

FREE
A Chaos Novel
By Kristen Ashley

PROLOGUE
Who's the Redhead?
Rush

RUSH, HIS DAD WALKING BY HIS SIDE, made his silent way to the two men standing by the edge.

Hawk was turned at the waist to watch their approach.

His man, Mo, had binoculars held up to his eyes and they were trained down from where they were on the roof of an office building next door to one of the parking garages at Cherry Creek Shopping Mall.

“What we got?” Tack, Rush’s father, asked as they arrived at Hawk and Mo and stopped.

“Take a look,” Hawk replied, and as if he’d given the order, Mo handed his binoculars to Hawk who gave them to Tack.

Tack took them and trained them where Mo’s gaze had been aimed. It took him a couple of seconds but eventually he honed in.

“Who’s the redhead?” he asked.

“Her name’s Rebel Stapleton.”

Rebel.

Kickass name.

Rush turned the way his dad was looking, but even if the garage was lit, he couldn’t see much from their distance through the dark.

Tack took the binoculars from his eyes and handed them to Rush.

Rush looked through them and scanned the parking structure.

“There a reason why it was urgent we show on this roof to watch Harrietta Turnbull talkin’ to some redhead with a kickass name?” Tack asked.

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Rush felt his lips curl up when his dad said what Rush thought...

And then he froze when he saw them.

Illuminated by the lights in the parking garage, she was in full color, and with the high-powered binoculars, it was like he was standing five feet away.

She was definitely a redhead, but even if that described the color of her hair, that huge mane of wavy auburn deserved a lot more words to define it.

She was tall.

She was built.

And fuck.

She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

"Rebel Stapleton's been makin' a name for herself in Denver for a few years now," Hawk answered his dad. "Started with weddings. Parties. But she was ambitious. Took some risks. Did some stuff with bands. Some DJs. Clubs. Bloggers who post to YouTube, mostly fashion shit."

Rush could tell his father was losing patience. "What are you talkin' about, Hawk?"

"Made some waves with her style. Won a few awards," Hawk went on like Tack hadn't spoken. "Small ones. Local and online, but that shit is new and she was on the cutting edge."

Rush vaguely noticed Harrietta Turnbull was gesturing wildly.

But Rebel Stapleton was cool as shit. The expression on her beautiful face was set one step up from bored. Her body language was closed with arms crossed on her chest, torso swayed slightly back.

While dozens were rushing out of Turnbull's mouth, he hadn't noticed Rebel open those full lips once to form a word.

She had fantastic lips.

And man, the woman had fucking *amazing* cheekbones.

"Now," Hawk continued, "she's an executive producer and the exclusive director and cinematographer of all movies made by Luxe Films."

At Hawk's announcement, acid filled his throat.

Rush dropped the binoculars and sliced his eyes to Hawk.

"Say what?" he asked.

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Hawk looked to him. “Benito Valenzuela’s new line of porn. He’s goin’ legit. Higher budgets. Better production value. Actual storylines. Actors who can kinda act, not just fuck. Apparently, women are gettin’ their porn groove on but they want love stories attached to their closeups of blowjobs.”

“We know what Luxe Films is, Hawk,” Tack told him. “You’re tellin’ me that woman is in bed with Valenzuela?”

“Not literally,” Hawk replied.

Rush turned his head back to the parking garage, but he didn’t lift the binoculars.

His thoughts were that Rebel Stapleton working with Valenzuela was a waste.

But what made him uneasy was just how sick that thought made him after only seeing the woman through a set of binoculars.

“Her name on the credits appears as Tallulah Monroe,” Hawk kept talking.

“So she’s not all in,” Tack murmured.

“She’s not putting her name on porn,” Hawk replied. “But Valenzuela actually has a bona fide payroll for Luxe Films. He’s turning a new leaf. Reporting to the IRS. And her salary is being paid to Tallulah Monroe.”

“Unravel why that means dick to us,” Tack demanded.

