



GPA PRESS PRESENTS
BAPTISM BY FIRE
CHAPTER 2

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ETERNAL DARKNESS OF THE DISTURBED MIND

The world slowly bleeds back into view. I'm lying on the floor of the bathroom. Filtered light from outside illuminates the room. My head is pounding, like a million dissonant war drums. My body feels heavy, almost as if I'm tied down.

I slowly lift myself off of the floor. My eyes are itchy, my mouth dry. I move slowly, my head is swimming.

I lift myself up and look into the mirror. My eyes are red and bloodshot. My skin is sallow and pale, clammy. My lips are thin, there is messy stubble growing.

But it is me that looks back. Something to be thankful for.

I stumble out of the washroom back into the hallway. I walk past the kids' rooms in a daze. It takes me a moment to realize that the ringing in my ears is actually the phone.

I pick it up, more out of habit than anything.

"Hello?" my voice cracks out.

"Hello, is this Mr. Frank Castle?" the voice on the other line is light, peppy, full of excitement.

The last thing I need is a telemarketer.

"Who is this?"

"Well, Mr. Castle, I am calling from Fox Media, and we were wondering if we could possibly come by later today and have a sit-down interview with you?"

"No."

I hang up the phone and sit down in the recliner and simply stare at the blank television screen.

And from then on the phone does not stop ringing. I eventually stop answering.

But a reporter is like a bloodhound. It'll keep hounding after you till it gets what it wants.

I eventually tear the cord out of the wall and throw the phone behind me.

I don't know how many hours pass as I simply sit there. All I can do is sit there and think.

The sun is low in the sky when I hear noises outside. I walk to the window and look outside. There is a news van parked on the street, blocking my driveway. Two men stand on my lawn, one in an expensive suit clutching a microphone, the other in a flannel shirt and jeans and holding a camera. They are both seemingly laughing their guts out.

The reporter is smoking a cigarette. He flicks it to the ground and stomps it out with his foot.

I walk out of my house and down the pathway towards them.

Neither of them notice as I approach. The reporter seems to be in the middle of a story.

"And then, she says to me, 'What about my sister?', and I say-"

“Get off my property.”

The duo is surprised. The cameraman nearly drops the camera.

The reporter looks flustered for a moment, but he quickly regains his composure. I've seen this man before. Late 40s, early 50s. Slicked back gray hair. Giant, out of place mustache. Beady little eyes, and the smile of a used car salesman.

I hated him on sight.

“Mr. Castle, hello. My name is Geraldo Rivera. I am a reporter for Fox News. You mind giving us an interview?”

I could see the barely-hidden glee and excitement. I am very good at reading people. I had to learn it the hard way. I could see what he wanted. The exclusive. The glory. The first one to interview the devastated family man, and maybe, just maybe, get that Pulitzer that is so close yet so far from his reach.

“I said, get off of my property.”

The expression on his face changed. I could see mild annoyance and irritation.

“Please, Mr. Castle, be reasonable. I realize that you are going through a tough time in your life, but now is probably the best and only time to reach out to the people of New York.”

“Get off. Of my. Property.”

“Look, Mr. Castle. As a journalist, I have the right to present the news and you are the news. So please, allow us to interview you.”

I begin to feel cold. The sun is setting, but it's still warm.

“What I want, is for you to leave my property and never come back. Do you understand that?”

Rivera begins to shift around a bit. I can see he's getting angry. The cameraman looks nervous.

“Sir, we are the press, and we have the freedom to get the news and present it in any way we want. You cannot -”

“Don't tell me what I can't do. Leave. Now.”

Rivera takes a step towards me. He's annoyed that he's being denied what he wants. I can see it. He begins to speak again.

And I am tired of hearing his voice.

I grab his left arm and twist sharply. He drops the microphone and begins to scream. I curl my hand into a fist and hit him once in the nose. I hear cartilage break, feel it crunch. A long, steady stream of scarlet flies into the air. He begins to fall back. I jerk him forward and knee his midsection. He drops to the ground without a word.

I look at the frightened cameraman. He's shaking but keeping the camera pointed in my general direction.

“Go. Now. Take him.”

The cameraman quickly nods and drags his fallen colleague back to the van. I turn around and head back inside. It's getting dark out.

The neighbors are all standing outside, a respectable distance away.

