



CHAPTER 1

REQUIEM FOR A FAMILY MAN

The air is thick with smoke and the stench of corpses. I walk slowly through the haze, deliberately, searching. The blade is no longer a blade. The blade is my arm. It's a part of me.

A man is on the ground, begging, pleading. I raise my arm and he is no more. His head falls to the ground.

I feel no pain. I feel no mercy. I feel nothing.

All I know... is this is right. This is how it was always going to end. In blood.

I walk to the door.

My footsteps are slow, my movements become lethargic.

What's on the other side?

I open the door...

There's nothing. Absolutely nothing. I'm gone again, cast back down into that darkness.

But I can hear. The voices, over and over again. They're strange but familiar. It's like listening to an old song from when you were a kid.

"Frank! Frank!"

"Dad!"

"Captain Castle! Captain, they're everywhere!"

"Dad, they're everywhere."

"Wake up."

They all blur together until they become nothing but a cacaphony of wails and noise.

Is this death? Nothing but darkness to see and nothing but screams to hear for the rest of eternity?

Was it always going to be like this?

The blur suddenly becomes very crystal clear.

"Frank, wake up."

So I do.

I'm blinded by white light when I open my eyes. I can't see. My retinas scream in protest. My breaths are shallow and ragged. My chest burns, as if I've been branded. My limbs feel heavy, as if they've become made of stone.

All I can hear is the low, steady beeping of the life support machine beside me. Something is strapped to my face. Oxygen mask.

I suddenly become very aware of where I am.

Hospital. I can smell the disinfectant. That oppressive sense of 'clean'.

I try to look around, but it's no good. The walls and ceiling are painted a sick, puke green colour. The window is shut and frosted. The door is closed. There is no one around.

I try to move, but it's no good. The pain in my chest is far too great to do anything but lie here and breathe.

I've suffered far worse than this. I force myself with every ounce of my willpower to move. It takes me ten minutes just to sit up. The clock opposite me ticks by every second. It's mocking me.

I feel my chest. It's bandaged, heavily. I count three wounds, major. Gunshots.

It takes my five minutes to swing my legs off the bed and stand without falling. I grab hold of the rack holding the IV next to me. I tear off the sensors hooking me up to the machine and begin to drag my feet across the room. There is no point waiting here.

Where is Maria? Where are the kids? I can't remember anything. What the hell happened?

I remember the sun was shining in the park. It was a little cool, but we can deal with anything, can't we?

I remember the clearing.

I remember the first shot. I crouched down, low. I knew this sound. HK MP-5. But here? In Central Park?

Then everything goes black. And I wake up here. What happened after the first shot is a blur, a broken memory I can't reach and piece back together.

I open the door and step out into the brightly-lit hallway. It's empty. Dead. I hear no one. No nurses, patients, no one.

Just silence.

I don't like it. I walk down the hallway towards the nurses station. I hear footsteps to my left. I turn and see a woman in scrubs.

She looks up at me and shouts in surprise. She drops the clipboard she was holding. To me, it sounds like a boulder smashing into the ground. She covers her mouth.

"Mr. Castle! What are you doing up? You should be in bed."

I don't care about me. I only want to know one thing. My body still screams... it can't stand the strain it's taking me to stand.

"Where is Maria? Where are my children?"

Her face goes pale. She's unable to answer.

Seconds go by without a sound from either one of us.

Without warning, I begin to scream and shout. The dam has broken.

“WHERE THE FUCK ARE THEY!? WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED!? WHAT AREN'T YOU TELLING ME!?”

I begin to scream, my throat goes raw. It becomes unintelligible. I see doctors and nurses and patients running and looking at me.

They look scared. As if they've seen something only from their nightmares, and they begin to retreat.

All of a sudden, everything goes silent again. I feel a pin prick in my neck.

And I fall back into that dark.

I awaken again. No dreams this time, no voices. I don't fall back into the haze.

There's a man sitting next to me. Old man, in his fifties or sixties. His face is weathered with age. His hair is snow white and beginning to recede. He's wearing a dark brown trench coat and reading from a file.

I know who he is. Cop. You can tell by the look in his eyes, his careful, precise movements.

I ask anyway.

“Who... are... you?”

It comes out barely a croak.

He looks up at me. His brown eyes are intense. Former soldier. I've seen the look.

“Mr. Castle, my name is Detective Laviano. I've been assigned to your case.”

“Case? What happened? Where is my family?”

His shoulders visibly sag. The intense stare in his eyes soften. He looks uncomfortable now.