“Tallulah Monroe with a false social security number, Tack,” Hawk shared and got Rush’s gaze again. “Though I figure the IRS knows what’s goin’ on considering she’s an on-file confidential informant for Lieutenant Hank Nightingale of the Denver Police Department. It’s just Valenzuela who does *not* know what’s goin’ on.”

Rush’s eyes cut back to the parking lot and this time he lifted the binoculars.

He did this still feeling sick.

But for a different reason.

He also did this clipping, “Jesus, shit.”

“Why the fuck does Nightingale have a CI in Valenzuela’s business?” Tack asked. “He’s not on that case. Slim and Mitch are.”

Turnbull was now in Rebel’s face, finger lifted and jabbing.

Rebel hadn’t moved a muscle, but she no longer looked one step up from bored.

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She looked like that red hair was not just a product of genetics, and she was about to let loose what it said about her personality.

“It’s my understanding, this coming from Slim and Mitch, that Hank didn’t have a choice. Either he sent her in, and she reported to the police what she dug up, or she went in on her own and took down Valenzuela by herself,” Hawk answered.

“Jesus, fuck,” Rush growled, and watched as all Rebel had to do was uncross her arms and lean into Turnbull, her gorgeous face hard with anger, and Turnbull paled and retreated a step.

For what it was worth, at least Turnbull thought she was a badass.

The problem with that was, Benito Valenzuela was a psychopath who had a pastime he exercised to take him away from dealing drugs, producing porn and pimping whores, and that pastime included exploring the various extremes of his pathological misogyny.

He’d not think Rebel Stapleton was a badass even if she actually *was* a badass.

And if he found out she was playing him, and informing on him to the cops, he’d slit her throat.

But only after he and his boys gang raped her to the point she begged him to bleed her dry.

Fuck.

“Hank, Eddie and Jimmy decided that if she was gonna go in, at least she should have the cops at her back however they could be that way,” Hawk finished.

“What’s her beef with Valenzuela?” Tack asked.

“I’m not sure her beef is with Valenzuela,” Hawk told him.

Rush listened closely and watched closer as Rebel Stapleton declared she was done with her conversation with Harrietta Turnbull.

She did this by simply turning on her boot and walking away.

And wasn’t that just fantastic?

She also had a spectacular ass.

Not to mention a way with dressing like she was a 70’s rock groupie who would catch the eye and become the muse of Jim Morrison himself, wearing low slung jeans, a thick belt, a flowy flowered top and cowboy boots, and she rocked it all.

Rush lowered the binoculars and looked to Hawk. “Who’s her beef with?”

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Hawk shrugged but his gaze was sharp on Rush's dad. "My guess? Arthur Lannigan."

Rush went solid and felt his father go the same at his side.

Christ.

And this just got worse.

Way fucking worse.

"Chew?" Tack asked.

"Chew," Hawk confirmed. "For Stapleton, Valenzuela will just be icing. From what we got on her, she's not a big fan of Valenzuela. Even so, she's all about taking down Lannigan."

Rush turned his body fully to Hawk. "Does she know women are droppin' like flies around Valenzuela and Chew?"

"She knows at least one woman has lost her life to this mess," Hawk said, and the way he said it made Rush's neck get tight.

"She know Natalie?" Tack guessed.

Hawk shook his head.

"Camilla Turnbull?" Rush asked.

Hawk shook his head.

His dad lost patience and bit out, "Spill, Hawk, Jesus."

"I got a file," Hawk told him. "I'm givin' it to you. You read it. Then you get that redhead's ass out of her porn set director's chair and back in her bohemian wasteland pad in north Denver. Hank's troubled. Eddie's pissed she tied their hands. Jimmy's considering retirement. They all want her out. She won't budge. I figure Chaos will have the touch."

Yeah.

Chaos was gonna have the touch.

Hawk kept talking.

