

Exile on Main St.

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Exile on Main St.

by [Ghostcat](#)

Summary

Jessica Jones is doing okay by her own, admittedly low, standards. She has an actual checking account, is not currently considered a person of interest by the NYPD, and the ice cream truck that used to park outside her bedroom window at midnight blaring Turkey in the Straw finally found another block to torment.

But it wouldn't be her life without a complication.

(set post-Defenders)

Notes

Happy Yuletide, Chosenfire! I took a few of your prompts regarding Jessica and Matt and mashed them together. I hope you enjoy it, despite the detours!

AN: There's a bit of dialogue between Luke Cage and Jessica Jones that's taken directly from Alias #28 by Brian Michael Bendis. The context is slightly different.

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

On paper, it sounds like an easy gig. Play bodyguard to the blind lawyer recently unmasked by the New York Bulletin as the Devil-suited hero vigilante that keeps Hell's Kitchen safe from gangsters and assorted ninjas.

Only he's *not* the local hero vigilante, he's just a blind lawyer.

A blind lawyer with a six-pack and the reflexes of a stray cat.

See where's this is going? There's no way to keep someone like Trish from guessing the truth, even though right now she seems more concerned with other details.

"So when did you see his six-pack?" Trish asks with the polished on-air tones that she normally reserves for civic matters and local politics.

"I am trying to tell a story here."

"Sorry, continue."

It's been a late-summer September in the city. Cool enough that the garbage doesn't stink, but balmy enough to sit on her fire escape in a tank top and shorts when she needs that late night cigarette. But Jessica's not at home right now; she's at Trish's air-conditioned Home Sweet MOMA penthouse which does not have a fire escape. It has a terrace garden she's not allowed to smoke in so...useless, basically.

Jessica blows the hair out of her face. Aside from her inner turmoil over the developments she has yet to properly introduce, life is more or less fine. Suspiciously fine. The kind of fine before it all turns to shit and a half.

"Admit he's hot though. Handsome. Smart." Trish raises an eyebrow and nods her head once, poking Jessica with a foot. "Went to Columbia Law School. Does significant pro bono work. I read about it in the Times."

"Really? Fucking *really*?"

"I'm sorry, go ahead."

Jessica sighs. "Thank you. And I saw his six-pack because it rained and he was changing out of his shirt into a new one."

"And you looked."

"Pour me a drink."

Trish squeals like she's sixteen and lusting after Rider Strong. She pours Jessica a shot and pulls the bottle away with practiced ease when Jessica reaches for that instead.

"Please tell me he wears undershirts. Does he keep a spare pack in his office? He seems like the kind of man that might."

“I don’t know, weirdo. No. It was just chest. Which was baby smooth, come to think of it. What is he? A fucking bodybuilder?”

“That is even hotter.” Trish licks her lips, her voice dreamy. “Did he hang his wet shirt on a hanger? What does his apartment look like?”

“You’re so pathetic. Please get laid soon. Just not by my boss. Or another psycho cop.”

“Fine.” Trish straightens, suddenly business-like, as if Jessica were one of her interviewees. “So you’re getting paid big bucks to be the bodyguard for an attractive blind lawyer who is accused of being a super.”

“Correct.”

“Is he Daredevil?”

Jessica thinks of cancer and kittens, kittens with cancer, grandmas eaten by cancerous kittens. “No,” she lies. “He’s *blind*. How could he be Devil Boy or whatever? He can’t see, Trish.”

Trish narrows her eyes. “Did you sign an NDA?”

“I signed a ton of shit. Jeri’s fucking crazy. Anyway. Forget Murdock, he’s not the actual problem.”

Trish leans in, shaking her head the way she does when she doesn’t know what’s next. “What is it?”

“It’s my co-bodyguard.”

Jessica breathes in through her nostrils, breathes out of her mouth, reaches for her shot glass and knocks back the fancy-ass tequila Trish buys especially for these get-togethers. It doesn’t burn, and it really should.

“Who is it?” Trish frowns.

“It’s Luke. *Luke* Luke.”

My Luke, she thinks. Only he isn’t.

For once, her best friend is at a loss for words. Jess pours two shots this time and hands one to Trish. They drink at the same time.

“I am fucked.”

“Wow. It makes sense. Jeri’s been using him for protection details, right?”

“Yeah, him and little Danny Rand, Boy Fucking Wonder. They’re a duo now. Only Rand’s traveling somewhere with Hogarth, probably on a mystical cruise and I’m the lucky asshole filling in.”

“Huh.”

“I need to find a way out of this.”

Trish gawks at her, open-mouthed, and then her lips slowly form into a grin. “This could be good.”

“No, it really can’t.”

“Why? Think of all the time you’ll spend together. Talking, getting to know each other again. You told me everything was good between you, the last time you worked together. It was ‘nice and easy’ you said-”

“Trish...”

“And those are words I have never heard you say. Ever. ‘Specially not as a positive.”

“I never said that. That’s like, a shoe brand. Remember the commercials? Wasn’t that the one with the nun playing basketball in heels?”

“Nice. And. Easy.”

Jessica sighs. “Luke’s seeing someone. Like, the coolest, most competent lady I’ve ever met. Beautiful and kind and smart. There’s literally nothing wrong with her. I’ve looked.”

“Everybody has flaws.”

“I’m a dick. I can find flaws in anybody. She’s perfect. Trust me on this.”

“You’re not a dick.”

Jessica is, though. It is a choice that has served her well. Her closest friend gets the best of her however, so there’s undeniable bias at play. Trish shifts closer on the couch.

“Did you find out tonight? That you’re working with him?”

“Last night.”

“And you didn’t call me?”

Jessica reaches for the bottle on the table but Trish stops her again with a gentle hand on her forearm.

“I went for a walk.”

“Where did you go?”

“Staten Island. The ferry ride’s less crappy than I remembered. They’ve got beer and hot dogs.”

“Jess.”

The paused screen unfreezes and the loud blare of pay-per-view commercials rings out. Trish hits stop and puts the remote on the table.

“What was it like? Seeing him again? You hadn’t spoken to him since the bar meet-up, right?”

Jessica hadn’t noticed him at first, which is ridiculous considering he’s a huge guy and also she’s in love with him, probably will be forever, seeing him in every big dude in a hoodie around the neighborhood. He’d been bending down by the water cooler, a ludicrously teeny paper cup in his hand. Their eyes met and he straightened, squeezing a bright splash of water out. Waterworks aside, nothing in his expression changed. She thought she saw a pulse jump in his jaw but maybe she was just hoping for anything—any sign that he was as affected. He’d reached out and offered a cool, dry hand for her to shake, only he’d squeezed it instead. Reassuringly. Like she was a kid that needed a hug. The unsexiest thing possible. A little *buddy*.

“It hurt. But it’s fine. I’ll deal.”

Usually she sleeps right through the garbage men doing their early morning routes. They’re the roosters of NYC, yelling at each other as they throw shit into their trucks, disturbing the peace like it’s their second job. Her prime snooze hours are ten a.m. to noon so normally their noise doesn’t penetrate the deep end of her sleep.

She’s listening today though, sitting at her desk, refreshing her browser at ass o’clock on a Monday, wondering what fresh Matt Murdock expose will pop up today. Nothing yet, which means bupkis. Either The Post has nothing false to report, or they’re saving something juicy for the evening edition.

Not that anything is happening. There’d been no threat. Only the idea of a possible threat, hence the security detail. Either the criminal element didn’t believe the blind lawyer from Hell’s Kitchen was Daredevil, or they were biding their time before going on the offensive. Or a third, more troubling option—they were being held back by a bigger fish. A much bigger, balder fish with revenge on his mind.

Matt Murdock doesn’t seem to have any opinions about it, one way or the other. He comes to work, seems to do work, and then goes home. She isn’t sure if he’s been keeping his after-school identity on lockdown or if he’s returned to his old parkouring ways. For a smart guy, he can be a real idiot, which means the latter possibility is more likely. Following him on the sly isn’t really an option anymore, since he knows her by now, has a better sense of her, and is always aware when she’s around. She’d taken to just going with him wherever he went after work, whether he asked her to or not. Usually, a bar. Or his Sad Man apartment with no food but lots of booze and Stones records.

There's a couple of quick, zippy lock clicks as Malcolm lets himself in, stopping briefly at the sight of her before going into the kitchen. Sometimes he makes pancakes in her apartment and eats them while reading one of those free papers they hand you outside of the subway stations (because her place had somehow become the local IHOP for ex-mind-controlled-former junkies). Today is one of those days, the sound of whisking confirms it. Minutes later, the smell of brewing coffee fills her nostrils too. Her stomach rumbles.

"You don't live here," she yells.

"*You* barely do." He walks in with a plate of neatly stacked pancakes, puts it down on a side table and walks back out, returning moments later with two cups of coffee. He places one next to her under a drink coaster she never purchased. "Sometimes you sleep here, mostly we work."

"You don't work for me. I pay you to do stuff. Sometimes."

Malcolm sits on a used-but-clean vintage armchair that just appeared in her apartment one day. He balances the plate on his lap and digs in, chewing for a minute before swallowing.

"I took a couple of calls yesterday. One was from Mrs. Westerly, confirming the Chase Quickpay."

"What?"

"I set that up, it'll be faster to bill clients that way. I created an invoice for her after the fact. She says 'thank you' by the way." Another bite, followed by more rapid chewing.

"It was just a lost vase."

"With great sentimental value. Which is why she's grateful."

Truth be told, Mrs. Westerley handed her an easy one. An inherited vase that had gone missing one day and had to be found immediately because priceless, blah blah blah. Jessica knows that cases like that are simply a matter of following the right breadcrumbs: the maid who throws out stuff she thinks is garbage, a dumpster diver who brings said garbage to an antique store, an antique store owner who sells it to a collector. A collector who is willing to return the vase to the original owner, especially after seeing the photos Jessica has of him snorting Ritalin off his babysitter's glitter-nail-polished pinkie.

Malcolm's knife scrapes against his plate. "There were a couple of inquiries but I'll hold them off until the end of the month. That's when Mr. Rand gets back, right?"

"Mr. Rand is like, five years old. Call him Danny, please. Or Rand."

Malcolm looks at her expectantly. He looks so healthy and awake, she wants to punch him in the face.

"He comes back in twenty days." Jessica drinks the coffee. She wasn't going to, but she didn't sleep well and she needs to be alert. It tastes amazing. It also dribbles down her chin and onto her t-shirt. She scowls. Malcolm stands up.

“You need to go. I packed you a lunch.”

It occurs to Jessica that she doesn't have a rug, has never had one, and yet, Malcolm is standing on one. Nothing too fancy, probably an IKEA special; white with a black swirl.

“Why are you doing this?” She's not sure what she's referring to.

“Because you pay me. But I'm also your friend. You're struggling but getting stronger every day. I see it.”

Jessica leaves the room before her natural impulse to heave hits.

Her lunch is in a brown paper bag, folded and stapled at the top, all fucking ready for elementary school. She taps it against her leg and it makes an odd soft, then harder sound, like a sponge attached to cardboard. Malcolm probably packed a juicebox too. Dork.

Jessica leans on the shitty band flyer-covered lamppost and closes her eyes, trying to listen like Murdock does—the buzz and whine of the red hand/walking man crossing signs and the passing conversations—but it's all just noise, impossible to differentiate or decipher. The city is so noisy, no wonder he's such a weirdo. The din must've driven him batshit and right into that Halloween costume of his.

“Morning, Jessica.”

Creeper: He probably smelled her from his apartment. She tries to sniff her armpit discreetly. He smiles one of his dumb smiles.

“Ready?”

“Let's go, boss. Lead the way.”

This is the daily routine. She picks him up outside his building, then they walk to the office he shares with Foggy Nelson, who left Hogarth to work with Murdock again (and probably keep a close eye on him in case he disappeared for a second time). At the end of the work day, she walks him back or out, to chaste dinners with the blonde in the pencil skirt who always looks like she's a second away from crying—or drinks with Foggy at that godawful dive they seem to love. Luke usually shows up at some point, to relieve her of her duties or to work alongside. If the former, she goes home or goes out, drinks or doesn't, and sidesteps any emotions that might make it impossible to get up the next day.

