

ALEX BARCLAY

Time of Death

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1

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PROLOGUE

El Paso, Texas

Erubiel Diaz lay curled on the wet floor of the soiled gas station restroom. He had been violently ill. But to a man with damaged senses, a weakened stomach and voided bowels could never be anything more than a physical condition. It could never be the bad omen that he had been foolish to ignore. As a result, his instinct that morning had not been to turn back, but to hook a fingernail into a small bag of white powder and take in a pure cocaine rush. Outside, a car radio crackled with a thunderstorm warning. Within hours, the searing heat was set to be broken by quarter-sized hail.

Erubiel Diaz now stood in the cobbled courtyard of a million-dollar home on the west side of the Franklin Mountains. Diaz was squat and muscular, short-limbed and heavy-browed. He was wearing a yellow sleeveless T-shirt and black shorts to his calves. His body, his clothes, hadn't been washed in days. He was a dark blot in a space that was filled with light, with flowers, plants and trees that he would have recognized if he was the landscape gardener on his van's fake

sign. Only the plant by the living-room window looked familiar to him. Something to do with a bird.

Diaz had a round, lined face, sallow skin, and bloodshot eyes. He squinted against the bright sunshine that bounced off the white walls of the Spanish-style house. He had done what he came here to do. As he made his move to leave, he heard a car pull up outside. The security gates to his left slid slowly open. He pressed himself against the cool stone of the perimeter wall.

The woman who stepped out of the car was nothing like the women he paid for, or took for free, nothing like the worn-out mother of his children. This woman was tall and delicate, with fine blonde hair to her shoulders and a light, freckled tan. She wore a long, flowing skirt, and a white cotton blouse. Three gold bangles shone on her slender wrist. Her polished toenails were the color of the flowers beneath the window. Diaz looked down at his feet. They were wedged into Tevas that were a size too small – their criss-crossed straps digging into his flesh. His toes were short, covered with black hair, their nails caked in dirt.

Diaz checked his watch. It was an absent glance; no matter where the hands pointed, he knew what time it was. What he could not have known as he lurched forward and slammed the woman face-down onto the trunk of her car, was that he had just sent those hands spiraling wildly toward his time of death.

The sound of the woman's breath as it was forced from her lungs died in the rumble of the forecast thunder. The charcoal sky exploded with light. And the woman watched as the quarter-sized hail came crashing down, severing the fiery blossoms of the Red Bird of Paradise.

1

Special Agent Ren Bryce pulled into the parking lot of The Rocky Mountain Safe Streets Task Force office. She reached out to turn off the radio.

'Coming up next,' said the presenter, 'we take a look at Denver's Fifty Most Wanted. The list will be released later today by the Rocky Mountain Safe Streets Task Force and the US Marshals office . . .'

Ren turned to her back-seat passenger.

'Coming up next, Misty – you and me in the office, trying to find these assholes.'

Misty was the black-and-white border collie she had adopted seven months earlier when her owner was killed. Her collar had a special engraving: 'I Smell Dead People'. Misty and Ren were recent graduates of cadaver dog training school – Misty's second time, Ren's first. But there were no plans to put her to work. For now, Misty's skills were on the down low.

Ren's boss, Supervisory Special Agent Gary Dettling, had given Misty security clearance for the week, so she could spend it in the office, instead of Ren's temporary motel home.

* * *

When Gary Dettling set up The Rocky Mountain Safe Streets Task Force, the maverick in him chose a building that was a piece of Denver's agricultural history. The Livestock Exchange Building, red brick, four stories high, was one of the few buildings in Denver that had its original interior: polished marble floors and grand mahogany staircases. It started out as home to the Denver Union Stockyard Company and one hundred years on, still kept a link to its roots; the Colorado Brand Inspectors' office was on the second floor, Maverick Press was on the third: cowboys still had a home in the Livestock Exchange Building.

Gary Dettling was the straightest maverick Ren knew. He had created something that shook things up – a multi-agency task force – yet he ran it with a tight grip on the reins. The nine-man one-woman team worked from a bullpen. There were no formal partners, but two years earlier, within months of Ren Bryce starting there, she had fallen into a natural group with the three men who sat around her – Cliff James, Colin Grabien and Robbie Truax. A filing cabinet to Ren's left and one to Colin's right created a subtle break in the room to seal the deal.

