost it all. Everything she had, she lost. She let it go.
And she doesn’t want to do this. She knows his own guilt is eating away at him. All she has to do is look at him to see it. She doesn’t need to share hers with him.

“You listen to me Karen. You are the strongest person I know…”

“Frank…”

“No. You are. Don't give me this bullshit. Don't pretend. You've got this. You've got it all.”

That instinct to fight rises within her, the denial, the guilt… everything she's ever been told she is.


All those times it was confirmed for her either by herself or other people.

And then Frank.

Frank.

The man who knows strength like it was etched into him at birth. The toughest, meanest, bravest son of a bitch she's ever met.

And he thinks she's strong. He sees something else. Something she hides.

Don't you know?

She does. Even though it's not important right now.

“You made promises,” she whispers and he cocks his head. “So did I.”
He nods slowly.

“I'll stay,” she says. “I promise I will stay.”

“You don't…”

Her grip tightens. “I do.”

“Karen…”

“But you… you gotta stay too. You have to.”

He frowns again and she knows she's not making any sense.

“You told me to let it go,” she says. “That night. You were dying and you told me not to think about you that much. To move on…”

She's sobbing hard now and she doesn't care that Eloise can hear. Doesn't care that her face must be a mess and her voice punctuated with hysteria.

“You… you don't get to fucking tell me that Frank. You don't get to tell me to hold on to everything with two hands and let you go. You don't.”

She didn't realise until now how much this hurt. She thought it was just another ripple in this storm, something that would fade and disappear in time. She tried so hard not to think about it, not to remember what it was like to lose him, to let him lose her.

But it was there. It’s been there from the start with them. From the night he murdered men in front of her in a dingy diner and told her to stay away from him and then the night after that when she stood in the cold woods begging him to come back to her and he told her to leave again. The night left her on the roof, the night he dragged himself to her to say goodbye. He’s always thought this should be easy for her, that leaving him or losing him isn’t something that should or can change her or her life too much.
You don't think about me too much

You carry on. You find someone good. You find someone who treats you right.

Red still loves you

Don't you know?

She hates herself for this. She hates how she's managed to get this all tangled up together. How everything is weaving together in some godawful wreck of a tapestry and she's slowly coming undone.

“You don't get to do that,” she says again. “You don't get to tell me to forget this and walk away.”

He doesn't tell her it's okay and he doesn't say he's sorry. He holds her hand, watches her with dark worried eyes as she cries.

There's a box of tissues next to her chair and, in time, she lets go of him and grabs them, wipes her nose, dabs her eyes and for a while neither of them say anything.

She can all but hear Eloise’s presence behind them and above that the lazy sounds of the traffic outside, people talking in the hall. It all starts to meld into some kind of mindless background noise broken only by her hiccupsing sobs and his heavy breathing.

And then after what seems like a lifetime he speaks.

“I didn't want to die,” he sighs. “The last thing I want to do is leave you. I don't even know if I can.

“Goddamnit Karen, I just told you how fucking hard you are to walk away from.”

“So stop doing it then. And stop pretending it's easy for me.”
She doesn't mean for it to sound harsh or petulant but it does and she half expects him to say something sarcastic and a little harsh in return, but he doesn't.

That's not him, that's not how he is with her.

His eyes flick back to Eloise and then he gives her another little nod.

She takes his hand and he presses his fingers hard against hers. He isn't gentle and the look in his eyes is heavy.

“I made you a promise,” he says. “I told you it was going to be about you now. I meant that.”

She shakes her head. “No. It was supposed to be about us but it…”

She trails off and he cocks his head.

“What?”

She sighs.

“... ended up being about… something else.”

She looks at him and all she sees is guilt. She knows he sees the same thing.

“We can't go back,” she says quietly.

He shakes his head.

“But we're in this together and you don't get to tell me to walk away. You don't get to pretend it's
easy for me and I can just forget this.”

“I won't,” he says. “I won't tell you to do anything.”

Neither of them speak for a long time. Again it's not uncomfortable or unpleasant. Just frayed. Heavy. It's too much to get through, too much to unpack in just an hour when her emotions are running high.

She wonders if it’s ever going to get easier, lighter again. She wonders what either of them are going to do next.

It’s Eloise who provides the answer.

“Two minutes Miss Page.”

She glances at her watch. She can barely believe it. It seems like only a second ago she walked in here and yet somehow it's true and it's almost time for her to leave.

Again.

When she just promised she would stay.

It's okay. He'll forgive her the same way she’ll forgive him.

“Thank you,” she says.

She turns back to Frank. There's so many things she still wants to say, so many confessions she still wants to make.

They still need to talk. They still need to work everything out but not now, not with an audience.
And the moment is fading.

He knows it too.

She doesn't want to go. It's the last thing she wants to do. She realises she should have planned this out in her head like she did when he was leaving to take Luna to Jersey. She needed to have a plan, a step-by-step blueprint of every move she needed to make. She needed to go through them one at a time and it would have been easy.

Except nothing with him is easy.

So she has to make do. She has to be strong because he's wrong and there's no time to rest.

She forces herself to let go of him, to stand and straighten her dress.

It's nothing short of torture. Agony.

“'I'll see you soon,'” she says.

“Hold you to that.”

So many things she wants to say.

So many.

But as she stands there she realises there's only one that's important.

Only one. And she has to let him know. She has to let him know right now.

Maybe it's his eyes.
Maybe it’s because she doesn’t want him to wonder, she doesn’t want him to doubt. Or maybe it’s something about how deep and dark they are, how they see every goddamn part of her - the good and the bad and everything she's ever tried to hide. How he's uncovered that too, picked away at her and exposed her wounds, shown them the sun and the air and not once called her ugly.

Maybe it’s his eyes.

Maybe not.

It doesn’t matter.

It’s time.

She has to.

Don’t you know?

She can hear Eloise’s panicked voice as she steps inside the red square of tape, see the confusion on his face as she reaches out and presses her hands to his jaw, the cuffs screeching against the metal of the bed rails.

His skin is warm and his beard is prickly but he feels so alive and so real and again she wants to laugh and cry and scream. Turn into a puddle on the floor.

Somewhere behind her Eloise is begging her to move away and she can hear her heavy footsteps coming closer and closer.

I’m sorry Eloise, she thinks. You’re only doing your job. I’m sorry I’m making it hard for you.

And then she puts her lips to his cheek, his mouth. He smells of medicine and some kind of harsh soap. He tastes of gunmetal and blood.
Of life.

“Karen…” he says but she ignores him as she holds him against her and brings her lips to his ear.

It's time.

“I love you Frank. I love you so much. Don't you ever forget that. Don't you ever forget.”

And then Eloise’s hand closes on her shoulder and she's being dragged away, backwards and out of that goddamn artificial red square that means nothing and symbolises everything.

Somewhere she knows she's being scolded, somewhere very far away from a place that isn’t important.

The only thing she cares about is the look on his face. In his eyes. The awe, the terror, the confusion behind all of it. And then the little monster that's fighting so hard with him to get out.

He says her name, soft and rough and she smiles at him.

It wasn't how she wanted to tell him. But then romantic walks and dancing under the stars aren't in their future. Candlelit dinners and engagement rings in champagne glasses aren't on the cards either.

They have to make do with what they can - find whatever it is they need to keep going and use it.

“I love you,” she says again. “I do.”

Don’t you know?

It's a gift. But she gave it to him long ago.

And then the door is closing on him and she's standing with Eloise in the hospital corridor where
she's stood so many times before. It's lighter though, the walls not quite so oppressive, the ceiling high and not bearing down on her.

There’s death here but it doesn't feel like a tomb anymore.
I'd like to hear what you'd say to me if I was bulletproof and free again

Chapter Notes

So yay, an update finally. I am sorry this took a while but as you will probably notice from this chapter, we are heading into very tricky territory and I am juggling a couple of balls right now and it feels inevitable that I will drop one. Hopefully when I do it will be fixable.

Anyway, let me know what you think, comments are always appreciated and thank you so much to those who have left reviews. It's my inspiration and motivation and I love every one of you.

Title is from The Gaslight Anthem's *Underneath the ground*.

The hearing is called for Wednesday morning. Foggy, being the saint he is, manages to pull some strings and get her a special pass to go and see Frank with him before the judge and the DA arrive.

She's spent the last few days in a state of turmoil, something she's just come to accept is her existence now. Between the case and the investigation and the reporters that dog her every move it doesn't feel like her life is her own anymore. And that’s before she even gets to Ellison and her job and the fact that she’s still being held together with surgical sutures and a stubborn streak that doesn’t let her give up. Not yet at least.

And then of course there's Frank. Frank who she loves more than she thinks she's ever loved anyone in her whole life and ever will again ... and he's being ripped away from her piece by piece. No matter where he goes now it'll be somewhere she can't follow and it feels like part of her died alongside him on the roof. A part they’re never going to get back no matter what happens. And, when she gets past that - when she looks at the way things have turned out - then that fantasy of an ordinary life - ridiculous as it was - seems even further away than before.

“Karen?” Foggy says and she glances over at him. It’s early and they’re sitting in his car in the hospital parking lot, watching the crowd of reporters convene near the entrance to the building. The day isn’t cold but it is grey and there’s a slight but very miserable breeze in the air.

“Yeah?”

“You ready?”
No. No she's not fucking ready. How can he even ask that? How can anyone?

She might even be more reticent than she was before. She might just be falling apart because, on top of everything else - on top of the scandal and the investigation and Frank nearly dying for her - who the fuck tells the fucking Punisher she loves him more than anything a second before she walks out of his life?


A crazy person, that's who. A woman who defines her life by the lists she makes and the vigilantes who fall in love with her. A woman who took the Punisher to bed, overwhelmed him, and told herself that somehow this made her invincible. And then she told him she loved him and hoped that made him invincible too.

Maybe it was a fantasy. Maybe.

She wouldn’t do it any differently though. He needed to know. He needed to stop thinking of himself as an afterthought in whatever this thing might be between them. It’s not about her. It’s about them. It has to be.

“Karen?” Foggy again and she realises she hasn’t answered his question so she nods, releases her seatbelt.

“Okay,” he says, taking a deep breath. “Let's go see your man friend.”

She nods. “Yeah.”

Her man friend. The one who is going to jail and still in love with his dead wife. That one.

Karen Page never did anything the easy way.

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The crowd of journalists outside the hospital is much bigger than it was on Sunday, which isn’t really a surprise. It’s a big day and even though it’s as good as a done deal that the judge is going to call a mistrial, the news hounds are not leaving anything to chance.

Her and Foggy do their best to ignore them again, but hospital security has to get involved when one overly enthusiastic photographer grabs her by the lapel of her blazer and a sizable part of her left breast, and drags her into the low sunlight to get a photo. It’s over fairly soon and the offender chased off the property but her skin aches and her blouse is crumpled and Foggy’s shouting something about assault and harassment and threatening to sue.

He’s more concerned than she is but he stops short of making her show him the handprint. It’s just as well. They’re already pretty much an old married couple as it is.

Inside they wait in the lobby until a big burly detective comes to fetch them and take them up to Frank’s ward.

D’argento isn’t there and Karen is oddly relieved by that. Not just because she feels bad about breaking the rules before and doing the one damn thing she was explicitly told not to do, but more because D’argento was the only witness to her confession and it feels uneasy. It’s not really embarrassment but more the fact that D’argento got to see something that wasn’t really meant for anyone but Frank.

Still, she wouldn’t change it.

They get their passes and a matronly looking middle-aged cop called Lola does the body search and takes her purse. It’s all very civilised. It’s all very controlled. If she didn’t know it she wouldn’t believe one of New York’s most wanted mass murderers is on the other side of the wall.


Husband. Father. Lover.

He breaks her into a million pieces. He truly does.

Lola gives them the standard speech: the list of instructions not to touch him, not to hand anything to him, not to step inside the red square. This visit is privileged. Foggy’s made some provision about
how she’s an integral part of Frank’s defence to get her in.

The truth is she doesn’t think they’re going to talk all too much about his defence anyway. She thinks Foggy is doing this just for her.

He does a lot of things just for her. He always has.

They both have to sign another waiver. She doesn’t read it but she assumes it says something about how they state of New York can’t be held accountable should Frank Castle decide to murder or attack them while they’re inside without police protection. It doesn’t seem to bother Foggy much so she guesses he’s done it a lot when he’s been here.

And then the detective is unlocking the door, ushering them inside and again it feels as if her heart is going to burst out of her chest and she’s just going to crumple to the ground in a big red pool of blood spatter.

She's no stranger to this room, and yet every single time she's come in here it's offered her something else. From the fatalism that infused her initial clandestine visits to the strange melancholy joy at seeing Frank back in the land of the living and knowing what that meant for both of them.

This time is no different. This time it's a wild flare of hope and optimism that swells inside her and crowds out literally everything else. It’s wonderful and heady and so, so very dangerous because she knows when it disappears it’ll be fast and cruel and leave a vacuum behind.

But that moment of pure joy… well, she knows it's stupid to think it's worth it, but she does anyway.

He’s in his bed, still cuffed. But god, oh god , he looks so good. His colour is up and most of his bruises gone. She can even see how the hospital gown is pulling tight across his chest and shoulders. And suddenly the story of him surviving an execution style gunshot to the head and getting up and walking away hours later doesn't seem remotely farfetched. He's strong and hard and him getting out alive doesn't even seem like luck or like a fluke. It seems the only possible outcome for any of this.

Shoot him and he gets back up. There's just no other way.

He says her name when he sees her and she has to fight the urge to run to him and touch him and kiss him and hold him. Foggy asked her not to after d’Argento reported back the last time and he's
done so much for them she can give him that.

So she stays where she is. But it's one of the hardest things she's ever done.

And then suddenly she can hear Matt's voice whispering in her ear and she can all but see him standing at her window, the tears leaking out from under his glasses when she broke his heart and then broke it again. *You said you'd thought about what it's going to be like? Did it look like this? Did you even get that far?*

She pushes him away. She can't... she can't deal with that now. She's here and so is Frank and everything else, including her fucked up brain, is just background noise. She can't let it be anything else.

“Hey,” she says softly, pulling up a chair as close to the red tape as she can and sitting down. “You look... you look better.”

He snorts. “Nurse Temple is making sure I eat all my greens. She could have been a goddamn drill sergeant.”

Foggy laughs. “Yeah, but it kind of makes you glad she went into nursing and not a life of crime. We'd all be fucked. Including you and Daredevil.”

Frank nods to him, doesn't smile but it's easy to see the fondness he has for Foggy. It's not just about her and the fact that Foggy is the most important person in her life and she'd walk across broken glass just because he asked. It's that Frank genuinely likes him too. He thinks he's good and decent and while she doubts they'll ever truly be friends, she's willing to accept mutual respect for now.


He looks up expectantly and catches Frank's eye.

Frank sighs roughly. “Yeah, I know. Keep my mouth shut and don't say anything.”
“No more blindsiding us,” Karen says. “Now and at the arraignment.”

It's meant to sound light and friendly but it comes out much harder than that. It's an instruction, she realises, and she's more than okay with giving Frank Castle instructions.

He regards them both for a moment, and then his gaze flits to Foggy.

“Yeah,” he says and then to her. “Yes ma'am.”

She grins and Foggy rolls his eyes, throws himself into a desk she imagines they brought in for the stenographer and pulls some papers out of his briefcase.

She can hear him muttering under his breath, *Yes ma'am, no ma'am, three bags full ma'am*. She shakes her head, looks back at Frank who has a small smile playing on the corners of his lips.

“You alright?” he asks. “Cops not giving you any more hassle?”

She shakes her head. The police have been conspicuous by their absence. The way Delaney spoke when Foggy ended their interview made her think he'd be back in no time. Yet there have been no calls or attempts at arranging an appointment. She feels like she's all but been forgotten and while on the one hand she's grateful she doesn't need to go to Matt with her hat in her hand and beg for representation, on the other it worries her. It worries her because, like Foggy said, it isn't like they're trying very hard to get to the bottom of this. They've made their case separate to the evidence.

She doesn't tell him about her concerns though and he seems mostly satisfied by her answer anyway.

He wants to know if there's any news on the people they saved at the warehouse and she shakes her head.

“There's been no press coverage on any of them further than to mention they exist and they were there. If there are investigations being done into the whys and hows, I don't know about it.”

“ Fucking shame,” he says.
She wonders suddenly if Ellison would give her that, if he'd let her investigate. Sure, it's indirectly related to the case and sure, it could be slightly problematic for the board. But if she frames it as some kind of expose human rights violations in Hell’s Kitchen, he might let her do it. She’ll mention it to him. She thinks he might want to say yes to something after all this.

But before she can think on it too long Frank is talking again.

“Can you do something for me?”

“Sure?”

Anything. Everything.

“Can you give the shelter in Jersey a call?” he asks. “Or send them an email? Check up on Luna?”

For a second it stings, a bright and horrible sensation that feels like a horrible cocktail of grief and shame at her own naivete. They were going to go and see Luna, they were going up to the shelter together. They made those plans that day by the river before the world turned itself inside out. But he’s making other plans now. Provisions. He’s preparing for the worst.

She should too.

“Of course,” she says and her voice is a little too cracked for him not to notice.

He waits for a second before speaking again.

“There's money going to them every month,” he says. “I just want to make sure they're getting it and everything is okay … they don't need more or something. Nelson is making sure my accounts ain't gonna get themselves frozen.”

Behind her Foggy puts his hand in the air without looking up from his papers.
“Yeah, I'll do that,” she says.

“She's a good dog.”

“She is.”

They're both quiet for a while and then he shifts, looks over at Foggy, and when he speaks his voice is barely a whisper.

“What you said the last time…”

“Yeah?”

“Did you…”

“I don't lie to you Frank, you know that.”

He nods, looks away and she can hear him breathing heavily, air coming out of his lungs in ragged puffs and it takes a while before he seems willing or able to continue.

“Frank? Are you alright?”

“Yeah…” he says dismissively. “I’m fine.”

He’s still not looking at her though. She lifts a hand, reaches out and then drops it back into her lap. She wants to touch him, soothe him. The last time she saw him this this vulnerable was in a graveyard a million years ago when he was out of his world and out of his mind and somehow she was the only thing pulling him back.

Maybe it's always like that for them. Maybe he always runs away and she keeps him tethered. She’s not sure she can do that forever.
“You're gonna need to say it again,” he says eventually, and his voice is low and thick, that gravel that she feels in her blood and bones.

She glances over at Foggy who isn't paying any attention to them.

“One day,” she promises. “When this is all over.”

She hears herself talking like it's a possibility, like it all being over is written in the stars. She wonders if maybe this is how she lies to him. How she lies to herself.

But he nods like he understands even if she's not sure there was anything to be understood by it.

“I'll look forward to it.”

He's so sweet and her heart swells with a strange mixture of joy and misery for the both of them. Everything is changing. Everything is going to be different now. And, unlike the last time she was here, when she could fool herself that she was just visiting a sick loved one in hospital, there's a nasty urgency in the air now. Things are moving forward, for better or worse, and she's not sure she's ready for it even though she knows she has to be.

It has to end. It will end. That part is certain. It's how it does it that frightens her.

Outside she hears voices in the corridor, the sound of heels on the cold hard tiles.

“Looks like they're here,” she says and he nods, pushes himself so he's sitting upright in the bed, holds out his fingers briefly so she can touch them with her own.

“It's gonna beokay,” he tells her with a short sharp nod.

And maybe this is him lying to her too. She doesn't think she knows anymore.

But then Foggy is at her side, doing up his top button and adjusting his tie and bringing a little levity to the situation. He gives her a nervous smile and touches her shoulder.
“How do I look?” he asks.

“Good,” she whispers. “Better than Frank Castle in a suit.”

Another tight smile and Frank rolls his eyes, snorts.

It's true though. He really does.

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Security comes in first - two uniformed cops with automatic weapons. They move silently to either side of Frank's bed, guns pointed at the floor.

She hates it. She truly does. He doesn't deserve it. None of them get it, not even Foggy really. Frank’s not going to hurt any of them, that's not who he is and it never was. His bloodlust is focused and precise.

He still needs it though … always will. Matt again. Matt like her conscience, a little angel - or in this case a devil - on her shoulder, whispering malicious hard truths in her ear.

She forces the thought away but when she looks at Frank, he narrows his eyes, cocks his head, and she can't help but feel he saw it anyway. Like Ellison said, she's a bad liar and her game face is terrible and Frank has always been able to read her better than most.

The stenographer comes in next. She's middle-aged and her hair is done up in an elaborate beehive. She doesn't look at anyone but takes a seat at the desk and starts setting up her equipment. The bailiff follows and then Blake Tower, his second chair - a young woman in a sharp suit - and finally the judge and her assistant.

“I'm the only member of the public here,” Karen whispers to Foggy.

“Yeah,” he says. “It's just a hearing technically. Don’t worry”
He squeezes her arm and then goes to shake Tower’s hand, introduces himself to the assistant.

And then an uneasy silence descends on the room and all she can hear is everyone’s low breathing and the far removed sound of the traffic outside.

She glances at the judge and her expression is sour as she regards Frank and purses her lips. It’s not hard to imagine that she hoped she’d seen the last of him. Not hard to imagine that she wished those warring emotions one feels when they’re confronted by the things Frank’s done and then the things that have been done to him, were a thing of the past.

He has that effect on people. He’s like a stray dog that needs love and compassion and patience and then turns around and tears the world apart with his rage.

She knows. Oh god, she knows.

And then it’s like the world takes a breath and everything starts again.

“Court is now in session,” says the bailiff, his voice deep and gruff. “Honourable Judge Batzer presiding in the matter of *The People vs Frank Castle* .”

The judge sighs and looks around the room before her gaze settles on Frank again and she raises an eyebrow.

“Mr Castle, I see the reports of your death have been greatly exaggerated.”

There’s a moment Karen thinks he’s going to say “Yes ma’am” and somehow in her head that’s incredibly funny. But he simply nods and Batzer sighs again.

“Alright,” she says. “So circumstances being what they are, and with the motion for a mistrial being filed and not contested, I think we all know this is just a formality.”

She nods at Foggy, at Tower and then finally at Karen. Her gaze lingers for a second and Karen
wonders if she's just remembering her from the trial or if this is something else, if she's being assessed and judged for her involvement with Frank. She doesn't care much. Batzer might be a judge but this isn’t *The People vs Karen Page*.

“Okay, well since there are no objections, I'm calling a mistrial,” she turns to Tower. “Mr Tower I'm assuming you want to pursue this case further?”

He nods, hands over some paperwork, which Batzer doesn’t even look at before handing it to her assistant.

“Yes, we are reinstating all the charges under the…” He rattles off some statutes and numbers, cites a couple of cases including some Supreme Court ruling, all of which seems totally unnecessary.

“Alright,” Batzer says. “Mr Nelson, is Mr Castle well enough to attend an arraignment next week?”

Foggy nods. “Yes, your Honour he's being transferred to Sing Sing on Saturday.”

And there it is.

*There it fucking is.*

It’s the drop, the payback for the elation she felt when she stepped into the room and for a second she was allowed to hope. She knew it was coming, it’s not surprise, but it makes her catch her breath, sends a nasty shiver down her spine and drops a cement block of dread into her belly.

Frank Castle is going to prison again. He's going from her bed and into a cell. She doesn't even know how to process that, how to compartmentalize it. She once told him she thinks he belongs in jail, and she can't deny that the part of her that can look past how much she adores him still does. The cold, pragmatic part of her. The part that is becoming smaller and more insignificant by the day.

She doesn't believe in his methods and his code, until she does.

And sometimes she really does.
“Is your guilt so bad that you’re looking for punishment? Or is it redemption?”

Not now. Not. Now. She needs the devils in her head to stay quiet and she bites her lip and clenches her jaw, forces herself to focus.

“Sing Sing?” says the judge. “Not Rikers?”

“No Your Honour.”

And that in itself is a blessing albeit a small one. It's not to say that he couldn’t end up in Rikers if this trial goes tits up, which is might. But at least for now he's not going to be anywhere near Fisk and his pack of rabid dogs. Foggy made sure of that. Of course he did. Because him and Claire are the only goddamn adults in this whole goddamn fuck up.

She glances at Frank to find him already looking at her. She gives him a weak smile but she knows he can see right through it.

He nods gravely, turns his attention back to the judge.

“Alright then,” Batzer says. “We’ll reconvene Tuesday the 9th at 2am.

“I’d like to move this along Mr Nelson. None of us want the rest of our lives taken up with this case.”

“Yes Your Honour,” Foggy says. “The defence is ready.”

“Excellent. Let's hope the same can be said of the prosecution.”

“Yes Your Honour.” Tower’s second chair adjusts her jacket.

“Very well. Court is adjourned.”
Batzer nods sternly and with that she's gone, the stenographer and the bailiff following her and Tower giving Foggy a nervous smile before he too leaves the room.

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They say goodbye fairly soon after that and Karen’s grateful. Again she's trying to hold back tears, trying so hard not to let him see how desperate this is making her. She's failing though. She's failing and she doesn't want to make this about her when he's facing the kind of future he is.

And it feels like she's being pulled in a million different directions. She wants to stay and she wants to leave and she wants to hold him until she can't anymore. She wants to break him out, run away forever and never look back. She wants to tell the world why he is like he is, show it the goodness in him that lives there right alongside the bad.

So many things. So many paths she wants to take but there's only one open to her.

She has to leave. She has to say goodbye. Again.

And again it's not any easier.

She can't touch him. She doesn't make any ill-advised dashes across the room to kiss him. So she just stands there, waiting for Foggy to finish up while she watches Frank and chokes on her goddamn tears. And when the time comes, she whispers goodbye without breaking down, and then finally finds the strength to walk out the door, his eyes drilling holes into her back.

And when they lock the ward behind her it feels like she's losing part of her life too.

“You alright?” Foggy asks her in the corridor as she retrieves her purse from Lola.

“No,” she says. “But I have to be.”

“I know.”
“I don't want him to go. I don't want him to be in prison. It doesn't matter whether he deserves it or not, I can't stand the thought of him there.”

“I'm doing my best Karen.”

It's true. She knows he is. He always does.

She stares at her shoes for a second, fiddles with the strap of her purse.

“She’s not here yet,” Foggy says. “She’s been in there a while. If it's not too late, I’ll go ahead and get her.”

She nods, relieved. She knows he means well. He always does.

“Foggy, thank you. You've done so much for me and Frank and this… I mean… I don't know how I'm ever going to make it up to you.”

“Hey,” he touches her shoulder and when she looks at him, he's smiling. “I got your back. You know I do. And I guess that means I have old GrumpyPants McManPain's back too.”

She gives him a wan smile. Foggy is always at his best when he's pretending Frank doesn't intimidate him. She thinks - no, she hopes - that one day that may even be true. Fake it until you make it and all that.

They head back to the lobby and they're just about to step into the chaos outside when she sees the tall man in the suit again, the one that was trying to get to see Frank and wasn't on any approved list.

He's dressed the same, black suit, a tie, dark sunglasses. She’d all but forgotten about him. She'd meant to ask Foggy if he knew who he was but life kind of took over and she relegated him to the back of her mind where he'd been discarded to collect dust.

He gives her an appraising look as he passes them. It's not lewd, more mild interest - amusement even - and then he's heading for the stairs that will take him to Frank's ward where no doubt he'll been turned away again.

“Do you know who that is?” she asks.
Foggy turns to look. “Who? The suit?”

“Yeah, he was here on Sunday too. He was trying to get into see Frank but his name wasn't on the list.”

Foggy shrugs. “Well he won't get in then. Very exclusive club Frank is running up there and all. You really gotta be on the list.”

Despite herself she smiles. “Yeah I know that I just wonder who he is.”

Foggy shrugs again. “I'd say he was a lawyer but he doesn't look the type.”

She shakes her head. No. No he doesn't. Unless lawyers are going for secret service chic attire.

“I just wonder what he wants with Frank.”

“I'll see what I can find out. Speak to Mahoney.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure.” He purses his lips and looks towards the parking lot and the flashing cameras and knot of bodies between them and it. “You ready?”

She sighs. “No, but let's do it anyway.”

He takes her arm. “That's my girl.”

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The reporters are like flies buzzing around a rotting corpse again when they get outside but no one grabs her by the breast so she considers it a win and they battle through the crowd until they get to
the relative safety of Foggy’s car.

“Christ, they're bad,” he says as he buckles his seatbelt.

They are. They're honestly the worst.

“You wanna go for coffee?” he asks. “That bakery has a special on peanut slices this morning.”

She shakes her head.

Foggy needs to go and work and frankly so does she. She's promised Ellison she’ll be back on Monday and even though he told her she can take as much time as she needs, she's itching to get back into the game. Joe’s stories are all over the front page and while she doesn't begrudge him his success, she can't deny she feels a twinge of resentment that he's getting the glory for something she worked so long and hard on. For something she nearly died for.

She needs time to think and time to plan. Time to get her head back in the game.

So she says no and he nods, drives her home and tells her to try not to worry too much.

She says she’ll get right on that and he grimaces, gives her a kiss before he leaves, asks her to at least try.

She barely registers Irene at the front door, although her sour gaze does leave Karen feeling judged and somewhat sleazy.

Even so she has bigger things to worry about than a death stare. Like getting her credibility back or, failing that, something she can sink her teeth into and distract her from the train wreck that is her life.

And then, like a gift or a curse, it falls into her lap.

She's just stepped out of the lift to her floor when her cellphone rings, the ringtone decidedly cheery and upbeat and she thinks to herself she really should change that. She wrestles it out of her purse to
see it's Elektra and briefly she genuinely thinks of just letting it go to voicemail. It's not that she bears any ill will towards her. If anything she probably feels more of a bond with her than ever before. But she's not in the mood for Elektra right now. Not in the mood for all the drama she tends to bring with her.

She answers anyway. She doesn't know why she does.

Elektra’s voice is soft and low, that slightly mocking undertone barely noticeable even though it's obvious she's trying very hard to keep it there.

She asks how Karen is, how Frank is doing and even though her interest is not altogether feigned and she does sound relieved when Karen tells her they're both doing well, it's obvious this isn't the reason for the call.

“I saw Matthew…”

Elektra lets her words linger and Karen can't help roll her eyes as she unlocks her front door.

“Yeah…”

“He's not happy.”

“Yeah well, I'm sorry about that.”

“I think he's more upset with himself than anything,” Elektra says quietly. “For not knowing it earlier.”

“How could he?” Karen drops her purse on the bed and sits on the couch, making room for Pickle to jump on her lap. “I saw him once at the party and then the night at the warehouse…”

“When even I could smell Frank all over you…”

“You already knew.”
“Hmmm… still though. What's it like to fall off that pedestal? Did it hurt? Seems like it was a long way down.”

Despite herself Karen snorts.

“View is different.”

“You break your halo too? Or did Frank Castle take that off along with the rest of your clothes?”

She shakes her head but despite the annoyance Elektra likes to bring, she can't help but be amused. There's something about Elektra’s forthright half joking, half serious cattiness she finds oddly refreshing.

“Come on Elektra you didn't call to talk about me or Frank.”

Pickle bats a bit at her fingers, butts her head against Karen's chin and she absently scratches her near the base of her tail, making her arch and claw.

“No I didn't but a girl’s got to get her fun somewhere.”

“I’m sure you have a lot of places where you can get your … fun.”

Elektra chuckles, her voice rich and throaty. “Touche. You read me like an open book.”

“Well not quite. I still don’t know why you’re calling.”

There’s a long silence and when Elektra speaks again there’s no trace of mockery in her voice.

“Karen, I need you to tell me what happened on the roof after we left.”
For a moment she’s convinced she hasn’t heard Elektra right, and then another when her brain grasps desperately at the disparate threads of this entire mess to try and follow some kind of logical path which leads to Elektra asking this.

But she has nothing. She has absolutely nothing save for the sinking feeling of reliving those long terrible minutes on the roof again, watching as Frank gets weaker and weaker, listening as he foretells her future without him in it.

It's cruel and painful and even though she's gone over it a million times since she woke up, she thought it was hers and hers alone to pull out when the shadows got to deep and the despair too much. Her own little self-inflicted cruelty that no one else could wield. That no one else would dare to.

And yet…

And yet Elektra’s talking and she’s listening and here she is and Frank's blood is on her hands and he's dying in her arms again. Again and again and again.

Like he always does.

“Karen? Karen are you there?”

“Yeah,” she says distractedly.

“So? What happened?”

*Frank's blood all over her, the light going out of his eyes, his body limp and her own death blooming in her side.*

“Why?” she asks, mouth dry and voice cracked. “Why do you want to know? He's alive now. He's going to be okay.”

She says it as much for herself as for Elektra. She finds there are still things she has to make herself believe.
There's silence on the other end of the line for a second and then Elektra speaks and her voice is tight and oddly apologetic.

“No no, I'm sorry,” she trails off. “Christ. I didn't mean about Frank…”

She doesn't understand and when Pickle’s nails dig sharply into her thigh she finds she's grateful for the distraction.

“What did you mean?”

Elektra sighs and she's not sure if it's exasperation or something else.

“Vanessa, Karen. What happened to her?”

Okay… so another game. Another riddle. She feels like she’s the butt of some joke or prank and she still hasn’t figured out why it’s funny.

“Elektra come on.”

“No, I'm serious. Just tell me what happened to her.”

It's Karen's turn to sigh.

“You were there…”

“Indulge me.”

She closes her eyes briefly, unhooks Pickle’s claws from her skirt.
“You put a blade through her head and then you guys left.”

There's another long silence on the other end of the line.

“That's what I thought,” Elektra says eventually.

“You _were_ there.” She says again and lets the sarcasm seep into her voice but Elektra ignores it.

“So why are the police asking where she is? Why hasn't that handsome piece of man-meat you sent my way from your office even mentioned her?”

“Wait, what?”

“They questioned me the other day. Obviously I couldn't tell them much because I'm just a poor little rich girl and all I have is advisors and brokers telling me what to do with my cash. But when they asked me about Vanessa, I got the distinct impression they don't have a body.”

And something clicks into place as Elektra finishes. It's small and insignificant and at the time she barely noticed because she was sick with worry and Frank was in a coma and all she could do was try and keep everyone safe during her police interrogation. But it comes back. It comes back fast.

Delaney shuffling papers and looking like a homeless person sitting in front of her, Foggy at her side.

Where is she now?

_You should try the morgue._

She didn't think anything of it at the time. Not really though. Maybe somewhere in her chemical-added brain and her broken heart she thought it was just lack of communication in the police department. They're overworked and underpaid and it would have been easy for another dead body to slip through the cracks. But, now that she considers it, that dead body being Vanessa Marianna is incredibly farfetched. They wouldn't just lose her. Not her.
“Karen? Are you there?”

Elektra doesn't sound angry or impatient, just concerned.

“Yeah, yeah. I'm here.”

“Well?”

She tells her about Delaney, about her own interrogation.

“I put a blade through her head,” Elektra says. “Matthew has given me nothing but grief for it since then…”

Karen sighs, “Maybe someone took her body? It’s possible. I was hardly in a state to notice anyone other than Frank at that point.”

“Why though? To hide her involvement? I don't understand.”

She doesn't understand either. She saw her. She saw Vanessa lying there with the blade peaking out through her forehead, that drop of blood growing long before dripping onto the concrete, her eyes wide and staring.

Nobody walks away after that.

Nobody.

Except when they do. Except when they don’t.

She's seen too much to pretend it's impossible.

“I killed her,” Elektra says but her voice is meek and unsure.
“Yeah, you did. She was dead,” Pickle jumps off her lap and flops down on the floor, rolls around. “Doesn’t mean she’s gone though.”

Not in Hell’s Kitchen.

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Saturday.

She stands in the parking lot of the hospital next to her car and watches him being escorted out of the building; watches as the crowd of reporters surge towards him, as Foggy pushes them away and security lances through the herd like a needle through an abscess.

Frank’s limping slightly and she can see it hurts him to move. It breaks her heart but she won’t cry about it.

As confident as she is in Foggy’s abilities she can’t help but feel Frank leaving in a police truck portends the future. Their future.

Things will move forward, they always do. It’s the whys and hows that matter.

( So why would you do that to yourself? Have you even thought about what it’s going to be like? )

She doesn’t even try and ignore Matt’s voice. It seems pointless now.

The wind whips her hair and tugs at the big pair of sunglasses covering most of her face. No one has seen her yet and she’s grateful even if she knows that won’t last for long.

She shouldn’t be here. Foggy told her not to come but she couldn’t just let Frank go away and not bear witness to it. He’s her friend, her confidant, her lover. She can’t just let all that mean nothing.
She wants to take him home, to mend him again, his body and then his mind and then maybe - maybe - his heart, his soul. If he’ll let her. God knows he still needs it. They both do.

If she started walking now she could be at his side in a few seconds. She wouldn't get through the security and she'd probably give Foggy a heart attack but she could do it.

Maybe she could save him too.

Then again, maybe she can’t, so she stays where she is.

(He loves his wife Karen. He loves her more than anything in the whole world. He started a war in her name and he’s still fighting it even though he already won. She's the mother of his children. She will always be his one and only.)

She watches him struggle. But he's strong. He's so strong and he won’t let the bastards get him down.

He's almost at the truck when he stops suddenly, head up, slightly cocked like he's heard something. And then he turns, looks directly at her and, even across the parking lot, his eyes are boring through her like they always have, like he can see inside her.

She's about to raise her hand but it's like her bones are made of lead.

He doesn’t do anything either but his lips twist so that she's not sure if he's about to smile or break down in tears. With him it seems like those two things are never all that far apart.

And then he mouths something and she doesn't need to lip read to know what it is.

I love you. I love you.

She touches her heart as they guide him into the truck.

I know my love. I know.
(Have you even thought about what it’s going to be like?)

She has. It’s all she does. It’s going to be like this. Exactly like this.

She turns, gets back into her car.

It's time to get to work.
Talking about the dream like the dream is over

Chapter Notes

Okay first of all I owe you all a huge apology for how incredibly late this is. I honestly never intended it to be so long between updates but for some reason my life sped up when it was supposed to get quieter, then The Punisher was released (ha!) and while I really enjoyed it, I did struggle to get my head back into this fic considering that it is now hugely canon divergent and very very definitely set in a post DD2 world where The Punisher season 1 did not happen.

And then I struggled so much with this chapter because I tried to skip big chunks of it just to get to the meaty stuff and realised when a fair bit of it was written that I am not doing anyone any favours and not being fair to the story itself by trying to rush through and ignoring how important it is to set the next part of the story up. So I had to start again. And then I had to write my secret Santa thing so that took some time, but hey, at least it means there will be more fic from me up in the next couple of days.

Okay so, I am heading into very very tricky territory here. I know I am fudging a lot of the legal details, so if I have any lawyers in my readership I apologise profusely. Basically I am probably being about as accurate as the show itself was, so I hope this doesn't upset anyone too much.

Anyway, enough talking - let's see how things are going now that we can get into a courtroom.

Title is from Matchbox 20's All I Need.

Walking from reception to her office on Monday morning is harder than she anticipates. And no, it's not just the press camped outside, rabid and frothing at the mouth as they may be. Rather it’s that everyone from the mailroom guy to the CEO seems to have an unspoken opinion on her presence in the building. No one says anything but she doesn’t need to be particularly perceptive to feel the weight of their combined gazes as she makes her way to her desk.

It’s okay though. There isn’t really all that much that could make things worse right now. Let them have their moment, let them be shocked or outraged that Karen Page was leading a far darker double life than they thought. At least it will give them something to talk about.

Ellison agrees.

Fuck ‘em , he says as he walks into her office and shuts the door behind him. Fuck ‘em. They don’t know and you do.
It might be the first time she’s heard him speak so callously about anyone - and she can’t help it, she goes to him and gives him a hug, tells him how grateful she is that he didn’t kick her out on her ass for lying to him and bringing this whole shitstorm down on his paper.

She knows some shrink somewhere would probably have a field day regarding her apparent daddy issues but she doesn’t care. Ellison is good to her. He’s better to her than she actually deserves and she’s not going to throw that away but she’s not going to ignore it either. She needs people more than she ever did before. And he’s one of those people.

“Okay Page,” he says after a while, patting her shoulder awkwardly. “That’s enough. We have work to do because in spite of my excellent negotiating skills, the board is still gunning for me and they want to know how I didn’t know The Punisher was still alive and apparently sleeping with my top reporter… I couldn’t exactly tell them that I pretty much knew both of those things and just decided neither of us needed the hassle.”

She pulls away, nods at him and he gives her a smile that’s almost completely genuine.

“So what did you tell them?”

He lifts an eyebrow. “That you are an excellent liar.”

She snorts.

“I also told them that I don’t make it my business to know my staff’s personal lives and that you are the best of the best. If they don’t like that, they can bite me.”

“Thank you,” she says.

“Don’t mention it,” he leans back on her desk. “Really, dear God, don’t mention it to anyone.”

She chuckles, wipes her eyes. “Okay.”

He regards her owlishly for a few minutes and she can see that he’s ready to move on and jump back into work; start prepping her for whatever she’s going to be doing while Joe covers the story she
spent months working on. But at the same time he wants to ask something else. Something that’s more important and less appropriate for work.

“Go on,” she says. “It’s okay. I won’t write a letter to HR. They don’t pay any attention anyway.”

He rolls his eyes.

“I just want to know if you’re okay Karen,” he runs a hand over his head.

“Yeah,” she says lightly. “Yeah. I’m not on painkillers anymore and my stitches come out on Wednesday.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

She sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose, closes her eyes.

“I’m fine,” she says. “There’s nothing I can really do other than trust Foggy to do his best for Frank…”

He nods.

“You really do love him don’t you?”

She looks at him, doesn’t say anything and lets the moment stretch until he nods. She feels like on some level she’s answered a different question that was implied but somehow never voiced. She’s okay with that too. She’s still here despite the press and the tabloids; she’s still here even though she could and should have been arrested. She’s here because he fights for her and she doesn’t see the point in lying to him about this.

“Yeah, I do.”

He purses his lips, frowns like the disapproving patriarch he is.
“Disgusting,” he says.

“Absolutely,” she agrees.

“Oh, okay,” he straightens up and clasps his hands in front of him. “So, since I am not going to put you on the cat blogs and the New York Post has already used all our cool headlines, the worst thing I can get you to do is attend the daily police briefings.”

She sighs loudly but he ignores her. The police press briefings aren’t terrible. They’re mostly just boring and they tend to happen at some ungodly hour of the morning. But all they really involve is sitting in a musty room listening to a bored cop rattling off a list of incidents in the past 24 hours and then coming back and writing them up for the website and possibly for the print edition too if the story is big enough.

“Ellison…” she starts but he hehushes her.

“So what are we going to do with you when you’re not giving Joe all the exclusives?”

And here it is. Here’s her moment. He’s given it to her like he always does.

She takes a breath, walks to the small couch in the corner of her office and sits down, hands on her knees. “Well I had a few thoughts about that.”

He folds his arms and cocks his head.

“Why am I not surprised Page? Why am I not surprised?”

She bites her lip and narrows her eyes.

“Hear me out okay? Hear me out before you say no.”
“Well now I’m intrigued. But I don’t know if that’s because I get to say no or because the story is so interesting you have to start it off with a disclaimer.”

And sometimes she really does want to punch him.

“Just keep an open mind.”

“As open as my smile,” he says and gives her a forced grin.

It’s her turn to roll her eyes but that just makes him snort.

But then he’s serious again and he adjusts his glasses and folds his arms.

“Oh, Page, what do you have?”

“So much,” she says. “So so much.”

She tells him as much as she dares. She tells him about Vanessa, how she knows she died and how there’s now a missing body. She tells him about the trafficking and how Hell’s Kitchen seems to have been a hub for it for years and no one seems to have bothered to try and figure out what was going on. And now that they have Frank Castle sitting in a jail cell, somehow they think they can pin it all on him.

He knows she’s holding back. His questions are precise and insightful and he gives her that ridiculous knowing look whenever she tries to sneak something by him. But he’s good. He respects her and her integrity and he knows when to back off.

“Well,” he says eventually. “Well, that if you’re right and Vanessa Marianna was there…”

“She was there. She shot Frank four times in the back.”

“Okay, I believe you. I do. The point is that has been kept so far under wraps her name hasn’t even
been tied to this thing. In fact even that vampy flame of your old boss who Joe’s been pining after
didn’t say anything.”

She nods. “I think Vanessa managed to buy off a lot of the police again. Just like Fisk did.”

He frowns. “Wouldn’t surprise me. But that means that literally anyone could be hiding her body.
The Russians, the Yakuza or apparently New York’s finest. It’s a dangerous game.”

“So what are you saying?” She says. “That I can’t look into this because of your patriarchal
bullshit?”

He sighs and shakes his head. “Look, I’m not going to lie. Should Frank Castle get out of prison, I
don’t want to be on his hit list if something happens to you…”

“Oh my god Ellison…”

He holds up his hand again. “But I know you well enough to know that when I tell you not to do
something you have to do it. I don’t know it’s like a chemical reaction or something. Ben was the
same.”

She puts her head into her hands.

“Fine,” he says. “Look into the trafficking angle. That’s a big story as it is. Start there. If you uncover
something about Vanessa along the way - something concrete and verifiable and not just the word of
some masked assassin or your own while you were bleeding out on a roof - then we can revisit it. If
it's nothing it's nothing but maybe you can shake something loose.”

“Okay,” she says.

“Good,” he pauses, shifts a little. “And Page, I am trusting you not to use this as an excuse to help
Frank. If it happens naturally, then by all means pursue it, but it can’t be the focus. You know that.”

He’s right. Coming from her it wouldn’t help much anyway.
So she nods and then she watches him as he tries to figure out a way to move on to the next part of the conversation.

“Spit it out,” she says eventually.

He sighs, leans back on her desk, and she has the distinct impression that he's buying time and that's unusual for him. He's not given to sensitivity when it comes to work, even with her.

“Karen, I'm not an idiot. Maybe the police are, although from what you've told me I'm pretty sure they have that narrative we spoke about…” she nods and he continues. “But it’s common knowledge that Daredevil was at the warehouse too and was involved in this whole screw up.”

She doesn't do anything. She doesn't roll her eyes or try and shake it off. He'd see through it anyway.

“So,” he continues. “One of the things I had to promise to the board is a revisit of the book deal…”

“Ellison!”

He holds up his hands. “Look, I didn't want to force this on you. Don't get me wrong, I want this. I think we could have a hit on our hands and I know you're the only person who can do it. You hold all the cards on this.

“But I'm going to at least need you to consider it seriously this time. Don't just shut me down. I need you to actually think about it… and stop looking at me like that.”

She doesn't stop though. She narrows her eyes and purses her lips.

“Come on Karen, just a maybe would go a long way here.”

“You and I both know a maybe means a yes. You know if I give you a maybe there's no way I can back out of it.”
He shrugs.

"Why are you so against it anyway? It's a book deal. All you'd need to do is write it. We'd handle the
promotion and the marketing. And the money is generous."

Yeah, sure, all she’d need to do is write it. Go to Matt and ask him to let bygones be bygones and
just help her out here to make a bucketload of cash off his story while she breaks his heart in the
process. She thinks about the sunflowers that are just starting to wilt in her kitchen and the look of
abject betrayal on his face the last time she saw him when she told him she loved Frank. She hasn't
heard from him, hasn't seen him. She doesn't know where he is or what he's doing. But she knows
he's still hurt. He loves her and there's a part of her that will always love him too.

It’s not fair to ask, but then she looks at Ellison and she knows she has to give him something. He’s
gone to bat for her. The least she can do is try and reciprocate.

She sighs, leans back into the couch.

“Okay, I'll think about it,” and when he opens his mouth she hurries to continue. “But I do the
trafficking story first. I do the Marianna story first. And I will give you my final answer after the trial
is over. Not before. It's too much otherwise and I won't commit to anything either way before then.”

He eyes her for a minute and then he nods. “Fair enough.”

“One more thing Ellison, if I say yes - and that's a very big ‘if’ - it's up to Daredevil to agree to it.
And just so you're fully in the picture, him and I are not on the best terms right now.”

He nods again. “I figured as much.”

“Okay,” she says. “Now I'm going to go and do some real work. Some actual reporting that isn’t
about chasing around after masked men in leather suits.”

Ellison glares at her over his glasses but there's no actual exasperation in it. “Be safe Karen. Frank
Castle isn’t the only one who’s worried about you.”
“Thanks.”

“Good,” he says. “I’m glad you’re back. I’m glad you’re safe.”

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She spends a good portion of the morning helping Joe with his story and then after lunch she retreats to her office and stares at her empty bulletin board for a good 20 minutes, sipping coffee and trying as hard as she can not to think about Frank and what he's doing; not to think about the people he's with and what he's facing.

It's not that he won't cope, it's not that there's any real danger to him in Sing Sing; it's that he doesn't belong there.

Even if he does.

She wipes at her eyes and stands, goes to get some drawing pins out of her desk and a clipping of an article The Bulletin ran on Vanessa’s art gallery from almost two years ago. Ben wrote it and she looks fondly at his name for a few seconds before pinning the scrap of paper to the board.

The article isn’t really about much, just a puff piece on the gallery and its artists, a brief but enticing biography on Vanessa and a picture of her in a sleek black dress leaning against a marble sculpture of a man.

“Where are you?” she asks. “Where are you hiding? Who is hiding you?”

Unsurprisingly there's no response, just Vanessa’s Mona Lisa smile and not much else.