It's all for show. She can pack a mean punch but Murdock, for all his whisper-voiced vagueness, can fight. He could easily get himself out of a surprise scrap. But of course, to do so in public, with civilian witnesses, would be to own up to being the Devil. And as Nelson keeps repeating—like a panicked chicken clucking at top volume—the lawyer and the hero can't be one and the same. If an ambush comes, she'll be the only one fighting, and her

employer will be expected to cower behind a trash can. There are no guarantees that he'll actually do so. She can't say Murdock will be any less stupid and impulsive than he was before getting buried under a high rise.

The story of Matt Murdock's return to the living was something she prefers not to think about too much. When she'd heard the news, that he was back and breathing, her anger had surprised her. Her happiness and relief had also surprised her. Murdock had offered no explanations—to her anyway—on how he'd managed to survive a fucking building collapse they'd all front-row witnessed. She was glad they weren't close because she might've had to murder him for it. Here he was though, strolling among the living, suddenly famous, thanks to that asshole Wilson Fisk and all the Bulletin journos he had in his pocket. Matt Murdock, blind lawyer and possible crime fighter, the new number one target for every criminal in the city with a score to settle.

Not that you'd know it. Murdock walks like there's nothing to fear. Like he can't hear the people whispering and pointing every time they stop at a light. Jessica mentally clocks them all, assessing and dismissing them as potential threats. Every now and then, a squirrely character stands out, and she goes into defensive mode, only for Murdock to put his hand on her shoulder and say something about how they're just late to work or hungry, and she doesn't know what to think. How is it any different than being inside people's heads? How could it possibly stop you from playing god?

Maybe he's not afraid of anything anymore. He's already died and come back to life.

"Jessica. Are you alright?"

They've arrived.

"Never better."

She stands out in the hallway, which she prefers over the waiting room. She reads, or stares off into space, trying not to think or remember. Nelson makes small talk and she humors him with a response or two. Murdock orders Brazilian food, and they invite her to sit down and join them. She plays with Malcolm's sandwich and restrains her eye-roll count as Nelson and Murdock try and outdo one another as the biggest dad-joke-loving losers in Hell's Kitchen.

It's not terrible, this gig. It's almost relaxing. Which is fucked up. Either she's getting boring, or just dumb. Calm isn't smart, calm means stupid. That's the mantra. Jessica knows she should be ready, in case the shit hits the fan and ninjas come flying from the vents. So she keeps a part of herself separate from this belonging, and tells herself it's the job and only the job that matters.

Luke arrives in the late afternoon with Claire Temple, who drops him off at the door to the suite with a peck on the cheek. They're not dicks about it, but she can see something real

there. She doesn't love it. Not because she's jealous necessarily, but because it makes her own feelings seem gross in comparison; one-sided, persistent, and undeserved. Untrue.

After Claire leaves, they stand outside Murdock's office door like a couple of guard dogs. She wants to ignore him, but small talk turns to big talk, and that's how it is with Luke; aside from Trish, there's no one else who makes her feel this comfortable. He listens to her too, like he cares, because she thinks he actually might, and it's a total fucking shit-show. He gets her. He understands her language of brusqueness and deflection, and reacts to the meaning beneath. He makes her... softer.

It's not good for business.

Jessica knows she should walk away, but the money's good, and she owes Hogarth one. Luke and his smile—talking to her like she's a normal human being and not a blight, laughing at something that human jelly donut, Nelson, says, or conferring with a grinning Murdock—is withstandable.

She used to think she'd conquered that specific Luke-triggered emptiness—the kind that feels like longing mixed with shame—but every morning, there it is, fresh. Like a cockroach in her bedside mug of water, floating on its back.

“Have you thought about going out on a date? With someone new? I could set you up.”

Jessica looks around the restaurant. “Are you talking to me?”

A pair of young women come up to the table and ask for Trish's autograph. She signs their napkins and takes selfies, and Jessica uses that time to come up with the perfect answer.

“Are you fucking brain dead?”

“Listen, I met Scott Lang last week, and he's single and really cute.”

“And...am I supposed to know who this is?”

Trish gestures to the waiter to bring them the check. “Scott Lang. I told you about him. He's Ant-Man.”

“What-Man?”

“One of the Avengers.”

Jessica groans.

“Come on! Think of the perks. He'll understand your lifestyle and challenges—”

“No.”

“He’s handsome. Funny.”

Words aren’t cutting it, so Jessica hopes a flat stare will work. No such luck, Trish barrels on ahead.

“He’s a grown-up. A dad. He has a little girl.”

“Hard pass. You know kids give me hives.”

“I think you need to think about what’s missing in your life.”

“Oh you think I need a family man to make me his little wife?”

“No, I think you need normalcy and understanding. I think you need to feel safe.”

“And I’m gonna do that by dating a guy who turns into an ant? Because that’s completely normal.”

“He does not turn into an ant.”

“Is half-ant. Whatever. Why didn’t he ask *you* out?”

“I think he prefers brunettes.”

Trish pays the bill, and they go to the movies. Jessica buys popcorn and promptly zones out before anyone can proclaim their love and devotion.

When she falls asleep that night, she has a nightmare, like every night, since forever. Kevin sits next to her on the subway. She has to get to Penn Station, so she can go home. He wants to come with. He loves her. He tells her that she loves him. Her mind races, thinking of all the ways she can get rid of him before the train gets there.

It’s a 7 train. They’re going the wrong way. All color becomes one color and Kevin smiles. Jessica’s fists are too small, but her feelings aren’t. She screams so loud the color bleeds out.

She sleeps like shit but instead of willing herself back to unconsciousness, Jessica leaves her apartment before Malcolm can show up, make hash browns, and give her the full blast of his concerned and patient gaze.

The light of the city sky is flat and dim and aside from a lone homeless guy asking her for a cigarette, nobody says anything to her. Delivery men and office workers, retail peons, all too busy getting where they’re going to take any notice.

Murdock's apartment is near a bagel place with decent coffee, so she buys two, somehow knowing he'll come down early. She hands one to him and he pops open the plastic lid, sipping quietly.

"How are you so relaxed? When anybody could jump out and get us right now? I'm a shitty bodyguard, you know I am."

"Nobody's going to attack me."

"I know. This gig is a joke."

He tilts his head, like a dog hearing a far-off train. "I was reading an article about how PTSD sufferers' symptoms increase during times of relative inactivity."

"That's fascinating. Thinking of embroidering it on a pillow?"

Murdock coughs. Or laughs. "Thank you for the coffee."

They walk. Pigeons assemble at their feet, and his cane does little to clear them.

"Coming back from the dead is—"

"Not the fun romp you were promised?"

"Err..."

"A heartwarming anecdote you're about to share?"

He stops walking, and Jessica guides him so they're not in the path of the early morning sidewalk traffic; they stop with their backs against the metal grate of a closed shoe repair/locksmith place that will be probably be obsolete in a few years. Matt bites his lip... and Jessica's worked enough in the information-getting game to know that this is the part where she waits and lets him spill.

"I have nightmares. Some of them aren't nightmares while I'm having them, but then they are, because I wake up and they're not real. She's always there with me. Elektra."

"Your murder-ninja ex?" Jessica finds it difficult to remember her exactly. Long black hair whipping around, high kicks, dark eyes. Death on her to-do list.

"Have you ever heard of a decision tree?"

Jessica sips her coffee. "No, but I have a feeling I'm about to."

"It's an analytical tool, a graph of decisions and their logical, probable outcomes."

"Sounds... practical."

"It can be. The hardest thing about using a decision tree to guide your choices, is that it's easy to sanitize the potential outcomes so you can fool yourself into thinking there truly is one

choice, which will lead to the best possible result. But how can anyone know? Life is random, the smallest detail can topple everything.”

“You trying to make a decision?”

Matt leans his head back, as if he were looking up at the sky, a slow smile spreading.

“No, I'm letting things happen.”

“So you're not responsible, then, when it falls apart?”

He laughs, and the spool of it, circular and wide like a gymnast's ribbon, sounds too loose to be mirth. It sounds like he's unraveling. And he does, seemingly, the laughter hushing to nothing; shoulders slumped and tie askew. He lifts the coffee cup tentatively, stopping just shy of his lips and not drinking. He breathes in, and determinedly moves back into the sidewalk traffic, towards his office. Jessica weaves through a web of teachers and hand-holding preschoolers to catch up alongside.

“I know you don't give a shit what I think but...” Jessica bites down on her tongue, and the coffee taste of it is bitter. “At some point you have to take responsibility for your choices. For good or bad. The stuff we didn't do wouldn't necessarily turn out any better. We're still... us.”

“Yeah.” He shrugs and finally drinks, scowling at the taste. “But it's an interesting exercise, reverse engineering a decision to see where it went wrong.”

“*Interesting*. In case your super ears don't pick up nuance, I said that with loud quotation marks.”

For once, he's not listening. “I stay and show her how much I love her, how that's more important than vengeance. She lives.”

“Matt, you tried.”

“I'm not talking about Midland Circle. I'm talking about another choice, a long time ago. It didn't have to end with us together, only that... She's here. Somewhere in the world. Alive.”

“You can't control that.”

“We can't? Then what good are we, really?”

His voice catches on his breath, like an unseen hand on his throat. Jessica almost wants to cry but knows she won't. She's managed to make it this long without tears. Perhaps Matt can do it for her—carry the burden. Dude's pretty Catholic so he's probably dying to.

“Don't be an asshole, Matt. She had choices too. Stop making her anything less than human.”

They reach Matt and Foggy's new/old office. Matt fingers the sign while Jessica unlocks the door. The temperature inside the building is cool, the stairwell is dim, and Matt's voice echoes off the walls, soft and slightly raspy.

“You know what I learned from dying? Being alone, pushing people away—that's also a choice.”

“Ugh. Don't lecture me. It's way too early for that shit. In fact, it's way too early for this whole conversation.”

Opera blares from inside the Nelson & Murdock offices, and between this and Matt, Jessica is due for some kind of bonus.

“Jessica. I was talking about myself.” He puts his hand on her shoulder and Jessica looks at it and silently mouths street names.

There isn't enough money in the world for this kind of job. Ideally, she'd kick Matt's ass right about now, but he's empty, barely even there, and there's no fighting with ghosts.

Main Street, Birch Street, Higgins Drive, Cobalt Lane.

“What's on Main Street?” Matt whispers.

Foggy bursts out of his office like the human/labrador hybrid he is, arms open, fingers spread wide. “Guess who scored three tickets to today's subway series game? This guy! Who's coming?”

At Nelson's excitable yip-yapping, the atmosphere changes instantly; from night to day and with a disturbing ease, Matt shifts into breezy, grinning, *look-at-me-an-actual-adult-person-without-issues* mode. Jessica can't quite switch the expression on her face from pissed-off to neutral.

“Queens or the Bronx?” Matt asks, folding up his cane.

“Queens, buddy. They have a Shake Shack! YES!”

Jessica downs the rest of her coffee. It needs whiskey. “The Mets suck. So does Queens.”

“Because I have the utmost respect for your superhuman strength, Miss Jones, I'm going to ignore those comments.”

“Sounds great.” Matt reaches out and grabs Foggy's shoulder on the first attempt, kneading it forcefully. “Thank you, Foggy. I'm in. Jessica?”

Foggy and Matt tilt their heads at an identical, questioning angle. Like schoolboys. Innocent. Sincere, even. Which is how she winds up sitting in the nosebleed seats at Citi Field later that evening. Matt to her right, holding an orange foam finger in the shape of a number one, and Foggy, yapping incessantly about stats, to her left. All of it makes her eyes cross. But there's beer, and she enjoys herself enough to almost forget what this feeling of annoyance, fury, and suppressed affection reminds her of. Almost.

They ride the 7 back towards the city, stopping at Queensboro to switch to the N. Foggy doesn't make the transfer—off to stay with his fancy girlfriend, who either has a thing for the

Pillsbury Doughboy, or Nelson has hidden talents that Jessica never, ever, wants to know about.

The platform is outdoors, and all the new Long Island City high-rises loom; some occupied—outfitted with the kind of glass that can't be looked through— and others still under construction, sturdy skeletons with single workman-light bulbs hanging inside. Like the weirdo mind reader he seems to be, Matt starts talking about how he can feel them, the buildings; their clutter, what they do to the wind, the path it takes. He's happy as a clam to tell her all this freaky shit, and it's fascinating, in its own way.