"I don't have to tell you that ugly has been gettin' uglier and uglier. What we haven't considered is that all this bullshit has been touching the lives and breaking the hearts of people not directly associated with Chaos. And Rebel Stapleton is one of those people. She's just made of stuff that isn't gonna let her take it lying down. Mo, get the file," Hawk ordered his man.

Mo moved.

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Rush looked back to the parking lot at the spot he'd last seen Rebel.

"I know you got a lot on your plate. I'd intervene, but you both know why I can't," Hawk continued.

Yeah, they knew.

Rush looked back to Hawk when he kept speaking.

"But someone has to get her out. Valenzuela or Lannigan catch on she isn't who she says she is, she won't be delivered to Chaos and laid out on your picnic table. She'll disappear. And she's not tight with her family in Indiana, but she's got a brother in Phoenix who will go apeshit something happens to his sis. I've seen pictures of that guy, *and* his partner, and if those two come tearing into Denver, we might not recognize it after they get done. Makin' matters worse, those boys got ties to a fixer I know who's currently outta the game. Something happens to a woman that means something to someone that means something to this fixer, she'll get involved and we'll miss the old days of dead women turnin' up on picnic tables with notes stapled to their foreheads. You boys don't talk Rebel Stapleton down, this shit is gonna split wide open. And this shit is already serious shit. It gets any more serious, they're gonna have to evacuate the city."

Mo showed with a manila folder in his hand.

He started to hand it off to Tack, but Rush reached in and took it.

He dipped his chin, flipped open the folder and saw an eight by ten closeup of Rebel's face.

She was wearing Ray-Bans and lip gloss. It was black and white, but he knew she had on gloss not only because her lips were shiny but because strands of her hair had been caught on them seeing as it appeared the snap had been taken when she was turning her head while on the move, that phenomenal mane of hair flying out at the back.

It looked like a goddamned ad for sunglasses.

Or lip gloss.

"You got this in hand?" Hawk asked.

"Yeah, we got this in hand," Tack answered.

"Good. We're out," Hawk muttered.

Rush didn't look up as Tack said, "Later," and he felt the other men leaving.

He flicked through the file, seeing a lot of shit typed out that he'd read later.

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He was looking for more pictures.

He had no idea if it was a second or ten minutes before his father remarked, “My bead, considering your fascination with that file, you intend to take lead.”

Rush looked at his dad.

“I need Shy, Joke, Snap, Dutch and Jag.”

Tack shook his head. “Dutch and Jag are recruits.”

“I need them.”

“I promised Keely—”

“I need them.”

Tack closed his mouth.

“They won’t be in danger and they gotta do more than work the store and clean up biker bunny puke to earn their patches.”

Rush knew Tack saw the truth of this when he nodded shortly and offered, “You want Chill?”

“I only need six bikes to surround a car.”

Rush watched the slow smile spread around his dad’s ragged-bottomed goatee.

Then Tack slapped his son on the shoulder. “Don’t scare her too bad, son.”

He wouldn’t scare her.

Not too bad.

That would fuck with his plans to get her ass in his bed.

CHAPTER ONE

Shallow

Rebel

Nine months earlier...

I SAT IN MY CAR LIKE THE OFFICERS TOLD ME TO DO, only ungluing my eyes from Diane’s run-down, piece-of-shit house to look at my dash and check the time.

The first squad car had arrived about nine minutes after I made the call to 911.

The second squad arrived about sixteen minutes after they went in.

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The 4Runner arrived twenty-one minutes after that.

Now it was seven minutes after that, a van had arrived, a black Ram truck was pulling up, and one of the first officers who showed, the one who came to my car and told me to stay right where I was before he went into the house, was walking out of the house toward my car.

I didn't get out. He told me to stay in.

I did stop watching him when the dark-haired guy who came out of the 4Runner, who had the body of a linebacker and a way with wearing a pair of jeans that even pierced my terror about whatever was happening with Diane, came out of the house on the same trajectory as the uniformed officer.