But it's a start. And every start needs a finish and Karen’s a firm believer that you only lose when you give up. So she goes to her laptop and starts researching cases of human trafficking in and around Hell’s Kitchen dating back the past five years.

It's a broad search and one she’s unwilling to narrow down too much just yet. She finds reports linking tangentially to Fisk, to Gao, even a mention of James Wesley and for a minute her breath
hitches in her throat and she lets herself look at his picture; his dark hair, his thick glasses, the fact that he doesn't look remotely frightening. He’s nothing like a dangerous white collar mobster and far more akin to a boring uncle you only get to see at Christmas and even that's more than enough.

He doesn’t scare her though. Not anymore.

She thinks of Frank lying behind her in their bed, his hand on her bicep and his breath warm on her cheek.

*Don't mean you ain't strong.*

She believes him. She believes herself too.

She makes printouts of what she finds, pins those to the board as well. She adds post-its and divides the board into sectors, starts colour coding too. She knows what she needs to do is actually speak to the people from the warehouse; sit down with them and find out where they’re from and what they were offered, what they thought they’d end up doing in The States, land of the free and all that.

She wonders how much she can push her luck with Mahoney and figures it's not much at all. He’s a good cop and part of being a good cop in this city means being a difficult cop, an angry cop. She's pretty sure that no matter what happens from here on out she's not truly going to have him to fall back on ... if she ever did. She's going to need to shake some sources, grease a few wheels and that's okay. She's done it before. She can do it again.

"You still here Page?"

She looks up from her screen and Ellison is leaning in at her office door. She follows his gaze out of the window and is surprised to see it's dark.

"You're allowed sick leave you know,” he says. “You don't have to make up the hours.”

“I know.”

"Don't wanna go home?” he asks and she shakes her head.
She doesn't. Her apartment feels empty and strangely separate from the world. She feels bad because Pickle needs the company and gets weirdly flustered when she's left alone for too long and that's been worse since Frank was there. But the fact is she doesn't want to face that hollowness. She doesn't want to see his bloody handprint on the wall and know that's the only part of him she still has.

*You know that's not true.*

Frank’s voice in her head is low and gravelly and it makes her think of how he'd talk to her at night once she moved back into her bed, how he was gentle and warm and she’d never felt so safe.

He's right though. It isn't true. For better or for worse, she has him. She has his heart or at least whatever tattered pieces of it he has left to give.

“Page?”

She snaps out of it and looks back at Ellison.

“I'm just finishing up,” she says and he scrunches up his eyebrows, looks at her like she just tried to convince him that Josie’s wasn’t in violation of any health codes.

“Great, I'll walk you out then.”

She shakes her head and closes her laptop, slips it into her bag.

“You're insufferable.”

“But luckily my dashing good looks make up for it,” he says as they head to the lifts and she laughs.

No matter what happens she has good people in her life. And that's more than she can really ask for.
Later that night Foggy calls her to let her know that Batzer is in a state about moving things forward as fast as she possibly can, saying she's sick and tired of wasting taxpayers' money on this case and she wants it done once and for all.

“I'm guessing that means you've convinced Frank to plead not guilty?”

“Yeah, that was always the play Karen. Just as long as he doesn't pull the same shit as last time.”

It's not that she doubts Foggy and, with the list of charges Frank has pending against him, guilty or not guilty isn't going to make much difference at this point but it leaves her with a feeling of dread in her bones. She knows it's really only because it's real now. It's real and it's happening and she might lose him. In fact she doesn’t think there’s much ambiguity one way or another.

“How long until the trial actually starts?” she asks.

He sighs. “I'm thinking it's going to be fast Karen. Batzer is wasting no time. I heard through the grapevine she's determined to have jury selection done by the end of the month if Frank pleads not guilty. That's what? Two weeks? Three?”

“Wow.”

“Yeah… there's a lot of pressure on her, a lot on all of us.”

“You're gonna be ready by then?”

He chuckles. “Oh ye of little faith. Yes I'm going to be ready. Who needs sleep anyway. Pfft.”

Despite herself she laughs.

“You saw him today?” she asks.
“Yeah, I needed to go over some stuff for tomorrow with him.”

"How is he doing?"

Foggy pauses for a moment and she doesn't know whether that's good or bad.

“About the same Karen. You know him. He doesn't let you see too much.”

Except he does. He does when you know where to look. How to look.

“He misses you though,” Foggy continues. “He misses you a lot. He asks about you and even though I last saw you the same day he did, he manages to make me feel guilty about it.”

“Oh Foggy…”

“Yeah, I just think he's still coming to terms with everything that's happened. He's struggling with it too, even if he doesn't say anything and is just a smartass most of the time.”

“Yeah, that sounds like him.”

“He feels guilty for what happened to you,” Foggy says.

“He took four bullets for me. He has nothing to feel guilty about.”

“Yeah, tell him that.”

She smiles against her phone. Frank carries his guilt like millstone around his neck. He does it with Maria and his children; there's no reason to think he doesn't do it with her too.
“Are you going to see him this weekend?” Foggy asks, changing the subject.

The question catches her a little off guard. It wasn't that she hadn't thought about it. On some level she’d just worked weekly visits to Sing Sing into her schedule but the actual reality of sitting there with him in a prison or speaking to him through glass on some old timey telephone wasn't something she'd truly contemplated.

“Karen?”

“Yeah,” she says distractedly. “Yeah I am.”

“Good. I think it'll be good for him to see you. Good for you too,” he pauses for a second. “Come to the hearing tomorrow too if you can. It’s at 2pm. I’ll put you on the list so you’re guaranteed a seat. I think it might keep him in check.”

There was never any doubt she would go. Not really.

“You encouraging my relationship with a psycho murderer?” she teases and she can almost hear him smiling on the other end of the line.

“That psycho murderer makes you happy Karen and you do the same for him. I don't know how but you do. You and those goddamn vigilantes.”

She smiles too but his words make her think about Matt and the book deal and for a second she considers floating the idea to him, asking if he thinks Matt might find it in himself to work with her. But she decides not to. It would be too much like putting Foggy in the middle because she knows he'd want to plead her case to Matt and that could either result in Matt shutting himself off more than he already has or, depending on how Foggy puts it, finding hope where there isn't any.

So she lets Foggy chat for a few more minutes, gives him a few details about her day and eventually thanks him again and says goodnight. And then she looks around her empty apartment with its bloodstained wall and Frank's presence literally saturating everything and tries not to think too hard about it all.

Instead she gets into bed, turns her laptop on, opens up her folder on Vanessa.
“Come on Ms Marianna,” she says. “Where the fuck are you?”

But again, Vanessa isn’t particularly forthcoming about that.

She works late into the night anyway, writing down names and addresses, contact numbers. She draws flowcharts and mind maps and inwardly curses Ellison for making her go home. She forgets to eat and when her stomach rumbles loudly she glances at the clock and isn’t surprised to see it’s well after midnight.

There’s a second she considers getting dressed again and taking a trip out to the warehouse, seeing if she can find anything on the lower levels but she pushes the idea away. She’s curious and determined but she tries not to be reckless and she doesn't altogether trust herself in her emotional state right now. Stress and rage seldom help when big decisions need to be made.

She adds it to her to-do list though.

And then suddenly Pickle is there and she's headbutting Karen's hands and walking over the keyboard of her laptop.

She reaches out to stroke the cat's furry little head. “Is it bedtime girl?”

Pickle’s response is to kick three of her pencils onto the floor and dip her paw into a forgotten glass of water on the side table. She guesses that’s all she needs to know.

She chuckles, puts the laptop in the floor and switches off the light, pulls the covers up to her chin.

She lies there for a while staring at the ceiling. Pickle tucked against her. If she closes her eyes she can imagine Frank here with her, his eyes drilling into her, his body semi-naked and hot as a blast furnace; the feel of his hands on her - tentative at first - and then more confident, heavier, demanding.

And then she's dancing on the roof of her old apartment block with him and above them the sky is on fire.
It's beautiful and so is she. He's telling her so as he draws her close, his hand pressing firmly into the small of her back. She's breathing him in - her face buried in his neck and he smells of soap and gunmetal. He smells of blood and musk, sandalwood.

He smells of home.

His hands are on her hips, fingers twitching and he’s holding her so tightly that it feels like every part of her is touching every part of him.

I love you, he says. Know that.

I love you too.

He spins her around again and she closes her eyes, listens to sky explode above them, feels the warmth of the fireworks against her face and her dress and she wonders why she doesn't burn, wonders why the heat doesn't burrow into her skin and scorch her from the inside.

He's laughing, spinning and spinning and spinning her again and then pulling her in, his hand in her hair and her face tilted upwards.

She waits for him to kiss her, to feel that press of his lips on hers, that taste of him, so real and raw and earthy, but it doesn't come. Instead the sky rumbles again, long and loud and she feels another flash of heat against her skin and then the sound of rain; thick, heavy drops in her hair and on her clothes, running between her breasts and down her legs and when she forces her eyes open she’s back at the warehouse and black blood is falling from the sky.

It smells of copper and something else, something dirty and corrupt and in the distance she can hear gunfire.

“Frank,” she whispers looking down at their hands, the blood on their skin, soaking their clothes. “Frank.”

And then his hands tighten on her, hard enough to bruise, hard enough that it feels like he's grinding her bones together under his fingers. She tries to pull away but she can't and he wrenches her closer, scratching her and gripping her wrists so hard she cries out.
This isn't him. He can't hurt her. He's never been able to, not even if he wanted to and he's never ever wanted to. She thinks of the cabin and her bruise that covered most of her side and belly and how his hand rested on it and all it did was soothe. She remembers how she could touch his wounds and hold him close, bear that burden and it never hurt.

And now it does. Now this one final insult. He's hurting her, breaking her, pulling her bones out of her flesh and sucking the marrow from them.

“Frank!” she says and he laughs. And it doesn’t sound like him at all.

And then she understands.

When she looks at him through the bloodrain and the gunsmoke, through the sky that's on fire, it's not him at all. He's gone, he's left. He's rotting in a goddamn jail cell like she said he would.

And she needs to fight this battle alone.

The man in front of her is taller, slighter. Despite the blood covering him from head to toe and the smell of fire in the air, his cologne is overpowering.

She shot him once. Except it wasn't only once.

*Seven bullets Miss Page. Seven. You really didn’t want me to get back up again.*

She wrenches herself away but he grabs her wrists again, pulls her closer and backs her up so that she's pressed between him and the wall.

*No one to save you now Karen. No one to pick up the slack. That pretty little nose is just going to get cut off the next time you stick it where it doesn't belong. And karma is such a bitch isn’t she?*

She twists in his arms but her whole body feels like slowly hardening concrete, thick and stupid.
He drags her forward, tells her to look, to see what she's done. To see all the people who've died for her but she doesn’t want to. She fights him. She fights him hard until his hand closes around her throat and he forces her to her knees, grabs at her hair and holds her steady.

*Look Karen, see what you’ve done.*

And there they are on the ground, a rapidly growing pool of blood around all of them. Matt. Foggy. Elektra. Claire. Ellison. And Frank. Frank with four bullets in his back. Three for his family. One for her. The one that's still lodged inside him. The one that will kill him.

She tries to shout but her lungs burn and James Wesley’s face flickers and shifts and then it's not him anymore and it's…

She wakes up screaming.

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She tells herself it’s just a dream - a product of a stressed and tired brain - but it takes a long time before she calms down. She goes to the bathroom, washes her face and then she makes herself some herbal tea and sits under her blankets, shaking. Pickle is still curled up at her side purring really loudly but the city outside is really quiet Karen knows she's not going to get any more sleep tonight.

Her clock says 4am and eventually she gives up looking at it and goes to have a shower, stands in the spray for a long time while she thinks of the night she brought Frank in here with her, when she undressed him and held him and somehow they ended up tangled in each other and they never figured out how to undo that.

They never wanted to.

She shakes the the thought away. She can't keep this up. She has to find a way to move forward without his constant presence in her life and she hates that more than anything else. She was fine without him in those months following the night at the cabin. She missed him, sure. He's easy to miss. But when he lurched back into her life with his blood pouring out of him and onto her floor, something changed. Something deep and foundational and now that it's gone it feels like part of her life is missing and she's never going to get it back.
Oh ye of little faith…

She gets out the shower and dries herself off, pulls on a cream pencil skirt and a light purple blouse, does her hair. She tries really hard not to think about the arraignment later today, tries really hard to ignore the way her gut twists and the bile rising in her throat.

And then she kisses Pickle goodbye and heads back to the office.

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She spends the early hours of the morning going over Smirnov’s deals, trying to pinpoint where and when he got involved with Vanessa and if the people they were trafficking were just a cog in the wheel or if there was some darker purpose to it.

She knows she’s going to need to have a good old face-to-face talk with Elektra and Matt as well. He did say that he'd kept tabs on Vanessa, and who knows what he uncovered when he was looking into Fisk the first time… When he was Daredevil and she was too stupid to see it through the stars in her eyes. But there’s no point in beating herself up for any of this.

So she doesn’t. Instead she works. She works hard and reminds herself that at the end of the day she’s a good reporter and an even better writer and she can do this.

She will do this.

At 7:30 she grabs a coffee and makes her way down to precinct for the morning crime report.

She waves at the desk sergeant who seems surprised to see her but indicates she should go into one of the musty reception rooms down the hall.

She’s the first one to arrive but the coffee already smells old and stale and she’s glad she picked up her own cup on the way.

In time, four much older men slink into the room. She recognises one of them from The Post and another from The Times. The remaining two she doesn't know but she's sure one of them harassed
her and Foggy outside the hospital. By the way he's looking at her she's sure he remembers her too.

They stink of cigarettes and sweat and they all leer at her with equal amounts of fascination and contempt. None of them say anything though and she guesses that's better than anything else. After all there's a good chance one of them was behind the “Keys to the Castle” editorial. Not that it matters either way.

To her surprise it’s d’Argento leading the briefing and she doesn't look nearly as angry as she did the last time Karen spoke to her. She’s remarkably efficient in giving the report, keeping it short and the point. There's was a stabbing on 4th and a sexual assault on 7th. They found a lost teenager by the river and they have no idea who she is and there were two domestic violence callouts during the night.

She hands them all a single piece of paper with the details, asks if they have any questions and, when Karen asks her about the lost teenager and if they have any leads, she shakes her head and tells her it's under investigation, they'll release more details when they have them and Miss Page, don't you have bigger problems to worry about?

The last bit isn't sarcastic. It's not even said with an edge but rather resignation and a hint of pity.

And then d’Argento makes a beeline for the door and she has no choice but to get back to the office and write up what she can, have it ready and subbed before anyone else even gets to work.

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At one o’clock Ellison comes into her office with a bright orange box of cronuts and a coffee and, when she raises her eyebrows, he tells her that firstly, quality doesn’t come cheap which is why he drove to the other side of town to get the best when only the best would do, and that secondly, she needs to eat fast if she’s going to make it to the courthouse on time.

She looks at him long and hard and tries as best she can not to let him see how much she appreciates pretty much everything about him except his ill-fitting pants and his sharp tongue, and even then she fails.

“How did you know?” she asks and she’s not even sure what she is referring to.
He shrugs, “You’ve been in since 4:45 and my guess is you’ve been working the whole night too. You’re stressed and you look like you haven’t eaten in weeks - take me to HR for that if you want - and I know that all you really want to do is go and see him and keep him in check so he doesn’t start mouthing off about being the big bad Punisher and threatening to kill them all.”

“Yeah, that’s about right.”

“So go do it. Really. It’s okay. And then go home and get some rest.”

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She takes a cab and she’s glad she did. Parking would have been a nightmare. As it is she needs to ask the driver to drop her a block away because of the congestion. The street outside the courthouse is teeming with people. It’s at least ten times worse than it was at the initial trial with the reporters and lawyers, law enforcement and pretty much anyone and their dog who ever heard the name “Frank Castle” before. News vans and metal barricades line the sidewalks and she can even see that they’ve started to close the road off to vehicles. Above her helicopters are circling and at the bottom of the courthouse stairs there’s a crowd of demonstrators with placards in the air. She can’t hear what they’re chanting but judging by the placards it seems to be a mix of people - some calling for a reinstatement of the death penalty and others with signs thanking Frank for cleaning up the streets of Hell’s Kitchen. She wonders briefly how many clashes there’ll be here today before they’re through; how much more blood will be spilled.

She fights her way through the mass of people and up the stairs, keeps her head down and her eyes fixed firmly on the ground. She hears her name called once or twice but the crowd is just too big and dense for anyone to really get to her, and it’s not without considerable relief that she makes it inside and through security.

The courtroom itself is also packed and people are standing in the aisles and pressed like sardines against the wooden walls. The noise is deafening and she struggles forward towards the attorney’s tables where she can see the back of Foggy’s head as he pores over some documents he has laid out in front of him.

To the left she can see Tower and his ADA and, when she looks at the seats behind them, she catches a glimpse of Joe stuffed between a young woman wearing a skull T-shirt and an obese biker with a beard that hangs all the way to his belly.

For a second she’s sorry she didn’t ask Foggy to pull some strings so that Joe could also get a place reserved but then she finally makes it to the front and she forgets all about it as she leans across the
partition and taps Foggy gently on the shoulder. He jumps visibly and swings around so fast he knocks two files onto the floor.

She can see he's gotten about as much sleep as she has. His face is wan and slightly grey and he looks like he's surviving on caffeine and not much else.

“Hey,” he says and he doesn't try to disguise the relief on his face. “You came!”

“And miss you looking like this?” she says indicating his smart suit and shiny shoes. “Not for the whole world.”

“You haven't seen Frank yet,” he says. “I think I'm going to lose in the suit stakes today.”

She shakes her head. “Never.”

He manages to grin at her, points to the row of seats behind her.

“You can sit there,” he says and she nods. “God, I'm just so glad you're here. I mean I probably shouldn't be with the extra pressure but I just think it'll keep him focused you know?”

Yeah, she knows. She does and it kills her a little that it's true.

“You've got this Foggy,” she says. “You do.”

He smiles wanly. “Yeah, we’ll see. I just don't wanna fuck it up this early on.”

“You won't.”

“I might,” he says. “I've got to play my ace today...”

“You ready to tell me what that is yet?”
He sighs, glances around the room, and in that moment she can see just how truly frazzled he is. He’s doing a good job of keeping it all together but his pupils are huge and he’s shaking slightly. Even so, there’s a twinkle in his eye.

“Reyes,” he says. “She can bring this whole thing down.”

Karen frowns. “Foggy…”

And he’s about to say something else but suddenly the bailiff is standing in front of the judge’s bench and tapping an ear piece.

“All rise! The honourable judge Batzer presiding in the matter of the People versus Frank Castle.”

The courtroom quietens down almost immediately and Foggy nods at her to go to her seat, while he adjust his tie and does up his top jacket button.

She squeezes his shoulder briefly, gives him a short sharp nod, and she hopes she’s done a good enough job of hiding her anxiety. The last thing he needs is to think she doesn’t trust his abilities wholly and completely.

And she does. She really does. She knows what he’s like. She’s seen him work and even in the early days at Nelson and Murdock she always thought he was a better lawyer. She realises now that was mostly to do with Matt not being fully present at the company, not applying himself as he should and spending so much time as Daredevil.

Still, the comparison stands. Foggy is the better lawyer. That doesn't change the fact that Frank’s case is tough and sometimes even the best lawyer in the world can't do anything in those circumstances. Except he has. Somehow. With Reyes.

And she has no idea how this is going to shake out but she guesses she’s about to find out.

Batzer takes her seat and then waves distractedly at everyone else to sit. The bailiff says a few hushed words to her and she nods at him.
“Please bring the defendant in,” she says.

As one the crowd turns its attention the small door next to the empty jury box. There are two policemen standing outside it holding rifles aimed at the ground.

Karen glances at Foggy but he's not looking at her, and there's a second that all she wants to do is bolt. This is too much and too hard and too real. And goddamnit but she’s done it before. She's been here before in this exact courtroom, watched this exact same spectacle unfold. The only difference is how much more she's entangled with it now, how much of her is tied together with the angry, brutal, beautiful man coming through the door.

And he is beautiful. His bruises are gone and she's sure she's the only one in the whole room who notices his limp, the way he winces ever so slightly as he walks.

He's wearing a suit like Foggy said he was and he looks good like Foggy said he did. He's handcuffed and the two guards flanking him are both armed. It doesn't matter though. She's sure he could take them if he wanted.

And then what Karen? Matt's voice. If he takes them what do you do? Run out of here at his side? Give up everything for him?

No, she thinks. No. I love him but I wouldn't give him that.

You thought about it though. You did.

She shakes her head, forces herself to focus on Frank and not the Matt in her head and his nasty truths. It’s not the time. Her existential crisis needs to wait.

She glances at Frank’s face and she can see he is looking for her, his black eyes scanning the room and when he finds her, she swears the world stops.

She knows it's a cliche. She knows it doesn't actually happen and it’s just something romance writers like to use a plot device. It isn’t real. Except it is. And suddenly nothing else matters. Nothing matters at all. He can see her and she can see him and his whole being softens: his eyes, his clenched jaw,
even the way he carries himself seems somehow lighter, less burdened. He looks at her with equal amounts of gratitude and resignation and for a moment it’s all she needs. He loves her. He's always been able to tell her without words.

She gives him a small smile, tries hard to blink the tears out of her eyes and wishes briefly that he wasn't looking at her and she was free to just let them fall.

But he is. And he doesn't take his eyes off of her as he's led to the defence’s table and told to sit next to Foggy, and even then he stares at her for a good few seconds before turning his attention to the judge.

“Alright,” says Batzer. “Let's get to it.”

She consults some papers and then looks out into the courtroom.

“I know this is a big case. It was a big case last time and there's no reason it won't be bigger this time,” she says with a considerable degree of exasperation. “But this is my courtroom and I expect that since you are all guests here you will behave accordingly. That goes for you too Mr Castle. That means the big bad Punisher stays at home. Is that clear?”

Frank nods and Batzer eyes him for a few seconds before she's satisfied. She consults her notes again, glances at a folder with Foggy’s firm’s logo on the front and turns her attention back to the courtroom.

“Would the defence please rise.”

It's not a request. It's never a request but somehow Batzer makes it sound like it's a command from the Almighty himself and both Frank and Foggy are already on their feet before she finishes speaking.

“So one more time for old time’s sake,” she says. “Mr Castle, you are charged with…”

She rattles off a list of felonies, mostly exactly the same as the previous case. Thirty-seven counts of murder, breaking and entering, criminal mischief. They're charging him with trafficking too, blowing up the warehouse, involvement in money laundering and drug smuggling.
And every single charge, even the ones that Karen knows aren’t true and aren’t provable; even the ones that Foggy will be able to show beyond the shadow of a doubt are made up and simply a way of covering the police force’s ass or throwing shit at a wall and hoping something will stick, feel like a stone dropping into the pit of her belly.

And she knows he’s never going to get out of it. No matter what happens he’s going to either spend the rest of his life running from the law or incarcerated and, despite how much they both want it, those two weeks they had is all they’ll ever have. It’s all that was ever set aside for them.

It breaks her heart. But then again, he always has.

“How do you plead Mr Castle?”

There’s a moment of silence, a hush that descends on the court; no whispering, no fidgeting. Just absolute oppressive nothingness that drowns out everything. And then he turns, looks at her. To anyone else his expression would be unreadable. But she sees everything. She’s sees his loss and his rage and his grief. She sees the way he wants to climb out of his own skin and leave everything behind. She sees how much he wants to die. But underneath all that she sees how much he loves her, how he will literally do anything for her and for them, and despite himself, how much he wants to live and be with her.

She smiles weakly and nods. He swallows, glances at Foggy briefly and then turns back to the judge.

“How guilty your Honour,” he says and a ripple runs through the room.

She lets out a breath. She’s not sure whether to be scared or relieved and she guesses it’s okay to be both. No matter what happens, this thing they have was never going to be easy. It was never going to be straightforward. She guesses that it playing out this way was just one of endless possibilities. Some better. Some worse.

Batzer is less impressed though. She glares at Foggy and Frank.

“So we’re doing this again are we?”
“Yes, your honour. We’d like to request bail to be...”

“Denied,” she says firmly. “Mr Castle will stay in custody at Sing Sing until the conclusion of this trial.

“I want to start jury selection...”

“Your honour,” Foggy interrupts and Batzer stops, looks at him with beady eyes.

“What is it Mr Nelson?”

He clears his throat and does up the top button of his jacket and again Karen is struck by just how far he's come. He's always been good. He's always been shrewd and insightful. But the difference is he believes it now too.

“Your Honour, in the interests of saving the court time, I'm calling for all the evidence gathered against Mr Castle for the previous trial to be excluded from this trial. I have the motion here.”

For the second time the court goes absolutely silent and somehow it’s more deafening than the first.

Batzer looks like Foggy just announced he intends to prove the moon is made of cheese and even Tower is having trouble finding words. But then he does.

“The prosecution opposes...” he starts but Batzer finds her voice and talks over him.

“On what grounds Mr Nelson?” she says. “You have to admit this is a pretty big request.”

“Yes your Honour,” says Foggy and he picks up the folders that fell on the floor earlier and hands one to Tower and one to the bailiff who takes it to the judge. “We have reason to believe that none of the evidence is admissible in court due to the section 14 of Federal Rules of Evidence governing evidence tampering.”

Batzer shakes her head as she opens the file.
“Mr Nelson,” she says. “This is patently ridiculous.”

“Your Honour, the prosecution could not be more firm in…”

“Hush, Mr Tower,” Batzer says putting on her glasses and scanning the document.

Foggy stays standing and Frank turns again to look back into the court, catches Karen's eye. She frowns at him and he shrugs, inclines his head towards Foggy.

The truth is she doesn't know what to think. It's not that she doesn't trust Foggy to know what's best. It's not that she doesn't think he's a brilliant lawyer but this seems like a gamble of dynamic proportions especially as the end result might just be to piss Batzer off. And truly she expects Batzer to look up after a few seconds, declare Foggy off his head for even trying to pull a stunt like this and then proceed with setting a date for jury selection.

But she doesn't. She carries on reading and even from Karen’s vantage point she can see her eyebrows rising and the line of her mouth getting thinner and firmer.

Eventually she looks up and her expression is bordering on murderous.

“Mr Nelson, Mr Tower,” and her voice is hard and clipped. “My chambers now!”

Foggy nods, picks up his briefcase and waits for security to escort Frank back into holding. Then he gives Karen a quick look that tells her he's simultaneously scared shitless and hugely proud of himself before he follows the judge out of the courtroom.

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They're gone for a long time, so long in fact that Karen wonders why the court hasn't been adjourned. Regardless, whatever Foggy has done has put the cat among the pigeons - that's for sure.

She shifts in her seat, glances across to the other side of the courtroom. People are having hushed
conversations, others are on their phones and she wonders if she should call Ellison and let him know what's going on. But then he did say to finish up from home this afternoon and Joe probably let him know already.

She looks towards where she saw Joe and sure enough, he's on his phone, scribbling notes down on a small scruffy notepad. She finds she's proud of him even if there's a certain bitterness over the fact that he's got both the Smirnov and the Castle story now. And no, she doesn't blame him, and she gets why Ellison had to do it but it still feels like a kick in the teeth.

Her gaze drifts to a pretty dark-haired woman sitting behind him. She's dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt and she has a little girl of about six sitting on her lap and Karen wonders what her stake is in all of this. In fact, she wonders what everyone’s stake is in this - the old woman in the back row, the shabbily dressed teenager next to her, a man with a blue mohawk and black painted nails leaning against the door. Frank Castle has affected all of these people in some way. Some good, some bad. Some just by virtue of being on the news. She wonders what their stories are.

She glances up, scanning the people pressed against the walls, and that's when she sees him.

The man in the suit from the hospital - the one so desperate to get in so he could see Frank.

He's standing near the far wall, but not leaning against it like most of the others who couldn't get seats. His expression is a mixture of mild annoyance and boredom and he's checking his watch every few seconds and then typing on his cellphone. He doesn't seem particularly angry though, but she suspects he's one of these men who could kill someone and not break a sweat and in many ways that gives her a strange kind of appreciation for Frank. Because for all the terrible things he does, Frank isn't cold. He's loud and messy and angry and he feels it in every cell of his being.

She doesn't know what that says about her. She's not sure she wants to either.

For a moment she considers getting up and going to him, demanding to know what his interest in all this is and why he's been so determined to see Frank - why he thinks he has the clearance to do so.

She's all but standing up and pulling her purse over her shoulder when the door swings open and Batzer walks back in, her face sour enough to curdle milk.

The bailiff, obviously not apprised of her arrival, starts to tell everyone to rise but she waves him away and gestures for everyone to sit, tells security to bring Frank back inside.
This time there's no moment for them as he walks to his seat, no gentle smiles. He's worried, which in itself is a huge change from the last time they did this when Frank Castle literally gave a fuck about nothing other than vengeance and punishment.

_I did that_, she thinks to herself. _I did that and I don’t know if it’s good or bad._

Batzer taps her gavel.

“Alright,” she says. “Mr Nelson has requested a hearing on the admissibility of evidence collected against Mr Castle during the initial trial back in September last year.”

A rumble runs through the crowd, followed by some harsh whispers and a few unhappy voices from the back.

“Order,” Batzer says testily and looks at Foggy.

“In light of this and the fact that the information that has now been disclosed to me has extremely far-reaching implications for both the DA and Mr Castle, I need a day or two to deliberate.”

“Your Honour…” Foggy starts but she talks over him.

“I'm going to adjourn until Friday 11am,” she says. “You'll have my decision then.”

“Your Honour in light of this, the defence requests that my client is released on his own recognizance…”

Batzer actually chuckles.

“Not on your life Mr Nelson,” she says as she gathers her files. “Not on your life.

“Court is adjourned until 9am on Friday.”
There’s a beat, another moment of silence that feels louder than it should be and then the court explodes into a cacophony of voices. People are shouting things from the back, demanding answers, others are clapping even though there is no reason they should be no matter what side of this thing they’re standing on. Security is moving in and trying to get people out of the courtroom, demanding that they take their things and move out in an orderly fashion.

Karen grabs her purse, looks to the man in the suit who is heading out towards the door and she knows she should follow him. He might have answers and she’s in short supply at the moment but, as she stands, she sees security walking towards Frank, and all that disappears. She can find him later - she has the feeling he’s not going away.

Instead she pushes forward towards Foggy’s table and says Frank’s name softly under her breath. She’s not allowed to talk to him. She knows she’s not. But she doesn’t want to talk. She just wants to see his face. Let him see her and know that she's here and she'll stay. No matter what happens she will stay.

He twists in his chair and looks at her again. His eyes are overly bright but she can see the smallest hint of a smile on his lips.

*I love you*, he mouths. *Know that*.

And she does.

She touches her hand to her heart and he nods, eyes red and wet.

*I love you too*.

And then they take him and lead him away but he's looking at her like she's the only thing left in the world worth looking at.

Her punisher.

Her big bad punisher.
“Franklin Nelson, what have you done?”

They're sitting in a booth in Josie’s which is already getting full with the early evening crowd. The beer tastes like dishwater and her hands stick to the table whenever she puts them down. It's not overly noisy though except for Lou who is on his perch at the bar and shouting at Josie about the shit music and how it's messing with his hearing aid.

Josie, like everyone else, ignores him.

Across the table, Foggy takes a swig of his beer and pulls a face.

“Jesus Christ,” he says. “They need to tell those guys at Rikers to clean the fucking toilets before they make this.”

“That's gross Foggy.”

“So is this,” he says looking dubiously at the bottle.

“So you gonna tell me what you've done? You know now that Frank's entered a plea and there's no one around to hear?”

He grins at her and he looks so smug she half wants to smack him and half wants to remind him how worried he was earlier in the court.

“Come on Nelson, spill it.”

“Okay okay,” he takes another sip of beer, pulls another face. “Before I say anything you have to remember Batzer hasn't made a decision on the evidence hearing yet. She could rule against it although that's unlikely. But you need to know it's possible.”

He sticks his tongue out at her and calls over what passes for a waiter and orders a side of fries.

“Okay so basically my stance on this is that any evidence collected against Frank up until he escaped from Rikers is inadmissible. The reason for this is Reyes…”

And suddenly it jumps out at her and she literally cannot believe she didn't see it before. It's so blindingly obvious that she's angry she managed to miss it.

“Oh my god,” she interrupts him. “Reyes was involved with the sting that killed Frank’s family. She had a vested interest in covering this up and getting him sent away or executed.”

Foggy's fries arrive and he stuff a handful into his mouth, washes them down with more beer.

“Oh my god,” he says. “Chain of evidence and all. We can't trust one damn thing that went through the DAs office during that time. It could have all been fabricated and who knows how much was ‘lost’ all because Reyes needed Frank out of the picture if she didn't want to destroy herself.”

She sits back in the booth. She can feel her blouse sticking to the dirty plastic but she doesn't care.

Somehow she's reeling but at the same time this all seems really clear, really neat in fact.

She sips her beer without tasting it and that's just as well.

“So, let's say Batzer grants the hearing and let's say she excludes all Reyes’ evidence and that part of the case falls apart…”

“Yeah?” Foggy picks up a bottle of ketchup, which is sticky and crusty around the rim, and proceeds to drown the fries in it. “It really depends on how far Tower wants to take it before it just becomes too embarrassing. I can see him giving it a go but I suspect he might fold sooner rather than later.”

“What charges are we left with if he does?”
“Jailbreak, but I'm guessing that might disappear if Batzer dismisses the other stuff and then the double murder at the diner…”

"He was saving my life..." she interjects and Foggy just gives her a dark look and continues.

"And everything that happened after at the warehouse."

“That he didn't do,” she says. “That he had nothing to do with.”

Foggy holds up his hands and his fingers are stained red. “You don't have to convince me Karen. I know.”

“But they're still going after him for it, even though it's garbage.”

“Look, let’s cross that bridge when we come to it. My aim right now is to reduce as many of the charges I can and throw what I can’t out of court. This is a start and it would be great not to have to concentrate on all the bullshit from before and just go with everything that happened at the warehouse because those are bogus.”

She grabs one of Foggy’s fries, stuffs it into her mouth - it’s undercooked and mushy but she barely notices. For the first time in weeks it feels like there’s a chance - an actual chance that doesn’t consist of Frank breaking out of jail and spending his life on the run, never being able to really see her again. She doesn’t want to get her hopes up. She knows she needs to prepare for the worst, but somehow the worst is seeming like less and less of a real possibility.

“I’ll need you to testify,” Foggy says. “Tell the court what you heard in Reyes’ office - you know before the Blacksmith tried to kill you.”

For a second she feels guilty. Foggy and Matt don’t know that Schoonover was the Blacksmith. They don’t know that he’s dead now either. It was another of Frank’s secrets that she kept, another that she held close to her heart, in that place where she puts all the bad things she doesn’t know how to handle.

“Karen?” Foggy’s chewing on his fries and she looks across at him.
“Of course,” she says distractedly. “Matt too, I’m guessing.”

He looks a bit put out at the thought. “Yeah maybe. I’d prefer not to subpoena my best friend, especially with his extra-curricular activities and all. But with how he feels about both of us right now that might be the only way.”

She reaches across the table and lays a hand on his arm. “Oh Foggy…”

“It’s alright,” he says. “He just thinks I should have told him about you and Frank. I think he feels very alone. Betrayed even.”

She’d be lying if she said that didn’t hurt her. And she’d be lying even more if she said she didn’t feel a twinge of guilt over it. Matt is a good person and he deserves good friends and loyalty, and she can’t imagine how much it must upset him to know that everyone he trusted - Foggy, Claire, Elektra - all knew what was going on with her and Frank before he did.

He told her he wasn’t sure he could be a friend to her and he wasn’t sure he wanted to either and, at the time, it seemed harsh, but she gets it now. The truth is she might want to be his friend but she’s also not sure she can. She might not qualify for the job any longer.

“Anyway, that’s another bridge I need to cross if and when it comes to it,” says Foggy picking up the grimy menu. “Right now the more pressing issue is whether I want the salmonella or the e.coli burger. We could get both and share.”

“I was thinking of trying the botulism one.”

“A bold choice,” he muses. “Very interesting. But then again, you’re all about the bold choices.”

She laughs. She guesses she is. She guesses she has to be.
She dreams of Frank again that night. It’s even worse than the first one.
I built myself a levee to hold back the flood

Chapter Notes

Yeah... I bet you didn't think this was gonna happen...

There were times I didn't either if I'm honest. But I don't want this story to die. I really
don't. I have a plan for it and I want to see it through so I apologise for how long this
has taken.

Also note, there's some pretty bad sexual harassment in this chapter.

Title is from The Mission's *Ain't no prayer in the Bible* which incidentally is a very good
Frank song.

So without further ado, here is the next chapter of this nonsense.

Please let me know what you think.

Her stitches come out the next day. It doesn't hurt as much as she thinks it should. That could be
because Claire is amazing or it could be because pain has taken on a different quality and the pinch
she feels every time one of the sutures leaves her skin doesn't really compare to the rest of what's
going on in her life.

There's a hole in her heart and even though she refuses to let it stop her from living her life, she can't
deny how much she misses Frank, and how worried she is despite Foggy and his master plan.

Delaney comes to talk to her but again his questions seem more about going through the motions and
there's something in his eyes that tells her he really doesn't want to be here and do this. Briefly she
considers going to Mahoney and telling him that his precinct is under threat again, that he needs to
look for dirty cops but Foggy tells her he's already passed on the message and her going to Mahoney
right now could open up another can of worms they're not ready to deal with. It's out of their hands.
As it is Mahoney would be a fool to place himself 100% behind Frank Castle’s legal team. But he's
smart and if anyone can figure out what's happening then it's him.

She works from home on Wednesday and on Thursday she manages to dodge the reporters on the
way to work. She's glad to see the crowd is thinning out considerably and she's no longer front page
news. She knows it'll have a resurgence when the trial gets underway but for now she'll enjoy her
new found freedom.

She keeps her head down. Does what Ellison asks. She writes up the police reports, she subs copy
from the more junior writers. But when she gets home, she sits in front of her laptop with Pickle
curled up on her legs and tries to piece things together, tries desperately to find something that holds more weight than her word that will prove her side of the story.

The truth is she knows she needs to talk to the people who were in that shipment but at this point she has no idea how that is going to happen.

Foggy calls on Friday morning as she's stepping into the office to ask if she's still coming to the court. She tells him she is. He's trying to sound breezy about the prospect that his entire case could fall apart in a few hours but he doesn't fool her for a second.

“I know I'm working for a big fancy law firm now and have actual reliable support, but is it stupid that I want Matt there?” he asks.

Yes, yes it is.

“Oh Foggy.”

“I know I can do this but I still feel there are some things he's so much better at than me, stuff he can do that I can't.”

“Remember how that worked out the last time?” She says.

_The city needs heroes but you're not one of them._

He makes an indiscernible mumbling sound on the other side of the phone.

“You've got this Foggy. There's no one in the world who has this better than you.”

“Careful Karen, my head is already big enough.”

She smiles.
“I'll see you later…”

“One thing though,” he says and she stops opening her laptop and leans back in her chair.

“Yeah?”

“Are you going up to Ossining to see him on Sunday?”

“Yes,” she says.

“Good.”

Foggy’s voice is more relieved than it should be.

“What's going on?”

He's quiet on the line for a few seconds and she can hear him shuffling some papers.

“It's just that…”

“What?”

“Well whatever happens today still means we have a long road ahead of us and I don't want him to run out of steam.”

“What do you mean?”

Foggy sighs. “I need you to remind him there's a reason not to throw this. That there's nothing better inside a jail cell and he wants to be out of one as soon as possible.”
Little prickles of dread meander down her spine and she shivers.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing. Honestly nothing,” he says emphatically. “I’m just having flashbacks to the last time we did this and if there’s one thing I know about Frank he doesn’t really have a huge tendency to think long term.”

That’s true. He doesn’t. It’s not like he can’t see the consequences of his actions. It’s just that often in the heat of the moment they seem inconsequential to him. Either that or he’s so laser focused on what he wants that anything beyond that isn’t part of the equation.

“We just have a second chance at this, I need him to remember that and not get even more melancholy than he is.

“Truth is prison isn’t good for him - not that it’s good for anyone really but I’m not going to get into that right now, but with him I don’t know if he’s just going to fold or do something stupid and break out again.”

“Okay,” she says even though it’s not okay at all. Even though this feels like a terrible thing to ask.

“Also…”

“Also what?”

He sighs. “Also, he’s seen some of those newspapers - you know the ones.”

Yes. Yes she does. *Glutton for punishment* . *Keys to the Castle* . And of course her personal favourite and the most recent one she saw, which was a picture of Frank and Matt from his previous trial, an inset of her face and the header *Now that we’re on the same Page*... She appreciates the originality, if not the sentiment, but she really does wonder how anyone found out about her short-lived romance with Matt or if they just took a stab in the dark and connected with some tasty meat.

“Jesus Christ,” she swears.
“Yeah,” Foggy says. “I think he figured he could handle it you know? He knew you’d be dragged into this but now actually seeing it has got him a little frazzled. He’s not happy - I mean he’s never happy, but this isn’t helping.”


“Yep,” Foggy sounds resigned and he’s quiet for a second before taking a breath and continuing. “Look, I'll see you later. I need to get down to the courthouse.”

They say goodbye and she spends a few minutes staring at her laptop cover.

The fact is she can't go through trying to pick up the pieces again if Frank decides to pull one of his outbursts again. Especially now when the stakes are so much higher. Especially now that the only reason he's facing this is because of her and because of the fact that she couldn't just leave things be and let Matt and Elektra sort out their own problems.

And even though she knows that's a vast oversimplification of the issue, it doesn't make it any easier.

She sighs and plugs in her laptop, reads her emails and writes up the daily crime report. There's not much going on in Hell's Kitchen this morning and D’Argento’s briefing was quick and simple: a stabbing on fifth and a car stolen out in the suburbs. The car story isn't worth the paper it would be printed on so she leaves it out.

She checks the rest of the news. There's a little buzz about the trial - not a huge amount though because no details have been released about why Batzer called the postponement. It's just as well because later when it comes out it'll put her and Matt firmly back in the spotlight; the truth is she wonders how much help Matt would be if it came to it.

On the same page indeed...

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At 11 she's back in the courtroom. Again it's full, again Foggy has got her a seat just behind his desk and again her heart nearly leaps out of her chest when Frank is led into the room.
He's still in a suit, he still looks smart, but he barely returns her smile and his hands shake in his cuffs. He looks tired, resigned and when his eyes meet hers, she sees something in them that looks exactly like guilt and she knows something has changed, that there's been a fundamental shift somewhere and the two of them are at the centre of it.

But she doesn't have time to think about it or let it bother her because Batzer is walking in and, as is her custom, waving at everyone to sit down before the bailiff has even finished announcing her.

She puts her glasses on, scans a few documents in front of her and then stares out into the courtroom and briefly her gaze rests on Karen. She purses her lips and then looks at Frank and her distaste is obvious and Karen feels her hopes starting to dissolve.

“Alright,” Batzer says. “So earlier this week I received some incredibly worrying information about evidence tampering in Mr Castle’s previous trial and misconduct within the DA’s department.

“I don’t need to tell you how serious these accusations are Mr Nelson and I’ve had no choice to pass this information onto the DA’s internal affairs.

“Regardless of what they find, we can’t all waste our time sitting around here waiting for the investigation to be completed - God knows we have wasted enough time on this case already. Also I think it would be irresponsible to just dismiss the enormous amount of evidence and work that went into Mr Castle’s previous trial out of hand. So what I’m going to do is call a hearing where both Mr Nelson and Mr Tower will be able to make their case for whether to include evidence from the previous trial,” she stops, gives Tower a very beady look. “That is if the prosecution still wants to bring those charges against Mr Castle?”

Tower looks at his assistant and then at Foggy. It isn't hard to see that he's unsure, that he's been thrust into a position he doesn't want and never wanted. Karen almost feels sorry for him, but then she looks at the back of Frank's head, the tension in his shoulders and it evaporates. Tower knew that Reyes was trying to save her own skin and Maria Castle and her children were worth more than that.

“Your Honour,” Tower stands and does up the top button on his jacket. “The prosecution feels that the evidence against Mr Castle is solid and are not planning on dropping the case against him.

“Mr Castle's crimes are heinous and it would be a severe miscarriage of justice to see him go unpunished on account of some paperwork.”
“Objection,” Foggy says. “Mr Castle is presumed innocent.”

“Mr Nelson, this is still the preliminary hearing, no need for objections,” says Batzer. “However way I'm inclined to agree with you, so save it for your closing statements Mr Tower.

“I'm setting a date now for the 25th at 9am. I trust that will be enough time for you all to prepare?”

“Your Honour,” Tower stands again. “The prosecution needs more time…”

Batzer screws up her face. “Mr Tower, the onus is on the defence to prove evidence tampering. If the DA’s office is innocent then you’ve got nothing to do.”

Mr Tower stands there for a second opening and closing his mouth and Batzer leaves him to do just that. She turns to Foggy, gaze resting on Karen again briefly and then on Frank.

“Mr Nelson, I trust you and your client will be ready?”

Foggy nods. “Yes, your Honour.”

“Very well, court is adjourned.”

Batzer bangs her gavel and exits to her chambers in what seems like a huge flounce.

And for a moment, before the courtroom explodes into a flurry of movement, Karen just sits there and lets the truth of this settle on her. It isn't what they wanted but it's what they expected. They both knew Batzer wouldn't exclude the evidence out of hand but there was that little gremlin of hope that she would.

It's as good as it can be.

Foggy swivels in his seat and gives her a shrug. She returns it with a small smile but he's not looking
at her anymore. Instead he's staring at the back of the courtroom and, as she stands, she turns to look too, half expecting to see the man in the suit standing there, cellphone in his hand and texting furiously. But it's not him.

It's Matt.

Dressed almost casually, dark glasses covering his eyes, he's seemingly waiting for everyone to pass him on the way out. His expression is unreadable - as close to blank as she's ever seen it - and Karen finds that extremely disconcerting, because if there's one thing about Matt it's that he, like Frank, is shit at hiding his emotions. It's a stark contrast from the last time she saw him in her apartment, his last stand when he thought he knew it all and he didn't know anything. When she broke his heart and in his own way he broke hers right back.

Still, he seems to know that they've seen him and he raises a hand - more in Foggy’s direction than hers.

She turns back to look quizzically at Foggy and she catches Frank's eye at the same time. He's chewing on the inside of his cheek and she can see a muscle jumping in his jaw. It's not exactly angry - god knows she's seen him angry and this is not that. Instead it's more worry and defeat, that odd combination she saw when he first walked in and possibly the same thing Foggy was talking about on the phone earlier.

She glances back towards Matt but she knows she can't think about him now. Whatever he's doing here - and she's sure it's not just a show of support for Foggy - is his business. It has nothing to do with her. She shakes her head and takes a step towards Foggy and Frank as she sees security heading in their direction as well.

“Frank,” she whispers.

He hears her. She knows he does. It's in the way his head turns almost imperceptibly towards to her, the set of his jaw.

“Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to stand back.”

Security. A big man with a buzzcut blocking her.
She doesn't fight him. There's no point. She just looks at Frank, the way he holds out his hands to be chained to another set around his feet.

It makes her feel sick inside, watching him be led away like an animal, put in a cage where he doesn't belong.

“I'll see you on Sunday,” she calls as security unlocks the door to the holding cell. “I'll see you.”

His whole body goes tense at her words and he turns his head to her.

“No, Karen,” he says softly. “No.”

For a second she doesn't think she's heard him right, that he's responding to something else that has nothing to do with her, that this is something she's not understanding and if this damn security guard would get out of her way so she could actually see Frank's face and talk to him properly, this would be easily explained away.

“What do you mean no?” She says.

“Ma'am, please don't address the witness,” says security.

Frank shakes his head again and he doesn't look back as he's led out of the courtroom.

~~~

Matt is gone and Foggy doesn't have much time to talk to her afterwards. He says that despite his early cavalier attitude about the time constraints Batzer placed on him, he's not nearly as prepped as he should be.

“Also I'm going to need to call Matt as a witness,” he says. “So I'm not sure how well that's going to go down.”

“Do you know why he was here?”
He shrugs. “ Probably just interested in the case … in you.”

She shakes her head. “No, I think Matt and I are probably going to need a while.”

“Doesn’t mean he's not here for you. Those feelings don't just go away because someone's stamped all over your heart.”

“You think that's what I did?”

Foggy sighs, the resignation on his face obvious. “I know it is Karen.”

No judgement. No judgement except what she metes out on herself.

“I can testify,” she says changing the subject, and he nods.

“Yeah and I need you to, but we've got to remember that Tower is going to call your integrity into question because you're sleeping with Frank.”

This is true. She knows it is. She's already some kind of scarlet woman, some sick and twisted Punisher fangirl who can't be trusted.

“Hey,” says Foggy, touching her shoulder. “It's not all bad. If we can remind everyone that you're a respected member of the community and you're trustworthy then we will be okay. If you believe Frank Castle that gives him a lot of credit.”

She purses her lips. “Yeah.”

“Also,” Foggy continues. “Don't listen to Mr ManPain McManPain about this weekend. Go. Go and see him and talk to him and help him remember what you have.”

She never had any intention of doing otherwise.
“I will.”

“Good. Now let me go and figure out how exactly I'm going to get your psycho murderer boyfriend out of this hot water.”

He kisses her goodbye and leaves her standing there in an empty courtroom staring at the space where Frank was and then the door he left through.

And she can't shake the feeling that it's forever.

