



ROCKING HARD  
LOVING HARDER

**HOT**  
**SUMMER SCHOOL**  
**NIGHT**

*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
MICHELLE MANKIN

# HOT SUMMER SCHOOL NIGHT



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Hot Summer School Night  
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Kyle Murphy is a drug dealer. Street level, he's a dog on a short leash, his every move controlled by his boss Martin Skellin. Handsome, resourceful, and talented, Kyle is more than he appears to be. He just can't be more.

Claire Walsh is a rich girl labeled a freak at her prestigious high school because she likes birds. Taunted and bullied, she ignores her classmates who torment her. That's the nice thing to do, and she's a nice girl, but she wishes that someday someone would see that she is more a beautiful swan than an ugly duckling.

That someday comes the night Kyle goes to Claire's school to sell drugs during her annual talent show exhibition. Claire sees more in Kyle. Kyle sees the beauty in Claire. But he's from Southside, and she's from Lakeside. He breaks the rules to survive. She follows them to please nearly everyone except herself. They are opposites from opposite worlds, a romance between them as star-crossed as *Romeo and Juliet*.

What happens when they break the rules and more than a few stereotypes on one hot summer school night?

Warning: *Hot Summer School Night* contains sexually explicit scenes, drug use, and bullying. It is emotional and suspenseful. It features a quirky heroine and an antihero. If you prefer your romance without any angst, darkness, or danger, and your romantic heroes without any flaws to overcome, do NOT read this book. Kyle and Claire's story begins on a *Hot Summer School Night* and concludes in *Breaking Her Bad*.

Never regret thy fall, O Icarus of the fearless flight. For the greatest tragedy  
of them all is never to feel the burning light.

– Oscar Wilde



ROCK AND ROLL  
CHAPTER 1

*Kyle*

All alone, I stood in my designated corner, surveying my realm.

The walls were a depressing gray. The carpet beneath my moto boots smelled like piss and jizz, stained to a mostly uniform shit brown. No one remembered what color it had originally been before the low-income apartment became my drug den. At least, that was the story I told, and no one questioned it. The past was the past, and I kept mine where it belonged.

An orgasmic moan from the coffee table drew my attention. Four guys were on their knees around it, licking and sucking blow off the skin of a naked chick who acted like she was getting off on what they were doing. She wasn't. She just wanted heroin.

I avoided Crystal. She made the right sounds, but she gave poor head.

Most guys didn't care and took her up on her deal because she was an easy lay, but not me. Besides the fact that her baseline was barely above breathing, her eyes were all wrong. Eyes mattered to me unless the lights were off, or my eyes were closed. I did have some standards.

Pulling my gaze away from Crystal's performance, I scanned the room. A few couples were making out in the area that used to be the dining room. Two guys from the Southside High football team, my bodyguard's ex-brethren, were getting nasty with a fucked-up cheerleader by the swinging kitchen door. I looked away. It wasn't anything I hadn't seen before.

As usual this late, the den was packed. Being graduation time, there were a lot of seniors with red Solo cups in their hands. That was good. The liquor was free, courtesy of my boss. Free booze got them in the door—it was the



drugs they inevitably wanted once they came inside that cost them. A few cats I recognized from school entered through the always-open front door. The breeze that accompanied them was only moderately tinted by cannabis, fresher than the stench inside.

The guys met my eyes and acknowledged me with raised fingers and chin lifts before moving farther in. I ruled unopposed in the den now. I appreciated the respect, but it wasn't anything to be proud of. The king of shit was king of shit. I did what I did because I had to. But that didn't mean I dug it.

Exhaling, I crossed my arms over my chest. I was bored. I just wanted it to be quitting time already so I could leave.

As if she sensed my restlessness, Missy Rivera signaled me from the stairs. On her ass on a step midway up, she'd been hanging around, watching me from between the rusted banister rails. With long black hair and all the curves, Missy was off-the-chain pretty, but too fond of coke. She'd blow me for it.

I usually indulged with someone at the end of my workday, and she knew it. That was why she was sticking around. It was a business transaction. It wasn't personal.

"Kyle, *psst*."

I wanted to roll my eyes at Gary. My number-two rep was a complete dork, but you couldn't complain about his reliability.

I signaled to Randy Rhodes. Looking all menacing, which he barely was, he stepped aside to let Gary come close to me. As my bodyguard, the lumbering linebacker was improving, but he remained a work in progress.

"How's it going?" I asked Gary.

"Take's good," he said. "But less than you-know-who will want."

Gary was scared shitless when it came to our boss. Never said his name, like it might somehow magically summon him. Gary had reason to be scared. He was missing a small toe on his left foot on account of sticking it where it didn't belong, but I wasn't sure he'd learned his lesson. He was reliable but not that smart.

"Skellin's not gonna like that," I said, just to say something. Fact was, Martin would be *I wanna fuck someone up* pissed at the news. "Circulate. See what more you can move."

"But . . ." Distracted, Gary turned his interested gaze to the coffee table where things were now getting triple-X pornographic.

"Man, focus. Move the product." I narrowed my eyes. "If you don't get

the job done, you'll have to answer to Skellin."

"Right." Gary bobbed his head and slunk off.

"I'm going upstairs," I told Randy, then signaled to Missy.

She stood up, looking animated rather than bored for the first time tonight.

"Need me to come with?" Randy asked, looking almost as eager as Missy. Dude liked pussy, lots of it, and he didn't mind sharing.

"No, man. I got this." I held up my fist, and he brought his up for a bump. "Keep the peace downstairs. No slacking off."

"You got it."

I nodded to acknowledge him, but I wasn't that hopeful about Randy's ability to follow even that simple directive.

Climbing the stairs, I picked my way through the group of heroin junkies sprawled on it. But getting through them wasn't any more trouble than usual.

Missy was waiting for me in front of my office. She pushed away from the hallway wall when I arrived, and I gestured for her to precede me. I could be a gentleman. Before things went really bad with my parents, my mom had insisted on it.

"You sitting or standing for this?" Missy asked, already unbuttoning her blouse.

"I'll sit. I've been standing all fucking night."

"Okay."

Blouse off, she set it on the bathroom counter, next to the rows of Ziploc bags full of drugs.

I slipped past her, undoing my belt on the way to my throne. Dropping the lid, I worked my jeans down to my thighs while she removed her bra. Her tits were more than handfuls and real. When my cock lengthened inside my briefs, her icy gaze dipped, then rose.

"Want me, baby?" she purred.

"I wanna get off, Missy." I lowered my briefs and took a seat. "It's been a long fucking night. You don't have to pretend to be into it."

"Cool."

Positioning herself in front of me, she placed her hands on my thighs and lowered herself to her knees. My cock came to life in her expert hands, and I eventually ejaculated into her mouth.

When we were done, she wiped the back of her hand across her lips. Expectantly, her eyes met mine for a moment. They weren't right, but they

weren't blitzed-out wrong either.

"Coke's in the medicine cabinet," I said.

"Thanks." She popped open the mirrored door and took what she needed.

We both got what we wanted, but it was sad that the conversation and eye contact was more intimate than the blow job. I got it, but I didn't attempt to change it.

Business was business. I was the king of shit, so shit was what I had.



*Kyle*

A little later, I stepped off the bus and planted the soles of my Daytona moto boots on the pavement.

The concrete was dry. The waterproof black leather wasn't necessary tonight, nor the steel toes or the shin guards, but I believed in being prepared. I'd learned from experience that not being prepared could get you messed up so badly, you wished you were dead.

Popping up the worn collar on my favorite denim jacket, I glanced around. At four a.m., the sidewalks in downtown Renton were deserted. All the quaint shops and restaurants on Main Street were dark, and the carefully cultivated tree-lined street was clear of cars. The air was damp from the southernmost shore of Lake Washington, cool but not cold against my skin. Summer was officially here. But summers—even well south of downtown Seattle—came with a chill.

It took a light-rail ride and three different bus transfers to get here. It was a long, pain-in-the-ass journey, one I took every night, but it was worth it. There were no pops of gunfire here, no screams. No razor-sharp edge of violence or despair that tainted the Southside air like ozone. Renton was day-and-night different from Southside. As different as I pretended to be here.

During a normal commute time, one train ride would have taken me from Southside to Renton, but I didn't work a normal job during normal hours. Keeping my two lives separate required effort. It wasn't just the logistics involved. I also had to make sure no one followed me. Not that I—as of yet—had ever noticed anyone doing so outside Southside. But just because you

didn't see the danger didn't mean it wasn't there.

The night my parents died came to mind. But as soon as that memory surfaced, I locked it down, returning it to the watertight box with all the other important things that I buried deep inside me.

Digging the hood of my hoodie out from underneath the collar of my jean jacket, I pulled it over my head. Chin down, I swept my eyes back and forth. I wasn't in Southside anymore, but I still had to be safe.

I made my way uphill along the charming-as-shit street. Colorful banners on lampposts fluttered, heralding the upcoming Puget Sound Bird Fest. Uncle Bob was excited about it, and so was I, to be honest. It was almost real, this other life I hid and protected. It certainly had the trappings of normalcy I craved.

The walk to my condo from downtown wasn't long, but it gave me enough time to switch out identities. After making two right turns and crossing a couple of quiet streets, I raked my hoodie off my head. Shaking out my untamable black hair, I removed the guardedness I wore like plates of armor. My footsteps were lighter without that burden.

I loosened my clenched fists. The fire inside me that sometimes made me do ill-advised things to defy my merciless master and rattle the bars of my unbreakable cage continued to burn. The anger and futile frustration that fueled that defiance never went out.

The entire transformative process took minutes, but I did it every night like a snake shedding its skin.

By the time I reached the wood steps that led to the deck of my condo, I was almost a different person. I breathed easier. All that remained of the guy from Southside was my rambling walk. My wide shoulders back, I timed my strides to the beat of my favorite Led Zeppelin tune.

My ramble was cooler than Warren Jenkins's glide. *I* was way cooler. Now that he had glided on to bigger and better things with his band, Tempest, and their RCA record deal, maybe people would finally acknowledge that.

A light suddenly switched on in the darkness. Caught in an unexpected spotlight, I stumbled.

Blindly, I reached inside my jacket for my blade. I wrapped my fingers around it, but when I withdrew it, it was knocked from my grip. Wheeled in a fast circle, I was shoved face forward into the wood deck. Seeing stars from the collision, I let out a grunt of pain.

"He's clear," Arturo said to his master. We served the same one. After

frisking me, Skellin's bodyguard pressed his heavy weight on top of me, holding me down.

"Clear for what?" I feigned cool, but it was shit acting with splinters in my skin and me wheezing.

"Quiet, Kyle." Arturo yanked my arm back between my shoulder blades and twisted it, sending a bolt of fiery pain through me.

"What the fuck, Arturo?" My heart raced, but I slowly spaced out my words.

I needed the extra time to put my armor back on. Without it, I was vulnerable. My face was smashed and my arm burned like crazy, but I couldn't let them know I was hurting.

*Never let 'em know you're hurting or who they can hurt to get to you.* My father's words from long ago, the only sound advice he'd ever given me.

He had his excuses, but he'd crapped out on me as a role model long before he died. And now I was alone. I had only one person remaining in my life who genuinely cared about me. And I protected Uncle Bob, no matter the cost.

"Lay off, Arturo. How am I supposed to deal if my arm is in a sling, man?"

"Martin wants a word." Arturo cranked my arm up higher and chuckled darkly when I hissed. He was as sadistic as his master.

"Release him," Martin Skellin said from a safe zone somewhere behind Arturo that I couldn't see since my face was smashed into the deck.

"You bet, boss." Arturo gave my arm a final twist and released me.

"Thanks for nothing," I gritted out through clenched, splinter-filled teeth.

After pushing slowly to my feet, as if I had all the time in the world and wasn't afraid, I rubbed my sore shoulder as I turned around. A shadow darker than the night emerged.

"Kyle Murphy," Martin said slowly. He had a thing about full-name formality and delighted in dispensing pain unnecessarily.

I hoped tonight was more about the former and less about the latter. But with Skellin and his ilk, you never really knew and always had to be on guard. A lesson my dad never learned, and he and my mother paid the ultimate price.

"How was the take tonight?" he asked.

"Better than decent." With War out of the picture, I had no one I owed product or favors to anymore. No one except Martin Skellin, unfortunately.

“Yeah?” Skellin stared down the length of his nose, studying me.

My eyes rapidly adjusting to the moonlight, I studied him right back.

With his dark hair and eyes, chicks seemed to think he was good-looking, but I didn't get it. Chicks were fucking blind. Lace Lowell, War's ex, was now one of them. She'd gotten herself into a trap with Martin that she couldn't break free from.

“Seemed short for an end-of-the-school-year party to me,” Skellin said.

“Our customers are strapped paying for graduation, along with the usual necessities.” Those took priority over recreational enhancements, or they did for the graduates who weren't drug dependent like my dad had been in the end.

“Bullshit. They wanna get high off my premium shit, they pay for it. I'll just take the shortfall out of your cut.”

“But—”

“You got a problem?”

In my peripheral vision, I noticed Arturo inching closer. Without a flashlight blinding me, I could see damn good at night. Like a barred owl, Uncle Bob said. Being compared to one of his favorite raptors was high praise. I didn't get praised by anyone except by him. But it was Bob. He cared about me, so his was enough.

“Got no problem.” I quickly shook my head.

Those who had a problem with Martin Skellin didn't have one long because they didn't live long. And Bob was inside that condo, along with Mrs. Paczynski. She kept an eye out for him while I was working, but she was seventy-two years old. No matter how this played out, I couldn't allow any of my other life to bleed onto them.

“Glad to hear that.” Martin narrowed his coal-black eyes. “Wouldn't want to bring child protective services in to have another look-see at your unconventional guardian situation before you turn eighteen, now would we?”

“No, we wouldn't.” My throat tightening, I swallowed hard.

“You need to remember whose name is on the lease of that shithole in Southside, and whose cash pays for your sweet condo here. Homes and cash can disappear just as easily as people.” He snapped his fingers. “You feeling me, Kyle Murphy?”

“Yes, sir.” My heart pounding fast, I lifted my chin, trying to ignore the sting behind my eyes. “I feel you.”

“Good boy. You're my favorite little rep. But don't forget favor must be

earned.” His lips curled into a reptilian grin that injected even more darkness into his eyes. “Speaking of earning, I have a job for you in a different zip code. Tomorrow night. Arturo will fill you in on the details.”





*Claire*

My hands trembling with nerves, I steered my Land Rover from the drop-off circle into the parking lot for my private school. The line of limos that had been ahead of me continued moving forward, inching their way toward the imposing multicolumnar facade of Lakeside High.

The school grounds were packed this evening. Students, teachers, parents, and former alumni were on campus for the annual end-of-the-year talent exhibition. Just thinking about my part in the show made my heart hammer inside its gilded cage.

Rolling through aisles in the nearly full lot at a crawl, I searched for an empty space. Finally, I found one near the back. Switching off the engine, I rested my hands on the steering wheel, wishing I could sprout wings and fly away.

Staring hard at the stately Western white pine in front of my vehicle, I breathed deeply. Its dark green needles blurred before my eyes. Among the many other embarrassing quirks that made me stand out rather than blend in with my peers, I tended to tear up when I was nervous.

Blinking through the wetness, I tried to envision the performance ahead and reminded myself that I only had to do this one more time before I graduated. But envisioning and reminding didn't help. My palms remained clammy, and my heart continued to race.

I sighed. If only I were a bird that could fly wherever I wanted, do whatever I wanted, be who I wanted to be . . . whoever that was. I didn't exactly have that part figured out yet.

I was only seventeen, and had a year to go before I graduated. In my mind, who I was wasn't fully formed yet. But in the privileged circles my family moved in, my identity was already established and had been before I could walk. I was trapped in a role I had to play.

Gripping the leather-wrapped wheel tighter, I held back my tears of fear and frustration. They would ruin my makeup. My mother had paid to have a professional makeup artist come to the house, an expense nearly as extravagant as my designer gown.

A Steller's Jay suddenly hopped from one limb to another, directly in front of my luxury SUV.

I went completely still like my dad had taught me to whenever I accompanied him in the field. This particular bird was a waiter and a watcher, the only North American jay with a crest. It let out a harsh, scolding call, seeming to chastise me for hiding inside my vehicle instead of getting out and doing what needed to be done.

*Okay, bird. I get it.*

Giving the jay a nod, I allowed myself a moment to watch it in flight. Graceful and almost lazy, it swooped through the air on its broad, rounded wings.

If only I could be as free, I would soar on the currents of my whims. Figure out for myself in my own time who I wanted to be, and what I wanted to do with my life after high school.

But that wasn't reality. Reality was me earthbound and shuffling in lockstep among a flock of geese that I'd known since our parents put us on exclusive waiting lists for the best preschools. Reality was me being a dutiful daughter, prioritizing my father's affection and craving my mother's elusive approval. One was my sure foundation. The other was higher ground that always seemed out of reach.

*Go, Claire. Move. Do what needs doing.*

Taking one last breath, I imagined myself as free as the jay in flight. I further imagined myself as an excellent mimic. With their calls, the Steller's Jay imitated a variety of other birds. I could do that. Mimic my classmates. Not be odd. Blend in.

With imitation in mind, I grabbed my silvery clutch and popped open my door. My high heels on the pavement, I pointed the key fob at the vehicle and clicked the locks. I smoothed a hand down my gown. The silk was a deep azure, nearly as beautiful as the jay's feathers.

Pushing my glasses higher up my nose, I turned. Walking between Porsches, BMWs, and Jaguars parked side by side was like moving through a luxury car dealer's lot. My gaze forward, I marched determinedly toward the Grecian-inspired three-story building that had been my school home for the past three years.

I was so tunnel-visioned on what I needed to do that I almost didn't see them at first, two guys standing together, blocking the aisle in front of me.

Vance Nagel, I knew. Handsome and tall, he was one of the most popular guys at school, a linebacker during football season. He also fronted a band, which was cool. Most girls went weak in the knees if he looked at them, but I just got nauseated. He was mean, and his arrogance was off-putting.

My stomach roiling, I began a pivot to avoid him and his dark-haired companion, but wobbled when his companion turned and I got a good look at him.

Wow. I sucked in a breath, ensnared by an arresting pair of eyes the color of storm clouds.

Beneath his unruly black hair, his gaze widened when he saw me. Time seemed to stop as our eyes locked.

I didn't know him, had never seen him before. With those high cheekbones, strong jaw, and firm lips, he had a devastating level of handsomeness you saw once and never forgot.

Tall and wide shouldered, he had a stance that was confident to the point of being almost confrontational. A dark prince in his tux, he'd laid claim to the ground where his regal feet were planted. His gray eyes brewed at gale-force intensity, and his chin was tilted at an angle that dared anyone to challenge him.

"Who's she?" Mr. Devastating asked Vance in a deep voice that rumbled across the two car lengths separating us. The perfect pitch of his voice raised chill bumps on my flesh.

Vance shifted. Giving me his usual head-to-toe scan as if he were imagining me naked, even though he was dating a friend of mine, he turned back to his companion. "Nobody."

Heat burning my cheeks at that cruel assessment and dismissal, I kept walking, leaving Vance and the unknown prince behind. Vance's words were a reminder I didn't need. I was who I was. My destiny was set. Handsome, mysterious princes weren't for odd girls like me.