I was so intent on the tall one in jeans that the officer knocked his knuckles on my window before I knew he'd arrived at my car.

I hit the button to roll it down and looked up at him.

"I stayed in my car," I said inanely.

He gave me a tight smile and muttered, "Good, ma'am. Can I ask you to get out of it now, please?"

I nodded. I did this a lot and fast, then he stepped out of the way as I pushed open my door.

"You might wanna turn off your car," he suggested.

It was winter.

It was cold.

I'd kept it running to stay warm.

I also kept it running just in case someone in this awesome neighborhood felt like coming by and saying hi, even with cops around, and before they did I could peel the hell out of there.

But there were cops right there, so I reckoned now I was safe.

I switched it off and straightened out of the car just in time for the linebacker to join us.

His face was better than his body.

He was also wearing a very wide, gold wedding band.

Of course.

"Ma'am," he said to me.

"Uh, hey," I replied, slamming my door behind me and stepping up on the curb.

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“Got it from here, Leahy,” the linebacker said.

“Right, Hank,” the officer muttered and loped off.

The linebacker turned to me.

His eyes were the color of whisky.

“You dialed 911?” he asked.

I nodded.

He jerked his head backwards. “You know the woman who lives in that house?”

Lives.

Okay, he said *lives*.

Present tense.

So...

“Yes.” I had a frog in my throat. I cleared it. Nodded again and repeated, “Yes. Diane. Her name is Diane Ragowski. She’s a friend of mine.”

“Can I ask your name?”

“I’m Rebel. Rebel Stapleton.”

He took a step closer to me.

In a club, I’d take a step back and find some words to remind him he was wearing a wedding band.

Right there, my heart slammed in my chest and my stomach heaved.

He’d said *lives*.

Lives, lives, lives.

“I’m sorry, Miz Stapleton, but I have to inform you that your friend has been killed.”

Has been killed.

Not, *has passed.*

Not, *is no longer with us.*

Has been killed.

Which meant someone did the killing.

That was when I took a step back, looked to the house, my feet, my car, my phone on the passenger seat, Diane’s house again.

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Then him.

But he'd said *lives*.

I swallowed the saliva that had all of a sudden filled my mouth and asked, "Killed?"

"Do you have time to come down to the station and answer a few questions?"

I didn't.

Who did?

Who had time to go to a police station and answer questions about their dead friend?

Questions they didn't have answers to because their friend *should not be dead*.

But I wasn't surprised.

God.

Diane.

Why did you make me not surprised *you were dead*?

Worse.

Why did you make me not surprised *you'd been killed*?

"Yes," I said.

"Are you okay to drive? Or would you like an officer to take you?" he asked.

"I-I..." I stammered. "I just need to breathe."

He gave me a smile. It was also tight. It didn't reach his eyes. It was still attractive but that wasn't the reason it soothed me.

His eyes were kind.

It was his job to be here.

But somehow I knew, even if he saw this every night, he knew precisely what I was feeling and he didn't like it.

Not at all.

And he wished I wasn't feeling it.

Not feeling it at all.

"Breathing would be good," he said on what sounded somewhat like a brotherly tease. "Do that. Coupla big ones for me, yeah?"

I nodded again and did as told.

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It was really hard. There seemed to be something obstructing my lungs.

“It’s not easy,” I whispered.

Oh shit.

Something was happening to my eyes.

With a practiced hand, a dark-blue handkerchief was out of his pocket and he was offering it to me.

I shook my head.

“I’m not gonna cry,” I told him.

“Then breathe, Rebel. You with me? *Breathe.*”

I breathed. In. Out. Shallow. In. Out. All shallow. Try again. In. Out.

There it was.

I drew a long one in.

Then let it out.

“Good,” he murmured, stuffing the handkerchief back in his pocket. “Again.”

I did it again.

Okay.

I had it together.

“I’m all right to drive,” I told him.