A little while later, the door bell rings. I get up to answer it. Laviano is standing there, along with a bandaged up Rivera. Next to Rivera is a young black man wearing a NYPD Detective shield.

“Yeah, Offisher, thab's hib! Thab's the guy who broke my nosh. Arrebt hib!”

Rivera had a tough time speaking.

I could see the hint of a smirk on the other NYPD Detective's face.

Laviano took one look at me, then turned to Rivera.

“Mr. Rivera, we cannot arrest Mr. Castle. We've seen the tape that your cameraman provided, and it's clear you provoked him.”

Rivera looked angry and crestfallen.

“I'b a journabist! You can't treat the bress this way!”

“Sir, freedom of the press only takes you so far.”

Rivera stormed off into the night, attempting to shout about his lawyers suing us into the ground.

Useless waste of oxygen.

Laviano introduces me to his partner, Stanley Witts. We briefly shake hands.

Laviano stands at the step for a moment before asking me if I'm doing alright.

“Yeah. I'm ok.”

He looks at me strangely.

“Frank, remember. If you ever need anything, do not hesitate to phone me, alright?”

I promise him that I will.

“How is the investigation going?” I ask Laviano.

“We're working as hard as we can, Frank. I promise you, we will nail these bastards. It's just a matter of time.”

Time... it always boils down to time.

Laviano asks me once more if I need anything. I tell him no. He and his partner bid me a good night and leave.

I shut the door and walk back into the living room.

Later on, late, in the dark, I think I finally fall asleep. In that darkness, I can't see anything. I can only hear people. People I know. People I love. Screaming in the darkness. Screaming for me. Screaming that I've failed them.

My entire life has been an abattoir. Did I condemn my family? Did I know what I was and as I knew this, I damned them anyway?

I should be the one that's dead. I should've died ten years ago when I first joined the Corps. I should've died in

the Box two years ago, like all those other good men. I should've died ten days ago in the Park instead of my family.

I should be dead.

So why am I still here?

Is this the Universe's sick idea of a twisted joke? Did God look down at me and decide to shit all over my life, take away the only thing that made my life worth anything at all?

I want to wake up. I want the voices to go away. But it's as if I'm trapped in a coffin, unable to move, stuck in the dark.

Later on, I dream about my old friend.

The Man without a Face.

Laviano drove back to the station in silence. Stanley sat next to him reading a copy of Nineteen Eighty-Four. The boy had come a long from his harsh childhood in Harlem, filled with violent gang bangers and corrupt cops.

That's how he put it, anyways.

Laviano's thoughts remained with Frank Castle though. When he thought about that young man who had his entire life torn from him in less than a minute, it brought forth a profound sorrow. Thirty years on the police force had not dulled Laviano's emotions. He still felt for Castle like he felt thirty years ago when he first joined the NYPD and met that child who's father killed her mother. His emotions remained the same when he first saw the Cambodian killing fields where he lost so many of his friends.

Laviano had not burnt out yet.

"What's wrong, John?"

Laviano became startled out of his reverie for a moment.

"Nothing, Stan. Just thinking about Frank."

"Yeah, man. It's fucking terrible. That guy barely looks like he's keeping it together."

Stanley was right. Laviano had seen men like Frank Castle before. They had that look in their eyes. Some called it shell shock. Some called it PTSD. To Laviano, it had always been The Thousand Yard Stare. That sense of detachment. The sense of falling apart.

Frank Castle had the cold blue eyes of a dead man.

"Listen, Stanley... we have to get this case done, and we have to do it quick. We can't stand by while those animals roam the streets. I'm not sure how much longer Castle will hang on."

Stanley agreed, and for a few moments, they drove in silence. Laviano's cell phone then rang.

"Hello?"

On the other line was Sergeant Gerard, who was also on the Central Park shooting case.

"Hey John, just called to let you know. Peter Miller, the other wounded at Central Park, just died. That's four dead."

“Shit. Alright, thanks for letting me know, Ryan.”

Laviano hung up and told Witts what had just happened.

“Fuck... he was our only lead here.”

Over the last week and a half, Laviano and Witts had pieced together the most probable series of events. It had taken a few days, but after some jurisdictional bullshit, the FBI finally released the files on Peter Miller, who, as it turned out, was actually a CI for an FBI agent in the New York office. He'd been informing on the Costa crime syndicate for the last six months. He had been due to testify in a week on an alleged hit that Bruno Costa had orchestrated when on a sunny day in Central Park, he was gunned down in front of his wife and son.