~~~

On Sunday she gets into her car, hooks her playlist up to the speakers and puts some Bruce Springsteen on and drives out of town. And as the city fades behind her she can't help but remember the last time she left New York, where it took them, the riverside, the street food, the way he kissed her because he couldn't hide how much he wanted to do it.

They had one night.

One.

And it's not fair and she's not prepared to let that be it.

Tell me in a world without pity

Do you think what I'm askin's too much?

I just want something to hold on to

And a little of that human touch

Just a little of that human touch

Bruce’s voice fills the car and she gives the speakers a dirty look. It’s not that she’s not a fan. Not exactly. Not like Frank but Bruce has always transcended age and, to a large degree, culture as well
but somehow this feels far too close to home. This feels like another one of those conspiracies against her, something to throw her off and confuse her - distract her from the real problem.

Oh girl, that feeling of safety you prize
Well, it comes with a hard, hard price
You can’t shut off the risk and pain
Without losin' the love that remains

No, Bruce. No, you can’t and she's not going to either.

She switches her phone off, turns on the radio instead and lets some mindless starlet du jour sing about boys and candy and staying out late on Friday nights.

It’s not great, but it’s better than it was - and she thinks that can and can’t apply to a whole lot of things in her life in equal amounts.

As she approaches the outskirts of New York, the houses get bigger and bigger until, almost like she turned a page, they’re suddenly smaller and fewer and further between and eventually she can see nothing but a kind of no man’s land on either side. But the trees are green and so is the grass and all things considered, the day is pretty enough. Definitely far too pretty to spend in jail.

She has no idea how to feel about that.

It's not a long trip either, not even an hour without traffic and it isn't long before she's driving along the streets of Ossining.

For a town that has a jail as a main feature, it's prettier than she expected. It's clean and slow and the facebrick buildings have decorative facades which she's not sure if she likes or not. The houses are uniform and suburban and kids play in the streets and parks and she has to slow down for dropped balls and lazy looking cats who give her filthy looks for daring to be on the road when they're crossing it. In some way it seems odd with a prison so close but she guesses escaped convicts don't usually stick around too close to their place of incarceration.

It's safer than New York, that's for sure. Still, there's something in her bones that says she never wants to come here again.
If wishes were horses and all that.

She takes the turnoff to the prison, tries not to give too much time and attention to the guard towers standing tall against the sky, nor the chainlink fence and the electrified wire at the top, or the guards she can see patrolling the area with lean German shepherds and thickset pitbulls and Rottweilers. She wonders how long it will be before Frank makes friends with every dog in this place, how long it will be before they're all listening to Mr Castle and ignoring their owners.

She doesn't think it will take much time at all but even that seems like an eternity she doesn't have to give.

She stops at security and a man in a khaki uniform comes out to take her name and registration and give her a pass to put against her windscreen. She has to sign an indemnity form and is told there'll be another when she gets inside.

She's grateful that he doesn't seem to know who she is or care too much to find out. He does give her the once over, and she half expects him to say something like “what's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this” but he doesn't. He smiles and waves her through and she finds a parking space close to the entrance and turns off the car engine.

And then for a few minutes she just sits in her car and breathes, pinches the bridge of her nose.

She didn't expect it to be this hard, this soon.

Visiting Frank Castle in jail isn't new - she did it so many times before at Rikers, she's lost count. But never like this. Never as something other than a part of his legal counsel. Never as his… as his whatever she is.

And what's that Karen? Matt's voice.

The devil on her shoulder… except Matt is more of an angel and she doesn't mean that in some fluffy, warm way most people do when they talk about them. Not at all.

So what do you think Karen? What kind of a angel am I?
She's not here for this but before she shuts that line of thought down, the answer is already there.

*Biblical.*

A mirror to all her sins. Judge and jury.

The executioner is inside. And somehow he feels the safest of them all.

She shakes her head, glances in the rear view mirror once and runs her fingers through her hair before she gets out of the car and heads inside.

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The first thing she notices as she steps through the door is how it's all exactly the same as Rikers - and all exactly different too. Different layout, different colours, different atmosphere. And yet the sameness is everywhere. It's that prison smell: the harsh antiseptic that doesn't quite cover the smell of blood and cheap food. And then underneath it all, more than anything, there's that heavy muskiness that hangs in the air like a cloud; as a sign of too many men being kept in one place.

It seems to pour through the doors in waves and no, it's not sweat or body odour of any other kind, it really is something undeniably male. Something else undeniably violent.

She wonders if that's what she smells on Frank sometimes, that maybe that underlying hint of gunmetal isn't gunmetal at all.

She signs in at the door, hands her purse over to the guard, gets a visitors pass on a lanyard which she hangs around her neck.

This guard does seem to recognise her but he doesn't say anything, just directs her through a set of double doors the colour of pea soup and tells her someone will be with her soon.

She thanks him, goes into the waiting area which is all industrial browns and threadbare couches, a
few semi-dead plants and a water cooler that looks like it's seen better days, some tattered magazines that swear they’ve cracked the top ten signs that he's in love with you.

She's pretty sure “He took four bullets for you and gave up his freedom” isn't on the list.

It should be though. It should be first.

There's a few other people there - mostly women. They don't look at her and she affords them the same courtesy.

And then someone is calling her name and she's standing and her legs feel like big, clunky slabs of stone that she has to drag across the curling carpet and into a small private anteroom where a woman who looks very much like Irene pats her down thoroughly, asks her to lift her shirt and undo her jeans and then seemingly satisfied, she issues some short, curt instructions about no touching or handing anything to the inmates and to be ready to leave by the time the bell sounds.

And before Karen can say anything she's ushered through a series of checkpoints, doors slamming behind her, and she's in the circular recreation area, which is both lighter and cleaner than she expected. The smell though - that muskiness - is stronger here. Harsher. No amount of disinfectant can mask it.

She looks up.

The ceiling is high - at least two storeys, with balconies jutting out into empty space. She can see guards posted there, rifles jutting out over the railings.

They're not taking any chances. None at all.

The room itself is large and there are small Formica tables dotted around the floor, more guards patrolling the floor between them too. The inmates sit in bright orange jumpsuits, hands on the tables in front of them. Some are waiting, others are already talking with family and friends. She spots a few tear-streaked faces, more angry ones.

It's no surprise that Frank's table is right in the middle of the room, and she doesn't need to be a genius to know it's because it's the easiest place to keep an eye on him - that he's probably directly in someone's line of sight at all times.
He's not looking at her, didn't even glance up when she came in and if she didn't know better - and that Frank Castle is one of the most observant people she's ever met - she'd think he genuinely did not know she'd arrived. But that's bullshit. She knows enough to know that.

He's glaring at his fingers on the table in front of him, tugging at them. His shoulders are tense and his face is grim, mouth set in an angry line and a scowl on his face - and she just wants to hold him, put her forehead on his and tell him it's going to be okay, she's here and they'll find a way because that's what they do. That's what they always do.

She takes a step towards him and the another. From the left she hears someone wolf whistle and when she turns her head in that direction, she sees a beefy bald man that might remind her of Fisk if not for the swastikas tattooed in a chain around his neck and some equally disturbing images on his knuckles. His name card says Jeb for all the help that might be.

“Well, well, well Karen Page,” he says in a way that makes her wish she never ever had to hear her own name again.

He licks his fingers suggestively, makes some comment about the smell of fresh pussy and how he'll stuff her panties in her mouth if she screams.

“But you're a glutton for punishment, aren't you?”

He smirks at his own joke and she feels a wave of nausea clogging the back of her throat.

She takes a breath, looks back at Frank whose eyes are now fixed on Jeb, fingers twitching wildly.

This is bad. This is very very bad. And the longer she stands here near this Nazi piece of shit, the worse it's going to get.

So she squares her shoulders, heads over to Frank's table, her flat shoes making gentle shuffling sounds as she does and she doesn't look back.

There's more important things going on than some rightwing lunatic harassing her for shits and giggles.
More important like this mess of a man in front of her.

(Don't you know?)

She slides into the seat opposite him and for a long time, he doesn't look at her.

Frank Castle always did have a way of breaking her heart.

She wants to touch him, put her hand on his face but she knows if she does that she'll be banned from coming back.

As it is, she's already skating on thin ice.

She cocks her head, puts her hands on the table too so she knows he can see them.

“Frank?” she whispers and he doesn't answer, doesn't even move and she wonders if this is how it's going to be, wonders how long they can do this before she gets up and leaves. Because she will. She can do a lot of things she never imagined she could.

Still… it isn't what she wants - for all the difference that makes.

For all the difference anything that Karen Page has ever wanted has made.

The tears are there again, pricking against her eyelids, but she bites her lip, forces them down her throat.

Holder back of tears under extreme duress, my ass.

“How are you?” she asks. “How are they treating you?”
He looks physically fine, bruises barely discernible on his skin and his cuts healing. His colour would be decent too if not for the fact that his face turned a skull white when he heard Jeb speak to her.

But he's not fine. He's not at all and she ducks her head to try and catch his eye.

“Frank?”

“I told you not to come,” he says eventually and even though she knows he's trying to sound firm, his voice is soft and cracked and gratitude bleeds in from the edges.

“How could I not come?” she asks.

He doesn't have an answer. He tugs at his sleeves, glances back over to Jeb.

“Ain't no place for a lady,” he says.

“Maybe I'm not a lady,” she says lightly.

He looks at her then, eyes dark and stabbing into her like she's meat.

“No,” he says. “You are.”

Okay, so this is important to him. This is one of those things that matter. And so many things matter when it comes to him that she finds it hard to keep count.

She thinks she needs a list for it, but maybe he can just share his.

“Okay,” she says. “Okay. But I still had to come. I had to see you… talk to you.”

He shakes his head in that way he always does when he thinks the rest of the world has lost its mind.
“No,” he says. “You shouldn't be here.”

It hurts. It hurts so much it feels like she could rip her heart out of her chest and dump it on the table in front of him.

“No. No don’t say that.”

*Please… not after everything.*

“You know I'm right.”

“No,” she shakes her head, suddenly angry. “No you’re not right. You don't get to tell me what to do Frank. You don't get to pretend that these last weeks … months even, were just some little anomaly and now everything just goes back to the way it was.

“You told me you weren't going to pretend this isn't real.”

“I ain't pretending it's not real,” his voice is loud enough to tell her she's touched a nerve.

“Then don't.”

He sits back, scowls at her. “It's *because* it's real that I don't want you here. Goddamnit Karen, I love you, you know that. But I ain't someone's prize. I told you it's my job to be fixed for you… well look around,” he flicks his hand randomly in Jeb's direction. “This is about as broken as it gets.”

Somehow she knew it was going to come to this. The second she woke up in that hospital bed with Matt and Foggy crowding her vision and telling her Frank was alive, she knew that if he woke up, one day they'd be here.

This is a jail. It's a jail for violent men who hurt people. It's a place where society hides its sins. It's not a place for her and even though she's been here before when he was at Rikers she knows it's
different now. They're different.

He loves her. He wants to keep her safe. And this? Well this isn't safe.

She also doesn't much care.

“Then we fix it,” she says. “Shit Frank, Foggy is up day and night to make that happen. He's working so hard and he's doing it for me… for us.”

He shakes his head.

“Come on. You and I both know I'm not walking out of here, no matter what rabbit Nelson pulls out of his hat.”

That hits hard. It hits so hard that she has to take a few seconds to digest it before she continues.

“But we can reduce the charges…” it sounds so lame. “If we get the original case thrown out of court, we could just be left with some misdemeanours and…”

He barks out a laugh.

“Seems we've been here before … ma'am.”

That hurts too. Everything hurts but that especially.

Ma'am.

It complicates things. It always has.

She takes a breath, sits back, looks out the window to the courtyard outside. There are a few families sitting around picnic tables enjoying the sunshine - moms, kids, dads in their orange jumpsuits and
then guards… guards with their guns and their dogs. She wonders if this is her future. She wonders if its better than the other future he seems to be offering right now.

Her gaze settles on Jeb briefly who’s now talking to a skinny woman with dead eyes who looks old and ragged but probably isn’t a day over 19. He seems to be issuing some kind of intense instruction but that doesn’t stop him leering at Karen when he catches her eye, making an obscene gesture with his mouth and hands.

She feels more than sees Frank bristle and she knows his shoulders are bunching and the muscle in his jaw is twitching.

She looks away quickly.

“Frank, Frank, don't.” She lifts her hand to put on his arm and then snatches it back when she remembers herself.

A guard gives her a meaningful look, turns around mid patrol to walk close to their table.

“No touchies,” Frank says humorlessly, but his hands are still clenched into fists and she can feel the rage coming off him in waves.

No, no touchies. No anything. Nothing but this and sitting here in this dismal room with these dismal people and this man in front of her who’s the most dismal of them all.

There’s nothing to ease the pain, nothing to gentle him. She can’t haul him into a shower, wash his hurt away, take him to bed and then take him to bed again. All she can do is sit here. All she can do is be who she is.

And that's always served her well before when it comes to Frank Castle.

“You know what?” she says and her voice is tight, angry, and it makes him pay attention.

“What?”
She frowns, purses her lips.

“Since the first goddamn day I met you, you've relied on me to help you out. And I've done it. I have come through for you every single time. I haven't judged you. I've done things and said things that cost me a lot more than a little of my time and a bad job that was going nowhere fast.

“I've lied for you, I've lost friends for you. And I know you didn't ask for it, I know you want to be better for me. I know you don't expect me to carry this burden for you but it comes with the territory when you're around.

“And I do it. I do it because you deserve it. All of you. Not just Frank Castle who was married to Maria and had two kids, not just The Punisher who thinks he's dead but probably couldn't be more alive if he tried, but you. All of you.

“And I know things are shit at the moment - I can barely get out my door most days without the press hounding me, Ellison has me writing crap so light that I'd welcome looking after the goddamn cat blogs and Matt won't speak to me and I can't even say it's because he has a stick up his ass. And that's okay. That's all okay. Because I made those choices. I'm not saying I didn't.

“But don't you make this all for nothing. Don't you make like you're being noble and decent when all you want is an excuse to…”

She stops and he narrows his eyes.

“An excuse to what? What? What am I trying to excuse?”

“To give up.”

For a second he doesn't say anything and then she sees the tiniest smile curling the edge of his mouth. Like his laugh it's almost humourless. Almost.

“To rot in my goddamn jail cell?”
There's a moment that feels good. It feels like she's grabbed back something of what they had before.

“Yeah,” she says. “Yeah… you don't get to. Maybe before but not now. I need you to do some of the heavy lifting too okay? I can't worry about everything and us right now. Neither can you.

“I'm in it Frank. I'm in it to the end. And I'm going to keep coming back. I'm going to keep coming back until all this shit is over and you walk out those doors a free man. I don't care how long that takes.”

He closes his eyes, breathes in through his nose, long and deep and she imagines she can hear the air whistling away in his lungs.

This is hard for him, she gets that. It just doesn't change anything.

“You told me this means something,” she continues. “But it can't only mean what you decide it means… that day in the hospital, you said you wouldn't tell me what to do. Don't go back on that now.”

He waits for her to finish, lets a few long seconds tick by and then he sighs.

“You deserve better,” he says. “I made a mess of this once and… she deserved better too.”

“Maybe,” she says and again she nearly touches his hand. “And I'm not going to tell you that you were a good father and a good husband and there was nothing you could have done. You know that or you don't and it's not my place to change that. But I'm going to tell you something else.”

She stops, looks him right in the eye and he nods.

“Go on.”

“I'm not Maria, Frank. Maria was a wife and a mother and she lived a life I never did and never will. Her and I are not the same and I don't know if she could have handled this, but it doesn't matter if she could because she’s not here now. I am. And you said it yourself - I'm not her. But you're not him either. You're not the man that married her. You haven't been for a long time. You know that.”
She throws enough force behind her words so that they linger a little after she's stopped talking and take a moment to settle. There's always the chance she'll overstep when it comes to Maria, always the chance she'll take things a little too far but it's really just one of those things she'll have to deal with as and when it happens. In many ways, Maria has taken on an almost mythical quality to Frank - a kind of perfection in death that's not remotely accurate but tends to happen when people lose the ones they love - and she doesn't know how ready he is to hear that.

It's true though. Whoever he was - and they were - isn't really something that can exist anymore.

It hurts. But all truth does.

So she watches him, waits, and she doesn't look away. And he closes his eyes and grits his teeth and his fingers drum on the table, but eventually he speaks.


“Okay…”

He gives her a tight, sad smile and for a while he’s quiet and they sit and listen to the gentle hum of voices around them. There’s laughing, some gentle crying, silences and shuffling, people talking in low and not so low voices.

“You're right.”

He almost sounds convincing and she thinks he’s trying for himself as much as for her.

“I am,” she agrees.

He sighs, rolls his shoulders, runs a hand through his hair.

“This just ain't how I saw it you know? I don't know how I did, but it wasn't like this. I don't know what I can give you but whatever it is has to be better than this.”
She nods.

“It will be. Just stay with me okay? We’ll have gingersnaps and spaceships again,” she feels herself choking up at the words. “We’ll have the river and the…”

...nights that come after.

“Yeah,” he says. “Yeah we will.”

He sounds like he almost believes it but somehow it still feels like a lie. Even so, he shifts his hands across the table so they’re closer to hers and it’s all she can do not to try and touch him again.

“What do you want?” he asks all of a sudden and the question feels bigger than the words. “I mean, if you could have it. You get to choose.”

She knows this is something she should think deeply about, that she’s supposed to have a plan, and by her age Frank was already the father of two and had more than one tour under his belt. He had a house in the suburbs and a wife he loved more than life. She wonders if he ever asked himself this question or if things just happened in such a way that he never needed to. He got the family and the home and it never occurred to him to wonder if he wanted anything else.

But she doesn’t have any easy answers. She doesn’t have any hard ones either.

So she shrugs. “I don’t want to be lonely,” she says. “I don’t want to be afraid.”

He glances pointedly at his jumpsuit. “Not working out so great is it?”

She snorts, wipes a tear from her eye. “No, I guess not.”

“Come on,” he says and there’s a playfulness in his voice. “Three-bedroom, white picket fence, 2.4 kids, SUV in the garage and holidays at Disneyland…”
“Cocker spaniel,” she adds and he smiles and even though it doesn’t go all the way to his eyes, it’s genuine.

“Karen…” It hurts less than “ma’am”. But only a little.

“Right now,” she says. “Right now I just want us to come out on the other side of this. I want us to have a chance. A life…” she stops suddenly, and looks into his eyes “What is it that you want?”

He seems to consider it for a long while, like it’s important and he has to find the right answer. She sees his jaw clench and he pull his bottom lip into his mouth and pops it back out.

She wonders what's going through his head… if he's thinking about the past or the future.

(I want them back.)

(I love you.)

Either answer is possible. Neither one is practical.

He purses his lips, bobs his head like he's found the right answer.

“I want you to be safe. I want you to be happy. That’s all I care about. Nothing else matters.”

She sighs and sits back, looks around the room and then back at him before Jeb catches her eye.

“I think those two things might be mutually exclusive. I think part of us likes it that way.”

“Yeah. Don’t make it easy.”

“No, it doesn’t,” she admits. “And I think we are going to need to work that out when everything calms down.”
“I don’t wanna make you sad Karen, but I also don’t want to put you in danger. And if that’s my choice, then it’s not even a choice.”

“Then we find another way.”

He looks at her dubiously.

He’s still not okay. Not by a long shot. That melancholy Foggy was hinting at but never quite named is still there and she can see it’s killing him that she’s here in this awful place with him. But she thinks she’s got him past the point of his own righteousness and that even if he doesn’t want her here, he’s accepted that she is and she will be, and that that is entirely her decision and she can change her mind if and when she sees fit.

“Alright,” he says. “Alright. Another way… when this is all over… if it's over.”

“Foggy's good. Don't underestimate him.”

“I'm not,” he says. “They just want me here and they're gonna find a way to make it happen. They’re trying to pin everything that happened at the warehouse down on me too. Something will stick.”

“Maybe not.”

He narrows his eyes and she sighs. “You just saying that? Or is there something you ain't telling me?”

Frank always was sharper than anyone gave him credit for. And it's time to come clean on this too.

“I don’t know how much you remember or what Foggy has told you but it’s a mess at the precinct.”

He shrugs. “They never could find their own asses.”
“And on that note, Vanessa Marianna’s body is missing…”

“Say what now?”

“Yeah,” she says. “It’s like she was never there.”

“So what the hell story are they spinning?”

“They’re investigating. They’re looking into Smirnov Holdings. They’re looking into The Punisher. There’s nothing concrete at all. Honestly, Vanessa’s name wouldn’t have even come up if not for Elektra announcing it and also the trafficking business on TV that day,” she drops her voice to a low whisper. “Also obviously she can’t say anything about that night without putting her and Matt at risk.”

Frank doesn’t seem particularly interested in that though.

“Does Fisk know?” He asks. “About Vanessa?”

“Probably,” she says. “We know so little really… the police are keeping everything under wraps. I’m not exactly going to go and ask him.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” he says.

She nods. “Sorry.”

He lets it go quickly, looks over to Jeb, and then back to her.

“Where do you think she is?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know that either. I think a lot of this is a bit outside the realm of what I would have considered possible a year ago… and it’s not just Matt and what he can do. It’s all this weird stuff that I only ever get pieces of and no one will ever really talk about it. People going missing, people being alive when we thought they were dead, all that weird bullshit with that old man with
the stick. Sometimes it feels like we’re living in a horror movie and not the real world.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Keep looking for answers… talk to Elektra. Matt too, if he’ll talk back. No one else is taking this seriously - the police are either lying or they think anyone who mentions Vanessa is delusional or mistaken,” she shrugs. “I know what I have to do Frank. I knew what I had to do when I met you as well.”

“I guess telling you to leave it alone is a waste of breath?”

“Yeah…”

He inclines his head but doesn't say anything more on it.

“You be careful,” he says.

“I will.”

“Can't keep you safe from in here.”

“I can look after myself.”

“I know,” he says softly. “I know.”

And on some level it seems like he really does.

It’s too soon that the bell rings; too soon that she starts to see wives and lovers with sad faces saying their goodbyes.

And it’s okay. It’s not necessarily good, but it’s okay, and she believes they can get through another
week and then the trial and that maybe they could keep this going.

“Guess this is it,” she whispers. “I'm gonna miss you.”

“Me too.”

She lingers, movements slow as she stands, that desire to reach out and touch him almost overwhelming, almost too much to bear.

“I don’t wanna go,” she says.

“I don’t want you to go either.”

*If wishes were horses*...

At least he’s smiling though. At least he’s happier than he was when this visit started and he’s not trying to push her away through any kind of self-imposed nobility. It was never going to be easy. But at least it was going to be.

She turns to look at the door, sees the last of the guests walking through it, and she nods as she sees a guard approaching her.

*Yes I'm leaving. I'm leaving him. Again. No need to worry.*

“I’ll see you soon,” she says. “Really soon. You think about me.”

He sucks in a breath. “Yeah.”

She gives him a small smile. He looks ridiculous there all in orange - like an angry traffic cone with thick curly hair and eyes that see right into the heart of everything.
“I love you,” he says. “Know that.”

It’s not unexpected, it’s not even profound but it makes her heart feel very full and the words seem to echo right through her.

_You’re gonna need to say it again._

And she’s about to. A confession like that deserves to be answered.

“I…”

And then from across the room, she sees Jeb turning his overly large body towards them, leering at her in a way that makes her feel like she’ll never be clean again.

“Hey Castle, you done yet?” His voice is rough and heavy, but there’s a smugness to it that tells her something worse is coming. “I also got a load I wanna blow in your slut’s face.”

There’s a moment of silence - a beat where she swears she could hear a pin drop - and then, like an explosion, everything seems to happen at once.

Somewhere behind her she can hear yelling; guards shouting orders, screaming at Frank to sit down, others doing the same to Jeb. But neither of them are listening. Jeb is charging across the floor towards her, far faster than a man of his size and stature should be able to and Frank is roaring in that terrible spine-chilling way he does when he’s blood is up and he’s itching for a fight.

Someone is shrieking at them both to stop. It’s a woman and for a second she thinks it’s that poor, beaten down girl who was sitting with Jeb before she realises it’s not and the sound is coming out of her own lungs. And then Frank is throwing himself in front of her knocking her out the way so hard that her legs hit the side of the table and she crumbles to the ground, banging her head on the linoleum.

It forces the air out of her lungs and briefly everything goes fuzzy. She can see someone swinging their arms wildly above her and an arc of blood trailing through the air like red rain and hitting the tiles next to her. The air feel heavy and muggy and, while she can hear a strange kind of buzzing, it all seems very, very far away.
And then as fast as it started it stops.

Almost simultaneously, both Frank and Jeb hit the ground, three guards on each of them, knees between their shoulder blades as they press them into the floor.

Briefly she finds herself looking directly into Frank's eyes and they don't look like his at all.

Except they do.

They're wild and cruel, black like two holes in his head, and then someone is grabbing her too and lifting her right off her feet, rushing her towards the exit as more guards pour into the room.

Frank is still screaming though and through it all she swears she can hear Jeb talking - *She swallow Castle? Take it in that tight ass? She eat your...* - and then the door is closing behind her and the guard is dragging her into the waiting room and dumping her onto the threadbare couch, before turning around and heading back the way he came.

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Later, after the prison administrator - a bespectacled old man that smells of old cigarettes and wet dog - gives her some tepid water and assures her that both Frank and Jeb are fine and back in their cells, she gets into her car and makes her way home.

She’s okay. She just has a sore head, but nothing’s broken or cut and if she’s bruised, she can’t really feel it. She tells herself she won’t think about it too much. Fights in prisons are not exactly new or unexpected. No one got shot or hurt and they’ll keep the two of them apart and, unless someone is going to put Frank in solitary, she’ll still be able to see him at his court appearances and over the weekends.

Nothing has changed. The status quo has been maintained.

She tells herself it’s going to be okay.
She stops at a red light, flicks her playlist back on without thinking and Bruce carries on from exactly where he left off.

So you been broken and you been hurt

Show me somebody who ain't

Yeah, I know I ain't nobody's bargain

But hell, a little touch up

And a little paint...

She doesn't bother to turn him off all the way home.

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The next morning at the police briefing, the first item on D’Argento’s list is one Jebediah Montgomery who was serving 10 to 15 for battery, rape and assault with a deadly weapon, has been found hanged in his cell in Sing Sing.

The coroner ruled it a suicide.

Karen looks at his name for a few long seconds, swallows back a lump in her throat and heads to the office to write it up.
It's gettin' so damn creepy just nursing this ghost of a chance

Chapter Notes

As always the response to this fic humbles me. I can't believe people are enjoying it so much. Thank you thank you thank you.

So first things first, please remember I am literally making the law up as I go along here. I care enough to make it seem plausible, in the same way that the show cared enough about legal accuracy in a world full of undead ninjas.

Secondly, I have not seen The Defenders and I don't really care to but I know in some way we might be touching on similar source material here (mainly because in this story Elektra is very much alive and obviously never "died" at the end of DD2). I hope this isn't confusing but this story really needs to be seen as a canon divergence from the end of DD2 with the understanding that Elektra did not die. I get that I did not actually explain this but this fic was never meant to be anything more than a one shot. I know how it will all eventually work but explaining it now will just spoil things.

Thirdly, and to just get it out of the way before I go into my main point, chapter title is from Matchbox 20's Black and White People.

Then my main point:

Okay, I generally hate writing things like this author's note in my fics because I dislike telling people “how” they should experience my work. How you experience my work should not be dictated by how I think you should experience my work. It's very subjective and something that speaks to one person might not do the same for another. In short, it's not actually my place even though I am the creator of this thing.

Furthermore I feel my work should stand on its own. I always worry that detailed descriptors and author's notes imply that either the author doesn't think they've done enough exposition in their work so readers understand what is happening, or that they don't trust their readers.

However this time I am making an exception because from past experience I have realised that these are the kind of chapters that people seem to feel strongly about and often result in a lot of people getting quite disgruntled. I'm not going to tell you not to feel that way and if you do you are welcome to tell me, but I do want to preface this part of the story with a little explanation.

This chapter is plotty - heavily so. This chapter is also probably not all that pleasant and not because anyone is getting shot but because it's time to for Karen to confront a couple of truths.

This in itself I don't see as being an issue. It's not like anyone can't see that Frank and Matt are not the easiest men in the world and all the love on Earth isn't going to change either of them - nor should it. We love them for their faults. But what I hope people bear in mind as they read this chapter and the ones that follow, is that this story is being and has been told exclusively from Karen's point of view. We are in her head and that's why we are seeing the mess that she is experiencing through her eyes. Everything that has happened so far has come through the filter of Karen Page. And while, in many ways,
Karen's very character is about a search for truth, about digging below the surface and finding things others miss, she is still human and fallible. She is still subject to herself and her emotions. She is still seeing things through the lens of herself and her experiences and her personality.

Am I saying she's an unreliable narrator? No, not really, or at least not more than any of us are unreliable narrators of our own experience. This isn't the kind of story where she's described things that have not happened and people are expected to sift through things to isolate truth from lies, but this is a story that is filtered through her and her experiences and right now, her stress and worry.

This is Karen's truth, but it's not unbiased truth because few of us are able to ever be completely unbiased at the best of times, and when we are going through tough experiences like she is, we can't and should not be expected to be 100% rational.

Obviously anyone can feel any way they want to, but it is my hope that people remember this as we head into new territory.

The next few days pass in a kind of nasty blur. She goes through the motions: sleep, eat, work, sleep, eat, work - lather, rinse, repeat. Most of the time she doesn't really remember how she moves from one situation to the next - it just kind of happens and there's nothing to break the monotony... Well, nothing except that horrible sweaty feeling that she gets every time she thinks of Jeb and her imagination proves just how incredibly vivid it can be when it comes to thinking of the various ways in which he met his demise. It might officially be being called a hanging but this is Frank, and she’s pretty sure it wasn’t anywhere nearly as clean or quick as that.

She tries to distract herself by calling Elektra but her voicemail says she's out of town for a while and can't be reached. Karen leaves her a few messages anyway, which she's not even sure go through, and toys with the idea of running the whole Vanessa thing via Matt, but eventually decides against it. She doesn't need anyone else throwing themselves headlong into danger on her behalf and, even though she knows he's hurt and disappointed, she's also fairly sure he'd do it if she asked. It's just how he is.

She doesn't see much of Foggy. He calls on Wednesday though when she gets the official summons to appear in court, and tells her they need to go over her statement and that he’s convinced Matt to testify as well without having to subpoena anyone. He sounds so happy about it and the progress he is making that he's either ignoring the obvious about Jeb and how they're lucky there’s not an additional murder charge added to the list of crimes Frank is being charged with, or he's genuinely oblivious. She honestly thinks it's the latter.

“Karen, it’s just… if I can pull this off… if I can do this, then I don’t even know. I mean I know this is you and it’s Frank and I want to fix this for you guys, but…”
“It’s okay Foggy,” she says. “You’re allowed to be proud of yourself.”

She can almost hear him beaming on the other end of the phone.

“Saw your man yesterday,” he says. “He asked about you. Wants to know if you're okay. Honest to God, I’ve never met anyone so entirely convinced that things can just change so suddenly, and the minute you step out of his sight, the chances of something happening to you skyrocket…” he pauses. “Although I guess, considering his history, it makes sense… everything did change for him in a split second….

"Yeah sorry, should have thought of that.”

“That’s okay,” she says, and even though Foggy is right, she knows Frank’s concern is only partly about something happening to her. A good chunk of it is about just how angry or disappointed she is about Jeb.

That's not a question she can answer now. She doesn’t know how.

They chat a little while longer and then she pencils in a date with Foggy for the following Monday to go over her testimony, pushes the thought of interacting with Matt out of her head, and tries very hard to concentrate on some story about potholes in Hell’s Kitchen before she goes home to stare at her wall of evidence before crashing into bed well after midnight.

And so it goes.

The dreams don’t get better either. Most nights she wakes up in a cold sweat, Pickle growling at her while images of James Wesley and Ray Schoonover morph into Frank and refuse to fade into the ether like dreams are meant to. Sometimes she can even taste the blood as the hazy night sky of New York turns red and drowns the city.

Some nights Jeb is there too. His face is swollen and purple and there’s a noose around his neck and he's gasping and sputtering, his eyes bulging. Even so his hand is working steadily between his legs and his voice - like nails down a chalkboard - is telling her all the things he wants to do to her and how Frank isn't going to be able to protect her again. He tells her he’s going to tear her apart, he's going to break her… And she's going to love every second.
She plugs him right between the eyes. She doesn’t hesitate, not for a second. She doesn't feel guilty either and that's another thing that she carries with her into the next day.

But by Friday the general feeling of discontent and discomfort has evolved into something else entirely.

She’s not sure if it’s the dreams or just the general trauma of the last few weeks but she wakes up nothing short of enraged. And, while the white hot anger should be compromising her assessment and judgement of the situation, she's feels like she's never seen anything more clearly.

Frank’s right - that moment of clarity comes from the strangest of places.

So she sits on her bed, cup of coffee clasped between her hands - it's too hot and it burns a little but she ignores it - and she seethes. It doesn't pass in the shower and not while she's getting dressed or on her way to work either.

And it's not that she doesn't get it. It's not even that there isn't a part of her that's always applauded Frank for taking out the scum, for cleaning out the trash… and she can't deny that Jebediah Montgomery was trash. What he did to her was a drop in the ocean against what he was accused and subsequently found guilty of. But none of that matters. What matters is that she can't have Frank killing people for her honour; she can't have Frank risking his case and life for her over something like an asshole who doesn't know when to stop running his mouth. She can't have him putting her or himself in this position. And she sure as shit doesn't need another piece of nasty-ass scum taking up real estate in her brain and keeping her from sleep.

Frank is a good man - she believes this fundamentally and without question. He's also the kind of boyfriend who murders men in prison.

Those two things are getting a little harder to equate than before.

And maybe not the worst thing, but one of them at least is how isolated it's made her. She can't tell Foggy for both professional and personal reasons. She can't speak to Claire just because you don't want to put that on someone who has only ever been good and decent to him and Matt is well… Matt is Matt.

It leaves her alone and adrift and harbouring a terrible secret she never asked to be a part of. She doesn’t need more guilt. She’s already drowning in what she has.
And when she thinks about it like that, the rage is back.

The day passes much like the ones before. Ellison is squirrelly but he wisely leaves her alone and Joe has a small reprieve from the Castle trial and seems to have found a way of moving past his initial weirdness regarding her relationship with Frank. He even asks her if she doesn't want to go out for drinks with some people from work, making sure to tell her it's just drinks and not A Thing - and she's not sure if he's so precise because he doesn't want her to think he's asking her out again or if it's because he thinks Frank will murder him in his sleep if a miracle happens and he doesn’t go to prison for the rest of her life. Of course the other thing could be simply that he’s realised that maybe Karen Page with her love of the darkness isn’t the kind of girl you bring home to meet mom for a Sunday roast.

Jokes on him though, she’s never been that girl.

Either way, the thought of sitting around awkwardly with her colleagues when everyone knows what they know is too much to even contemplate and she begs off. Joe seems disappointed but he doesn’t press.

Before she leaves she tells Ellison she's got a lawyer meeting on Monday and will be working from home, but she'll still do the morning police report. He waves her off, tells her not to worry and that he’ll get someone else to go ... if she's working from home she may as well get the luxury of sleeping in.

Sometimes he's not too bad.

Sometimes.

She buys a bottle of whisky and some Thai takeout and decides to give herself the night off from trying to piece together the Marianna situation - she thinks maybe looking at pictures of James Wesley is keeping her up as it is - and watches a documentary on killer snakes in Galapagos, which she has to admit is pretty damn exciting.

Still, it doesn't do much for her rage. It blows hot and cold with equal measure but it's still there and it doesn’t go away. And three glasses of whisky don’t help one bit.

She goes to bed and hopes that her anger will have ebbed by the time she has to go back to Sing
Sing.

But things are worse by the time Sunday rolls around. She's tired and when she looks in the mirror she barely recognises herself. She’s wan and pale and her eyes look like holes in her head. They’re cold too, nothing more than bloodshot icy chips and if she squints she can imagine them sitting inside bone white sockets and she’s sure she sees the ghost of a skull underneath her skin.

*Glutton for punishment* indeed.

The thought of the drive to Ossining and then the subsequent sit down in that rec area with Frank knowing what's happened makes her feel physically ill and she legitimately thinks she might throw up. She even gets as far as the toilet before the feeling passes and she takes big gulps of air just to settle her stomach.

It's too much right now. *He's* too much right now and she doesn't know how to even start dealing with it.

*So don't go, just don't.*

For a second she's angry that Matt is stepping back into her thoughts like he has a right to them. And then she realises it's not Matt's voice at all.

It's hers.

She shakes her head, tells herself she has to go.

*No, you don't. You don't have to do this if you're not ready to see him yet. Even he would agree with that.*

And she surprises herself when she doesn’t even fight it. She gives herself a moment to imagine not going and even though the idea is nebulous, the feeling of peace that comes with it isn't.

And yes, there's guilt. He's there because of her, because he loves and he wanted to protect her, but somehow that's not enough to change her mind. He took away the thinnest silver lining they had in
this whole fucked up situation. She’s dealing with the consequences alone. He can too.

And somehow that settles it.

She goes to the kitchen, puts the percolator on again and calls the prison to tell them to remove her name from today's list of visitors. She asks if they can pass on a message and she's told they can't and he'll just be told she isn't coming but she's welcome to come during the week for a telephonic visit if she likes. And no... no she doesn't like that idea at all. Not being able to touch him is bad enough, but seeing him on the other side of a pane of glass, dirty telephone in his hand while he watches her with frightened eyes, is almost too much to bear.

It feels like she's trying to punish him even though that's not the case at all. She wonders if he would see it that way.

“Isn’t that a good thing,” she says as she sips her coffee.

“No problem ma’am,” says the woman on the other end of the line. “I’m just checking again. You are Karen Page to see Frank Castle, inmate two-zero-one---” she rattles off a long number that Karen really doesn’t want to hear. “…and you’re cancelling your visit today at 2pm?”

*Last chance Karen. Last chance to change your mind. You could be on your way up there in a few hours. You could see him and maybe this would all feel better.*

“Yes,” she says firmly, even though it feels like her heart is about to snap clean in half.

“And your whole party isn't coming, or just you?”

She stops, coffee cup inches from her mouth and she stares at the dark liquid as she tries to parse the question.

“Ma’am?”

“Wait, what now?” she says, walking to the kitchen window and not taking in anything of what she sees outside. “There's only me.”
There's an embarrassed silence, some shuffling of papers and what she imagines is a mouse clicking, and then the woman clears her throat. “I'm sorry ma'am, that's just you cancelling then.”

“No, wait,” she puts her mug down. “Who else is on the list?”

Another long silence.

“I can't give out that information ma'am,” the woman’s voice is uncertain. “You have a good day now.”

The line goes dead and Karen spends a good few seconds looking at the phone as if the fading blue light from the screen is going to give her some insight.

Neither Frank nor Foggy have mentioned any other guests, and while she's not naive enough to think Frank doesn't have family somewhere who would want to come and see him, he's never mentioned parents or siblings, and maybe that's to protect himself as well as them.

She guesses she's guilty of that too.

Still, it doesn't give her an answer and she mulls it over while she's drinking the rest of her coffee.

Does Frank Castle even have friends? Other than her of course? She supposes there are some marine buddies out there somewhere who would want to see him. Maybe some people him and Maria used to hang out with before everything went bad. She wonders if the intensity of this thing him and her have together has made her oblivious to what his life is when he isn't with her and when he isn't punishing.

That makes her feel guilty all over again.

Pickle makes a sound like a foghorn and Karen glances at her where she sits on the floor in front her food, her expression indignant even though the bowl is full. Apparently seeing patches of the blue porcelain peeking through the kibble is the same as starving her, so Karen goes and adds an extra handful, which seems to please her ladyship immensely and she starts to eat.
Karen watches her for a few seconds, still mulling over Frank’s mystery guest and just letting her mind travel down whatever paths it wants to, but nothing is immediately forthcoming and eventually she sighs and resolves to ask him the next time she sees him, which brings her back to the fact that she won’t be seeing him today.

(What do you want Karen?)

Not this. Definitely not this.

But then life never has gone to plan.

She spends the morning doing some cleaning and stubbornly refusing to acknowledge that she's going to have to make a decision one way or the other about the bloody handprint on her wall.

Later she goes out and buys herself a coffee from her usual spot and she tries equally hard not to think about the fact that it's not already paid for and won't be for a while, and then she takes a jog through the park and tries to clear her head and enjoy the sunshine; pretend she's just a normal person with a normal life and the world isn't going to hell in a handbasket.

She watches the minutes tick by as visiting hours approach and wonders how he felt when he heard she wasn't coming or if he's too distracted by his other guest - whoever that may be - to worry.

She buys some sushi on the way home, grabs a bottle of wine and what’s left over of the whisky and heads to Claire for an early dinner and extracts a promise from her that this will be a Frank Castle and Matthew Murdock free experience and any mention or even allusion to either of them will result in a fine of a million trillion bazillion dollars.

Claire agrees readily and somehow it's a surprisingly easy resolution to stick to. And when she gets into bed that night, she's still angry, she's still guilty but she feels better for it and she sleeps without dreams right through until the next morning.

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Monday brings nightmares of its own though.
At 2pm, she's sitting in a boardroom in Foggy’s offices, a glass of water next to her and a bunch of paperwork in front of her, and she's staring at Foggy across the table while he shuffles through his notes and tries to get his laptop screen to display on the big screen monitor at the far end of the room.

“Sorry,” he says for the third time. “I'm literally the only one in this office who can never get this to work.”

She smiles at him, takes a sip of her water.

“Press the flashing light on the dongle.” She says.

“I've already tried that,” he shoots back, so she leans across the table and presses it herself and suddenly the monitor lights up with his laptop screen.

He smiles sheepishly at her.

“How did you…?”

“You must have been using the wrong finger,” she teases.

“Funny, that's what Marci says,” he answers distractedly as he takes a sip of water.

She tries to keep a straight face, tries so hard not to let the giggles bubble out of her, but both the comment and Foggy’s obliviousness to it is too much and, for the first time in a really long time, she laughs. It's not sardonic or dry. It's hearty and genuine and it takes a few seconds, but soon Foggy is laughing too, and it's pathetic but the tears are streaming out of her eyes and her makeup is smudging and she doesn't care. It just feels good to find some kind of levity in the situation even if it's going to be short-lived and at the expense of Foggy's sexual prowess.

Not that she wants to think about that. Not that she wants to think about that at all.

“I walked right into that one,” Foggy says gasping for air.
“Yeah, you did.”

She wipes at her face, hand coming away streaked with mascara and eye-shadow and for some reason that seems funny too and then Foggy starts laughing again, snorting water out of his nose and over his keyboard.

And that's when the door to the boardroom door opens and Matt walks in, white cane tapping on the floor, and a look on his face like he'd rather be anywhere but here.

The laughter dies in her throat and Foggy’s does too and an entirely unpleasant silence descends on the room and even though she has no right, she feels cheated.

It didn’t used to be like this. But then again some things can’t be unsaid. Some things can’t be undone and some things she doesn’t want to undo.

“How’s it going?” Foggy says.

“Karen,” Matt inclines his head in her direction. “Foggy.”

She nods back, catches herself and says his name, and his jaw tightens as he does.

It's plain to see he's still upset about their last encounter and maybe he has every right to be. But there's something about the revelations of the last few days, something that's making her claw her way back into her own life… and that's that she's angry too. And not only with Frank. Matt also deserves some of her rage. She’s been spending so much time beating herself up for hurting him, so much time feeling guilty about it that she ignored the fact that he is willing to put their friendship aside because of Frank. And even once she strips away all the implications of that and how he sees her, it remains a dick move.

A really dick move.

He takes a seat a few chairs away from her, sets his cane down next to him and folds his hands on the table.

Matt shakes his head.

“It's a nice place you've got here,” he says. “Definitely a step up from *Nelson & Murdock.*”

He sounds wistful, a hint of self deprecation and an even smaller hint of envy in his voice. There’s something else too though. Something a little darker and nastier… Something she swears sounds like betrayal.

“Yeah,” Foggy says uncomfortably. “It's alright… and I don't get paid in…”

He catches himself, looks at her with panic in his eyes.

“It’s okay Foggy,” Matt says. “You can say it. You don’t get paid in chickens.”

Foggy makes a non-committal grunting sound in the back of his throat.

“Sometimes it was baked goods. I miss Mrs Olsen’s pies…”

The joke falls flat and there's a long silence, and then Foggy shuffles some papers and abruptly turns to look at the monitor.

“Okay,” he says. “So, I’m just gonna start.

“Matt, I've got a copy of the Castle file up on the screen, there's one to your left in Braille if you want to read it.”

Matt shakes his head. “No, I remember it.”
“Okay…” Foggy's voice is uncertain and he glances at her. “So I'm basically gonna go over what Reyes said when we saw her, before… well before The Blacksmith got a little trigger happy…”

“You know Tower is going to try and pin that on Frank,” Matt says. “Reyes was convinced he was coming after her when he broke out of jail, and then she pretty much immediately gets shot up. Easiest case in existence.”

There's another nasty silence and Foggy looks between her and Matt and she decides to save him from this one.

“Except we were there,” she says. “I was there and he would have never…”

“Hurt you?” Matt asks.

The question lingers and she suddenly so angry with him for even asking, but she reigns it in, takes a deep breath.

“Not like that, no.”

Firm. Final.

He nods slowly, like he’s digesting the information and has decided he doesn't believe her.

“Pity we don't know who or where this Blacksmith character is,” he says. “If he’d actually been found, we could at least take some of the potential charges off the table.”

She's not sure if this is intentional or if it's just Matt stating a fact, but she feels a horrible roiling in her belly and a shiver runs down her spine.

(“You do this and I'm done. You're dead to me.”)

“I'm already dead.”)
Except she isn't and neither is he.

“Well we don't,” Foggy says decisively, “So we need to move forward with what we do have.”

There’s a longer silence and Matt doesn't bother to hide the fact that he's studying her. She wonders what he’s picking up on. It could be anything and everything: elevated heart rate, sweaty palms, a drop in body temperature.

“You alright Karen?” He asks.

“I'm fine.”

She's not fine. She's not fine at all.

“I'm pretty sure Frank got him,” he goes on. “I don't think he'd be able to focus on much else if he hadn't.”

She gets the impression that there’s nothing “pretty sure” about the way Matt feels about this. He’s 100% sure. She just not certain whether that’s because he thinks he knows Frank and the things Frank does, or if he’s just more familiar with the Hell's Kitchen narcotics market than most. It really could go either way.

“He ever say anything to you?” he asks turning to her.

“Damnit Matt…”

“No!” Foggy says firmly, looking away from both of them and covering his ears. “Lalalalalalalala, I can't hear this. Let's focus on what he is being charged with and not a list crimes he might have committed.”

“Foggy, I’m just saying it might come up in…”
“Well stop just saying stuff,” Foggy retorts. “The Blacksmith isn’t part of what we are doing here. And since no one knows who he is - or was - it doesn’t matter either way.”

Yeah… no one knows. No one at all. Except she’s pretty sure Matt can smell the truth in her sweat or hear it in her breathing.

There’s another horrible silence and then Foggy continues. “He isn’t being charged with killing Reyes - that’s not part of the original case anyway and this is specifically about the original case and what evidence the DA can use from it. We'll deal with the old charges and the new charges when we get there.”

“Doesn't mean Tower isn't going to sneak it in.”

“Tower can try and sneak a dancing monkey in,” Foggy says irritably. “But it doesn't change the fact that Frank would never have put Karen at risk like that, if not us.”

“Except that according to the police reports he already did,” Matt says. “Or am I the only one who remembers that Karen told Mahoney Frank kidnapped her the night he blew up the boat at the docks?”

“Yeah, I think we all know I was lying. Mahoney too. Even then.”

“That's not exactly an endorsement for your testimony.”

“Christ Matt,” she snaps. “I am well aware that I'm not the most credible witness in this case, which is why you're here, but if we can't trust you on this…”

“Trust me? I'm the only person in this room who isn't keeping any secrets.”

“For now,” she says firmly. “For now, you're not keeping secrets.”

He turns to her then and his voice is so cold it doesn't sound like him at all. “I heard your heart beating so fast that night and I figured it was because you were scared... and you were, but not because of the reasons I thought.”
She wonders what he’s hearing in her breathing or her heartbeat now. She wonders if maybe it’s enough for him to accept that this is what it is and that he can hate it but it doesn’t change anything.

“God…” she shakes her head.

“Okay, okay,” Foggy says. “Can we all just stop this? There’s a lot of water under the bridge here - a lot - and it’s weird and uncomfortable, but it’s there and none of this is helping the case at all, so if we can focus back on both your testimonies…” he pauses and looks at Matt. “Don’t think I won’t treat you as a hostile witness if I need to.”

Matt purses his lips.

Even though the little bit of rage she's managed to put away has been replaced by a new kind of anger towards Matt, she's once again impressed by how far Foggy has come. He's fierce and self assured, only held back by a silly nagging feeling that he's not as good as Matt. And maybe in some ways he isn't. He can't hear lies or smell truth. But he makes up for it in almost every other way he can.