“Right. I’m Lieutenant Hank Nightingale. You go in,” he was pulling his wallet out of his back pocket, “you tell them I asked you to come talk to me. I’ll call it in. They’ll be waiting for you. They’ll take care of you. But I won’t make you wait long. Okay?”

I nodded and took the business card he offered me.

“Hank Nightingale,” he repeated.

“Hank Nightingale,” I parroted.

“See you soon, Rebel.”

More nodding and, “Yeah.”

He was waiting for me to make a move, either his cop-handling-a-shocked-and-newly-grieving-friend schtick or he was a gentleman.

Or both.

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I turned to my car. Got in. Switched on the ignition. Looked up at him through the window and did more nodding.

He nodded back and I saw him mouth, *Breathe*.

In. Out. In. Out.

Big ones. Deep ones.

I was good.

I put the car in gear.

He turned and moved back to Diane's house.



“Rebel?”

I looked up from the black coffee mug that said DENVER in white on the side with some white stripes under it, through which there was a gold badge, to see Lieutenant Hank Nightingale striding toward me.

I grabbed my bag, shoved the strap on my shoulder and popped up out of my seat. “Hi. Uh, hi. Hi.”

Goddamn it.

I waved.

Goddamn it.

He gave me another smile, this one partially amused, partially pained, partially forced. It appeared he wasn't a big fan of women made nervous due to the fact they were sitting in a police station at four in the morning due to another fact, that one being their friend had been killed.

He still thought I was funny.

Shit.

“Would you come with me?”

I nodded.

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I forced myself to stop doing that and said, “Yes. Sure. Yeah.”

He swung his arm out and I moved toward him, but he didn’t lead. He fell in step beside me.

He also didn’t take me to an interrogation room, which was what my mind, for the last fifteen minutes I’d been sitting in the waiting area being brought coffee by a nice Hispanic cop in a uniform and assured “Hank” wouldn’t make me wait too long, had conjured was the next step.

But of course I didn’t have anything to be interrogated about.

He took me to a large room with a lot of desks, some offices that had walls of glass on one end and rounding this out there were a bunch of file cabinets and whiteboards and one couch.

It wasn’t teeming with people, but it was bustling more than I would think it should be at four on a Thursday morning.

Then again, Denver was a city, not a Podunk town. Crime happened in cities.

It just never involved me.

And then there was Diane.

He took me to a desk another Hispanic man was sitting on. This Hispanic man was in civvies, and if I was in another frame of mind, I’d happily turn that mind over to trying to decide which of them looked better in their jeans: linebacker sweetheart who carried handkerchiefs or edgy Latin hottie who some might say needed a shave, but I would not.

“Have a seat.” Nightingale gestured to the chair sitting next to the desk.

I sat, tucking my purse in my lap and setting my mug of coffee on his desk.

“This is my partner, Lieutenant Eddie Chavez,” he introduced.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hey,” Lieutenant Chavez replied.

Nightingale sat in the desk’s swivel chair, not close to me, but turned to me.

“We’re not gonna take a lot of your time. We’re gonna ask some questions. I’m gonna take notes,” Nightingale stated, reaching a long arm out for a worn leather-bound pad and the pen sitting beside it on the desk. “And we’ll get you home as soon as we can.”

“Who’s gonna tell Diane’s folks?” I asked.

Both Chavez and Nightingale focused on me.

Whoa.

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I had a hot flash I didn't quite understand, outside the fact these two men could focus in such a way half the energy in a room was sucked into their effort.

"Do you know Diane's folks?" Chavez asked.

I nodded to him. "And I should...we're...I know them. We're close. We worked to try to get Diane..."

I trailed off.

"To try to get Diane...what?" Chavez queried.

"To uh, stop what she was doing."

"What was she doing?" Nightingale asked.

I drew in breath.

Then I looked him in the eyes. "Drugs. Porn. And I mean starring in porn movies. Not watching them. Chantilly. Chantilly and porn. Google those words. You'll see a different picture of Diane than whatever you saw tonight."