“Do you wake up screaming sometimes?”

“Yes,” she answers, as if he'd asked if she liked tacos. Jessica coughs and hits her chest. “Why did we take this train? We should have switched to the C at 8th Avenue.” She lost count of her watery beers.

“I know, but I wanted to feel this.”

He stretches his arms. For a moment, Jessica can picture it—the wind. Little lines twisting through the buildings, swirling up to the platform, surrounding their bodies, connecting them to the structures looming all around them, to each other.

“Try and remember that I'm getting paid to be your bodyguard. Not some kind of freak-enabler.”

The N train rumbles in and Matt covers his ears, smiling. “You're doing a wonderful job, Jessica. Thank you.”

After dropping Matt off at his apartment, she takes the long way home. The completely out-of-the-way way. Up to Harlem, but not down Luke's street, or even near it. But the act of being closer is soothing, somehow. A world with Luke in it is a good and just world. She gets a coffee from a bodega, pets a Tabby there named Sandwich who meows conversationally at her, and goes back to her apartment.

It's Claire's birthday, and Luke takes the earlier shift. He looks so good in his suit, Jessica reconsiders all her previous clothing preferences on him. When he leaves, he does so with a soft smile that she wishes was still for her. She tightens her hand into a fist.

Matt comes out of his office, shrugging into his jacket. “I'm going to go for a drink.”

“I guess I am too.”

“How many does it take for you to feel it?”

“Depends.”

“Let's find out.”

For the umpteenth time in forever she loses count of the number of drinks ordered. Her drinking companion is easy to spend time with. Not that the conversation is particularly deep—Matt makes shitty jokes, she makes fun of him, he grins delightedly. They play pool, the fucker winning handily, even pretending to feel his way around the table, lining up behind the wrong ball and other fake garbage.

She likes her drinks with less activity, so she goes back to the bar after, for beers this time instead of the Mexican paint thinner they've been drinking. This is her being responsible or something. She imagines Luke rolling his eyes, like he's her conscience now.

“That's not sexy. At all.” Jessica scowls, using a napkin to wipe the testicles off of a penis drawing scrawled on their table.

“What isn't?”

“Moral fiber,” she says dejectedly.

The jukebox is blaring a song about crabs crawling on balls, and the bartender looks like she can pull off bottle caps with her teeth. Normally, she'd say it was her kind of watering hole, but she might actually be above the locale for once.

“This place is really fucking nasty and I've gotten drunk in dumpsters. Like actual fucking dumpsters.”

Matt smiles. “It's Josie's. It's almost a second home.”

As if on cue, a couple of shots are brought over to their table by a middle-aged biker with watery blue eyes and an enormous salt and pepper mustache. He pats Matt on the back and nods at her, before ambling off towards the jukebox.

“So... you're some kind of secret drunk?”

He laughs softly. He's got a nice laugh, like rubbing your face on soft... *No*, she thinks, straightening. She's not that hard up.

“You still there?” He feels around the bar top, as if she could be found next to the bowl of mystery nuts.

“Yeah, I just realized I'm drunker than I thought.”

Jessica rubs the corner of her eye. There's something in there she can't get out.

“Claire's great, isn't she?” she says after a bit, knocking back the last shot.

“Yes.”

“I'm happy for them.”

“Yes,” Matt breathes out, through his lips, leaving him with a pouty, deflated expression.

“They’re good people.”

“Yes.”

They are both quiet after that. She has another drink and hopes to God and Matt’s Jesus that no one decides tonight’s the night to ambush a blind man—who may or may not be a superhero—and the disaster that is his bodyguard.

Jessica and Matt stumble home, and about a block from his apartment, he freezes and says *no, no, no* with a soft rising insistence and grabs the back of her neck, pulling her down so that—in a blink—she’s staring at someone’s initials on the sidewalk. Before she can punch Matt in the dick for doing that, something whizzes past, just above their crouched bodies. *Splutter, pop, bang, fizz*. Fireworks? A bullet. Bullets.

She grabs Matt, her arms tight around his in a bear hug and pushes them down to the sidewalk. Together, they roll on the concrete and hit some building steps. Jessica picks him up, slings him over her shoulder, and pushes a door open, dumping him inside the marble-floored vestibule. There isn’t much time to think, or plan, and just like that, she’s on a roof. Ahead, the shooter scampers onto another rooftop, a black bag bulky on his shoulder. Jessica realizes she still has the doorknob from the vestibule in her hand, so she winds back like Jacob deGrom, and throws. It connects with a comical thud, and he goes down, oddly, as if he were lifted, momentarily suspended in the air, before falling splat.

He’s still lying there when she gets to him, all five-feet-something of him. Young, sandy brown-hair, with a scar through his lip and a tattoo of that stupid internet frog on the back of his bony neck. There’s a slim leather wallet in his jacket pocket with no ID in it. Not that she’d expected an I-work-for-Wilson-Fisk card in there, but she knows from experience that people do careless shit all the time, so no matter what, check.

She takes the bag from his shoulder; the rifle inside is also a new model. Pricey. Too pricey for some malnourished pipsqueak. Then again, maybe he saved his pennies. These guys value their guns.

Jessica pulls her ever-present scarf from her pocket, rips down its length until she has two strips of material, and ties up his feet and hands like a prize hog. Best to have him ready for pick-up.

“Jessica.”

Matt jumps from the next roof, out of breath and weaving slightly, shaving off another year of her life.

“What the fuck, Matt? You need to stay where I leave you. People can’t see you doing freaky superhero shit. Don’t forget what’s going on here.”

He points a finger at her, then puts his hands on his hips. “You *flew*.”

“No.”

“You were on the street, and then you were on the roof.”

“Your ears are fucking with you.”

“You can fly.”

“No. I can jump. And you're drunk.”

Matt pouts, and what is her life right now?

“Jesus, it wasn't that big a deal. Come on, we gotta get you downstairs before the police show up. You're helpless, remember? Goddammit, stay helpless.”

They're escorted to the police station and questioned briefly by the robo-armed Misty Knight, who seems to a) always be working and b) have a hate-boner for her that just won't go away. Probably because Jessica's a smartass who knows her rights and never gives the detective anything. Especially not tonight. What the fuck for? Jessica's the hired muscle.

Claire, Foggy and Luke arrive soon afterwards. Claire gives her a quick once-over, then moves on to go have a look at Matt. As great as their unofficial nurse is, Jessica's happier to see Foggy, because it means they can fucking leave. Luke, less so. He's still in his going-out ensemble, but not wearing his jacket and his mouth is a taut pucker of disappointment.

“What the hell were you thinking?” He says through gritted teeth.

“That ‘beer before liquor, never sicker’ is a crock.”

“You are *working*, Jessica. I know that's never stopped you before, but this time you've got to know that the chances of shit going down are always a possibility.”

“No, they're not. Nothing's been happening. You know there's got to be some kind of freeze on any action against Matt and this dude tonight didn't get the memo. Besides, everything's fine. Our client is fine. I got the bad guy. I *always* get the bad guy.”

Luke glares up at the ceiling. “Come on. Foggy will take care of Murdock. I'll go settle things with Misty and get you home.”

On the way out, she sees Matt talking to Claire down the hallway. Their faces are close and something he says makes Claire laugh and look around. She catches Jessica watching and looks away. Instinctively, Jessica wants to take a photo. But of what, exactly? She remembers then—like an image in a darkroom solidifying, turning from silvery nothing to black and white—that night at Midland Circle, watching a building they knew was coming down and

Claire, hands clasped together, praying for all of them, she'd thought. Or, from the current look of things, maybe just the one still inside.

In the cab to her apartment, Luke sits alongside; arms crossed and brooding. She keeps her distance, fingering the fogged up taxi window and sitting on the hand closest to him. She's fucked up alright—the combo of unlimited sketchy tequila, beer, and adrenaline roil together like waves in an angry sea—but she's not so drunk that she can ignore the pull to his side, the urge to touch him. Which is what she'd already be doing, if he weren't seeing someone else. That's a line she'd never cross. Not even to kiss him, chastely, on the cheek. Hold him, be held. The smell of cream he uses on his skin. The crease of his smile.

It doesn't help that when they get to her apartment, Luke puts his hand on her back. Not too low, but not a spot a stranger would rest their palm. His thumb at the knobs and his fingers spread wide. Jessica leans out of his touch, anxious suddenly. She doesn't want this, not this way, she wants to get inside, away. Wait, waiting patiently, like a good girl, a good girl. The wall feels moist, like it's breathing, her forehead is on it, it seems to turn with her and the floor dips down sickeningly. For a second, she freezes, body stiffening, feeling everything around her go purple, a bold bruise, pulsing. Slowly, it fades back to a dull gray as she slides to the ground, it feels like time breaking apart. She counts backwards in her head, like she's going into surgery, like the mask is getting fitted over her face.

“Jess.”

Malcolm and Trish blink at her, Luke stands behind them, eyebrows knitted together. Jessica moves her hair out of her face with shaking hands.

“Why is the cavalry here? I had some drinks, I'm fine.”

They all talk at each other with their eyes, the way people do when they're worried.

“Jess, honey. You've been on the floor for a bit. We're going to put you in bed.”

They carry her, like she's a package, to her bed, and Jessica meets it cheek-first. It feels cold like a slap. She wakes up immediately and it's morning.

The rain is more of a mist, but still annoying. It gets everywhere, under the umbrella, right up her nose. Jessica wipes it with her wrist and attempts to light up a cigarette. After several tries, the Parliament ignites, but tastes damp and disgusting, the filterless end sticking wetly to her lips.

Matt comes out, and Jessica's gratified to see that he's a little green.

“Did we really drink that much?” she asks.

“Apparently we split the worm at Josie’s. And racked up an astronomical bar tab which, for that establishment, means we should be dead.”

“We had a worm inside a tequila bottle from that shitty bar? Holy crap, I can’t believe we’re alive.”

“And you flew,” Matt says with an eyebrow raise.

“Shut up. I didn’t. Almost getting shot’s made you stupid.”

She puts out her cigarette with the toe of her boot, and Matt wrinkles his nose. He takes her arm while she holds an umbrella over their heads. She feels very old suddenly.

“So who was he? Our attacker.”

“Out-of-towner,” Matt answers, knowing exactly who she is talking about. “Not much of a professional record. Had an uncle slash guardian that got sent-up for a series of elderly muggings. He blew what little money he had to buy that rifle. Acted on his own, didn’t know what he was getting into. Got assigned a public defender.”

“You don’t hire someone like that if you want a job done. So it was personal. Let me guess, the Devil gave the uncle to the cops.”

“You bet.”

“Great. Back to no action then.”

“Yes. Unless this emboldens other lone wolves to come out and try their luck.”

Matt straightens up, and Jessica follows the movement of his shoulders, a slight wiggle, as if he’s honing in on something. Or someone. Like Luke waiting on the other corner.

“What the hell is he doing here?”

His smirk doesn’t last long. “Babysitting us, I expect. He gave me a call this morning.”

“Because you slept with his girlfriend?”

“What?” Matt splutters. “No. Why would you think that?”

“You’re not slick. And this,” she gestures Luke’s way. “...is bullshit. I can do this piddly little job just fine. I don’t need a supervisor.”

They cross the street, and Luke joins them at the curb. Jessica doesn’t engage, and leaves the ‘good mornings’ to Matt, who readily starts filling him in on details he shouldn’t have remembered, considering how much they drank. She’s so fucking mad, furious at this condescending fuckery. She’s not a little kid who plays with stoves. She incapacitated a man with a gun, tied him up with her own scarf, and handed him off to the police. There’s no need for a *monitor*.

The subway's on the corner, it's two stops back to her apartment, but Matt takes her arm, asking her, with a suspicious mildness, if she wants an egg sandwich. She does. She stays.

Luke takes off to interrogate a lead from last night's ambush to rule out all possibilities of a Fisk connection and she's mercifully free of him for a couple of hours. Nelson sits in Matt's office for a million years with the door closed, goes back to his office, Matt follows. They close that door. And so on. Back-and-forth, like human pinballs.