By the time I reached the front of the school, I was out of breath. My skin

continued to prickle with awareness from my brief encounter with the unforgettable stranger.

I was dismayed to discover the path into the building was clogged by my classmates. The girls wore expensive floor-length gowns like mine. The guys wore tuxes like Vance and the prince. Everyone was clustered into cliques, none of which I belonged to.

Blocked from going forward, I glanced back over my shoulder, scanning the parking lot. When I didn't see the stranger again, disappointment washed through me, and I spun back around. My long heavy braid swished the still tingling skin between my bare shoulder blades.

"Excuse me," I said determinedly, pressing my way through the throng.

As those in front of me shifted sideways to let me pass, the inevitable quacking started. I didn't see who started it tonight, but the name calling and hurtful commentary accompanied the quacking like it always did.

*Odd-duck Claire.*

*She's so weird. She likes birds better than people.*

*Just look at her. She's got a nest in her hair.*

I touched my French braid and the baby's breath woven into it. I'd thought the style was pretty until now. Tears filled my eyes. I'd earned the duck label in first grade because of my impassioned speech about local factories encroaching on the woodland fowls' habitat.

By now, I should have been accustomed to the ridicule. I should have let their words roll off me like the water-impervious feathers of my namesake. But I couldn't. Though I pretended not to care, deep down like everyone else, I simply wanted to be accepted by my peers.

Straightening my shoulders, I continued toward the entrance, wishing I hadn't let my parents talk me into doing this tonight. I wished I hadn't believed them when they said I looked beautiful.

Despite my glammed-up outward trappings, I remained the same person underneath. Always an odd duck, and never a beautiful swan.



*Claire*

“Hey, wait up.”

Inside the school, a hand landed softly on my shoulder.

Recognizing her sweet voice, even if I hadn’t heard her approach, I stopped in the hallway and turned to face her. “Go back to your friends, Ella.”

“You’re my friend too,” she said in a hushed tone. Stepping in front of me, she moved gracefully on high-heeled designer shoes she was accustomed to wearing. Her cheeks were red, and her eyes were shiny. “I’m sorry about them.”

“Apology accepted,” I said with a nod. Grudges weren’t my thing.

“I should stand up to them.” She dropped her chin. “I know that. They were being assholes. They’re just jealous.”

“Jealous of what?”

“Your poise. Your strength. Your unique personality that trumps their sad, boring conformist ones.” Her gaze brightened. No thick lenses dulled their imploring green sheen. “Like mine. I wish I were braver like you.”

“I’m not brave.”

Or beautiful like Ella Skellin. In addition to her striking jade-green eyes, she had long sable-brown hair with coppery highlights and an adorable smattering of faint freckles across the bridge of her cute nose. She didn’t look much like her father.

“You are so brave. You marched right through the middle of them, ignoring their ugliness with your head held high. You look stunning, by the

way. That dress is gorgeous with your coloring.” She reached out and tucked a stray strand of my sun-streaked gold hair behind my ear.

“I’m the same girl I was earlier in the day. Dorky Claire, only without the hideous school uniform.” I captured her hand and squeezed it. “But thanks for the compliment. I like this dress. Yours is pretty too. You look beautiful.”

“Thank you. My grandmother picked it out. She has my wardrobe and practically my whole life planned for me.” Ella suddenly looked tired and sad. I knew she felt trapped in her life too. She jerked up her head, pointing with her delicate chin. “Are you really going onstage all by yourself tonight?”

“Yeah. My mom and dad want me to.” My empty stomach lurched, disturbing the already agitated butterflies flapping their wings. “But I won’t be alone. I’ll have a wind ensemble accompanying me.”

“You’re singing alone, though. No choir, right?” She tilted her head, and the fiery highlights in her hair caught and reflected the hallway lights.

“Uh-huh.” I pressed a hand to my stomach, feeling ill as I imagined the eyes of my parents, school staff, and peers on me.

“Wow,” she said. “That *is* brave, putting yourself out there, revealing your hidden talent.”

“Hidden, yes.” I swallowed hard. “But I don’t know if I’d call it talent.”

“I’ve seen your solo parts for interscholastic choir competitions. You’re good.”

“Among my nerdy, grade-minded peers, maybe.” I bit down on my lip. “But I’m not gifted like you are with your photography.”

“That’s just a hobby.” Her gaze turned unfocused, which was why I noticed Vance entering the auditorium, and she didn’t. He scanned the interior, probably looking for her. “I like the world better through my lens.”

“Yeah,” I said. I did too.

I preferred the romantic ideals in the songs I chose to sing. The one for tonight was from my dad’s favorite band. My mom and dad thought if I performed in front of everyone, they would be impressed. I didn’t think that was likely. I just wanted to please them. Maybe make my dad smile. Take his mind off his worry for a little while.

“How’s your dad doing?” Ella asked.

“He’s all right.” I shrugged as if I wasn’t worried. As if he weren’t.

Dad was in excellent shape. He needed to be for his job as a wildlife ecology consultant for Aranco. He often hiked into rugged and remote areas to determine where his company should run pipelines that would be least

harmful to the environment. It was a job that paid well. It was important, and he was passionate about it.

“Test results not back yet?” She caught her bottom lip between her teeth.

“No.” I shook my head. “But soon. The cardiologist is supposed to call with the results.” We still didn’t know why he’d suddenly fainted while working out a few weeks before.

“I’m sure it’s nothing serious.”

“I hope not.”

Needing a distraction from a topic that ratcheted up my tension, I looked for the devastatingly handsome guy I’d seen in the parking lot. Head and shoulders above the others, he was easily found. He might be dressed in a tuxedo like the other men, but he stood out, even in a crowd of people. He was with Ella’s father. His head was down, his expression serious.

“Who’s that guy with your dad?” I asked, hoping my interest sounded casual.

“What guy?” Ella turned to follow the direction of my gaze, and her red-stained lips rounded. “Uh . . . he’s one of my dad’s . . . He’s one of my cousins.”

“I’ve never seen him before.” I tilted my head.

Ella had had lots of cousins of varying ages who didn’t look like her. They weren’t usually around during on-campus school functions. This one didn’t have the menacing aura most of them did, or maybe he did, and I just didn’t see it because his good looks overshadowed it.

Ella dropped her gaze. “He’s not from around here.”

“What’s he doing here?” I asked. “Does he work for your dad like the others?”

“Yeah.” Her lips pursed, she said, “He definitely works for my dad.”

“Does he have a name?” I asked.

“Kyle Murphy,” she said, and I turned his name over and over in my head, liking it. A lot.

“What about Kyle?” Vance joined us just in time to hear her.

“Nothing.” I stepped back as Vance threw his arm around Ella, almost tripping on the long hem of my gown. “I’ve gotta go.”

Before I turned, I glimpsed Ella’s mask of cool, practiced indifference sliding into place. It was the look she nearly always wore, one that kept people at a distance. I never would have talked to her, really confided to her, or her to me, if I hadn’t run into her one day without her mask when she’d

been taking pictures by the sound.

Setting the memory and the couple behind me, I made my way down the corridor and stopped when I reached the backstage door. Opening it, I entered the darkened area cluttered with cardboard boxes and sound equipment. There, I paused to take a calming breath.

Closing my eyes, I brought the jay back into my mind. I imagined a blue sky and flying above everything and everyone that stressed me out. Lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice the door I'd just come through opening again. But I did notice light spilling into the darkness.

Startled from my reverie, I opened my eyes and inhaled sharply. The alluring scent of a mossy wetland and the invigorating evergreen of a forest flooded my senses.

"Hey, sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," he said, and I recognized his voice. Kyle's voice. It was like earlier in the parking lot, only deeper and more intimate now as the door clicked closed and the darkness returned.

A compelling wave of heat hit my back as he touched my arm.

"Are you okay?" His touch was gentle, the connection between us sparking like a struck match.

Fire skated across my skin and rose to my cheeks as I slowly turned to face him. My eyes met his, earthy brown to cloudy gray. There was something in his gaze, a concern that calmed my fear.

I realized then that his eyes weren't merely a storm. They were a cyclone that spun and lifted me into the air, a rapid ascent from the ground to the sky that left me light-headed and breathless.





*Kyle*

*Fucking hell.*

This chick was even prettier up close, but I'd spooked her. She trembled like a little bird caught in a predatory raptor's claws.

"I won't hurt you," I said firmly.

"I know you won't." She bravely cranked up her chin. She was tall for a girl, slender sexy, but a good six inches shorter than me.

I got why she was nervous. I was a total stranger and we were isolated, alone in this darkened corner. The murmur of others was distant, but she wasn't going to admit she was scared. Her bravado was consistent with what I'd seen earlier. She'd flinched at the bullshit name calling and quacking outside, yet she'd held her head high and marched through the group of assholes without acknowledging them.

*Rich, entitled pieces of shit.*

It pissed me off the way they'd treated her. I knew what it was like to be taunted. Labeled. Made to feel like a caricature rather than a person.

I was Kyle-the-drug-dealer to everyone in Southside. Most didn't even know my last name. I was more than what they thought, but I couldn't be more. Anger from that ever-present fire rolling through me, I curled my fingers into fists, though there was no enemy here to fight.

"How do you know I won't?" I asked, admiring her.

That bravery spoke to me on some basic level, telling me she was her own person. She wasn't going to let me, or those shits outside, or anyone else intimidate her.

However, I also knew what she'd done could be perceived as a challenge to those who got off on tearing strong people down. In Lakeside, on this side of Seattle, she got a pass. But in Southside, they'd eat her alive.

"I see it in your eyes." As she studied me from behind the lenses of her black-framed glasses, her eyes were wide. A soft sparrow brown in color, they were surrounded by a thick dark lashes. "I felt it when you touched me just now. You were gentle. Careful. You didn't come back here to hurt me."

*Don't think about touching her again.* I fought the urge, though the pads of my fingers and the rest of me continued to register the seductive charge.

"I'm not gentle." I gave her the truth, though I wanted to be gentle with her.

There was something undeniable about this girl, something beneath her strength that stirred my protective instincts. Instincts I activated for only one person now.

Sure, she was beautiful with her sun-streaked long blond hair and tiny white flowers woven into her braid. Sexy too with her body-skimming blue dress, revealing curves that made the palms of my hands burn with the desire to shape them.

Outside, I'd gone instantly hard the moment her gaze had connected with mine. My heart beat so fast and I was so distracted by her, I'd barely managed to complete the deal with Vance. Then that idiocy by her peers happened, which I'd witnessed firsthand, because of course I'd pursued her.

After that, even knowing she had some connection to my boss's daughter didn't stop me from following her backstage. I had to get a closer look. Touch her if the opportunity presented itself. Hear her voice. Determine if she was real.

God, she was most certainly real. She smelled like wildflowers, a field of them on a warm spring day.

"You can't know I'm gentle. You don't know anything about me." I took a step back, putting needed breathing space between us. Being too close to her made my mind spin with impossible ideas. I didn't do impossible. I did what I had to survive.

"I know your name," she said, lifting her chin higher.

So, she'd asked someone about me. Intrigued, I shifted closer.

"Ella says you work for her father."

I froze solid. Maintaining the mere inches between us, I nodded. The truth was Martin Skellin owned my ass. But working for him sounded better.

“What’s *your* name?” I asked. She knew mine. It was only right for me to know hers.

“Claire.” Her voice cracking, she swallowed. “Claire Walsh.”

“Pretty name.” My throat suddenly dry like hers must have been, I swallowed too. I wanted to reach up and loosen the bow tie that now felt like it was strangling me. “For a pretty girl.”

*Oh fuck.* I sounded like a douche.

Her eyes rounded, making her perfectly arched dark blond brows rise to peek at me above the dark plastic frames of her glasses. The lenses didn’t detract from her beauty. Instead, they magnified it, providing a slideshow for her easily readable emotions.

“Thank you.” Her gaze warming, she blushed. Her cheeks turned the dusky rose of a new dawn. That rosy hue spread to her shoulders and the skin over them that her sleeveless dress left bare.

Her round breasts above the low-cut bodice were tempting handfuls. The rest of her skin—and there was a lot of it exposed in that dress—was dewy and glowing like honey in a mason jar held up to the sun. She wasn’t a stranger to the outdoors like most of the chicks on this side of town. Her skin bore witness to that fact.

“Hey, Claire.”

She jumped as an Asian boy with thick glasses approached us. He gave me a wide berth and a furtive glance, recognizing the threat I presented like most people did, even if she didn’t.

“We’re waiting for you. We go on first. Remember?”

He gestured to the stage, where another boy in a tux and a girl in a green gown sat beside each other, holding instruments and wearing curious expressions. When they noticed me looking at them, they quickly glanced away.

“Right. Okay. Thanks, Henry.” Claire blinked and then focused on him. “I’ll be right there.”

She shifted to face me as Henry went to rejoin the others. I decided to focus on her, rather than the fact that I’d let someone approach without noticing because my guard was down. Claire was a distraction. Even on this side of town, a distraction was something I couldn’t afford.

“I’d better go,” I said.

“Could you stay?” She licked her lips. “I’d really like you to.”

My gaze dipped to her mouth.

*Fuck.* I'd been trying not to look at it. Her lips were deep pink like the fiery flowers on fireweed. Her top lip had a cupid's bow, and the bottom one was lush. Both were slick with gloss. More than anything, I wanted to trace her lips with my tongue. Fit my mouth to hers.

What would she taste like, a girl like her? Fresh like a flower, I imagined. Hot like fire. Bursting with flavor like a ripened cherry plucked right from the tree.

"I can't." My hands formed tighter fists to resist the temptation.

"Of course." Her head bobbed. "You're working. I remember. I've distracted you."

Hell yes, she'd distracted me, and I was working, or I was supposed to be. Skellin was going to have my ass if I didn't sell the product he wanted me to move tonight.

Blushing again, she said, "I'd like to talk to you some more. Get to know you. After I do this thing, that I don't really want to do because it makes me nervous, but I have to do it for my dad. He hasn't been feeling well lately."

She hooked her thumb over her shoulder, giving me a new source of distraction. Her movement lifted her tits. "Maybe afterward, if you're done working, we could go outside. There's an arboretum with some benches. It'll be quiet. Nice outside. We could talk."

"I don't think that would be smart." My voice dropped, revealing the strain it took to refuse her.

"Right. I guess not." The rosy pink returned to her cheeks. "But can you tell me why?"

"Claire!" the Asian dude called, pointing to the center mic. "C'mon. They're getting ready to pull the curtain."

"Shit." She stamped her foot and her breasts jiggled, making my cock jump inside my briefs.

Claire wasn't just pretty—she was an irresistible combination of cute and sexy. That combo had never attracted me before. I got what I wanted from chicks, and they got what they wanted from me. It was just business.

Until now.

Claire tilted her head. "Well, it was nice to meet you, Kyle."

My name on her lips. That sultry voice of hers.

I was dazzled by Claire. In deep trouble.

I didn't belong here, yet I stayed.



*Claire*

*Stay. Come to the arboretum.* How pathetically desperate I sounded.

I took my Martin from its stand where I'd left it after our afternoon rehearsal. I managed to get my guitar strap over my shoulder and fastened just before the curtain rose.

The audience went silent. A sea of expectant faces blurred before my nervous eyes.

The spotlight switched on without warning, nearly blinding me, but not before I found my parents sitting side by side in the front row. My mom was beautiful, stunning tonight with her light blond hair up in a fancy twist. My dad held her hand. He wore a tux, his bow tie and cummerbund a hot pink to match her gown. On another man, that color might have been too much. But on him it was perfect.

His gaze meeting mine, he smiled encouragingly at me. My dad's approval was usually all it took to right the wrongs in my world. But it didn't work tonight, not with my heartbeats panicked and his normally healthy skin too pale.

I swallowed hard. "This is for my dad," I said with my mouth to the mic. Then I eased back onto one pinpoint heel, hoping my long gown would hide the fact that my legs were trembling.

The guitar perfectly tuned, I picked the iconic opening to the signature song by my dad's favorite band, Kansas. "Dust in the Wind" was meant to be played on the concert-quality instrument he'd given me for my sixteenth birthday. Right now, sixteen seemed a long, trouble-free lifetime ago.

I played the opening without messing up, and managed to sing the first couple of verses, but when I reached the chorus, the words hit me. The meaning of the song. The worry about my dad. The disaster my life would become if something bad happened to him, and he wasn't around anymore.

A sob strangled me. I couldn't do this, couldn't stand here and pretend everything was okay, not even for him.

I turned, planning to leave the stage, but stopped abruptly to keep from plowing into Kyle. A handsome and formidable blockade, he met my gaze, his eyes gentle, the soft gray of a mourning dove.

Gripping my arms, he squeezed reassuringly. Then he did something else that was as unexpected as his appearance on the stage. Moving one of his hands to my lower back, he steered me back to the mic and filled in, singing the song right from the point where I'd faltered.

My pulse flew higher than before, but not from fear. It soared like the jay, only on the rousing currents of his voice. A tenor, Kyle knew the words to the classic song, and he sang them divinely. No guitar accompaniment was necessary, but I could play now with him beside me, and it would make the song better.

With his gaze on mine and his hand warm on my back, I strummed my guitar again and added my voice to his. With him beside me on center mic, I was energized and excited, but I wasn't afraid. An electrical connection surged between us, and I knew the way we sounded together was special. We were in sync, and it all came together as we sang the song.

When it was done, Kyle's eyes sparkled as brightly as my delicate gold bracelet with the sparrow charm. Another gift from my dad, extravagant at 24-karat, and one of a kind. Taking my hand, Kyle ran his thumb over the shiny gold.

My skin tingled from the caress, then burned when he lifted my hand, bringing it to his mouth. Warmth from the firm press of his lips spread outward. Lifting his head, he gave me a low-lidded look through his dark lashes. He was so handsome with his dark hair skimming his eyes. I found it difficult to breathe. I think he knew the effect he had on me. That connection between us sparked like a live wire. Surely, he had to feel it too.

*My dark handsome prince.* The thought arose as I stared at him, and he stared back at me.

Kyle wasn't mine, of course. I barely knew him. But I wanted to know him better. I wanted to know everything about him. He was here on this stage

with me. Was it possible that he wanted to know me too?

Applause startled me from my thoughts. I'd completely forgotten where I was. Sporadic clapping gained momentum, becoming thunderous applause. As if it were his regal due, Kyle slowly smiled, then released my hand and backed away.

My principal came forward from the other side of the stage. Moving into the spot Kyle had abandoned, he said something flattering about our performance into the microphone. He thanked the wind ensemble that had accompanied us, but he didn't mention Kyle. What would he say? Kyle didn't go to our school, and he wasn't a scheduled performer.

In a daze as Ella and the other members of the dance team took their places, I exited the stage. I looked for Kyle on the sidelines and backstage, but he was nowhere to be found.

"Hey, songbird." My dad's gaze lit up as I stepped out into the hallway. He pressed a soft kiss to my cheek. "You were amazing."

The familiar smell of cedar from the closet where he stored his tuxedo and his favorite sweaters surrounded me as he studied me. His eyes were the same light shade of brown as mine.

"Who was that boy singing with you?"

Was Kyle a boy? He didn't seem like one to me. He seemed much older. But I guess that even though he was probably close to my age, from my dad's perspective, he was more boy than man.

"I don't really know him," I said. "I just met him tonight."

"Really?" Dad tilted his head. "I've never seen you look so comfortable with a boy. And you sang together beautifully, like you'd been doing it for years. I assumed he was in choir with you."