Nightingale's jaw got tight, and when I looked to Chavez, I saw his stubbled one ticking.

"So I should...I feel like I should be there when they're told. Diane's folks, I mean," I finished my earlier statement.

"We're locating next of kin. That was next on our list. To do the notification," Nightingale shared. "If you'd come, and you think it would be of comfort to them, we'd appreciate you being there."

"I'll do that."

Nightingale nodded.

Chavez cleared his throat and spoke.

"You were at her house tonight. Can you explain why?"

"I got a call," I told him.

"From who?" he asked. "And what did they say?"

"I don't know. It was a female. Her voice sounded familiar, but I don't remember how. She also sounded really scared. She called on my landline."

"Your landline?" Nightingale asked, having an uncanny gift of being able to write in his notepad even as he was looking at me.

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Cop skills.

I nodded to him. “Yeah. No one uses that. I only have it because I got it in a bundle with cable and Internet, and then I told my brother about the bundle and he said I lived alone, do I keep my cell by my bed when I’m sleeping? And I said no. And he said he wanted me to keep my cell by my bed. And I said I didn’t want ugly cords around my bed and I charge my cell at night. So he said to get a regular phone and have it by my bed. And I said why? And he said because I live alone and he’d feel a lot freaking better if I had a phone close in case anything happened in the night, I could—”

I cut myself off.

Both men watched me patiently, and I made the decision to stop babbling about Diesel, my protective brother, and definitely stop talking about things happening to women alone in the middle of the night.

I went on, not babbling this time. “So I think, I mean, thinking on it, maybe I’m listed. And obviously my cell isn’t. So whoever it was, was trying to find me and that’s how she found me.”

“What did she say?” Nightingale queried.

“She said, ‘If you still care about Chantilly, you better come and see to Chantilly.’ Then she hung up. And that creeped me out not only because it was two in the morning and I had a call on my landline, or because she said that, and it was clearly a warning. But she called her Chantilly. No one calls her Chantilly.”

“Even at work?” Chavez asked.

I shrugged, shook my head. “I don’t know. I’ve never been to her...” I swallowed, “work.”

“Of course,” Nightingale muttered. “So you went to Diane’s after the call?”

“I called her,” I told him. “She didn’t answer. I called her again. She didn’t answer. I was creeped out enough to get up and go. So I went. I called her again on the way.”

“She didn’t answer,” Chavez finished for me.

And again I was nodding to Chavez.

“We’ve listened to the 911 call,” Nightingale stated. “You didn’t go inside?”

I shook my head. “I got to her house. The lights were on. But when I got up to the door, it was open.” I shook my head again. “Not open, ajar. Not much, a few inches, but it freaked me. She

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doesn't live in a good 'hood. No one leaves their door ajar in the middle of the night. I looked into the window, you could see light through the blinds, one blind was not all the way down. I saw a lamp that was lit, but it was on the floor, the shade off, but still, it was lit. It tripped me out. I got worried, Diane didn't keep good company, and not just the porn variety of not-good company. So, I ran back to my car, got in and called 911."

"That was the smart thing to do, Rebel," Chavez informed me.

"Was she... was she, I mean," more swallowing, goddamn it, "should I have gone in?"

"No," Nightingale said. "Like Eddie just told you, what you did was right."

I looked in his eyes again. "What I mean to ask is, could I have helped her?"

Nightingale leaned back in his chair, sorrow filling his eyes for a second before he blanked it and answered gently, "No, Rebel. She was gone before you arrived."

"You're sure?" I asked.

It was his turn to nod. "I'm sure."

"You're *sure*," I pushed.

"I'm sure, Rebel," he said quietly.

I looked to my purse in my lap and tried deep breathing again.

It came shallow.

And more shallow.

Then came my eyes feeling funny.

"Rebel—" Nightingale called softly.