She's proud of him and she wishes that she wasn't such an endless worry for him. He'd tell her it's no bother, that if he didn't have something to worry about he'd invent a problem. She wishes he had that luxury.

“Okay,” Matt says. “I'm sorry.”

“Alright,” Foggy says testily. “So, let's get on with this, now that we've discussed the things Frank isn't being charged with.”

He gives them both a stern look and points to the screen. “On the left I have a timeline for the original case. On the right I have the evidence associated with it. Everything marked in red we know for sure Reyes was involved with, everything in orange is what we know resulted from the red and everything in blue is where your testimonies come into it. Green is what I'm trying to get thrown out based on Reyes’ duplicity. Matt it's page four of the document on the files to your left.”

Matt actually does pull the file closer, runs his fingers over the document.
“Why is Tower pursuing this?” Karen asks. “Surely this is terribly embarrassing for the DA?”

Foggy shrugs. “I'm guessing it's because it's more embarrassing to let someone of Frank's reputation be exonerated without a fight. Reyes is dead so dragging her name through the mud probably doesn't hurt anyone…”

“Except for her daughter…”

Foggy inclines his head towards her. “Yeah… I think they're going to try and characterise Reyes as a rogue DA, make up some nonsense about doing better in the future and vetting people blah blah blah. They'll say she did her own thing and try and claim that it makes no difference to the evidence because facts are facts, and hope Batzer agrees.”

“Do you think she will?”

Foggy shrugs. “Maybe. Batzer is tough to read, but oddly she doesn't hate Frank - seems to see him as a poorly behaved dog or something - and she's been fair so far.”

“Okay.”

It's cold comfort, but that seems to be the only kind she qualifies for these days.

Foggy gives her a wan smile and turns back to the screen.

“So we've got the fact that she was behind the sting that killed Frank's family. That's going to require testimony from both of you. That's basically going to set the tone for this. Karen you're also going to have to testify about the things Frank told you in the hospital.”

“Do you have his permission for that? Isn't it protected?”

“Well it's a grey area. You're technically not protected by attorney client privilege on account of well… not being Frank's attorney. But you were in the employ of Nelson & Murdock at the time and those meetings were part of you carrying out your mandated duties, which does afford certain privileges otherwise every legal PA in the world would be subpoenaed all the time. Either way I
have managed to get Frank to agree to waive the confidentiality on that. It was a struggle and a half but I did.”

“Why was it a struggle?” she asks.

“I think maybe he's trying to minimise your involvement,” he shrugs. “I don't know. The man doesn't think like you or me.”

She guesses that's true.

“Anyway,” Foggy continues. “If we discredit their case enough, we'll be putting forward that their evidence is untrustworthy at best, manufactured at worst. I'll be making a sworn statement too.

“So Karen, that also means you'll have to work your magic again with Frank.”

It's an off-the-cuff comment and he turns back to his notes. “Then we have…”

“What do you mean?”

He stops abruptly and glances between her and Matt.

“I mean we need him to testify in this.”

She glances at Matt too. “That didn't go well the last time.”

“Yeah but this isn't the case Karen. This isn't The People vs Frank Castle. For all intents and purposes, this is not about establishing Frank's innocence. This is about Reyes and what she did. He's the only one still alive who was there at the carousel, the only one who has the first-hand experience to discredit the story that Reyes put out about Maria Castle and her children dying in a car accident.”

“So you want him to relive that? You want him to relive the worst moment of his life and you think that's going to help?”
Foggy frowns, looks at her like she's quite mad.

She's being impractical - she knows this - but it sends a shiver down her spine nonetheless. She gets that it's this or Frank is back spending the next 40 years in jail, and she knows that means he's either dead or on the run somewhere far away. Neither of these options are good, neither of them make any sense, but every protective instinct she's ever felt towards him wells up inside her and screams at her that this is a bad idea.

And then, with all the willpower in the world, she forces it back down.

It is what it is. And also what it isn't. Because there's no small part of her that feels terrible for bailing on him yesterday and somehow all these bad things just seem to be melding together into a giant and overwhelming mass that she has no idea how to tackle.

But now is not the time to baby Frank Castle. Now is not the time to let anything get in the way of what Foggy is trying to do.

“Look Karen, it's not nice, but it's gotta be this way.” Matt, voice soft and easy and she wants to scream at him too. He has no right.

He has no right. None at all.

It's not his fault.

“How did Frank seem yesterday? Where’s his mind at when you talk to him?” Foggy asks and she can't tell if he knows about Jeb or if he's doing a version of sticking his fingers in his ears over that too. She wouldn't blame him if he was. It's not like Frank needs more charges against him.

Either way the question opens a can of worms she was hoping to avoid. And both Matt and Foggy are expecting an answer and she knows she's going to need to fumble her way through some lame excuse that neither of them will believe.

“Karen?” Matt asks.
“I didn't see him yesterday,” she says and Foggy's head snaps up. “I couldn't make it.”

Not exactly a lie. Close though. So close.

“Why?” Foggy asks and she knows it has nothing to do with any interest in her personal life and everything to do with the fact that this was something he asked her to do, something he thinks he needs to keep the case on the rails and not lose Frank to one of his self destructive rages.

Matt, on the other hand… his interest is completely in her personal life. She doesn't even need anything but normal intuition to know that.

“I just needed a break,” she says.

Technically not a lie either.

“A break,” Foggy echoes.

“Yes,” she says. “It's nothing really. But I've been going a mile a minute for so long now and I just needed to get away from everything to do with…”

“Frank,” Matt offers.

“The case,” she states firmly, even though the difference between that and Frank is negligible.

Everyone is silent for a while and she knows she hasn't really fooled either of them, but eventually Foggy shrugs and jots something down in his notepad.

“I think it's time to talk about the elephant in the room,” Matt says and Foggy rolls his eyes and sighs.

“Yes please, I wanna do that,” he says sarcastically but Matt ignores his tone.
“Karen and Frank have history and that's everywhere now. Tower is going to use it as much as he can and make out like she’s one of those women who write love letters to Charles Manson and try and hide skeleton keys in baked goods.

“She knew where he was when he escaped from Rikers. She saw him. She helped him. She watched him murder two men in that diner and then lied to a policeman about it. And now she's been harbouring him at her apartment for two weeks… Come on Foggy, the police and the DA might not have done anything to her already, but they're going to go for the jugular. You know that.”

“Which is exactly why we need to do this right,” Foggy says. “If we can discredit Reyes to the point that it looks like Karen was the only one interested in the truth, we might be able to convince them that going after her isn’t worth it… as it is, they’re not very interested in pressing charges,” he looks at her and gives another wan smile. “It’s a good thing Mahoney likes you Karen.”

That’s true. It is.

Matt shakes his head. “Maybe it's best to just leave things be. If they're not interested in filing charges against her, why put her in the firing line? This is going to be brutal for her.”

Foggy frowns. “Well I don't see another way. My job is to represent Frank. This is the way I think I can do it. It's his best shot.”

“This is Karen, Foggy. How can you…”

And she's had enough. She stands up and puts her hands on the table.

“I'm right here,” she says loudly. “I'm right here and I don't know what the two of you think you're doing but I have a say in this too.” She glares at Matt. “Stop trying to protect me. Stop trying to shield me. You don't know what I've done. You don't know what I can do. If you think some embarrassing questioning from the DA is enough for me to put my tail between my legs and run away, then you don't know me at all.

“If this will help, I'm doing it. Frank's in jail now because of me. Because he wanted to do something for me, because he was trying to save my life. Maybe that doesn't mean anything to you but it does to me and I won't just let him rot, no matter whether that's what you or him want.”
“Karen, it’s just…” Matt makes to stand but she shakes her head and somehow he seems to know.

“No, it’s not just anything. I know this case Matt. I did more work on it than you,” and she doesn’t mean for that to sound like it does but he flinches anyway and she finds she doesn’t really care. “I’ve made up my mind. Stop trying to change it.”

For a long moment both Foggy and Matt are quiet and even though the room is cool and air-conditioned, it feels hot and oppressive, but then they both nod and she sits down again.

“Okay,” she says. “I know we’re all busy, and pressed for time, so can we move on with this?”

“Yeah,” says Foggy pulling up a new screen. “Yeah, let’s just go through what we all remember about that conversation with Reyes, so all our stories are straight. I’m going to call you both back later this week to do a trial run of the cross-examination but judging by how this has gone so far, I think it would be better if we did that separately.”

He looks meaningfully at both of them and Karen nods. He’s right. It is for the best. And it’ll be easier not knowing that Matt is listening to her speak and hearing everything she’s trying not to say at the same time.

“Okay,” he says. “Let’s get started.”

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The meeting lasts for another two hours and by the time they’re done, she’s exhausted but Foggy seems satisfied and he has a big smile on his face.

“We have a real chance here and that’s good,” he says as she shows him how to remove the dongle again.

“Is it Foggy?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean Frank is a murderer. Aren't we supposed to be seeing justice is served? Isn't that our job?”

“Then we're in the wrong profession.”

Matt doesn't seem to like that answer and she can see a muscle jumping in his jaw and suddenly all she wants to do is hug him, forget all this crap and how terrible they've both been to each other. He was her friend and he's not wrong when he said he's the only person who's been honest here. He's been bombarded from all sides and he's smarting from the blows. It's no wonder he feels like he does.

Still, now is not the time. She picks up her purse, says goodbye and heads out the door, but even as she goes she can feel Matt’s attention on her and she knows that whatever tension exists between them now is far from over.

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It's a quarter past midnight when she pushes Pickle off her lap, stretches and goes to the bathroom to brush her teeth.

She glances in the mirror, doesn't like what she sees and heads back into the bedroom, and is about to pull her Henley off to replace it with something to sleep in when she hears a tap at her window.

It's faint but deliberate, and then it comes again.

She freezes, glances around the room. Her gun is in her purse which is on the couch and in direct firing line of the window but she could make it back to the bathroom if she wanted to; she could even grab her phone on the bedside table as she went.

The thing is though, there’s only ever been three people who have turned up on her fire escape, and none of them have ever wanted to hurt her, and she doesn’t think that tapping oh-so-politely on her
window is exactly the MO of Hell’s Kitchen’s criminal underbelly… even if she does have something of a reputation for just opening up her windows and letting whatever is on the other side walk into her life.

Case in point: Pickle rolling around on Frank’s side of the bed without a care in the world.

It's not a thing. She tells herself it's Not. A. Thing.

She waits another few seconds and the tapping comes again, impatient this time.

“Oh come on Rapunzel, let down your golden hair so I may climb the golden stair.”

Yeah, she should have guessed. Apparently the messages did get through.

She goes to the window, pulls back the curtain and there’s Elektra, standing in the shadows, ponytail blowing in the wind, dark leather suit hugging her like a second skin.

“You people know I have a front door right?” she asks as she unlatches the window.

Elektra scowls as she hops off the ledge and into the apartment. “And face your doorlady? Thanks, I'll take my chances out here.”

Karen can't argue with that.

“Matt likes her.”

“Yeah, we all know he has no idea what's good for him.”

She can't argue with that either.

For a moment Elektra just stands there looking around and then her gaze falls on the corkboard with
its papers and strings, coloured drawing pins and big red question marks.

She walks over to it, crosses her arms and frowns at the picture of Vanessa in the middle and then her gaze travels outwards to the photos of James Wesley, Nobu, Alexei and Fisk.

“You gonna tell me why you here?” Karen asks eventually but Elektra doesn't answer immediately.

Instead she picks up a couple of thumb tacks and pushes them into an empty area of the board, grabs a string and runs it from Vanessa’s face and loops it around them.

“You're missing something,” she says.

“Yeah, tell me something I don't know.”

Elektra turns then, lithe and quick on her feet, and her eyes are shining.

“I'll do better than that, I'll show you,” she glances towards the bed. “That is unless you're going to sleep.”

“That was the plan. School night and all.”

Elektra snorts, leans down to rub Pickle’s head where she's now winding herself around her legs. “Good thing we don't go to school then. Come on. Get dressed, we’re going out.”

Karen frowns. She's not opposed to the idea and she doesn't think Elektra would be here unless she had something solid, something worth showing. Still, she's not just about to just leave without any explanation.

“Where?”

“Oh come on Barbie,” Elektra rolls her eyes as she picks Pickle up like a baby and snuggles her with surprisingly little resistance. “Don't suck the fun out of everything.”
“Just like to know where I’m going.”

“Live a little.”

She folds her arms, looks pointedly at the door and Elektra sighs dramatically, rubs Pickle behind the ears, which starts her purring loud enough so that it feels like the whole room is vibrating.

Pickle always did have the oddest taste in people.

“Okay,” Elektra says. “I think I might have something on where Vanessa is, but you’re going to need to see it, otherwise you’re just going to think I’m crazy.”

“Too late.”

Elektra shrugs but her smile is genuine and not for the first time Karen feels something almost like camaraderie with her. Maybe they won’t be friends and in some ways that’s a pity, but they get each other, they understand each other and that means something.

And she knows in her head she’s already agreed to whatever Elektra is offering. It’s not a hard choice.

“Guessing you can’t show me in daylight?”

Elektra shakes her head. “No. It's much more dramatic in the middle of the night… and what’s Hell’s Kitchen without a little drama anyway?”

Karen shrugs as she grabs her .38 from her purse.

“I guess it’s not Hell’s Kitchen at all.”
It doesn’t take long to figure out where they’re going. The truth is she knew already. There’s only one place that her and Elektra are mutually connected to that isn’t Matthew Murdock. And even that connection is negligible.

Elektra doesn’t say much as she winds her way through Hell’s Kitchen’s dank and twisty streets. She puts the radio on, leaves the windows open and drums her fingers against the steering wheel in time to the music.

It’s not a bad night either. There’s no clouds and the sky is clear, stars twinkling brightly. It’s nothing like the last time they did this when Hell’s Kitchen’s sky was red and foreboding and the man she loves more than anything in the world died in her arms. It’s nothing like that at all.

She wishes that night had never happened. She'd also give anything to go back and do it over. Differently.

Eventually they stop across the road from the warehouse. It’s almost completely black against the night sky, walls blackened and windows smashed, doors hanging off hinges and the only pop of colour is the yellow stripes on the tattered police tape surrounding the building, and the glow from the nightwatchman’s torch as he does a patrol of the fence.

It looks like a husk and, in many ways, it is, but Karen suspects they wouldn’t be here if that was all it was.

Luna’s post is gone too. There’s not even a stump there anymore and for some reason that makes her feel better. At least one of them got away from this place. At least one of them could leave it behind.

She turns to Elektra. “You know, we've never had a good experience here. Not once”

“I don't know,” she says, tone mocking. “First time you were here you disappeared with Frank for a night and came back wearing his goddamn pajamas. Second time he was here he ended up in your bed for two weeks. It's only the last time things went a bit awry. I'd still say we're batting above average.”

She’s not sure that’s true. She thinks the odds aren’t stacked in their favour.
“Frank might not see it quite the same way,” she says.

Elektra is quiet for a while, staring across the road, eyes glittering as she scans the warehouse and the grounds.

“I heard you didn’t go and see him yesterday,” she says softly.

“Wow, news travels fast and…” she stops, tries to work out how to phrase the next part without it sounding awful but can’t seem to find the right words. “... and Matt shouldn’t be talking to you about this.”

You love him. It’s not fair.

“He thinks you might be coming to your senses about Frank,” Elektra pauses and then grins. “Fat chance of that.”

Karen snorts and Elektra’s smile widens for a second before it disappears.

“I think it had something to do with that suicide in Sing Sing last week,” she says casually. “The one your paper hid at the bottom of page two.”

Karen knows better than to say anything - she also knows better than to think Elektra doesn’t already know she’s right. She might not be as good as Matt when it comes sensing things but she does have two working eyes and women’s intuition has always come out a winner in these kinds of situations.

She expects Elektra will push though, try and ferret out some confirmation of her suspicions but she doesn’t. She sits there in silence for a long time as they watch the warehouse, the police tape fluttering in the breeze.

When she speaks again, her voice is melancholy and there’s absolutely no mocking in it at all.

“It’s always difficult when you realise how far someone will go for you. It’s fine when it’s abstract and it’s easy to say things like ‘he’d lay down his life for me’ or ‘she’d give up everything to keep me safe’. But when you see them… when things actually happen and you can understand it in real
physical terms and not in words, that’s when it gets complicated. That’s when you need to figure out how you’re going to deal with that being a part of your life.”

It’s all true. It’s all real and it hurts like a bullet wound. Or four.

“It's hard loving someone like that,” Elektra says simply. “I know.”

Karen’s not sure if she’s talking about herself or Matt but it’s all the same anyway. It’s all true and it’s all hard. For all of them.

“Elektra…” she starts and she doesn’t know what to say really. She doesn’t know where to begin.

_I’m sorry that Matt loves me. I’m sorry that even though you’re not second best, he makes you feel like you are. You deserve better. You deserve more._

None of these things are good. Every single one of them sounds patronising. And Elektra deserves better than platitudes.

But then the pinprick of light from watchman’s torch disappears as he rounds the corner towards the back of the structure, and Elektra takes that as a signal to move.

“Come on Bambi,” she says reaching for the door handle. “We’ve got work to do.”

Karen zips up her hoodie, pushes her .38 into the back of her jeans and follows Elektra across the road and back into the warehouse where all the nightmares started.
She bleeds for love, forever gone

Chapter Notes

Okay, so a few things to say about this.

First, I am posting two chapters tonight, because I tried to add the next chapter onto the end of this one and it really did not work. It destroyed the flow and I lost the impact I was going for, so what we have now is essentially this chapter followed by a considerably shorter chapter or interlude. I hope that does not jar anyone too much, but I agonised over this and I really do think this was the best solution.

Secondly, the song title is from Drunk on Shadows by HIM and spoiler alert, it's not about Karen and Frank.

Thirdly, I mentioned before that I had not seen Defenders and didn't really have much interest in doing so but that I would be using some of the myth and lore associated with The Hand and the Black Sky and ultimately with Elektra later on in my story. Well, the time has come now. I'm not really very interested in being 100% accurate or true to canon with it, I'm working with broad strokes that kind of follow the same general theme. I'll probably get a lot of stuff wrong and I'm okay with that.

Fourthly, I never knew how much I would enjoy writing Elektra. I struggled with her in the show but this fic has really led me to adoring her in a way I didn't think possible. She's great and I hope you enjoy her in this as much as I do.

Fifthly, this is super plotty and dialogue heavy - I'm sorry.

Anyway, without further ado, let's get into it.

They enter the building through the same service door they used the last time they were here; it seemed to escape the brunt of the explosion and the fire - its surface only mildly discoloured and damaged. The same can't be said for much else though. The inside of the warehouse is barely recognisable save for a few choice markers: the massive double doors now hanging off their hinges and the “Welcome to Hell” graffiti is still visible on the soot-covered wall.

She guesses some things don’t change no matter how hard you try to burn them away.

For the rest, the inside of the warehouse is as much of a burnt shell as the outside. There’s little but rubble and crumbling walls, the smell of smoke still heavy in the air, and Elektra hands her a rag to hold over her nose and mouth, before taking a few steps forward and making a sharp right towards what looks like nothing more than a blackened patch of drywall.

Except it isn't. Even in the dim light Karen can see the edges of a door; it's not even disguised that
well. And the thing is she knew it was there already. It’s the door where her and Frank burst out from the lower floors when she was taken the first time - when they ran into the night and he went back to save a junkyard dog.

Because he's Frank Castle and he saves dogs. Because he's Frank Castle and he makes love to her with a tenderness and a desperation she's not quite sure she's ready for. Because he's Frank Castle and he murders people who would hurt her.

*(I got a load I wanna blow in your slut’s face)*

She shakes her head, pushes Jeb out of her head and thinks about Luna and hopes she's happy up in Jersey. Of all the bullshit that’s gone down, she's a silver lining in all this. She can be the one good thing that comes out of it.

“You alright?” Elektra asks.

“Yeah … being here ... it’s just…”

“I know,” Elektra says. “It’s a lot… and it’s about to get a whole lot more.”

*Good. Great. Bring it. Too much is never enough and all that.*

She can put whatever's coming on a list too. She has millions to spare.

Elektra turns, shoves at the door, and it gives with a small scraping sound along the floor.

It's black as pitch inside, nothing but inky darkness rising out of the depths like it's some kind of living thing. Karen wonders if maybe it is. It wouldn't be that far-fetched even - darkness filling her up and choking her. The truth is she suspects it's happened already.

An image of her and Frank in her bed flits through her head. His hand is on her throat but his mouth is gentle on hers and he's moving inside her and…
“Come on, Rapunzel,” Elektra says stepping into the blackness. “Journey to the centre of the earth and all.”

Yeah, no time for bullshit. Not while you’re standing at a crime scene with a ninja heiress who has a flair for the dramatic.

“I hope your eyes are better than mine, because I can’t see a damn thing down there.”

“Seeing isn’t everything,” Elektra answers, but she reaches into one of the pouches on her belt and pulls out a glowstick, snaps it and hands it over.

Immediately their surroundings turn a garish lime green, and it’s so ugly it almost makes Karen wish she hadn’t said anything at all, but she guesses it’s not the time to worry about trashed Hell’s Kitchen warehouse aesthetic.

*Get it together, Karen Page. Get it together.*

She draws level with Elektra and looks down into the greenish darkness.

Below them she can see endless flights of grayish stairs and she tries to remember how long it took for her and Frank to run up them eight months ago when this whole mess started, but she can’t. Memories of that night are fragmented and elusive until they’re not - until they’re snuggled up on the floor of his cabin in the mountains and he’s confessing his deepest secrets to her.

Those parts aren’t going to help them now. Part of her isn’t sure they ever did.

“Okay?” Elektra asks and she ignores her, turns the glowstick over in her hands.

“This is military issue.”

Elektra grins. “Yes, you’re not the only one with military contacts … even if mine isn’t quite as *close* as yours.”
Karen ignores her.

“I'm guessing we're going down?”

Elektra nods. “All the way.”

She doesn't bother to ask why or what for; Elektra will tell her when she's ready. So she sighs, squares her shoulders, and steps into the abyss.

~~~

They take their time. She's nowhere near as nimble and steady as Elektra, but even Elektra seems worried about charging down the stairs at full speed. The place still smells of kerosene and she's surprised that somehow this part of the building remained intact after the explosion, but she guesses it was built for that.

She can also hear water dripping and on the few occasions she touches the walls, her fingers come away wet and dirty, so she doesn't trust everything else not to be slippery too.

When they speak she tries to keep her voice low but it bounces off the walls and echoes downwards.

“It's okay,” Elektra says. “There's no one here except us.”

“You sure about that?”

When Elektra nods it doesn't seem all that confident.

It gets warmer the further down they go and puffs of hot musty air gust up from the lower levels and into her face, making her eyes water and her mouth go dry. Every now and then there's a loud racket of water running through leaky pipes and then fainter vibrations, which she imagines are the underground train lines. The stairs themselves also change after a while - the standard concrete steps giving way to a browner, more uneven stone while the eerie green light from the glowstick shows small puffs of dust falling from the walls and she wonders just how long this place has before it collapses in on itself.
It's not a pleasant thought and she pushes it out of her mind and concentrates on putting one foot in front of the other.

One two, one two.

*Drip drip drip.*

“Not exactly my idea of a great venue for a first date,” Elektra says. “But then again you and Frank have always done your own thing.”

Even though she's trying for levity, her voice sounds strained and the attempt at humour falls flat.

“Let's just get to the bottom,” Karen says and as she does, her foot finds flat ground and when she holds her stick up she sees there are no more stairs and they're standing in a dusty alcove with a shattered light bulb swinging above them and an industrial door in front of them, also hanging half off its hinges.

Elektra bobs her head, and Karen pushes at the door so that it swings open and crashes into the wall on the other side.

*Drip drip drip.*

She glances at Elektra over her shoulder.

“Go on, it’s safe.”

“That sounds like bullshit.”

“If it isn’t, I’m sure it’s nothing you and your gun can’t figure out.”

Karen rolls her eyes and steps through the doorway into what she can only describe as an enormous
basement-cum-boiler room. It spans the footprint of the entire warehouse, maybe part of the grounds as well. The floor is pitted stone but she can see bronze grates built into it and that seems to be where the hot air is coming from. There’s a sickly orange light from below and it mixes with the green of the glowstick making everything look slightly surreal. Otherworldly even.

It’s one of the most hideous things she’s ever seen, and she hates it. She hates it so much she wants nothing more than to run back up the way they came, burst out into the night and forget this place - and all the nights she’s spent at it or worrying about it - ever existed.

But she doesn't. Her curiosity has always got the better of her.

Karen Page, intrepid reporter, lover of vigilantes, holder back of... oh fuck it.

Karen Page: full of shit and always getting herself into trouble.

She peers into the garish light and the dust. The far wall is lined with empty cages, most with doors busted open and blankets scrunched up inside them, and she remembers Frank saying he saw traps and bars here the night he arrived half dead and bleeding on her doorstep.

The memory makes her catch her breath and suddenly all she can see is him bleeding out on her bed.

She loves him. She loves him so much.

She takes a few steps into the room, the glowstick casting strange green shadows on the floor. She sees some black splashes which she knows is dried blood - maybe Frank’s even. Maybe some other poor soul.

“This isn’t where they held me before,” she says and Elektra shakes her head. “I would have remembered something like this.”

“No, that was way up. We passed that floor around about the same time the stairs became stone.”

“That still looked like a warehouse,” she says. “This, this looks like…”
“Hell?” Elektra offers.

Yes, hell. Welcome to it and all that.

“Seems a bit cliche, don’t you think?” Elektra says. “Hell in Hell’s Kitchen.”

Again, she’s trying to be funny and again, it falls flat. The fact is - and Karen always knew it - Hell’s Kitchen is hell. It just has a few more fallen angels than one might expect.

She turns a full circle. Across from her, right at the other end of the room, there's what looks like a set of deep oval alcoves in the stone wall, hollowed out and big enough to fit a person. Smashed stone coverings lie in front of them.

They look like tombs. Karen thinks they probably are.

“What is this place?” she asks and she knows even before the words are out that she really doesn’t want to know the answer, that she’s heading into territory she’s not sure she’ll be able to deal with. She’s stepped away from the world where a man who had a bullet in his head lived to tell the tale, and another man who is blind sees better than all of them, and into something else. This is Nobu back from the dead only to die again, this is wraith-like women standing in their petticoats in the snow, neither looking nor sounding human when they scream. This is an old man with a stick and a deep secret she sensed more than saw when she found Elektra in Matt's bed.

“How much do you know about The Hand?” Elektra asks.

Nothing. Nothing at all.

She thinks maybe she could live without knowing.

She takes another step towards the broken stones and the hollows in the wall. They’re smooth inside, deeper than she thought. She doesn’t need to be a genius to figure out that the broken stones on the floor were doors or coverings… barriers.
“Tell me,” she says.

Elektra sighs. “How good is your suspension of disbelief? I don't wanna waste my breath.”

Karen shrugs. “I'm standing in an underground room that looks like it's right out of a Stephen King novel, Matt Murdock is blind and also Daredevil and Frank Castle was shot execution style and somehow managed to survive. I think I could take a little more.”

“Okay Barbie, but one eye roll from you and I'm stopping. I feel like enough of a fool actually having to say this…”

“Go on. Try me.”

Elektra takes a deep breath and squares her shoulders. “You think I'm an heiress, a poor little rich girl, right?”

Karen doesn't say anything but she can't help the way she inclines her head and Elektra rolls her eyes indulgently, as if this was the answer she was expecting.

“So you ever wonder how I can do what I do?”

To punctuate her words she pulls her Sai blades out of her belt and twirls them, lets one fly past Karen's head so close it lifts her hair before getting stuck in the wall behind her.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Karen swears and Elektra snorts.

“Don't worry, I have really good aim.”

She thinks of Vanessa's lifeless body lying in front of her on the roof, the tip of Elektra’s blade sticking out of her forehead. Yeah, she does have good aim. She really does.

“Besides,” Elektra continues as she fetches the blade and then comes to stand in front of Karen, touches her cheek gently and pushes her hair back behind her ear. “Wouldn't want to mess this face
up. Not even I can dodge the number of bullets Frank Castle would put in me... Matthew might even break his rule about killing.”

“Stop it,” Karen says, batting her hand away.

“True though… told you before. I want him, he wants you, you want Frank and Frank, well Frank wants his dead wife…”

Karen doesn't object. Elektra's right. She's perfectly tragically right and the lilt in her voice says far more than her words ever could. She loves Matt. She loves him more than he knows, maybe more than he deserves.

And it's heart-breaking.

Karen sighs. “I guess if one of us would turn around, at least someone would be happy.”

Elektra considers this for a moment.

“If I turn around there's no one behind me, if Frank turns around, no one gets hurt.”

She touches the tip of her blade, rubs her index finger and her thumb together.

"Thing is,” she continues. “Frank needs to know there's something to turn around to see.”

“He does.”

She thinks Elektra will object to that, make some snide comment about how he's rotting in his jail cell, alone and lost, while the person he loves is slowly abandoning him, but she doesn't. She nods firmly, like this is fundamental and incontrovertible.

“I want you two to make it,” she says softly. “And that's not because of Matthew and it's not because I got you into this… it’s because I think you're good for each other - he loves you. Love like that shouldn't be thrown away.”
Again Karen thinks she's really talking about herself and she feels a wave of empathy for her. She's lonely. She has everything except it's not what she wants.

*Everything but everything.*

She's not sure what to say. Her and Elektra aren't friends by any stretch of the imagination and talking about this in any real depth seems insensitive, so she touches her shoulder gently, gives her a rueful smile and glances back at the busted stones.

“You were telling me about The Hand.”

Elektra shakes her head. “Yeah… and you never answered my question. How do you think I can do what I do if I'm just some poor little rich girl?”

Karen shrugs again. “I dunno. Never really thought about it… pretty sure rich parents could afford martial arts lessons… can't believe an old man with the stick would have been out of their budget.”

Elektra's laugh is rich and clear and it echoes through the empty chamber. “Oh Karen… you think I learned this at some dojo somewhere where the boys got mad at me because I was half their size and I could put them in a chokehold in under five seconds? You're precious.”

“No,” she says. “It's pretty clear Stick had a special interest in you.”

Elektra sobers then, regards her.

“Stick… well Stick is a terrible man. He's ruthless, unkind, devious, impatient. I don't know if Matthew has told you the stories, but he comes close to being hateful at times… I hate him at times…” she glances to the side. “But I can't forget what he did for me…”

“What did he do?”

Elektra smiles sadly. “He took me in when no one wanted me. He cared for me, he trained me…”
And when he discovered I was the thing he'd sworn to destroy, he still saw that sweet child he'd taken in and he saved me instead,” she pauses for a second, seems to be considering something. “I hate him Karen, but I love him more. Do you know how that feels?”

She does. She does all too well. Families - even ones that don't have the blood ties - are complicated like that. Love and hate can - and do - exist very comfortably next to one another and it takes a lot of time and soul searching before people realise that both of those emotions are nothing but distractions. Neither of them make the slightest bit of difference when it comes down to deciding how to move on. She knows, she's been there.


For a second, it almost feels like Elektra can read her thoughts - that she gets this too and she agrees that it's sad and terrible but also just the way things work, and for the first time, Karen wonders if they're more similar than she ever imagined they were.

“Stick is… well I'm not sure what he really is, but I do know that he’s dedicated his life to fighting The Hand.”

“Which is? We haven't got to that bit yet…”

Elektra bites her lip and frowns. “It’s an ancient organisation - a cult really - and it’s obsessed with immortality… getting too far-fetched for you yet?”

“Go on.”

“Generation to generation, father to son, mother to daughter, all the good stuff… they want to live forever and they think the Black Sky is going to help them do it; lead them or something. Do you know what that is?”

Karen shakes her head. “Not really. Matt mentioned something about the Black Sky and you the day he came and told me about Daredevil. It was just in passing - I’m not really sure he even meant to say it. I didn't really think about it too much,” she huffs. “I was too busy reeling from the fact that he was Daredevil.”

Elektra smiles wanly. “Wow, when he said he was going to be honest about everything, he meant it.
I didn't expect he'd tell you about that."

"He didn’t say much and I haven't told anyone,” she says. “Not even Frank.”

Elektra sighs. “Not much to tell. Right now I'm not even sure I know what it means.”

“You haven't asked Stick?”

“Oh I've asked,” she says. “He hasn't told me anything…” she stops then, kicks at something on the ground that Karen can’t see. “He killed a child you know?”

Karen shakes her head. “No, I didn't know that.”

“He was a Black Sky. Matthew told me. Said he refused to kill the child when they found him but Stick went behind his back and did it anyway. He said it wasn't a child and that's why it was okay.”

“And yet…”

Elektra nods knowingly. “And yet here I am… and he'd do anything to protect me … guess somewhere in his cold heart it was a child, just like I was… I don’t know how that makes me feel.”

It's a lot to take in but Karen promised she'd listen and she promised she wouldn't judge. And she’s not really quite sure what to do with the fact that someone killed a child that wasn’t a child but might have been a child.

“Why are we here?” she asks Elektra. "What did you want to show me?"

“I did a little research myself, tried to figure out who and what was involved… didn't come up with much, but I came up with something.” She walks to carved out piece of the wall. “I wanted to show you these.”

“What are they?” Karen asks, although deep down she already knows. Sunday school and Bible studies might feel like something she did far too long ago.
Elektra doesn't answer, instead choosing another tangent.

“The Hand wants the Black Sky. The Hand also wants immortality… resurrection... I think they have one of those things. And I think they have Vanessa too.”

Karen frowns. “Elektra… come on.”

“You said you were willing to suspend your disbelief,” she says sharply. “You said you’d listen… and if this is already beyond what you can handle, we may as well stop now.”

Okay.

Okay, so Karen knows there's things she doesn't know. There's a whole world out there and she's happy to admit she hasn't experienced most of it. But this is impossible, this is fantasy and not rooted in reality and her entire being objects to this line of thought.

“I'm just… I don't know Elektra. I was always half joking when I thought about undead ninjas and shit. I always figured there was a rational explanation.”

“Yeah, there's a rational one. You just need to alter your definition of rational.”

She eyes Elektra for a good few seconds, trying to push the million question and objections rising in her gut back down. She wants to tell her she's talking rubbish. She wants to put this all back in a little box and forget it ever existed, but she also wants to hear this out, try and find some sense in the fantasy and see where she can go from there.

“Okay,” she says taking a breath. “Tell me what you think is going on…”

“You sure you're ready for it?”

Karen shakes her head. “No, but even if you told me Vanessa was immortal or a Black Sky or whatever, it would still mean we need to find her, so it doesn't really matter if I'm having trouble
squaring this all away… What matters is what it means we have to do.”

Elektra regards her for a second and then smiles. “Very pragmatic, Barbie. I’m impressed. I guess all that's on the line then is you believing I’m still sane…”

She smiles back. “That's never been on the line…”

Elektra chuckles. “Fair enough.”

“So hit me,” Karen says walking over to the alcove. “What do you think is going on here?”

“Alright,” Elektra says. “Vanessa is not a Black Sky - that's the first thing. We are apparently incredibly rare, so it's not like The Hand has got itself a leader or attack dog or whatever it is the Black Sky is to them.”

“But they have her anyway?”

“It's a good a guess as any - The Hand or at least part of The Hand. It would explain why the Yakuza was here, why they helped the Russians. They were looking for something… they thought the Russians would help them find it or use it.”

“So why take her body then?”

Elektra turns to the alcove, kicks at the stone pieces on the floor.

“I think they mean to bring her back…”

“Bring her back?”

“From the dead.”
She lets that sink in and Karen’s not sure how long it'll be before it does, all those questions and objects trying to fight their way out of her mouth again. This is nothing short of insane - a really dark and twisted fairy tale where nothing makes sense and reality has been left at the door and isn't allowed to enter.

“Resurrection? Come on Elektra…”

“This…,” she indicates the wall and the stones at their feet. “...as you've probably figured out, is a sepulchre. I've reason to believe The Hand has something that heals wounds and in some cases ...”

She knows what Elektra is going to say and her entire being rejects it. “Yeah but…”

“And on the third day…”

“Stop it. Elektra this is…”

“Crazy?” she asks. “Yes it is. It's batshit, but how else do you explain it? How else do you explain that when Matthew and I fought the Yakuza they had no heartbeat? How else do you explain those missing kids who all went weird? How else do you explain…”

She can't. She can't explain any of it but it doesn't matter at all because she's under no obligation to explain nonsense or fantasy. She's doesn't need to account for fiction.

And yet...

And yet something about this feels like there's a seed of truth to it.

“Okay,” she puts up a hand. The room has started to spin slowly and her brain feels like someone stuck a fork into it and scrambled it around. Even her tongue feels thick and stupid when she starts to speak. “Let's say this is partly true. Let's say The Hand believes they can…” she stops, tries to find a way to say the words without them sounding too stupid. “... revive someone…”

“Resurrect,” Elektra says and Karen scowls at her.
“So they've taken her body to do that… this brings two questions. Firstly, why her? And secondly, where is she? She's not here and these hardly look functional.”

She kicks at a piece of stone.

Elektra shrugs. “Those are both good questions. The truth is I don't know why her. I'd guess it's to hold something over Fisk…”

“Why though? He's… he's in jail. He's powerless.”

“Is he?” Elektra asks. “Seems to me, he still wields considerable power and if Vanessa and her relationship with Smirnov Holdings is anything to go by, she'd be a decent asset in her own right…”

That's fair enough.

“So what about my other question. Where is she?”

“I'm not sure, I'm sure they have more of these tombs elsewhere, pretty sure that if they can do what I think they've done, they might not even need them. I do know one thing which might be of interest to you. It could be nothing, but the timing seems weird.”

“Okay…”

She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a small clear plastic wrapper with a smiley face on it.

“Recognise this?”

Karen takes it, turns it over in her hands.

“Drugs, heroin probably,” she says.
“Top brand in Hell’s Kitchen. No one else has a foot in on the trade. I found it here when I came back the first time after the explosion.”

“Okay… well it's not exactly a stretch to imagine there was a narcotics business going on here… they were pretty much doing everything else too.”

“Yes.”

“So what's the connection?”

“Do you remember Madame Gao?”

Yes, she remembers. Dark times like that aren't easy to forget.

“One of Fisk's inner circle. Heroin manufacturer.”

“Also one of the members of The Hand… maybe even a founding one.” Elektra doesn’t wait for her to object before she launches into another topic. “You know she was the one who told Matthew about The Blacksmith.”

Karen's head snaps up then and briefly she sees herself standing alone in the woods, Frank in front of her and Schoonover at their feet.

(I'm already dead.)

He was. He was dead and she brought him back to life. She needs to remind him. He needs to know.

“Ah, so Matthew didn't tell you everything at least… interesting that he's more than candid about me and my secrets, but when it comes to Frank he clams up… tell me Karen, do you think he knew about the two somewhere deep down? That the roof here or when you told him the truth was just confirmation of what he already knew?”
“I don't know,” she says. “I don't know what Matt thinks.”

Elektra nods, seemingly chewing on this information but she doesn't say anything about it instead reverting back to the subject at hand.

“Gao wanted The Blacksmith neutralized because it meant she could hang on to her turf.”

It makes sense. Of course it does. Nothing like using a husband and father's grief to further your own drug business. She doesn't know why it would be a surprise. Frank was the perfect missile. Sometimes it bothers her how easy he is to manipulate. He hears Maria's name and nothing else matters.

“So now the Blacksmith has disappeared…” she pauses and lets her silence carry a lot more weight than her words. “… and Gao should be thriving. There's no stranglehold on the routes, there's no turf war. She has an empire if she'd just take it.”

“And?”

“And she hasn't. She's just disappeared, gone to ground. I can't find her for love or money. I can't even find her heroin. There's a new trafficker in town - the kind of operation Gao would have shut down in her sleep and yet he's gaining ground in a way I haven't seen before and she's doing nothing. There hasn't even been a clash. Not one. He's got his product and it's moving like wildfire and Gao is in the wind somewhere.”

“You think she specifically has Vanessa, and that's why she's gone to ground…?”

“Yes, she's part of The Hand… it's not really a leap. Also…” She walks past the alcoves and stops by a seemingly blank piece of stone wall. “You won’t believe me but this was once a doorway.”

Except she does believe her.

“Where does … did it lead?”

“I don’t know, whatever tunnel was behind it is concrete now, but I’d be willing to guess they
It makes sense. If Gao had people at the warehouse it wouldn't have been hard to take Vanessa's body in the chaos, bring her down here while all the chaos was going on upstairs. And then of course, if Gao believes she can bring her back - Karen firmly pushes the idea out of her mind that it's possible - she would disappear, even if it meant losing ground in Hell’s Kitchen drug trade. Lose the battle to win the war and all.

“So what now? Even if it is true, we still don't know where Vanessa is. I can't exactly write this up either. My editor lets me get away with a lot but even he would fire me on the spot and I can't blame him.”

Elektra sighs. “Now I'm going to try and find Gao…”

Karen shakes her head. “Elektra, no. No you can't. If you're the Black Sky and she finds you…”

“You know, I can take care of myself, Barbie.”

“That's not the point…”

“Doesn't have to be.”

“At least let Matt know, at least…”

“And what? Let him protect me? Come on, I think we both know that most of the time it's the boys that need saving.”

She's right but it doesn't matter. Every single cell in Karen's body screams that this is a terrible idea. It's dangerous and reckless and the thought of someone else getting hurt or worse is just too much for her to bear.

Karen bites her lip, stares at the gloomy depths of the tomb and for a second she can almost imagine a body inside slowly coming to life, fingers jerking and twitching and eyes opening. It sends a shiver down her spine.
“Elektra if they find out who you are…”

“Which is exactly why I need to find them first…”

“You don't know what they could do to you…”

Elektra’s mouth curves into a nasty smile as she heads to the door. “But they don't know what I could do to them either.”

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They go for coffee at the same nasty all night diner she went to the night she couldn't find Frank and she ended up watching him fall apart and then put him back together.

She wonders now if she did it right or if she missed something.

They don't talk much. She's still firmly rejecting any preternatural explanation for any of this and has resigned herself to believing that if Elektra is right, she's only right in lore and not in practicalities. The Hand might exist, it might be looking for some mythical Black Sky character, it might even have Vanessa, it might even think it can do some weird voodoo to bring her back to life, but that's where it ends. They can't actually do any of these things. To believe it is nothing short of ridiculous.

And yet…

And yet Elektra isn't actually ridiculous, she isn't gullible or stupid or easily led and it's easy to see she believes it. Then again maybe it is easier when you're at the forefront of all the drama.

She sips bad coffee and Elektra stirs her own aimlessly. They watch the cars go by outside and despite everything that Karen is still trying to process she thinks of sitting in another diner with Frank. She thinks of him rotting in a jail cell and she thinks about how much she loves him and how alone he is right now.
“He was going to run away with me…Matthew…” Elektra's voice is mild and she doesn’t look up from her coffee. “That night on the roof, when I nearly died…”

“He should have,” Karen says. “He was a fool.”

“He didn't because he loves you.”

Karen shakes her head. “He doesn't love me. He thinks he does.”

“Same difference.”

She guesses that's fair.

Elektra’s quiet for a while and then her mouth twists into a smirk. “Tell me Rapunzel, why does a girl like you carry a gun?”

“Personal safety,” she states and Elektra purses her lips, suppresses a laugh.

“Sure.”

“It's true,” she says. “Sometimes things happen and…”

“... there's only one way to solve it.”

Karen wishes she didn't believe that, but she does. She can't deny it anymore. Not after what she's done, not after what she knows Frank does.

Briefly, she locks eyes with Elektra. She wouldn't describe the look as “knowing” but more of a kind of resignation, a kind of feminine camaraderie and solidarity. Sometimes men hurt and sometimes women need to stop them. She wonders how many times Elektra has found herself in that position; she wonders whether it hurts Elektra as much as it hurts her.
And that circles her thoughts back to Elektra wanting to go off and find Gao, and she hates that idea more than anything. She doesn't want anyone else to be in danger. She doesn't want to lose anyone. And she realises with a start that despite everything, she's starting to think of Elektra as more of a good acquaintance than some annoying ex of an ex.

They're not friends but maybe one day they can be. She thinks she might even like that.

“C’mon,” Elektra says. “It’s late… early. You told me it was a school night.”

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It’s already getting light outside when she gets home. She gets equally filthy looks from Irene and Pickle, the latter makes her feel a surge of guilt, the former not so much.

There's no point in going to bed. She’ll need to be up in under an hour anyway and she doubts she could sleep.

She stands in front of her cork board, trying very hard to be pragmatic and not think about all the unscientific shit she needs to wade through. She was right when she said that for all practical purposes what's real and what people believe isn't going to change much; the point is knowing where those beliefs will take them. Still, it doesn’t change the fact that she’s entirely at a loss over what to think about what Elektra told her. She wants to reject it all outright, put it down to lore and myth that’s taken on a will of its own but which ultimately means little. She thinks that’s a comfortable place for it to sit for now. She’s not sure what she’s going to do when it’s not comfortable anymore.

She goes to the board, pulls off one of the papers with a question mark on it and throws it in the bin. There are no pictures of Gao; it's not like the city's biggest heroin supplier has a Facebook page or an etsy store, so she pulls the smiley face wrapper out of her jeans pocket, sticks it to a PostIt note and writes Gao's name on it before pinning it next to Vanessa’s picture.

Elektra was right. She was missing something, but the answer doesn't make her feel any better.

When she looks at it like a rational person it seems crazy. The only mystery is that a body is missing and the easiest explanation for that is that someone hid it or it got lost in the chaos of that night. The easiest explanation is certainly not that the body was taken by a member of an ancient cult with the intention of resurrection. That's not even a thing that's possible. But as she loops a red thread between Vanessa’s picture and Gao's name, she can't help but wonder if she's wrong.
She wishes Frank was here to talk this through. He'd tell her if she was being led down the garden path, he'd tell her if she was crazy... but then again he's seen a lot of crazy first hand. After all, he was there the night they tried to kill Elektra.

After all, he basically had a resurrection himself.

She goes to the bathroom, undresses, gets into the shower and ponders her next move.

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She's at the police station for the crime report before anyone else but the coffee is already stale and she makes a promise to herself that at some point today she's going to give herself a treat of a decent cup. She's been going a mile and minute and without proper coffee that's just starting to feel cruel and unusual.

The chairs are uncomfortable and the air is musty and she waits for the equally uncomfortable and musty journos to arrive. She feels antsy; her hands twitch but her mind is dull and just running in a million directions at once, none of which are going to go anywhere until she gets some sleep. She should be doing some researching. She should be texting Foggy or getting her story straight for the trial, but she's 90% asleep and she pretty much knows the rest of the day is going to be a write off. It might be for the best though. She thinks if her mind was sharp and clear, she'd probably be having a meltdown about the bullshit from the previous night. She'd be questioning her own sanity and everyone else’s more than she already does.

It's not too long though before the others start filing in. Most of them look how she feels - disheveled and unkempt, surviving on bad habits and coffee - and they look her up and down like they always do. She's realised over the past few weeks of doing this that she both intrigues and frightens them... And all of that is interlaced with a hint of disgust too. She wonders if that's really different to how Matt sees her now; the thought gives her a horrible pain in her stomach.

She is the girl who fucked Frank Castle, knowing full well who and what he is. And if he was here now she'd do it again.

Luckily she doesn't have much time to dwell because Mahoney walks in, rustling papers and looking morose. She imagines these briefings are not much more fun for whoever draws the short straw at the department every morning, than they are for her.
He gives everyone a quick hello, looks at her briefly with a mixture of resignation and indulgence, and hands out an A4 sheet to everyone before taking a seat behind an old beaten up desk.

He tells them the previous night was uneventful in Hell’s Kitchen. There was a bar fight at Josie’s and both of the suspects are in custody but expected to be released with no charges.

“Is Josie okay?” Karen asks and Mahoney snorts.

“She climbed in herself, had both of them by the scruff of their necks by the time we got there.”

There’s a few good-natured chuckles from around the room.

“There were also two domestic disturbances and one arrest for joyriding.”

“Slow night,” says The Post's reporter, a middle aged balding man who looks just as seedy as his paper.

“Yeah, sorry,” Mahoney says. “We'll do better tomorrow. Wouldn't want you guys not to make money out of human misery.”

Karen suppresses a smile and Mahoney catches her eye.

“We did find a body on 19th,” he says. “Junkie overdosed, so maybe you guys can do something outraged in all caps with that? Something like DEAD HOMELESS DRUG ADDICT MOLESTS YOUR CHILDREN.”

“He had a record for that?” the reporter asks a little too hopefully.

Mahoney shakes his head. “Nope. But that's never stopped you guys before.”

Karen bites her lip and Mahoney grins again.
“Okay, now get out of here you vultures, some people have to make a living out of doing good.”

There’s a little muttering and grumbling and everyone heads for the door, but she hangs back, while Mahoney scribbles in his notebook.

“What can I do for you, Karen?” He asks without looking up.

She frowns. There’s a few ways she can play this but she thinks Mahoney will see through any subterfuge and he’s been good enough to her over the last little while, that she decides to be honest about it.

“Any news on those people from the warehouse? I’d really like to talk to some of them.”

“No can do, you know that.”

Yeah, she does. She didn’t really expect anything else.

“Anything else?” he asks.

“That man on 19th...” she starts, “was it heroin or something else?”

Mahoney stops writing and looks up. “Why do you ask?”

She bites her lip. “I have a source,” she says. “It’s probably nothing but apparently the ah… narcotics landscape of the city has shifted.”

“Narcotics landscape, eh?” Mahoney repeats as if he’s trying out the phrase and quite enjoying it. “I always knew I liked you.”

“Is it true then? There’s a new dealer?”
“What if it is?”

Good question. So what if it is? There's always going to be someone coming in to steal space that's left open and it probably doesn't mean anything either way. Still though, no stone unturned.

“Come on Mahoney.”

He sits back in his chair and folds his arms.

“Yeah, it's changed. What about it?”

“You know who it is?”

“No.” He says in such a way that she's honestly not sure if he's lying or not. “Do you?”

She shakes her head.

“What does your source say?”

“They don't know either. They just know the heroin business that previously owned the city has disappeared.”

Mahoney nods. “That's true enough. Almost without a trace… we don't know much about the new guy though.”

“Not much? Or not much you can share?”

“Both,” he says. “Besides it's not unusual for a gap to be filled like this and…”
“And?”

“And shouldn't you be worrying about your man friend and not the politics of drug trafficking?”

She shrugs. “Not much I can do for him now.”

Mahoney hisses. “Wow, cold as ice,” he says and then he smiles. “You don't fool me though.”

Fair enough, she barely fools herself.

“Okay,” she says, picking up her purse and heading out. “I'll see you around.”

“Karen,” he calls as she gets to the door. “You let me know if your source tells you anything, okay?”

“My source doesn't even know the new guy’s name.”

“Yeah, but that's never stopped you lot before.”

“If I do find something, what do I get in return?”

“C'mon, this is a police investigation. You get my gratitude and you can sleep at night knowing you did the right thing.”

She glances at him over her shoulder and smiles. “You have a good day, Mahoney.”