Nelson loves Matt, he frets over him like an anxious, hand-wringing bubbeh. Jessica doesn't fully understand the guy. No one is that cheery without some darkness behind it, but she believes his love for Matt is real. The way she knows Trish's love for her is real. The anger is panic, the panic is love. She doesn't need to be Matt Murdock to hear it.

Jessica takes a bathroom break and when she gets back, Luke's there, making the too-tight hallway that much smaller. He's wearing sunglasses, and she snorts softly at the sight—soft enough not to jar the boss man's delicate ears, and loud enough for Luke to do that thing he does with his jaw when he's 100% done with her shit.

“Rough night?”

“Oh, we're talking now?” He doesn't even turn his head her way.

“If you wanted to switch shifts today, you could've just called me.”

“I wasn't switching shifts.”

“So you admit that all this is some kind of underhanded let's-show-up-Jessica routine? And that you just found out that I was right? That the little glue sniffing twerp acted alone?”

He removes his sunglasses and leans into her space, his voice taut and whisper-thin.

“You and I both know that you are not okay. What happened last night in your apartment? Are you ready to tell me? No?” Luke shakes his head and turns away, staring straight ahead at nothing. “This isn't about the drinking. I respect you, Jessica. You're not being honest with me.”

Jessica lets the quiet settle, then fishes an old Cosmo she stole from the ladies room from inside her jacket: *10 Steps To A New You In The New Year*.

“Look, I understand if you're cranky and shit. If you want to talk about how this is all about how much you miss Rand's soft, soft lips kissing you at night, go ahead. I won't judge.”

Luke narrows his eyes. “Oh, you've kissed him, too?”

“Say what, now?”

He laughs and the rumble of it fills the hallway. “You're the one who started going on about my boyfriend and his soft lips.”

“Man, I don't know. It tracks. the way he looks at you is...”

She breaks off, stumbling on the word. *Lovestruck*. Having thought it, she doesn't want to say it, afraid of what it will sound like in her voice, said aloud, to him.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Luke sighs and she doesn't have to see his eyes to know he's rolling them. "Stop fucking up, Jessica. Be an adult. Take care of yourself."

"Are you my social worker now?"

"I guess so since you clearly need one."

The truce is short-lived. She doesn't speak to him the rest of the afternoon; and at six o'clock, goes home with no voiced goodbye, only a single middle finger salute.

She gets a text from him later on that night, as she's halfway through a six-pack and a cup of ramen.

I'm no social worker. But I'm your friend. I'm here. Talk to me.

Her heart pounds and she falls off the bed, springing up into defensive mode.

The apartment is quiet. Outside there's the steady white noise of passing cars. She hears her name, echoing in her ears, soft and snide, but she knows it's not real. Well, real, but not really real.

There'd been a time, in the months after, where she'd honestly thought now that he's dead, I'm free, but she still couldn't fall asleep until two a.m., and the circles under her eyes skewed deeper into violet. She would check the doors, the windows, the vents, over and over again, as if anything could get through, as if she wouldn't be able to fight it. In the morning, she'd lean against the hallway wall, hiding the tremor of her hands by holding her morning coffee with both of them. It would spill over, scalding the skin of her knuckles and wrists.

She picks up the phone and dials without thinking. Luke answers.

"Do you ever think that maybe you're lying to yourself?"

"Excuse me?"

Luke sounds tired, but she can hear the TV on in the background.

"Shit. Did I just interrupt your Netflix and Chill time or whatever?"

“I don’t even know what that is.”

“Are you alone?” Jessica regrets asking almost immediately. She sounds desperate. Luke says nothing, effortlessly cool and adult as always.

“Yes. You ready to talk?”

“I think that I can’t put the shit that happened to me in context. With Kilgrave. I had feelings that were not real, feelings that were suggested to me, and I don’t know how to remember them. I can’t. I don’t know what I’m saying.”

“Did you have a nightmare?”

“Yeah.”

“Was Kilgrave in it?”

She nods, knowing full well he won’t be able to hear it. Matt, he’s not.

“He can’t hurt you.”

“You know that’s a lie. Things that hurt can keep right on hurting even if they’re not immediately present.”

There’s a bottle of whiskey behind the handheld phone she uses for business. In her hurry to grab the bottle, she knocks it on the phone and it clatters open, batteries spilling out. Luke sighs on the phone but waits while she picks everything up. Waits some more as she pours the booze into a little glass painted with oranges. And then drinks right from the bottle. Her heart steadies a little, but still hammers.

“It doesn’t feel like he’s actually gone.”

“You broke his neck. I read the autopsy report.”

“Yeah and if he were to pop up out of his grave right now, I wouldn’t be the least bit surprised. That’s exactly the kind of shit sandwich I’ve come to expect.”

“Well, IF that shit sandwich gets made, you won’t be alone.”

“I know that’s meant to be uplifting, but instead it just sounds gross.”

In the background, there’s music, theme music to a show, and Luke makes a teeny *hmmhmm* sound, his small, closed-mouth laugh. The show theme sounds vaguely familiar and unexpectedly, with a weird sort of longing, she wants to know what it is, to be there with him. The idea of sitting with Luke, watching television, putting her head on his shoulder and sniffing the warm, clean detergent smell of his t-shirt, sounds like heaven.

“Are you tired? Do you want to meet up for a drink or something? I’ll buy.”

He's silent for so long, the silence expands and settles over them, heavy and cold. He's breathing, she's not. It's like she's drowning in ice water.

"I don't think that would be a good idea right now." His voice is careful and even. "Let's—"

Jessica can read between the lines. She's a crazy bitch, forcing herself on the upstanding guy with a beautiful girlfriend, because she can't bear the night alone.

"Gotcha. Night."

"Jessica—"

The rejection doesn't sting, instead she feels energized. She wants to get dressed and go to the nearest shithole bar where nobody knows her, and get hammered. Flirt with idiots until they realize she's more trouble than she's worth. Put the same song on the jukebox five times, see who wants to fight her over it. Eat the fucking worm.

But she's already eaten it. And it *sunnuuucked*.

She texts Trish.

Send me Ant-Dude's deets.

Because she's an asshole, she arranges the date for after work. So she changes into a clean tank top of Trish's in the shared hall bathroom, which can only be opened with a small key hanging from a big block of wood. She tries some make-up, might as well go all out. It's been years, so her mascara bleeds as soon as she blinks, leaving little black lines like caterpillars under her eyes. The lipstick is easier, she has a big mouth, smearing and blotting is nothing. It's a look. A nighttime look. Or morning-after look, depending on your standards.

Luke doesn't say a word, he barely looks at her. He has an earpiece in one ear, and she imagines he's listening to a podcast about baking, because that's what she wants him to be listening to—something unbelievably wholesome, and 1000 miles away from her own brand of fuckery. She grabs her jacket and nods to him. He nods back.

Matt comes out of his office, ambling over to the coffee maker while reading some documents with his fingers—as always, an accident waiting to happen. His eyebrows raise slightly as he passes her. He starts another pot, with choreographed efficiency and simplicity, and Jessica watches him, waiting for him to trip, spill hot coffee on his papers, something. But nothing happens and really, she's stalling.

On her way out, Matt murmurs, "Have fun," and for a few seconds, she almost throws a filing cabinet at him. She doesn't though; luckily there's some goodness left in her, however hard it is to find sometimes.

The restaurant is in the West Village; a small and nondescript Italian place with only three other dinner guests. Scott is seated already. He's not ugly, but he is nervous, dropping his napkin when he stands up to greet her. Then again, when she asks him if he goes down on the first date (answer: "it's never come up but... sure?"). His eyes are his best feature, bright blue and—for a smart ass—unbelievably earnest looking. He's a bit of a fool too, glib and quippy, but after a few glasses of wine, she sees something else—an itchy dissatisfaction just under his bland handsomeness. Something mean and sharp at the edge of his banter, a little like anger or frustration. In a superficial way, she might like this the most. It reminds her of the boys that used to ask her out in high school; the ones she usually wound up making out with, even though her real preference ran to good boys who did things like carry your mom's groceries to the car. The good boys never noticed her.

Scott tells terrible jokes, maybe one grade better than Matt's, and he clearly wants to suck Captain America's star-spangled dick, but he doesn't ask her about Kilgrave. Not once. So Jessica gives him a pass and doesn't delve in the prison stint Trish conveniently didn't mention. He talks about his ex during dessert, maybe too much, but the complaints are all about himself. How *he* fucked up, how she was too good for him. This bodes well, makes him seem like less of a twinkly-eyed douche. He doesn't mention his kid, which Jessica feels grateful for. She's not mommy material.

When she talks about *her* ex, it's Luke she's talking about—not by name, but by small deeds. His kindness and calm, how no one has ever made her feel so herself. The person she would've been without an accident, the person she'd always be at heart. She was barely with him, but it was enough to take hold in her. Scott listens and nods at exactly the right intervals, and, after they're finished with their pasta, she brings him back to her place and rides him so hard that, afterwards, he looks shellshocked; sweaty, wild-eyed and dumbstruck.

She ushers him out before any possible post-boning conversation. He manages to ask if they can see each other again. She says maybe. His dick's not ant-sized so why not?

This isn't what she wants for herself, though, being some semi-famous super's side piece and drinking to forget. She thinks about what her parents had. A house, some fights about the dishwasher and working too much overtime, but love, mostly love. Fall turning into winter, bringing out the heavy blankets and adjusting to earlier darkness, listening to the wind outside from the warmth of a shared bed. The radiators in their house clanging, her mom badgering her dad to bleed them. Her brother learning how to do that, while she listened to In Utero on her headphones, already apart from them. Already gone.

The more she thinks about it, the dumber it sounds. A house in a quiet town with a yard, tuna casseroles and the Elks. People without agendas, baking pies and making small talk. Going to church, shaking hands, being good—*good*, the word she associates most with Luke. That wasn't her, could never be her. And yet... when she thinks about peace, the image is simple: a late afternoon, Sunday, sitting on her ratty couch, Luke on the other side, listening.

The next morning at work, Foggy sits inside Matt's office doing what sounds like pleading. His voice continually rises at the end like a question and countering it, every other line, is Matt, murmuring rebuttals that only inspire additional volume from Foggy.

When Foggy comes out, she pretends to be lost in her Candy Crush game. She adds a yawn to sell it. Foggy waves his hand and beckons her to the kitchen area.

“Ms. Jones,” he whispers. “Please don’t let Matt do anything stupid tonight.”

“Define stupid.”

His eyes flutter closed. “Activities that could endanger his life.”

“Is bar hopping one of those activities?”

Foggy rubs both of his eyes like he’s trying to blot out his entire life. “No. That’s fine. Just... stay with him. Don’t let him fight.”

“Got it.”

She slaps him on the back and he flinches, walking back out into the hallway slightly hunched forward.

They go to the movies. It doesn’t make sense to her either. Jessica finds herself describing scenes in a whisper, under her breath, knowing that he alone can hear what she’s saying. A young woman, haunted by a car accident she’d barely survived, attempts to solve a cold case disappearance in a small town. The town turns on itself, everyone suspecting everyone. Her ex from high school is a suspect; she might still love him. There’s a long wordless scene where she feels her way out of a tunnel beneath a house, roots scratching at her hands and Matt nods as Jessica narrates. She’s more invested in this idiotic movie than she’s been in anything she’s seen in years.

After that, of course she has to dream her usual violet-tinged nightmares. Kevin Kilgrave pleads for his life with that nasal voice of his, large eyes full of tears. She can’t let him go, she has to stay. That’s the only way for anybody to be safe. She feels her way through the tunnel, holding him by the neck and he won’t stop saying her name.

She’s standing in the hallway outside the Nelson & Murdock offices, drinking from a child-sized thermos of spiked coffee when Matt appears, pulling on his suit jacket.

“Jessica, feel like a walk?” Matt asks, with a softness that would make her twitch if it wasn’t so kindly meant.

She’d worked alongside Luke all day. Another morning and afternoon of nothing but standing guard. They’d laughed throughout—and then he’d left, off to an appointment she didn’t press him on but was probably a date. He’d smelled great.

Matt and Jessica walk for a long time, down to 34th Street and across, avenue after avenue until they hit the East River. He’s fast, she knew that, and she alternates between knowing he’s there, cane tapping, right alongside, and forgetting—feeling alone and desperate for a drink. Sad is in there too; sad because it’s stupid to care about The Luke Situation and the other kind of sad that she likes to blot out. The kind that comes from loss.