I aimed my gaze at him and snapped, "Why is it so *hard to breathe*?"

"We'll give you a minute," he offered. "You want more coffee?"

"I want my friend not to be dead," I told him.

He glanced at Chavez.

"She was going to be a goddamned therapist," I shared.

Nightingale looked back at me.

"She didn't know, physical, occupational, even speech. She was leaning toward physical. She already had her psychology degree. But she wasn't into it. Her folks and I thought she just wasn't coping. You know, not having the challenge of school. Getting good grades. Working

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hard at something. Then she took that bad fall. Playing volleyball. Fucking *volleyball*. She was into sports. So fit. *God*. Always running or hiking or playing tennis or volleyball. Goes up for a spike, runs into the other chick, *bam!*”

Nightingale and Chavez were silent.

“Docs give her Oxycontin.”

“Damn,” Nightingale murmured.

“Yeah,” I spat. “Next thing you know she’s on oxy, on meth, smoking pot, and starring in porn movies as *Chantilly*.”

I shuffled my ass back in my seat, tucking my purse deep into my abdomen. So deep, I could feel the clasp digging into my flesh.

Neither man spoke.

So I did.

“You know, I watched one. I watched her have sex and give blowjobs to four different men in forty-five minutes. She took it *everywhere*. And the whole time she was *gone*. Diane was not in her eyes. She was spaced *out*. Doped *up*. So damned high, my girl, *my* Diane had left the building. I don’t even think she knew what was happening to her. Like a trained dog, going through the motions, moving and moaning, just to get her fix. It made me sick. Literally. I haven’t vomited in years. That DVD ended, I ran to the bathroom and threw up.”

After offering that morsel, it happened.

I dropped my chin into my neck and there was no holding it in by pressing my bag to it. The pain tore up my stomach, burned through my lungs and forced its way out of my mouth laying waste to my throat as it came out on a ragged sob.

My purse was gently pulled from my hand and a dark blue handkerchief was pressed into it.

I bent forward, lifted it to my face and pushed it hard against my mouth as my shoulders shook with silent sobs.

“She was...she...she was...sh-she was gonna be a physical therapist,” I whimpered into the blue cloth.

“I’ll get her some water,” Chavez murmured.

“Yeah,” Nightingale murmured back.

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Eventually, I saw the toes of his boots close to mine. I sniffed, wiped the cloth on my face, tipped my head back and saw Nightingale had wheeled himself close, elbows on his knees, not in my face but encroaching my space.

This was soothing too.

Shit, he had this down.

“You hear these stories a lot,” I whispered.

“Yeah,” he whispered back.

“How do you do it?” I asked.

“Someone has to do for them what they can’t. Make things as right as they can get after they’ve gone so wrong. Find justice. And someone has to find answers for people like you.”

“I couldn’t do it.”

“Most people surprise themselves with the stuff they can do,” he told me.

“Both the good and the bad.”

He did a slow nod. “Both the good and the bad.”

“She was good,” I told him quietly. “Honest to God, however you saw her tonight, that wasn’t the real her. She was good. She was sweet. She was funny and smart and hard working. She was a great friend. She loved her folks. God, she loved her folks so much, Lieutenant Nightingale. They were so close. I was jealous of that until she gave me them too.”

“Hank.”

“What?”

“Call me Hank, Rebel.”

“Okay.”

“I’m not sure you should go with Eddie and me to see them.”

I straightened and shook my head.

He straightened with me.

“I’m not certain they should learn this at all if I’m not there when they do,” I returned.

“So, you’re tight with them too.”

“That happens when you wage war against addiction,” I educated him, though I reckoned he probably knew that a lot better than me. “We did interventions. All the shit. But they’d already

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adopted me before.” It surprised the hell out of me when I felt myself grin shakily. “Her mom and I’d sneak a flask of mojitos into her volleyball games. Made them a lot easier to watch.” I tipped my head to the side as I did a one shouldered shrug. “Neither of us are into sports.”

