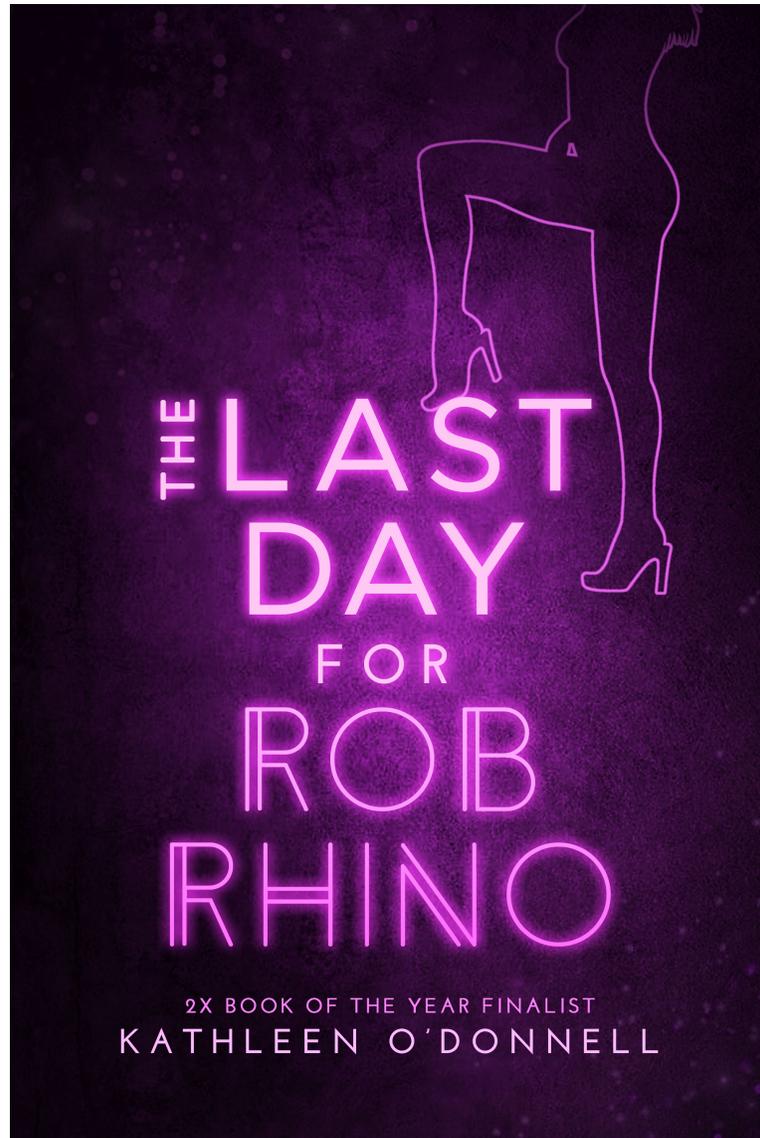


Read on for a preview from *The Last Day For Rob Rhino*.



# CHAPTER ONE



“I bought you the hat because you’re scary bald.”

Claire held the phone away from her ear, nostrils flaring. “I wouldn’t wear a hat if Philip Treacy sailed it over himself on the *QE2*.” She strolled the gateway to watch the planes take off through the windows. Her reflection in the glass mirrored back, her head shiny, embryonic.

Her stepdaughter let out a puff of breath. “Claire, you know how much his hats cost. It’s just lying here on the floor.”

“I don’t give a flying—” Claire caught herself, counted to five. Annabelle meant well. “I don’t do hats. I do bald. It is what it is.”

“Listen, why don’t you take a vacation?” The wheedling commenced. “Instead of going wherever, to do whatever, you could go to that place I told you about in Hawaii.” Annabelle spoke in run-ons. “They have a state-of-the-art meditation center.”

A woman wearing sweats gawked going by, smiling, nodding. Claire’s condition elicited the sympathy of strangers. Maybe it was terminal. Whatever it was it looked bad.