~~~

The day passes uneventfully. Ellison is in meetings for most of it and Joe seems back to doing weather while he waits for the Castle trial to start again. She writes up the crime report, grins when she finds a Reuters picture of Josie from the previous night’s bar fight showing her literally holding two men by their collars - both of them barely even old enough to drink if their pockmarked skin is
anything to go by - while she talks to the officers on the scene. She does a little probing to see if she can find out where the people from the warehouse are being held but all those doors are locked up tight.

At lunch time she goes out and buys herself that coffee she promised she would; it's silly but she still balks at having to pay for it every time and even though it's been that way for a while, she doesn't think she'll ever get used to it.

She sits on a park bench, watches the trees blow in the early summer breeze, and thinks about Frank and how it's feeling like pretty much everything is balancing on a knife edge and one false move will make it all come tumbling down. She misses him, but whenever she thinks about him an image of Jeb invades her thoughts and she wonders how long it's going to be before that disappears.

A lot of men have died because of her and that total keeps increasing.

The trees offer no answers and eventually she goes back to work and watches the clock until she can leave and go home to collapse into bed where her dreams don't let her sleep for too long anyway.

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For the rest of the week, she does what she always does and keeps her head down and gets her work done. She doesn't have any late night visitors and Foggy is so immersed in the case that he doesn't even have time for a friendly coffee. He does call though and ask her to come in to go over the questions on Friday morning and put her through the paces so she knows what to expect.

She takes the day off and they meet at his offices at 8am and he grills her relentlessly - but not nearly as hard as he should - until noon when they're both tired and feeling a little worse for wear.

“I want you to take the stand in the middle - between Frank and Matt,” he says as he flips through one of his many folders, and she snorts at his phrasing.

Yeah, of course, between Frank and Matt - that seems apt.

“Yes,” she says. “Whatever you think.”
“It's just Frank *has* to lead on this. He's got to tell the beginning of the story, establish Reyes’ and the DA’s involvement from the start… but if he gets a little carried away… Well, *when* he gets a little carried away I need you to be the next thing the judge remembers. Someone smart and calm who can corroborate everything he's saying. Matt can pick up the end because I actually don't think he'll be as good a witness as you even if he's more credible, and the judge might be a bit tired by then. I've made my statement already.”

“That's fine,” she says.

Foggy smiles sheepishly at her. “It's not though,” he says, and rushes to continue when she frowns at him. “I saw him yesterday… he must have asked me about you ten times if he asked me once… I could barely get him to focus and although he's agreed to take the stand, it's a very grudging agreement and I think he's going to pull out.”

“Can he do that?”

“You ever tried to get Frank Castle to do something he doesn't want to do… actually don't answer that.”

“Yeah, he’s... difficult.”

“Please go see him,” Foggy says, tone changing from professional lawyer into something between friend and scared, tired little boy. “Please.”

“Foggy...”

“I know it's a lot and I know it's hard and I'm pretty sure there's a lot I don't know because you've never let something like this get on top of you, but Karen I need you to do it… he needs you to do it.”

Of course he does. Of course they all do.

Her gentle and sweet murderous boyfriend needs her and she needs him too.

“Today?” He asks. “I can get you an emergency visit.”

“Yeah,” she says before she can stop herself and before the gnawing feeling of dread can overwhelm her. “Yeah, make the call. I'll go.”

He does and she's not sure if it's relief or dread she feels when he gives her the thumbs up and all but ushers her into her car and on the road to Sing Sing.
You thought the world might end if you just looked the other way

Chapter Notes

I know it's short but this scene gets to me and has a very special place in my heart.
Title is from Matchbox 20's Parade.

“Foggy asked me to come,” she says. “He wants me to convince you to testify at the hearing again, tell everyone what you know about Reyes. Not pull out at the last second.”

She doesn't stumble over her words.

He sits behind the thick glass staring at her, holding a big black phone complete with a curly cable to his ear; his jumpsuit somehow a brighter orange than she remembered.

She hates it as much as she thought she would.

“Okay,” he says.

It takes her by surprise. She expected a fight, another argument like the last time she had to do this. She never expected him to just roll over and take it. She can't decide if she likes that or not.

“Okay?” she asks and he nods.

“Okay.”

She looks around, suddenly a little lost and unsure how she can continue.

He shouldn't be here. He should be with her. He's so close, but he may as well be on the other side of the world.
“That the only reason you're here?” He asks. “Because Nelson asked you to come?”

His voice isn't mean, if anything it's worried and a little broken. He's dreading her answer, she realises. She thinks she might be dreading it too.

She takes a deep breath and runs her hands through her hair, rests her elbows on the counter in front of her.

“Tell me one thing,” she says, voice firm bordering on angry and he nods, eyes not leaving her face for a second.

“Anything.”

“Did you do it to chase me away? So that I wouldn't come back? Did you do it to prove a point, that this … that this ‘ain't no place for a lady’?”

His brow furrows and for a second he looks almost confused, like he's struggling to keep up with her logic and follow her train of thought. But it's not for long. Frank always was much cleverer than any of them have him credit for.

Except her.

*Except her.*

She believed in him once. She tells herself she can do it again.

He shakes his head slowly.

“No,” he says.

His voice catches and she doesn't miss the way his eyes go wide and his nostrils flare.
The question hurts. It's hurts him almost as much as it hurts her. He's hearing her deepest fears about him, opening up a little window into her darkest thoughts and fears about who and what he is. She feels like this flies in the face of how much she claims to trust him.

Looking at him now, he does too.

He doesn't ask her how she can ask him this, he doesn't ask her if this is what she thinks of him, even though she knows he wants to. He pushes it back down, swallows it like bile and even though she wishes it didn't have to be that way, she doesn't regret it. Not for a second.

She loves him. He is who he is. These two things are fundamental. They are also sometimes at odds.

“Then why?” she asks, shifting on the uncomfortable plastic stool and hating how grimy the phone feels in her hands, hating that the glass is murky and his face ripples on the other side of it like he's underwater.

He sighs, purses his lips.

“Because I don't know how long I'm going to be here Karen. You coming here and going through that asshole’s shit every Sunday… It's just…”

“No,” she shakes her head firmly and he bites back whatever he was going to say. “Don't you say it was for me. Don't you put that on me. I'm not your excuse.”

She locks eyes with him through the glass, tries to see the flecks of gold and green in his irises. He has beautiful eyes - she's always thought so. They're hard and soft and everything in between - much like him. But it doesn't matter. He has to know this. He has to understand. This isn't like saving her life, this isn't killing someone who tried to harm her. It's not the same, even if in his mind it is.

Not for the first time, she sees a flash of how broken he truly is, how what's left of him doesn't really resemble all that much of the Frank Castle from before.

You were lucky Maria, she thinks. You were. But so am I. You got Frank, I got The Punisher and maybe that's how it was always meant to be.
“No,” he says softly. “No you're not.”

He looks away then and something deep inside her whispers that he heard her thoughts - he heard them and they shamed him. And well they should.

They stay like that for a while: quiet, awkward, at odds. They used to get each other and now it feels like they don't.

She doesn't realise she's started talking until the words are already out.

“When I was here before, you asked me what I wanted and I didn't have an answer…”

His head snaps up and he pulls the phone closer like he knows what she's going to say is important, like he knows he needs to listen and understand.

“I want the same as what I wanted that day we went to the river…” she says. “I want you to put us first. Not me. Us. Because if you don't we won't survive. It doesn't matter if you're in here or not.”

No you or me. Only us.

He's quiet again, head bobbing slowly. She thinks he might be gearing up for one of his speeches - one of his *Frank Castle and the Hard Truth of the Day* interludes where he spells out why the rest of the world is illogical and he's the only one who gets it - but it doesn't come.

Instead he shifts his hand to the glass, knuckles rapping against it close to where her hand rests on the other side.

“I want to keep you safe,” he says.

“I know,” she says. “And you do. But I need to know that bad stuff can happen - that I can tell you the things that upset me and people can hurt me - and that they won't turn up dead the next day. I can't worry about what you'll do to every guy who cat calls me or every asshole who cuts me off in traffic.”
“Karen…”

“Don’t do these things and say it’s for me. Don’t do them because you need to do them and then pretend it was in my honour,” she pauses, watches him and takes a deep breath. “You take on so much you don’t need to. You take on things no one could hold you responsible for. You blame yourself for Maria and your children, for not knowing about Schoonover, for things that happen to me… and what you really need to be doing is owning this… facing up to whatever this thing is inside you that's so broken.”

He takes a while to digest that, hand on the glass and eyes focused on the counter in front of him.

She's hurting him. She knows this. She has to. If she doesn't they won't make it.

She grits her teeth, waits for his objection, tries to see them on the other side of this and...

And then he nods again and looks up at her. His eyes are red and he makes no move to hide it.

“‘I love you,” he whispers.

He breaks her heart. He tears her apart. He pulls her heart and stamps on it and feeds that shit to a dog.

She moves her fingers so they're pressing on the glass next to his.

“‘I know.”

“‘I would die for you.’

You already did.

“I know. But you don't have to.”
“Sometimes it feels like…”

“Like what?”

“Like if I take dying off the table, then I'll lose.”

He says it like a confession. She takes it much the same way and, like all confessions, it hurts. For a long time, she's wondered how he processes metaphysical checks and balances and now she knows. As long as he's willing to die at a moment's notice, no one else needs to. It's a death wish, but it's also a bargain and as she looks at him sitting there in a jumpsuit so bright she's pretty sure it glows in the dark, looking so lost and hopeless that she wants to die too, she feels tears rolling down her cheeks.

He cocks his head, frowns and she gives him a wan smile.

“Oh okay,” she says. “But if you don't put it away, we both lose.”

He flinches like she's hit him and maybe she has. Maybe this is just like that moment in the graveyard when her hand connected hard with his face and she drew blood that was as black as the night. She didn't hurt him because she couldn't, but she did anyway and she's doing it again now.

But then he nods. “Yeah,” he says. “You're right.”

“Okay,” she says and somewhere she feels the smallest glimmer that they might get back on track and he might just believe her when she says she's going to stand by him.

He might even let her.

She picks up her purse then. She's not going to tell him about Vanessa and Elektra yet - the truth is she isn’t even sure how she would start, and her time is limited.

“I have to go now,” she says.
“Yeah… you do.”

“You take care. You look after yourself and we’ll get through this.”

Somewhere to the left she hears a door open and she knows it's a guard coming to get him and take him back to his cell.

“Will I see you Sunday?” he asks as she stands.

“You want to?”

She almost gets a smile. “You know I do, Karen Page.”

“Then I'll see you Sunday, Frank Castle.”

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Later, as she's waiting in her car for the guards to sign her out and lift the boom at the gate, she sees a sleek midnight blue Aston Martin coming up the road towards the prison. The windows are tinted and she can't see inside but she wonders who it could be; it's not like Sing Sing is exactly a place for the rich and famous.

It’s probably nothing, just a lawyer coming to see a client, but as the car pulls up to the guard station and the window opens a crack so the occupant can speak to the guard, she can't shake the feeling that whoever is behind those tinted windows is watching her closely.

She squints and tries to make out a shape through the dark glass but can't see anything, except a man's hand as he signs in and hands the clipboard back.

And then she's being waved through and she feels a chill run down her spine as she turns into the traffic and heads back to Hell’s Kitchen.
A little help from my friends

Chapter Notes

Ha! So I am sorry this has taken so long but I feel better about writing it than I have in a long, long time now. I realise how difficult it gets for me when things get this plotty and also when Karen and Frank have limited interaction. I've realised it is something I stress about a lot as I wonder sometimes if people are here for the plot and the angst as much as for the smut and the fluff. It doesn't matter either way, but I still worry that people won't like the plottier parts and we really are stuck in the middle of that right now. I just hope people stick with it and accept that there is fluffier, smuttier stuff happening in Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea and also in Between the Shadow and the Soul (and yes I have noticed my titles are eerily similar).

Anyway, this is a short chapter because I wrote this one and the next one as a single chapter and then realised it really made sense as two chapters, so I am planning on either getting the next chapter up later this evening or tomorrow morning - it just needs a quick edit.

Also, while I adore writing Karen and Frank, I think Karen and Foggy just melt my heart and I think I could write them all day.

“You are a godsend, you know that?”

It's Sunday, and her and Foggy are driving back from Sing Sing together.

“I mean I'll take it,” she says putting on her indicator and changing lanes. “But you wanna tell me why?”

“Oh, just that on Thursday he was a nightmare - and he sees you and it's like he turns into a pussy cat.”

“Frank Castle isn't a pussy cat.”

“Until he is. Until he sees you and the world makes sense again.”

She concedes this is true on some level. On another level she thinks she probably confuses Frank and the carefully crafted version of the world he thinks he lives in more than any one person ever has.
Most days she's not sure it's a blessing or a curse, but apparently today it's the former.

She and Foggy had driven up to the prison together - her to honour her promise to come and see Frank and Foggy to go over some finer details of the case, which he'd been missing.

“No sleep for the wicked,” he'd said as he climbed disheveled and bleary-eyed into her car that morning, while she'd handed him a coffee she'd picked up along the way.

The truth was the visit was mostly uneventful, and that's not just because Frank hadn't beaten the shit out of anyone and she's fairly certain he's not going to murder anyone either.

(“I'd die for you.”)

“But you don't have to”)

Thing is, he'd kill for her too and she's still not sure where that leaves her.

Still though, today was good.

She went in first, sat with Frank for pretty much the full time, talking about everything and nothing, telling about Pickle and how she's been destroying furniture, and then about Luna, and how she had spoken to Kat earlier that day, and learned she's doing well and how the workers at the shelter all love her and save extra treats for her every day.

He’d been calm - sweet even - his voice rough but gentle and his eyes taking in her every move. He's still not right though. There's a nervousness to him, a twitchiness that he can't hide when he sees her and she knows that he hates that he's stuck inside and, in his mind, forcing her to come to this terrible place where evil and the unmistakable smell of violence hangs heavy in the air. She can almost see him fighting himself over it and she'd ventured to put her hand on his arm and squeeze it gently before she'd got a sharp reprimand from a guard.

It was worth it though, she thinks as she weaves in and out of the traffic. She hasn't touched him in so long and even those few seconds were a kindness.
“So did he give you what you need?” she asks.

Foggy gives her a dark look and fiddles with the radio eventually settling on a station doing a Springsteen celebration, because apparently that’s the only music allowed anywhere on the airwaves when Frank is in town.

“Frank Castle never gives anyone what they need,” he says. “Present company excluded.”

She gives him a sideways glance and he shrugs and takes a bite of a bacon roll he bought from a gas station as they left Ossining, and washes it down with a mouthful of coffee.

“Seriously though,” he continues. “I’m sorry I had to intrude, but I thought I’d strike while the iron was hot and all…”

“It's okay,” she says, ignoring the jab. “With all you're doing, intruding is the last thing I'm worried about.”

“I'd rather not impose on this time because… yeah, it's weird, but the hearing is on Wednesday and I still need some information from him for when the actual trial comes along. It's very difficult trying to prep for two separate things when the one is so dependent on the other,” he licks a drop of coffee off the side of his Styrofoam cup. “I talk a good game but Batzer's schedule really is madness and while I think we're good for Wednesday, it's the trial I'm worried about.

“I can make a good guess as to what charges they're going to drop if the judge throws out Reyes’ case, but that still doesn't leave much time.”

“Continuance?”

He shakes his head. “I don't think Batzer is going to give much. She's already sided with us over the whole Reyes thing and she's not going to want to be seen as being overly partial to The Punisher. Besides I'm not in nearly as much hot water as Tower. He's got a mountain to climb to save the DA's reputation and keep the charges from being dismissed.”

“So what are you behind on?”
“Oh, everything.”

“Come on Foggy.”

“Look, it's difficult because if Batzer rules in our favour and Reyes’ case is declared a mistrial, we need to look at what's left and how hard we are willing to go for Frank.”

She frowns, changes lanes again to get out from behind an old man who couldn't be going any slower if he was in reverse.

“What do you mean ‘how hard we're willing to go for Frank’?”

Foggy takes another bite of his bacon roll and wipes his mouth.

“Karen, we are all hoping for the best here, but even if this goes to plan, he's still facing charges from that night at the warehouse.”

“He was there because I asked him to be. He saved kids, he broke open one of the biggest…”

“I know. I know.” Foggy holds up his hands and a river of bacon grease runs down his arm. “All I'm saying is we are not out of the woods.”

“We're never out of the woods,” she says irritably.

Foggy gives her a wan smile. “Not true.”

“Yes it is.”

“Nope,” he says. “How far can a dog run into a wood?”

“Oh Jesus,” she says, shaking her head.
“No, come on. How far?”

She sighs. “How far, Foggy?”

“Halfway, otherwise he's running out.”

She rolls her eyes but can't help the laugh that bubbles up inside her chest. Again, Foggy is a saint and he's always willing to do whatever he can to make her feel better. She knows she owes him big time and when this is over, no matter the outcome, she's going to need to make this up to him.

“Ok,” she says feigning exasperation. “Now that you have that out of your system, what do you still need to do?”

“Well,” he says. “The main thing is character witnesses. Last time we had that ranking officer, Ray Schoonover, but I can't seem to get hold of him…tried to call him but we got nothing.” He lets that hang for just long enough that she isn't sure if he's just thinking out loud or if he's trying to imply something. “So anyway, I needed some more names. Marines, officers, friends even, from him... And now I need to get Sebastian to vet them.”

He sighs loudly at that and takes a big and angry bite of his sandwich.

“I thought you liked him,” she says. Sebastian is Foggy's firm's newest paralegal and so far it had seemed to be going well.

“Yeah, he's fine. Overly eager and happy to learn…”

“I feel there's a ‘but’ coming.”

“Yeah, he's great and all, but he's not fast and he's not thorough and I'm worried he might miss something.”

“What would he miss? Do you think Frank would give unreliable witnesses?”
“No, it's not that…” Foggy pauses like he's choosing his words carefully, chews thoughtfully. “You know how Frank is with people he cares about. He's got this idea that if they have some kind of shared experience with him, they'll always come to the same conclusions he does and follow the same code - even if it's not as extreme as his.”

Yes, she knows that side of him too well, which is why she knows he still agonises over Ray Schoonover and what he did to her and his family and all the other people who’s lives he played with.

She decides not to dwell on it now. It's something they'll need to figure out when this is all over.

“Wow, Foggy, that's quite astute.”

“Yeah, well I've spent a lot of time with him and when he's not talking about you and when he's not thanking me for being there for you, he rambles about shit from before and it's not hard to pick up how he views the world but also the kind of logic he's almost desperate for other people to have.

“I don't even think it's because he's looking for absolution. It's more like he doesn't get why people don't feel the hurt the same way he does but at the same time, he genuinely doesn't think anyone can.”

And if that isn't one of the most insightful comments she's ever heard about Frank Castle, she doesn't know what is.

“Anyway,” Foggy continues. “Now I've got a list of names here and I honestly don't know how many of those people would be willing to stand up for him or stab him in the back … or they're just not the people Frank wants them to be... and Sebastian… well he's too young to realise how cutthroat people can be.”

“Wrong profession then,” she says.

He nods, tears off another bite of bacon.

“He'll learn, but just not fast enough.”
“I could do it,” she offers taking her eyes off the road to look at him.

“No, you have a lot on your plate.”

“Like what?”

*Other than a mass murdering lover who I'm stupidly trying to absolve of any guilt. Other than a job that's circling the drain. Other than a fucking fairytale about undead ninjas and a new best friend who's going to take them on alone.*

“Karen, it's really not…”

“Come on, you know I can do it. I did it all the time at…”

“... not your job…”

“... at Nelson and Murdock…”

“I'm not saying you *can't* do it…”

“And you know I'm good at it and you know…”

“It's not a statement on your capabilities…”

“... you know I'd never be stupid enough to put Frank at risk like that!

“... It's just too much to…”

“Damnit Foggy!”
“Christ Karen, Jesus ain't taking the wheel!”

She's been so focused on the conversation that she's meandered into the slow lane and is fast approaching a propane truck she tried to avoid earlier. She hits the brake hard, watches in horror as they barrel towards the back of the truck before the ABS kicks in and she swerves into the shoulder of the highway where they come to a complete stop.

“Shit! Sorry,” she says as Foggy's coffee slops onto his jeans.

He looks at her shocked for a second, breathing fast.

“Jesus Karen, are you okay?”

No, she's not. She's really not. She's barely slept and when she does all she can think of is Frank and if she manages to get past that then it's Elektra and Vanessa. And when she pushes past that then there's so many other things too. Work, Matt, the way she's being frozen out of the investigation, the man in the suit.

Ray Schoonover begging for his life on the cold ground and her begging for it too.

“I'm sorry,” she says again, voice cracking. “I'm sorry, this is all such a mess and sometimes I don't see a way out and…”

On the radio, Bruce seems to agree.

It's a fairytale so tragic
There's no prince to break the spell
I don't believe in magic
But for you I will, for you I will

She doesn't want to cry but the tears start to leak out of her eyes and she curses herself for how easily it happens.

(“I cry a lot”)
“Doesn't mean you ain't strong”)

“Hey,” says Foggy, putting his coffee into the cup holder and then taking her shoulders, smearing bacon grease into her shirt. “It's okay. Really, Karen, it is.

“You're under so much pressure from everyone right now, I'm honestly surprised you're still standing.”

She sniffs, gulps back her tears and he looks at her sadly, rubs her arms.

“It's just… it's…”

“I know. I know this is killing you.”

He does. She knows he does.

They stay like that for a while - him looking at her and her looking at her hands, the cars zooming past on the highway - and then he flicks her nose gently and a bubble of watery laughter erupts from her throat.

“Karen, if you'd vet these character witnesses, it would take a load off my mind,” he says. “Would you do that for me?”

She sniffs.

“Now you're just placating me,” she says lightly and he chuckles.

“No, I want the best. And you're the best.”

“I think the word you used was ‘godsend’.”
“Well then it's time to do the Lord’s work.”

*Now I'm counting on a miracle…*

*Countin’ on a miracle to come through.*

Foggy gives the radio a filthy look and it makes her laugh all over again.

She realises in that moment that she has no idea what her life looks like without him. It's not the same as Frank because she knows what that looks like; she knows what it feels like and even though being without him but loving The Punisher comes with a lot of baggage and a lot of managing her expectations, it's stop something she understands. Foggy is something else entirely though. A world without him in it is unimaginable to her.

“Want me to drive?” he asks.

“No, I'll be okay. I'm sorry.”

“Oh then, I'll have Sebastian prepare the files and send them over tomorrow. I can give you until next Monday. That okay?”

She wipes her eyes, gives him a sharp nod, squeezes his hand and manoeuvres back into the traffic for an uneventful trip home.

~~~

True to his word the files are couriered to her office the next day arriving just after 10 and she has to stop herself from ignoring her actual work and diving into them immediately.

Thankfully the weekend police report was short and Mahoney managed to stop himself from commenting on how much simpler life is when Frank Castle is behind bars. A drug dealer was busted though, carrying more heroin than the department had seen in a long time and Mahoney had caught her eye when he told them that the dealer had killed himself in custody before they'd had a chance to question him about his suppliers.
“Scum,” the reporter from *The Post* had said. “Couldn't live with himself. Fucking coward did the world a favour.”

“Or he's more scared of his bosses than he is of jail.” Karen had said and she didn't miss the agreement written all over Mahoney’s face even if *The Post’s* reporter had rolled his eyes and made some comment about bleeding heart liberals under his breath.

Either way, she's written the story up by 11 and she spends the afternoon doing actual work trying to draw a connection between it and Gao and anything Elektra has said.

When it doesn't pan out she even considers giving Elektra a call - not only for information but also because she wants to check in and make sure she's okay and hasn’t got herself into trouble just yet.

Not for the first time Karen wonders if she should tell Matt what's going on. It might feel like a betrayal but on the other hand, it could literally save Elektra's life.

Elektra once said she'd rather have Matt hate her and be alive than honour his wishes and have him dead and Karen finds she feels the same way about Elektra. She doesn't want more blood on her hands, doesn't think she could live with it if she did.

She decides to put a pin in it for now but plans to revisit it very soon.

By 3:30 when the paper goes to print and Ellison has retreated to his office either for a stiff drink or just because he hates his job and life in general and prefers to be alone, she can't ignore the neat plastic folder anymore, and she's done enough overtime lately to warrant a few hours of personal time.

She grabs some coffee from the kitchen, ignores Joe's attempts to fish for insider information on the Castle case and gets comfortable at her desk and opens the file.

The first thing she notices is Foggy's right. Sebastian is efficient. He's colour coded and alphabetized everything, divided Frank's character witnesses into friends, family, and military colleagues and even put together an index for her and folioed the pages.
She runs her finger down the index, not doing much of anything other than reading names, letting herself imagine the people attached to them and their relationship to Frank.

In a strange way she almost feels like she's intruding in his life, like this is a version of social media stalking without the social or the media part. It makes her sad. These were things she wanted to learn about first-hand, people she maybe wanted to meet in person and not from an overly efficient looking impersonal file.

Nothing to be done for it. It is what it is.

She starts at the beginning. An great aunt in Rochester who is pushing 90 and has dementia and then an uncle in Naples, Italy who also spent most of his life in the marines. Neither of them would be much help. Still there's a part of her that feels nothing but the most incredible loss at seeing their photos. Again she's reminded that she was really thinking of holidays and celebrations and all those things ordinary Karen wanted that she'd told herself she could do without.

Thing is she can. She can do without. She's always been alone and honestly, so has he. She just wishes this wasn't an either or situation.

She flips through more of the files. She find one on Kat and realises with a start she's the woman she saw at the very first hearing with the baby on her lap. She looks nice. She's smiling in her photo and Karen wonders again how Frank knows her. On a whim she Googles her and a webpage for the sanctuary pops up.

Like he said it looks lovely. The pictures are of rolling farmland and happy looking animals, and when she explores a little further she sees sweet looking villas for holidaymakers and a list of activities around the farm. It's so light and pretty, drenched in sunshine and even though Karen isn't an idiot and understands the basics of marketing, she can't help but wish they could make good on their promise to visit Luna.

She shakes her head, does a little more investigating on Kat but she doesn't come up with much other than she's recently widowed and she's decided to create this sanctuary out of the money her husband left behind. There's not much information on her husband's death either, just an article claiming it was a hit and run… and then a little nagging voice in the back of Karen's head becomes impossible to ignore.

She logs into the regional database that collates the police crime reports released to the media from the tri-state area and does a keyword search for battery and domestic violence. And, after a little filtering, as she knew she would, she finds a few scattered reports about a woman matching Kat's
description being admitted to hospital with broken bones and internal bleeding. All the reports are written in such a way that either implies clumsiness or negligence on the woman's part or claims the attacks were in a public place. They were also all written by the same police officer.

Karen sighs, sits back in her chair. Well, at least one mystery is solved. She always wondered what Frank had done that warranted such a good deal for a lost dog he took pity on one night. She's just not sure of the wisdom of putting a woman on the stand whose husband he murdered, no matter how grateful she might be. It puts Foggy's opinion on the situation into stark perspective.

She swallows a mouthful of coffee, carries on paging through the files dividing them up into two piles of rejections and others that need further investigation.

The marines and other military connections give the best possibilities. There's a tall, handsome man called Curtis Hoyle who was honourably discharged after losing his leg. He runs a group for vets with PTSD and she thinks would make a more than decent witness if it comes to that.

She makes a third pile for people to contact first, hopes there will be more military personnel who seem like good choices. Judges and juries love the armed forces, after all. It makes them feel safe and grateful and it'll remind them just how much Frank sacrificed for them.

She gets to the last file, flips it open and her heart skips a beat as another piece of the puzzle that is Frank Castle slips into place.
Told you this would be up soon.

Okay I have a lot to say about this. First up is I am not a lawyer. I am literally using stuff I learned from watching TV to get through these legal-y bits. Again I think that is okay because the show does it too. Secondly, I have not stuck exactly to everything that was going on in the original case against Frank because it got really complicated with who knew what and who was acting with whose authority. To be fair, I am not convinced the show kept track of that either especially when it came to Foggy accusing Reyes of conspiracy in open court and Tepper confessing to falsifying medical reports. To be fair, a lot of that court case was a bit of a mess. The good thing is that means I can also be messy. Thirdly, I have tried to simplify where I can. No one really wants to read through hundreds of thousands of court transcripts, so I've gone for importance and brevity rather than realism. Again, this is a show about undead ninjas and a man that just won't die, so I'm relying on the fact that you guys don't care too much about the intricacies of State and Federal law (especially from someone who is not American).

Finally, I have been waiting so long to introduce a new character, so I am excited by that.

Oh and the song title comes from Matchbox 20's "Angry".

Hope you all enjoy

It’s a strange thing figuring out how to dress for court. It feels like a strange combination of both enforcing and disregarding gender stereotypes. The last time she wore turquoise and then maroon, but it didn’t matter. She was a paralegal, she wasn’t up on the stand. She didn’t need to make people believe her.

A small sad smile plays at the corner of Karen’s lips as she runs her hands along the line of blouses neatly hung in her wardrobe. Back then it was a simpler time. Life made some kind of twisted sense and the man in the orange jumpsuit sitting next to her hadn’t completely and irreversibly claimed a place in her heart.

Except maybe even then he had. Maybe even then she knew they were two of a kind. Cut from the same torn and bloodied cloth.

She can’t wear the turquoise now. It’s too flighty. Something about it won’t let them take her seriously. She can’t wear the black silk button down either. It’s too corporate - she’ll look cold and distant. Aggressive. The same way judges and juries trust marines, they distrust women who seem
cutthroat and ambitious.

Foggy’s also warned her against looking too prim or too feminine.

*You don’t want to give off the impression that you’re some lost, lonely soul that sends letters to convicts and wants twenty cats and seven dogs,* he’d said.

*And that’s different from how I am how?* She’d asked and he’d pulled a face.

Either way it rules out another chunk of her wardrobe.

“What you gonna do?” she asks Pickle, who yawns, rolls over on the bed, stretches her legs and sticks her furry little feet into a morning sunbeam.

Yeah, she wishes that was an option.

Eventually she settles on a grey pinstripe skirt and an off-white blouse. She pulls her hair into a bun, leaves some tendrils loose to frame her face and get past the whole hard, cutthroat look. She wonders if it helps. She knows the first impression she gives what with her pretty hair and her big eyes is one of vulnerability and maybe even fragility, but she also knows that if people look - really really look - they see through it and find a toughness inside. She guesses it just depends on how hard people are looking today.

“Am I good?” she asks Pickle, who yawns again.

“You could at least take some interest in all this. I’m trying to get him back as much for you as for me.”

Pickle takes the moment to grab the pillow on Frank’s side of the bed and kick it hard with her back feet.

“Yes, I feel that way too,” Karen says picking up a mug of rapidly cooling coffee and taking a sip. “But let’s get him home first and then we can kick him.”
Home…

Frank’s side of the bed…

She looks into her mug. It’s still the coffee he bought and her sleepwear last night was one of his shirts.

His blood is still marking her wall and she has no intention of scrubbing it off.

“Jesus Christ, get a grip,” she tells herself.

She puts the mug into the sink and she’s just slipping her shoes on when her phone vibrates and a text from Elektra pops up on her screen.

It’s short and to the point but there’s something about it that warms her heart.

*It’s going to be okay, Barbie. Go save your man.*

The message is followed by emojis of a skull and a black heart and while on some way that seems strange for Elektra, in another way there’s something about it that makes perfect sense.

She smiles, wonders how they’ve gone from their initial meeting which involved her storming out of Matt’s apartment in a huff to this. Not quite friends, but not quite not friends either.

*Thanks, it means a lot.*

A minute passes and her phone buzzes again.

*Don’t thank me, fix it. It’s what we do.*
Karen snorts. Elektra’s right. It is what they do.

She gives Pickle a pat on the head, gets a few playful swipes for her trouble and heads out the door to go and save the life of the man she loves.

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There’s a crowd outside the courthouse. It's big but not as big as the last time and Karen thinks it could be because this is almost an administrative hearing rather than an actual trial. Still, it's a sizeable number of people seemingly from all walks of life, and seemingly all with different opinions on how things should shake out today. There are placards, some big and bright and calling Frank “The Protector” rather than “The Punisher”, others with his face on them and a flower crown on his head - one even with a halo and the words “Avenging Angel”. Many others are less complimentary with pictures of the electric chair alongside bloody images from his crimes. She even sees her face a few times with the word “Whore” written across it in big red letters.

She’d almost forgotten how bad it was that first little while after the shootout at the warehouse - forgotten about the Glutton for Punishment and the Keys to the Castle headlines. With little of public interest happening for the last few weeks the scrutiny on her had died down. There weren’t any reporters outside her home and office and she only got one or two phone calls every day asking her for a statement, but she suspects that’s all going to change now and it’ll get worse the longer it drags out and the more she’s called on to testify.

It doesn't matter, she tells herself. Nothing matters, except for him and getting him out. And while this train of thought might not be in her best interests, she knows herself well enough to know that she’s bound to it and she’s going to see it through to the bitter end.

She sighs and she signs in at the door of the courthouse and hands her weapon over to security and heads down the hall.

As she expected the courtroom is stuffed to the point that they've stopped letting members of the public inside. She wonders how many people here actually have a vested interest in the case and how many just want a glimpse of The Punisher.

She’s not one to judge. Sometimes it feels like she just wants a glimpse of The Punisher too.

Foggy’s already at his table, folders laid out neatly in front of him. He looks smart and shiny but she
knows him well enough to see that his calm demeanour is entirely faked and underneath the plastic smile, he’s freaking out. As it is, the terror in his eyes is something to behold.

He notices her as she takes her seat, gives her a quick wave and then turns back to his notes, barking orders at a young, overwhelmed looking aide who she assumes is Sebastian.

She glances around the room. As always there’s people standing against the walls and security seems to be doing what they can to remove those who are just there for the show, which is a good move in her opinion. Joe is also there and seems to have a more comfortable seat than the last time, but he’s still stuffed between two of The Post’s reporters and she knows first hand how bad they both smell after a night of heavy smoking and beer.

The man in the suit is there too. He’s sitting on the other side of the room towards the back. She watches him coolly for a few seconds. He’s not on his phone today and he seems calm enough but, like Foggy, there’s a certain anxiety written into his posture and even the clean lines of his Italian suit can’t hide that.

“You ready for this?” Matt’s voice is soft and smooth like caramel and he lays his cane down on the floor as he takes the seat next to her.

She looks up, momentarily startled. She didn’t even hear him coming, didn’t pick up that tap of his cane or the smell of his aftershave which is fresh with hints of sandalwood.

“Have to be,” she says, moving her purse to under her seat. “You?”

A tired smile tugs at the corner of his lips. “Of course.”

There’s a part of her that wants to ask him if he’s being genuine, but he beats her to it.

“I’m not going to sell him out,” he says. “I don’t agree with what he does, but I do believe in the system and Reyes abused that… besides, you’d never forgive me.”

No. No, she wouldn’t. She knows that no matter how bad she feels about everything that happened and no matter how she still has a twinge of guilt over the fact that she knows Matt still loves her somewhere, they would never get over it if he betrayed her now.
He seems to want to say something else. She can see by the way he’s frowning at her and chewing on the inside of his cheek that there are things he wants to get out and she’s not surprised. Other than the singular meeting at Foggy’s offices, the last thing he said to her was that he didn’t think he could be her friend and that’s left a lot of very dirty water under the bridge.

“Say it,” she says and he looks surprised that she could read him that well.

“It’s just, Karen,...”

He stops short as the doors bang shut behind them and about a dozen security guards, armed with guns take their positions throughout the room.

“Looks like it’s showtime,” Matt says, turning away from her, his attention focused on the door to the hold.

When Frank is led in he’s cuffed, both around his wrists and ankles, a long chain connecting the two so that he shuffles uncomfortably to his chair. It’s such a stark difference from how she knows he can move with a kind of brutish agility which belies his stockiness. Now he looks cowed and complacent - beaten - and she hates that more than she has ever hated anything to do with this whole mess.

He’s not an animal. He’s not. And yet... and yet maybe there’s a part of him that is.

He catches her eye as he sits down and she swallows hard, gives him a nod and a small smile and wills the tears not to fall out of her eyes. He doesn't smile back but he gives her that once over which somehow isn't lewd but should be. It’s both familiar and incredibly disconcerting in the circumstances.

Next to her Matt shifts uncomfortably and clears his throat, but she doesn’t have it in her to worry about whether he’s listening to her heartbeat or smelling her pheromones. He has his own damage and for now it can just be his. There are some things she is not meant to take on.

The bailiff tells everyone to stand and a heavy silence settles over the room as Batzer takes her seat. As always she waves everyone down and shuffles through some papers before looking out into the court, glasses perched on the edge of her nose.
“Alright, thank you all for coming,” she says in a way that sounds like she’s entirely unimpressed to see 90% of the people in the room. “So just for the record and the press who love to get confused about these things, this is an evidence hearing. Evidence. The purpose of this hearing is categorically not to make a decision on Mr Castle’s guilt or lack thereof.”

Someone sniggers and Batzer glares out into the courtroom, nods once to security who goes to bodily remove the offender.

“Mr Nelson contends that the evidence which was used to bring charges against his client in The People v Frank Castle isn’t permissible on account of a conflict of interests and possible tampering within the DA department. Today we will have testimony from Mr Castle, Miss Page and Mr Murdock to corroborate these claims.

“Tomorrow, we'll hear from Mr Tower's witnesses. Then there will be a semi-private sitting for the DA’s office to present their defence as a professional courtesy to the office,” She frowns and doesn’t say anything for what seems like a very long time and then she looks at Blake Tower. “Mr Tower, are you sure you want to pursue this?”

Tower looks like he’d literally be anywhere else other than in this courtroom and dealing with this case. In fact he looks almost sick and when he speaks his voice comes out cracked squeaky and he needs to clear his throat and start again.

“Yes your Honour.”

Batzer takes a deep breath. “Okay then. Should we start? Mr Nelson, are you ready?”

Foggy stands, “Yes, your Honour. I call Frank Castle to the stand.”

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Karen's wondered from the minute the case was reopened why Tower is pursuing the old charges.

They were all in the room when Reyes confessed her involvement in the Castle tragedy, including him. And yes, maybe he did think that the extreme nature of Frank's crimes would be enough for that to be handwaved and the case to pick up where it left off. Maybe it would be embarrassing for the DA to quietly drop the charges to minimise their own liability but it couldn't be more embarrassing
than what's already happening. Then again, maybe it was a matter of knowing it was going to be aweful one way or another but still holding onto the hope that something would come out of it - something that would overshadow the duplicity and conspiracy within the department. Not that that helps as they're already being investigated by internal affairs.

But whatever the reasoning is, the look on Tower's face as Frank takes the stand says more than any words ever could. She's not sure if it's only the embarrassment or if there is a good dose of fear of Frank Castle heaped in there too. But either way he wants to bolt. He wants to stop this whole thing in its tracks.

She wishes he would but she guesses he's not the one pulling the strings and she herself knows how incredibly awful it is when the powers that be won't listen to reason. She’s been there with Ellison and she’d hedge her bets that most people in the working world have been there with their bosses at one point or another.

The legs of Foggy’s chair scrape across the wooden floor as he stands and buttons his jacket. He doesn’t look at her or at Matt. He doesn’t even really look all that nervous anymore either. It’s like he’s taken all his stress and put it away somewhere and now he’s just doing a job he knows how to do. He's not her friend or Matt's; he's not the sweetest man in the world; he doesn't sing badly or love the terrible fishbowls at Josie’s. He doesn't go to his hipster coffee shop in his slippers and he doesn't fall in love with slobbery dogs who he looks after for mass-murdering clients. He's Franklin Nelson, city lawyer. He's tough as nails and sharp as a blade. And he has a job to do.

“Hi Frank,” he says.

“Mr Nelson.”

Frank’s voice is a rough rumble, thin and a little hoarse and for all the world it sounds like he's been crying.

“How are you doing?”

“Been worse.”

Foggy smiles. “Better too, I'd say.”
Frank shrugs, knits his brow like this line of questioning is a farce, which it is.

“Okay, Frank,” Foggy says. “I know this is painful for you and I know we have all heard this story a thousand times and the last thing you want to do is relive it all but we need you to. Can you tell me what happened the day your family died? The massacre at Central Park.”

There’s a long, protracted silence and Frank bristles. She’s seen this before when he’s angry or upset; he almost seems to shake with the effort of trying to keep his emotions in check. If they were alone now, he’d be grinding his teeth and his speech would sound almost slurred, and she’d hold him and hush him and promise him it was okay and he was okay; that these things he feels are normal and real and it doesn’t mean anything other than he loved his family very much and they’ll live in his memories forever.

But she can’t do that now.

She’s done it so many times already and that will have to be enough.

Still, she finds herself tensing, wills him to carry on and remember what’s at stake and force himself to go through this again. For him. For them.

_Be strong, my love. Be stronger than you’ve ever been. Be as strong as I know you can be._

He lifts his head, looks straight at her like he’s heard her and she gives bites her lip, gives him a small nod.

_It’s okay. It’s really okay._

He seems to find strength somewhere and he takes a breath, squares his shoulders.

“I took my family to the carousel in Central Park. My wife and I always did it when I came back.”

“Back from the Middle East? From Kandahar where you were stationed?”
Frank nods.

“Kids… Lisa, Frankie junior, they were getting too big for it already but we took them anyway.”

“Okay, so you’re in Central Park with your family, and then what happened?”

There's another silence so long that Batzer looks about ready to prompt him to continue but then his voice breaks through the void.

“We were there with my best friend…” briefly his eyes flicker across the courtroom. “And the kids were on the carousel… they loved those painted ponies…” he stops abruptly and then a wan smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. “Hell, maybe they didn't. Maybe I just loved them. Maybe it was all me.”

He gulps, chews on his lip and looks up at the ceiling. Even from where Karen sits, she can see his eyes have turned glassy. She thinks hers have done the same and, as she feels a tear running down her cheek, Matt puts his hand over hers and presses a tissue into her palm.

It's not an apology and it's not forgiveness, but it is something. She whispers a thank you and he squeezes her fingers before he lets go and there's a part of her that almost wishes he hadn't.

“I know this is hard, Frank. I know and I'm sorry,” Foggy is saying. “Would you like some water before we carry on?”

Frank shakes his head, puts his hands out in front of him and she watches as his trigger finger taps on the wood of the witness stand. One, two, one, two, three. One, two, one, two, three.

*And then a fourth for her.*

“I heard the hammer.”

“A gun?”
“Yeah a gun. I was too late. I was too slow. I…”

“Frank, you need to tell us what happened there. You need to…”

“They shot them, okay?” he chokes out. “They shot my baby girl and my boy. My kids, my babies. They weren't even…” he cuts himself off again, grits his teeth. “I was holding her… And there was so much… and then they shot my wife and I couldn't... they shot me…”

His voice has changed again. The rage that lives in his chest is flowing into his throat and sitting just behind his teeth and it’s bleeding into every word. His cheeks are wet and suddenly there’s a flash of a camera behind her as one of The Post reporters steps out into the aisle to try and line up a shot.

*Fucking vultures. Fucking disgusting pieces of shit.* Not for the first time Karen wonders about her chosen profession, hates that its noble origins are now so twisted and cutthroat it barely resembles the institution it’s meant to be.

Batz er seems to feel the same and nods at security to remove the reporter, and Karen feels a grim sort of satisfaction as he's ushered out. Frank doesn't even seem to notice though. His whole body is shaking and he has a kind of wild look in his eyes like a caged animal that knows it's about to be skinned alive.

Her fingers tighten on her chair and she shifts in her seat, braces her legs…

And then Matt’s hand is on her arm, fingers closing just above her wrist.

“You can’t help him now,” he whispers. “Not like this. Come on, Karen, you know it.”

She resists him for a second, angry that he’s intruded on her again, that he’s used his abilities to read her thoughts, but he’s right - and while right and wrong feel very confused at the moment, the truth is she can’t do anything other than be here.

So that’s what she does.

She stays. She listens.
Frank doesn't cry - he’s too stubborn for that - but he falls apart all the same. And all she can do is watch. Last time this happened she held him until it passed and there was an angel protecting them. This time there isn't anything.

Except maybe there is.

The night at the graveyard, he threw all his pain and rage out into the world and hoped she would catch it. She did it then but she can't do it now. Matt is right. She’s done it once and that has to be enough.

Now all she can do is be here.

And it's enough.

Suddenly he swallows, closes his eyes briefly and takes a breath. And then he looks directly at her.

*It's okay*, she mouths. *I love you.*

Next to her Matt stiffens and releases her arm.

“Frank,” Foggy says. “I know this is hard and I am sorry to do this, but who killed your family?”

He doesn't answer. He just stares at her long and hard, fingers twitching.

“Frank?” Foggy again, voice kind, gentle. “It's alright.”

She knows part of this is reminding everyone in the courtroom and specifically Batzer that he’s human. Human and traumatised and no matter what, he still needs to be treated well, But she also knows Foggy. She knows him through and through and it’s not an act. It’s genuine and decent and
there’s part of him that has a deep affection for Frank and sympathy for what he’s been through.

Frank takes a deep breath, breaks eye contact with her and shakes his head. “I didn’t know it at the time but DA’s office had engineered a clash between rival gangs at the carousel because they were after The Blacksmith…” he pointedly does not look at her then, but next to her Matt stiffens again and she doesn’t know if that’s because he suspects something or because he was the one who gave this information to Frank in the first place.

“Who was he?”

Oh Foggy.

Frank frowns. “A supplier… drugs - big name.”

“You say the DA's office engineered this?”

Frank nods.

“How do you know that?”

Frank takes another deep breath. “It went bad. Fifteen people injured, my family dead. I was taken to the hospital with a bullet in my head, right here,,” he aims his index and middle finger like a gun, points to the back of his head,. “Execution style. Bang. They didn’t think I would make it. I shouldn’t have made it, not from that. But I did. When I woke up I was told that a DNR had been signed for me.”

“That’s a Do Not Resuscitate order? By whom?”

Frank snorts dryly, leans back in the chair. When he speaks his voice is clear and he enunciates perfectly. “DA Samantha Reyes.”

There’s a few gasps from the courtroom and Tower looks decidedly ill even though he must have known this was coming.
“DA Samantha Reyes? The prosecutor in your original trial?”

“That’s the one.”

“The Samantha Reyes I accused in this courtroom once before of this very thing?”

“The same.”

“Interesting,” Foggy says looking hard at Batzer and then at Tower.

Matt sighs and Karen can’t help but feel the same. Foggy’s great but he almost never passes up the opportunity to say *I told you so*.

Foggy lets his small victory hang in the air for a few seconds longer than necessary before focusing back on Frank.

“Why would Samantha Reyes have done that?” he asks.

Frank sighs. “She was the one behind the sting, thought it would bring her something, that she could catch The Blacksmith, put an end to the drug operation and the gang wars,” he huffs, shakes his head. “She didn’t clear the park, she didn’t follow protocol. Hell, she had no goddamn idea how something like that goes down when the bullets are flying. You can’t know unless you’ve been there and she didn’t. She just went in with no plan, no back up, no contingency… we … my family was just collateral damage. My babies, my wife - they meant nothing. They were an acceptable risk …”

“Objection. Mr Castle can’t speak to Ms Reyes’s state of mind,” Mr Tower says.

“I’ll allow it,” Batzer says looking over at Frank. “But Mr Castle, stick to the facts please.”

Frank huffs. “Facts… Facts are my family is dead because she did a sloppy job in something she knew nothing about.”

Frank takes a moment like he’s mulling the question over in his head and trying to figure out where it’s going.

“When Reyes realised what she’d done she knew she was going down and that she’d take the DA office with her. She could be disbarred, definitely disgraced, maybe even serve time if it came to that, so she tried to cover it up… which is why no one knew what really happened until…”

“Until?”

“Until Miss Page started looking into it… until she helped me remember.”

He looks at her again then, manages a weak smile which isn’t really a smile at all but more a look that somehow combines both exasperation and gratitude.

“Karen Page?” Foggy asks.

“Yes.”

“Can the court please note that Mr Castle has indicated Miss Karen Page who was in the employ of *Nelson & Murdock*, Mr Castle’s defence attorneys at the time of his original trial,” Foggy doesn’t smile at her but there’s something sweet in his eyes, something that reminds her her friend is still in there. “Frank, do you have any other reason to believe Ms Reyes was trying to cover anything up? Other than the DNR.”

Frank huffs, fingers tapping on the wood.

One two, one, two, three, one, two, one, two, three.

“Reyes put out the story that my family… died in a roadside shooting… That was bullshit.”

“Language, Mr Castle,” Batzer says primly, even though it’s fairly obvious she herself, could not
give a shit about cursing in the courtroom.

“Sorry,” Frank says.

“So do you think she signed the DNR and put out the story to try and hide her involvement…”

“Objection,” Tower stands. “Leading the witness.”

“Sustained,” Batzer says and gives Foggy a stern look.

“Okay,” he holds up his hands. “Did Reyes do anything else?”

“When I woke up, one of the nurses - George Bach - took me home. Reyes got him fired for his trouble. She also got a doctor to falsify the reports on the victims of the massacre.”

“How do you know that?”

Frank smiles then. It's wan but it's also genuine and there's a hint of exasperation and admiration in his expression when he looks at her.

“Karen Page, Mr Nelson. And Doctor Tepper confessed before he was murdered,” he glances at Tower and shrugs. “Word gets around.”

Foggy smiles too and nods. “Thanks Frank. No further questions.”

Batzer looks at Tower. “Your witness.”

Tower looks like he’s been put on the spot, which truth be told, he probably has. He checks some of his papers, briefly confers with his assistant and then stands up and glances between Foggy and Frank before stepping out from behind his desk.
“Mr Castle,” he begins. “We’re all sorry for your loss. It’s a terrible thing that happened and a lot of mistakes were made.”

“Mistakes?”

Tower spreads his hands. “Yes, mistakes.”

“My family is dead,” Frank says flatly. “That’s not a ‘mistake’…”

“And yet it was an unintentional accident, entirely unforeseen.”

“Anyone who has any kind of training in sting operations knows that casualties are certain if you do not clear the area of civilians.”

“Mrs Reyes did not target your family though.”

“Objection,” Foggy says. “Does counsel have a point or is he just trying to bait my client by belittling the most traumatizing experience of his life?”

“Sustained,” says Batzer. “Mr Tower is this line of questioning leading anywhere?”

Tower sighs, looks a bit lost for a moment.

Briefly Karen feels almost sorry for him. He’s been given an impossible and embarrassing task and she knows he wishes he was anywhere but here.

And then her goodwill evaporates.

“Mr Castle, the charges brought against you in the previous case were numerous. Thirty-seven separate murder charges..., felony assault, criminal possession of a deadly weapon - that was a rocket launcher if I recall correctly... Are you actually sitting here denying that you committed those crimes?”
Foggy’s off his feet before she’s had a chance to even digest the question.

“Objection. This hearing is not about my client’s guilt - that is being established separately. Mr Tower can’t use this hearing as a platform to implicate Mr Castle in the next one. He will need to gather evidence without my client… and hopefully without a sting operation and a cover up of his own.”

“Your Honour,” Tower says. “We can’t possibly test the veracity of the evidence unless we establish what it points to.”

“Alright, alright,” Batzer holds up her hands. “Mr Nelson, I’m going to sustain your objection but I am also going to ignore your last remark. Keep those kind of comments to yourself.

“Mr Tower, Mr Nelson is right. This is about the chain of evidence and the cover up within the DA’s office. Please focus on what this hearing is about.”

“Yes, your Honour,” Tower’s voice is small and he looks a bit lost for a second before he starts again. “Mr Castle, were you aware of any specific piece of evidence brought against you for your case and not for the Massacre at Central Park, that Samantha Reyes or DA’s office tampered with?”

Frank glances at her briefly and then shakes his head. “No.”

“So you can pinpoint anything? You can’t say ‘That Sauer in a police evidence locker was not mine’ or ‘I was in Cleveland on the day of the Montaigne robbery’. Nothing like that?”

“No,” Frank says, twitching.”

“Nothing?”

“No.”

“Pity,” says Tower. “Considering this hearing is about the chain of evidence…”
“Objection,” Foggy says.

“Withdrawn,” Tower shrugs. “No further questions, your Honour.”

“Redirect Mr Nelson?” Batzer asks and Foggy shakes his head.

“No, your Honour.”

“Very well, Mr Castle you may step down.”

The bailiff escorts Frank back to his seat and when he's settled he turns and looks at her and then at Matt.

His face is unreadable and while she's not ridiculous enough to imagine there's any jealousy in his gaze, there's something in it that she doesn't like… and she likes the way he's chewing on the inside of his cheek even less.

She swallows, gives him a small smile and he reciprocates wanly. She can see it in his eyes that he's done. He’s not angry or sad or, alternatively, he’s so angry and so sad that he has nothing left in him anymore. She has a horrible thought that maybe he’s fighting because that’s what she wants - because she asked him to and there’s nothing she can ask that he won’t try and deliver.

He breaks her heart. He always has.

She glances away from him to see Foggy looking at her. “The defence calls Karen Page to the stand.”

_Come on Karen, it’s time._

She stands and looks around the courtroom. The remaining _Post_ reporter is smirking at her and Joe looks like a deer in the headlights. The man in the suit has a strange gleam in his eyes that she doesn't like.
“Miss Page?” says Batzer. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” she says. “Sorry.”

She walks to the stand on legs that feel like lead. Her stomach is roiling and even though the day is mild and the courtroom is air-conditioned, she’s hot and her clothes feel constricting.

The words stick on her tongue as she stumbles her way through being sworn in, wonders how many laws - both cosmic and federal - she might break as she puts her hand on the Bible and swears to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

*I love you Frank.*

Maybe that’s the only truth she needs.

She settles into the chair, keeps her shoulders straight and her back stiff.

“Hi Karen,” Foggy says, standing up. “Last time we were here you were sitting next to Frank Castle over there.” He indicates his table and Frank. “Can you tell us the court how you came to know Frank Castle?”

She nods, gives a brief rundown of how she worked at *Nelson & Murdock*, how she was tasked with speaking to Frank and extracting information out of him.

“Why you?”

She shrugs. “I’d built up a rapport with him. It was logical.”

“Okay, Karen, where did you get the evidence and the charge sheet on Mr Castle?”

“DA Reyes passed it onto us when we were at Metro General representing Mr Castle.”
“So it came directly from the DA’s office?”

“Yes.”

“Was there anything strange about the evidence?”

She leans forward in the chair, it's strangely uncomfortable and she crosses her legs. “Not initially, but then after a discussion with Frank … Mr Castle … it became obvious that the information about how his family died in a roadside shooting was false.”

“And this was information from DA Reyes?”

“Yes. It was a police report that had been passed to the press.”

“Signed?”

She shrugs. “With a fake name and no way to trace the alleged crime scene or any one at it.”

“Okay, Karen I need you to cast your mind forward a few months. After Frank Castle's trial concluded, do you recall a meeting at the DA’s office with me and Mr Murdock?”

She notes he very specifically does not mention Frank's escape from Rikers during that time.

“Yes.”

“What transpired in that meeting?”

“Samantha Reyes confessed that she had been behind the sting which resulted in the massacre at Central Park and she was ultimately responsible for the injury of 15 people and the death of Maria Castle and her two children with Frank Castle, Lisa and Frank Junior.”
Saying their names out loud to a courtroom of people feels strange. It feels like she's only ever whispered them as if they're sacred and have the power to destroy everything and saying them now makes her feel like she’s testing fate, daring the universe to come in and take everything away from her.

Frank’s face is like stone except for the muscle jumping in his cheek and something tells her not to look at him, and not indulge whatever rage he has inside him.

“Frank Castle was among the wounded and not expected to survive which is why she signed the DNR. When he did and was subsequently arrested, she wanted the case to be moved to a state where the death penalty was an option but failing that she wanted to put Frank away forever.

“Funny, but if she'd just left it all alone and not signed the DNR and not got Mr Bach fired, no one would have been any of the wiser, but she wanted him dead. No loose ends, I guess.”

“Objection,” says Tower. “Speculation.”

“Sustained,” says Batzer but it's obvious from her expression that she doesn't think it matters one way or another.

Foggy gives her a small smile and then proceeds to ask her a few more questions, establishes timelines, makes a point about the fact that The Blacksmith was responsible for Reyes’ death before he thanks her and returns to his seat.

There's a moment of silence punctuated only by some coughing and shuffling in the courtroom and then she Tower stands and gives her a fake smile.

“Miss Page, are you a lawyer?”

“No.”

“And yet during your time at Nelson & Murdock, you were acting as counsel to Mr Castle?”
“Objection,” Foggy says without looking up. “Miss Page was a paralegal. The work she did on the Castle case fell within that mandate.”

“Let me rephrase,” Tower smooths his jacket. “You work at a law firm - a small one with two actual lawyers who are men.”

“Objection.”

“I'll allow it,” Batzer says, “But there better be a point here Mr Tower.”

Tower nods. “And these two bosses of yours send you to talk to a man with a rap sheet as long as Frank Castle's. Seems a little unwise, don't you think?”

Karen shakes her head. “Frank Castle would never hurt me.”

_Only deep in my heart where no one can see it._

She chances a looks at Frank then. He's chewing on his cheek, grinding his teeth.

“I see…” Tower shifts from side to side. “Miss Page, you see I just find that a little hard to believe. You had had an encounter with Mr Castle before though?”

Her voice sounds small but strangely firm when she answers.

“Yes.”

“The first time you saw him was at Metro General, wasn't it?”

She nods.

“When he chased you with a shotgun.”
Again that small but firm voice. “Yes.”

“So you don't consider trying to murder you…”

“Objection,” Foggy stands up. “There is no evidence, tampered with or not, that suggests my client was trying to murder Miss Page … And again Mr Tower is trying to use this hearing as a platform to gather evidence for the next one.”

Batzer frowns. “I'm going to allow it but Mr Tower please move this along and stick to the facts.”

Tower smiles. “Facts. Yes, let's go back to some earlier facts. Miss Page, the only female employee at Nelson & Murdock is sent in to work with one of the most notorious criminals in the history of New York… a man who chased after her with a shotgun.”

“Yes,” Karen says firmly. “He spoke to me. He felt more comfortable working like that.”

“You don't find that suspicious?”

“In what way?”

“The pretty paralegal is the only one the misunderstood murderer with a heart of gold will talk to … sounds like something from a movie…”


“I'm just pointing out that this is a very odd situation. An attractive woman like Miss Page and the big, bad Punisher …”

“I’m sorry,” There’s an affected hook in Foggy's brow. “I thought I was in court, not on an episode of The Bachelor. Would Mr Tower like to hold a rose ceremony? Is the court willing to pay for the Moët?”
The insane desire to laugh bubbles up in the back of Karen's throat and she forces it away. Batzer however is less controlled and smile tugs at her lips before she forces his face back into a frown.

“Miss Page has an intimate relationship with Mr Castle and has for a while now,” Tower implores. “You're sleeping with him right? That's not just something the newspapers are putting out there to sell.”

“Objection again, your Honour.” Foggy hasn't even bothered to sit down. “As Mr Tower is having trouble remembering, this hearing is specifically covering the time from Mr Castle’s initial arrest up until his final court appearance last year. Mr Castle was in custody throughout that time and Miss Page only saw him under police supervision. Any relationship they may or may not have had past that point is irrelevant to the matter at hand… which, if I can remind the court and Mr Tower, is whether the evidence stands up to scrutiny knowing what we do about the DA's conduct. Furthermore unless Mr Tower actually thinks that there would have been the opportunity for intimate relations between my client and Miss Page to occur while he was in a maximum security prison, then this line of questioning is not only inappropriate but could be considered harassment. Even then it's borderline for this case as Miss Page is not on trial and we are not covering the time from after Mr Castle’s initial arrest.”

“Your Honour, I’m just trying to make sure the court is aware of the facts. Miss Page has a vested interest in seeing Mr Castle walk free and is an unreliable witness at best.”

“Objection, Mr Tower can't know what Miss Page's 'vested interests' are nor declare her unreliable without proving it first…”

Bater bangs her gavel and when everyone quietens down, she sighs and purses her lips “Alright, alright. Mr Tower, I will take Miss Page's position into account but Mr Nelson is right. This is purely about the evidence from the initial trial, so unless you can prove some kind of complicity prior to Mr Castle's trial I'm going to sustain the objection.”

Tower looks deflated for a second but then he takes a breath. “Just so we all know what exactly that position is that needs to be taken into account can Miss Page please confirm to the court that she currently has an intimate relationship with Mr Castle.”

She was expecting it but it's still like a bucket of cold water being thrown over her head. She glances at Frank. His hands are on the desk in front of him but he's not drumming. His knuckles are white and his face is hard as the skull he has emblazoned on his chest piece.
“Yes.” She says and Frank's shoulders hunch and she knows his breath is coming out hard and fast.

She looks away. She can't worry about him now.

“You have had sexual relations with him? You have had knowledge of his whereabouts and haven’t felt the need to report that to any authorities.”

“Yes and yes.”

There are one or two gasps from the court and Matt, despite his earlier gentleness, looks decidedly ill.

“And your sexual relationship is ongoing?”

Oh for fuck’s sake.

She closes her eyes briefly, shakes her head before answering.

“Does it matter?” she asks.

“Does what matter?”

“Mr Tower, I love Frank Castle. That doesn’t change, no matter how many times we slept together or how salacious this is made out to be.”

“Miss Page…”

She ignores him, looks directly at Frank.

“I love him,” she says again. “That’s all there is to it.”
There’s another silence. She thinks maybe no one in the entire room breathes, let alone moves, but then it could just be her. And then Matt gets up and heads out of the courtroom, doors clicking softly behind him and breaking the spell.

It doesn’t matter. She can’t let it.

“Okay,” Tower says and she forces herself to focus on him again. “Now that we have established that there is far more of a connection here than just a paralegal doing her job…”

“Now,” says Karen.

“Excuse me?”

“Now there is a connection. There wasn’t before.”

Not entirely a lie, but not entirely the truth either.

“Alright, there’s a connection now,” Tower says. “At the meeting between Nelson & Murdock and the DA’s office that resulted in the tragic death of Samantha Reyes, did Mrs Reyes tell you anything that would lead you to believe there are specific pieces of evidence that have been faked or tampered with?”

“Other than the story about how Maria Castle and her children died, the DNR she had no right to sign, and the doctor who had to fake his reports? Other than those... no.”

“What about the evidence you received from the DA when you took the case?”

“No.”

“So in your opinion, other than the three incidents you mention above, there was nothing to suggest conspiracy or tampering or breaking the chain of evidence.”

“Mrs Reyes herself more than suggested conspiracy when she admitted to her role in the Castle
family's death.”

“Yes, Miss Page but I'm talking about the evidence that was used to bring Mr Castle to trial, not the evidence from the massacre.”

She looks at him for a few seconds, pushes a stray strand of hair away from her face.

“No,” she says.

“No? Nothing else that you noticed when going through Mr Castle’s files?”

“No, nothing that I noticed,” she pauses, smiles. “But, as you've taken great pains to point out Mr Tower, I'm not a lawyer.”

Tower visibly pales, swallows hard and when she glances at Foggy, he's smirking and nodding. Frank, on the other hand, looks like he's ready to beat someone to death and a horrible image of Jebediah Montgomery on the floor of Sing Sing's rec room comes to mind as she watches him twitch.

“No further questions, your Honour.”

Tower takes a seat and Batzer nods at Karen that she may step down.

“Okay,” says Batzer. “I think we'll take an hour recess for lunch and then we'll continue at 1pm.”

She bangs her gavel and is gone before the bailiff is even on his feet.

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Karen spends lunch in the courthouse canteen alone. It's not really out of necessity but Foggy does have work to do and she'd rather not see Matt or even Joe right now. It's not that they didn't know about the exact nature of her relationship with Frank. After all she confessed it to Matt herself and even though she suspects he's spent a lot of time pretending it didn't happen, he can’t truly be
shocked to hear it again. And yet… and yet apparently she underestimated how badly he was taking this. Apparently she underestimated how hard it would be for him to hear.

And Joe, well Joe is a lot of things but he's not stupid and since they're all adults he would have assumed that her and Frank just do all the things adults do. But still, announcing it to the court like that, making it feel like it's something bad and shameful and that she should be suitably mortified by not just allowing Frank Castle access to her body but actively wanting it too, has her stomach feeling tight and a heavy feeling sitting between her shoulder blades.

It was their night and that's all. It was just for them and it was wonderful and special and all the things she imagined it would be. And now it feels like it's a spectacle for the public to comment on and pull apart, something sleazy and dirty - and she refuses to let that happen.

She picks at a sad looking salad, tries hard to concentrate on the rest of the testimony. The truth is, all things considered, it did go well. She didn't break, she stayed calm and she doesn't think Tower is any closer to keeping his evidence in the game than he was before the hearing. And that's good. It's the best she could hope for and if she had to sacrifice a little of her dignity to get that, she'll consider it a worthy trade.

On impulse she pulls out her phone and sends a text to Elektra.

Seems to be going okay, so far. Matt's up next though. Don’t know how that will turn out

Her phone buzzes almost instantly.

Trust him. He knows what the right thing is.

Elektra always did have a lot of faith in the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen.

She sighs. Maybe that's true. Doing what's right has always been Matt's thing, but right and wrong seem very upside down at the moment and she thinks Matt might be having something of a greater good crisis on top of everything else.

He hurts people. She just hopes this isn't one of those times.
It isn't. Not really.

Matt’s testimony goes well. It's better than hers and he has the years of law study behind him so Foggy plays that well, citing precedents and statutes that all go against Reyes’ actions and involvement in the trial. He even manages to drive home how unorthodox it was for Reyes to be acting in this capacity and how a sting of this kind is not something to be left to chance by being headed by someone with limited experience operating outside their sphere of influence.

The truth is he sounds like Frank.

Tower objects, citing that Matt is not law enforcement and even though it's sustained Karen can’t help but feel the point is well taken. She also finds it amusing that Matt is lecturing people on getting involved in things outside their sphere of influence and taking matters into their own hands.

She’s glad she can still find a kind of dark humour in the situation.

Foggy doesn't need to treat Matt as a hostile witness as he threatened to and he even manages to introduce Matt's Catholic roots and the pro bono work he's doing at the moment, which only bolsters his credibility.

Matt corroborates her statement regarding Reyes’ confession to her involvement and adds some details regarding the evidence and the process it needs to follow and where Reyes overstepped.

All in all, he's very good. Unflappable almost. He speaks clearly and kindly and he comes across as calm and dependable. And yet, she doesn't miss the tremble in his voice nor the way he avoids saying her name whenever he can. She doesn't miss how he has to force Frank’s name out between his teeth and that his knuckles are white around his cane.

Tower's questioning goes much the same. No, Miss Page’s work was good and she wasn't performing outside of her mandate. No, there's no way they had an inappropriate relationship during that time and even if they did, it does nothing to exempt Reyes or the DA from their involvement. No, he can't pinpoint one exact piece of evidence, no he can't say for certain what Reyes did. She didn't confess that, but what she did was enough to cast doubt.
Tower lodges an objection at that.

“Mr Murdock is not delivering the closing statement,” he says. “Move to strike.”

It's sustained.

And then it's almost over. Almost.

“One final question Mr Murdock,” Tower says as he goes to stand near his desk. “How do you feel about Mr Castle?”

“Objection. Relevance,” Foggy says. “Or are we breaking out the Champagne again?”

“I'll allow it,” says Batzer. “And really, Mr Nelson…”

“Your Honour…”

“It's okay Foggy. It’s okay,” Matt's voice is still smooth and calm and he takes a long moment before he speaks. “The truth is I think Frank Castle is a very damaged individual. I think he has suffered in a way few of us have. I don't like him. I don't like what he does and I don't like how he views the world. But ultimately how I feel about him is irrelevant…”

Karen knows he can't see her but his gaze feels heavy and hard anyway.

“... the justice system is meant to serve us all and that includes the people we don't think deserve it. It fails when we pick and choose. It failed Frank Castle and I don't think he'd be who and what he is if it hadn't.”

“Thank you, Mr Murdock,” Batzer says. “You may step down.”

He nods grimly and makes his way back to his seat next to Karen, cane clicking on the floor as he goes.
When he sits she dares to put her hand on his, runs a thumb across his fingers.

“Oh, Matt,” she says.

For a second he's absolutely still and then he pulls his hand away.

“Don't,” he says. “Just don't.”

It doesn't hurt as much this time. In fact it almost doesn't hurt at all. What she feels is more like resignation and a tacit acceptance that she was right the night Frank dragged himself across town to die in her arms: they can't go back to what they were because they never were the things they wanted to go back to.

She bows her head, “Okay,” she says. “Okay I won't.”

He shifts uncomfortably in his seat and when Batzer announces that court is adjourned for the day, he's gone before she can say another word.

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The hearing continues on Thursday and Friday. Tower and Foggy question the police in charge of investigating the massacre at Central Park and then from the officers assigned to the Castle case afterwards. Foggy even manages to get George Bach in to make a statement about his dismissal and corroborate on the DNR. Tower objects to a new witness being added but Batzer overrules him. Matt doesn't show up at all but Frank himself seems increasingly agitated whenever he sees her, to the point that she almost decides against attending the Friday afternoon session and finds herself pining for Sunday when she can see him and talk to him and remind him of his promises to her.

She talks to Foggy on Friday evening over burgers at some cheap and cheerful place on the wrong side of town, and he agrees that even though he thinks they have a good chance of getting the evidence thrown out and having Batzer declare it a mistrial, Frank does seem to be acting strangely.

“Not like he was before though,” he says. “This is different. He's compliant and helpful but he acts like it doesn't matter or mean anything.
“Still, he's on board. He's not being obstructive or worse, destructive. Maybe he's just learned the art of quiet contemplation.”

“Yeah maybe,” she says but she knows it's not true. Mainly because Frank already knows how to do that, mainly because finding him brooding with only his thoughts for company isn't strange or out of character.

She goes home and falls into bed without looking at her cork board and only Pickle’s gentle purrs for company.