“Do you want to go to a bar?” Matt asks softly, “Or do you want to take the ferry to Long Island City?”

He’s also sad, both-ways sad, and he knows it.

“What the fuck would we do there?”

“Drink.” Matt has a funny smile, always wobbling on the edge of dead serious.

“What’s going on with you, Matt? Why are your friends so spooked?”

“What’s wrong with *you*, Jessica? I died and went crazy, what’s your excuse?”

“You went crazy?”

He shrugs. “I spent some time living on the street. Then a little more time as someone else. I drink too much.”

“I killed my rapist. He carved out a space in my head and sometimes I can’t remember my time with him the way it actually happened. I also drink too much.”

Matt extends his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

They shake hands and people jostle past them, rushing to board the ferries. Some of them have the checked-out look of having survived a long, soul-crushing work day. Others stare at their phones. Jessica hates phones. She’s never seen Matt play with a phone. It’s like he’s abo—*Oh*.

“God, I’m an idiot.”

“Why?” Matt asks, frowning.

“Don’t ask.”

He takes her arm and they walk again, along the river, the FDR-bound traffic whizzing

“Manatees, they have brains the size of peas. Did you know that?”

He raises an eyebrow, which is one of the many ways he has of indicating he’s listening. Jessica’s never really seen his eyes, so she reads everything else. Like, now, a slight subtle shake no.

“It turns out that they have no natural predators so they’ve never needed to be smart,” she continues. “They can just swim around all day like dummies.”

“You’re not prey.”

She chooses not to acknowledge his comment. “Let’s just buy some 40s and drink them at your place. If I wind up punching someone in the face, I want it to be you.”

“Awww.” He smiles, his face is all smile, and can she start punching him now?

The bodega around the corner from his apartment is noisy with music and talk and the owner—a squat man with white hair and a black mustache rocking a guayabera and trying to read a paper through two pairs of glasses—greets Matt like he’s the white son he never had. Matt speaks to him in Spanish, because of course he does, he’s a fucking show-off if there ever was one. He pivots slightly in her direction as he does it, as if to say *looooooook at me, aren’t I special?*

Of course, he *is* special. *Special Ed*, as her little brother loved to say, flicking her ear. She wonders if Matt’s accident caused him to be an insufferable pain in the ass in this specific way—as overcompensation for everything else. Just like her need to push everyone away before they realize she’s an asshole who breaks things.

She’s special too.

Matt takes her elbow, “What’s the matter?”

“Luke. He’s special. He doesn’t break anything. Well, faces. But that’s it.”

“Yeah. Let’s go.” Matt raises his hand. “Buenas noches, Victor.”

Matt’s apartment is neater than last time. He turns on the light when they walk in, for her benefit, she supposes. There are a stack of papers on a table, all in braille of course, no smudges, just pure white page and rows of little bumps. She touches them with the tips of her fingers.

“Did you hire a cleaner?”

“Nah, Foggy came over.” He puts the bags from the bodega in the refrigerator, sliding out one of the bottles. Over his shoulder, she sees the refrigerator is mostly empty, save for a box of baking soda and a lemon. He closes the refrigerator door and hands her the malt liquor.

She unscrews the top and takes a long swig, wiping her mouth with the front of her hand. “Can he come to my place?”

Matt goes into his room, removing his tie and sliding the door shut behind him. He calls out, “Sure, if you promise not to beat him up.”

She sighs and whispers “Can’t promise that.” He laughs on the other side of the door.

While he changes, she knocks back her 40 and snoops. It’s a huge place, Matt’s apartment, or rather, the ceiling is absurdly high, giving it the appearance of a cathedral. Simple and austere, adding to the quasi-religious vibe. There’s a couch, a couple of upholstered arm chairs and a slim, glass fronted cabinet, mid-century, with doors that slide open to reveal records and a turntable—she’d already inventoried the contents on a previous visit and hadn’t found anything there to make fun of him about. On the wall, hangs an always-askew painting that she’s never bothered to ask the origins of. There’s got to be a story there. No television, which, *duh*. Perhaps there’s one hidden in a closet or something, there to listen to when needed, but she doesn’t bother to check. Maybe another day. Her bottle now emptied, Jessica grabs another from the fridge.

Right outside the windows an electronic billboard shimmers with color, advertising flights to Dubai. Matt claims the billboard's the reason he pays cheap rent. Bullshit, she thinks. In New York, people pay insane rents to live in apartments with tubs in their kitchen and bedrooms without closets or windows. This rental must be \$3k plus monthly, easy. It's got a staircase to the roof, which means you can sit up there and drink. That is a perk. Jessica might not have sensory superpowers but she can certainly smell a rat about the whole set-up.

Matt's bedroom door slides open. He's in sweatpants and a hoodie. He's not wearing his glasses and that's more jarring than the outfit. His eyes are trained just past her ear. They're brown and kind of guileless. Like a child's.

"Do you want to go up?" He goes to the fridge and grabs the bodega bags.

"Yeah."

The roof floor is painted silver and she walks slowly, looking down at her black shoes against the ground. She's feeling the alcohol, and there's a kind of relief to that. Like all her hard work has finally reached the desired result. Matt grabs a couple of folding chairs, opens them, and motions for her to sit. Her second bottle is almost done, and he's already pulling out two from the bags, one in each hand.

"Is one of those for me?" she asks, and reaches forward to grab it from him. "Thanks. I think I'm finally buzzed. I hope no one decides to jump us again, and yes, I'm aware that is a stupid fucking thing to say out loud."

Matt stretches out his legs. "I think we're fine. Not hearing anything unusual."

"Has anyone ever snuck up on you?"

"Yes. One person."

He twists opens his bottle and chugs, his adam's apple bobbing.

"How drunk are you?" she asks. He doesn't look tanked, but he does look relaxed. That's not a word she'd normally associate with him.

"Very fucking drunk."

"Nice. We should probably call Luke. So he can come protect us."

"I already did."

Jessica tucks her hair behind her ear. "I think he's on a date."

"Yes, he is." Matt grins and takes another long swig.

"That's a shitty thing to do." She laughs and so does he. Her eyes droop.

"Jessica, why do you drink so much?"

“Well, counselor... I enjoy it.”

A plane goes overhead and Matt breathes in like he’s trying to center himself. As if the line of air going into his lungs is doing more than keeping him alive, like it’s tethering him to the ground. Does he have street names to recite, she wonders.

“It helps me sleep. He can’t get into my dreams if I’m out cold.”

“Kevin Kilgrave?” Matt says to her arm. She realizes she’s rubbing it. Jessica doesn’t know why, she has no injury.

“Kilgrave.” Saying his name out loud feels like she’s calling the devil. Even though his neck snapped in her hands. It’s as if he still lives inside of her, whispering his bullshit.

Matt touches her arm, gently, so gently, and it makes her want to throw up.

“Don’t.”

He draws his hand back and ducks his head down apologetically. “I’m sorry.”

Matt picks up the bottle at his feet and knocks back a long swig. She mirrors him but regrets it as soon as the beer goes down. It tastes skunky and sour and all she wants to do is sleep. With her eyes closed, she could be in her own backyard. Her dad could be in the basement trying to fix the washing machine. Her mom is working in the garden. Her little brother is still a shit but he’s all grown up now. A big shit. A lawyer probably.

“I don’t mind talking, Matt. Just cut it out with the sympathy.”

He laughs. “Yeah, of course. I hate it too.”

His hand goes up, pointer finger directed at Jessica and three seconds later, her phone rings. She eyes the screen: *Trish* and answers.

“Hey.”

“Hey yourself. Weren’t we having dinner tonight?”

“Oh fuck, I’m sorry. I forgot. Can we meet tomorrow?”

“Uh, no. I have plans.” Trish’s voice goes from coolly irritated to suspicious. “Where are you?”

“I’m at Murdock’s.”

“Are you working?”

Matt sits slumped, pouching his lips out. His malt liquor nearly finished.

“Sort of. I’m sorry, Trish. I owe you one.”

“Don’t worry about it. So what’s he doing? Is he there right now?”

“Yup.”

“How hot does he look? From a scale of one to ten? I saw him do an interview with Ross Pelchik a couple of years ago and I have never been more attracted to a man’s lips in my whole life.”

Matt smiles, resting his head on his shoulder winsomely. Jessica removes her shoe and throws it at him. It lands with a satisfying thump.

“The words ‘fiery raw sewage’ spring to mind. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Find out if he’s single for me?”

“Absolutely not.”

Jessica hangs up before Trish continues to unwittingly bare her lust. Matt throws her shoe back, hitting her calf hard.

“Ouch!”

“Please, like that hurt.”

“You son of a bitch,” she hisses, rubbing her calf.

“So is she cute?”

“You’re lucky we’re friends or I’d throw your ass right off this roof, you know I could.”

Matt’s grin is the widest she’s ever seen it. He looks like a big, dumb nerd. She blows into her now-empty bottle, making a sharp pan-pipe noise that causes Matt to wince. “Serves you right. We need more beer, dude.”

“Go get it.”

“You go.”

Neither of them move. Eventually, Matt stretches his arms behind his head, face completely free of tension and Jessica imagines him listening to something far away. Not sirens or crime, but contentment, calm. Do those things have a sound? A smell? The city is glittery-dark and almost peaceful, as quiet as the city can get when a low-level hum ever present; always there, irrefutable, getting right under your skin.

“You still hear nothing? No threats?”

“No... not really.”

“Good. Wake me up if your bat ears pick up anything.”

Matt’s sigh is endless. “It doesn’t work like that, Jessica.”

“Whatever. Just wake me up if I need to fight.”

She's out in less time than she can think. It's that surrendering moment when blackness overtakes and no one, not a person or a thing, can stop her from going under.

Light is yelling through her eyelids and her arm isn't enough to block out the burn or the *bang, bang, bang* in her head. She rolls over, burying her head under the pillow, eyes shut tight. It takes her a minute or maybe seconds, time is hard when you're hungover—but then, like a sudden, cold freeze, she realizes what's wrong. The light is coming from the wrong side of the room.

Jessica moves slowly, her fear shutting down the splitting headache, the sore throat. She's wearing somebody else's t-shirt and last night's underpants but feels... Alright. So not a one night stand, then. She looks around. It's a bedroom. King bed. The room is tidy and bare, it smells like cleaning products—familiar. She slides off the bed, setting her feet on the cold hardwood floor and breathes in. She's not tied up, she feels like herself, it's daytime. In the city, plenty of people around, plenty of witnesses. Her heart slows.

There's a photo on the wall next to the window, Danny Rand and Claire Temple sitting in a park. Claire is rolling her eyes, smiling and somehow still the most gorgeous. Rand looks like he's in the middle of a sentence, probably something stupid that Jessica would never listen to with that much grace. Next to it is a photo of a skinny man in a pork pie hat with a little goatee and a kid leaning in closer to the screen; all teeth. Another photo, half hidden under blue curtains, Matt Murdock smiling, his arm around Foggy Nelson, at the Nelson & Murdock office. She's in the background but prominent, slightly more in focus than the boys, looking down at a coffee cup in her hands. Frowning. The cup says #1 Avocado. She's looked better but it's accurate enough.

Jessica can't figure out what's more confounding: that she's half-dressed in Luke Cage's bedroom with no memory of how she got there or the fact that he has her photo on his wall.

Her clothes are nowhere to be found and all of Luke's jeans are size extra motherfucking huge. She decides to try her luck and ventures out pantless. Besides it's not like Luke's never seen her legs.

Luke's apartment is clean and neat. It smells like he does—like soap and cologne with faint traces of cooking. She follows the scent, stomach grumbling, to the kitchen. Onions sizzle in a pot, fresh cut mushrooms and tomatoes, eggs. The man himself, sitting at a formica table. There's a half an orange on a plate opposite, which must be for her. She sits and pushes the orange away. He looks up from his paper. She can't read his expression. Is it annoyed? Admiring? She rolls her neck and cracks her shoulders. *Ouch*.

“Thanks for the t-shirt. You should try other colors maybe. Something less banana yellow.”

Jessica knows she shouldn't repay his obvious kindness with bitchery but she's feeling scrubbed and raw and lost, and somehow she knows he'll understand because he always

does.