"No." I shook my head, and my long braid brushed the sensitive skin between my shoulder blades. "I don't know where he goes to school or if he goes. Ella said he's a cousin. He works for Mr. Skellin."

"Oh." My dad's brows drew together.

I understood the shadows that crept into his eyes. My mom didn't like Martin Skellin for some reason, and avoided him. Plus, there were rumors about him. He'd accumulated his wealth—a massive amount of it—wickedly fast.

Some speculated that his fortune didn't come about by entirely legitimate means. But those were only rumors. Both he and his parents were Lakewood alumni. His parents lived on Lake Washington like we did, though their

house was directly on the water, newer, and cost several million more than ours. Ella's grandparents had custody of her, instead of her dad, though she never talked about why. Every time someone asked her about it, she got shadows in her eyes like my dad had now.

"Can you come sit with me and your mom?" Dad asked, his eyes lit from within once more.

Thoughts of my mom chased the darkness away for him, but they didn't have the same effect on me. I loved my mom and wanted to please her, but it seemed an impossible goal.

"Did Mom like my song?" I asked.

"Of course she did."

*Hmm.* I could read between the lines. That hedgy reply meant she'd found some fault with it. She wasn't wild about me being in choir, beyond that the extracurricular activity looked good on my college applications. But I wasn't in the frame of mind to deal with her and her disappointment right now.

"I think I'll just catch the rest of the exhibition from the back row, if you don't mind."

"Of course," Dad said. "I don't mind. I want you to be happy. I just hope you realize that you don't have to please me or your mother to do so. I want you to pursue your own dreams."

"I know that." Yet I had to stay on the path they had for me.

"You need to follow your heart. Try new things, like being onstage and singing with that boy tonight. You never know you can fly or how high you can soar if you don't spread your wings."

"Thank you, Daddy." I gave him a small smile. "That's good advice."

"I love you, Claire." He touched my arm. "Life doesn't have to be as serious or as planned out as your mom would like it to be. Go. Let loose a little. Be with your friends."

My dad never seemed to realize that I didn't have many friends. He was the only person I really confided to.

"Go talk to that new boy," he added. "He made your eyes sparkle. I'd like to meet him."

"If I see him again, I'll introduce you."

"Good."

After a nod, my dad departed, and I entered the auditorium behind him. As he slipped into the front row, I went to the back. Finding and taking an empty seat, I scanned the rows in front of me for wide shoulders and unruly



black hair.

But though I searched, I didn't find what I was looking for.



# ROCK AND ROLL

## CHAPTER 7

*Kyle*

“What the fuck was that?” Martin asked me.

“What?” I shrugged my shoulders in my borrowed tux, pretending I didn’t know.

“That singing shit.” Martin’s coal-black eyes narrowed.

“What’s it matter to you?” I jerked my chin up. “I did what you wanted. Product’s gone.”

A feat of monumental proportions and then some, considering the distraction Claire represented. I’d watched her as I’d skirted the periphery of the auditorium, doing in the shadows what needed to be done. Her gaze darting about the room, she appeared to be looking for someone. Was it wishful thinking to believe it might be me?

I’d kept my eyes on her during the ninety-minute exhibition, and afterward while everyone mixed and mingled. I’d seen her circulate the room with a middle-aged woman in a hot pink dress and a man in a tux with a matching bow tie and cummerbund. Her parents, obviously. Claire’s hair and her delicate features were her mom’s. Her eyes were the same brown as her dad’s. She favored them both in different ways, but only her dad made her smile.

“It matters,” Martin said. “You weren’t supposed to draw attention to yourself. You’re supposed to be inconspicuous.”

Frustrated, I threw my hands in the air. “You got your cash.” And more than the asking price he’d set, because I’d added a delivery fee. “A lot of cash, since I talked up the risk of us moving high-quality shit in an area

Strader's claiming belongs to him."

"Lakeside is mine." Martin frowned.

I suppressed a smile. I knew mentioning money and his rival would get him off my ass. "Need me to stick around for anything else?"

"No." He shook his head. "You can take off. But leave the tux and money with Arturo before you head south."

"Right." I turned, but his next words put a hitch in my smooth stride.

"You sounded good on that stage. Look good tonight in your borrowed tux. But you are what you are, boy. Don't get any grandiose ideas about sticking around. You don't belong here."

Martin was right. I knew he was, but after I handed off the money and my borrowed clothing to his bodyguard, I defiantly hung around.

Strategically, I parked my KTM 990 under a tree by a trail leading into the woods. If Arturo, Skellin, or even Strader spotted me, my off-road but street-approved motorbike would allow me to maneuver dirt paths where they couldn't follow. From my position, I also had a clear sight line to the front of the school.

Ducking my chin to my chest, I curled my fingers across the bridge of my nose, letting my hair slide forward. I'd read once that it was the nose people focused on for facial recognition. Wearing my improvised disguise, I fixed my gaze on the entrance and waited. Whatever the consequences, I wanted to see Claire one last time.

I didn't have long to wait. Her hips swaying, she exited the school with her parents. Others streamed past her as she stiffly hugged her mom, then relaxed into a longer hug with her dad. When her parents moved away, she turned and headed my way.

My eyes gleamed in anticipation. I didn't know which car in the parking lot was hers. Busy with Vance, I hadn't noticed her driving in. But I knew the direction she'd come from when she unexpectedly rocked my world.

When she got close, I pushed away from my bike. "Hey, Claire," I said low. Stepping into the glow from a nearby streetlight, I made my presence known.

"Kyle." She gasped, her hand with the pretty bracelet going to her throat.

"Didn't mean to scare you." I touched her arm. I was genuinely sorry I'd startled her, but I wasn't above using her fright as an excuse to touch her again.

"I thought you left." She didn't remove my hand. In fact, she leaned

deeper into my touch.

“I started to.” I shifted closer, her warmth washing over me, along with her intoxicating flowery scent. “But it didn’t seem right, leaving without saying good-bye. I mean, not after our big moment together in the spotlight.”

“You were incredible.” She smiled, and the reaction that set off inside me wasn’t insignificant.

“It’s not my kind of music.” I deflected the compliment and downplayed my reaction to her smile. “But it’s an easy song to sing. You did the difficult part. Nice pick work, by the way.”

“Do you play the guitar?” She tilted her head, and I lost my train of thought watching a shiny strand of her hair slide along her skin, like I would with my fingers or my tongue if given the opportunity.

“Some.”

That vague bit of misdirection was less sad than the truth, that I barely played anymore except alone, late at night, in the stillness of my room. Music was too personal. Too wrapped up in the person I was before my parents passed.

“I taught myself to play the guitar when I was six,” she said. “I wanted to impress my dad. I can practically play his favorite song with my eyes closed now. That might’ve made tonight easier. I froze onstage in front of everyone, but you unfroze me. Thank you.” She licked her lips.

“My pleasure.” I leaned in. “But it’s getting late.” Not at all late by Southside standards, but late here where people could go to sleep early, knowing they were safe and sound in their beds. “I’d better take off.”

“So this is good-bye.” Her gaze turned shiny, like the thought of my going upset her.

“Yeah,” I said. I wanted to stay. And I wanted her—I couldn’t deny it. But nice girls like her weren’t for shits like me.

“Good-bye, then,” she said sadly.

And I decided, *fuck it*. If we were incompatible and this was wrong, I wasn’t leaving without a taste.

“Just one more thing.”

I lifted my hands and framed her pretty face. Her eyes rounding in surprise, she slowly blinked at me, her emotions magnified behind those lenses as her surprise darkened to desire.

“I’m going to kiss you,” I told her. “You can stop me.”

“I don’t want to stop you.” She placed her hands on my chest.

Beneath them, my heart pounded like a bass drum. The heat of her palms practically burned a hole through my T-shirt.

“Good.” Not good, but I was focused on being bad.

My eyes locked on hers, I lowered my head. She went up on her toes, bringing her tempting mouth closer. Smoothing my fingers over the creamy skin along her delicate jawline, I dipped my hands under her thick, silky braid. I cradled her head gently, waiting a beat and watching her heavy lids slowly close. Her surrender was exhilarating, her breath a sweet flutter like the flap of wings.

Tilting my head, I got the angle I wanted and touched my mouth to hers. My lips were as firm as my determination. Hers were as soft as a dream. Together, we felt more right than anything I’d ever known.

Curious, I brushed my lips over hers a second time. She moved her mouth in concert with mine. This kiss was even better.

“Claire . . .” I groaned against her lips. “You taste so good.” Like clover and honey.

Gripping her upper arms, I brought her closer, marveled at how our bodies fit together, as if she were formed to complete me. I kissed her harder. Deeper. Passion rose inside me like a cresting wave.

She moaned my name.

When she parted her dreamy lips, I slipped my greedy tongue inside. Her mouth was warmth and limitless blue sky that brightened my numbed senses. The velvet glide of her curious tongue electrified me. My cock extended to full length, and my grip on her arms tightened.

I didn’t want the kiss to end. I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t want to ever let her go.

She gasped.

Worried that I was being too rough, too greedy, I loosened my hold. Ripping my mouth from hers, I set her from me.

Claire swayed. The lenses of her glasses were fogged, but even with her pretty eyes veiled, she was too much temptation.

Breathing hard, I studied her as my chest rose and fell rapidly. I was starved for oxygen, and so was she. The sight of her perfectly round tits rising and falling didn’t help me regain my control.

“I’m sorry.” Dropping my arms to my sides, I balled my hands into fists. “I didn’t mean to take things that far.”

“I liked it.” Her lenses clearing, she licked her lips, and my cock gave an

eager leap as I remembered the wet velvet of her tongue. “I wanted you to kiss me.” She lifted her chin. “No one ever has. I mean, no one has ever kissed me like that before.”

*Fucking hell.*

My gaze ablaze like the rest of me, I stared down at her, and she stared right back at me. Her eyes were dark. She was as turned on as I was. I could kiss her again. Could have her right now. And damn, did I want to.

“Claire, I can’t—”

“Don’t go,” she said. “Please.”

No chick had ever looked at me like she did, or made me feel the way I felt with her. It was still wrong. I should go, but I couldn’t make myself do it.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll stay a little longer.”

“Awesome.” She let out a breath, her expression lightening. “Would you like to go with me to get something to eat?”

*Her.* I’d like to feast on her. Lick every sweet inch of her skin. Shape every curve. Take from her more than just a kiss.

“I could eat,” I said, my voice husky.

“Great.” Having no clue of the direction of my thoughts, she gave me a blindingly bright smile.

It did things to me. She did. She was more than I bargained for. More than I could safely control. But I couldn’t say no to her.

“There’s a burger place just a few miles from here. I’ll take you in my Land Rover.” She gestured to a nearby SUV.

“No.” I shook my head. “I don’t like cars. Too small for me.”

They made me feel trapped, and had since I was a kid. I was already trapped inside my life, in ways I could never change and never wanted her to know about.

“We’ll go on my motorbike.”

The logo features the words "ROCK AND ROLL" in a stylized, pink, distressed font. The word "ROCK" is larger and more prominent, with "AND ROLL" written in a smaller font above it. Below this, the words "CHAPTER 8" are written in a bold, pink, sans-serif font. A thin, grey, wavy line underlines the text.

## ROCK AND ROLL CHAPTER 8

*Claire*

“Okay. Sure.”

I probably shouldn’t go with Kyle, but I couldn’t refuse him. He was Ella’s cousin. We weren’t going far, and he really wasn’t a stranger anymore, not after that thrilling kiss. It had been like nothing I’d ever experienced before. Heat continued to roll through me in the afterglow.

I bit down on my lip. “I need to change if we’re riding your motorcycle. I’m pretty sure I have more suitable clothes in my locker.”

“It’s a KTM 990 Adventure Bike,” Kyle said. “Not a motorcycle.”

“Ah, well, whatever you want to call it.” I glanced at the matte-black machine behind him and raised a brow. I didn’t see the need for a distinction. Though maybe it was a little taller and less shiny than the motorcycles I’d seen before. “I still can’t get on it in this gown.”

“It’s not the name that’s important, it’s the functionality. This one can do things and go places a standard motorcycle can’t.”

“Oh, I see.” I noted the mud splatters and imagined him riding it on trails, like the dirt one in the woods behind him. Speeding through the night on the back of the ebony bike with his dark hair and clothing rippling in the wind, he would blend in, be practically invisible.

Did he need to be invisible for some reason?

“It’s not fancy like your Rover, but it’s nimble, safe, and more importantly, I’m an experienced rider.” He hit me with a firm look. “Let’s go get your clothes.”

“Right. Let’s.” I liked any plural term he wanted to use if it included him

and me. But wondering about how experienced he was in other areas besides his motorbike, I wobbled on my pinpoint heels.

“I have you.”

He caught me, steadying me with his warm hands high on my shoulders. As he stared at me with that forceful gaze of his, I could feel it. Could he? Desire, longing, heat. The air crackled with it. Longing this intense couldn't be one-sided, could it?

“Thanks,” I whispered.

“My pleasure.” He slid his hands down my arms, and his touch ignited sparks that burned my skin.

He leaned closer. I sucked in a breath, hoping he would kiss me again, and wet my lips. My entire body buzzed in anticipation, but he only took my hand and threaded our fingers together.

“I'm not usually so clumsy,” I told him after swallowing to moisten my dry throat.

“I believe you, but I'll keep your hand just in case, if that's okay.” His head dipped and he held my gaze. His gray eyes were hot and only inches away.

“Of course it's okay.” It was better than okay. It was great. Staring into the smoldering depths of his gaze, I saw desire that seemed to match my own.

“Just in case you're tempted to fall again.” His voice rumbled in amusement.

I was tempted to fall, for sure. Into bed with him after that kiss.

Dangerous and safe, he felt like both, worth taking a risk on, though I wasn't usually that type of girl. Or I wasn't until now. Until him.

“It's these heels. My mother insisted I wear them.” Turned out I'd needed the extra height for the length of the dress.

“You're breathtaking in it. I can't even remember what Vance said to me after I saw you.”

My lips curved. No one had ever called me breathtaking before. “Vance isn't a very interesting conversationalist if you're not part of his fan club.”

“That's the damn truth.” Kyle's lips curved, and my stomach flipped.

“C'mon.” I tugged his arm. “I'm starved.”

“So am I, babe.”

He was so close, and he looked so comfortably cool in his black motorcycle boots, faded jeans, and dark gray T-shirt, that a thrill shot through me. Yet I wondered where his tux was.



“Good. You’ll like the fries at the Stop. They’re great.”

“Food isn’t what’s on my mind at the moment.” His warm breath ghosted the night air.

Getting his implication, I stumbled and leaned more of my weight into his hand.

He gave me a knowing look. “I hope you have different shoes in your locker.”

“I do.” Grasping his fingers tighter, I found my bearings. It was telling that he made me stumble and then also righted me.

My thoughts in a whirl that circled solely around him, I led him back into the building. The auditorium was mostly empty. The corridor beside the stage was deserted, but when we entered the junior hallway, two boys turned to look at me and snickered. My stomach churned.

“Hey, duckie.” Lawrence Winter the third had an anticipatory gleam in his eyes that I well knew.

I ignored both him and his companion, who predictably started quacking. It was just like a typical school day, though they wore tuxes rather than school uniforms. Avoiding eye contact with them, I marched straight to my locker. I released Kyle’s hand and reached for my lock. The air suddenly cooling beside me, I turned.

“Whoa, dude.” Lawrence lifted his hands in the air, his eyes widening as Kyle stalked toward him. “I have no beef with you.” Whatever he saw on Kyle’s face made his tanned skin blanch.

Kyle didn’t acknowledge him, and he didn’t slow his strides. He planted his palms on Lawrence’s chest and shoved him hard. Lawrence stumbled backward and his body hit the lockers. The metal clattered.

“Now wait a minute,” his companion said.

Kyle snapped his head to the side, growling out, “You wanna be next in line for some of what he’s got coming?”

The fine hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. Kyle wasn’t messing around.

“No, man.” Wearing a frightened expression, Lawrence’s companion backed away.

“Then never bother Claire again,” Kyle said firmly. “And get gone. Now.”

“Right.” Bobbing his head, the boy took off. The sound of his scurrying footsteps faded quickly. Soon, it was only the three of us left in the hall.

“Kyle,” I said, moving toward him. I didn’t know what to say, only that when he glanced at me, I knew it was too late to defuse the situation.

“Stay where you are, Claire,” Kyle said, his anger a dark presence . . . a cold, unyielding one.

I wrapped my arms around myself, watching helplessly as he lifted Lawrence by the lapels of his jacket. Kyle pinned him to the locker with one strong arm and then his other hand shot forward, a bullet from a gun that snapped his unworthy opponent’s head back. Bone crunched. Blood splattered. Lawrence’s weak chin dropped to his chest, then the rest of him crumpled, his spine sliding down the locker until his ass hit the linoleum floor.

“Tell Claire you’re sorry.” Kyle glared down at Lawrence, his arms straight, his fists opening and closing at his sides. He was controlled, but his chest heaved like it had earlier when he’d abruptly pulled back from kissing me.

“Sorry, Claire,” Lawrence said immediately, his tone nasally. He glanced at me, his eyes wide with panic. He lifted his hand to his face, barely staunching the flow of blood from his nose.

I started to say that it was okay. That was how we’d been taught to respond when someone apologized, no matter the offense. It was the civilized thing to do.

But a part of me was happy and relieved. The way Lawrence felt right now was the way I’d felt for years, being on the receiving end of bullying from him and my other classmates.

“Don’t accept his apology.” Kyle shook his head at me, bent down, and grabbed Lawrence under the arms.

“I won’t bother her ever again.” Lawrence’s entire body quivered as Kyle yanked him to his feet. “I’m sorry.”

“Damn straight you are,” Kyle said. “Go.”

He shoved Lawrence in the direction his companion had gone, and Lawrence went. Practically sprinting, he left spatters of red behind on the floor.

“Kyle,” I said to get his attention.

Slowly, he turned to face me, his expression dark, and my eyes widened.

“You’re brave, Claire,” he said. “But you can’t ignore bullies. It’s a waste of time giving them a pass or trying to be their friend. You have to show them you won’t tolerate their shit, or they won’t respect you.”

A graphic for 'Rock and Roll Chapter 9'. The word 'ROCK' is written in a large, stylized, pink font with a textured, grainy appearance. The words 'AND ROLL' are written in a smaller, pink, sans-serif font, positioned above the neck of a pink electric guitar that is angled upwards. Below the guitar, the words 'CHAPTER 9' are written in a large, pink, sans-serif font. A thin, grey, hand-drawn line loops around the bottom of the guitar and the text below it.

## ROCK AND ROLL CHAPTER 9

*Kyle*

I knew what I was talking about, and now Claire looked at me with the same wariness as everyone else did.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” she said, inexplicably moving toward me instead of running away.

“Why the fuck not?” I scowled at her. “Asshole was treating you badly. Same as those other shits earlier.”

“Yes, you’re right. He was.” Claire pushed her glasses higher on her nose, managing to look sexy and adorably sweet at the same time. “But it doesn’t mean anything. It barely bothers me anymore.”

Her lenses magnified the kernel of truth within the lie. Meanness hurt, no matter what form it took. And it had hurt her deeply, even though she pretended it didn’t.

I was so shaken by her, I just gaped at her as she reached for and took my hands.