Ren secured Misty in her quarters and headed down the hallway to her office. She threw her coat on the stand by the door and hung her gray suit jacket on the back of her chair. Her work wardrobe was always a slim-fit black or gray suit, a top in whatever color matched her mood in the morning, and black three-inch heels. Years earlier, Ren had bought an Armani pant suit after a drunken lunch-time date. She had no idea where it was, but the forgeries – expertly made by her mother, Kitty – were holding up well.

Cliff James was the only person in the office when Ren arrived.

Cliff was ex-Jefferson County Sheriff's Department, fifty-two years old, a big warm bear with a face set to permanent smile. Happy family life, happy man.

Ren turned to him. 'My motel room is the type of place a man called Randy would take a girl called Bonnie in his pick-up on a Friday night when her trucker husband, also called Randy, is out of town.'

'Does it have a heart-shaped bed?' said Cliff.

'To Randy and Bonnie, every bed is heart-shaped.'

'God bless them and the illegitimate offspring Randy-the-husband will unknowingly have to bring up as his own.'

'The good news, however,' said Ren, 'is that I am leaving. I will soon have in my possession the keys to a beautiful home on Mardyke Street, straight out of Olde Denver.'

'How did you swing that?'

'My mom's friend, Annie, is in need of a housesitter.' She paused. 'Desperate need, clearly.'

'What? You'd be a great housesitter,' said Cliff. 'Clean. Rarely home. Avoids the kitchen. Excellent firearm skills . . .'

'I like the way you said "clean".' Ren smiled. 'I note, also, that "tidy" didn't go along with it.'

Cliff glanced at her desk. That was all it took.

'Where is everyone?' Ren checked her watch.

'Two separate robberies in the wee hours.'

'Lucky escape for me.'

'Yeah, because being here today will be a whole lot more fun,' said Cliff. 'Hey, here it is. He pointed at the television mounted on the wall in the corner and hit the volume on the remote control. Gary Dettling was standing at a podium, flanked by officers from Denver PD and the US Marshals Office.

Gary was athlete handsome, taller than all of them, dark-haired, loved by cameras. Ren had read posts on a 9 News

forum from women who prayed for him to get a regular slot. Ren worked with him every day. She smiled at the screen. *And you still do nothing for me. And please let it stay that way.*

'Agent Dettling, can you tell us a little more about The Rocky Mountain Safe Streets Task Force?' said the reporter.

'Just that it's fabulous,' said Ren.

Gary was nodding at the reporter. *'The Safe Streets Violent Crimes Initiative was set up by the FBI in 1992 to tackle violent gangs, violent crimes and the apprehension of violent fugitives.'*

'Violent, violent, violent,' said Ren. *'Do you have any idea how brave we are?'*

Cliff laughed. *'My neighbor's kid, he's about sixteen years old? He thinks we help little old ladies cross the street.'*

Ren shook her head slowly. *'Safe Streets is not a great name, though . . .'*

The reporter's voice struck up again. *'So, this is about pooling resources?'*

'Yes,' said Gary. *'The task force is FBI-sponsored, so we have access to all the FBI's resources, but we also benefit from local law-enforcement knowledge, and we're working together as one unit, instead of each agency taking care of individual cases that may overlap. It saves time, money, and it's proven to be a very successful formula.'*

'You bet,' said Ren. *'Two people at Safe Streets are currently and fiercely protecting the city of Denver and beyond, as he speaks.'*

'Three,' said Robbie Truax, walking in and putting his knapsack on the floor beside his desk. Robbie was a former Aurora PD detective. He was Ren's pal; kind, wholesome, blond-haired, blue-eyed, healthy – an elongated boy scout. He was also a strict Mormon – no caffeine, no alcohol, no swearing, no sex before marriage. Robbie was the 30-Year-Old Virgin.

The TV screen flashed quickly across the first few lines of faces on the Fifty Most Wanted list. A stab of anger hit Ren.

When the hell did this change happen?

Gary picked a few fugitives from the list, pushed by producers, as always, to choose the most glamorous cases – the fallen-child-star fugitive, the murderous teen, the homecoming hooker . . . The Crimestoppers number scrolled across the bottom of the screen. Ren stood up and went over to the office gallery of the Fifty Most Wanted, pinned across a huge corkboard on the wall.

Cliff checked his watch. ‘Ren, don’t bother – Gary will be back in a half-hour. He said he’d go through it all when everyone’s here.’

‘Well, let me just do this—’ Ren began grabbing pins from the photos and stabbing them into the top five faces as she re-arranged them.

‘Easy tiger,’ said Cliff.