“There’s eggs on the stove. Your clothes are in the bathroom.” Luke fails to hide the glance up her legs, and Jessica looks down at them, as if they weren’t hers.

The plate she nabs is chipped and she puts her thumb at the spot like she expects it to cut her. While she scrapes up eggs, she notices the kitchen window has no glass; it’s covered in thick plastic and packing tape.

“Holy fuck, what happened to your window?”

“You, last night.”

Luke is on the sixth floor and there’s no fire escape outside his window. She’s getting sloppy.

“I’ll get it replaced.”

He turns the page of his newspaper. “And the refrigerator.”

The dent in the stainless steel is just her size, a full body silhouette of an idiot who flew through a window and landed on the side of an appliance.

Oddly enough, she has no response to that, it makes a kind of dumb perfect sense. She dips a corner of her toast into the egg yolk, popping it and watching the yellow goop run. “Thank you. Sorry about—” She gestures around the room. “All this.”

Luke regards her calmly. “You’ll pay me back.”

About three hundred inappropriate methods of payment run through her head. “Yeah, okay.”

She sits down and they both eat. There’s no attempt at conversation. It’s not uncomfortable, not exactly. There’s a kind of music to the clink and scrape of their fork tines.

“I don’t even know how I got here. Last thing I remember was passing out on Matt’s roof. Did I say why?”

“You told me you wanted to talk.”

Oh shit. “About what?” she asks, staring hard at a scrape on her knuckle. When he doesn’t answer, Jessica looks up. She can’t see his face, it’s hidden by an ad for this year’s luxury Lexus model.

Luke folds his newspaper and sits back. “I don’t know how you think you can defend Matt when you’re both drunk as skunks. Danny can’t get back here fast enough.”

“I agree.” Jessica empties the rest of her eggs in the garbage. “Thanks for the breakfast. I gotta go meet somebody.”

“Jess-”

She throws the plate in the sink, finds her clothes, gets dressed and books. Luke texts her about an hour after that. It's a list.

This is what you wanted to tell me:

1. *You talked about Kilgrave. You can always talk to me about what happened.*
2. *You told me about your dreams and how you don't know how to control them.*
3. *You also said you don't know what love is. (I know a few people who would disagree)*
4. *All about the gerbil you had in elementary school, Captain Cheez.*

He sends another list:

I told you things too.

1. *I told you I was a pip squeak as a kid.*
2. *That I like talking to you.*
3. *Yellow is my favorite color. What's the problem with that?*
4. *I had two pit bulls growing up. Teena and Marie.*

See? Nothing bad. Try the front door next time.

Scott takes her to see some band. She drags him out before the set is over, takes him back to hers and fucks him stupid, his mouth open at her neck.

There's something about that goofy post-coital look of his that she really gets a kick out of—it's equal parts winded and confused. Also there's the soothing fact that while it feels good to have sex with him, it's never charged enough to send her into the purple deadzone that Kevin Kilgrave left behind, triggered only when she feels something real. Which is hardly ever.

They get along though and Jessica lets him stay. It turns out, Scott's super power is not that he can turn into an ant but that he wears a suit that makes him ant-sized, and therefore super strong and able to talk to ants. This seems like a total cop-out, as far as abilities go. Spending more time with him makes her realize, however grudgingly, that it's his *character* that makes him worthy of such a thing because not everybody could. It's painfully simple: whoever wears the outfit, has to be worthy of it. Which she could never be.

Luckily, she's not wearing Stark-spun spandex any time soon, so she can continue being a shitshow, which is how she likes it.

Her work-talk can't rival Scott's for crazy but after they fuck, she bitches about the protection detail anyway; how nothing is going down, but if ever did, she wouldn't be enough to stop it. Jessica longs for a simple investigation: a wronged wife, a buried scandal, digging up some honest, clear-cut dirt. This hero-for-hire business is so dull it makes her feel like a teenager again—waiting for shit to start and worried that it might.

In fact, the assignment is so boring for so long that when trouble comes, she's not ready. After work, her and Matt usually follow their new routine of long walks—aimless itineraries south or north, subways back; usually in complete silence save for the tap of Matt's cane. Sometimes there are drinks, and then home. Today there aren't. They stay late in the office, Matt reading braille files at his desk and Jessica listening to music on one headphone, checking emails from Malcolm about possible cases. Their most familiar surroundings and sober as judges besides. But it doesn't make her sharper. Doesn't make the shot to her arm hurt any less.

She's flat on the ground now, and her arm stings like a motherfucker. There are tiny holes in her leather jacket and thin tendrils of smoke coming from them like smoke signals in miniature. This is not a real moment, this is a fucking cartoon. Jessica tries to get back up, but it takes her longer than expected; she has to work her way through the surprise first.

Two white-supremacist-looking guys come out of the shadows of the hallway. One, with a bleach-blond flat top and meth-assisted teeth nubs, has a snub-nosed little gun, the other, tall and thick with a gym rat's neck, holds a lead pipe with an odd curve at the end. They both have hiking boots on and they make a dull smeary squeak on the hallway floor. She shifts, lifts up the top half of her body, and angles forward using her good arm for leverage.

"Stay down, bitch, or I'll aim for your eye."

Matt crouches above her and whispers, "Stay down, Jessica. I'll go with them."

She stands up, legs shaking. "To your left. Throw it."

He hesitates for just a moment before throwing his cane, with his usual unerring accuracy, at a light sconce right next to the guy with the gun. It shatters in a shower of sparks and glass and Jessica fights through the pain to leap up and run right at him. She's no kung fu master but she has eyes, she does it like she's watched Danny and Matt do it before. A big leap up, hip-pivot left, right leg out, hard and fast, right at the gunman's knee. She doesn't need Matt's bat ears to hear the *crunch*. He falls and the gun falls with him, clattering out of his hand onto glass strewn floor. Before she can get to it, Thing #2 goes at her with the lead pipe and gets her right on the shoulder of her injured arm. She yowls.

"Jessica!" Matt yells, his fists clenched.

"Fuck. Stay where you are, Matt."

Thing #2 pushes behind her and puts the pipe over her head, in front of her neck and starts to squeeze. She doesn't know what's worse: the burn in her arm or not being able to breathe. If she can't breathe, she can't feel the pain.

Matt rushes at them and before he can backflip off a wall or something incredibly fucking stupid, Jessica gets her head forward just enough to slam it back into her attacker's nose. The weapon clatters, she elbows him in the windpipe. Then knees him in the crotch. Twice. He gag-coughs and sinks to the ground, joining his little friend.

Matt grabs her good arm. "It's buckshot. You'll live."

“No shit. Let’s go.”

“But your shoulder...”

“Is fucked up. I know, shhhh. Come on.”

They go towards the back, to their previously established rear fire stairwell escape route. She can’t move as fast as she’d like; the pain, formerly fixed in one tiny spot, begins to radiate down her arm.

“Almost there, Jess. Wait.”

Matt stops her and pulls at his tie until it comes off. He knots it around her arm, tight enough to make her yelp, then shushes softly, patting her gently.

“Quit it. You’re not my mom. We gotta keep going.”

They go down a couple of flights. Matt stops suddenly, mid-stairs to the lobby.

“The guys on our floor, one of them is up, heading towards us. Outside, there’s a car parked, how many men... I can’t tell, but in the back there’s at least two waiting.”

“What did they have for lunch?”

“Huh?” He tilts his head, nostrils flaring slightly.

“Oh my god. Come on, head towards the back, I can take one of the two.”

“Three. Now four.” He swallows.

Above them, the door to the fifth floor opens. Matt holds his finger to his lips. One of their attackers limps down the stairs and they wait, pressed tight against a second floor hallway wall. She doesn’t hide, that’s not one of her moves, but they’re outnumbered and her arm aches. Eventually, Rolf from Dusseldorf passes by without seeing them on the first floor stairwell and heads out the front door. Matt steps forward and stops; leaning forward, tense and attentive, looking more animal than person—filtering sensory information and ready to run or fight.

“He’s approaching a car parked across the street and calling his boss. He’s saying the building hallways are clear.”

“Not very detail oriented. We weren’t exactly camouflaged.”

“I think he might be concussed.”

She rolls her eyes. “Woop-dee-doo. We all are. Seriously, how many times have you been knocked out cold? *You* still manage to see where the bad guys are lurking. Or hear, smell, you know what I mean. *Ow*. This hurts way too much to be normal.”

Matt considers this with a grim sort of smile. They move quietly down the stairs to the first floor. He's holding up the bulk of her downstep weight. Their gait is awkwardly in unison, one step, one stride, inside leg, outside leg. It's like they're teammates in a doubles sack potato race.

"Don't laugh," he whispers.

"I wasn't."

"You were about to."

"Ugh, you suck."

They stop by the back exit door. Matt squeezes her good arm.

"They're outside."

"What's outside?"

There are no windows to look out of, but he seems to know.

"A walled-in courtyard, with an opening leading to a parking lot. The bricks were removed, so not a door. You have to stoop to go through."

"Great. A bottleneck. So three dudes, waiting and some more out front."

"And... nevermind. I don't know." He stops and tilts his head back. "One more, climbing down, maybe."

"I can't fight them in here if they push in, we gotta get out there where we have a chance of ___"

"Getting away, I know. Jessica—"

"What are you waiting for then, let's go," she hisses in his ear, knowing the sibilance is going to make his brain fry. "Stay at my back and don't even do a single karate chop, so help me God."

He nods. They push out, into a courtyard, all concrete and darkness. Someone's taken out the lights. At the far end, she can see the outline of two men.

"We know you're hurt, so don't try nothing. Give us the lawyer."

"First tell me why you want him."

"Haven't you heard, lady? He's Daredevil."

"Did somebody say my name?"

Jessica twists her neck so fast to look up, the whiplash blinds her. Up on the fire escape, crouched and ready to spring, is... *Daredevil*?

She whispers out of the side of her mouth. “Did you know about this?”

Matt’s eyebrows are so far up his hairline, she guesses the answer is no.

Daredevil flips forward smoothly and lands in front of them, addressing the White Power duo confidently. He’s more slender than the last time she saw him in action. And shorter. “I think you guys might want to use this time to consider your life choices.”

The men stare at each other.

“Really? No? Does no one in the city know how to take a hint? Fine.” He leans forward, fists held up, like a boxer. “I can see there’s going to be a lot of butt kicking going on tonight.”

Under his breath, Matt mutters a single, indignant *no*.

Daredevil does one of those cartwheels where you don’t put your hands on the ground. It’s completely unnecessary and manages to both look cool and confuse the shit out of their attackers. They practically pose for their beatdowns. One is punched in the face and after Daredevil jumps off the guy as he goes down, he lands right on top of the other man, who shrieks as he settles himself on the man’s shoulders.

“Funny, you look like you’d have deeper scream.”

The goon screams again.

“There it is again, this is gonna smart. Sorry!”

Daredevil tightens his thighs around the man’s neck and twists, legs crossed, pulling them both backwards. They land and Daredevil rolls backwards and up onto his feet.

“Staying down?”

The man scrambles to get up, rubbing the back of his neck.

“I see. Going down it is.”

He roundhouse kicks him, sending the skinhead to the ground in a slow, circular arc. The White Power mini-movement is still, sprawled around in various states of unconsciousness.

“Well, that was easy.” This Daredevil’s voice is straight out of a movie about aaw-shucks high schoolers from the ‘50s: boyish and enthusiastic.

Jessica winces and tries to smile. “Not that we don’t appreciate it, but if you ever do this again, could you maybe cool it with the banter? Daredevil usually doesn’t say much.”

Matt coughs. Not-Daredevil lifts his hand to his mouth apologetically.

“Of course. Sorry, ma’am.”

“Please don’t ma’am me. It’s Jessica.”

“Right. Ms. Jones.”

“Jessica,” she repeats.

He nods and smiles. His teeth are very white and it hits her then, that he’s young. Really young.

“Thank you,” Matt says, a mixture of confusion and surprise in his voice.

“My pleasure, Mr. Murdock. I’m a big fan of your work. Your lawyer work I mean. You’re *not* Daredevil.”

“No,” Matt smiles. “I’m not.”

“Umm, I’d love to hang out but I gotta get home and do some Chem...stuff. Goodnight, Ms. Jessica, Mr. Murdock.”