“What are you doing?” I asked as she carefully gripped my hands and stared down at them.

“There was a lot of blood.” Her head bowed, she turned my hands over and gently swept her thumbs across my skin. “I’m making sure none of it was yours.”

“Of course none of it was mine.” I took offense at the implication. “I hit him, remember?”

“Yes, I know. You were defending me.”

She lifted her head, and I found myself drowning within the sheen of

concern in her eyes. No one cared about me. That she did was unfathomable.

“No one’s ever done that at school. It means a lot, you doing what you did, only . . .” Pausing, she released my hands and pointed at the ceiling. “You’re lucky they haven’t finished upgrading the security cameras inside this hall.”

I glanced up, noting the unattached wires. “Guess so.”

Refocusing on her, I gave her a nod and pushed aside the darkness within me. I wasn’t accustomed to women like her, or uptown amenities like security cameras in school. But even knowing they were there wouldn’t have stopped me.

“I don’t like people treating you badly.” I stepped closer, catching a loose strand of her hair and tucking it behind her ear.

“You came to my rescue earlier when I was scared, and you defended me just now. That’s a lot for one night. Stuff like that goes to a girl’s head. Makes her think you care.” The sincerity in her pretty brown eyes was mesmerizing.

“You deserve rescuing and defending,” I said firmly. “I was doing what needed doing, but I’m no hero.” In fact, the opposite was true, but she didn’t need to know that.

“Maybe not, but what you did means something. Actions matter. So, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” As off-kilter as I was by her, I was surprised my hand was steady as I ran my fingertips around the delicate shell of her ear.

Claire shivered. “That feels good.”

She hummed as I skimmed the back of my hand down the soft skin of her cheek. My dick responded, vibrating inside my boxers.

“Your skin’s beautiful.” I searched her eyes, waiting for her to do something to stop me. “You are.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“I know so.”

I grasped her by the arms, drawing her closer when I should be setting her away from me. When I lowered my head, she came up on her toes. Once again, it seemed mutual need choreographed our movements.

I fitted my mouth to hers. Parting her sexy lips, she fisted her hands in my shirt and molded her body to mine. I slipped my tongue into her wet mouth, kissing her like I wanted to fuck her, and she flexed her fingers to the rhythm of my strokes. Turned on as fuck, I walked her backward. Pressing her

against the lockers, I caged her in.

*Mine.* I changed my angle and deepened the kiss. Possessive thoughts flooded my mind as my hands roamed. Her sexy body was fire. Mine was unquenchable heat. My fingers burned, but I couldn't get enough of her.

Ravenously, I plundered her mouth. She twined her arms around my neck like a vine and climbed me. My cock pounded against the fly of my jeans. Whimpering low in her throat, she arched and pressed her soft tits harder against my chest. I thrust my cock between her legs while she sucked on my tongue.

She was a light shining brightly in my dark, but I knew light and dark couldn't coexist. One had to yield, and I didn't want it to be her.

Remembering who she was and who I was—just barely—I reluctantly broke the seal between our mouths. Not ready yet to come down from the starlit heights, I skimmed my burning lips across the gentle round of her cheek.

“Kyle . . .”

She moaned, and I felt that moan in my dick. Her lids fluttering with pleasure, she turned her head to the side, giving me better access to her neck. I took it, racing my mouth down, then up, nipping her ear.

“Too much. My legs are shaking,” she whispered as she grabbed my forearms.

I didn't admit that inside, I was shaking too, about to go off from a few kisses from a slip of a girl. The lap dances I'd had were less erotic than kissing Claire.

“I'm sorry.” Breathing hard, I pressed my forehead to hers.

Slowly focusing on me, she said, “Don't say you're sorry after kissing me.”

“What should I say?” I asked low. I was at a loss what to say or do with a nice chick like her.

“Tell me it's good. Tell me you can't get enough. Tell me you want to do it again.”

I groaned. “Hell yes, I do.”

“This isn't how I usually am, but with you, I feel like someone else.” She shook her head as if trying to wake from a dream. “No, that's not it. I feel like me, but I'm more. Does that make sense?”

It made a whole lot of sense. “If we don't stop now, Claire, I'm not going to be able to stop. Cameras or not, I don't think you want me to fuck you

right here in this hall.”

“No.” She blinked the remaining haze from her eyes.

“Then you’ll have to let go of me, babe,” I said. Her nails were digging crescents in my skin.

“Oh, sorry.” She loosened her hold.

“Don’t apologize for holding me like you never want to let go.” I gave her words that mirrored hers. “Like you can’t get enough. Like you want to do this again.”

“Exactly.” Her lips curved, and I grinned.

I didn’t just turn her on—I made her smile. Making her happy made me happy. An experience as foreign to me as her concern.



*Claire*

“It’s too big,” I said. Wearing the helmet Kyle had given me, I eyed his large motorbike with trepidation.

“Yeah, I get that a lot.” Kyle grinned a full smile that crinkled his eyes at the edges. It was dazzling. He dazzled me. “But it’ll feel good when you climb on for a ride. I guarantee it.”

“Right.” I rolled my eyes and stepped closer. But I glanced down, unable to stop myself.

Wow, the man was finely formed. His low-slung jeans were snug, fitting him well in all the right places. In formal or casual clothes, he was unforgettably hot.

Considering getting burned, I bit my lip. What would it be like having sex with Kyle?

“The undercarriage is high so the bike can go over streams and obstacles easier.”

“That makes sense, I guess. So, how does this work?” Squinting at the motorbike, I focused on it rather than other things.

“I get on, and you get on after me.” His matte-black helmet seeming to absorb light rather than reflect it, he ran his gaze over me, like he had several times since I’d changed clothes.

I felt the heat in his eyes. He seemed to appreciate my school uniform. The plaid skirt and the white oxford button-down were all I’d had in my locker. Luckily, I also had a pair of gym shorts to wear underneath the skirt. Otherwise, a ride on the bike would have been out.

“Are you ready?” He raised a brow as I continued to stand in place without moving.

“Yeah, sure.” I gestured. “You first.”

He gave me a nod and ambled toward the bike. His wide shoulders were thrown back and square with the pavement, his strides long and confident. Watching the denim glide with his narrow hips and cling tighter to his perfect ass made warmth bloom low in my belly.

He threw one of his long jean-clad legs over the bike. Straddling it, he rose from the seat to kick the stand away, then crooked his fingers at me. “C’mon.”

“Coming.” My mouth went dry, my body shivery warm in anticipation.

“Don’t be shy,” he teased.

“I’m not.” I lifted my chin.

Well, maybe I was shy, but I wasn’t with him. Kyle was careful with me. He’d rescued and defended me. When he teased me, it wasn’t to put me down. He seemed to be acknowledging an equal opponent. It was exhilarating.

“So, move.” He gave me an impatient look. “I thought you were hungry.”

“I am.” But like him, not so much for food anymore.

Swaying my hips, I walked toward him, and his gaze dropped. He seemed to enjoy watching me move as much as I’d enjoyed watching him.

“That skirt regulation-length at your school?” he asked, his heated gaze rising to meet mine.

“Uh-huh,” I said. At least, it had been before my last growth spurt.

“Damn.” He shook his head, whistling under his breath. “You’re a schoolgirl fantasy in that uniform with your sexy legs and those cute lace-up red boots of yours.”

But I only wanted to be one guy’s fantasy.

“They’re Duckfeet boots.”

I loved these boots. They were made in Denmark of waterproof leather. My feet were warm and protected from the elements in them. Bonus, I could maneuver in them without falling.

His eyes widened. “They’re what?”

“You heard me correctly. I have some in nearly every color. They’re my quirky way of taking control of the narrative for a label I didn’t choose.”

I shrugged one shoulder as if what I shared wasn’t significant, but it was.

Reaching the bike, I stopped. I found the foot peg and stepped up.



Throwing a leg over the seat, I skimmed my hands across his wide shoulders for balance.

“It’s not quirky. It’s cool.” He exhaled. “Fucking hell,” he said, all low and rumbly, as I scooted closer to him on the leather seat.

“What’s wrong?” I purred, though I knew. It was hellishly hot with his body heat and his moss-and-evergreen scent washing over me.

“I didn’t anticipate how good your sexy body would feel pressed against me.”

My lips curved. I liked that he thought I was sexy. I liked it a lot. Basking in his approval, I slid my arms around his waist and laid my cheek against the soft cotton of his T-shirt.

“Hold on tight, babe.” He found my clasped hands. Squeezing them together, he pressed them into his rock-hard abs. That warmth low in my belly became molten heat that moved significantly lower.

He started the engine, pedaling his feet on the pavement to get us in motion. In just a few seconds, we went from slow to wind-whipping-my-skin fast.

Smiling, I held on tight to him. My body lit up like a Fourth of July sparkler as we zipped through the lot, then sped around the drop-off circle in front of the school.

Those lingering in front of the building turned to watch us. The KTM wasn’t quiet. It buzzed like a chainsaw, daring you not to notice its passage.

It really was something. Just like Kyle.

The logo features the words "ROCK AND ROLL" in a stylized, pink, distressed font. The word "ROCK" is larger and more prominent, with "AND ROLL" positioned above it. Below this, the words "CHAPTER II" are written in a bold, pink, sans-serif font. A thin, grey, hand-drawn line loops around the bottom of the text.

## ROCK AND ROLL CHAPTER II

*Kyle*

A large red neon stop sign rotated slowly on the low roof of the Stop. A fifties-inspired restaurant with mostly outdoor dining, the squat, circular building was surrounded by cars like spokes to a wheel. Only those spokes were luxury vehicles that cost their owners a fucking lot of cash.

Again, the differences between Claire's world and mine hit me. And again, I ignored them and a warning like a red stop sign inside me. I knew what I was doing with her was all wrong.

I parked the KTM at a designated spot for motorcycles in a lot across the street from the popular Lakeside burger joint. Claire removed her helmet like a pro and got off the bike first. I removed mine and hung it on the handlebar, registering the warmth of her fingers skimming my shoulders long after I dismounted.

Feeling more than a little proprietary where she was concerned, I placed my hand low on her back and guided her across the street. On the other side, I eyed with a great deal of trepidation her fellow students swarming the place. Unlike us, most remained in their formalwear.

Spying an empty picnic table away from the cars, I steered Claire toward it. We dodged roller-skating carhops wearing red tops with the restaurant logo along the way. Tellingly once we arrived at the secluded spot, I was reluctant to let her go.

Ducking underneath the branches of a Pacific silver fir, I moved to the other side of the picnic table. I pretended to take in the view of the lake through the trees, but really the only scenery that interested me was her.

“Hiya, Claire.” A carhop zipped up to our table just as I took a seat. Her twin red braids swinging from her abrupt stop, she flicked her gaze to me, then Claire. Her emerald-green eyes widened. “Who’s the hottie?”

“Rhonda.” Claire gestured to me. “This is Kyle.” She flipped her hand over to gesture to the girl. “Rhonda, Kyle.”

“Hey.” I lifted my chin. I didn’t want to encourage her to stay. The fewer people who saw Claire and me together, the better.

“How’d the performance go?” Probably sensing my antisocial vibe, Rhonda shifted her focus to Claire.

“It went well.” Claire glanced at me through her lashes. “I had help.”

“That’s great. Wish I could’ve been there.” Rhonda nibbled on the stylus in her hand. “But Dad said I had to work.”

“Bummer.” Claire’s eyes were a warm brown, her expression empathetic.

“Yeah, it sure is.” Rhonda gestured widely with the head of her gnawed stylus. “But this place pays my tuition, so I can’t complain too much. So, what’ll it be? I’ll put in your order.” She tapped the tip of her stylus on her phone.

“My usual,” Claire said.

“A burger with everything, large fries, and a mondo chocolate shake. Got it.” Rhonda’s stylus tapped with the speed of experience. “And you, Mr. Hottie?” she asked, arching an inquiring red brow.

“Same,” I said, fighting a grin. Out of necessity, I needed to be antisocial. It was my usual MO in Southside, but I couldn’t help it. I liked Claire’s friend.

“Good choice.” Rhonda tapped in the order. “Got it.” She looked back up at Claire. “Heard Ella and her gang were shits to you tonight.”

“It wasn’t that big a deal.” A shadow darkening her gaze, Claire shut her eyes for a moment as if to erase the memory from her mind.

“Don’t know what you see in Ella.” Rhonda shook her head and gave Claire a disapproving look when she reopened her eyes. “She should shut them down when they start treating you like that.”

“She has her troubles like we all do,” Claire said. The shadows gone, her gaze warmed again.

Rhonda shrugged. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Yo, Rhonda.” A guy in the driver’s seat of a nearby BMW waved his hand out his open window.

“Work. Gotta go.” Rhonda spun a complete circle on her skates. “See you

around, Mr. Hottie.” She winked at me before skating away.

I grinned at Claire. “She seems nice.”

“She *is* nice.”

“Not everyone’s a shit at your school.”

“No, not everyone.” Claire bit down on her plump bottom lip as she studied me. “How about you? I mean, are you still in school?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I have one more year to go.”

“Ella said you’re not from around here.” Claire leaned forward, placing her chin on her folded hands.

“Definitely not.”

“Oh.” She looked sad. “Where you live, is it far?”

“Yes.” Southside was like another planet, it was so different from here.

“And is your work mostly based there?” Claire tilted her head, and tiny white blooms tucked in her braid rained onto her hands and the table.

“Yeah.” I reached up, brushing the delicate blooms away. “Tonight was an exception.”

*A dangerous one.*

“Part time like Rhonda?” Claire asked.

“No, I work full time.” As if on cue, my burner phone vibrated in my right front pocket. Leaning backward, I took it out and glanced at the display.

SKELLIN: Where the fuck are you?

Frowning, I slid the phone back into my jeans pocket. I didn’t need a tug on my short leash to remind me whose dog I was.

“Is that work now?” she asked, and when I nodded, she gave me a confused look. “It’s late.”

“Yeah, doesn’t matter. I’m on the clock 24/7, even at school. It sucks, but it pays the bills.” My brows drew together. “School’s not my future. It’s just a means to an end for me.”

*A dead end.*

“School is my work.” Claire’s gaze turned unfocused. “I have to make good grades. Do lots of extracurriculars so can get into a good college.”

“Do you want to go to college?” I asked.

“My mom expects me to.” She shrugged, the high-sheen white cotton stretching tighter across her tits.

I recognized a non-answer when I heard one. After all, I was an expert at

them.

“And your dad?” I asked, curious. “What does he expect?”

“He just wants me to be happy.”

“What makes you happy, Claire?”

“Spending time with him,” she said without hesitation.

“Cool that you have that.” I distantly remembered a time when my dad had been someone I wanted to spend time with.

“Anything else that makes you smile?” I feigned a casual interest, though my interest in everything related to her was keen.

“Sure, a lot of things. Music. Singing. Birdwatching. Sunrises. Sunsets.” Her gaze sparkled. The color of her eyes was earthbound brown, but just thinking about the things that made her happy made them twinkle like she’d swallowed stars.

“Birdwatching, huh?” I tilted my head. “That’s a unique interest.”

“Yeah, I like all birds, not just ducks.” She was making light of the teasing that obviously hurt her, something I couldn’t do, and it amazed me that she could. She gave me an expectant look. “You don’t like birds?”

“I like ’em. I have a relative who loves them. We go to a park when I have time to watch them. I have a website on my phone bookmarked with facts about birds, their calls, their habitat, and such. We use it to identify them.”

“We have that and music in common then.” Claire’s eyes sparkled. “My dad is my birdwatching companion. He’s a wildlife ecologist and works at Aranco. Sometimes he takes me out when he scouts a new location for his job. We haven’t done that in a while, though, and I only hope . . .”

“Hope what?”

“Enough about me.” She shook her head. “What about you? What makes you happy?”

“I don’t do happy,” I said without hesitation. “I do what I need to.” There wasn’t a lot of happy where I came from.

*Note again the huge difference between her world and mine.*

“I haven’t had much to smile about until I met you tonight,” I said, refocusing on her. Knowing we didn’t have much time left, I wanted her to know the truth.

“Kyle.” Her expression softened. “I—”

“Who ordered the mondo shakes?”

A boy with red hair suddenly appeared at our table. Given his similar

features to Rhonda, they had to be siblings. Carrying two shakes atop a round stop-sign tray, he glanced back and forth between the two of us.

“We did,” I said gruffly, appreciating while also not appreciating the interruption.

“Right.” He placed two old-fashioned fountain glasses filled to the brim with chocolate on the table between Claire and me.

After he skated away, there was a long moment of awkward silence between us. Mentally, I kicked myself for sharing a truth with her that I shouldn’t have.

“You said earlier you play guitar.” Claire reached for one of the shakes, pulling it closer. Removing the paper top from the straw, she put it between her lush lips, giving me a new distraction, and I shifted to accommodate my cock’s immediate reaction. “Doesn’t music make you happy?”

“It used to.”

*Now it just makes me sad.*

“Why only used to?” Her brow crinkling, she released the straw from her mouth.

“It reminds me of things I try to forget,” I said, letting more truth slip free.

“Such as?” She leaned her elbows on the table. Behind her glasses, her pretty brown eyes were bright with interest.

“Hopes. Dreams,” I said, thinking of my former life where those were possible. “Being loved. Loving.”

“Those are good things.” Serious, Claire nodded, and more blooms fell. Scattered on the table, they weren’t as pretty on the wood as they were in her hair. “Why do you want to forget them?”

She had no idea, and I didn’t want to be the one to enlighten her.

“I need a smoke,” I said abruptly.

Leaning back on the bench, I plunged my hand into my left pocket, searching for the joint I’d stashed earlier. Finding it and my lighter, I brought the blunt to my lips and started to light up.

“No.” She shook her head, and I raised a brow. “You’re underage. This is a public place. You’ll get arrested.”

Not an unfamiliar experience for me. “No one can see me here.” I flicked the lighter, and she reached across the table and snatched it from me.

“No drugs,” she said firmly. “I can’t afford a blemish on my record.”

“It’s just pot, babe.” The unlit joint dangled from my lips. “It helps me

focus.”

“That’s an illusion.” She gripped the lighter tightly. “I don’t mean to sound judgmental, and I know there are medical uses for marijuana, but there are also big pitfalls if it’s misused.”

“What would you know about it?” Removing the blunt from my mouth, I narrowed my gaze. Inside me, sirens were going off. Finally, I was paying attention to the signs I’d ignored since I met her.

Claire was a nice girl, a good girl, a rich girl.

I was a drug dealer. Period. End of story.

Apparently, she was also anti-drugs. Wrong just got more wrong.

So we both liked birds and music. So she was adorable and sexy. Sure, I wanted to fuck her, but the moment she found out what I did for a living, we would be done. She certainly wouldn’t be sitting across the table from me. She’d look at me like they all did, and I didn’t want that. Not from her.

“My grandmother was a drug addict.” Claire’s voice broke through my dark thoughts like a light. “She OD’d when my mom was just a little younger than me. I never had a chance to know her. But even if I had, I don’t think I would have liked her. She neglected her children. All she cared about was getting high. Without any other family, it was my mom’s sister who stepped up to raise my mom. They were both so young, they barely had enough money to scrape by. They were on the verge of being homeless when my dad came along. That’s why my mom’s so serious about me having an education. She wants me to have opportunities she never did.”

“That makes sense.”