Frank Castle's family had been in between the shooters and Miller.

Unfortunately, it had turned out that the Costas and their employees had apparently iron-clad alibis for the day of the shooting.

All of them.

It disgusted Laviano when he had to let them free. Miller had been their only chance, as he was the only one who could identify them.

No other witnesses had come forward.

Now their only lead was dead. He'd held on for ten days after taking a bullet to the head, but he lingered in between life and death in a coma.

Laviano's guts grew cold. This wasn't good.

Frank would be asking soon how the investigation was going, and Laviano wasn't about to lie to him. A man like Frank...

“Stanley, we need to move fast on this.”

“Yeah, I agree. But without Miller, what're we gonna do?”

“I'm thinking. But whatever it is, it's gonna have to be soon. Let me tell you something. Frank Castle is on the razor's edge right now. There's only so much men like him can take.”

“What do you mean, John?”

“I've seen his type before, Stan. A long time ago, before I'd even joined the Force. Back in 'Nam. There was only so much they could take before it all went to hell for them. Sometimes they'd snap and blow their brains out, walk into enemy fire. Sometimes they'd become junkies as a way of escape. Sometimes they'd go insane and start seeing VC everywhere. I've seen the things that Frank has seen... and they certainly left an effect on me. Frank Castle is a soldier. Not only that, but he's a soldier with a frayed mind and a razor thin grasp on reality. The only thing keeping him stable was his family.”

“And now?”

“God help us he doesn't do something... rash.”

“I tried to get ahold of his military records. DOD refused to release them.”

The DOD would generally release this stuff in these cases.

Unless there was something in there they didn't want the NYPD or, God forbid, the Press to see. A dishonorable

discharge? Psych fuck up? Black ops?

They continued driving into the night, their minds heavy with the thoughts of a man named Frank.

I wake up on the floor of the living room. The late afternoon sun is shining through the window. I blink my eyes slowly, taking everything in.

I walk upstairs and brush my teeth and take a shower. Just going through the motions, pretending everything's still normal as ever.

I'm lying to myself, and I know it.

I avoid looking at my reflection.

I change my clothes. I take my pills.

I take down the photos. I can't look at them without feeling as if my heart is about to shrivel up and die.

I watch TV for a few hours. I lose myself, looking at the problems of other people. Less important problems. I see a broken nosed Geraldo and smirk without realizing it.

By the time I've had enough of TV, it's late. The moon is outside, gleaming, full.

I can't stay here. Everywhere I look, I see them.

And I can't see them. Not now.

I grab my car keys and walk to the garage. I take my pain pills with me.

There's my car.

We'd gotten a real family car last year, a Honda Accord, but I never got rid of my car. A black '67 Chevrolet Impala my father had gotten me when I'd graduated.

This car had been good to me for a long time.

I go out for a drive.

I open the windows and take in the cool brisk air.

I drive through the night, lost in the City. This has been my home for as long as I can remember. I've never felt comfortable anywhere else. Everytime I came home from overseas, it always felt like the City was welcoming me back. Like an old friend.

I love this city.

One day I came home and saw pillars of smoke in the distance. It was as if the City itself was wounded, an animal crying out in pain and sorrow.

This City... it's like a living organism. It ebbs and flows like no other.

Nowhere else I'd rather be.

This is how I lose myself. I drive through the dark streets and the brightly lit main sections. I see people all over, even this late, it's crowded.

The City That Never Sleeps.

It's been a few days since I've seen the sun. Every morning, I call John, and he updates me best he can. But it's slow going. He's explained what happened, the roadblock. He's run into jurisdictional roadblocks. Legal roadblocks. All that bullshit.

I know it's not Laviano's fault. But I still get angry with him. He's patient with me, like a kind father waiting out a child's tantrum. He reminds me of my father, before the cancer had made him sick and weak.

At night, I go out and drive. I drive all over the city. I explore every nook and cranny.

I don't like what I see sometimes.

It's as if the City itself is... sick. In the darkness, bad things happen. People are hurt, everyday here.

One day, a man from Jennings & Rall, some insurance corporation had come by and left me a check. He was a small, nerdy sort of a man. He took one look at me, left the check, and ran as fast as he could.