Gary slipped quietly into his office without visiting the bullpen, but Ren had seen his car drive into the lot. She paused outside his door. Despite her years at Safe Streets, there were still times when she took a moment before going in. Gary's office was like a Dutch minimalist armchair – handsome and elegant, but you wouldn't want to stay in it for too long. It was as if it had been designed as a quick stop-off on your way to solving a case.

Ren knocked. Gary didn't respond. If someone said jump, Gary Dettling, wouldn't say 'How high?' He would probably never jump again for the rest of his life.

Ren leaned an ear to the door.

'Come in,' said Gary.

He was sitting at his desk. Ren imagined him there on his first day in the job, carefully flattening out a sheet of graph paper and marking in the exact location of each piece of furniture and drawing red circles with Xs through them over any spot that would typically hold a personal touch. But Ren knew that the polished mahogany, the pristine blue carpet, the sharp lines, the austerity did not define the man. It masked

him. Gary was not just head of the Safe Streets Task Force, he also trained the FBI's UCEs – undercover employees. He had spent so long in deep-cover assignments that hiding his real life had become a habit. He had a wife, a teenage daughter, a house in the mountains, but his office gave no indication of who Gary Dettling really was.

After her own deep-cover assignment, Ren had gone the other way. Once it was all over, she wanted to reinforce who she was more than ever. The problem was, she had never worked out who Ren Bryce was. And somewhere along the way, she had given up. Now, her workspace was as impersonal as Gary's.

'Hey,' she said. 'How are you?'

Gary looked up. 'What's up?'

'Uh . . . the Most Wanted, maybe?'

'Late-breaking change of play.'

'How did you let that happen?' said Ren.

Gary stared at her. 'It happened. US Marshals wanted it that way. I said, sure, OK.'

'Right . . .'

'Ren, it's done,' said Gary.

'I know, but . . .'

'You still get to highlight the Val Pando three. OK, so they've dropped a few places on the Billboard charts . . .' He shrugged.

'That's not the point.'

'Ren, here's the deal. Last year, we almost had the Val Pandos. And it dead-ended. This new top two have had confirmed sightings in Denver in the last month . . .'

'Ah, meaning it's going to be easier to strike this top two off the list. So everyone looks better?'

'Including you,' said Gary.

'I could give two shits,' said Ren.

Gary looked at her patiently. And glanced at the door behind her.

'Fine. OK,' said Ren.

'Where are the others?'

'In various states of "on their way".'

Back in the task force office, Ren checked her email, flagged most of the new messages, then ignored them.

'Coffee, anyone?' Colin Grabien walked in the door with an offer he usually didn't make until at least two hours into the day.

Colin Grabien had transferred to Safe Streets from the FBI White Collar Squad and was the task force's IT and numbers expert. He was five foot eight in the flesh, six foot eight in spirit and a ball of latent anger. He was the mosquito – Ren was the citronella candle.

Gary finally appeared in the office as Ren was walking out with her makeup bag hidden by her side. She didn't wear a lot – sheer foundation, brown or gray eyeshadow, black mascara on her poker-straight lashes and clear lip gloss – but she couldn't go without it, even when it meant applying it in the ergonomically challenged Safe Streets ladies room.

'Nice makeup,' said Colin when she got back.

'Fuck you,' Ren coughed into her hand.

'OK,' said Gary, 'everyone's here. I'm going to give the lowdown on one and two on our list. Ren will do three through five.'

'Sure,' said Ren.

Gary's phone beeped. 'Ren, go ahead. I need to take care of this.'

Ren stood up. 'OK, gentlemen: here's the lowdown on the Val Pando posse. If I'm repeating myself, please realize

that I don't care. First up, number three – Domenica Val Pando, Latina, DOB 10/02/64.

'Domenica was head of a huge cartel operating in New Mexico in the nineties – people trafficking, drugs, weapons, branching into biological weapons. No one has actually seen her since she disappeared the night the compound was stormed, with her seven-year-old son, Gavino Val Pando and her fifty-year-old husband, Augusto Val Pando.

'Domenica showed up on the radar again last August when she was attempting to set up a lab outside Breckenridge to make H₂S – colorless, odorless, fatal in seconds. We stopped her. But we couldn't make any firm links to her, because she was, sadly, too fucking smart.'