Claire and I were different, worlds apart. Irreconcilably so, but there were similarities in our backgrounds, for sure.

“Don’t let drugs be a crutch.” She gave me a serious schoolteacher look. “Find another way to relax is all I’m saying. One that won’t get you in trouble with the law, or dependent.”

It was decent advice. Although I had dependence issues to worry about in my background similar to hers, I was always careful not to overindulge on the really addictive stuff. But that was me. I couldn’t control other people. Sure, I dealt drugs to addicts. I had to, but even if I didn’t deal, they would just get them from someone else.

“What you need is already inside you,” Claire said gently.

I just stared at her, not sure that was true. There was a lot of bad shit inside me.

I glanced down at the joint, turning it over in my hand. It was high-quality weed. I'd skimmed the best of the good stuff from tonight. If I didn't take some for myself, Skellin would be suspicious. It was how things were done.

"It's up to you what you do." She placed the lighter on the table and slid it toward me. "I just know there's better things in life."

"Such as?" I took the lighter, pocketing it and the blunt.

"Experiencing life to the fullest without anything to dull your senses," she said. "Doing things that make you happy. Music. Birdwatching. Spending time with those you love, like the relative you mentioned. Get high on things that are real. Drugs just mask the truth and keep you from seeing what's right in front of your eyes."

She was right. But . . .

"Maybe I don't want to see what's there," I said. It was too sad. Too dark and depressing.

Claire thought she was trapped because her mom wanted her to go to school. And I guess she was, but not in a bad way. I was the one well and truly imprisoned. Once I set down this path, I knew even way back then that there was no way I would ever get out.

"You look cold," I said, suddenly feeling every bit of chill in the air. "I'll make a trip to the bike. Grab my hoodie from the luggage compartment for you. Be right back."



A graphic featuring the words "ROCK AND ROLL" in a stylized, pink, distressed font. The word "ROCK" is larger and more prominent, with "AND ROLL" written in a smaller font above it. Below this, the words "CHAPTER 12" are written in a bold, pink, sans-serif font. A thin, grey, hand-drawn line loops around the bottom of the text.

## ROCK AND ROLL CHAPTER 12

*Claire*

Our food came while Kyle was gone. When I thanked Rhonda, she tried to grill me for more information about him, but I deflected her. I didn't know all that much, and I wasn't sure what was going on inside him. I only knew that I felt different with him. More myself than before. A better version of myself, somehow.

Kyle returned, appearing as if conjured by my thoughts. He was so handsome with his midnight-black hair and his starry silver gaze. There was something undeniable about him. Even halfway across the parking lot, I was drawn to him. Like he was an axis, the ground beneath me seemed to tilt toward him.

Rhonda noticed my fascination. I could feel her speculative gaze on me, but she didn't say anything and discreetly skated away.

Wearing a jean jacket, Kyle carried a gray hoodie over his arm. It was ridiculous how warm that made me feel, knowing he was looking out for me. I no longer really needed the hoodie. Not with him nearby.

Unaware of my fixation, he stepped beneath a streetlight that illuminated him like a spotlight. The steady murmurings around me faded, and my entire focus narrowed to him. It had been that way since he first appeared tonight.

Kyle didn't seem to notice me. His gaze active, he swept it back and forth as if he were searching for someone, or maybe expecting someone to be looking for him.

Suddenly, an angry shout cut through the murmurings. Tension seized Kyle. His muscles locked, and his head snapped in the direction of the

disturbance.

I rose from my seat. No plan, I just saw that Kyle was upset and knew I had to get to him. I was almost to him when an upperclassman I barely knew rushed past me. Another guy appeared right on the heels of the first. This one I didn't know, but he seemed to know Kyle.

He stopped and said something to Kyle, and Kyle leaned in and said something back. I couldn't hear what he said or see his face, but I saw the stranger's reaction. His head jerked back as if Kyle had struck him.

Worried, I inched closer.

"You shouldn't be here," the stranger said harshly, then stepped back and moved away in the same general direction the upperclassman had gone.

Kyle watched the guy until he disappeared, then turned his head and startled when he saw me standing only a few feet away from him. "Claire, what the fuck?"

"That looked tense. Is everything okay?" I asked, and his expression changed from dark to light like a switch.

"Yeah," he said, his expression smoothing out, but his eyes remained hard like stone.

"Who was that guy?" I gestured in the direction he'd gone, though there was no longer any sign of him.

"A work colleague," he said, moving behind me. "Here."

Standing behind me, he unzipped his hoodie and draped it around my shoulders. His palms brushed the skin on my nape as he lifted my braid, arranging it so it lay over the hood. I shivered as warmth, not cold, rushed through me.

"Let's get this on you." Gently, he turned me to face him again and helped me tuck my arms into the overly long sleeves.

"Thanks," I whispered to his bowed head.

His thick, glossy black hair was so close. I wanted to fill my fingers with the silken strands. His scent swirled around me—moss, forest, and a hint of nicotine that likely came from cigarettes he smoked. His hoodie was soft like an embrace, but being in his strong arms was infinitely better. I longed for a repeat of the experience.

"You're welcome," he said in that seductive rumbling voice of his, and a needy heat gathered in a low secret place. "Warmer now?" he asked, glancing up at me after rolling back both sleeves.

My cheeks warmed, reflecting that lower heat. "Yes, definitely."

“Good.” He placed his hand on the small of my back. “Food’s here, right? Let’s eat.”

“Okay. Sure.”

I let Kyle steer me back to our table. A gentleman, he took his time with me, making sure I was seated before he moved to take a seat on the other side of the table.

It was comfortably quiet as we dug into our food. He was hungry, and I was too. Worrying about singing solo had twisted my stomach into knots for most of the day.

So I made up for my earlier fasting, tucking greedily into the crisp, salty home-cut fries and thick, juicy burger. Glances across the table confirmed Kyle did the same.

But as more of the food disappeared, I noticed there was something different about him. His expression remained light, but the rest of him had turned guarded. The stoniness in his eyes seemed to spread to the rest of him, forming a barrier like a wall.

I managed a couple more bites before I stopped eating. The food would soon be gone, and so would my excuse to spend more time with him. Setting the remainder of my burger in the red plastic basket, I chewed and swallowed, then asked him what was at the forefront of my mind.

“Do you think I could see you again?” My question triggered the wall I’d noticed. It slammed down like a steel cage over his gaze. “I mean,” I said quickly, “if your work brings you back here.”

“I don’t think I’ll be returning to this area anytime soon.” Kyle set what was left of his burger in his basket. His movements were stiff, when they’d been relaxed before.

“Oh.” My stomach bottomed out. It was full of food, yet it suddenly felt gnawingly empty. “Well, maybe I could visit you. If you’d like me to,” I squeaked. Uneasiness rose within me, tightening my throat.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea.” His gaze lifted, its stony gray dashing my dwindling hope.

“We could talk on the phone.” I wadded my napkin into a tight ball.

“Claire.” He sighed, and the look on his face made me want to curl into a protective ball. “I think this was a mistake.”

“It doesn’t feel like one to me,” I said breathlessly as steely clamps squeezed the remaining air from my lungs. “It feels exactly right. You said —”

“I said a lot of things.” Interrupting me, he reached across the table and took my hand. “And I meant them.” He squeezed my curled fingers. “You are . . .” He trailed off, his gaze flashing like lightning in the clouds.

“Pushy, quirky, weird,” I said flatly, filling in for him. I knew what I was, and who I wasn’t. Obviously, not a woman to tempt him.

“Fuck no.” He shook his head. “You’re beautiful, Claire. Caring, talented, strong, and smart. I like you a lot. Any guy would, except for those stupid asshats at your school. But I can’t be the type of guy a girl like you needs.”

“Can’t?” Emboldened by his praise, I lifted my chin. “Or won’t.”

“Can’t, won’t, shouldn’t. They all apply.” His chiseled lips flattening, he released my hand. “What I should do is get you home. I stayed too long.” He stood and climbed over the bench, then stared down at me. “C’mon.”

“All right.” I stood. Icy dread pooling in the pit of my stomach, I grabbed the table for balance as I climbed out. I was unsteady again, but not for a pleasant reason now.

Kyle pulled out his wallet and dropped way too much cash on the table, but I didn’t protest him paying my portion of the bill or the amount he paid. Rhonda could use it, and I was now too upset to broach subjects that seemed unimportant in the wake of everything else. Mistakenly, I’d thought he and I were at the beginning of something, not the end.

“I need to get my car.” My voice was strained by disappointment, much like the rest of me. “Could you take me to the school rather than my house?”

“Of course I can.” He gave me a tight smile and held out his arm.

Coming around the table, I stared at his outstretched hand for a beat. My eyes burned. I should refuse it, stand on my own two feet like I usually did, even if I sometimes stumbled. But in the end, I took his hand because I wanted to. My will was mush when it came to him.

His fingers closed tightly around mine, giving me that thrill again from his touch.

Warmth spread up my arm. I pretended I didn’t feel warmth in other places too. It didn’t matter since it was only one-sided, and this was only an interlude.

But even knowing that, I couldn’t resist being connected to him just a little while longer.



ROCK AND ROLL  
CHAPTER 13

*Kyle*

Leaving the school with Claire, my mood was light. But returning, it was heavy. The inevitable end to our time together was coming, and I didn't want it to arrive.

I slowed the motorbike to catch every stoplight, and made two wrong turns on purpose. I leaned unnecessarily deep into curves, savoring the tightening of her limbs around me. I asked her for directions, even though I knew the way, just so I could stroke her soft skin and squeeze her delicate hands to acknowledge her reply.

Despite all my effort, my tactics were only delays. To my dismay, we arrived much too soon back to where we should never have started.

"Thank you," she said and climbed off. Like before, she glided her hands across my shoulders. And like before, her touch left a pleasurable burn behind. Only now, there was also pain I probably should have tried harder to avoid.

"You're welcome." Kicking the stand down, I climbed off. Probably and shouldn't didn't apply. None of what I knew did when it came to her. "Claire."

In two strides, I reached her and spun her around. Small buds of baby's breath fell, the few that remained of them in her braid. Tiny white blooms, confetti for a celebration cut short, they scattered on the dark asphalt.

"What? I thought we already said good-bye." Her chin down, she stared at her upper arm where my fingers gripped her.

She didn't want to focus on me. I got that. I got that she was hurt about

our time together being over. I hurt too, like a voodoo doll with a million sharp pins sticking out of me. The choices I'd made had cursed me. But at least now, here at the end, I was doing the right thing.

"I need you to look at me," I said softly. Grasping her by both arms, I pulled her toward me. The sweet bloom of her wildflower scent washed over me. My heart raced, much like we had on the bike.

"Okay." She lifted her head. Seeing hurt shimmer in her eyes like dewdrops on broken earth, those sharp pins twisted deeper.

"I'm sorry I can't stay. I have to go."

Running into one of Strader's minions at the burger place shook me. It was a reality check, an unwelcome reminder that Claire's world and mine were as different as day and night. Sure, there were overlaps at dawn and dusk when the differences weren't as stark, but our paths were never meant to cross. I was a dealer. Valuable stuff passed through my hands. The few moments I'd spent with Claire weren't mine to keep. Nothing of value ever was.

"I'm sorry too." Her lush bottom lip trembled.

"Oh hell," I muttered, my resolve crumbling.

In my head, I knew what I should do, but with her this close, I couldn't do it. My dick didn't care about any of that—it just wanted to be inside her.

And there was another hungry part of me she stirred that couldn't be ignored. *My heart*. It was starving, wasting away, a pitiable shrunken thing. But around her, it clamored.

Surrendering to temptation one last time, I lowered my head, placing my mouth on hers.

"Claire . . ." I breathed out her name against her satiny lips. Her name was the answer to so many things. *She* was. I could sense it.

This. Her. Us together. It wasn't simply wrong, it was dangerous. I knew that, but it felt so incredibly right.

My clamoring heart settled. Light and beauty, it had what it wanted with her in my arms.

Claire's quivering stilled. Maybe she felt some of what I did, which would make it harder to summon the strength to set her from me.

But that difficult feat became impossible when she parted her lips and her sweet breath spilled into my mouth. Taking matters into her own hands, she grabbed my T-shirt and held on.

That was it. I was gone. I lost the will to fight it.

I groaned as the tip of her tongue touched mine. Yes, this time with her was stolen. I knew the pleasure was momentary. But she was mine right now, and I was going to have her.

Bringing my hands to her hair, I buried my fingers in the silken tresses that spilled from her braid. I buried my reservations deeper, locking them in a watertight box. Then I kissed her without restraint. Deeply. Desperately. Demandingly. She responded, and I spun out of control.

Claire was a high, one I couldn't afford to indulge. I'd known it since I first saw her and looked into her eyes. Just a glimpse was all it took to make me an addict.

Whimpering, she sucked on my tongue. Palming her ass, I walked her backward, using my body to cage her against the door of her Land Rover.

I kissed her harder, deeper, longer. My hands raced all over her, everywhere I could reach. She was shapeable fire, burning like a hot flame in my hands. Everything I gave, she returned, kissing me harder and taking me deeper. The more she took, the more I became hers.

Slipping her hands underneath the hem of my T-shirt, she worked her way up my chest. Her fingers burned me. Her nails clawed my skin.

"Claire." I hissed, breaking the seal between our mouths after the edge of her nail grazed my nipple. My cock continued to vibrate with aftershocks. "No more." Grasping her by the shoulders, I put some space between us. "We can't do this."

"Why not?" Her light brown eyes were dark with passion. Her hair was loosened by my urgent fingers, her grip on my T-shirt unyielding. "I want you, Kyle. I think you want me too."

"I do," I said. There was never any denying it.

"Then why stop?"

"Cameras." I'd clocked their location when I first arrived at her school, which seemed a million lifetimes ago. Alone, without the temptation of her, I'd been more clearheaded and cautious. "I'm sorry."

I lifted my hands to frame her pretty face. Sweeping my thumbs over her flushed skin, I treasured the view of her looking at me like she was. Like I mattered. Like I could be worthy of someone like her. No view had ever been more compelling.

"So, not no. Just not here." She searched my gaze. "I know a place where we could be alone. It's my favorite place. Would you come with me? If I drive, you could follow me on your bike."

“Yes, I’ll come,” I said roughly. “Hell yes.”

*Just for tonight.* Tonight, I would follow her anywhere.

“Good,” she said, seizing on my agreement as if desire were all it took to transform longing into reality.

In her world, that might be true. But where I came from, desire was all we had.



The logo features the words "ROCK AND ROLL" in a stylized, pink, distressed font. The word "ROCK" is larger and more prominent, with "AND ROLL" written in a smaller font above it. Below this, the words "CHAPTER 14" are written in a bold, pink, sans-serif font. A thin, grey, hand-drawn line loops around the bottom of the text.

## ROCK AND ROLL CHAPTER 14

*Claire*

My gaze kept drifting to my rearview mirror to look for Kyle. With me in the lead and him following on his motorbike, it seemed like he pursued me. But it was more that I was unwilling to let him go.

With his black bike and helmet and his dark clothing, he almost blended in with the night. But it seemed to me his silver eyes gleamed. When I imagined his gaze on me, my blood warmed and my heart raced.

I wanted him. I'd never wanted a guy like I did him. But was I ready for this? I thought I was.

When we were together, everything seemed clear. The risk seemed worth the reward. But during the short drive over a bridge and through my neighborhood, doubts arose. Though I wanted him, I knew it would be just sex between us. He wasn't planning to see me again. No matter how sure I felt while in his arms, that part wasn't something I could forget.

I pulled into my driveway and turned off the engine. *This is it.* Trembling, I drew in a big breath.

The headlight of his motorbike flashed bright in my rearview mirror, then went out. Looking out my driver's side window, I saw him steer the KTM onto the driveway beside me.

I exhaled. No more second-guessing my decision.

Despite my doubts, inside my heart, I was certain. A heart peered deeper than what could be seen on the surface.

Kyle was more than his good looks. Rescuer, defender, protector, the important things about him his actions showed. When I looked into his eyes,

I'd recognized that, knowing from the start that he wouldn't hurt me. Which was why I brought him to my home instead of having sex with him somewhere else.

For me, it wouldn't be just sex. I felt connected to him. Too connected to let him go.

Maybe I was naive thinking a single meeting, a handful of conversations, and a few hot kisses were all it took to be certain. But that was how it had been with my parents. A single night had changed the course of their lives. It could potentially change mine.

Kyle rapped on the window.

"Hey," I said thickly, opening my door and stepping out.

"Hey." He gave me a long searching look. "You okay?"

"Yeah, why do you ask?"

"You were sitting there staring into space for a while."

"I didn't realize."

His gaze narrowed in concern. "Having second thoughts?"

"No." Looking into his eyes, I relaxed as my few lingering doubts vanished.

"Okay, just let me put this up." He removed his helmet and shook out his jet-black hair.

My heart skipped a beat as I watched him swagger to his motorbike. His confidence was so sexy. He hung his helmet on the handlebar by the strap. Turning to face me again, his handsome features were set into determined lines. My eyes widened as he strode back to me, eliminating the space between us. Renewed certainty about my decision washed over me as he took my hand.

But would he get what it meant, me bringing him here? I wasn't just sharing my favorite place with him. I was sharing *me*.

"Is this your house?" He tipped his chin toward the sprawling two-story house beside the drive.

"Yes."

"It's huge." He shook his head.

"It's not, really. It's just spread out. Ella's house is bigger," I said, babbling nervously.

"You shouldn't have brought me here." He tugged his hand loose. "I don't think this is a good idea."

"We're not going inside." Panicking, I reached for him, diving my hands

into his hair.

His eyes flared, and my heart raced. The skin along his jaw was sandpapery rough with dense stubble, though his hair was silky soft. The ebony strands in front were long, skimming his fiery gaze. I combed them back with my fingers, but as soon as I released them, they returned to their previous position.

I had a stray, unsettling thought. Would he return to his life completely unchanged after tonight? I didn't think I could, regardless of how our night together ended.

"Wherever you have in mind, we don't have to do this." He removed my hands from his face and gave them a reassuring squeeze. "We can say good-bye here. I feel better about doing it here, knowing you're somewhere safe."

"I feel safe with you."

He shook his head. "Claire, I'm not."

"Kyle." I went up on my toes and touched my mouth to his.

Sparks flew. My lips tingled. Heat spread from my mouth to the rest of me.

"Don't you feel it?" I asked, easing myself slowly back down to solid ground.

"Yes," he said, his voice rough. "I'm attracted to you. You're attracted to me. There's chemistry between us."

"More than chemistry," I said firmly. "There's a connection."

"I agree, but—"

"No more protests. I made my decision before I brought you here. Come with me." I took his hand, turned, and tugged. "I think you'll like my favorite place."

"Okay," he said softly. "Lead on."

With his agreement secured, I was more excited now than scared. "Watch your step."

I quickly made my way over the uneven driveway pavers. Kyle kept pace with me, a tall, dark presence beside me.

"Sprawling maybe, but it looks like a nice house," he said.

"It's nice now. But my parents had to take out a second mortgage to update it. There are less expensive houses around the area that might've been a better choice, but my mom wanted me to go to Lakeside High, and my dad wanted me to have this."

I stopped at the end of the driveway. In front of us was our large backyard

where the ground continued to slope upward into heavy foliage.

“My favorite place is there in the trees.” Lifting my chin to point to it, I turned to glance at him.