“That place where I can sit around all day touching myself?”

“You can get *in touch* with yourself, Claire.”

“I’m halfway to Pennsylvania where I want to go.” Claire’s free hand pushed against the window. “Me and my bald head.” Airport foot traffic hurried behind her in both directions.

“Well, you look like crap. Please reconsider Hawaii. It’s a luxurious place, the—”

“The ashram?”

“It’s not an ashram. It’s a—”

“Loony bin?” A harried traveler knocked her purse sitting by her feet. The pill bottles at the bottom rolled and shook, cha, cha, cha, a druggist’s maraca.

“It’s a retreat center. Andrew sent Meg there for her birthday. He said she loved it.”

“Um-hum.”

“Are you listening?”

Claire suffered in silence as loud as she could.

Annabelle tried a different way. “I’m worried about you. Jordan is too. Dad—”

Claire’s sudden tears annoyed her. She stabbed her phone off with one rigid finger, rammed it into her purse. Enough of that nonsense. You can cry yourself a river, but you can’t cry your hair back, or your life the way you wanted it.

\*\*\*\*

Claire stared at the homeless looking guy sleeping on the airport floor and brushed the tears from her lashless eyes.

She looked around. There were serious looking men in expensive suits waiting for their flights. Most poking at their iPhones. Liam used to think every man who crossed her path wanted to sleep with her. Now if they saw her at all she repulsed them. Claire had been a beauty until she wasn’t. *An emerald-eyed, fair-haired princess*, her dad used to say. *A long, tall, drink of water*. Before she’d been stared at, smiled on, envied. Now she was just stared at. Sometimes laughed or pointed at and almost always pitied.

The wreck on the floor moved. Propped up on his scaly elbows, nodding off, his mouth open, eyes closed. Even in his unwashed state he looked familiar. Like someone who used to be famous. Claire scanned the crowded O’Hare terminal but didn’t notice anyone else looking at him. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe he was just another loser. She looked at her Rolex and wondered how late the flight was going to be. She couldn’t remember now what the voice said on the announcement. Between the noise and the sedatives it was hard to keep up.

When she walked back to her gate the boarding had already started. She hadn’t heard the announcement. Again. The man lying on the ground was gone. Maybe security’d shooed him away. She noted her seat number and got in line. Sweat broke out over her upper lip. Sweating was a problem with no hair. An added humiliation. She hoped they didn’t dilly-dally too long with the drinks on the plane. Thank God for the three-hour jump in time going east.

She boarded then hunted for her seat—8B. She really needed to get some glasses. The plane was a small commuter with three seats across, a single on one side of the aisle, a double on the other. Claire found aisle 8 and was about to sit in her seat, one of the doubles, on the aisle, when she saw him.

The dirty hobo from the airport slumped in the window seat, 8C. Right next to her.

He sprawled out over both seats, looking fatter up close, and older, late sixties at least, despite the desperate dye job and combover. A bushy moustache like a squirrel's ass wasn't big enough to cover his pock-marked face. His gut hung over his thighs. He looked either asleep or passed out. He reeked.

"This is a mistake." Claire stopped, twisted around in search of a flight attendant. She couldn't see one. The teeming line of travelers behind her tried to keep her going. "This can't be right. I can't possibly sit here," she said like an Astor in steerage on the *Titanic*.

The Asian man behind her smiled, moved his head up and down.

She was about to indulge in a hurricane force panic attack when she heard, "This is a full flight. Please find your seats. Make sure your carry-ons are stored below your seat or in the upper bins."

Claire swung her Louis Vuitton bag into her seat hitting the filthy hobo's fat leg hard. He jiggled up with a snort and scooted over to his side. She heaved her matching carry-on into the overhead bin, sat down, dug a little blue pill out of her bag then swallowed it dry. She made a big show of settling into her seat so she could turn her head to see what he was doing without seeming obvious. He leaned against the window, eyes closed, mouth open. She could hear him snoring.