He jumps on a fire escape balcony and scampers up until he’s out of sight. Matt and Jessica stand there, breathing hard.

“Wait. Why did he climb up to the roof to go home?”

Matt’s head, tilting rapidly at tiny angles like a bird, is about to reply when the door slams open and Luke strides out, followed by...*Daredevil*?

“That was fast,” Jessica says, a wave of nausea hitting her. One of her knees give. Luke rushes up and catches her.

The second (third?) Daredevil runs past them, right at two more thugs coming up from behind. He kicks one in the face, three whip-fast jabs and whips around to punch one in the chest, first with the tips of his fingers, then his whole fist. A dim light is just visible under the red of his glove.

“Get the fuck out,” Jessica manages, her voice sounding like the aural equivalent of a stretched balloon before it’s filled with air; rubbery and empty, ready to snap. So she does; the world goes purple and she crumples into Luke. Yellow, black cotton sweatshirt, zipper at her mouth, her name. Purple brightens to blue and flatlines to black.

The room is pale greenish-yellow and there’s a painting on the wall of an island shore. She knows the shoreline, the exact curve of it: looking, she remembers the fresh, shiny green seaweed lining the shore in clumps. She always wanted to eat the stuff. It looked like it should be eaten.

It was a goof, buying that painting. Trish made her go to a fair in Huntington once. An old lady had been throwing a tag sale and she had stacks of paintings out, lined up against one

another. Jessica would have recognized that sound beach anywhere. Her brother had taken special delight in flinging the seaweed at in her face. He was annoying as hell. She misses him so much sometimes, she can't swallow back the panic. It rises and rises and spills over.

Trish comes in, carrying a steaming mug and slows upon seeing her.

"Hey."

"Did they bring me in?"

"Yes. Ten minutes ago. Luke carried you." Trish raises a perfect eyebrow.

"Well, that's something."

"They brought you in after that nurse Claire took a look at you. She is lovely."

"Yes."

Trish looks like she wants to say something, her mouth open slightly.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. She left me some painkillers. Let me know if you need more."

"I'm good." Jessica tries to move but finds that she can't get the message to her limbs. She manages a slight shift and is rewarded for it with a radiating pain across her left shoulder and down her arm—which is in a navy blue sling. Jessica peers at it; the skin is a nasty purple where she got hit.

"You have a slight fracture."

"From buckshot?"

"No, from getting hit with a lead pipe made out of alien material."

"What the fuck? So a not-lead pipe? How did a bunch of skinheads get their hands on alien material?"

"Do you ever listen to my show? There's a huge black market for the stuff, ever since the Incident."

Trish puts a hot mug of green tea next to her. The sheer officiousness of the gesture says it all; no, it's not alcohol, yes, you will drink it. Jessica knows she probably will.

"You'll have to wear a sling for another couple of weeks."

"Great."

"You could stay here. It'll be fun."

Jessica succeeds in scooting her legs over to the edge of the bed, the movement all the answer she needs to give Trish. She looks down at the satin looking nightie that someone put her in. "These are some fancy ass pj's. Don't tell me Luke dressed me too?"

"No, that was me. Natori. By the way, Scott is here."

The pain is dim but manageable and her tongue feels furry. "Eh, okay."

Trish scrunches up her face. "He looks ridiculous. Be nice."

Right on cue, a pirate from a ballet walks in. He's in a bright yellow and green leotard spandex harem pants ensemble, with a yellow half-mask on top.

"Don't be weirded out." Scott lifts up the mask. "It's me."

"What the shit..."

"It's my Iron Fist outfit!" He poses. "You like? Look, I can make my fist glow."

He lifts his fist and it glows electric green, like a night light.

"Huh. Were you Daredevil before?"

"No, that was Pet-errgh, ah, a kid I know who did me solid. Avengers-adjacent. Local. He handled some guys in the back and I took care of a few out front."

"Then who was the *second* Daredevil?"

"That was Danny Rand. He's back. He thinks my outfit is awesome."

Scott beams at her and she's not sure what she's supposed to do.

"How did you know? To be there?"

"You told me. The other night. That you were worried about escalation."

"I did?"

"Yeah. Stark's got crazy tech. And uh, it's been quiet. So I thought I could help."

His speech slows down as he talks. She can tell he's thinking his way through the past few hours.

"Too much?" He squints.

"A little. But thanks?"

Scott stands up as if to head out the door, then leans down, kissing the top of her head.

"Yeah."

“Hey, Scott.” Jessica waits for another stab of pain to pass. “I think I need to not be seeing anyone right now. There’s somebody else that I’m having a hard time letting go of. So... there’s that. Sorry for not telling you before.”

“We’re breaking up?”

“Uh, yeah?”

She’s never broken up with anyone before. It feels profoundly shitty. Jessica soldiers on, reminding herself that she’s an adult.

“You’re a good guy, Scott. I think you know exactly what I’m talking about, judging by what you’ve told me about your ex. We could stay fuck buddies but you know, maybe not?”

Scott nods. “It’s the outfit isn’t it?”

“No. Yes.”

He does a series of ridiculous dance moves—The Carlton, a pelvic thrust square dance, his bandana flapping behind him—and Jessica discovers that laughing makes her arm burn like a son-of-a-bitch.

“Still friends, J.J.?”

“Sure, weirdo. But don’t call me J.J.”

Scott smiles. “Fair enough.”

“Hey, Scott. Can you do me a favor?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Can you get back into your regular clothes? I think I might puke if I have to keep looking at your Halloween costume.”

“Sure thing, Jessie Jo.”

She gives him the fiddle finger and he catches it like a blown kiss.

Shortly after Scott leaves, Jessica tries to get dressed and after ten minutes, manages a to get a single sock on. Trish walks in and frowns at her.

“You shouldn’t be doing that.”

“I’m leaving. I need a smoke.”

Trish rolls her eyes. “Luke is here. He wants to see you, should I tell him to come back?”

It’s unexpected but she’s happy to entertain. “No. It’s okay.”

Trish nods. “Do you want me to get you a robe?”

“It’s nothing he hasn’t seen before. If he’s here it must be important.”

“Right.” Trish moves the rest of Jessica’s clothes closer to the bed. “I’ll send him in.”

She hears them talking outside of the room and Luke enters tentatively as if he isn’t sure he can fit. It’s a perfectly large Upper East Side apartment bedroom and seeing both of them in it makes Jessica feel like she wasn’t fully aware of reality before. She got beat and feels like hell. Shot with tiny pellets, whacked with a lead pipe from space and now, standing there in practically nothing, black and blue and unsure, as Luke approaches, concern playing across his features.

“Hey. Have you been here the whole time?”

“I just got back from the precinct. I convinced Misty to get your statement tomorrow.”

“Thanks for that.”

“How do you feel?”

“Like garbage. But I’m definitely getting out of this place. I love Trish but I can’t relax here.”

He helps her sit down and takes the sock from her hand, kneeling down in front of her. She tries not to think too hard about the last time she had this vantage point. “What’s happening, something else go down?”

Luke puts the mouth of the sock over her foot and pulls it on slowly, his thumbs at the arches, past the heel and ankle point; all the way up. He takes her other sock, already on her foot, and smooths out the places where it bunched, pulling the hem up to match its pair. The tops of her socks form a perfect line across her shins.

“Matt is staying with Danny tonight, it’s all good. Do you want to get dressed?”

She’s shivering. “Yes.”

“Do you want me to help you?”

Jessica nods, and grabs his shoulder without meaning to. Her hand looks like a claw there, almost proprietary, and horrified, she pulls it back, curling it into a fist at her side.

“It’s okay, you can hold on. After you’re dressed, I’ll take you home.”

He helps her stand up and, with an unbearable sort of tenderness, brushes the hair back from her face. She’s never been frail in her life, even before she became a freak, but she feels like she’s made of a thousand tiny pieces now and they are all cracking. Luke goes down on one knee, jeans in hand, and lays them at her feet, helping her step into each leg. He takes her hand and puts it back on his shoulder, and, pulls up her jeans, shifting with her as she wavers.

“I can button them.”

“You sure?”

She zips and buttons. Her right hand and arm work fine. "I need help with my shirt. It's a button down. You can ask Trish to take over if you want. I should probably take this off," she says, gesturing to the Natori.

Her nipples stand at attention and, ever the class act, Luke's eyes never leave her's. "I'm going to put shirt on over your nightgown so you don't have to lift your arms again. But I'm going to need to take off your sling. You think you can handle it?"

At her nod, Luke carefully unfastens her sling and when she sucks in a breath at the pain, he rests his forehead against hers and leaves it there until her chest stops rising and falling like a panicked rabbit.

"You are strong as hell, Jessica." He moves his face back and looks into her eyes. "Shirt?"

"Let's do it."

He takes the shirt from her bed and slides it on Jessica, bad arm first, then unhurt one. Luke is quick and so is the discomfort, he's buttoning the buttons before the pain plateaus, his hand stopping at the third one down from the top, fingers hovering above the spot there as she breathes through it. After a moment, he says, "I'm going to put the sling back on."

Luke is putting on her shoes when Trish knocks on the door. Jessica calls her in and Trish stops at the doorway, watching them. Jessica focuses on Luke's hand at her laces, fixing the tongue and tightening the fit.

"Malcolm is waiting at Jessica's apartment, Luke. Let me know when I can call a car," Trish says.

Luke stands. "Thank you. Tell Malcolm I'll stay with her tonight."

"Right." Trish nods. "I'll call him now."

Jessica snaps her fingers. "Hey! Still here. Don't I have a say in this?"

"No," say Luke and Trish simultaneously.

"You don't have to stay here, Jess, but if you're intent on going home, someone else has to be there." Trish crosses her arms. "No arguments. Luke will come with you"

When they get to her apartment, she tells Luke he doesn't have to stay and he doesn't respond. He fingers the painted-over cracks in the walls, looking around at all the broken and put-back-together stuff that piles up everywhere despite Malcolm's best efforts to have it look like a real home.

"It looks good in here."

"You don't have to lie."

Because life is cruel and delicious in equal measures, Luke helps her with her clothes again. Undressing her, even slower, more carefully than before, back to Trish's gray satiny number.

Jessica doesn't ask him to get in bed with her. Or maybe she does, if eye-fucking is asking. He sits down on the floor instead, back against the bed. She could fall asleep right now, she thinks. Fall asleep and actually rest. In the morning, maybe Luke could help her take a shower. Would that be any weirder than anything else that's happened? The answer is yes, of course it would be.

Luke speaks. "I've missed you. More than I was admitting to myself. You know what I mean?"

Jessica stares at Luke's shiny dome and doesn't say a word.

"You frustrate me. You frustrate the shit out of me. But then... I worry about you."

The light grows blue outside and the city birds start their annoying-as-fuck four a.m. din. And Luke is there, close enough to touch.

"You like me?"

He turns around, looking tired and oddly resolved. As if whatever decision he wanted to make, has been made. "I'm here, Jessica. I'm here."

She wakes to the smells of Malcolm Ducasse's deep commitment to breakfast, Luke nowhere in sight. Trish appears and helps Jessica shower and dress before running off to interview New York City's brand new Council Speaker. Jessica notices that Malcolm and Trish have become a team of sorts, they have a shorthand and an understanding. Probably a necessity when it comes to her.

Now that Danny Rand's back from his magic travels, she's officially done but the boys ask her to stay on as a consultant, and despite her grumbling, she accepts. They invite her over to Luke's place the following morning to discuss what went down.

Luke, with an assist from Misty Knight, found out that a couple of years ago, a crew of skinheads vandalized the Congregation Beth Israel on 34th Street. They broke windows, spray painted anti-semitic graffiti and tried to take off with some artifacts. Hearing the commotion, a passerby managed to call the police, and in the ensuing melee, an officer was shot. Daredevil cartwheeled into the scene shortly thereafter, incapacitated the shooter and knocked out the rest of the crew. Of course, the shooter turned out to be the favorite son of the local Neo-Nazi dumbass, who decided that the unofficial embargo on going after the "real" Daredevil wasn't something that needed heeding. After all, if some nobody almost had a shot, why not them?

"Is he a dumbass because he's a Neo-Nazi?" Danny asks slowly. Sometimes it's like the kid's just learning the English language.

“Well, yes, automatically, but he’s an even bigger dumbass because he’s a Neo-Nazi in *New York City*. It's like, 'know your audience, asshole'.”