“Whoa.” He craned his neck as he stared. “Is that a treehouse?”

“Yes.” I bobbed my head.

“It doesn’t look real.”

“That’s the way I reacted the first time my dad showed it to me.” Releasing his hand, I skipped ahead. “C’mon. Let me show you.” My eyes brighter than the moonlight, I gave him an expectant glance over my shoulder.

“Okay.”

“Hurry,” I said, clambering up the grassy hill with Kyle right behind me. I could feel him without glancing back.

Reaching the meandering fern-lined path that wound around beneath the trees, I sped up. Tiny solar ground lamps glowed, and crushed shells crunched beneath my feet along the way.

At the end of the path, I stopped and lifted the rope latch on the ornamental grapevine gate. I held it open for Kyle. After he entered, I refastened the latch. Stepping up onto the first wooden landing with him, I slipped past him and started the climb.

Up the stairs, I went, with him directly behind me. Motion sensors on the handrails clicked light on as we passed them. We were both quiet during the climb. The only sounds besides our breathing were the swish of our clothing and the creaking of our footfalls on the wood planks.

The stairs were steep. They spiraled around, making the most use of the narrow space between the trees. Somewhere in the distance, a few musical whistles and warbles sounded. I recognized the call of a reddish-brown thrush, a songbird that sang at night.

Whimsically, there was a trap door entry onto the porch of the treehouse from the last landing. I started to climb the ladder to open it, but stopped on the first rung to glance back at Kyle. His large hand was right beside mine on the smooth rail. The safety lighting on this level gave his handsome features a mysterious glow.

“Do you like it so far?” I asked, then held my breath.

“It’s beyond anything I could have imagined,” he said. “Like you are, Claire.” His eyes were silver like the moon.

My heart fluttered. “Thank you.” I swallowed hard. “I knew you’d like

it.”

“What’s not to like?” he said, and knowing he was talking about me more than the treehouse sent warmth flooding to my cheeks.

“Wait till you see the rest.” Continuing up the ladder, I stopped and pushed the trapdoor open. It landed on the porch above our heads with a thud.

“What’s up there can’t be better than this.” Kyle placed his hand on my knee, but I didn’t move.

I barely breathed. My heart raced as he glided his fingers along my skin. Turning to glance down at him, I watched his hand disappear under my skirt. Beneath it, a fire blazed. One I didn’t want to put out.

“I think it will be,” I said.

No matter what happened after tonight, I trusted him to stoke the fire he’d started higher. I was following my heart, wanting the flames.

I just hoped I didn’t get too badly burned.

The logo features the words "ROCK AND ROLL" in a stylized, pink, distressed font. The word "ROCK" is larger and more prominent, with "AND ROLL" written in a smaller font above it. Below this, the words "CHAPTER 15" are written in a bold, pink, sans-serif font. A thin, grey, hand-drawn line loops around the bottom of the text.

## ROCK AND ROLL CHAPTER 15

*Kyle*

I leaned into the railing. From this height, I could see Lake Washington over the roof of Claire's house. Focusing on it, I tried to get the lust pounding through me in check.

In the daytime, the surface of the lake sparkled light blue, even from the south. At night, it was a wide expanse of black, the light yielding to the darkness, much like Claire was yielding to me, to these feelings that ran so hot between us. But she did it not knowing all the facts.

"What are you thinking about?" Claire asked softly, moving behind me. She wrapped her arms around me and rested her soft cheek against my back. Her warmth seeped into me, her certainty chasing away my reservations.

"How unchangeable some things are," I said. Despite my past and the reality of who I was, being with her tonight felt inevitable.

"That's a deep thought." She released me and stepped up to the railing, leaning into it beside me.

I turned my head to look at her. At one with nature here in her favorite place, she was otherworldly pretty. Moonlight lovingly bathing her form, she tipped her face into a moonbeam as if it were a ray of sunlight. But the moon wasn't warm. It was as cold as the world I belonged to. Not just cold, but unchangeable.

"The water seems to go on forever," she said softly. Her delicate brow scrunched while the breeze tossed loosened strands of her hair. "But it doesn't, really. There's a shore on the other side. You just can't see it from this perspective."

That was a thought as deep as mine. Was she trying to tell me she believed there was a way forward on the other side of tonight for us? I couldn't see it. But then, it was easy to believe you could change the unchangeable when you didn't know the dark as intimately as I did.

"Claire," I said, needing her to know there was no way. That there was nothing but now. Then maybe she could end this before it went any further. But I couldn't. How could I? She was my one chance to finally have something in my life that was beautiful and untainted. But before I could go on, she interrupted me.

"Take off your shoes," she said.

"But I need to tell you something."

"I wish you wouldn't." She gave me a sad look. She didn't want my explanation. She wanted right now, a moment in time where a wish could be reality. "I want to show you the rest of my favorite place."

Stepping away from the rail, she went to one of the Adirondack chairs and took a seat. Leaning forward, she began to untie the laces of her red boots.

My watertight motorcycle boots had Velcro and a hidden zipper. Easy on, easy off, I had my footwear and socks removed well before she did. So I indulgently watched her.

Through the sparse curtain of the loosened strands of her gold-spun hair, I noted her pensive expression and her front teeth catching her plump bottom lip. Though she had faith in a distant unseen shoreline, she had concerns too. Like me.

"Done," she said. Standing, she stuffed her socks inside her boots and moved to place them by the glass that ran the entire length of the dwelling.

Her sexy bend gave me a tantalizing peek under her skirt before she straightened. Her legs were so long and shapely, I bit back a groan. I didn't think she got how sexy she was in her school uniform. As I imagined taking it off her, my eager cock pulsed.

Ignoring it—mostly—for now, I placed my boots beside hers. Looking at her quirky red lace-ups beside my kickass Daytonas, I experienced a surge of satisfaction. There was nothing for us after tonight, but right now our things looked good and right beside each other.

Unaware of my thoughts, she slid open the glass door. Apparently, all you valued in Lakeside could be left unlocked and unguarded.

"Wow," I said after following her inside. "This is nice."

The interior floors were glossy light wood, contrasting with the rustic red cedar of the outside deck and stairs. In the middle of the open space was a platform bed. It dominated the interior, like she dominated my thoughts.

As I thought about being in that bed with Claire, my persistent cock pulsed harder. Needing a distraction, I scanned the room to take in the rest.

On the right side of the room was a desk nook. The picture on the wall above it was a familiar framed print of the birds of the Pacific Northwest. A gas fireplace beside the nook was built into the wall. The fire flicked on as I looked at it, and I glanced at Claire. Her form wavered in the muted light of the gas flames, and she explained.

“It gets a little chilly in here with the door open.”

“I like it open,” I told her.

“Me too,” she said, but I wondered if she had kept the door open because of the claustrophobia I’d mentioned earlier. “My dad calls the treehouse my nest.” She gave me a soft smile.

“Some nest.” I shook my head in disbelief. It was more luxurious than any dwelling I’d ever been in.

I noted an additional table by the fireplace and a maple-top acoustic guitar on a clip above it. But as intriguing as that instrument was, Claire fascinated me more. So my gaze went to her after passing over a small kitchen alcove on her side of the room, and a closed door by the head of the bed that I assumed led to a bathroom.

My brows rose as I noted the album covers and pictures of only one band filling nearly every inch of available wall space behind her. “You like Anthem, babe?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Gale Lafleur, apparently,” I teased.

“Yes.” She blushed, and the dusky rose on her cheeks was distracting, making me imagine other places on her body where her heated blood might change her. “But it’s about his music more than him as a person.”

*Sure it is.*

“What’s your favorite band?” she asked, and I went stock-still. That was an important question. Musical preference revealed the heart, and in Southside, a heart couldn’t be revealed to just anyone.

But I wasn’t in Southside. I was here with Claire inside a fantasy.

“Led Zeppelin,” I said honestly.

“Any other favorites?”



“Is there another band?” Again, my tone was light and teasing. “I wasn’t aware.”

“I guess not for you.” She smiled, dazzling me with the sparkle in her soft brown eyes.

Suddenly, I wanted to dazzle her too. “That guitar on the wall yours?”

“It was my mom’s,” she said softly, and I could see something working behind her eyes, some important history there. “She gave it to me. It’s mine now.”

“Your mom is a musician?”

“She was.” Claire shook her head sadly. “But I don’t understand how she can be a musician in the past tense.”

I understood it. Lived through the experience with my dad. Saw firsthand how drugs took precedence over everything else.

“I mean, I need to play. It’s a compulsion and my therapy.” She gave me a pointed look, and I knew she remembered more than just my claustrophobia. She’d remembered me telling her that I didn’t play guitar much anymore.

“Music, like life, isn’t just to play. It’s to feel, huh?” I held her gaze. “To process.”

Her eyes widened. “Yes, exactly.”

There was a time when I wanted to feel, and I believed in the restorative value of music. But those were parts of me that I locked inside that watertight box.

“Mind if I take the PRS down and strum it a bit?” I gestured.

“Of course not. I’d love to hear you play.” She got dewy-eyed, and that was all the encouragement I needed to show off.

I unclipped the PRS. It was an inexpensive guitar but a good choice, a player’s guitar. Her mom had been a serious musician. My dad had been too, but everything from that life was gone before I came along.

Holding the guitar by the neck, I took it to the bed and sat down on the edge. When I lowered my head and strummed a few chords, my hair fell forward, skimming my eyes. As I adjusted the tuning, Claire came and sat beside me.

“It has a good sound,” I said softly.

“It does,” she said, watching me closely.

I began to play “Babe I’m Gonna Leave You,” a Led Zeppelin favorite of mine. It was a sad song, one that contained a message for me as well as her.

Receiving it, she stiffened as I sang.

Reverently, I continued to pluck the poignant melody. At the chorus, I lifted my head, and my gaze locked on hers. I put everything I felt—along with my regret for not being someone else—into the music and those words.

“Kyle, don’t.”

She got it. Got *me*.

Placing her fingers on my lips, she shook her head and stopped me. I pressed a kiss into her skin. Drawing in a sharp breath that brightened her gaze, she dropped her hand. I leaned in and kissed her slightly parted lips.

“If things could be different,” I said, but paused as her cell rang.

“Excuse me.” Drawing back, she withdrew her phone from a pocket in her skirt.

“Sure.” I started to play again, needing something to do while pretending I wasn’t curious about who was calling her so late.

Did Claire have a boyfriend? Just the idea she might made me furious. Maybe this was only a moment in time for us.

But in this moment, she was mine.

A graphic featuring the words "ROCK AND ROLL" in a stylized, pink, distressed font. The word "ROCK" is larger and more prominent, with "AND ROLL" written in a smaller font above it. Below this, the words "CHAPTER 16" are written in a bold, pink, sans-serif font. A thin, grey, hand-drawn line loops around the bottom of the text.

## ROCK AND ROLL CHAPTER 16

*Claire*

“It’s my dad,” I said, looking up to glance at Kyle. At my explanation, the flare of inexplicable anger in his eyes faded.

Shakily, I swiped my fingers over my screen. My heart raced, and not just because of Kyle’s response to the call or my sudden worry about my dad. It was my discovery that Kyle didn’t just play the guitar—he made love to it, his fingers as proficient as Jimmy Page’s.

If his hands were that nimble on guitar strings, what would they be like on me?

“Hey, Dad,” I said into the phone, my voice breathy. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, songbird. Everything’s fine. Don’t worry so much about me. I’m just a little tired and wanted to let you know I’m going to bed early.”

I frowned. It wasn’t normal for him to go to bed early. He was usually a night owl like me.

“I saw your car in the driveway,” he said. “Are you in the backyard in your nest?”

“Yeah, I think I’m going to spend the night out here.”

“Is that your mom’s guitar I hear?” he asked.

“No. I mean, yes.” I shook my head at Kyle, and he stopped playing.

“That’s a Led Zeppelin song,” Dad said.

“I was in the mood for something different.”

“I guess being onstage with that boy tonight inspired you to branch outside your comfort zone.” His voice deepened. “It’s good to expand your

horizons, and I like that you're playing your mom's guitar. That relic's been on the wall too long. It deserves a new shot at life."

"Is Mom still awake?"

"Yes. She's right here beside me in bed reading. And she just elbowed me." He chuckled. "She wants me to ask if you're planning to see him again."

"His name is Kyle, and probably not," I said. "He's not from around here."

"That shouldn't matter if he likes you."

"I'm not sure he likes me *that* much," I said, noting how Kyle narrowed his gaze at that.

My father chuckled. "Is his eyesight faulty?"

"Dad," I said, protesting. "Not everyone thinks I'm as wonderful as you do."

"You *are* wonderful." His tone turned chastising. "You've let those miscreants at your school get into your head."

"No, I haven't." Adamantly, I denied it. Though maybe I'd worn my label so long, some of it had rubbed off on me.

"Well, I hope not. You're more than what they see. They just can't handle it."

"Thanks, Daddy. It means a lot to me that you think so."

"It's the truth. One you need to embrace and believe for it to take hold." He exhaled. "He'll be back. I saw how he looked at you. And just as importantly, how you looked at him."

"I know, but—"

"It can be overwhelming when there's a strong connection right at the beginning," my dad said, interrupting. "At least, that's how it was for me with your mom. We were from such opposite worlds, it was scary. None of those closest to us thought it would work, but we made love our common ground. Standing on it, our differences didn't matter. Obstacles are just stepping-stones if you use them to grow closer together."

"It's not like that."

"Maybe not yet, but don't close yourself off to the possibility."

"I won't."

"Good girl. Just because something seems impossible, doesn't mean it's not worth the effort or the risk. Some of the most unlikely pairings in this world, like your mom and me, can end up being the best." He lowered his

voice. "I love you, songbird."

"I love you, Daddy." My voice cracked. "So much."

"Good night, Claire. See you in the morning." He ended the call.

My cheeks warm, I set down my phone and glanced at Kyle. "How much of that did you hear?"

"Your parents care about each other," Kyle said. "And you."

In other words, he'd heard a lot.

"Yes." I nodded to confirm. It was just that my mom and I were different, and so often at odds about what was best for me.

"Do you know how rare that is?" he asked.

"Yeah." Among my classmates, broken homes were more the norm than solid ones like mine.

"My parents were never like that. Not with each other or me." Kyle shook his head, a dark resignation extinguishing the light in his eyes.

"Were?" My throat closed.

Abruptly, he stood and turned away. Even with his back to me, his tension was obvious.

I stood too and gently placed my hand on his shoulder. Dread filled me as I noted his death grip on the delicate neck of my mom's guitar.

"What happened to them?"

The logo features the words "ROCK AND ROLL" in a stylized, pink, distressed font. The word "ROCK" is larger and more prominent, with "AND ROLL" written in a smaller font above it. Below this, the words "CHAPTER 17" are written in a bold, pink, sans-serif font. A thin, grey, hand-drawn line loops around the bottom of the text.

## ROCK AND ROLL CHAPTER 17

*Kyle*

“They drowned.”

I answered Claire using the fewest words possible. But even so, I could barely breathe, and the scar on my back burned like it did when my skin was ripped open.

“That’s terrible.” Her light brown eyes glistened with unshed tears. “I’m so sorry.”

I nodded to acknowledge her sympathy. The reality was a nightmare, not something I willingly shared. At least, not until now.

“How old were you?” she asked.

“Ten,” I said, but I remembered everything like it happened yesterday.

The force of the initial impact. The rolling of the car down an embankment. Knowing before we hit the water that my parents were dead. Being alone in the backseat. Sinking. Clawing at the window. Screaming as the interior filled with lake water.

“How did they drown?” she whispered.

“Our car slammed into a guardrail and rolled down an embankment into the lake.” I recited the facts coldly, as if there weren’t any terror or loss associated with them.

“You were there.” Her eyes rounded. “Is that why you don’t like being inside a car?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I snapped. *Fucking hell*, she was sharp. “In fact, I make it a point not to.”

The most tragic day of my life, it set into motion a series of events that I

was powerless to change. My bad situation became worse. Alone and just a child, I owed an unrepayable debt to the worst sort of person. I was trapped like I had been in the car. Every day, I sank further into the darkness. Now, like then, I was helpless to change anything.

“I understand.”

I shook my head. There was no way Claire could understand. I wouldn't be here right now with her if she did. I was an asshole for not telling her the entire awful lot of it.

But I didn't want her to look at me like everyone else did. I wanted this. I wanted *her*. Just a little while longer.

“I'm sorry. Of course I can't know what it was like.” Her eyes swam even more. “What I mean is that I feel privileged that you shared such a private painful confidence with me.”

“If you say so.” My grip tightened around the neck of the guitar.

“Here.” She gently touched my hand. “Let me have that. I'll put it away.”

“All right.” I relinquished the instrument, noting sadly that even a guitar wasn't safe in my tainted hands.

“I usually just keep it on the wall.” She slipped past me, leaving a trail of her seductive wildflower scent behind.

“I guess we're both doing things tonight that we don't usually.” I raked a shaky hand through my hair. Her scent and the swish of her uniform skirt above her shapely legs made my cock hard, even with the past assaulting me.

“You're right. I've never brought anyone up here to my treehouse before.”

“No one?” I asked, surprised. “No girlfriends or boys from your school?”

“No. Just me and my dad come up here. But what about you?” Her gaze sharpened. “Do you have a girlfriend at your school?”

“Hell no. I don't do serious.”

“Oh.” I could see the hopeful candle her dad had lit with his advice flickering. Her old man was a dreamer like she was. “Love is for rich people who can afford the fallout when it inevitably goes bad.”

She flinched. “I don't believe that.”

“You don't because your parents are an exception.” My brow furrowed. “My parents started out caring about each other, but they ended up hating each other.”

“That's sad. I'm sorry.”

I shrugged. Sad didn't cover it. The constant arguing. The squalor we'd

lived in as my dad spiraled and my mom tried everything she could think of to keep us afloat. It was horrible.

In Southside, everyone knew who he was, what he could have been before the drugs, and who I was. They thought his son was just like him, and I probably was.

But Claire looked at me and saw someone different. Somehow, she saw something good. How was I supposed to resist that?

“How about you?” I asked. “Are you serious with anyone?”

Just because I hadn’t seen her with a guy at her school didn’t mean she didn’t have a boyfriend. I clenched my teeth, imagining her with another guy. Someone touching her like I wanted to. Someone who wasn’t on an unbreakable leash. Someone worthy of her.

“I’m not with anyone right now.”

She wasn’t looking at me, and I didn’t like that. Was she hiding something? Could she possibly have terrible secrets like me?

I gave her words some thought. “So, no one right now,” I said, and she nodded.

Okay, that was good. But jealousy still clawed inside me at the thought of anyone else with her.

“How many have there been?”

She pushed her glasses higher up the bridge of her nose while giving me a narrow-eyed look. “How many have there been for you?”

So, Claire wasn’t going to answer the question. She didn’t have to. I had no hold on her, no right to ask. Rather than make me mad, her standing up for herself made my lips curve.

“I haven’t been with any guys,” I said lightly.

“Well, I haven’t been with any girls.” Her eyes flashed. If I was going to be evasive, so was she.

“Never met a girl like you.” I shook my head in wonder.

Claire glowed with goodness like a jar full of fireflies. She smelled like a meadow of spring flowers. And when challenged, rather than back down, she stung like a bee.

“I find that hard to believe,” she said.

Our brief heated exchange over, she didn’t protest when I folded her into my arms.

