



PROLOGUE

Nothing but silence now. The silence after gunfire has died away. I know this silence well. It's been a long time, but I still remember it. The world's been put on mute. All I can hear is the wind in the trees. All I can smell is gunsmoke in the air. All I can see is my shredded family in the grass ahead of me.

Then the screaming begins. It goes on for what seems like forever. There's fear, rage, sorrow in those screams.

It takes me a moment to realize that I'm the one doing the screaming.

I hear sirens in the distance. Their wails reach a crescendo. I try to stand. I will every ounce of my strength to stand and get over to Maria, Frank, Lisa, see if they're okay. My breaths are ragged and short. I only get up to my knee before falling down again. I begin to cough and spit blood and bits of lung tissue out.

Everything goes dark.

All I can hear now is the sirens. I can feel movement. But I can't see anything. I open my eyes and everything is a blur. I feel something strapped to my face. Cold. Plastic. Air is forced into my mouth and down my throat.

It burns.

I try to speak but my throat is beginning to shut.

Pressure now. At my chest. The pain is unbearable. I hear yelling and screaming, panic. The voices become echoed and distorted, unintelligible.

I see the medic above me, fear in his eyes. His hands are covered in blood and sweat is streaming down his face.

I feel weightless for a moment. I'm being lifted. The red lights of the ambulance blind me. I feel like I'm being shoved into a metal coffin. The walls begin to close in.

It's been a long time since I've been here like this, in the dark. Just me, no air to breathe, no room to move, nothing to see or touch. I'm trapped in the box with no way out. Not this time. There's no enemy to kill. No problem to solve. No one left to save.

I've been here before. Alone, isolated, afraid. The fear... I remember, it was like death itself. There was only ever one thing that kept me going back then. One thing that kept me from losing who I was in that long, cold dark. The light at the distant end of the tunnel.

The light has burned out.

I'm jolted back into consciousness. I'm beginning to move again. Faster and faster we go. Everything around me is so bright.

Above me is a frenetic blur of activity. People in long white coats or puke green scrubs running around. There is shouting all around.

The edges of the world are turning red and going out of joint.

"Heavy chest trauma! Multiple gunshot wounds!"

"Shit, they've blown apart his lungs! How's he lasted this long? He's a goddamn trainwreck."

I can barely draw air into my lungs. I feel my heart, beating frantically, trying to keep my body going in it's now ruined and rotting state. How much longer can it last?

It's beginning to grow cold. The pain, the unbearable pain in my lungs and heart is going numb. What a sick joke, one of the hottest days in the summer, and I'm beginning to freeze.

"We're losing him!"

My heart begins to slow down. It's giving up. Why even bother with life? Ha, what life is there left to go back to?

"No, no, he's going into shock!"

Just shut your eyes. Block out all this sound and fury and go. You've fought all this time, all for them, and now there's nothing left to show for it.

Nothing left here. You've seen it. One look was enough, and you knew.

That pump in my chest that'd been beating for nearly thirty years decided it was quitting time. My heart stops. My lungs seize. I begin to fade away. Where am I going now? Back into the dark? I sure as hell don't see the Pearly Gates with my family waiting for me.

But then again... I may not deserve to go there in the first place. Not after all the things that I have done.

Is this my end? This is how it ends for Captain Frank Castle? Fighting war after war, battle after battle for almost ten years, this is how it ends? Shot down in Central Park of all places on a nice, summer afternoon where I took my family for a picnic?

Not here, not now. This is not how it ends. I won't let it. I won't go quietly into the night. I will not give up and let it all go. I can't let it end here, on some cold, metal gurney in some anonymous emergency room.

I can still feel... the cold metal paddles of the defibrillator shock me back into life. My ragged heart begins to pump again. My lungs free up. I cough out bits of blood and tissue as I begin to draw in the cool hospital air. Everything is so bright in here.

"He's awake!"

"Get him stable, prep him for the OR!"

"Hold on, Mr. Castle, it'll be alright."

I hear more words of assurance. It'll be alright. You'll be fine. Nothing to worry about.

I only have two words I need to say. I have to know.

"My... family?"

The look in the eyes of the attending physicians is enough.

It's all fallen apart.

I let it go dark again.

I'm gone a long time. It feels like an eternity.

What is there left?

This great evil - where's it come from?

How'd it steal into the world?

What seed, what root did it grow from?

Who's doing this?

Who's killing us, robbing us of life and light, mocking us with the sight of what we mighta known?

Does our ruin benefit the earth, aid the grass to grow and the sun to shine?

Is this darkness in you, too?

Have you passed through this night?

-The Thin Red Line