Ren stood back. 'This photo is eleven years old.' The team followed her gaze to the noticeboard. Domenica Val Pando used to have an exotic beauty, but she had Americanized it, tweaked her features with surgery. Her hair was now the yellow-blond that only very dark hair can be dyed. It was perfectly styled, but wrong. Her eyes were deep brown, slightly protruding, her lips full.

'Not every psycho is dead in the eyes,' said Ren.

Colin stared a little too long at the picture. 'I'd hit it,' he said.

'Your standards are rising,' said Ren. 'Let me quickly give you the lowdown on Gavino Val Pando, Domenica's son.' She pointed to his photo, stapled under his mother's.

Gavino had flawless dark skin and longish black hair that he pulled back off his face. He had strong bone structure and full but angular lips. His eyes were brown and lost. Ren stared at the photo. She had spent one year looking after six-year-old Gavino Val Pando and trying to deny how much she really cared about him.

'Gavino's eighteen years old,' said Ren. 'Our last encounter

with him was last year in the Summit County jail, where he was taken in for under-age drinking. More significantly, he was paying for it with bait money from a robbery in Idaho Springs, of which he claimed to have no knowledge. We couldn't prove otherwise, but it was definitely connected with Domenica. There is nothing to suggest that Gavino Val Pando is violent and a lot to suggest he was drunk and stupid that night. We had to release him and we don't know his whereabouts, or whether he has remained in contact with Mommy Dearest.

'His relationship with her is complicated. Her husband, Augusto Val Pando, was not Gavino's biological father, but Augusto probably suspected that – he had no time for Gavino. So, while Gavino may be with his mother and therefore a very effective route to her, he definitely will not be with Augusto.'

'And what about his real father?' said Robbie.

'James Laker – presumed dead,' said Ren. 'It is believed he was killed in the fire that destroyed the compound.' *A sweet, kind man, used and abused, first by life and then by Domenica.*

'Now to number four on our list,' said Ren. 'Another of Domenica's minions: Javier Luis, born 1973, five foot two, one hundred and sixty pounds. First-degree murder, attempted first-degree murder, aggravated robbery; drugs; rape, sexual assault on a minor . . . he went MIA from Domenica's compound in 1998, just before the shit hit the fan.'

Ren remembered Javier Luis. He was always dressed in concert T-shirts for bands he had never seen. He was not tall, so his shorts almost reached his ankles. His voice was nasal and whiny. He would look at Ren in a way that reminded her to shutter the windows at night and lock all the doors. She rarely spoke with him and, when she did, she kept it brief.

‘Finally,’ said Ren, ‘number five, Erubiel Diaz, Latino, DOB 12/10/58, one of Domenica’s shit shovelers.’

She pointed at the photo.

‘This roidy little man was involved in the H₂S lab – as a gofer, not a scientist, so that qualifies him for our hit list,’ said Ren. ‘He’s violent, a probable rapist and every daytime chat show’s favorite – a dead-beat dad. He was ratted out by his ex-wife four months ago for showing up in Denver, penniless, trying to see his kids. And off the record? He tried to assault me late one night in the parking lot of the Brockton Filly in Breckenridge and I—’

‘Kicked the living daylights out of him?’ said Robbie.

‘All the way to Frisco Medical Center,’ said Ren.

‘Where he told everyone he was attacked by a man,’ said Gary.

‘He was,’ said Colin.

Ren rolled her eyes. ‘Diaz obviously didn’t know at the time that I was an agent, but I let him know when I paid him a visit in the Summit County Jail, where he was being held for failure to pay child support. I couldn’t let the sheriff there know what Diaz had done to *me* because then the sheriff would know what I had done to *him*. So Diaz was released, we had nothing on him. But after he’d gone we found out that he had been working for Domenica Val Pando.’ She paused. ‘And probably still is. So, right now, although he is a little lower in the pecking order, I believe that Erubiel Diaz may well be our golden ticket.’

3

Gary walked back into the office. ‘All done?’

‘Yup,’ said Ren.

‘Number one on our Fifty Most Wanted,’ said Gary, pointing to a photo of a man with long, thin, greased-back hair, balding at the front. He had fuck-you eyes and a nose that looked broken, re-set and broken again. His face was hollowed out. He had two shaven patches of white hair high on each cheekbone and a downturned slit for a mouth. ‘This piece of shit,’ said Gary, ‘is Jonah Jeremiah—’

‘Jim Jams,’ said Ren.

‘Jonah Jeremiah Myler,’ Gary finished, ignoring her.

‘Priiiceless,’ said Ren.