“Believe it. You have a good heart and share it freely.” I captured a lock of her hair and rubbed it between my fingers. It was soft and smelled as sweet



as she did. "I don't know anyone like that."

Basic Southside 101: never give away anything without demanding something in return.

"You have a good heart too, Kyle." She gave me an unwavering look.

"You think that because you don't see me as I really am."

"I see you." Her gaze sparkling temptingly bright, she laid her palm against my cheek. "You're a boy with kind eyes and a gentle touch."

"Claire." If only I could do my life over and just be a boy again. "I'm glad that's the way you see me."

Gently, I framed her face. She glided her hands into my hair, cupping my nape. Holding me while I was holding her.

*Brilliant.*

I brought her mouth to mine and kissed her. I kissed her as if my life depended upon it. As if the boy she saw truly existed.

And for a moment, here and now with her lips moving with mine, he did.



*Claire*

“Let me show you how gentle I can be,” Kyle said softly as he peeled his hoodie from my shoulders.

Staring into his moonshine eyes, I was stunned, in a daze after that perfect kiss. Every time his lips touched mine was better than the last.

I trembled as his warm palms skimmed the length of my arms. At my wrists, he tugged on the sleeves to remove them. The borrowed hoodie slipped to the floor, spilling around my bare feet.

“Cold?” he asked, noting my shiver.

“No, the opposite,” I said breathlessly. “My skin burns wherever, whenever you touch me.”

“I like that.” His eyes flared. “Like that you’ve been on fire like I have since I first looked at you. I want you, Claire. I don’t think you get how much, and I need you to understand that once we start—” Staring into my eyes, he poised his fingers over the top button at my throat. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to stop.”

“I don’t want you to stop. I’m right here with you. I want this too.”

“But you’re trembling, little sparrow.”

“With excitement. Anticipation.” I placed my hands flat on his chest. His pecs were solid muscle. Beneath the soft cotton of his T-shirt, his heart thundered beneath my palm.

“You and me both.”

His gaze dropping, he didn’t see the effect his low rumbling voice had on me as he undid one button on the front of my white oxford shirt, then another.

I held my breath as he unbuttoned the rest, then separated the sides.

“Incredible.” He exhaled as if he’d been holding his breath too. He ran the tips of his fingers over my bared skin in a straight line between the two halves of my shirt. “Your skin is warm like sunshine and as soft as a down feather.”

“That feels good,” I said.

The truth was, I loved his touch. The pads of his fingers were rough against my naked flesh, a conduit for lightning. Electrical ripples of sensation spread outward from the line he drew. His warm breath lifted wispy tendrils of hair around my face.

“You’re so sexy like this.” Resting his hand against the side of my throat where my pulse thrummed, he lifted his gaze. His eyes were liquid steel.

Mesmerized, I didn’t speak for a long moment. I just fell into his eyes while thinking wistful thoughts. His hair was black as a midnight sky, a backdrop for the heated silver of his starlight gaze.

“Okay for me to remove the rest?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Good.” His hands moved to my shoulders. His fingers skimming my skin, he set off more tremors as he grasped the edges of my shirt. Once again, his gaze dipped to look at me, and I held my breath.

“So pretty,” he said before sliding the white cotton off my shoulders. He tugged the sleeves down my arms. The cuffs were tighter at my wrists than his hoodie had been, but a determined tug removed them. He tossed the shirt aside.

Cool air from the open door rushed over me. Naked now from the waist up, except for a delicately beaded strapless nude bra, I swallowed to moisten my dry throat.

“Fuck me,” he said hoarsely while staring at me.

“You’re not disappointed?” I lifted my head, and his eyes met mine.

“Fuck no.” His impassioned gaze locked on mine. “I could come just from looking at you.”

“Don’t. Not yet,” I whispered, unfurling like a rosebud would to the sun from his approval. “I need you to touch me.”

“So many options.” Staring at me a long moment, he ran his heated gaze over me. “It’s difficult to choose where to start.”

“Choose somewhere, please.”

Fire licked my skin from his perusal, as palpable as a caress. My nipples

drew to points within the satin of my bra. Between my legs, my pulse pounded hot.

“How about here?” He returned his hand to my throat and strummed his thumb across my skin.

I moaned. His touch was a brand, an arc of fire marking the place where my life force beat rapidly.

“My turn,” I said after a swallow to moisten my throat. Emboldened by his response, I removed his hand and pressed my lips into his palm before releasing it.

When his arms were at his sides, I grasped the edges of his jean jacket and glided it off his strong shoulders, feeling powerful doing so. He was so handsome, so virile, most certainly a grown man, not an inexperienced boy. The cuffs were unbuttoned. Without any impediment, the jacket fell to the floor with a surprising metal clatter.

“What was that?” I looked down, curious to see what had fallen, but he cupped my face.

Turning my head, he brought my mouth to his and kissed me. His lips were hot like a forge, his tongue a hammer. I was molten metal. With those instruments, he reshaped and remade me.

When he broke the kiss, I gulped for air. My lips felt swollen, bruised by his passion. I clung to him, my hands curving around his biceps, as much of the wide circumference as I could hold.

“I can’t seem to slow down when it comes to you.” He urged me toward the bed, sweeping the pile of our discarded clothing aside with his foot.

“I don’t want it slow. I want it the way you want it.”

“Thank fuck.” He walked me backward.

“Just let me do this.”

My hands on his abs, I tugged on his tight T-shirt, drawing the hem free from his belted jeans. At my first glimpse of his taut skin and the happy trail of dark masculine hair that disappeared into his jeans, my blood caught fire. Eager to see more, I lifted his shirt higher, revealing as I suspected that Kyle was ripped. I whipped the shirt over his head and tossed it aside.

His unruly hair resettled around his handsome face, and my lips parted. His abs were ridges. His pecs were solid slabs. His skin was smooth and lightly bronzed. His muscle definition was *Men’s Health* cover worthy. His entire upper torso was a fantasy, just like he was.

Swallowing hard, I placed my hands on him. From what he’d shared

about where he was from, I was certain his strength was necessary and not just for show. I had to touch him to convince myself he was real, that this was real. His skin was warm against my flattened palms.

I licked my lips. I wanted to meld my flesh to his, absorb all his warmth, absorb everything.

“Claire.” His thumb under my chin, he lifted my head, and I refocused on his face, noting his lids were heavy and his eyes were blazing hot. “If you keep looking at me and touching me like that, I’m going to go off too soon. I need you to get in the bed now.”

“I need you now too.” I took his hand and led him the remaining distance toward the bed.

He stopped me at the edge of the mattress. Tugging on my arm, he turned me into him.

“It’s not usually like this, and I’m not accustomed to girls like you.” He released my hand and raked his through his hair. “What I’m trying to say is that I don’t want to go too fast. Be too rough. Scare you.”

“You won’t,” I said confidently, but inside, I was a little scared. Kyle was undoubtedly more experienced than me.

“I don’t think you can know that for sure.”

“I know you want me, and I want you.”

Boldly, I reached for his hand and brought it to my breast. He cupped it, and my nipples hardened, my body knowing exactly what to do. Reaching for his other hand, I placed it on the back of my thigh and slid it underneath my skirt.

“Do what you want. Be how you want, Kyle. Just give me all of you, and I’ll give you all of me in return.”



ROCK AND ROLL  
CHAPTER 19

*Kyle*

Her eyes, her hands, her lips, I was obsessed with Claire. All of her.

Standing in front of me, speaking those words, did she get she was offering me everything I'd ever wanted? That she was everything I'd wanted but never knew to wish for?

"Babe." I had to level with her. "I need to tell you—"

"Let's get the coverlet back." Interrupting me, she touched my arm, then scooted past me on her way to the left side of the bed. She switched on the lamp, bringing light into the previously shadowed space. Drawing back the covers, she smiled shyly at me. "Get your side turned down too, okay?"

"Sure."

I moved to the opposite side of the bed. Not where I wanted to be, with her in just a bra and a short skirt on the other side of it. Watching her, I flipped back the coverlet, folding it over twice like she did. A glimpse of her tits as she bent over had my tongue practically falling from my mouth.

And that glimpse woke me the fuck up.

Any side of this room away from her was the wrong side. Remediating that, I retraced my steps, unbuckling my belt on the way. I paused to unbutton the top button on my jeans. Watching me now, she parted her lips as I lowered my zipper and removed my jeans. That aside, I closed the remaining distance between us, wearing only my now very tight boxer briefs.

"Any way I want this, right?" I stopped in front of her, grabbed her by the upper arms, and yanked her into me. Skin to skin, every part of her that touched me was hot.

“Yes.” She was feeling that heat too. Her breathing quickened, her brown eyes round behind her glasses.

“All right.” I gestured to the bed where the covers were turned down to reveal the crisp white sheets.

This was so not my usual. Her or the setup. Inside my office at the apartment in Southside, sex was nothing more than business in exchange for drugs. This, what Claire was offering me, was something else entirely.

I reached behind her. Finding the clasp of her bra, I unfastened it, then removed it and tossed it aside. It landed on my jean jacket—one a thrift-store find, the other likely cost hundreds of dollars. I didn’t care about any of that. Claire was the prize I was after.

She started to bring her arms up to cover her gorgeous tits, but I stopped her.

“Let me see you,” I growled.

Her eyes darkening, she dropped her arms to her sides.

“Fucking phenomenal.” I drank her in and just about spilled my load. Her tits were perfect—full, round, rose-tipped handfuls. Her nipples hardened as I stared, and her cheeks blushed the same attractive shade.

“Is this your first time?” I asked as my eyes met hers.

“Yes,” she said softly.

Given her shyness, I wasn’t entirely surprised. But a surge of satisfaction blazed through me at the knowledge I was the only one.

“I mean, I’ve fooled around, but I never went all the way. Not technically, not where protection needed to be involved.”

I didn’t know exactly what all that meant, but I didn’t want to know. I couldn’t stand the idea of another guy putting his hands anywhere on her.

My hands. My mouth. My cock inside her. That was what I wanted.

“Are you on the pill?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. I have a condom.” Reaching in my pocket, I removed it. It had been in my pocket a while, but I counted on it to work. Not taking my eyes off her, I dropped the packet on the bed.

Those important matters out of the way, I should have let the rest go, but like most everything regarding her, I couldn’t let things just be.

“You deflected about others,” I asked. “Why? Is it because you didn’t want me to know that this is your first time?”

“I was afraid you wouldn’t continue. That knowing would be a turnoff,

that you'd leave." Her gaze brightened. Suede brown became misted satin.

"Everything about you turns me on, and I don't think it's possible for me to leave. Not when I almost have you." I gave her honesty. I'd give her anything of mine at this point, if I thought she could take it.

"Good. I don't want you to go." Her bottom lip trembling, she trapped it in her teeth and blinked away the brightness in her gaze.

"I have no other desire right now than being with you."

I placed one hand on her back. Her skin was warm and smooth, my palm so large it nearly covered the width of her back. As I drew her closer, electrical current whipped through me as her tight nipples brushed my chest. My cock hardened, lengthening more, stretching my briefs. Taking this slow was going to be impossible.

I slipped my other hand under her braid. Urging her to lift her head, I lowered mine. I had to taste her again. Her lids fluttered closed as our mouths touched. I swiped my tongue across her plush bottom lip. The sugary taste of hers was a rush, and my eyes closed as I savored it. When her wet tongue tentatively touched mine, I groaned. Lust struck my cock like a bolt of lightning.

*Fucking hell. Fuck slow.*

I crushed my mouth to hers, devouring her lips, unable to get enough of them, of her. My hands holding her in place for my hunger, I feasted on her mouth. Stroking my tongue deep, I explored, swallowing her whimpers. Then I retreated, adjusted my hold on her, and did it all over again, going at her from another angle.

Gripping my biceps, she dug crescents into my skin with her blunt nails as her lips warred with mine. Our tongues dueled. Our teeth clashed. She was passionate fire that had met her match. Oxygen in short supply with my heart at an all-out sprint, I reluctantly broke the kiss, but I wasn't done with her. Not yet. Not ever, if that was an option.

Sliding my hands under her arms, I lifted her and tossed her into the center of the bed. Her skirt lifted before her ass hit the mattress, giving me a glimpse of her nude lace panties. I'd seen more erotic things, paid cash for them at strip clubs, but nothing affected me as strongly as she did.

I put my knee on the bed and tugged my boxers down. Twisting my body, I quickly kicked them away. My predatory eyes on her, I stalked toward her on all fours. I had to get closer, get inside her. I placed my hands on her, just above her knees, and skimmed them along the surface of her smooth skin, all



the way up to her thighs.

Coming up on her elbows, she watched me through her lashes, provocative without even trying. Under her skirt, I discovered that her skin was just as soft as outside it, but it was warmer. So much warmer, and so was I. I was on fire.

“Babe, are you wet for me?” I flipped up her skirt, and she gasped.

I knew before she nodded that she was. I saw the patch of wetness on the lace. Seeing it, I had to taste how I affected her.

I dipped my fingers into her panties, and she watched me as I lowered them. Once I got them off, my gaze focused on her pussy, a neatly trimmed golden triangle at the apex of her legs.

Tossing the panties aside, I put my hands on her thighs again. The pads of my fingers, hell, all my body buzzed with anticipation as I separated her legs and moved between them. My cock was throbbing, the engorged head slick. It didn't care about tasting. It just wanted to be inside her.

“Kyle. I don't think I can—” She shuddered, her breath hitching as I found and circled her swollen clit with my thumb. “Oh. Oh my. I—”

She broke off and moaned because my mouth was on her. With my tongue, I followed the same circular path my thumb had. She was warm and tasted like rich honey.

“Please, no more, Kyle.” Moaning again, she grabbed fistfuls of my hair and tugged.

“I wasn't done.” I lifted my head, swiped my tongue across my lips, and frowned at her.

“I'm too close,” she said. “I need . . . I want you inside me.”

Releasing her grip on my hair, she reached out for the condom packet on the mattress, just beyond her reach.

“I want that too.” I went back on my heels.

Snagging the condom, I ripped open the packet and rolled it on while she watched me. Her rapt interest was a huge fucking turn-on, just like she was. Her delectable lips were parted. Her nipples rosy and tight, her skirt flipped up. She was wet and ready for me.

“This is going to be fast and rough. Are you okay with your glasses on?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, and I moved back into position.

She grabbed my cock and brought me right to where we both needed me to be.

In one swift motion, I was inside her. She was slick and tight. All the hot looks and electric touches had led to this. Being inside her was beyond what I could have imagined, the culmination of everything.

Her hands raced over my skin, my shoulders, and my back. She seemed as eager as I was to explore. And though my breath caught for a minute as she traced my scar, she didn't ask about it.

Withdrawing my cock slowly, I thrust back inside her fast. I couldn't get enough of her, of the feel of her sweet pussy gripping me like she never wanted to let me go. I rocked into her again, and she lifted her hips to take me deeper. I slid my hands under her, squeezing a perfect globe in each hand and driving into her over and over again.

"Oh, Kyle." Her lids fluttered with ecstasy.

"Is it good?" I asked, knowing it was. She was so hot, slick, and perfect for me, it was insane. But I had to verify. My previous experience might have just been business, but I always made sure it was consensual.

"So good. I never knew it could be like this." She dug her nails into the taut skin stretched over my ass. "Don't stop."

"I won't." I honestly didn't know if I could stop.

My chest pressing against her soft tits, I moved, and she moved with me. Repeatedly, our pelvises came together. Heat built. Passion swelled. My body, my cock, every part of me straining, I was determined to take us both high, higher than we'd ever been before.

"Claire." I drove into her. She was so hot. The edge was sharp. Near. Racing toward it, I hammered into her faster, my breaths short and hard. "Are you close?"

"Yes." Her eyes fluttering open, she focused on me. "It feels so good, I don't want it to ever end." Her gaze was a flame that singed me. An irresistible one. "Take me there. Take us both there."

Higher, harder, hotter, I drove my cock into her. My balls drew up, and she tightened around my cock. As our flesh slapped together, our rapid breaths merged.

"Kyle, oh, Kyle." She moaned.

"Claire."

Groaning, I stiffened inside her. Up we went together and over the edge. To the rhythm of my white-hot pulses, she climaxed around me. Speeding, spinning, flying, we went so high, we were melted by unimaginable heat, and after melting, we rapidly returned to reality.

Earthbound, I clutched my wing-singed angel to me. She was everything I wanted. I'd known it from the moment our eyes first met.  
But I knew I couldn't keep her.

The logo features the words "ROCK AND ROLL" in a stylized, pink, distressed font. The word "ROCK" is larger and more prominent, with "AND ROLL" written in a smaller font above it. Below this, the words "CHAPTER 20" are written in a bold, pink, sans-serif font. A thin, grey, wavy line is positioned below the text, resembling a guitar string or a decorative flourish.

## ROCK AND ROLL CHAPTER 20

*Claire*

I stepped out of the shower onto the bathmat. Snagging a towel from the warming rack, I dried off and went to the vanity.

The bathroom was small but soothing with its natural elements like river rock and recycled sea glass. However, I wasn't soothed as I swiped condensation away from the mirror. After being with Kyle, I wasn't the same. I was changed.

Scooping up my glasses from the rock counter, I put them on. I leaned forward and peered closely at my reflection.

Did I look as different as I felt?

My eyes were shinier than usual. My skin was noticeably pink from the abrasion of Kyle's stubble. My lips were swollen from his perfect passionate kisses. But other than that, would anyone know that inside me, everything was changed?

More importantly, would Kyle know?

I had to open the door, go out there, and say good-bye to him, if good-bye was what he wanted. Maybe I could borrow a little more time with him if I talked him into showering before he left, but I couldn't make him stay. And I couldn't force or manipulate him into feeling the same way I did.

One night, a handful of hours, yet I'd never felt closer to anyone than I did him. He saw me the way I wanted to be seen. I wasn't Claire, the duck girl. I was me, only a brighter, bolder version of myself.

Having sex confirmed everything about him for me. Emotionally and physically, we fit. And when we climaxed together, I'd felt something warm

and undeniable shift inside me. Something I didn't want to put a name to. Something unchangeable, not that I wanted to change it.

Kyle had clasped me to him for a long moment afterward, but then he released me, reminding me that he had to go. And after releasing me, it had hurt, hurt deeply inside that shifted place to see that the heat in his gaze had cooled. Sex with me hadn't changed him the way it had changed me.

"You okay in there?" His voice rumbled through the thin door.

"Yes," I lied, shaking like a leaf. I was afraid to woman-up and say goodbye. "I just need to slip on my robe, and I'll be right out."

*Be brave. Be me.*

If he didn't like the real me—this new me I was with him—then no matter how I felt about him, we weren't meant to be.

I grabbed my robe from the hook. The whimsical bird pattern on the robin's-egg-blue background didn't make me smile like it usually did. Removing the towel, I hung it on the empty hook and belted on the robe before opening the door.

I froze. Kyle was right there, wearing his jeans again but no T-shirt. That alone was pause-worthy, but so was the concern etched on his handsome face.

"You're not okay," he said, his gaze actively searching mine.

Before I could take another breath, my eyes filled.

"Fuck, I knew this was a bad idea." Now he looked as distraught as I felt. Raking his hand through his thick hair, he exhaled.

My fingers tingled, even as my emotions swirled. I longed to reach for him, to comfort him, to connect to him. But I couldn't.