He grinned back. “Mojitos help make a lot of stuff a lot less boring.”

“Word on that, policeman.”

His grin got bigger.

“I see Hank has worked his magic,” Chavez remarked as he re-joined us carrying a paper cup of water.

He handed it to me.

I took it, thanked him, and took a sip.

Then I held Hank’s handkerchief to him.

“Keep it,” he said.

Yeah, I should keep it. We weren’t quite done with our thrill-a-minute night and I had a feeling the best was yet to come.

“How many of these you lose in a year?” I asked.

“Enough my wife keeps boxes of them in the linen cabinet next to the toilet paper she’s obsessive about never running out of, due to her mother’s decree we’re always prepared for a blizzard.”

I hoped his wife was awesome.

I had a feeling he deserved awesome.

Really, *freaking* awesome.

“We live in Denver, not Alaska,” I noted.

“We just stock toilet paper. Trust me. It’s better than rubbing up against Trish,” Hank replied.

Chavez settled back down on Hank’s desk and I looked to him before I said, “We probably should keep going. There are, um...things to do that need to get done.”

“You’re right,” Chavez said. “You good to go on?”

I nodded.

“Just the routine questions left, Rebel. Like do you know anyone that would want to hurt Diane?” Chavez asked.

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I shook my head. “Not that I know of, but I wasn’t a part of her world anymore. I don’t know what she was into, outside of what I told you. But she was so deep into what she was into, who knows what else she got herself into.”

“This voice on the phone,” Hank put in. “You think you might remember who it is?”

I shook my head again but said, “I hope so. If I do, I’ll tell you. But it isn’t coming to me now.”

“It might,” Chavez said. “Things are extreme now, Rebel. Your head clears out, it might happen. My advice, don’t try too hard. Just take care of you, Diane’s parents, and let it come if it comes. No pressure.”

“Right,” I replied.

“You see anyone come, go, anything around Diane’s house when you pulled up, walked to the door, sat in the car waiting for the police?” Hank asked. “Anything, Rebel. A car, someone walking by, movement in any of the other houses?”

I had to shake my head again. “No, and I was looking. I was freaked. I was freaked sitting in my car in her ’hood and waiting for the cops. I was freaked about what might be happening with Diane. So I was hyper-alert. I still didn’t see a thing.”

Hank and Chavez glanced at each other before they looked back to me.

“That’s all we have now, Rebel,” Hank said. “Drink your water. Freshen up in the bathroom. Eddie and me need to have a chat. Then we’ll head out to see Diane’s parents.”

I looked between them both and stood up.

But I ended my look on Chavez.

“I’ll tell you what I told Hank. That wasn’t her, what was in her house tonight. She was good. Diane Ragowski was a good person. A good woman. A good friend. A good daughter. Until she wasn’t. But that part was always with her. It was just who she was. It was the drugs that made her something she wasn’t.”

“She doesn’t have to be good for me to work my ass off to find out what happened to her, Rebel,” Chavez replied. “But I’m glad to know she had people who loved her and at one point in her life, earned that.”

She had that.

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People who loved her.

Okay, time to deep breathe again.

“Thanks,” I mumbled.

And having said my piece, I decided to let them have their chat so we could move on to the next bodacious part of this fabulous late-night party.

“Bathroom?” I asked.

“I’ll show you,” Chavez said, pushing off the desk again.

He showed me. I drank my water, threw the cup in the trash in the bathroom, freshened up as best I could, went out and met them again at Hank’s desk.

Then I led them to Paul and Amy’s house and we moved on to the next bodacious part of this fabulous late-night party.

It was seven million times worse than what had come before.

It was also a time I’d never forget.

And then there’d come a time I was glad for that.

Because I would need to remember just how hideous it was in order to make sure I got the job done.

Hank had been right.

I surprised myself with the stuff I could do.

The good.

And the bad.

RELEASE DATE JANUARY 29, 2019

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