Claire stuffed her bag under the seat in front of her then fastened her seat belt with a click. When he opened his milky blue-gray eyes he looked at her with eyelids that appeared too heavy for him. All of a sudden he had the hearing of a dog. One side of his mouth lifted in a lopsided half smile. He leaned forward to make sure his ragged backpack was still there, fiddled with the seat-back pocket, readjusted his seatbelt. Satisfied that all was as it should be in his area, he gave Claire another look, one that seemed to urge her to give hers another check just to be safe. She did. In seconds he slept again.

It occurred to Claire her unwanted traveling companion hadn't noticed he sat next to a hairless woman. He didn't look her up and down and then quickly look away like most people. Nor did he insist on politically correct earnestness, meaningful, direct eye contact. Her grubby neighbor seemed to care only that seat trays were upright, all electronic devices were turned off, and appropriately stored until takeoff. Claire shook her bald head. Whatever drugs he was taking she had to get some.

The plane was almost full. Claire looked up to see a man about her age. One of the impatient ones in a pricey suit in the aisle next to her seat. Staring. *Oh no*. She could feel the color begin to climb up her neck.

“Hey, aren’t you that guy?” the man in the suit said.

Claire exhaled. She turned to her right, startled.

“Yeah, you’re the guy from that reality show, aren’t you?” The suit wasn’t budging without an answer.

“Uh-huh... yeah, I’m him.” Claire’s seatmate slurred, barely stringing the words together. His double chins fell forward on his chest.

“Rob,” the suit said.

“Yeah, Rob.”

The flight attendant came up behind the man prodding him forward. “I knew it,” he muttered before moving toward his seat.

That’s where she’d seen him. What’d he say his name was again? She turned toward him. Asleep again. “Hey,” she elbowed him. “I thought you looked familiar. You were in a reality show. What else would I have seen you in?” She hardly ever watched reality television—at least not on purpose.

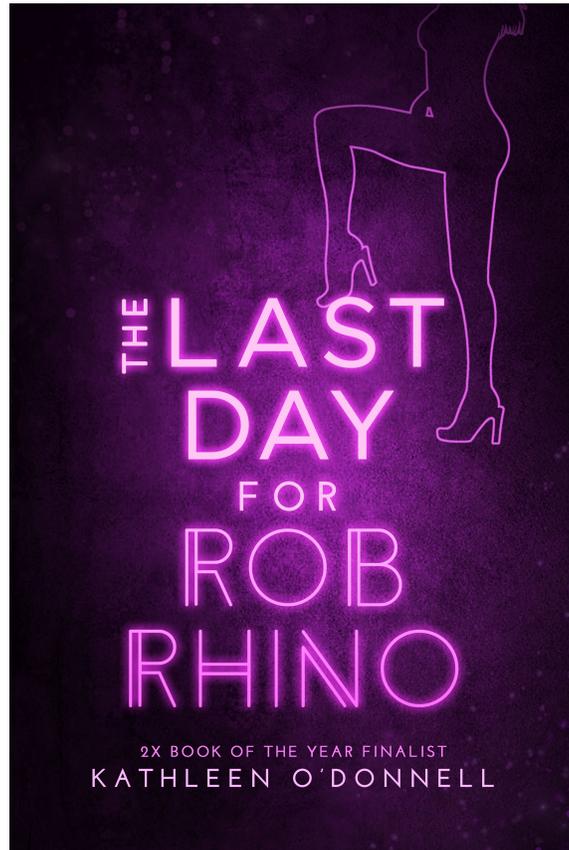
He eyed her Rolex and ten-carat diamond ring. “Nothing.”

“I thought you were someone famous when I saw you in the airport.” She knew she was right. She almost always was. “What else are you famous for?”

His head swiveled toward her, jowls sagging.

“My cock,” he said. “I have a thirteen-inch cock.”

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