‘Caucasian, DOB 08/12/57,’ said Gary. ‘Myler springs up in a different city every few months, preying on vulnerable teens and setting up short-lived “cults”. He grooms the kids for sex. He has young followers, so he gets them out on the streets. And he waits behind the scenes for the disenchanting youth to show. They may not always use the same name for their sect. Names to date: Crystal Wakenings, Army of the Risen, The Witness Gathering, Divine Seers of the Watchful—’

'You are making them up,' said Ren.

'You couldn't make them up,' said Cliff.

'And The Watchful what?' said Ren. 'That's a lot of seeing and watching. The Watchful Observers. Divine Seers of the Watchful Crowd of Onlookers. Divine Seers of the Watchful Blind . . .'

Gary ploughed on. 'Don't be fooled by Myler's gaunt face. He's not as feeble as he looks.

'Next up is number two, Francis Gartman, African-American, DOB 01/15/83. First degree murder, aggravated robbery, drugs, sexual assault on a minor.'

Gartman looked like someone had paused while inflating his head to allow him to pose for the photo. Every feature looked like it was about to blow.

'Those eyes are completely vacant,' said Ren. 'Soulless.'

'Gartman is a former boxer,' said Gary, 'which translates in his case into giant man, huge strength. He's had enough blows to the head for his frontal lobe to have left the building.'

Gary stepped back. 'Not as dramatic in my delivery as Agent Bryce no doubt was, but there's our top five. Knock yourselves out.'

'Ren,' said Colin. 'Call for you on one. She wanted to speak with a female. She didn't give a name.'

Ren picked up the phone. 'This is Special Agent Ren Bryce. How may I help you?'

'My name is Catherine Sarvas. I'm calling from El Paso, Texas. I saw your Most Wanted List on line this morning . . .'

Ren slid her notebook across her desk. She picked up a pencil. 'And do you have something you'd like to tell me, ma'am?'

'I . . . yes,' said Catherine. 'Yes, I have. I do. I . . .'

She paused. 'I'm sorry . . . I thought I could do this.'

She hung up.

'Short call,' said Robbie.

Ren nodded. 'Weird.'

'What did she want?'

'To give me a little flicker of hope on a dreary Monday.'

'Are you going to call her back?'

'I'll give her a little while. El Paso . . . What's going on down there?'

Ren spent Monday lunch-times in the offices of Dr Helen Wheeler. The psychiatrist all lunatics should have: intelligent, warm, caring, wore great shoes you could admire while avoiding your issues.

Until Ren was diagnosed bipolar at twenty-six, she had never guessed that there was anything wrong with her. Mental illnesses were for the mentally ill. It seemed like one minute she was the youngest FBI agent to go under deep cover and blow apart an organized crime operation and the next, she was lying in her pajamas on the sofa, eating junk food, crying, not answering her phone, drinking, obsessing about all the regrets she had in her life, wondering what point there was in doing anything again. Ever.

Her older brother, Matt, suggested she get help. But he already knew what was wrong with Ren. So he brought her to his computer one evening and gently opened a checklist on a psychiatry website that covered her symptoms: the despair, the exhaustion, the sofa, the hopelessness. Ren had looked up at Matt and shrugged. 'That's just depression, though. Everyone gets like that.'

Matt had scrolled down to the mania checklist: *I have lots of energy. I feel amazing. I want everyone else to feel amazing. I want to go out and party. I love everyone. I know everything. I feel creative. I'm working hard. I'm talking too quickly. I'm loud.*

I'm impatient. I'm exercising. I'm alert. I'm swearing. I'm invincible. I'm hypersexual. I'm overspending. Check, check, check, check, check . . .

Ren had cried her heart out. 'This is so depressing. My entire personality can be reduced to a checklist. If I buy lots of shoes, it's because I'm nuts. If I'm having sex five times a day, it's because I'm nuts. Me and two million other losers. And it's not that I thought I was special or unique, but there is something so grim about fitting into this formula. It's like we're some fucked-up alien race. I mean, did you read all that shit? It affects every part of my existence. And there's nothing I can do about it. I can't be fixed.'

Matt had cried too and explained that it may not be fixable, but it was treatable. He told Ren that she was unique and smart and loving and funny and generous and all women have too many shoes and that she was beautiful and he loved her to bits. And she loved him too. Because Matt had also read that telling Ren all this could come back and bite him. Because there was a high risk that someone bipolar would shoot the messenger; at some point, maybe not the same day or maybe not the same year, they would turn to the person who wanted to help them the most and scream, 'This is all your fault. If you hadn't told me all this, I would never have known, and I would have been happy just the way I was.' And then they would scream, 'You. Ruined. My. Life.'