“I'm sorry to be the one to have to tell you this, Mr. Castle... but your family... is gone.”

“Gone? What the fuck are you talking about?”

He takes a moment to gather his thoughts.

“Nine days ago, you and your family were shot in Central Park. I'm afraid you're the only one who survived.”

He's lying. He has to be. What kind of sick joke is he playing?

He's able to read my mind.

“I'm sorry, Frank, but it is true. If it's any consolation... they died immediately. They didn't suffer.”

He's lying. They can't be dead. No, it was impossible.

“Fuck off.”

"Mr. Castle,"

"Leave me alone."

He doesn't push it. It isn't the first time he's had to break bad news to someone. He nods and walks away. He turns before he shuts the door.

"I'll be right outside when you're ready."

He shuts the door and leaves me inside the room. I sit there for a moment, attempting to comprehend the sheer madness of it all.

It wasn't possible. How could it be possible? Not Maria. Not Frank. Not Lisa.

It all comes back to me in a rush.

The bullets fly. I run forward, try to get my family down. I'm hit instantly and collapse to the ground.

I look up, and see the red spray in the air. My son's head snaps back and he falls down without a sound. The blood splashes in my face, but I can hear my wife and daughter screaming, then going silent in an instant. I wipe the blood from my eyes, and I see their shattered bodies in the field.

I stand. I try to walk towards them. Another burst of gunfire. My heart feels like it's about to explode. And then... it's gone.

I remember everything.

Tears well up. I begin to sob uncontrollably. It's not fair. Not them. It was all for them, and this is what happens?

After that, everything becomes a blur again, and I feel nothing but sorrow.

This is the end of the world.

Two days later, I'm let out of the hospital. The media jackals are in a frenzy. Hero Soldier and Family Shot Down in Central Park. Gang Violence on the Rise. Family of Four Mercilessly Gunned Down. Everyone wants the big exclusive. The lone survivor.

I hate them.

Laviano helps. He first takes me to the police station and takes down my statement. He promises me that he will find those responsible.

Promises.

It's all a blur. I don't pay attention.

He takes me to the cemetery. Maria's mother asked that Maria and the children be buried. She's an old woman, living out in Jersey now. The funeral was held a week after Central Park.

No one thought I'd wake up.

I walk slowly through the silent graveyard. Laviano stays at the gates. He's given me directions to where my

family is... buried.

Buried.

I walk through the dead land. No one but old ghosts here.

I find The Stone.

I fall to my knees and see the names.

Maria Castle. Francis Castle Jr. Lisa Castle.

It's finally hammered home.

They're gone. Forever. It's just me left.

Just me.

I'm not sure how long I stay there, just staring at The Stone. By the time Laviano comes to get me, the sun has begun to set. The light is dying and night is beginning to take over. The air is cold, bitter.

He takes me home. He promises he'll be by tomorrow to check in with me.

I walk into the silent house. It's dead inside. I shut the door behind me and walk in. I don't bother turning the lights on.

I walk upstairs into the bedroom. The one that Maria and I shared.

I rummage in the closet for a few moments, and I find the box.

I take it and the key downstairs, and sit down on the sofa.

I pick up the photo that's on the stand beside me. It was from when we visited Disneyland. It feels like it was an eternity ago.

I put the photo down, and think a moment. Amidst the voices and wails that sound so far away, there is only one crystal clear thought that makes perfect sense.

I load the magazine into the pistol, and then I turn off the safety. I pull the hammer back and set the .45 down onto the table in front of me.

This is no place for some... thing like me. They were all that kept me grounded. Without them...

I'm just a soldier with nothing worth fighting for. A WMD with no target.

The clock strikes 12. I look up at it. How long have I been sitting here, just staring at the gun? Maria usually reminded me when to take my meds.

I get up and walk to the bathroom. I open the medical cabinet and pull out the little orange container.

It's labelled 'Amisulpride'. The doctor prescribed it after the discharge.

I dry-swallow two. I close the cabinet and look in the mirror.

The grinning face is back. The face without a voice. The dark eye sockets look back at me, staring. I begin to shake. My vision begins to go away. The ticking of the clock stops. All I see is that damn face. Staring back at me. The flesh stripped away. It mocks me. It hates me.

“Leave me alone.”

The face fades away, and I'm left staring at myself. The first time I've really taken a look at myself. My eyes are dark and sunken in. My skin is pale, bordering on pure white. My hair is disheveled. There's a stitch running up above my left eye. My body looks thin, starving. I lean against the opposite wall and slide down.

I sit there for the rest of the night, trying to keep the voices at bay.