~~~

On Saturday morning she sits in a booth in the coffee shop across from Foggy’s apartment by herself, sipping a latte and picking at one of their poppy seed muffins which she doesn’t really feel like but ordered anyway. It’s only 10am and she’s been out running errands since eight, buying cat food she can smuggle past Irene and getting some grocery shopping done to at least convince herself that she's living some kind of adult life and that her garbage isn’t full of take-out containers and ready meals.

It’s warm outside, summer truly in full swing and the streets are busy with people looking to catch some of that hard-earned sunshine. She watches a couple walk past with two dogs on leashes; they’re laughing and every now and then the man presses his lips to the woman’s temple. There’s a part of her that wonders if she’d ever have anything like that again; part of her that wonders if there’s a future for her with the man she loves and dogs and walks in a nice part of town on a Saturday morning.

She doesn’t think there is, but she’s not willing to give up on the dream just yet.

She sips her coffee, tries to concentrate on a Scandinavian murder mystery novel she borrowed from Claire. It’s not that she particularly wanted to read it - in fact she’s finding it hard to actually get into it and that has nothing to do with the quality of the book - it’s just that she needed something else other than the newspapers to read, something that provided a little escapism. Still, she finds she checks her phone between nearly every paragraph hoping there is something from Foggy or Elektra. Or even Matt, although she’s pretty sure that’s not going to happen and that whatever progress they had made since that day he brought her sunflowers and she gave him a broken heart in return, has been lost. That’s his prerogative though. She can’t do anything about it.

Another couple walk past the window and as she watches them cross the road. She sees a flash of a blue Aston Martin, pulling out from a side street but she pays it little attention and tries to focus on
her book, refusing to accept that she’s just forcing this because she doesn’t want to go back to her apartment and be alone.

It’s not that she’s not used it. Karen Page and lonely go hand in hand - they’re not even on one of her lists together, it’s more like they’re the paper and the ink she uses to write them - but it’s hard when she’s seen the other side. It’s hard when she’s had someone there 24 hours a day, and even though there were times she wished for her solitude, Frank always seemed to be able to understand that and back off when she wanted him to. And now, it just feels like she’s bearing the full brunt of becoming complacent in his presence.

_You just miss him_, she tells herself. _You miss him and that’s okay. It’s normal._

Except nothing about this feels normal. Nothing about this feels good.

She taps her teaspoon distractedly against the lip of her cup, stares into the distance. She wonders what Claire’s shifts are looking like and if she has time for dinner or if she’s going out on another date with this mystery man she’s been keeping under wraps for so long now. She thinks she might take a trip down to her floor when she gets back home and find out.

The door to the coffee shop opens with a cheerful sounding chime and a gust of hot air touches the back of her neck and somehow it feels like it drives home the fact that she’s just procrastinating and she should head back to do something productive because all she’s done since she arrived here was read the same paragraph over and over again.

Nothing to be done for it. She doesn’t think she’s in the right headspace to do anything other than worry.

She drains the last of her coffee, pushes the muffin aside and is about to stand when she suddenly becomes aware of someone looming over her.

“Miss Page? Karen Page?”

A man’s voice. Smooth. Deep. Friendly even, but there’s something almost smug about it which he’s failing to hide.

She looks up, studies the man in front of her. His picture didn’t do him justice, and neither did all
those flashes of him she’s seen since Frank ended up in hospital and the world fell apart. He’s tall and his hair is perfectly styled, his face clean shaven except for a neatly trimmed goatee. His eyes gleam and his mouth is sensual and cruel at the same time. Even though it’s Saturday and easily 85 degrees outside and she has it on very good weatherman authority that the mercury is going to go up to 95, he's wearing a carefully tailored blue suit and a crisp white shirt that she’s sure is starched. He’s not even breaking a sweat.

“Miss Page, if you have a moment, I need to talk to you about a mutual interest. I’m not a reporter. My name is…”


He looks slightly surprised, eyebrows rising and then knitting together.

“Yes…” For a second he sounds like she’s caught him off guard but he recovers quickly. “May I sit down?”

She leans back in her booth, watches him to see if he’ll show any sign of worry and, when he doesn’t, she indicates the chair opposite and calls for a fresh round of coffee.
Show me your doubts and I'll make you believe

Chapter Notes

Not much to say about this, other than "hello Billy".

Thank you for all the wonderful feedback and comments up to now. I appreciate each and every one of them and I am so glad to be sharing this story with you all.

Title of this chapter is from "Show me" by Matthew Mayfield - so many of his songs are perfect Kastle songs, I'd really encourage people to give him a listen.

“So were you ever going to tell me? Or were you just going wait until you were sure? Disappear and maybe send me a postcard when the heat died down?”

The tears feel hot under her eyelids and she bites her lip hard to distract herself from them.

She doesn't know why it's important that she doesn't cry, just that she really doesn't want to. Frank might not judge her; he might think strength isn't measured in tears or lack thereof but right now that doesn't matter at all.

He’s quiet for a few seconds, eyes roaming her face as he chews on his bottom lip, and then he looks at the empty plastic chair across from him.

“Sit, please.”

She doesn't want to - something inside her rebels at doing anything he asks no matter how small it might be - but at the same time, she can't stand in Sing Sing's rec room making a scene for an hour. That's pretty much guaranteed to have her struck off the guest register, for as long as she might need that privilege.

She sighs and sits down at his table, crosses her legs and angles herself slightly away from him.

He takes a deep breath. His face is hard and mean, the only outward sign of stress is a muscle fluttering in his jaw.
It's raining outside - the promise of yesterday's summer cut short the second she left the coffee shop and the rain crashed down into Hell's Kitchen like a deluge.

“You've been talking to Billy Russo.”

He says it with no shame. It's a statement. If she didn't know him better she would swear he has no real opinion on it. That in itself makes her feel even worse.

But feelings aside, yes, she's been talking to Billy. Or more correctly he's been doing the talking and she wonders if that's some trait that these brooding military vets share - they try to be the strong, silent type, hiding their man pain behind an overly tough exterior, but when it really comes down to it, she can't get them to shut up.

She guesses that's not the end of the world. Nothing worse than trying to draw conversation out of someone with nothing to say. At least Frank has always been forthcoming in that respect. He'd think it rude not to be.

“So have you,” she answers and her voice falters at that. This feels like a betrayal - in many ways it is.

He nods slowly, that muscle still jumping, trigger finger tapping out its beat on the Formica table in front of him.

They sit in silence for a long while and then he ducks his head to look at her, tries to catch her eye but she doesn't let him and she wonders if this is the first time she hasn’t had the courage to stare him down or if she's allowed this moment where she doesn't know how to look at him.

“What did he tell you?”

She bites her lip, glances at the table where Jeb sat before, now occupied by a skinny man, arms covered in gang tattoos.

“Why don't you tell me what he told you first,” she says evenly, but he shakes his head.
“You're the one who's angry,” he says. “So tell me why.”

It's one of those moments when she's confronted by the truth of who he is. He murders people, he punishes and tortures them and he has no mercy in him when it comes to that. Jeb is dead because he didn't like the way he spoke to her and countless others are gone for far lesser crimes. And yet at the same time, he's gentle, attentive, sweet even. He wants to understand. He wants to see if he can soothe her rage.

He's the best and the worst of everything. And it doesn't change how she feels about him at all.

“You know why,” she says. “You know.”

“Yeah, but I'm not stupid enough to just assume I know how he's spun this and that I know which part you're angry about.”

“Really?” She doesn't bother to hide the incredulity from her voice. “That's the hill you're gonna die on? You're sticking with that?”

He sighs, looks to the side, stares at Jeb's seat for a beat and then shakes his head. “Karen, since I've known you, you have done every goddamn thing you could to make sure I don't go to jail. You didn't press charges against me for chasing after you with a shotgun, you've defended me even when you knew the shit I did. You've lied to the police and to your friends more times than I can count, you've let me crash at your place no matter how dangerous that was... And you don't know what that means to me. You don't know how something like that makes me feel...”

“Frank...”

“I know you've got my back,” he says between gritted teeth “I know you do. It's like you can't do anything else and I don't know if it's because you're the most stubborn person I've ever met or if it's because you love me despite what I am. I don't know why you stay but you do...” he trails off for a second. “... I didn't think something like that was on the cards for me again. Ever. And I didn't think it could be like this. Maria knew it about me - knew who and what I was, but you... you don't only know it, you've seen it, the worst of it.”

“That doesn't change anything.”
He shifts slightly so he's hiding their hands from the guards and runs his finger over her knuckles, ducks his head again so he can look up at her.

“I know,” he says, eyes dark and laser focused. “I know. And sometimes I don't know what to do with that. And sometimes I don't know what you'll do in return.”

He lets that linger, doesn't press, doesn't say anything more and eventually she nods.

“So do you understand why I might be a little confused about why you're upset?”

She nods. She does get it but there's a part of her that feels a little like she did when she realised he was using her for bait that night at the diner.

“You could have at least told me.”

“Yeah…” there's a small smile playing on his lips. “Yeah, I got that part.”

“Okay,” she says, pressing her mouth against her fist. “Okay, I'll tell you what he said and then you tell me everything.”

“Yes,” he says. “I will. Everything.”

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Billy Russo is more impressive up close and in person than he was in the photos in Sebastian's files or in the glimpses she's had of him in the courtroom up until now.

His attire is immaculate, fitted in a way that screams custom-tailoring. His shirt is crisp and white and even though he's foregone a tie (it is Saturday, after all, Karen thinks sarcastically), he looks sharper than the most dapper stuffed suit on Wall Street.

He's handsome too, possibly more than he needs to be, bordering almost on pretty. His hair is smooth and dark, shining where it curls against his collar, and his eyes are bright like polished daggers and
she imagines they can pierce just as well when he wants them to.

But really, it's his smile that sets her on edge. It's easy and friendly, yet somehow sharper than his suit; hint of fangs as his teeth scrape over his bottom lip. It's not that it's not nice - it is - but it's the type of smile that hides a lot of trouble - a kind of boyish slyness that loses the boyishness and just keeps the slyness the longer she looks at it.

“You're not an easy woman to find, Miss Page.”

“Strange,” she says, stirring her coffee. “I've been in every hearing and unless you don't drive that blue Aston Martin out there,” she jerks her head to the window. “... we were both at the prison last week.”

If she caught him off guard, he doesn't show it. His mouth quirks on the side and he holds up his hands in mock surrender. “Okay, you got me. I should know better.”

“Better than what?”

He shakes his head in a way that should be self-deprecating but somehow isn’t. She suspects self-deprecation is not something Billy Russo knows a lot about.

“Better than to try and fool the woman who got old Frankie all messed up, turned that brain of his into even more of a scrambled mess than it already is…”

“I don't--”

“Didn't think that would ever happen… again,” he pauses dramatically, “I still can't believe it.”

She doesn't like the way he says that. It’s a backhanded compliment, a small but precise jibe that tells her it's not that he's surprised by this development in Frank’s life but that he genuinely does not believe it and that someone is being fooled here - someone who is not him.

She eyes him coolly and he meets her gaze over the rim of his coffee cup.
He grins. “Frankie always did know how to surprise me though. Part of his charm or something.”

When he doesn't offer anything further, she decides to speak.

“You've known him a long time,” she says and he nods. “You knew Maria, the kids. You were there at the Park when it happened.”

It's not a question but he answers it anyway.

“Yes. Like a second family...no, that’s not right,” he frowns, seems to choose his next words carefully. “Like a family. Nothing secondary about it.”

There's a moment when he seems to falter, eyes no longer like daggers and lips tight and pensive. It's gone before it's even really there though.

“Frank’s my best friend. He's a brother to me, not just in arms. Not just in the same way that you call your marine buddies ‘brothers’... a real brother…” Another moment of hesitation. “He never mention me?”

She shakes her head and he narrows his eyes and nods like this amuses him in some way.

“Guess there ain't no crossover for Frank Castle and The Punisher. Explains a lot.”

She raises her eyebrows at that but doesn't say anything. Billy Russo apparently doesn't know Frank as well as he thinks.

She files it away on a list of Things Billy Russo Doesn't Understand About Frank Castle. She'll work on the inelegance of the name later but it suddenly seems an important thing to keep a tally of.

“Frank is… complicated…”
He barks out a laugh. “Don’t know if that’s the word I’d use.”

*And you’re wrong not to,* she thinks but doesn’t say anything and waits for him to come out and say what’s on his mind and why he’s tracked her down here on one of the few free days she has.

But Billy is unhurried. Relaxed even. He drinks his coffee, looks around the shop, takes in everything from the hipster baristas to the soccer moms in the far corner to the overwhelmed father who seems to have been charged with looking after two toddlers for the day.

Karen can’t help but think this is probably what Billy is like in most of his conversations, regardless of whether he’s in a business meeting or on a date… or cornering the lover of his best friend in a trendy coffee shop on the right side of town.

“Have to say I was surprised not to get a summons for the defence two years ago when Frank first went on trial.”

She shrugs. “Like I said, Frank never mentioned you…”

“And yet Ray Schoonover…” he pauses so briefly that she’s unsure if it’s intentional. “…took the stand.”

She nods. “He did.”

He’s quiet again, and Ray’s name fills the space between them. It's heavy and stifling and she tries to deflect by sipping her coffee and scalding her tongue for her trouble. She doesn't break eye contact although it's difficult when faced with eyes as hard as his, and the way his incisors are two hard points making dents in his bottom lip.

And then, just as suddenly, he grins again and leans back in his chair, cocks his head.

“Was he a good witness for Frank? They butted heads often enough…”

“I’m sure you read about his testimony in the papers.”
His smile falters a bit and his eyes flash. “Can read about a lot of things in the papers. Can read about even more if you know where to look.”

It's not hard to hear the weight behind the statement, although she has no idea how exactly to classify it. The obvious answer is he's talking about the latest slew of headlines from the tabloids which still haven't run out ways to make salacious puns on words like “castle” and “punish”; which are still trying to paint her as something between a sad lonely woman who was taken in by a criminal and some Lady Macbeth seductress who sent an unhinged man into destruction using only her feminine wiles - although of course the papers are not using phrasing that is nearly as polite.

But there's a part of her that knows Billy Russo isn't that obvious. He's baiting her and trying to unsettle her at the same time and she can't deny he's doing a good job of both.

“You know where to look?”

“For some things… like you… girl from nowhere come to see the big city lights... secretary turned paralegal and now star reporter at the New York Bulletin … and Frank’s—” he stops. “Well… Frank's biggest defender.”

She stays quiet. Her game face might not be as bad as Ellison claims but at the same time, she's not sure she's willing to test it out on Billy. She’s fairly certain he'd see through it.

But then he smiles again and it's warm and genuine and she finds its easy to imagine him sitting in the Frank's dining room, teasing the kids and semi-flirting with Maria, complaining that her pot roast it going to put him in the gym for hours but still eating all of it.

She wonders if dinner parties and pot roasts will ever be part of her life, with or without Frank. It's not something she wants to dwell on right now.

“You got the true story though. Found out what actually happened that day.”

He tries to sound amiable but she has the distinct impression they’re moving closer to the actual reason he’s here, that they’re getting into darker, more difficult territory and she feels a small thrill running down her spine.
“A family massacred because a DA bit off more than she could chew? Yes.”

He shakes his head. “Terrible thing,” he says. “One minute they're fine and life is normal and the next…It was such a shock when I heard…”

“You were lucky,” she says and he frowns, perfectly sculpted eyebrows knitting together.

“Lucky?”

“That you left early that day,” she says.

His frown stays where it is but the confusion fades.

“I don't know about lucky,” he says. “If I'd been there maybe I could have done something…”

“Maybe, but it was so unexpected, even Frank couldn't have done anything. Chances are, you'd be where he is… or worse.”

He doesn't seem to consider that particularly deeply, shaking it off as if it's neither relevant or possible.

“Frank has always been in his own hell. This just gave him another reason to stay there.”

No, she thinks, it's not all hell. Not all of it. There's been Schoonover and the prison, bullets and blood raining around them, the warehouse and the fires. But there's been other things too. There's been the night at the cabin and the fireworks on the roof. There's been the graveyard and what came after, the day at the river and the one night she got to after to take him to bed and be taken right back.

She thinks there's been a lot of goodness and somewhere she hopes it's enough to outweigh the bad.

And if she's had goodness - if she's had his sweetness - even if it's always been tempered with his rage, then Maria must have had so much more of it. There was more heaven than hell. There must have been joy. There had to be. She won't accept anything less.
He must see her concern because he flashes another charming if somewhat wry smile.

“Maria, those kids, they were his life… he would have done anything for them… but there was another side to him. I saw it when we were in Kandahar… a darkness he needed for himself, separate from them…

“Didn't mean he loved them any less, but did mean there was a part of him he never showed them…”

She sips her coffee again, wonders where he's going with this.

“He needed that. He needed whatever it was they gave him as much as he needed the war. And Maria… Maria was the kindest soul. Truly. Not a mean bone in her body. And Frankie… he was done, you know? Head over heels. Even ten years later when we're sitting in some shithole barracks and it feels like we haven't seen civilisation in years and there he is shouting about how much he loves his wife, telling me she's the best thing that ever happened to him… and she was… She really was.

“There was her or there was nothing…” he gives her a brief once over. “No second best, no in between.”

Despite the humid day there's an oily coldness seeping under her skin, sitting between her shoulder blades and rising up the back of her neck. He's trying to unsettle her - she's knows that much, but she has no idea what his angle is. This isn't like Matt and his goddamn sunflowers telling her she's always going to be Frank’s second best. This doesn't and can't have that level of personal investment. This is something else entirely. It's an attempt to see if he can push her buttons, disorient her… but she can't figure out why.

So she decides to ask him.

“Mr Russo, I'm sure you didn't come here just to tell me things I already know or shoot the breeze about Frank, so is there something you need?”

His eyes are hard for a few seconds and then he grins again, big and wide.
“You aren't what I expected at all,” he says.

She doesn't give him the pleasure of asking what he expected.

“Even so…”

He sighs. Mouthful of coffee like he's fortifying himself and a quick glance around the shop to be sure they can't be overheard.

“Okay…” he says. “Karen, you and I have a mutual interest…”

“Go on.”

“But, as you know, that mutual interest is stubborn as shit…”

So, maybe Billy isn't completely wrong about Frank on that count. She inclines her head, conceding the point.

“...sometimes he needs a little push to get him moving,” he continues.

“Moving where?”

He pauses, eyes hardening and mouth set in a firm line. He looks around the coffee shop once more and then leans across the table towards her and she fights the urge to do the same.

Voice low, not quite a whisper - whispers carry after all.

“I can get him out, Karen.”

He says it flatly, no inflection, no wavering. He says it like it's a foregone conclusion and whatever plan he has is watertight. And it takes every last ounce of her self control not to balk at his words, not
to show her surprise, not to grab him by that goddamn crisp white collar and shake him until his perfect teeth rattle in his equally perfect head.

And she doesn't know why she doesn't want to let him see he's gotten to her, why she's trying to maintain this veneer of calm. After all, it's a crazy, irrational and incredibly stupid thing for him to say, let alone promise and any reaction of shock would be more than justified- expected even - but there's something about Billy Russo that tells her to keep her cards close to her chest.

She takes a breath, frowns like she's contemplating the idea but doesn't fully understand it.

“What do you mean ‘out’?”

Flash of teeth, bladed smile back on his face, and his eyes twinkle like he's got the punchline to a joke he's just dying to deliver.

“Out of Sing Sing, out of New York, out of the US of A. By Tuesday he could be drinking Daiquiris in Havana or Margaritas on a beach in Mexico…” he stops, gives her a once over that feels both contrived and disdainful. “You too, if you think that's something you want.”

He leans back, shrugs like it doesn't matter to him one way or another.

_Calm. Stay calm, Karen. Don't let him see that this is getting to you. Don't let him see shock or fear._

She takes a moment, lets the silence between them stretch and then she purses her lips indulgently, like she's interacting with a small child who wants to show her a shiny toy. “And how would you do that?”

“I have contacts,” he says dismissively, “I know the people other people want to know. It comes with the territory.”

“Which territory? Marine or security consultant?”

“Both. Neither. Trust me, if this gets the go-ahead, it will happen. And it'll happen fast. We're talking same day.”
She shifts in her chair, crosses her legs, oily feeling receding ever so slightly as she sees the hint of an advantage.

“The go-ahead? That's why you're here.” she says. “I'm supposed to talk him into it.”

“Karen, the case isn't going well…”

“Isn't it?”

It's his turn to look indulgent. “I know you think that lawyer friend of yours is some kind of rockstar and he's done well enough from what I have seen, but we both know how this is going to go… there's no way Frank is walking out of that prison a free man. He's going to rot in there for the rest of his life and I don't want to see that. I don't think you do either.”

This is true. She doesn't want him there forever, but she also doesn't want him looking over his shoulder forever either. She realises with a start that in some ways she's been looking at this entire thing as an opportunity - a way for him to have a life, a way they can be together and not have to worry.

She wonders just how insanely naive she's been.

“Look, Karen, I'm so close to convincing him. On Wednesday evening, he was pretty much in. I thought for sure that things would be moving by Thursday but he called it off… said he needed to think on it.”

She frowns. Wednesday was the day she gave her testimony. Wednesday was the day everything - barring a few nasty moments like Matt’s storming off and Tower putting her sex life on display for the world - seemed to be going well.

“... let me tell you, Frank's never thought on anything in his life…”

Another checkpoint for the list of Things Billy Russo Doesn't Know About Frank Castle.
“Why now?” she asks. “Why Wednesday? He's been in prison for a while. He's been running the streets even longer…”

“I thought he was dead then,” Billy says. “That was the story. Apparently only a select few got to know it wasn't true.”

He almost sounds hurt at this, almost betrayed that he wasn't taken into Frank's confidence the same way she was.

“But now?” she asks. “It's been weeks. Months if you count when he was in the hospital… And I know you were trying to see him when he was in there - I saw you.”

Billy nods, takes a sip of his coffee. He drinks it black, like Frank.

“I couldn't get to see him at the hospital. That detective Mahoney is full of shit.”

Yes, yes he is. And she's never been so grateful for it in her life.

“Still, he's been in Sing Sing for more than a month - I know you've been to see him a few times … so why is this only coming up now?”

“I told you, the case isn't going well.”

The first time he said it, she wasn't sure, but now she is. He's lying. He knows he’s lying. He knows the case is going better than it should be. He might sound smooth and practiced and he might sound like he believes what he's saying but it's still a lie.

“So why not wait? He's not going anywhere. If he gets out there's no risk; if he loses the case, he won't be any more in jail than he already is.”

There's something in the way his eyes flicker that tells her she's touched on something he didn't expect her to. He bites on his lip hard, shuffles in his seat and wraps his hands around his coffee cup like he's trying to warm them.
“This isn't the kind of offer that comes around every day. He wants to take it - I know he does. I've seen him, spoken to him, but he's wavering, and I can only imagine it's because of you…”

He says the last bit like he isn't quite sure what it means or how to put it to her. She also notes that he hasn't actually answered her question, so she stays quiet and waits for him to continue.

“I don't want to hang around to see how bad this can go, and it doesn't have to if we move quickly. But you need to give him that final push… Tell him it's what you want for him. Or hell, tell him it's what you want for you. Like I said, you can go too if that's what you want to do. Just give him permission or freedom or whatever it is he seems to think he owes you.”

“He doesn't owe me anything.”

Her voice is surprisingly brittle and forceful but he still finds a way to ignore her.

“He's almost there. And he'll do it eventually - he'll get there - but this offer is here and now and we don't want to miss it.” He stops, seemingly realising how he almost sounds flustered, and takes a breath, swallows. “Come on, Karen. It'll work. It'll be good. By Tuesday this could all be over.”

There's a second that she actually considers it. She thinks of her and Frank lying on a beach in Havana, drinking cocktails and watching the ocean, his hand on hers. They go back to their home, make love with the windows open to the sound of the waves. They have a dog and somehow Pickle is there too.

And it is good. It's all so, so good.

But it's also not them.

In her heart she knows it as well as she knows her own name. It's not what they're about and it never has been, and it never will be. If they find happiness and freedom one day it will still be mostly in the shadows - the twilight - not because it's bad or wrong but because that's where they're both the most comfortable.

The beach and the sunshine is as difficult as it is easy to dismiss as a fantasy.
She sees it clearly, and she lets it go.

She shakes her head. “You've got the wrong person Mr Russo.”

He frowns, scrapes his lip again, hint of a pink tongue, and she expects an objection, a renewed plea to at least think about it but neither comes. What does come is another smile - one devoid of boyishness and full of slyness.

“No, I don't think I do. I don't think that at all”

He stares at her for a few long seconds and just like that, the conversation is over.

He drains his coffee, reaches into his pocket and pulls out a slim leather wallet and a silver embossed card holder. He tosses some dollar bills on the table and, as he stands, he hands her his card.

It's matte navy blue with the word “Anvil” printed across it and his name at the bottom in silver letters.

“That's my personal number. You can call me any time of the day or night.”

She has the urge to crumple it up in front of him but she's not prone to rudeness, so she puts it down on the table.

“I'm not going to call.”

He nods, purses his lips.

“I don't want to see him rot, Karen,” he says, as he straightens his jacket. “I don't think I'm the only one.

“Besides, I hear Cancun is lovely this time of year.”
The rain beats steadily against the roof. The outside area is empty and the recreation room is noisy and stuffy. Even so, it feels like someone put a lid on the din as she stares at him and he stares right back.

“So, you going to tell me what's going on?” she asks.

The muscle in his jaw twitches and he's drumming out some kind of tattoo on the table with his trigger finger.

One… two… three…

One… two… three…

And the fourth one for her.

(Just give him permission or freedom or whatever it is he seems to think he owes you)

Maybe she was wrong. Maybe he does owe her something. She thinks he would agree if with that if she asked. She suspects Billy already has.

“Billy has been to see me, you know that,” he says eventually. “And on Wednesday he came here after the trial and put this offer on the table - just like he said.”

“And?”

“And…” he swallows. “I turned him down, just like he said.”
She doesn't press, doesn't ask him to explain. Like she thought earlier, these strong, silent types don't actually seem to need much pushing when it comes to getting them to talk. And Frank has always been one to express his feelings in no uncertain terms.

As usual he doesn't disappoint.

“Look Karen, I'm not gonna lie to you - we don't do that, yeah?”

She nods.

“I wanted to take it. Billy is rock solid. Dependable. Reliable. There ain't anyone in the world I'd rather have at my side when the bullets start flying…” he stops suddenly, catches her eye. “So if he's got a way out, if he's saying it will all be over by Tuesday then it'll all be over by Tuesday. His word is cast in stone…”

“Frank, I don't know if we should be trusting him so easily…”

For a second he looks almost like he can't believe she said it, and then the disbelief is replaced entirely by hurt.

He shakes his head slowly, frown deepening and fingers drumming hard and heavy on the table.

“No,” he says as if he's testing the word out with her. “No, Karen, Billy's family. He's good and he's got my back… And now he's got yours too. He'll give his life for you if it comes to it.”