Maria's insurance policy.

I left it in a drawer and haven't looked at it since.

I'm running out of pills. The holes in my chest are healing up. But it feels as if there are holes in my head, as if I've been shot. Sometimes I get migraines. Sometimes I just break down and cry. Sometimes I break things.

I think I'm losing control. The thought scares me.

I am driving. I'm in the Bronx. I stop at a red light and turn my head. On the street corner, a scantily clad girl is arguing with an older, unshaven man. He looks angry. She looks barely seventeen.

The light turns green. I turn and park my car in front of a fire hydrant. This won't take long.

I get out of the car and walk towards the man.

He's screaming at the girl about his money. Up close, I can see him clearly. His skin is sallow and pale. He looks sweaty. I see his nose is faintly red. Coke?

His pupils are dilated. He's sweating. He's filled with rage.

"Look, bitch! When I say give me my money, you fucking give me my money!"

"Billy, I told you, I had to get fucking groceries."

The man grabs the girl's arm and is about to strike her when I yell out.

"Leave her alone."

He looks at me, actually wondering why someone would stop him.

"Fuck off, sick man. Ain't your business."

"If you're gonna hurt that girl, it's my business."

She looks at me, strangely. "Look mister, it isn't your business..."

Billy gets angry and slaps her.

"Did I tell you to talk, bitch?"

I take a step forward, intent on hurting him. Teach him a lesson.

That's when he pulls out the .38 and takes a shot at me.

It misses, but not by much.

A warning.

"Fuck off, big man, or the next one won't miss."

I can't risk getting near him. He's too wired. He might hurt the girl.

It hurts me, but I have no choice but to walk away.

"That's fucking right!" he screams, "you don't fuck with me!"

I hear the girl's scream as he hits her again and again.

I get in my car and drive home, shaking all the way.

How could I let that happen?

When I get home, I phone Laviano. He has nothing new to report. More promises.

Everyday, it's more promises. No results. Always just fucking promises.

I go upstairs and sift through my closet and find a locked box in the back.

I tenderly open the box. It's been a long time since I've laid eyes on this. There are many like it... but this one is mine.

I get into my car and drive back to the same area as last night. I park about a half block away from where the girl was.

I'm wearing a dark hoodie and pants. The hood's up above my face. I walk briskly.

I soon spot the girl. Her face is cut and there's a bad bruise below her left eye.

Billy is standing in a dark alley a few feet behind her, smoking a cigarette.

I slowly and silently approach him. The girl's oblivious, but Billy notices when I'm a few feet away from him.

"What the fuck you want? Looking for a good time, buddy?"

"Not quite." I raise my head and he sees my face.

"Back for more, huh? Just can't get it through that thick skull, huh motherfucker? Alright, I'll teach you."

He reaches into his wasteband and pulls the .38. He's cocky. He draws it slow.

Good.

As he pulls it out, I step forward quick. I draw the machete and slash across quick.

The gun goes flying.

So does his hand.

His eyes widen as he sees the space where his hand used to be. Blood sprays out in arcs across the cement. The shock outweighs his fear and pain. He doesn't scream. Yet.

His mouth opens, and I quickly bury the machete into his neck. The blade cleaves through skin, muscle, and bone. His head doesn't quite fall off. I stopped about an inch short. I put my boot on his chest and push. My blade comes free easily, quickly. He drops down without a sound.

But the girl's noticed.

She backtracks in shock, her hand over her mouth. She hasn't seen my face. She doesn't run. Too scared, I suppose.

I reach down and rifle through Billy's pockets. I pull out a money clip. There's at least a few thousand dollars here. I throw the money to her.

"Go home. Don't come back here. It's not safe."

She looks at me, then the money. She nods her understanding and runs away.

I look down at the body. I have to move soon before someone else notices. I grab Billy's wallet and gun. Throw them both in the trashcan, but not before unloading the gun and throwing the bullets into the sewer grate.

I drive home slowly. It's nearly 4 am when I finally reach the house.

I go upstairs and strip off my clothes and lie down.

It takes me a moment to realize something.

I felt nothing. Nothing on the way to kill him. Nothing when I cut off his hand. Nothing when I nearly decapitated him.

I felt nothing.

Sleep comes easily, swiftly.

And that night, I do not dream.