Luke snorts. Jessica tells him to thank Claire for last night’s medical attention and he looks at her—her eyes, her nose, her mouth, slow and careful; then says, “I’ll give you her number.”

It’s unlikely there would be other attacks. The aforementioned local Neo-Nazi dumbass had been found dead in the gym at Fort Dix only a few hours ago.

“I think that for better or for worse, Matt, Wilson Fisk has plans for you that are even bigger than revealing your identity. It buys us some time, at least.”

“Yes.” Matt nods in Luke’s direction.

Jessica, yawning, shuffles slowly over to the refrigerator, every muscle screaming, and grabs the two Caesar Augustuses—Augusti?—stored there from the last time they’d had a meeting at Luke’s. She brings them back to the table, opening both with the bottle opener on her keychain.

“It’s ten a.m., Jessica,” Luke says.

“Not in Tokyo. Besides, I had a rough week,” she replies, holding her bottle up, knowing full well that despite the inappropriate drinking hour, Matt Murdock is definitely going to clink the second bottle against hers with a perfect, peeling *ping*.

Danny shakes his head. “I don’t get it. Why reveal Matt’s identity and not attack? Why wait?”

“Control. He has all of it and wants Matt to know it,” Jessica says. “I haven’t come up with a plan to counter his bullshit, but I’m sure if we all put our heads together, we’ll come up with something.”

None of them say anything, just stare at her like she’s grown an additional set of arms. Except for Matt, obviously, who just seems to be intently listening, his head cocked at an even more extreme angle than usual.

“What?”

“You said ‘we’,” Danny says, beaming, and holds out that magic fist of his, presumably, for her to bump. The other two dummies grin and she knows, despite whatever her face is telegraphing, that she’s not all that upset about giving herself away.

As they leave Luke’s apartment, Matt tiptoes his fingers up to her good shoulder and whispers, “Laugh. As if I’ve just suggested we have sex.”

“Gross,” Jessica says, but laughs, especially when Matt grins and gently pulls her closer. “I am throwing up in my mouth right now.”

“Jessica,” Luke says from behind them. “You forgot your scarf.”

When she goes back to grab it, Luke pulls it out of reach. “Why do you need a scarf anyway? It’s still warm out.”

“Oh, you never know when you have to tie someone up. I like to be prepared, just in case.”

“Are you free tonight?”

“Excuse me?”

“Can I stop by? Around nine?”

“At my place. Okay.” Jessica swallows, trying to remember if Malcolm came by today. If yes, then the place would be visitor-friendly. No, and god knows what she’d find when she got there. “Eh, yeah. Nine works.”

“Cool, see you later.”

Matt’s waiting outside, listening to Danny talk about Game of Thrones like it’s a documentary, goofy smile on his face.

“What was that about in Luke’s apartment?” Jessica asks when Danny takes a moment from monologuing to answer a phone call.

“Did he invite you over?” Matt asks, with entirely too much smugness.

“No.”

“No?” He frowns.

“No. He asked if he could come to my place.”

Matt smiles like the Cheshire Cat. “He’s jealous.”

“Uh, okay. Did he *smell* jealous? Or *sound* jealous? Jesus, you’re a trip.”

“Yes, to both.”

“You’re wrong. He has a girlfri—”

“He doesn’t have a girlfriend. He’s not with Claire anymore, hasn’t been for a few weeks now. Mutual decision, apparently. Unfinished business, on both their parts.”

Jessica steps aside to let a lady walk by with a squadron of teeny, yapping, dogs with barrettes in their hair. “How do you know this? What have you been up to?”

He smiles again and tugs at his earlobe. “Nothing. Not really.”

“You’re so fucking shady. When have I ever even talked about Luke?”

“When? Only in every single one of our conversations.”

Danny raises his voice, he's speaking Cantonese to someone and his volume is killing her. But on the plus side, he's not hearing a word they're saying.

"Not that it matters, but what makes you think he feels the same way? Because he doesn't."

The cane *taps, taps, taps* in one spot. "I knew about the two of you. From the night we all met. You react to one another in ways neither of you can hear or see. But I can. It only got clearer and stronger, the past few weeks."

Jessica shakes her head. "If he feels the same way, why hasn't he done anything about it? He's not exactly a person who stands back."

"Fear, I think."

"Fear of what?"

"I don't know, Jessica. I only know it's there." Then softer, like the teacher's pet he is. "But I can guess."

Matt leans in, murmuring quietly enough that she has to really focus to make out the words behind the New York City street noise; the honking and Danny yelling. The attention makes them starker; inarguable.

"You shouldn't be afraid either. You are a good friend, with a good heart. I've been doing better lately and you have a large part in that."

He lifts his head and for a moment, it's almost like eye contact. However he sees, it's happening now, and Jessica sees him as well; there's a color to him that wasn't there before. She's glad, so glad that Matt's on his way back to the world of the living. Not that she'd ever tell him.

Matt Murdock told her once that he couldn't hear facial nuance but that's a lie—he's bored her to tears describing the sound of smiles. Jessica puts all she has into the smirk directed at his ear. "Sounds like you're gonna write me a hell of a reference letter."

They split up at 72nd, she's off to Trish's and he's headed downtown to see Jeri with Danny. Matt is not her professional responsibility anymore and she's not expected to return to her bodyguard post. Yet, she immediately answers yes when he asks her to meet him for a drink the following day. Because the fucker's basically family. She can't let him booze it alone.

Malcolm hadn't been by so she calls Luke to cancel only for him to invite her back for dinner. Outside his door, she toes the marble of his threshold for about five minutes, working up the nerve to ring the doorbell. He opens the door while she's vacillating and she breezes past him into the apartment instead, hoping he won't look too closely at her face.

“Back at work already?” Luke says, slinging a dishtowel over his shoulder. His blue t-shirt is small on him, they always are.

“How did you know?”

He nods at her bag, camera peeking out at the top.

“Yeah. A potential hire at the Mayor’s office is actually a secret perv. Shocker.”

“The Mayor’s office. Going legit?”

Jessica puts her bag down and peers out of the window to the building across. “Sure? Maybe Misty’ll call next, put in a good word for me with the NYPD.”

He laughs.

“Nah, right? You’re friends with Knight. Why do you think she hates me so much?”

Luke’s gaze is even. “Maybe you’re too much the same. Same tribe. Same fire.”

“Ha. Yeah, right.”

“How’s your arm?”

She pauses before answering, and holds her breath while Luke gently takes off her jacket. Her t-shirt underneath isn’t a sexy number or anything, but the act of removing a layer seems more provocative than it actually is. Luke’s gone back to the kitchen so she uses the time alone to inspect her reflection in the hall mirror. She’s got a cut on her forearm from scaling a fence, poorly. She had put on make-up the night before for some reason and the unwashed black eyeliner, smudged around her eyes, is uneven.

Luke returns with a beer and a tray of lasagna. It’s been cut into perfect squares. He hands her the beer and walks over to the table, placing the tray on a metal stand. She watches the muscles in his back move as he carefully serves two portions.

“I-” she starts, putting her beer down carefully.

“I wanted-” he says, simultaneously.

Luke looks at her sheepishly. “Ladies first.”

“I’m sorry I’ve been such a bitch. Believe it or not, I’ve never had to do the whole working-with-exes thing. I mean, we’re *barely* exes, I know that-”

“Same.”

Jessica nods. “Cool. So. What happened with Claire? If you fucked that up, you must be not as well-adjusted as I thought you were.”

“How did you hear about that?”

“From our very own super-eared friend. He’s got the heart of a gossipy eighth grader.”

“Yeah, well, he’s an old friend of Claire’s, as it turns out.”

“Really?” Jessica erases all expression from her face. Luke raises an eyebrow.

“Really. Don’t worry, he ain’t on my shit list.”

“That’s good, because he pays you.”

“No. Jeri Hogarth pays me.” Luke sits on the couch. “But I like the guy, can’t help it.”

“I know what you mean. He reminds me of my brother. He would’ve loved his stupid devil outfit.”

Jessica sits down next to Luke, folding her legs in.

“Brother?”

“Phil. Little jerk. He died in the car crash. *The* crash.”

Her knee touches his thigh and she stares down at the point where they meet.

“How is the PTSD?” He reaches for her hand.

“Better.” She takes it and squeezes knowing she could never break it. “I know what is real and what isn’t. What I felt with you was real. What I feel right now is real. Everything I remember, with him, Kilgrave, wasn’t. Especially the things he engineered to seem fine, which weren’t. I’ve always known it, that the feelings he put in me weren’t real, even when it was happening. But...”

Main Street. She can’t remember past Main Street.

“You regret killing him.”

“Yes. No. I was fine for a while but then the non-stop dreams started. It’s as if he implanted this fucked-up idea in my head that I needed him around. That he’d actually loved me and that I was wrong to say no. It’s such bullshit. I know that it’s not true, but in my nightmares it can seem true. I’m working my way through it.” She lets go of his hand. “I hope this doesn’t freak you out.”

“No. You went through some shit.”

“I mean the stuff about you.”

“Nope.”

Luke is beautiful, his eyes especially. They contain certainty. She doesn’t lean in. He does a little. The movement is careful but deliberate.

“You still seeing that Avenger dude?”

“Who told you? Oh, of course. Matt Fucking Murdock. No, I’m not seeing Scott anymore. Why are you asking? Because you’re suddenly single and want to bone?”

She tosses it out there like a joke but her voice doesn't quite sell it. Luke, to his credit, doesn't acknowledge her misstep.

“Claire is a wonderful woman. But there were things that neither of us were really addressing, and it took actually being together to see it.”

“Well, I think you fucked up. She’s incredible. Can I ask her out?”

He picks her hand back up and their fingers intertwine. “Jessica.”

Jessica swallows, suddenly clammy.

“I want to clarify something,” he says.

This is the part where he tells her that as much as he likes her, he’ll never forgive her. They can never be together. Not as friends. Not even as co-workers.

“I love you.”

She nods, feeling like someone just pushed her out of a plane.

“You got that? Good. Food should be ready to eat.”

They eat and talk and talk and eat. From his dinner table, then the sofa. Not about what he said, or what she’s feeling but all the things they hadn’t told each other while they were apart. This happens the following night and the next. Enough that little Danny Rand asks her if she’s living there with none of the mind-your-business his parents should have taught him. He hangs out with them too. Luke adores the guy and seeing them together, Danny makes a little more sense to her than he does on his own. He’s good-natured and impish, his rich boy imperiousness more clueless than insulting. And the Golden Child legit knows a lot about dragons. Luke’s gleeful enthusiasm for this fact is hilarious. He always looks so smooth, “Power-Man of Harlem NYC”, with his perfectly maintained goatee and skin like a Neutrogena commercial. Little do they know, Luke Cage is a secret giggler.

She waits until the sling comes off three weeks later, before she says to Luke, bent over and fiddling with some old stereo system a local grandma gave him, arms flexing beautifully, “Do you remember the first night we spoke? When I was lurking outside your bar and you told me I was hot?”

Luke puts his tools down and stands up to his full height. He walks towards her slowly and stops, touching her hair and then her neck, fingers sliding down her nape to hollow of her collarbone. Like he’d never stopped. “Yeah. You are.”

He’s got a hole in his jeans. She wiggles a finger in and touches his bare thigh and he laughs, ticklish and ridiculous.

“I liked when you said that.”

“I’ll say it again.” He speaks into her ear, turning her head for access; soft, low but not whispered. Clear and nerve-tingling. “You’re hot.”

Their faces align and she prolongs the moment of contact for as long she can. She wants to see him approaching, feel it inside, the fear and elation of the moment as it happens, shifting things back irrevocably between them. She wants to hold on to this pre-kiss anticipation, even as his lips touch hers and her hands come up to his face. She wants to give him this, the knowledge that she wants his everything, even though it sounds stupid and makes her want to run away.

“Hey, Luke. I love you too.”

The colors of the room don’t change. Luke’s shirt remains red. His hoodie, green. He’s dressed like a fucking parrot. Or Christmas. *Sweet Christmas*. In September, October, November, past December—that feeling—all year round. Yes, just like that. Jessica Jones can hear, see, and taste it, lighting up inside of her, real and true: *joy*.

End Notes

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