She has no idea what to say to that. No idea even where to begin. Billy has zero interest in her beyond her apparent ability to get Frank to agree to a crazy jailbreak. If anything he spent an inordinate amount of time implying how - when he compares her to Maria - she doesn't measure up and never will.

But it's obvious Frank doesn't see it the same way. Not remotely. She's reminded of what Foggy said last Sunday just before she nearly killed them both and he ended up with coffee all down his front.

(You know how Frank is with people he cares about. He's got this idea that if they have some kind of shared experience with him, they'll always come to the same conclusions he does and follow the same code.)
“Frank, Billy just met me yesterday.”

He shakes his head. “It doesn't matter. He would protect you with his life because of me. He would have done it with Maria too.”

He's shaking a bit, the way he does when he thinks something that's his is being taken away from him.

“How can you say that?”

“Because I'd do the same for him.”

He tries to keep his voice even and flat but he can't and it's easy to hear the panic trembling at the edges.

She frowns, sucks her bottom lip into her mouth and scrapes her teeth across it as she pushes it out again.

“Come on Karen, he's good. He is. He wants to help. That's all. He's family. He's doing this for me… us.”

He may as well be on his knees begging her to believe him and she wonders if she needs to start a list for The Things Frank Castle Doesn't Know About Billy Russo.

She sits back in her chair - it's hard plastic and uncomfortable and makes her shirt stick to her. Frank is looking at her intently, but it's not a glare and it's not like the ducking and following thing he does when he wants her to believe him or do what he says. It's something different - a kind of hopefulness mixed with worry and loss - he wants her to believe him, tell him he's right and Billy is obviously on the up and up.

There's a moment she's struck with how different her and Frank really are. Despite everything that's happened to him and the things he's seen and done, he's oddly trusting. He wants to believe the best of people. It makes her feel old. Jaded. And she wishes she could tell him what he wants to hear.
But they don't lie.

So she doesn't.

“Frank, are you sure?”

“Yes I’m sure. I know he's slick and he's a bit of a ladies man, but that doesn't change anything about him. He’s loyal, Karen. He is.”

He's so emphatic, so entirely assured of what he's saying and his frustration seemingly coming entirely from her not being 100 per cent on board with his beliefs, that she almost wonders if she's read everything wrong, if maybe she’s just tired and paranoid, seeing shadows in every corner, seeing every act of kindness rather as a poisoned chalice of retribution. The universe, after all, has been something of a psychotic bitch of late. Maybe Frank is right and Billy is just doing what he can to help out a friend in need - a brother.

But then she thinks of Billy's eyes, the way he appraised her with the intention of finding her lacking. She thinks of his insistence that the trial was going badly, and the implication that she was the reason Frank is where he is and also the reason he won't move away from it. She concedes maybe he was right on the last point but it does little to soften her opinion on him.

And sure, she could be wrong. She could just be misreading the situation entirely - after all, she’s not a marine and she doesn’t know the kinds of bonds that are forged in blood on foreign soil when the difference between life and death might just be the guy standing next to you. In fact there’s part of her that wants to be wrong. But it doesn’t change the fact that she doesn’t think she is. It doesn’t change the fact that Billy Russo for all his apparent help and good intentions has left her with an uneasy feeling in her gut.

Still, an uneasy feeling isn’t going to be enough to convince him of anything. He loves Billy, therefore Billy is good. Frank Castle’s logic has never been anything other than utterly straightforward.

She looks at Frank, at his hands, his mouth, his eyes that make him look more like a puppy than a man. Everyone told her he was bad. Everyone told her a psycho murderer and she didn’t believe them. Her gut wasn’t wrong then, maybe it’s not wrong now either.
“Why do you think he's offering this now?” she asks. “You've been in here for a while. There’s been a lot of time for him to come up with this idea.”

Shame. And then guilt. Muscle fluttering in his jaw and hands clenching into fists. She can see him processing what he wants to say, discarding the bits that aren't important, searching for the right phrasing.

“How come?” she says gently. “You can tell me, we don't lie.”

He sighs. “Billy doesn't think the trial is going well.”

“He said that to me too. He tell you why he thinks that?”

“He says that even if the evidence is thrown out, they’ll find something else. They ain’t gonna let me out… not *The Punisher*.“ He spits the last two words out with such bitterness and disdain it shocks her. Whenever he’s referred to himself as The Punisher there’s been a certain amount of sarcasm hidden in his words, a kind of grim, sardonic humour which seemed to indicate he knows the title has been forced on him and doesn’t particularly care for it, but this is different. The anger and resentment in his voice tells her all she needs to know.

“Oh Frank…”

“They’ll find something - ain’t like I’ve made it so they need to look very hard.”

She smiles ruefully. “Maybe you should let your lawyer be the judge of that. Foggy is good…”

He nods. “Yeah, yeah I know he is, but that ain't all of it. That ain't the reason I wanted to take Billy’s deal. Doesn’t matter if the trial is going well or not.”

She cocks her head, tucks her hair behind her ear, catches his eyes as they flicker to her fingers and sees his hands twitch.

“So what is it?”
He sucks in a breath and she can all but hear his heart beating in his chest.

She chances another brush of her fingers across his knuckles, makes it look like an accident when the guard looks over.

“It’s okay,” she says. “You can tell me. We can figure it out.”

He keeps his head down, stares at his knuckles, clenching and unclenching his fists, and then he gives her a quick half smile.

“You always say that.”

“I believe it.”

Another deep breath and then he squares his shoulders.

“Karen, you took the stand for me and Tower went for the jugular…”

“I can take it.”

She gives him a wry smile which he doesn't return. His eyes are serious and his mouth set in a grim line.

“I know, but you shouldn’t have to.”

She’s about to object but he shakes his head. “No, hear me out. That could just be the start, you know? Hearing him talking to you like that… seeing the newspapers, the signs… what they’re saying about you… and us. Murdock… I saw the way he was with you, saw how angry he got… I did that Karen. I did that to you--”

“No--”
“If I’d left you alone. If I’d walked away when I told myself I should. If I hadn’t come to you that night at your old apartment and if I’d just died like I was supposed to that night you and Claire patched me up--

“No, don’t say that.”

The thought is nothing short of horrifying but he shakes his head.

“It’s true. You know it is. If I’d just made one different decision any of those times. Hell, if I’d left when I could, when I was well enough…”

“Please…”

“No, I was selfish. I was so goddamn selfish. Remember in the graveyard when I told you that when I was with you it felt okay?”

She nods. She can all but see his head pressed to her breast, his hand gripping at her necklace and the blood from his split lip seared over her skin while the rain bucketed down and Maria’s wings kept them dry.

“I wanted to be okay. I wanted it to be okay and it was… I thought it was. I had you and I didn’t deserve it and somehow I thought that didn’t matter. I love you… and I thought that was enough.”

“It is--”

He shakes his head. “It isn’t. The world doesn’t just change because we want it to, because we’ve found something we want to hold onto and it feels like we’ll die if we lose it. It doesn’t care what we ‘deserve’. It just is. There ain't anything out there loading up and checks and balances. It's just the choices we make and the consequences,” he stops, looks her dead in the eye. “You are where you are because of me. Not one thing that is happening to you now isn't my fault.

“All of it... All that shit is on me.”
He sits back, spent. Exhausted even. His breath coming out hard and fast again and he's looking at her like he simultaneously wants her to fight him on his words and agree with them wholeheartedly.

She takes her time to get her bearings, turn his words over in her head, watch him as he sits there like a small, scared child who has more fight in him than sense.

And then she shakes her head. “No, I’m where I am because of me, because of the decisions I made and what I wanted… and what and who I still want.

“You don’t get to take that away from me. You don’t get to pretend I haven’t been all in right from the start and that this has all been about you. You don't get to rewrite who we are into something we're not. I’ve made all these decisions myself,” She pauses. “If you owe me anything, you owe me that --”

He's cutting her off before she's even finished, his fist hitting the table.

“Goddamnit Karen, my whole family is gone. They're gone because I couldn't do shit to save them. I don't want that to happen to you too. You already got hurt because of me, because of who I am. And then seeing you up there on that stand, while Tower tried to make it sound like what we did was something ugly and bad, like you can’t be trusted... and then Murdock too. I saw how he was with you before. He loved you, he still does... and now--”

“That doesn’t matter-- ”

“It does,” he says firmly. “It does. And I can’t keep you safe. I can’t look after you in here. All I can do is make it worse. Billy gave me a way to stop that...

“Goddamnit, I need to stop hurting you. That was the last thing I ever wanted.”

“And you think leaving me will stop hurting me?” she's struggling to keep her voice low and her whispers sound strained and angry. “You think if you disappear this whole mess will go too and I’ll be able to pick up and carry on, maybe work things out with Matt and carve out some kind of ordinary life that I don’t want?”

“Maybe--”
“That’s not going to make things better,” she wipes her eyes. “It’s not. You of all people should know that. You of all people should know you can’t just replace something you’ve lost with a ready made second choice that ticks enough boxes for you to be able to pretend you can fool yourself for just long enough to get through the day.

“If you want something - if you want anything that means something you have to build it yourself. You know that.”

She expects some kind of rebuttal - Frank’s never been one to back down on something he believes in without a fight, and this feels big and messy and just the kind of situation he likes to barrel through with nothing but his own self assurance and a lot of black and white thinking - but instead he just looks at her, eyes dark but shimmering.

“Yes,” he says eventually, voice thin and harsh. “Yes I do. That’s why I said no.”

“Frank, I…”

For the first time since she’s seen him today, his mouth twists into something that could almost be a smile.

“I wanted to take him up on it. I wanted to end this and I mean every word of what I just said - this is on me, and this is probably the wrong decision, this is probably gonna bite me in the ass, and every part of me is saying that if you ain't gonna walk away, then I should… but…” he goes quiet, ducks his head to look at her.

“What?”

He sighs. “But I said we're going to do this your way so we’re doing this your way. I owe you enough to at least try.”

*We're doing this your way...*

She didn't realise how long she'd been waiting for him to say that. It feels like taking a breath after suffocating.
The knot between her shoulders loosens and the tears pricking in the corners of her eyes start to seep out under her eyelids.

“Don't do that,” he says, but his voice is soft and kind and there's no force behind it.

She scrubs a hand across her cheeks, gives him a wan smile.

“I'll do whatever I like,” she says and his smile widens a little.

“I know,” he says.

They sit for a moment in silence while she tries to get a handle on exactly what she is feeling, before she realises it's too big to do right now in the time allotted. It's something she's going to need to get used to and it doesn't need to be done now.

“What about Billy's offer?” she asks.

He shrugs. “Offer will still be there if I need it when this is over.”

“Not according to him.”

“Well, then it won’t be.” He touches her hand briefly. “Nothing we haven’t faced before.”

No. No it isn't.

She has nothing more to say. Everything feels overwhelming. They've come full circle and yet somehow it still feels like there's places they can go. Outside the rain pelts down and all she wants to do is take him home, strip him and lie under the covers listening to him breathe in her ear and feel his hands on her.

“What?” he asks. “What is it?”
“I miss you,” she says eventually and she sees a flicker of light in his eyes that wasn't there before. “I miss you so much.”

“I miss you too.”

She wonders even if he gets out if there'll ever be a time she doesn't feel that on a regular basis, if she'll ever really get the chance to just have him and love him without any worries of what tomorrow brings.

She's not sure that's a possibility, but she's not ready to give up the dream just yet.

“I want to come home to you,” he whispers.

*Home.*

It's a small word but it feels very big. Very, very big. And she's okay with that.

There's room for big things like him in her life.

“I want that too.”

“You shouldn't.”

“But I do.”

“Guess that's all there is to it then.”

"Guess so..."
He shrugs. "I never really liked the beach that much anyway."

She gives him a wan smile, and then the bell rings and she has no choice but to leave him and her whole heart there again.

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That night she slips into her pyjamas and stands in front of her cork board, absently scratching Pickle behind her ears. She hasn't added anything to it and Elektra hasn't found anything new either. She looks at the smiley face wrapper and wonders if she should take it to Mahoney, if it would even be considered evidence. But then she'd need to explain to him what she was doing in some underground basement in a restricted area and she's not sure she's ready to trash her reputation any further by telling him Elektra's story about the Black Sky and The Hand.

Mahoney is a lot of things but she doesn't think he's given to fantastical storytelling and the existence of preternatural evil - even if he does spend most of his time chasing a blind man dressed as the devil around the rooftops of Hell's Kitchen.

No, she'll keep this to herself, at least for now. And she's not going to bother Frank with it until they have some clarity on the trial.

She switches the lights off until only the one at her bedside stays burning and pulls her gun out of her purse. As she does, Billy's card sticks to the hammer and falls into the coffee table with a soft click.

It glints in the dim light and she picks it up, turns it over in her fingers. She should throw it out. She's not going to give him the news he wants and she doesn't think her and Billy Russo will ever sit down for a chat about Frank in any capacity that she - or he - would want to. He's not going to give her a bigger insight into Frank than she already has.

And yet, she doesn't throw it out. Something tells her that there's still a part of the puzzle she isn't seeing and she hasn't seen the last of Billy Russo and his smooth knife-edged smile.

“We should keep this, don't you think?” she asks Pickle who seems indifferent to anything but butting Karen's elbow particularly hard with her little furry head. “Ok, if you say so. In any case you might need professional security considering the circles you move in. I know about those alley cats you used run with.”
Pickle huffs and makes an annoyed grunting sound in the back of her throat, jumps from the coffee table onto the bed and flops down.

Karen smiles and wedges the business card diagonally into the corner of the cork board, and watches the silver embossing glint and glimmer.

“I'm sorry Mr Russo,” she says. “I'm not giving you what you want.”

It's a lie. She's not sorry at all.

She puts her gun in the draw in her bedside table, and slides under the covers, listens to Pickle purring until she drifts off into nasty dreams.
I don't know if I can let you in, what if you see all the devils and sin inside?

Chapter Notes

I have been looking forward to this chapter for a while. I hope you like reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Song title is again from Show Me by Matthew Mayfield.

Again, do not look for legal accuracy in this. It might not be quite the level of ridiculous that was Ally McBeal or Boston Legal but it's on par with the reality of pretty much any other show with lawyers in it.

Thank you for sticking with me through this. It's so enormous now, but I really want to see it through.

Please drop me a review if you liked it.

"You're making a mistake." Billy's voice is clipped and hard, and even his attempt at an affable - if somewhat pitying - smile can't disguise it.

Karen shrugs. "Maybe, but this is his choice."

Billy's eyes narrow and he regards her suspiciously as he sips coffee from a styrofoam cup. "You sure about that, Miss Page? Doesn't seem like the Frank I know."

She cocks her head, sips her own coffee.

"Maybe you don't know him as well as you think you do."

Something passes over his face then - a strange mixture of amusement and pity, but it's tinged red and she can't help but see a deadly anger in his eyes.

It doesn't stay long though. Billy Russo seems to have mastered the art of changing his expression in milliseconds and she imagines one really does have to watch closely in order to see the truth hiding beneath them.
But she is watching closely. She is.

It's Wednesday morning and they're standing outside The New York Bulletin's offices in an alcove, trying to avoid the hustle and bustle of Hell's Kitchen's morning foot traffic. The day is mild - strangely pretty - all shimmering dew drops and ethereal clouds, and she's just returned from the police department where nothing much happened other than a few mean stares from the Post's reporters and Mahoney looking like he needed at least two months of sleep to recover from his weekend.

Truth be told she wasn't all that surprised when she saw Billy standing there waiting for her, cup of coffee in each hand, Burberry coat floating more than flapping in the breeze, and a smile too charming to be genuine on his face.

"Frank Castle is my best friend. I know him better than anyone," he says and she nods.

"I'm sure you do. But The Punisher is a different beast."

He seems to consider this, and then looks at her dubiously. "Lets just say I'm not 100% convinced those are binary positions."

She shrugs. He's right. They definitely are not, but Frank isn't the same man he was before Maria died and Billy doesn't seem to have really caught up fast enough.

"I'm disappointed."

*Yeah, well welcome to the real world where we mere mortals don't always get what we want,* she thinks uncharitably.

He looks up at the sky and into the busy street. There's a line of yellow cabs waiting at the traffic light and two buses trying to navigate into a single lane that's been mostly closed off by roadworks. "He could have been out already. You two could have been in Havana or Barbados by now. New names, a new life, with nothing to worry about other than your tans."

She shrugs. "I burn easily."
A wry smile tugs at his lips but he sobers almost immediately.

"Don't be flippant."

"Says the man suggesting a casual jailbreak."

"There's nothing casual about it." He sounds almost insulted. "I could give Frank his life back. I'm sorry that I'm the only one who wants that."

She refuses to rise to that. She refuses to give credence to a lie, no matter how much he's trying to manipulate it into truth.

"Why do you care so much?" She asks. "He went to jail before. You weren't waiting with this offer back then."

He sighs. "He's my friend, I don't care whether he's Frank Castle or The Punisher. I don't want to see him rot."

*And you don't want to answer my question either,* she thinks as she pushes a strand of hair out of her eyes.

"He will rot, Karen," he continues. "He will."

She shakes her head, can't help but wonder how much prophecy or promise there is in his words. "You don't know that."

"The judge will never let someone with his rap sheet get off with no time served, even if they have to throw some of the evidence out. If they can get him on a parking ticket or a jaywalking charge, you can bet they'll find a way to give him life for that."

"Sentencing guidelines are a real thing, Mr Russo."

He actually smiles at that. Genuine. Amused. Hard. "And they mean shit when it's in someone's best
interests not to follow them. They're called 'guidelines' for a reason."

"You still haven't told me..." she starts but her phone starts chirping loudly and vibrating against her hip through her purse.

She's tempted to let it go to voicemail but Billy takes her coffee out of her hands and looks at her pointedly.

"Best get that," he says and she scowls at him as she turns and pulls the phone out, and puts it to her ear.

"What are you doing right now?" Foggy asks without saying hello.

She considers answering that she's talking to a man who seems to have the will and the means to break Frank out of jail and make him disappear forever but, from the sound of Foggy's voice, she's fairly sure it'd give him heart failure on the spot.

"Sunbathing," she answers and despite himself, he snorts.

"Okay well, put some clothes on and get your ass down to the court. Batzer's made her decision."

It takes a split second to parse his words but it feels like in that moment the world stops. The hubbub from the streets seems to disappear, the sounds and smells of the city fading as if some cosmic hand put a lid over them. She's not even sure she could breathe if she tried, not sure she could move either.

In her head she can see Frank lying in her bed, body bleeding and broken, Claire tending to his wounds. She sees the blood in her car, hears that damn song on the radio. They're in the graveyard and he's saying terrible things to get and then collapsing in her arms. The river is blue and glistening because she's in love and then his lips are on hers and he's in her bed again and she's seeing stars as she comes.

There's Luna and Pickle, Matt and he looks like a giant bird of prey as the world explodes around them and a blade slices through her side and four bullets pound into Frank's back.
And it all coalesces into Foggy's voice on her phone, tinny and thin through her crappy speakers.

"Karen? Karen? Are you there?"

Is she? She's not sure. She really isn't.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here," her mouth feels like sandpaper and her throat is even dryer. "I just… I just thought it would take longer."

"Nope. Batzer has wanted to keep this moving fast from day one. So here we are 'moving fast' or something."

"Yeah…"

"Well, are you coming?" He asks. "She's called it for 10:30, which is just enough time to get Frank here from Sing Sing. I think she doesn't want to give the vultures much time to get there."

"Yeah, of course. Of course. Did she say--"  

"No," he says and she hears a car door slamming on his side of the phone. "They don't say anything ever. It adds to the drama."

She knows he's trying to inject some levity into the situation but it fails.

"Okay, Foggy, I'm on my way now."

"Good. See you there."

He disconnects without saying goodbye and she stares at the fading screen of her phone as the sounds and smells of New York slowly bleed back into existence.
There's hooting and shouting. Both buses have managed to turn into that single lane and the line of yellow cabs is gone. Somewhere a jackhammer starts to grind against concrete and the whine of a buzzsaw fills the air.

None of it matters. Not one little thing.

She takes a deep breath, squares her shoulders.

This could be it. It could be the beginning or the end or something in between. Anything in between.

Anything at all.

She looks up and isn't surprised to see Billy Russo looking at her intently.

"Judge made a decision?"

He phrases it like a question, even though it isn't and she nods unnecessarily. Somewhere she knows she needs to call Joe and Ellison and let them know but none of that seems very important right now.

Billy hands her her coffee and pulls his car keys out of his pocket.

"Well, Karen, I guess we don't need to argue about who's right and who's wrong anymore."

"Guess not."

"Give you a lift?" He nods to where his Aston Martin is parked in a side street.

She narrows her eyes. On the one hand it would be a good opportunity to fish for more information on why he's doing what he is, on the other she's not sure she's in the right frame of mind for that level of cat and mouse. In fact there's a good possibility he might beat her at her own game.
She glances at his keys and his outstretched hand.

"No, thank you," she says. "I have my own car."

He shrugs, crumples his cup in his fist and tosses it in the trash. "Suit yourself. It was just a free ride."

She drains her own coffee, gives him a tight smile and heads to her own car. It might be a small thing but she doesn't think Billy Russo is the kind of man that gives anything away for free.

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She texts Ellison and Joe from her car when she gets to the courthouse. On impulse she texts Matt and Elektra too. Joe responds immediately to say he's on his way and Ellison is remarkably restrained, forgoing any caustic remarks in favour of a simple 'Take care of yourself. I'll be around later'.

Elektra's text remains unread while Matt's shows it's been received and opened but no reply is forthcoming.

*That's okay*, she thinks as she drags a comb through her hair. *He doesn't have to be here. He has every right to sit this one out.*

Still, she's not entirely sure this is a pragmatic assessment of the situation. Matt has been on this journey with them since it began and somehow it's fitting that he should be here for the big moments. Although, she can admit, he's not exactly shown dedication to Frank's cause before.

She knows she can't blame him but she does anyway.

She checks her reflection in the rear view mirror, applies some lip gloss and tries hard to ignore the bags under her eyes and the lines around her mouth. She tries even harder to ignore how she's living on caffeine and the occasional bite of bad fast food with Foggy, and the strangely hollow look on her face and gaping pencil skirts around her hips that come with it.

*Something has to give,* she knows this. *Something has to give and soon.* *She's just determined that*
that something is not her or Frank or what they have together.

*Brace yourself*, she hears Matt's voice saying in the back of her head. *It might have to be all three. There are things you can't control.*

She sighs, leans back against the car seat and rubs the bridge of her nose, closes her eyes. She hates that Matt has become her conscience - the voice of reason and long suffering righteousness - although she can't help but appreciate the mental picture it makes.

The angel on her shoulder is the devil and a beautiful one at that. But then again isn't a beautiful angel all the devil really is?

She wonders what a theologian would make out of all of that. More importantly, she wonders what a shrink would make out of her mind.

For a second she tries not to think about anything other than the mildness of the air on her skin and the gentle drone of the city outside. She breathes in the heavy air and forces herself to search for oblivion.

It's as good and bad a substitute as any to that happy place she's never really had.

It doesn't last long or at least it doesn't feel like it does, although time must have passed. Her phone beeps loudly with a text from Foggy. He's asking where she is. Says the court is filling up and they're going to start soon. So she smooths her blouse, tucks her hair behind her ear and heads inside.

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"This is a complicated case." Batzer's spectacles are off and she looks around the room accusingly, as if somehow it's everyone in the audience's fault that this is true. "Not only because of the DA's involvement but because of what this means for the future of *The People vs Frank Castle*. To further complicate matters we are simultaneously saying DA Reyes was personally involved - a fact that is not in dispute - and this means evidence tampering has most definitely happened. It's been my job to not only decide if this is in fact a conflation but to also unpick the provable fact from the conclusion the Defence is arguing for. It hasn't been an easy task and I have not taken it lightly."

There's a lump in Karen's throat and a stone in the pit of her belly. She's vaguely aware that Joe is
sitting somewhere behind her, scribbling notes, and Billy has got a prime seat in one of the front benches usually reserved for witnesses. But all she really cares about is Frank. She's almost directly behind him. If she reached out now and stretched a little, she could touch the back of his head, run her fingers over the short, fine hairs on the nape of his neck.

"In cases like these it's always important to start with the facts, and in this instance we need to remember that we haven't established any facts pertaining to Mr Castle's guilt," Batzer continues. "Whatever your or my opinion on him and his guilt or lack thereof is entirely irrelevant to these proceedings.

"I need to look at what we know, so that's what I've done."

She stops, glances at Frank and Foggy and then her gaze rests hard on Tower. "DA Reyes was an acquaintance and I held her in exceptionally high regard. She was diligent, astute and devoted to her cause. Needless to say these revelations have been a shock to me and have not been easy for me to hear. In many ways this has felt like she's been on trial too, and yet, unfortunately she isn't here to defend herself, so it means I must decide her guilt for her. But that is my station. That is the job that the state of New York has charged me with and I must carry out my duty to the best of my ability."

Batzer takes a deep breath and squares her shoulders. "It is indisputable that Samantha Reyes was responsible for the Central Park Massacre - how that played out and if anyone took advantage of that, is a question for another day - but the facts are that she did it on her own jurisdiction without clearance and with little experience. That does not change the fact that she was operating in her station as DA and that means the office she represents bears an enormous part of the responsibility for the lives that were lost that day," Batzer looks directly at Frank. "For that, Mr Castle, you have my apologies. As a wife and a mother, I cannot even begin to comprehend the loss you have experienced, and I won't insult you or your family by saying I can. We are responsible and while I know that is cold comfort in the face of what you have lost, it is all I can offer you along with the promise of a full investigation from internal affairs."

There's a long silence and then Frank bows his head "Thank you ma'am."

Batzer nods and refers back to her notes.

"This does not however, change the nature of the charges against Mr Castle. True or not they are heinous…"

Batzer pauses, and across the room Billy swivels in his seat and looks Karen dead in the eye. He's not smiling, not at all, but there's a grim satisfaction on his face.
Karen looks away. It's not over yet, no matter what he might think.

"... And I need to consider what it means to allow someone accused of these crimes a free pass. Again, this has not been an easy decision and one akin to throwing a case out because of botched or forgotten Miranda rights, or a coerced confession… And yet we do these things, we throw these cases out precisely because we know that when the law is not upheld for one, it's not upheld for all. This might seem idealistic but in many ways that is why law exists. And sometimes what is *just* and what is *lawful* is at odds…"

It's an interesting, if not exactly original point to make and Karen wonders what Matt would make of it, and she realises with a start it's something she doesn't know about him and can't truly infer no matter how many times he dons a red suit and heads out into the streets of Hell's Kitchen to protect the innocent.

She's not sure he'd know himself. She's not sure how much he's thought about the uglier side of justice.

"All in all," Batzer continues. "Law and justice and all the places they fail to meet might be a metaphor for Maria, Lisa and Frank Castle Junior."

Frank flinches at the mention of their names and she can't help but think it looks like he's being shot. One bullet for each of them.

The fourth one for her. Except that one doesn't come.

Batzer is quiet for a long time, beady eyes flitting from Frank to Foggy to Tower and then settling briefly on Karen as her jaw hardens.

"I have reviewed the evidence and the testimonies we have heard here - Mr Murdock's was particularly enlightening - and I have painstakingly gone through the notes and declarations of Samantha Reyes’ involvement. I've studied the chain of evidence and I know more about case law regarding tampering than I ever wanted to," she stops and sighs heavily. "Would the Defence please rise."

They do. Frank throws an unreadable look over his shoulder and Karen nods at him with a confidence she's not feeling.
Batzer, however, has no time for any such anguish.

"Mr Castle, it pains me to say this because I know what's at stake here. Your case is enormous, the likes of which have not been seen in New York state before and hopefully won't be again. To take away its foundation before it's even really got started seems reckless and flies in the face of justice. And yet not doing it and allowing evidence that is untrustworthy and tainted is an affront to the very justice system I am charged with upholding. The message it sends is one that asks that we should compromise and hope for the best. It's hubris at best and at worst, it's disregard for the process…"

The lump in Karen's throat is bigger and harder, almost suffocating, and there's a nasty high pitched ringing in her ears, but somehow her belly feels light and her heart like it's going to jump right out of her chest.

"It is for that reason…" Batzer continues, "that I am approving the Defence's request to exclude all evidence that went through Samantha Reyes' office starting from the day of the Central Park Massacre up until the informal conclusion of The People vs Frank Castle."

There's a moment that Karen doesn't feel anything at all. Her body, her mind, her heart that only a second ago wanted release feels disconnected and very far away from her. She could float away, exist outside her corporeal form forever. Ride out the storm as stardust and never feel a thing again. But then a happy gasp forces its way out of throat and she instinctively claps a hand over her mouth and the world seems bigger and brighter than ever before.

The courtroom comes alive around her. People are talking and whispering, some are shouting, although it's impossible to make out whether it's approval or not. A flash goes off and then another as photographers move out of their seats to try and get a picture of Frank or Foggy, or maybe even her - she's not sure. Somewhere Tower is lodging an objection and Foggy is busy asking for something that sounds very much like a dismissal of all charges.

It's chaos, but when she looks up Frank is staring at her and she'd need to be more than blind to not see the hope in his eyes.

And god, it's been so long since she's seen that.

"Order! Order!" Batzer bangs her gavel. "I will have you all thrown out if I need to. Court is still in session. The next time someone blinds me I'll lock them up for contempt and confiscate their camera."
She gestures at the bailiff, and security start moving through the rows of seats and escorting some of the worst offenders out. The room settles back into an uneasy hush that feels almost louder than the eruption and after a few seconds of angry glaring, Batzer turns her attention back to the court.

"Yes, Mr Tower," she says.

"Permission to appeal--"

"Denied," she says firmly. "Mr Nelson?"

"Requesting an immediate dismissal of all the charges against my client."

"Denied."

"In that case I'm requesting bail to be reviewed."

"Objection your Honour," Tower says. "The charges are still standing."

"Barely," Foggy retorts. "You ever played Jenga?"

"Alright, alright," Batzer says banging her gavel again. "Let's try and keep this discussion worthy of the system I've just spent the last half an hour defending.

"Mr Nelson, Mr Tower is right. The charges are still standing and I am not willing to declare a mistrial today, however we don't know what those charges are going to look like a day or two from now, unless the Prosecution has thought ahead…?"

Tower shakes his head.

"I didn't think so," says Batzer.
"My client can't sit in Sing Sing indefinitely while the DA decides which of their feeble charges is the hill they want to die on," says Foggy.

Batzer purses her lips. "I'm inclined to agree with you Mr Nelson, but as the charges are still standing, I'm sticking with my original ruling, which is denial of bail. However, Mr Tower will need to give us clarity on the charges against Mr Castle in the next seven days, otherwise I will be forced to throw the case out."

"Your honour, I can't possibly--" Tower begins but Batzer cuts him off.

"And I can't have a man rotting in jail indefinitely Mr Tower. It's illegal, even for Mr Castle."

Tower sighs loudly but offers no comeback and Batzer turns back to Foggy and Frank.

"When Mr Tower clarifies the charges, we can reconvene for a bail hearing and I'll decide if an adjustment is appropriate."

Foggy's shoulders sag a little and he glances behind him at Karen with a defeated smile on his face which does absolutely nothing to hide the glow he has underneath it.

She shrugs at him. It's okay. They got more than she expected. Bail seems almost secondary. Superfluous.

But then Foggy's eyes harden and there's a gleam in them that wasn't there before.

"Permission to approach, your Honour," he says and Batzer nods and waves him and Tower forward.

They stay at the bench for a long time, heads bowed and a wary look on Batzer's face, sharp whispers flying back and forth. Eventually, Tower shrugs and walks back to his table and Foggy glances at Frank briefly before Batzer sighs and gives him a firm nod, before handing a piece of paper to the bailiff.
When Foggy walks back, he's positively beaming and when he catches Karen eye, he gives her a conspiratorial wink.

_Wat?_ she mouths and he shakes his head, sits back down next to Frank.

Batzer looks around the room again and shrugs.

"I guess we're adjourned then."

She bangs her gavel one last time and leaves the court in a flurry of black robes.

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She waits for Foggy outside the courtroom and when he eventually emerges his smile stretches from ear to ear.

She has no words really, none that could even begin to describe how she's feeling, none that could really encompass all of her emotions, so she just stands there, grinning back at him like an idiot, tears shining in her eyes and a wave of pride and gratitude crashing over her.

He's come so far. He's done so much. And at the end of it all, he still chooses to be her friend.

It's been a long while since she's felt this rich. This lucky.

"Not bad for a couple of weeks with no sleep," he says as casually as he can. "I mean I'm no Perry Mason yet, but…"

"But he's no Foggy Nelson," she finishes for him.

"No," he agrees. "There can be only one and all that."
And that's when she can't contain herself any longer. She's half laughing, half crying, as she babbles mostly incoherently about how wonderful he is, thanking him over and over until even he gets uncomfortable and takes her arm, steering her in the direction of the courthouse canteen.

"Stop, stop," he says eventually. "It's not over yet, there's still--"

"I know," she tells him. "But even so, you've won the original case for all intents and purposes - it would have been thrown out of court. Don't you see how big that is?"

"Yeah," he says and he can't disguise the smugness in his voice. "Yeah I do."

“You did this,” she says. “You did it all on your own. I said right back then that you could.”

He doesn’t need her to tell him this. She knows that over the last year he’s come into his own in a way that he never could have done at Nelson & Murdock. He’s thrived, gone from barely walking to soaring in a way that most lawyers never do or only achieve when they’re old and grey. And yet, she knows they both still feel the melancholy for what Nelson & Murdock could have been, and she knows that deep down, Foggy still believes Matt to be the superior counselor.

He gives her a goofy smile, and grabs a sludgy coffee from the vending machine, grimaces as he tastes it.

“I really don’t know how to thank you,” she continues. “You’ve done so much and it’s been so hard and if I could buy you a vacation or something, I would--”

He holds up his hand. “It’s okay, Karen. This is what I do.”

It’s true, but her gratitude doesn’t seem like nearly enough.

“But speaking of things I do,” he says as he discards the mostly full cup of coffee in the trash. “I have something for you. You don’t have to leave immediately, do you?”

She frowns and checks her watch. Ellison is going to want her to fact check Joe’s story before it goes to press today, and she’s going to have to write up the crime report she got from Mahoney, but Joe
won’t have started the story yet and she’s managed to get the time spent - or wasted as the case may be - on the crime report down to 30 minutes on a good day. Still, she does feel bad about the amount of time she spends out of the office, and while Ellison has never shown much adherence to the whole “asses in seats” ideology that some bosses do, she doesn’t want to take advantage of his kindness.

"I really should be getting back…"

“Trust me,” Foggy says. “You want to do this. It won’t take long.”

“Is this why you requested a sidebar?”

He chuckles. “She is as sharp as she is beautiful.”

She gives him a playful shove. “Stop.”

“Come on,” he says. “Indulge me.”

She guesses Ellison won’t mind - she has done an awful lot of overtime lately.

“Okay,” she says, “What have you got?”

“Nope, it’s a surprise.”

He takes her arm and leads her out of the canteen and down the hall past the courtroom. He flashes a pass at a security guard standing outside a door that leads to the administration wing and they head down a few very old fashioned wood paneled corridors with portraits of old, stern looking men.

"They're lookers alright," Foggy comments as they turn the corner into a waiting room that looks like it's been pulled kicking and screaming into the 21st century, refusing to give up its paisley wallpaper and heavy iron sconces, nor its dado rail or the massive coat of arms affixed the the walls.

A smartly dressed woman, sitting behind a wooden desk and typing away at a laptop, and a set of leather couches look entirely out of place too, as does a small glass sliding door nestled between two
bookcases.

“I’m not sure I’m allowed back here,” Karen says but Foggy shakes his head.

“You’re with me. Think of it like a backstage pass.”

She huffs at him and he gives her a big grin which is still mostly made up of smug victory.

They wait in silence for a few minutes, while the woman continues to type, and Karen takes the moment to press gently at the overwhelming mass of emotions she's carrying inside her - elation, joy, anxiety, fear, hope - but it's too much to even begin to unpick and classify so she pushes it away and let's herself just exist in it without expectations.

It might not be alright, but it'll be alright for now. She thinks that might be all she could ever ask for.

"Mr Nelson? Miss Page?" The woman stands up and holds out a lanyard with a plastic key card attached to it. "They're ready for you."

"Come on," says Foggy.

She takes the lanyard - the key card simply says "Special visitor access" - and follows Foggy through the glass door and into a passage where it's disorientingly stark and bright as compared to the sombre mood of the waiting room.

The tiles are white and shiny and the walls a very light cream which looks almost reflective under the bright halogen lights.

A set of guards - one male and one female and both heavily armed - is posted outside a door at the far end.

And it's then that she realise where they are going.

"You didn't," she says.
"I did."

"Bazer would never…"

"But she did and here you are."

"How did you…?"

"My boyish charm and rugged good looks," he says earnestly. "Also because I promised not to make a song and dance about the bail review… it would have wasted our time anyway and I didn't want to push my luck."

She doesn't care about that. She doesn't care at all.

"Oh my god Foggy…"

"Go on," he says inclining his head towards the guards and taking her purse off her shoulder. "No one will bother you but I think they're…" he nods at the guards "are probably going to feel you up better than you have in years before you get inside."

That's okay. Frisking is something she's become very familiar with in the past few weeks.

"Also," Foggy continues. "I could only get you 20 minutes."

*Only 20 minutes.*

In that moment it feels like a lifetime.

She turns to him, about to say something but whatever it is, the words disappear. Foggy is a blessing that she will never ever deserve. It seems fitting that there aren't words to describe it.
So she doesn't bother to try. She squares her shoulders and walks down the hall, does indeed get frisked within an inch of her life after seemingly signing that life away on an indemnity form that's longer than the average novel, and steps through the door to be alone with Frank Castle for the first time in months.

~~~

The room is warm. There are no windows and the walls are empty but Frank's staring at them like he can see all the way to the ocean if he just wills it hard enough.

He's sitting at a Formica table, his back to the door - which strikes her as both unusual and almost tragic - fingers drumming heavily on the desk in that trigger sequence that seems as much a part of him as his limbs or heart.

To her surprise he's not handcuffed and he's taken off his jacket and pushed his shirt sleeves up to just below his elbows.

He doesn't look up when she comes in, eyes still fixed on that spot on the wall.

"I've been sitting here thinking about it for 30 minutes and I still can't figure out if that was dazzling them with brilliance or baffling them with bullshit," he says good-naturedly. "But I guess it doesn't matter now, Mr Matlock."

"Actually, he's going with Perry Mason," she says softly as she takes a step towards him. "Matlock's not dashing enough."

She knows him. She knows him so well and she watches the scene play out in front of her seconds before it does.

He stops drumming, fingers poised in mid movement, stark light bouncing off his nails. His shoulders bunch, drawing together under his shirt, and a muscle flutters in his jaw. And then he swivels in his seat, eyes locking onto hers and lower lip trembling.

"Karen," his voice is sandpaper - she expected that too - but her name rolls off it like honey, and she
finds she's trembling too.

He swallows, half stands, seems to reconsider trying as his knees buckle, and then stubbornly pushes himself all the way up. "Karen, I--, what are you--. You can't be here--"

"Yes, I can," she says.

*I'm Karen Page, intrepid reporter, lover of vigilantes and screw the rest because holding back tears now seems futile and I can do anything I fucking want.*

"But what about--?"

And that's when the wall inside her breaks and she feels that expected wetness on her cheeks, dripping down her chin and no doubt messing the mascara she doesn't care about at all.

Because right now she doesn't care about a damn thing other than him.

She takes three unsteady steps towards him.

"Shut up, Frank," she says as she throws her arms around his neck and her lips press down hard on his. "Just shut the fuck up."

For once in his life, he listens. For once in his godforsaken life, he does exactly what she asks him to.

~~~

He doesn't let her go. When she finally pulls away from the warmth of his mouth, he manoeuvres them from where she has him backed up against the wall and into the chair, sliding her into his lap and pressing his forehead against hers.

Her hair hangs around them like a curtain and he breathes heavily into her mouth and she into his.
His fingers twitch on her hip and even though his thumb slides maddeningly over the zipper of her skirt, he holds himself in check and doesn't make any attempt to undo it.

She's grateful. She's not sure she has the self control. She's not sure she wants to have it either.

"What are you doing here?" He asks, lifting a hand to her face and running his knuckles down her cheek, thumb tracing the curve. "How?"

She kisses him again, soft and slow, tastes the salt of tears - his and hers - on his lips.

"Foggy," she says. "He managed to get the judge to agree to let me see you. I have no idea how, but it doesn't matter."

"No," he says, tangling his fingers in her hair, eyes boring into her like he wants to consume her and worship her all at the same time. "No, it doesn't matter."

"He did it, Frank," she says. "They'll have to drop so many of the charges now…"

He nods, lips brushing hers briefly and then pressing kisses into her chin and jaw. "Like you said."

A half sob, half laugh catches in her throat, and she bites down hard on her bottom lip to stop it going too far either way. It's like a tightrope and she knows when she falls there's no going back.

"Like I hoped."

"You…" he says, shaking his head, smile sliding onto his face. "You are relentless. You are the most stubborn woman I've ever met."

"Got to be," she says, "when I have someone like you testing my patience all the time."

He chuckles and she's reminded how his smile changes his whole face, how it's charming and genuine and enough to almost make her forget that there's a killer lurking just under the surface. He's cruel and difficult and damaged beyond repair.
She's fairly certain she doesn't want to forget. She's fairly certain it's one of the many reasons she loves him like she does.

"Do you know what happens now?" He asks and she shakes her head.

_No, no I don't know. You come back to me or you don't. We fix this or it breaks. There is no in between._

"We won the battle," she says. "We still need to win the war."

"Yeah," he says. "But we still won. It might not mean much, but for now…"

"For now…?"

"For now, there's this."

He kisses her softly and his hand slides over her hip to the small of her back, fingers dancing against her spine.

He sounds downright positive, almost hopeful, almost happy and the last time they were happy seems a lifetime ago.

_(You keep the bed warm… don't start without me…)_

...

_OKay, don't finish without me…_)

No. She can't lose herself in that now. Not when she has him right here. Not when his arms are around her and she can bury her face in his neck and smell the blood and the tears and that gunmetal scent that always lingers on him.
"You come back to me," she says.

"If I can, I will."

It's too much. For the second time in only a few hours, she feels like she's suffocating under the weight of what they have. It's his hands rubbing between her shoulder blades and his hot kisses on her cheeks. It's the months of worrying about him and what he was doing even before he arrived on her doorstep to die. It's the graveyard and the river, the time spent in her bed. The fire and the explosion from the warehouse and Alexei and that stupid ass gun with its fancy grip. And it's every moment of her life before that. Losing and losing and then losing again. Harder and sharper and each time worse than before.

The only difference is now there's hope. And somehow that makes it unbearable.

The tears spill out of her eyes and a harsh sob rips forces its way out of her ribcage and she chokes it all back with a wet laugh and a watery smile.

He cocks his head, touches her face again.

"What is it?"

She shakes her head.

"It's not important."

"Yeah it is."

He always did see right through her. Even if he doesn't know the details, he's always known the trauma that she carries.

She sighs, blinks the tears out of her eyes.
"It's just… I just…" she starts. "Oh it's silly."

He shakes his head. "It ain't."

"I don't want to put any more pressure on the whole situation."

He frowns, drags her even closer and looks her dead in the eye.

"So you put it on yourself instead? Doesn't seem like the answer to me."

"A problem shared is a problem halved?" She says. "That what you're saying?"

He shrugs. "I guess."

She smiles. He is a good man. No matter what he's done. No matter whether he believes it or not, that truth is fundamental.

And even though every fibre in her being is telling her it's a mistake to do this, she finds she can't stop a little of that part of herself that is the most dark and secret, from escaping.

"It's just that I feel like I've spent my life losing people--"

"Who did you lose, Karen?" He asks.

And no, he wasn't supposed to ask that. He was supposed to let it slide like he always has. He was supposed to let her be vague and just accept it. He was supposed to act like not knowing was enough.

But he's looking at her and his eyes are worried and the fact is, it's a simple enough question for now.

*For now...*
"First my mother... " She takes a breath and it catches in her throat, "then later my… my brother… my father - he's still alive, but I lost him all the same."

She waits for the sting and as always it doesn't disappoint. It never does when she thinks about them. The guilt, the shame, the rage - at the world but mostly at herself - it all mixes together like poison and feels like it's peeling her skin off from the inside, boiling her brain like an infection she can never get rid of.

He rubs tiny circles into her back, touches her hair again. It soothes in its own way, but it's not enough. She's not ready for this. Not now. Maybe not ever.

"What happened to them?"

She shakes her head again, looks down at where her hand rests on his belly.

Not now. She can't talk about that now. It's too big and this room is too small. She wonders sometimes if the whole world is too small.

If this was a way to test herself, she failed.

She kisses his forehead, his cheeks, the bump on his nose.

"It's just that this time it feels like I might be getting something back. That I might not be losing it and I think that's scarier."

He frowns, pulls back a little. He hasn't missed that she's avoided his question but it seems what he wants to say takes precedence over pushing her on that.

"You can't lose me," he says. "No matter what happens or where we are, that can't happen."

Except it can. She wonders if it counts as a lie if he doesn't know it is one.
She doesn't want to think about that right now. She doesn't want to think about anything at all.

He's here and so is she and they haven't been like this in so long.

She covers his mouth with hers, slides her tongue between his teeth and kisses him hard and deep, rough and tough, until his hands are digging into her hips and she can feel his cock pressing against her ass.

"You can tell me anything," he says between kisses. "You know that. You know."

But she can't. Not now at least.

There's a discrete knock on the door. "Miss Page, you have two minutes."

Two minutes.

Two minutes is also a lifetime.

She wraps her arms around his shoulders, touches the soft, bristly hair on the back of his neck and holds him tight enough so that it's almost difficult to breathe.

"I love you," she whispers.

"I love you too."

She rests her head against his, feels his heart beating against her chest, and when the two minutes are up, she leaves and she doesn't say goodbye.
What we learned here is love tastes bitter when it's gone; forget the light, things look dirty when it's on

Chapter Notes

Again I feel like I am at a tricky part and things are only getting trickier, so I am trying to write ahead a little bit so as to get most of the setup out of the way and we can get back to what we love i.e. Karen and Frank. This means the next chapter should hopefully be up in a few days.

I'm just gonna ask that you all bear with me for this - I'm going to try and have some other stuff up soon for other fics as well.

Anyway, having said all that this was one of my favourite chapters to write. I feel like I got the tone right and it just felt smooth and right. Hope you like it too.

Title is from Matchbox 20's "Shame".

Thank you all for sticking with me on this incredible journey.

"Best case scenario is they drop all the charges from the original case... or, if they want to pursue them, they get thrown out because of lack of evidence. That leaves me having to explain a jailbreak and when he murdered those two guys at that diner." Foggy takes a sip of his beer and grimaces. "Hey Josie," he shouts. "When are you going to stop watering down your beer - it's already goddamn Budweiser."

Josie glances over from behind the bar and flips him off goodnaturedly and he pretends to be very offended.

Karen's grateful for the distraction though. It gives her time to arrange her expression, compose her thoughts into something she can show the outside world. That night at the diner is still a moment in time that makes her feel uneasy and brings up a whole lot of questions about herself she isn't ready to answer or embrace yet. It was the first time she really saw Frank's violence laid bare, the first time she saw the full level of rage boiling in his veins, and while it shocked her and disgusted her, it scared her so little that only minutes later she was crying over the possibility of him being dead.

She's more like him than she'd care to admit and that scares her less than it should.

"He was protecting me at the diner," she says. "Those men wanted to kill me."
"I know," Foggy says distractedly, still grinning at Josie. "Don't think I won't use that. But it doesn't help that you are on record telling Mahoney he kidnapped you."

"Mahoney didn't even believe me back then."

"True. But that makes it look like you'll say whatever you need to, to get out of a situation."

Yeah, she's an unreliable witness - that much she's known from the start.

She pushes her drink, mostly full, away and stares at the pitted wood of the counter.

"So what's the worst case scenario?"

Her question sours Foggy's mood instantly and he takes an angry swig of his beer like it's personally to blame. "They try and pin all the warehouse nonsense on him."

"Oh come on Foggy, that was a case of the wrong place at the wrong time…"

"Yes, Frank makes that a habit. You can't think that if he's around when the world is on fire, no one is going to ask if he lit the match."

"Yeah, but they also can't actually think that he was running some human-trafficking, racketeering ring. That's beyond ridiculous."

"No, but the police and DA seem to be trying to throw shit at the wall just to see what will stick. And they'll be worse now, considering that all their evidence has been thrown out. Don't forget that I'm fairly certain a good chunk of the force were on the take from Alexei. Frank might just be a very easy fall guy."

She hates that he makes sense. She hates even more that this is the exact conversation she had with herself the second she left the courthouse and Frank's arms and his feverish kisses.

"Sorry Karen," Foggy says. "We just have to wait now. Batzer gave Tower more time than usual
because she knows that she's effectively killed the initial case and she doesn't want to be seen as being biased in favour of The Punisher.

"Fact is, we can't do anything until we actually know what he's being charged with. And I can make a song and dance about that but I guarantee it'll be a waste of time."

It's true. It's also not what she wants to hear.