Before that year was out, Ren had fired every one of those razor-sharp words at Matt and they had struck his heart. Ren did, indeed, shoot the messenger. And with a true bipolar flourish, had come back six months later, laden with guilt and gifts, to apologize.

Ren had tried different psychiatrists and psychotherapists since then, but when she met Helen Wheeler two years ago, Ren knew she had found her savior. Helen was

in her early sixties, with a cultural awareness that spanned decades and created a bridge to all her patients. On Ren's first visit, Helen had told her, 'I am a psychiatrist, not a mind reader. What you tell me is what I will know about you. And you can leave your brave face at the door. If you're having a bad day, my office is the perfect place to have it in.'

Ren checked her watch as she waited to be called in to Helen's office.

Hurry up. Hurry up. Hurry up.

Helen leaned her head out the door of her office. 'Come on in, Ren,' she said. 'How are you today?'

'I'm . . . good,' said Ren, sitting down.

Helen smiled. 'OK . . .'

'I don't know,' said Ren. 'Did you see the news? It's Most Wanted time . . . which is fine. It's just . . . this year, it's got Domenica Val Pando on it and I feel I'm being taken back years and . . .'

She hung her head.

Helen waited.

'It's just . . .'

said Ren, 'I guess . . . I was diagnosed at the end of that assignment and some part of me, I know it's not rational, but some part of me thinks that if it wasn't for that, I would be fine, there would be nothing wrong with me. And then . . . then there's another part of me – and it's so screwed up – that wants to be back there, because I was oblivious, I didn't know how lucky I was to be sane. Or at least to think I was sane.'

Helen smiled at her. 'Ren, you are sane. And those feelings are understandable.'

'But what makes no sense is that paranoia is the worst part of bipolar disorder for me, yet undercover work is a whole world of paranoia. You are lying all day every day

and you're never sure if you're going to be found out. Give me depression over paranoia any day. Because I just . . . I feel paranoia is what will ultimately bring me down.'

'Ren, nothing is going to bring you down,' said Helen. 'You are in control of all of this. And you are not alone. You have an entire team working with you. Good people, from what you tell me. So, rely on them, Ren.'

Ren nodded. 'I can't stop thinking about the assignment, though. I told this terrible story to gain someone's confidence and get into her life – I sat on a park bench crying to Domenica Val Pando, telling her I had lost my four-month old baby . . .'

'That is part of undercover work, Ren. You were doing your job.'

'I know, but I look back sometimes and I think "How could I have done that?"' Ren shook her head. 'Nothing to do with Val Pando personally – she's a piece of shit – just, me. How could I have done that?'

'It was your job.'

'I know it's what I signed up to do,' said Ren. 'But I guess I get scared at how easy it was for me to do it. Undercover work is such a rush – the better you are, the greater the high. The more you find out, the more you want to find out. It's addictive. You go to bed at night, you write notes, you give them to your contact agent. He's making a case, he's happy, you're happy. But I was still playing the role of Remy Torres, a fake name in a fake life. She was like part-me, part-stranger. So . . . in a way, you never know what she's capable of.' She paused. 'And when it's over and you bring your real self into the equation, when you're away from whatever group of dirtbags you've been investigating, you're faced with how good a liar you were and how well you manipulated people. And you tell yourself that the ends

justify the means. But sometimes the means just make you feel dirty.'

'OK, take some breaths.' Helen handed her a box of Kleenex.

'Thanks,' said Ren. 'Oh sorry, I've pulled out the whole lot. It must be a sign. I'll be here weeping all day.'

'I'm sponsored by Kleenex,' said Helen. 'It's written on the back of my blouse.'

Ren laughed through the tears. 'I honestly don't know why I'm crying.'

'Ren,' said Helen gently, 'Remy Torres did not take you down with her. Here you are, Ren Bryce, over ten years on, successful, stable, still pursuing these people, not turning into them.'

'Still pursuing,' said Ren. 'Exactly.'

'You are so hard on yourself,' said Helen. 'You're doing great. Stop beating yourself up. Get back to that office this afternoon and kick some butt. Like you always do.'

'Thanks. I'll try.'

When the session was over and Ren was driving back to work, she could feel her anxiety drifting away. She smiled.

Helen's room always felt like the furthest room from the crazy house.