She glances over to the table in the corner where her and Foggy and Marci sat a lifetime ago, drinking grey fishbowls and teasing Ellison about salmonella poisoning. Matt's cane was a tap on the wooden floor and there's two birthday presents - one of Bukowski poems and another of a Victoria's Secret gift card - lost somewhere in her bedroom.

There's another rotting in Sing Sing.

"No." She shakes her head. "No. I'm not going to let that happen. I'm not going let him go down for something we all know isn't true, especially not something like that."

"Karen..." Foggy's voice has gone serious and he's looking at her warily. "What are you doing?"

"Getting off my goddamn ass," she says. "I'm sick and tired of every aspect of my life being on hold because of what's happened. My job is something an intern could do, I can only sometimes go out my door without being hounded by the press and my love life is a bigger disaster than normal and it's enough now. I'm done."

"Karen--" he starts but she shakes her head and stands up, the plastic covering on the bar stool sticking to her as she goes. "Where are you going?"

"I..." she says swinging her purse over her arm, "...am going to see Matt."

"What? What has Matt got to do with this?"

"And then I'm going to see Mahoney..."
"Karen, you can't talk to the police without a lawyer, it's too--"

He's fumbling with his jacket and briefcase as he stands up, bar stool almost toppling over as he does.

"Don't worry, I would never do anything to put Frank in more trouble."

"It's not Frank I'm worried about, it's you. I don't want to get Frank out just to have you locked up inside." He follows her as she picks her way between Josie's drunk patrons and out into the muggy New York air outside. "Jesus, let me deal with this one thing first. Then we can work out the rest."

No. No she can't.

She stops and turns to look at him, standing there in the Hell's Kitchen smoke. His shirt is creased with dark patches forming under the armpits, his hair wild and his tie skew and pulled halfway down his chest.

He's a mess. He is also without a doubt the best thing that ever happened to her.

"You've dealt with enough. You've done more than anyone ever could."

"No--"

"Go home. See Marci. Sleep late and take her somewhere nice tomorrow. Just the two of you. Don't think about me or Frank or anything else…"

"Karen, you know I can't--"

"You can," she says and when he looks at her lost and hopeless, mouth opening and shutting like a fish out of water, she takes a step towards him and presses her lips to his cheek. "You can. "
And then she turns on her heel and heads to her car and the lost world that is Matthew Murdock's apartment.

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The simple fact is she's been needing to do this for a while now. The air between her and Matt is as thick and dirty as the night over Hell's Kitchen, and while he might be hurting over something that could once have been a very good thing for both of them, the past is the past, and there are more important things at play here. Things that go beyond a few heated kisses and a date that never went anywhere. Things that go beyond their pride and the betrayals - both perceived and real.

Not that it makes much difference which is which in the grander scheme of things. Not that it makes much difference at all.

She's bought takeout - Chinese - and a six pack of German beer and all that needs to happen now is he needs to be home and not running the streets, saving lost souls that need him less than he needs them.

That's his downfall. She thinks it always will be.

She steps out of her car and a breeze runs through her hair and over her skin - still clammy from the smoke and sweat in the air at Josie’s. It almost feels cold but when she shivers she knows it has nothing to do with the temperature.

The last time she came to Matt's apartment, she found Elektra in his bed. And yes, she knows now that in that moment it was innocent, but she also knows so much more too. There's a part of her that almost hopes she finds that again, but if Elektra was in his bed, Karen wouldn't be here and her messages to Elektra wouldn't still be unread on her phone.

She put a pin in that. It's time to take it out.

She walks into the foyer, past the postboxes on the left and the trash on the right, walks up the stairs to his door. She wonders if he already knows it's her, if he's picked up her footfalls, her gait, if he can smell her in the air.

She raps smartly on the door, waits only a few seconds until she hears his voice, rich and musical, on
"Hello?"

"Hey," her voice cracks and betrays her. "It's me."

He doesn't say anything and for what seems like a long while all she can hear is the cars outside and kids yelling in the streets.

"Can I come in?" Light. Gentle. "I have beer… and Chinese."

She wonders when she felt like she'd need to resort to bribery.

There's another long silence and then she hears the deadbolt turning and the scrape of wood across the floor.

He stands there in the darkness, in casual jeans and that black Henley that fits too well. His feet are bare and there's something smooth and instrumental on the record player.

She swallows hard, wonders if this is how he felt the day he arrived at her apartment with those sunflowers and the wine she couldn't drink.

"Did I interrupt you?"

"No I was just reading."

"Anything good?"

*Bukowski maybe.*

He shakes his head. "John Grisham. Guilty pleasure."
"I guess we all need some of those."

He nods without smiling.

"Some of us more than others."

He leaves that to hang heavily in the air as he steps aside and ushers her into the apartment and she chooses not to read into it.

She heads to the kitchen counter and he switches on a few lights.

"That good?" He asks. "There's another switch next to you for the downlights if you need it."

"No," she says as she pulls the takeaways out of their bag, grateful that the rustling of the plastic fills the silence. "This is good."

It's not good. It's not good at all. It's fraught and strained and she cherishes every split second that she postpones the inevitable silence that she'll need to find a way to fill.

He lingers near the sofa, clearly as uncertain as she is, even on his home turf, and she wishes it didn't have to be like this. She wishes they'd both been different.

_Better._

But there's no time for that now. There isn't time or space for that particular flavour of regret. She isn't here to apologise. She decided that on the way over. While she's sorry he's hurt and she's sorry they've lost something precious to them, she's not sorry that she fell in love and that the person she did it with wasn't him.

Frank's love doesn't make her small and ashamed. She won't allow it to be sullied like that, no matter how many people try.
Finally, she has nothing left to do, nothing left to unpack and she takes a breath and looks across his living area, where he still stands like a shadow.

She cracks open the beers, hands him one and puts his bowl of Peking roast duck on the coffee table, next to a plate of fussily arranged dumplings. He makes no move to acknowledge any of those things.

"Why are you here, Karen?"

There was once a time when he wouldn't have asked. He would have just been happy that she was. She would have been happy too.

That time feels very long ago. Not quite lost but fast becoming that way.

She regards him sadly and sinks down into an armchair. It's uncomfortable, hard, and she guesses he doesn't spend much time in it, or maybe he just likes to suffer.

Maybe they all do.

"Can you… can you sit down please?"

He sighs, shakes his head like this is both too big of a favour to ask and also entirely unnecessary, but he sits on the couch, takes a sip of his beer and then leans forward, elbows resting on his knees.

She shoves a forkful of the duck into her mouth. She knows objectively it's good - the restaurant she got it from is authentic and upmarket, a luxury she could only afford now with a full time grown up job - but chewing it feels like an effort and she has to wash it down with a gulp of beer. The next mouthful tastes like cardboard and her stomach heaves.

She's not hungry - she doesn't remember the last time she was - and neither is he. His plate remains untouched.

"So are you going to tell me what's going on?"
He manages to keep most of the exasperation she knows he's feeling out of his voice, but all it does is make room for the hurt to break through.

"Firstly, I wanted to thank you," she says. "For testifying … what you said about Frank."

"You already did."

He inclines his head to where his phone lies on the coffee table. He hasn't answered any of her messages but at least she's now sure he got them.

"It's not the same," she says. "Not like saying it in person."

"And it's not the reason you're here." He says flatly.

"No," she concedes. "But it needed to be said. I don't know if we would have won without you."

"You haven't won. Not yet."

"Well…” she starts, glances at the dumplings, and the beer dangling between his long fingers. "...that's the other reason I'm here."

He sighs. "Of course."

Once this would have been easy. Once - before Daredevil and before The Punisher - coming to his apartment with takeout to ask for a favour wouldn't have been a thing, it wouldn't have been this strange push and pull, fraught with fear at overstepping or appearing ungrateful. Once, not too long ago, she thought that was lost to them forever and now she thinks it even more likely that it is. She just didn't realise how much she didn't want that to be the case.

She puts her food down. She's not going to eat it and she doubts he will either.
"Do you remember the night of my birthday?"

He smiles. It almost reaches his eyes.

"The night Frank bled all over your car. The night all this started. Yes I remember that. It's not the easiest thing to forget."

She knows somewhere in his head, even though he would never admit it, he views that night as the beginning of the end, the night he lost her, the night she took Frank Castle into her bed, for better or worse.

He couldn't be more wrong though. On all counts. He didn't lose her and it didn't start that night. It didn't start the night in the mountains either or the time in the diner when he murdered two men in front of her.

Maybe it started when Frank said "stay". Or maybe it started one night in the ass end of nowhere when she pulled a trigger and crashed a car and two people died and she got to live. Maybe Karen Page was always destined to fall in love with death. Maybe she didn't even need to fall.

She pushes the thought away. It's not the time.

"Before that, at Josie’s. You said you were keeping tabs on Vanessa Marianna - she opened a new gallery…"

"I did," he clears his throat. "I was."

"How?" She asks.

He frowns. "Karen, you know the importance of protecting a source… even a bad one."

"Yes, I do," she says. "But Matt, they're probably going to try and pin everything that happened at the warehouse on Frank--"
"They don't even know what happened at the warehouse."

"Drugs, human trafficking… they don't need to know much more than that. Russian influence and corruption… and Frank is perfectly positioned to be the fall guy for it. It ties everything up in a neat little bow and puts him away forever."

"And don't you think that's justice, Karen?" He asks suddenly, voice hard and jaw set in a straight line, and her heart drops like a stone.

"How can you even say that? You? Of all people."

"He's just got away with murdering 37 people that we knew of on a technicality. Those people are still dead, their families still grieving. That's not justice, Karen. That's not how the law is supposed to work."

"So it's okay then if he rots for hurting women and children he helped save? It's fine for the actual culprits to get away with this? Fisk? Vanessa? Madame G--?"

She cuts off before she can finish her name but he doesn't seem to find her inclusion in the list of the guilty particularly surprising.

"No, of course not. That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean then?"

"I meant he's guilty, Karen. He is. He's murdered people. He's destroyed lives and saying it's because he's sad isn't an excuse. Other people died at Central Park that day - You don't see their husbands or fathers out on the streets doing what he does. You don't see them torturing people. When does he get held accountable? When does he pay penance? And don't tell me he pays it every day he lives without his wife and children. He doesn't get a free pass because he's sadder and angrier than the rest. That's not justice."

She has nothing to say to that. He's right. He's absolutely right. She said it herself once - Frank belongs in jail - and now she'd do anything to make sure that doesn't happen.
She looks away from him, watches the record now spinning soundlessly on the player on the sideboard. She should have expected this. Matt's always been righteous. Judgemental. Dogmatic. Humourless to the point of dry. She doesn't blame him; she can't exactly expect a blind, abandoned orphan to be a ray of sunshine. She also doesn't have the power to change that or fix it. Despite what he might think about what they once might have had, she knows with stark clarity that she doesn't have what it takes to get his blood up and hot. The joy she could have once brought him is fleeting, superficial.

It's not possible for a shadow to make light. Knowing and accepting that is more of a relief than anything else.

Still, it doesn't help with the here and now and she looks down at her shoes, at a small scuff on the one toe where the patent leather is dull and rough. She'll need to get that fixed - either buffed out or replaced. She'll need to do something.

"It's funny." He says sipping his beer.

"What is?" She sighs, 100% sure it's not funny at all.

"Before I told you about what I did, and who I was, about Daredevil, I thought that you were the one who didn't know me, that I was guilty for keeping secrets from you… and I was. I'm not denying that. I just never realised that I didn't know you either. I never realised how dark your darkness is," he huffs, mouth twisting into a half smile. "I guess it serves me right. What is it they say about those that won't see…"

"Stop," she says. "Just stop. It wasn't about you or trying to get back at you. Stop pretending it is. I love him for himself, who and what he is, no matter how ugly. There's nothing that would have changed that. Not you. Not Maria. Not anything he's done."

He frowns.

"Is this your own punishment, Karen? Is this how you atone for the things you've done?"

Her head jerks up and her gut twists painfully.

"You don't know what I've done," she says between gritted teeth.
"No," he says. "I don't, but I know it drives you. I know it has you seeking redemption in places where there's no redemption to be found."

He's right. He's also never been more wrong.

"Frank isn't punishment for me," she says. "He isn't some subconscious way for me to torture myself."

He looks dubious, hand vaguely indicating the spread on the table in front of him. "You sure about that?"

She won't rise to that. Not like this.

"He's good and kind and decent. He doesn't lie to me."

"Confession is still easier. Quicker too."

She licks her lips and shakes her head. "I guess it is but I don't need it. I'm not sorry. Not about him. I never was."

He sighs and something passes over his face that looks almost like defeat. "You'll do anything for him. You'll give up everything for him if he asks."

"Good thing he doesn't ask then."

"He will," he says mildly. "One day, he will."

He's so assured, so absolutely certain in this conjecture that it makes her blood boil and she curls her hands into fists. She's sure he knows. Sure he can feel the change in temperature, hear the elevated beating of her heart.
"It doesn't matter though.

"Damnit Matt, I know you're not happy about this. I know you're upset about him and me, I know you're pissed that he went to the warehouse that night to help you. I know you hate the fact that you're more like him than you want to admit. What's it he said to you once? That you're one bad day away from being him--""

"I've had a lot of bad days. But as I said, like all the other people at Central Park I'm not out there murdering people."

"-- but you can't be okay with this. You can't be okay with allowing people like Fisk off the hook just so Frank can sit behind bars."

She spits the last words out and falls back into the chair, breathing heavily, while her fear and anxiety melds into anger and determination.

He's silent for a long time, sipping his beer, face inscrutable.

She doesn't think this is faked or forced calm. She's only seen Matt prone to pacing or other attempts at diverting attention a few times since she's known him - it might be something to do with not being able to see, although she's fairly sure he gets the tone of any encounter better than most. But this is different. He seems to genuinely be considering his answer, weighing up the pros and cons of doing what she asked.

"My source won't know anything. They were so low down on the chain of things, they were barely more than a blip… it's all I needed considering the point was just making sure Vanessa stayed where she was supposed to."

"Didn't work out too well, did it?"

He shakes his head. "I can't help Karen."

"You can. I know you can."
"No, I can't. This wasn't some big spying operation. I asked my source to keep an eye out and they did. There's nothing in what they sent me that will help you with anything."

"You don't know that."

"I went over their intel a hundred times after the warehouse, searching for things I'd missed. I didn't find anything. It's just invoices, photographs."

"But I didn't go over it. Come on Matt, this is what I do. I just need something to help me build a timeline."

He gives her a smile she refuses to label as indulgent and shakes his head. "It's useless, Karen."

"Is it? Or do you just want it to be?"

For the first time since she arrived he looks almost angry and there's a small victory in that.

"I'm not exposing my source. Not for Frank Castle and definitely not to put them in Wilson Fisk’s crosshairs if it came to that."

"I wouldn't put their names on anything. No one would know. Come on, I've been doing this for a while now - I've never exposed a source."

"Neither have I," he shakes his head. "Enough people have died and I'm not putting someone else at risk for something that won't go anywhere…. Besides I would have thought Elektra would be a better source of information than anyone I ever found. I know you've been talking to her."

"She's not exactly around right now."

"No, she's in Hong Kong with Stick. They're trying to find out more about The Hand… The Black Sky… Madame Gao."

So that takes the pin out of that particular stressful post-it note. She's weirdly relieved, both by the
fact that Matt knows and that Elektra is with Stick. But at the same time it makes her sad. She purses her lips, let's her anger rise in her blood as she watches him.

"Something wrong?" He asks.

"No, I'm just surprised she told you about that."

"Why?"

She considers his question for a while. She thinks about the fact that he's sitting here in front of her and Elektra is on the other side of the world, searching for answers to her own existence and how to thwart destiny.

"She was scared of what your reaction would tell her," she says evenly. "You're here, so she was right."

He smiles as if he's just been caught in a lie. "You think I should have gone with her."

"Doesn't matter what I think."

"Yeah it does. It always matters what you think."

There really are times he's an insufferable ass.

She puts her beer on the table and leans forward in her chair. He might not be able to see her but he mirrors her movement until there's only a foot or so between their faces. She could slap him if she wanted to. Even he wouldn't be fast enough to avoid it.

But she doesn't need to slap. She can hurt in other ways.

"I think..." she says. "I think, one day when you wake up alone, it won't have anything to do with me. You'll realise it's not because of me and my choices."
He nods and smiles sadly. "But when you wake up alone it will be because of your choices."

"Yes… and I'll find a way to live with that."

For a while, neither of them say anything. The record spins, throwing out some low level static, and outside a police cruiser wails, casting blue and red lights on the walls.

The seconds stretch to minutes and then when she can’t bear it anymore, she stands, picks up her purse. This was pointless. It served nothing other than to highlight their faults and mistakes. It's time to accept what they have can't be repaired. Not with all the will in the world.

"Goodbye Matt," she says and he gives no indication that he's heard her.

She walks across his living area, glances at the record sleeve on the sideboard as she goes. It's Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*. Somehow that seems fitting. Gentle. Dramatic. Terrible things going on beneath a calm surface.

Hand on the doorknob and she casts one final look around his apartment. Despite the lights it seems dark and foreboding and he sits there in the middle of it like the eye of the vortex.

She can leave him. She can leave him and never look back if that's what needs to happen.

"Why do you love him so much?" He asks as she pushes the door open and the stuffy night air filters in.

He has no right to ask, but the answer is easy. She lifts her head. He can't see her but he must sense her defiance.

"Because I don't know how else to do it."

For the first time tonight, his entire demeanour softens and briefly it seems like he'll have no answer, but then he nods thoughtfully and there's nothing but complete and utter sincerity in his voice when
he speaks. "That's a very good way to love."

"Yes," she says and her voice is soft but clear and firm. "Yes it is."
Chapter Notes

Can I say I'm really enjoying the fact that this is so firmly Karen's story, and while Frank is a huge part of her story, this is giving me a chance to explore so many aspects of her character.

Also I am so excited to be bringing in someone new who just complicates this whole thing even more.

Song title is from Jewel "Standing Still".

On Thursday there's some unexpected construction going on in the basement of the Bulletin's building and the drilling echoes and vibrates all the way up to her floor making it impossible to talk, let alone think. It drives Ellison quite mad too and he sends everyone home who doesn't have to be chained to their workstations.

He stays though, sitting stoically at his desk with a pair of noise-cancelling headphones jammed over his head.

"You don't have to be a martyr, you know?" Karen says as she stops by to say goodbye.

"No, but I do have to be the editor of this newspaper," he says wincing as he pulls the headphones away from his ear. "Unfortunately I own one of the asses that needs to be in its seat."

"You're too hard on yourself."

"That's rich, coming from you… besides if you feel guilty enough maybe you'll start that book."

Yeah, fat chance of that now. She'd be surprised if Matt would give her a smile let alone trust her enough to tell his story with dignity and discretion.

"We had a deal."
"Yeah," he says. "I know, but maybe seeing me here like this - suffering - will get the better of you."

"Not enough guilt in the world for that."

"Yeah, I don't know what I was thinking, Mrs Frank Castle."

She makes a face and briefly he looks almost contrite. "Too much? Too soon?... too close to the truth?"

"You know the answer to all those questions."

He shrugs. "Go home Karen. Save yourself the migraine at least. I've sent a message to Facilities to find out how long this is going to go on for - could be that the whole damn lot of you can work from home until it's done, because this is hell on earth. God knows what the publishers and owners would do if you all sued for tinnitus and breach of working conditions at the same time, which is something I would never ever encourage you to do. Ever. Forget I even mentioned it."

She gives him a smile that's not entirely forced and wishes him good luck, but he's already got his headphones back on and is glaring at his screen like he can make the newspaper appear just be willing it to.

So she goes home and she puts in more hours than she would in the office and when she's finished she stares at the corkboard above her desk - at the little smiley wrapper that no doubt once contained heroin or cocaine, maybe even meth, although she has to admit that seems a bit low end for whoever's behind this. Meth doesn't replace heroin, same way ketamine doesn't replace cocaine. Dealers swap out like for like... or something better with a lower price tag. She would know, after all.

She shuts the thought away - it has no place here, or anywhere else for that matter.

She turns her attention to the newspaper clippings of Alexei and the photos from the aftermath at the warehouse, at the images of Elektra standing underneath an umbrella and doing what she could to throw doubt and suspicion on people other than Frank.

That may have worked for a while. Karen doesn't think after Batzer's judgement it'll carry on that way. They'll go for him. They'll go as hard as they need to.
Her gaze finally drifts to Vanessa's pictures and how absolutely none of the connections she's made link her and Smirnov Holdings, nothing but Elektra's word and the four bullets in Frank's back.

The fact is simply that she just needs more information than she has, proof that these dots all line up somehow. And she doesn't have a shred of it. It's out of reach so it doesn't really matter what she knows or suspects.

She hasn't bothered to go to Mahoney yet, although she thinks she might have to try her luck anyway. Her intended pitch to him rested on Matt's cooperation and she feels that familiar glow of rage at his adamant refusal to help. Not that she's entitled to it - she knows she isn't - but she's surprised by his lack of foresight about what pinning all of this on Frank could mean.

*It doesn't matter*, she tells herself. She'll find something on Vanessa one way or another. She doesn't care how.

She sighs, makes herself some coffee and stares at Pickle lying in a sunbeam on her back without a care in the world. Well, maybe that's not entirely true; the cat misses Frank, that much is obvious and it's not uncommon for her to patrol the apartment at night searching for him and yowling loudly when she can't find him.

Karen rubs her bare foot over Pickle's belly, gets a sharp swat with a paw for her trouble.

"What's going on, girl?" She asks. "Can you and your army of cat spies tell me?"

Apparently they can't and Pickle goes back to rolling around on the floor, kicking an almost shredded blue worm toy with her back feet.

Karen huffs. *It's fine*, she tells herself. *It's something you're not seeing. Tell it to yourself like a story. Tell it to yourself like you're writing a mystery.*

She was always good at telling stories. It was what her mom used to say… Kevin too and she pushes that thought away as far as she can because she knows if she falls down that rabbit hole it'll be a long and hard climb back up.
She sips her coffee, eyes the board, lets her thoughts flow for a while before forcing them to become more coherent and logical.

It started with Fisk. He wanted to buy the city, own it, and brandish his own form of justice. For that he needed the Japanese and the Russians, some others with interests in building their empires… Nobu, Madame Gao, the Ranskahov brothers - all of them now dead except Gao. That's not a coincidence. Not at all.

But that all went to hell and now he's sitting in a jail cell, maybe not rotting, maybe not neutralized forever, but still stuck. Down, if not out, although she has to wonder how much clout he still wields. And wouldn't that be a thing? Hasbeen mobster still pulling the strings from inside a jail cell? It's the plot of every noir movie and sometimes she feels like that's exactly what she's living in.

Regardless, that left Vanessa to do what she could to make things right. That's where Smirnov Holdings and Alexei as a puppet came into it.

She grabs her laptop, pulls up a folder of her articles on Alexei. She'd already written three about him before she'd been taken that night in December and Frank saved her and a dog and this whole thing between them started.

(Don't you know?)

Yes, she knows. And she knows so much more now.

The articles themselves were not massively scathing. Ellison wasn't on board with her suspicions so all they really say is that Alexei was a successful entrepreneur who was independently wealthy and they're peppered with a few questions about where his money came from. It was fairly standard for business pieces but she obviously got their attention even then. And while she's fairly certain her kidnapping was a ruse to draw Matt, Frank and Elektra out, she gives herself enough leeway to believe that someone somewhere was worried enough about her attention to want her taken out too.

Still doesn't explain why Gao was involved or gave a fuck about the Russian mafia or Fisk's girlfriend.

She has to wonder if it matters though. The possibilities are limited - money, protection or maybe Gao thought hedging her bets with Vanessa would bring her closer to finding a Black Sky and maybe that's where the people trafficked into the warehouse fit in. It's easy to think it could simply be
a combination of all three and Karen suspects that might be closer to the truth than any of the possibilities on their own.

And if Elektra is right and Gao has Vanessa - and she refuses to let her mind meander too far down the path of what state Vanessa might be in - what does she intend to do with her?

Her eyes wander to a newspaper clipping of a picture of Vanessa and Fisk from a fundraiser. Vanessa is tall and poised, wearing a cream satin dress that hugs her curves and Fisk is smart in his tailored suit; dapper despite his bulk.

What is interesting though is how he’s looking at Vanessa. The picture isn't posed and the camera that took it is hardly high end; the printing itself is subject to a little chromatic aberration (and in her head she can hear Ellison losing his shit about it, because along with Josie’s and dirt, that's one of his personal bugbears and she's heard him on the phone to printers yelling about it more than once) but even with all these flaws it's impossible to miss the fact that Fisk is entirely smitten. Helpless almost in Vanessa's glow.

Perversely, it almost makes her feel sad. She knows enough now to know that monsters aren't always monsters and despite everything - despite what he did to Ben, despite what James Wesley did to her - it still jolts her to see that side of Fisk. The softness. The neediness. The man underneath it all.

She finds she spends a lot of time looking for the men under the disguises... it's just sometimes the disguise is the man and the man the disguise.

(I thought that you were the one who didn't know me, that I was guilty for keeping secrets from you)

She wonders how Fisk reacted to the news about the Vanessa's death - even if the newspapers didn't report anything because there was nothing to report and no body to warrant any investigation - there's no way he doesn't have contacts who would have told him she was missing, presumed dead.

To be a fly on that wall...

A while ago she would have thought they would have all heard the explosion from Rikers itself, but maybe his grief has become more calculated. Tempered. Or maybe there's something else at play. Maybe something that could throw some light on the situation. Maybe something a little less real...
She pinches the bridge of her nose. She doesn't believe in resurrection. She didn't believe it when her Sunday school teacher told her and as she grew older she believed less and less in salvation too. Still, Vanessa Marainna alive and well would be an ace up anyone's sleeve if they wanted to turn Fisk compliant and were clever enough to do it. And Gao is clever. There's no doubt about that.

Which brings her back to not believing in resurrection. And that in turn brings her back to having nothing to make a connection between Vanessa and Alexei or Vanessa and Gao. Frankly if she hadn't seen Vanessa with her own eyes at the warehouse that night, she wouldn't have even imagined she was in the country. All she really has is Elektra's word and a haze of bullets and gunsmoke while the man she loved all but died in her arms.

It's not enough. It's nowhere near enough.

"Damnit, Matt," she says into her empty apartment, and Pickle makes a loud noise like a foghorn.

"Yes, girl," she agrees.


She draws big black holes to show where the gaps are and then she copies everything over to another sheet of paper and fills in some of those gaps pretending she believes what Elektra told her and that it's possible that people can rise from the dead. The truth is it's very existence makes her feel uncomfortable and she shoves it to the side and tries to ignore she spent time on it, even though she's not willing to throw it away.

She makes more notes, forgets to eat and only realises it's dark when Pickle starts yelling about the fact that the bottom of her bowl can be seen. She fills it and then checks her phone to see Ellison telling her to stay home for the next few days if she can - the construction is apparently scheduled to last at least another week.

And then it's back to her laptop, fresh coffee dark and strong in her mug. Briefly, her gaze falls on Billy Russo's business card and she wonders if he'd have a source who could help her. With his past and present, he's sure to know people in low places who could help.

She picks up his card, taps the corner of it on the coffee table, while she thinks the idea through.
He's not about to just help her no questions asked and she wonders what is the least she could say in order to get him to agree. She wonders what he'll ask in return.

No. Scratch that.

She doesn't wonder. She *knows*. He wants to break Frank out and even though Frank trusts him implicitly, she's not convinced he won't deliberately come up empty-handed just to force his jailbreak idea to become reality.

She puts the card down.

Not now. Not yet.

She never needed Billy Russo before and she doesn't need him now, not at least until she's exhausted all other options.

She works well into the early hours of the morning and eventually falls exhausted into bed where sleep evades her until her alarm goes off and she drags herself into the shower to start another day.

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"Listen Karen, it's not my case."

It's become so common for Mahoney to look and sound like he needs a six week holiday to recover from the weekend that it almost seems normal. She'd finds she might worry if he looked well rested and calm. She wonders exactly what his shifts are like these days and then thinks maybe she shouldn't ask.

It's Monday morning and the crime briefing is over, the other reporters having shuffled out in a cloud of cigarette smoke and bad tempers and she's decided to hedge her bets with Mahoney in the absence of absolutely anything else coming to light in her investigations and cornered him as he stepped out into the corridor.
"You have access to the evidence from the warehouse though. You are one of the lead detectives."

"Yes, but…"

"But you don't trust anyone…” she finishes for him. "This is Fisk all over again. You must see that."

The expression on his face tells her all she needs to know.

"Karen--"

"If I could just see it, then maybe…”

"You remember there was a fire there, right?” He asks. "I would have thought that would be something you remember. Fires burn things, including evidence, no matter how much you need it."

She rolls her eyes. "Yes but you must have started to look into Alexei and--".

He gives her a smug smile, which he seems to have to put a lot of effort into, but still tells her he's caught her out. "So it's not just the warehouse evidence you want. You want everything we have on Alexei and his companies."

"I never said that."

"No, you didn't, but I've dealt with my share of crime reporters and you guys have a knack for taking a ruler when all you've asked for - and been offered - is an inch."

This is, she has to admit, 100% true. It's also not nearly enough to stop her.

"Come on Brett, you know Frank isn't the guilty one here. You know this is much bigger than him and you know the police force is on the take…”
"Keep your voice down." He hisses, glancing behind him and then into the corridor perpendicular to where they are standing.

"So it's true then?"

He sighs, gives her a look that's halfway between exasperation and relief.

"Karen Page--"

"You can tell me."

He rolls his eyes but she knows she's broken through at least the first barrier of his defences.

He takes her arm and pulls her into a musty smelling waiting room and closes the door, glances at the small but obviously broken surveillance camera in the corner.

He sighs. "You are going to get into trouble and you're going to take me with you."

She doesn't answer, just folds her arms and lifts an eyebrow. He holds her gaze for a few seconds and then folds like a cheap suit, shoulders sagging and hands falling helplessly to his sides.

"Yes okay it's true. I've known for a while, suspected for even longer. I never trusted Smirnov, not from the first day he waltzed into Hell's Kitchen and started bidding to buy the park of 10th and it only got worse from there. My nephew's school was next on the list and his mom has only got him into a new one now…"

"We really should have spoken sooner," she says and he nods.

"Yeah. But I can't exactly discuss cases with civilians. And it's not like there's a long list of people I can trust around here."

"You can trust me."
He frowns. "Yeah, until Frank Castle is involved and then all bets are off… I know you, Karen."

Okay, she can give him that. Partially. He can have a little bit, but not much.

Gentle sigh. Self-deprecating smile, which she doesn't hold for too long. It's mostly to give her time to bite her tongue and stop herself from rolling her eyes.

Mahoney might make sense, but she's so tired of having to explain Frank and his code to people who already know it.

"You know him. If this was murdered mobsters and rapists on meathooks I'd tell you, you were right, but drugs and racketeering…? High crime and corruption? Human trafficking? Please, that's not Frank."

"Yeah I guess he doesn't have the finesse."

She gives him a dark look. "He doesn't have the evil. He punishes. He doesn't scheme. He doesn't hurt innocent people for personal gain. Don't you remember how many rapists and child molesters he put down? Does that strike you as someone involved in trafficking?"

"You can't just pin every bad thing that ever happened to this city in the last two years on him. And wouldn't you rather have the actual culprit behind bars?"

*And don't you dare start waxing lyrical about how this is justice anyway or I'll put my fist through your teeth.*

But while Mahoney is a lot of things he's not Matt.

He shakes his head and his demeanour softens even further.

"Yeah I know all these things about Castle. Doesn't excuse the things he's done… but I guess, considering the latest judgement, that doesn't matter now."
She sighs. "I'm not going to sit here and debate his guilt with you. He's decent and he has a code and you already know that."

Mahoney looks at her dubiously but he doesn't object and she can't help but think that deep in his heart of hearts, he knows she's right and that it's a conclusion he's already come to on his own. Not that that will stop him trying to put Frank away. Not that it should.

But that doesn't seem to be something he's too concerned with right now.

Instead he's quiet, frowning, and then in a sudden moment of vulnerability he sinks down into a plastic chair and runs his hands over his head.

"What makes you think I have anything anyway? I told you it's not my case."

She folds her arms, cocks her head. "Because you're you… you've been doing your own off the books investigation haven't you?"

It's not exactly a shot in the dark, but it still is a complete and utter bluff and it pays off.

"Yeah…" he sounds almost guilty. "But I'm hitting a dead end. I can't find out anything concrete about Alexei or his company. It's like he puffed into existence fully grown and rich and then Frank Castle shot him--"

"To save me."

"Yeah, I figured as much," he concedes. "The bullet that killed him was precise, even if the gun used was about ten times more powerful than it needed to be."

"It was in my statement. Alexei was torturing Frank, then he took me as a hostage…"

"Yeah I can see how that didn't work out well for him…" Mahoney says dryly.
He's quiet for a while and she can all but see the cogs turning in his mind.

She decides to give him something.

"When I said it's Fisk all over again, I wasn't being figurative."

His head snaps up and he glances around the waiting room again as if there was a chance he missed someone hiding behind its plastic chairs and unsteady pine tables.

"I'm hoping you've got some other explanation and not that Fisk is actually behind this all." He’s trying to sound disbelieving but his voice is strained and pleading.

She doesn't say anything and he shakes his head even though she's fairly sure he's already past the point of denial.

"Fisk is in Rikers," he says firmly.

She huffs. "But Vanessa Marianna isn't."

He frowns. "Vanessa? What's she got to do with any of this?"

She decides not to blow his credulity immediately, so she sits down opposite him and briefly sums up what she knows excluding the bit about ancient mystical cults and resurrection. She tells him that she had a source that alerted her to the fact that Vanessa was providing the cash and the backing and that it was confirmed when Vanessa turned up and shot Frank in the back four times. She adds that she saw Vanessa die but there was apparently no body.

“So where is her body?”

"I thought it would be in the morgue. You didn't see that in the statement Delaney took from me when I was in the hospital?"

Mahoney shakes his head. "No. If I recall correctly, he said you didn't know who shot Frank and put
it down to the fact that bullets were flying and no one really knew what was going on. He made a point of saying you were distraught and your recollections were vague."

"I think I would remember who shot Frank," she says softly and she takes a moment to push away the image of him bleeding out in her arms.

"Yeah, I guess you would."

"Well, there's your first confirmation of someone on the take."

He sighs. "I always liked Delaney."

She lets him have a moment before she moves ahead.

"I've been putting together timelines and appearances, trying to follow the money and see where things intersect, where Vanessa came into it, what she's been doing for the past 18 months. If we could pool what we know—"

"I've looked at the Smirnov evidence a hundred times…"

"But I haven't."

He sighs again and it's so tired and so resigned, her heart almost breaks.

"Karen, does this source of yours have any actual physical evidence that she's involved other than their say so?"

Mahoney never was one to shy away from the immediately pragmatic. It's something she's always appreciated about him, even when it means she's about to be severely disappointed.

"No."
"I see."

"If we could just--"

"Look," he says standing up and even though he still looks exhausted, there's something in his stance
that seems to have a little more life in it. "I believe you. I don't want to, but I do. It's as good an
explanation as any. It makes sense. I don't want to it to but I do. It's also easy because it's not even
much of a conspiracy…"

She didn't realise how much those words would mean to her and she finds herself sagging with the
relief of it all.

"But," he continues. "You've got to bring me something concrete. Something that's not just hearsay
and theorizing. Because right now I could be forgiven for hearing is 'my mass murdering boyfriend is
in jail and I really don't want him to be'."

"Is that really what you believe?"

He sighs. "No. No I don't believe that, but I do believe he should be in jail and you're going to have
to do more than ask nicely before I change my mind."

"Brett--"

He shakes his head. "I'll help you Karen. I will. But I need some reason to justify doing this when
people start asking questions. Get me that answer and we can talk."

She guesses it's more than she expected. And she hates the fact that her mind immediately jumps to
the Anvil business card on her corkboard.

"Okay," she says nodding. "Okay, I'll find something."

She has no idea how. Every single lead is a dead end.
"Alright." He glances at his watch. "I have to go now, but I don't think we can meet here anymore for this.

"When you get something, call me at home or let me know in one of the morning sessions. I'll find you."

She appreciates the fact that he said 'when' and not 'if'.

"If I tell you I know where they sell Malboro cheap, then you'll know."

He rolls his eyes. "Mama Mahoney does not need any more cigarettes - and you can tell that to Mr Nelson too. And you'll have those other sad sacks of shit that ooze in here every morning after you for that too. Cheap cigarettes would be like Christmas to them."

She gives him a smile that's less forced than it feels and picks up her purse.

She's disappointed but she guesses she couldn't have realistically expected more. And yet somehow her spirits are up and she sees a flicker of hope at the end of this very long and dank tunnel.

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The morning is lost to writing the crime report and other various pieces of nonsense that Ellison feels entitled to foist upon her. But from about two o'clock, she stares at her notes and lists and other creations that she imagines makes her look like some kind of insane conspiracy theorist who needs a psych evaluation more than a lead. More than once she picks up Billy Russo's card and puts it back down again, angry at herself for even considering it.

Apparently a quick smile and great hair doesn't have as much effect on her as it once might have done.

Still, he's there, in the back of her mind like a lifeline, a safety net, if everything else goes to hell. And she wonders when her mind betrayed her and started to associate "safety" of any kind with the likes of Billy Russo.
Not yet, she tells herself. You're just frustrated (and desperate). You don't want to put yourself in his debt.

And yet by the time it's dark and well into the night, she's no further than she was before, save for six cold coffee cups on her table and a yelling Pickle in the corner.

She picks up the card again, unlocks her phone and starts typing his number into it and is just about to press dial when the buzzer for her door sounds.

It sounds loud and shrill in the silence and she frowns and checks her watch. It's 10:47 and usually any visitors she has at this time of night tend to favour the drama of her fire escape rather than the front door.

She stands, leaves her phone flashing on the table and answers the intercom.

"Delivery for you."

Irene's voice is harsh and strained, crackling more than the expected static on the system, but there's something upbeat to it too, something amiable and excited. Something giddy.

“Are you alright?” she asks before she can stop herself and immediately regrets saying anything at all.

“Yes, of course,” Irene snaps back. “Are you coming or not?”

"I'll be right down."

Irene ends the conversation without another word and Karen stares at the intercom for a second, wondering why on earth she'd get a delivery at this time of night.

“You order tuna steaks?” she asks Pickle as she slips into a pair of flats.
Pickle makes a high pitched squeaking sound and rearranges herself on Frank’s pillow, stares hard at the front door as if she’s now ready for him to walk right through it.

Karen snorts, grabs her keys and heads down to the lobby, ignoring the elevator and taking the stairs two at a time. The building creaks around her as she goes but it's familiar and comforting. It's started to feel like home. Or maybe that’s just because Frank’s presence has become such an integral part of it, that she can’t conceive of it being anything else. Maybe, at the end of it all, he is home.

Maybe she is too.

And maybe she shouldn’t be thinking in those terms and rather devoting her time to getting him home after which they can figure out what exactly that means to both of them.

She pushes open the door from the stairwell into the foyer. It’s brightly lit and warm, and Irene sits behind her desk, beady-eyed and tight lipped. She's clasping her gnarled hands to her chest and her hair is scraped back into a severe bun. Not for the first time Karen wonders why she didn't become a school mistress or a matron of a woman's residence. It would have at least given her some power to go along with all her ire. Although there's no teenage girl in the world she'd wish that on.

"That gentleman came by," she says stiffly as Karen approaches.

She doesn't make the word “gentleman” sound like "john” but somehow she still sounds disapproving. Judgemental.

Karen's tempted to ask which gentleman - there are so many, after all - but she thinks that might just push Irene over the edge and leave herself wide open for more derision.

The tabloid press with their salacious headlines would have anything on Irene.

Besides this isn't Irene's normal type of disapproval - this feels different, almost more like exasperation and Karen's really not sure what to make of it.

"He didn't want to see you." Irene lets that hang in the air long enough to make sure her meaning is clear, but when Karen doesn't react she reaches behind her desk and pulls out a thick envelope. "He left this. Asked me to write a note."
It doesn't sound like Irene thought this was an imposition at all.

Karen takes the envelope and unfolds the sticky note on top of it, takes a breath before she reads Irene's scrawl.

\[ I \text{ was wrong. Confession isn't easier.} \]

No, she guesses for him it's not.

"Do you know what it means?" He wouldn't say." Irene asks and she nods.

"I do."

It breaks her heart, because that's what Matt does. He's righteous to a fault and she feels like a hypocrite for appreciating it only when it works to her advantage.


"Yes, he is," Karen says. "He really is."

\[ He's also the devil, but that's neither here nor there. \]

She turns and is almost at the elevator when Irene calls her back.

"I never said anything, you know?" She says and when Karen frowns, she continues. "About the other one with the broken nose. They asked - the police, the men from the newspapers too. They wanted to know if he was here often, if he stayed here, if I'd seen him… I didn't say anything. I told them I didn't know your comings and goings."

That stops her, one hand poised to press the button for the elevator. "Why not?"
For the first time since she's known Irene, she seems to soften and Karen can see the hint of a wistful smile playing on the corners of her lips.

"I always thought he was doing the city a favour before. Cleaning out the pimps and the drug lords. Made Hell's Kitchen a bit safer. Looked out for the ones who had no one looking out for them.

"I know it was about his wife and those poor children but I didn't care why he did it… just that he did."

"You knew who he was?"

"Course I did. I knew it the first night you brought him here and pretended you were both plastered. I know the difference between drunk and dying, even if sometimes they feel the same. Not like I could have missed the blood on his clothes."

"So you know he's done bad things."

"Yes, he has," Irene agrees, "But I was young once. I know what it's like to love the wrong man so much it feels right."

Irene gives her a knowing look and somewhere deep down it feels almost like camaraderie.

"Thank you," she says as the elevator opens in front of her. "That was kind of you."

"Nothing to do with kindness, I just like a clean city."

That's a lie, but Karen chooses to let her have it. "Well thanks anyway" she says stepping into the elevator and punching the button for her floor.

Maybe she's misjudged Irene, maybe she has a heart after all.
"Oh Miss Page," she calls and Karen glances back at her desk. "I hope the rehoming for that black cat is going well. There's no pets allowed in this building."

Karen pretends she doesn't hear as the doors close and she ascends to her apartment.

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"You're contraband," she tells Pickle and she dumps the envelope on the table. Pickle doesn't seem to care.

She doesn't want to but she makes herself take a few bites of some leftover pasta and makes another pot of coffee before sitting down on the couch. It's going to be another all nighter and somewhere she needs to remember to look after herself.

(It's not your job to fix me. It's my job to be fixed for you)

That goes both ways. It has to.

She slices the envelope open with a letter opener and pulls the contents out onto the table.

At first she doesn't bother to look at any of it too closely, just lets her eyes wander over the array of documents and photographs, flash disks marked as audio recordings, printouts of expenses for Vanessa's gallery - Le Centre De La Vie - in Paris, and its sister galleries in Florence, Budapest and Krakow, plus a planned expansion into Salzburg and Belgrade.

She muses at how all of this is even possible for a small bespoke gallery featuring only limited artworks, but she guesses that's probably not the right question to be asking in this instance anyway.

The documents are not arranged chronologically but each paper has a date stamp on it that she recognises as the one Matt used to use at Nelson & Murdock.

She wonders if he has Braille versions of all these papers and how he knew what was on the photos, although she suspects that maybe the audio recordings could provide some clarity on that.
She sips her coffee, glances at the time and pulls out her lists and flowcharts and gets to work.

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She starts with the Paris gallery and goes through the documents methodically, making notes of anything she sees of interest. The information itself is also staggered and scattered. She finds ledgers for three months and then nothing for the next four, followed by disparate invoices and accounts and then suddenly a month where every expense, down to a box of paperclips is listed.

There are regular payments of large amounts of money from a “Tempête de Neige” (which Google and some badly remembered French classes tells her means for “snowstorm”); she notes one particularly large amount of 3,75 million euros, and then there’s a number of big payments for various paintings and sculptures she's never heard of and don't turn up when she looks for them online.

There’s photos detailing almost every aspect of a holiday Vanessa took to Zagreb last July right down to the food she ate and her walks on the beach but nothing from a trip to Russia two months later, save a handwritten to-do-list which included “book tickets to Moscow” in between “buy cheese” and “call Gerard about car service”. She guesses that’s not that weird - it was September last year that Alexei started making headlines after all. If Vanessa was involved with him then, she’d probably keep it out of her accounting. Or that could just be wishful thinking.


She picks up the photos from Zagreb, turns them over, puts them back down and picks up the accounts for July. She scans over the hotel bookings, the car hire, even the walking tour booked to the Dalmatian coast and the invoices for some statues Vanessa bought while she was there, which also seemingly never made it into any kind of virtual space, but look suspiciously like some kind of tacky Lladro one can pick up from any medium level interior designer.

It’s frustrating because following the money has always been a rule of thumb for investigations, but she guesses it makes sense if Matt’s source was as low level as he claimed; it’s unlikely he or she would have been involved in every aspect of Vanessa’s comings and goings.

Still, it helps to fill in some of the blanks and give her an idea of Vanessa’s timeline over the past two years. She makes a ledger of her own, noting all the expenses in one column and the income in another, draws question marks over the missing months and other gaps.
There’s a small photograph hidden in the bottom of the envelope of Vanessa talking to a man who looks incredibly familiar and is just listed as her curator. But when she logs onto the Le Centre De La Vie website, he’s nowhere to be found in either the photogallery or the staff page.

By 1:38, she’s finished making the list of accounts for Paris and she turns her attention to the Florence gallery and repeats the process. She does the same for Budapest and Krakow.

At 3:17 she makes herself more coffee, gives Pickle a back scratch and a kiss between the ears which the cat happily submits to before jumping onto the coffee table to kick every pen and scrap of paper onto the floor.

As she picks up the papers, her eye falls an amount for 3,75 million euros in her notes for the month of January for the gallery in Budapest. She clocks it up to Tempête de Neige again, before noticing that she has it listed under expenses. Frowning, she rummages through the accounts again to make sure she didn’t make a mistake. She pulls out January’s Paris ledger and two her surprise there is an amount of 3,75 million euros attributed to one of the elusive art dealers for an unnamed piece by an anonymous artist.

Breath catching in her throat, she scans her notes again, looking for numbers that are repeated in both the expenses and incomes columns, draws red lines between them, heart beating a little faster every time she finds one.

When she’s done, her paper looks like a spiderweb of red veins, connecting nearly every amount over 10000 euros. Every entry in the income column is from Tempête de Neige and every single expense is for some inscrutable piece of art. The money is scattered too. Some amounts seemingly coming in from Salzburg but going out from Florence or Krakow. Others came in through Budapest and went out through Belgrade.

She goes back to her notes, checks the starting and ending balances of every month she can. In some cases where she has consecutive information, the differences in the balances value hundreds of thousands of euros, in one case it’s well over two million. And that’s just for Belgrade. The numbers for everywhere else are much, much higher.

By 5:45am, she's filled in a large portion of the black holes on her timeline, added the money together to find an amount nothing short of staggering going through Vanessa’s galleries, all coming from Tempête de Neige and leaving through a series of unknown art dealers - and that’s only for the months covered in the evidence. She knows if she ever got hold of the rest of them, there’d be much more. So much more.
She sits back on the couch, looks at the first hint of morning light coming through the curtains. She realises she’s cold and tired, hungry, but still stuck with that roiling feeling that comes with drinking too much coffee on no food.

“Jesus Christ,” she whispers. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

Vanessa wasn’t just a partner or a mystery investor or a shareholder for Smirnov Holdings - she was Smirnov Holdings. It was her company in everything but name. Well, hers and the Tempête de Neige.

Which leads to some very interesting questions… and some even more interesting ways to find answers. She’s so close. She’s so incredibly close she can almost taste it.

She’s also acutely aware that this is still all conjecture and it might not be enough for Mahoney, because all it looks like is Vanessa Marianna was doing some excessive money laundering in France. She fairly sure he’s going to say that proves nothing about Smirnov Holdings, even if it is interesting in and of itself.

What has done is open up more avenues for investigation, and with enough luck one of those will pan out.

She closes her eyes, rests her head against the backrest and considers her options, even though the truth is she knows there is only one. And it’s dark and dangerous and even the kernel of the idea makes her heart beat a little faster.

Matt would lose his mind, Foggy would probably have a heart attack and Frank, well she doesn’t even want to think about what Frank would do.

It doesn’t matter, she can’t think of that now. She won’t. She’s running out of time and this is the quickest way to solve anything.

She lets herself drift for a while, listening to the sounds of the early morning and thinking of nothing but getting Frank home and how good it’ll be when she does. She allows sleep to overcome her for a few hours, but when she wakes up she picks up her phone and, before she can consider it any further, she punches in a number, waits for a tired sounding woman to answer.
"Rikers State Penitentiary, good morning."

It’s about the furthest thing from a good morning that she can imagine. Her gut clenches and in that moment all she wants to do is put the phone down and find another way but she looks at Frank’s bloody handprint on her wall and she knows she can’t.

"My name is Karen Page from the New York Bulletin. I'd like to make a special request to interview one of your inmates."

“Press requests are at the inmates discretion and if approved at a time of the prison administration’s convenience. They could take up to a week for approval.”

“I understand,” she says.

"Very well,” says the woman. What is the inmate’s name?"

She takes a breath. No turning back now.

"Fisk,” she says. "Wilson Fisk."

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