*No clinging, Claire.*

"It didn't feel like a bad idea to me," I said, my voice small. His words stung. They were a toxin to the new-and-improved me.

"That's not what I meant."

He reached for me. Placing his large hands on my shoulders, he drew me into him. I went readily, breathing easier as his strong arms closed around me.

"How did you mean it?" I asked.

"I didn't want to hurt you. It was selfish of me to come here with you tonight, to take all you shared, knowing I had to leave." He eased back and looked at me, his expression softer. "I hurt you. Haven't I?"

"I hurt me." I couldn't let him have all the blame.

“Don’t try to absolve me.” His eyes turned to stone.

“It was my decision to bring you here. My choice to be with you.” I lifted my chin. “You were up front with me. I knew what I was getting into.”

I just didn’t know that he would leave for sure, and that it would hurt this much.

“I don’t think you knew. How could you? I didn’t know it would be this wonderful. You’re wonderful, Claire.”

He captured a strand of my hair and tucked it behind my ear. The gentle brush of his fingers along it was a catalyst, setting off a deluge of sensations. My blood warmed. My nipples puckered, and that spot between my legs that only he had claimed ached to be filled again.

“Then stay.” I placed my hands on his hard chest. Flattening my palms, I spread apart my fingers. I wanted to cover and feel as much of him as possible.

“I can’t.” He squeezed his eyes shut. On some level, our parting pained him too.

“Why? Why can’t you stay?” The new Claire bristled. She didn’t like being abandoned or sounding needy.

“I have work.” He opened his eyes, revealing a turbulent storm brewing within them.

“At this time of night?”

“All day, all night.” He exhaled heavily.

“Your work is dangerous.” I shuddered at the memory of the long, jagged scar on his back, wondering what had caused it.

“It is sometimes.” His eyes narrowed. “How did you know?”

“I saw the switchblade,” I said. “I felt your scar.”

“Right.” He licked his lips and my stomach fluttered, recalling the taste of him and his talent with his tongue. “I told you, it’s not safe where I’m from.”

Dangerous and safe, he was both, a product of his environment. The one, I understood since he’d shared a lot, but not so much the other. For all I knew, he remained a mystery. A reward that required a risk.

“So, this is good-bye.” I swallowed hard. *No crying*. I’d wanted to fly, and I’d flown.

He nodded.

Tears sprang into my eyes. *Not yet*. When he was gone, I could cry. Now, I blinked them away.

“A temporary good-bye or a forever one?”

“Claire.”

He framed my face. This time, I squeezed my eyes shut. I could hear the finality in his voice and didn't want to see it confirmed in his gaze.

“Babe, look at me.”

Pulling in a shaky breath, I opened my eyes. The sun was shining inside the storm. I focused on that, basking in the warmth of that glow, though I knew it was temporary.

“I want you,” he said softly. “If I had a choice, I would stay. I would hold you all night. Have you again as many times as I could until morning. But I don't have that option. I'm not free to choose what I want like you are.”

“Why not?”

“I have obligations.” The dark clouds regathered. “Commitments you can't understand.”

“I could.” My lips flattened. “If you'd share them. Try me.”

“The things you'd have me share aren't pretty truths like yours are. I don't have parents or a home like yours. I don't have a future. I certainly don't have a treehouse that's fancier than most people's homes. I have what I gave you, a part of me worth sharing. And this,” he gestured to the bed and his voice deepened, “us together for one hot unforgettable night.”

He was unmovable. Certain. But I couldn't let him go, not yet, not knowing this was it.

“Will you make . . . will you have sex with me one last time?” I asked.

“I don't think that would be wise.”

“Maybe not.” My eyes filled again. “But I don't feel like being wise.”

I peeled his fingers from my face, though I wanted to meld them to my skin. Stepping back, I unbelted the robe and shrugged out of it. I was completely nude beneath it. He hissed as the silk pooled at my feet.

Holding his gaze, even though it was so hot it burned me, I stretched out my arm. His brows slashing together, he stared at me a long moment. I didn't dare breathe.

“Okay, little sparrow,” he said low, and I exhaled shakily when his fingers closed around mine.

Surprising me, he bent and lifted me into his arms. Held like a bride might be on her wedding night, I gazed at him and memorized the view. The warm way he looked at me. His unruly hair. The determined stamp of his dark brows. The almond shape of his silvery eyes. His thick, inky lashes. The way the surface of his gaze sparkled now like moonlight rippling on the lake.

“You’ll have to let go of me.” His chiseled mouth curving, he stopped at the bed. “So I can take my jeans off.”

“Oops.” I relaxed my hold.

Undoing my clasped fingers from his neck, he removed my arms. After he set me in the bed, I came up on my elbows to watch him undress. Unbuckled, his belt dangled. The top button of his jeans was already undone. It was only a matter of lowering his zipper.

The rasp of it was loud in the suddenly quiet room. Even the breeze seemed to still as his jeans and then his black boxer briefs hit the floor.

My heart pounded hard as he came toward me. His muscles were flexed, and his fully erect cock bounced with each step.

“You sure about this?” he asked. Bending at the waist, he placed both his hands on the bed and looked at me.

“Yes, I’m sure.” I reached for him.

“Not sore?” He grasped my ankles, and heat ran up my legs.

“No.” I shook my head. The fooling around I’d told him about made me less shy around him than I might have been otherwise, and it made my body more accommodating to his size. “I’m achy. Needy. Hot.”

“Okay.” He climbed over me, and I reached for him, yearning to feel his warm skin and his tightened muscles leap at my touch, but he grabbed my wrists and lifted my hands above my head. “Keep them there.”

I licked my dry lips and nodded.

He placed his hands on my shoulders, pressing me deeper into the mattress. Pinned, I held my breath as he lowered his head.

“Oh, Kyle.” I moaned as his mouth fastened warm and wet around the tip of my breast. “That feels so good.”

I would have arched my back to give him more of me, but he had me pinned. I couldn’t move. Wet warmth rushed to my core. His fingers flexing at my shoulders, he swirled his tongue around my nipple. Sucking on it, he drew it deep, then grazed the throbbing tip with the edge of his teeth and lashed across the tingling surface with his tongue. Moaning, I writhed beneath him.

Lifting his head, he gave me a darkly approving look that made the pounding of my pulse between my legs intensify. Then he lowered his head and did the same to my other breast.

“Kyle.” I brought my arms down. Grabbing fistfuls of his thick hair, I lifted his head. His eyes were dark gray pools, his lips temptingly wet. “Kiss



me, please. I need—”

He silenced me. His mouth crashing down on mine was a perfect pause. A moment where everything stopped but sped up at the same time.

Grabbing my hands, he pressed his palms into mine and kissed me like he had the first time, but it was more. Harder. Hotter. Longer, yet over too soon.

Releasing my hands, he moved lower. Bathing my tingling body with his humid breaths, he pressed his lips firmly to my skin. Across the slopes of my breasts. Down the center of my body to my abdomen, where he dipped his tongue into my navel.

My hands freely roamed. I savored the play of his muscles, the sleekness of his skin, and the drag at the rougher parts where he had a dusting of masculine hair. The fire I wanted to slowly build rose inevitably higher.

“Are you ready for me?” Kyle asked. Staring down at me, he caged me between his sculpted arms.

*No and yes.*

But I gave him the only answer he wanted. “Yes.” I pressed my lips to his and heat ran through me. Wetness pooled. My blood pounded expectantly.

His hair casting shadows in his starlit eyes, he held up a small packet. “Luckily, I found another condom.”

I forced a smile as he ripped it open. Hopefully, it would work better than the previous one. I’d found some of his semen on my leg when cleaning up in the bathroom.

Imagining him being inside me again, I set aside any worry about that. I licked my dry lips. I tasted him, but as good as he tasted, I didn’t feel as excited this time as I watched him roll the condom on because I also felt sad.

What I needed wasn’t sexual protection. I needed protection for my heart. But a heart couldn’t soar on the ground, and I couldn’t play it safe if I wanted to fly.

I reached down between our bodies. Wrapping my fingers around the significant girth of him, I drew him toward me. Once we were aligned, his gaze lifted and our eyes connected as he surged inside me.

Relieved, I sighed. This was the closeness I craved. Pushing deep within me, he groaned with pleasure, and the pure dulcet tones of his approval plucked my heartstrings.

Holding me with his gaze, he moved. Shallowly and slowly at first, then deeper and faster. Our passion built like the waves as they neared the lake’s shore, and just like them, there was no force on earth capable of stopping it.

My heart racing, I lifted my hips into each of his strokes. His eyes smoke, he drove into me.

Again and again, I received him. He gave me that part of him he could, and I took it. It was the dream I dared to dream, just not all of it. Dangerous and safe, exhilarating and terrifying, falling and flying, I accepted him. My lids fluttered as it came for me. Sultry sweetness, willful weakness, addictive bliss, I surrendered to it. Being desired and sharing desire, I surrendered to him.

Stiffening, he drove into me one final time. Swept away with him on the same blissful current, I blinked as tears fell from my eyes.

Though it was beautiful. Though it moved me. Though he filled me with warmth better than the sun, after stroking in and out of me a few more times, he eventually pulled out.

Separated, we both knew we had reached the end.



ROCK AND ROLL  
CHAPTER 21

*Kyle*

When I emerged from her bathroom, I was drenched in Claire's fresh spring scent. The source of it was the bodywash in her shower. But it was more her. She was the source. And I had to do the right thing by her. I had to leave.

"Here." Raindrops in her eyes, she tried to hand me my hoodie.

"Keep it," I said roughly. Taking it from her, I tossed it on the bed. "To remember—"

"I won't ever forget," she said quickly, her eyes as bright as her spirit.

I gave that a curt nod. I would never have been able to wear it again without thinking of her in it. And I couldn't remember. This, who I was here, I couldn't be in Southside. Who she was, I couldn't have. It was all a dream, a fantasy that couldn't exist outside her realm.

"I like your favorite place." My eyes burned. "Thank you for sharing it with me. Thank you for sharing you."

"You're welcome." She bit down on her lip and glanced away. She'd been quiet, pensive since her second shower. Or maybe I was just projecting. I was withdrawing, retreating behind my walls, returning to my familiar role.

I snagged my jean jacket off the floor. Putting it on, I tucked the blade back into the inside pocket. Where I was going, it wasn't safe to have it far from my fingertips.

Steeling myself, I turned around, allowing myself one more look.

Claire shifted as I stared overly long at her. She was beautiful in her robe, her braid barely a braid anymore. Yet, I regretted never getting a chance to run my fingers through her hair, never seeing it fully loosened. I regretted so

many things.

Braver than me, she stepped close. As she blinked, a few tears slipped from her fawn-brown eyes. She lifted her glasses and swiped the tears away. “I’m sorry you have to go. I’ll miss you.”

“Oh hell.” I scooped her up, lifting her onto her toes and into my arms. She felt so right there, but I knew it was wrong.

“You never told me,” she wheezed out, and I loosened my hold.

“Never told you what?” I asked, tension flooding through every inch of me.

“What your favorite place is.”

“This. Holding you.” Relaxing, I squeezed her tightly one last time. “You are my favorite place, Claire.”

“Kyle,” she said, her voice strained. “Please, won’t you reconsider? Maybe . . .” As she trailed off, tears regathered.

“I can’t.” I set her from me.

“There must be some way.”

“There’s no way,” I said firmly, slipping on my mask. “This was good. Remember this.” *Remember me.* “Someday you may come to regret it. Someday you might hate me.”

If she ever found out the truth about me, who would it hurt worse? Her? Or me?

“Impossible.”

Her concept of impossible and my horrible reality were two separate but similar things.

“Take this.” She unfastened the gold bracelet at her wrist.

“I can’t.” I shook my head. That fancy piece of jewelry undoubtedly cost a whack.

“But I have your hoodie.”

“It’s worthless.”

“It’s yours. It’s not worthless,” she said firmly. “Plus, it’ll keep me warm when winter comes.” She took my hand and dropped the bracelet in my palm. “Please. To remember me.”

“Okay.” My fingers closed around it. My throat barely functioned. “Good-bye, Claire.”

“Good-bye, Kyle.”

She stepped back, her hands twisting on the belt of her robe as if she had to have something to do with her fingers or she’d reach for me.

Reluctantly, I turned, the emptiness of my life without her making my steps heavy and slow. Somehow, I managed to make it through the opening in the floor to the ladder, but leaving her was like slamming into a closed door.

Down the stairs, I went, setting off motion sensors along the way. The lights served a purpose. They illuminated the dark, but it was all wrong. Even the darkness wasn't right without her.

I'd almost stepped off the last landing when she caught up to me. Her arms came around my waist. Wetness I had no right to flooded my eyes.

"Claire," I choked out. "Go back inside."

"I will. I just needed one more hug, and I needed to tell you, be safe, Kyle. Okay? I don't want anything bad to happen to you."

"Okay, babe." I tried to sound casual, but it was bullshit. No one had ever looked after me but me. Nothing was good without her. Everything returned to bad.

Claire released me. I thanked the God I'd once believed in before my parents died for that mercy. I didn't have it in me to look at her again and do what needed to be done.

Doggedly, I focused on the gate, staggering toward it like I was drunk. My strides sped up on her unfamiliar path. I was doing the right thing. I put distance between us.

She didn't follow. I didn't have to look back to know she wasn't behind me. I could feel the absence of her, and it slashed through me like a blade. Though I'd only had her for a brief interlude, she was undeniably the best I'd ever had.

Leaving her, and who I was with her behind, I flipped up the collar on my jean jacket. Digging deep, I found the that familiar swagger and rolled my hips as if I didn't give a shit as I walked up her drive.

The sight of her Rover ruined everything. I wasn't ready to be the type of guy she would despise . . . not just yet. I needed time.

Then out of nowhere, pain slammed into me, stealing my breath. A blunt blow to my midsection, delivered by an unknown hard object.

Didn't matter what did it. My ribs cracked.

Unable to breathe, I doubled over, and her bracelet slipped from my hand. I had no time to look for it or react before the next blow came, delivered by what I now saw was a baseball bat. This time it smashed into my lower legs. A bone on the right that should have been more durable than my ribs

splintered.

“What the fuck?” In excruciating pain, I fell on my ass, barely able to form the words.

A bloody tinge creeping into my gaze, I peered into the darkness. My assailant blocked out the light set off by the motion sensor, and in the type of pain I was in, my vision was blurry. But it registered that the guy was huge, and his unflattering features formed a cruel mask.

“Strader wants a word, asshole,” he said while someone else lifted me from behind by my arms.

My right leg hung at an unnatural angle as I was dragged toward a panel van with blacked-out windows. I somehow managed not to make a sound, though near-blinding pain racked me. I knew my leg was fractured, and that this was bad.

I was also sure that once they took me from here, there would be no escaping whatever else they planned to do to me. But I knew there had been no escaping fate since I’d looked into Claire’s incredible eyes.

The jarring motion of being picked up and thrown inside the van spiked additional pain that made me lose consciousness briefly. When I came to, the door was sliding closed. I could have yelled, cried out for help, but I pressed my lips together and didn’t make a sound.

Claire’s parents were in that house, unaware of the danger. Claire was somewhere behind me. My wretched world was too precariously close to their dreamlike one.

I needed to play this right. Not give any indication that they mattered. That she mattered. Enforcers like these guys didn’t mess around.

Skellin had majorly offended Strader by dealing in his territory, and I’d been his agent. I’d also overstepped with Claire, going where I didn’t belong.

I’d reached too high. Fucked up. Now it was time to face the consequences.

The logo features the word "ROCK" in a large, stylized, pink font with a textured, grainy appearance. A pink electric guitar neck is positioned diagonally across the top of the "K". The words "AND ROLL" are written in a smaller, pink, sans-serif font along the guitar neck. Below "ROCK" and "AND ROLL", the words "CHAPTER 22" are written in a bold, pink, sans-serif font. A thin, grey, wavy line is drawn underneath the text.

## ROCK AND ROLL CHAPTER 22

*Claire*

I held myself together until I stepped over the threshold. But inside the treehouse where Kyle's mossy forest scent lingered, I let it go. My tears fell like rain.

Through the watery curtain, I could see the rumpled bed linens. The towel he'd used after showering was thrown over one of the chairs. But it wasn't those little traces of him that made me sob, it was his absence. What I'd lost when Kyle left played through my mind in quick succession—his soft gaze, his gentle touch, the way he seemed to get me.

I made it to the bed before I collapsed. Curling into a ball, I grabbed a pillow and hugged it to my aching chest.

Minutes passed or hours, I wasn't certain. I wasn't certain of anything, and I couldn't remember where I'd put my phone so I could check for the time or messages. I didn't want to check. Kyle wouldn't call.

Even if he hadn't been clear about this being over, which he had been, he didn't ask for my number. He wasn't going to change his mind. Yet I stared at the opening to the treehouse, and with each beat of my breaking heart, I willed him to return.

I don't know how long I stared and hoped against hope, just that it was long. My body cramped from being hunched in the same position. But worse than the physical discomfort was the growing certainty that he wasn't coming back.

A huge hole opened inside me. A gnawing one that overflowed with the burn of being rejected. I'd given him everything I had to give, but it hadn't

been enough for him to want to stay.

It was less dark outside when I swiped away the tears and got up. I put on clothes, not my school uniform. I would forever hate putting that on because wearing it, I would remember him taking it off. I clenched my hands into fists. It was easier to focus on being hurt by his rejection than remembering how good it had been.

On the way down the steps, I moved stiffly, like my bones were glass that could easily shatter. Placing my foot carefully on the last landing, I heard a siren. I almost dismissed it, but as it got louder and louder, I froze and held my breath.

Surely, it would pass my house, but it didn't. It stopped.

*Dad.*

*No!*

Metal doors slammed from the direction of my driveway. Authoritative voices rang out.

My battered heart lunging to my throat, I broke out into a run. The flashing lights from the ambulance blinding me, I stumbled on the familiar path and fell. I skinned my knees, but I rose.

Continuing down the slope, I headed for the rear patio door, the closest entry point into the house. But I stopped abruptly when I heard my mother's voice from the driveway. She started to sob. She rarely cried, and the sobbing coming from her was gut wrenching. I suddenly couldn't breathe, but I somehow managed to change direction.

It was strange. I had no way of knowing then how drastically everything in my life would change. But in the months to follow as I looked back, I would remember that pivotal moment.

Facing one direction, all the good I ever had was in front of me. But once I turned the other way and rounded the corner, I knew in a single moment that all the good I'd had was behind me. I took it all in from one slowing dread-filled heartbeat to the next.

A paramedic holding my mom's shaking shoulders.

Another one rolling a stretcher behind them.

An eerily familiar form atop it, unmoving, completely covered by a sheet.

Sensing my presence, my mother turned her head. Her watery pain-filled gaze hit mine. Skin, tissue, muscle, and bone exposed, I dropped to my knees. The terrible truth slammed into me.

My dad was gone.



My heart stopped, and it would never beat right again. A rip opened my chest, rending me in two, the old Claire and the new one becoming separate parts. Lost and adrift, I couldn't speak. I could barely think.

The only thing I knew was that nothing would ever be the same.

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# ROCK AND ROLL CHAPTER 23

## *Claire*

“I don’t want to go.” My stubborn brown eyes met my mother’s steely blue ones in my mirror.

“You’re going. Her gaze narrowed. “Come on.”

“I’d rather say good-bye to him in my own way.”

In other words, not at all.

Every day since my dad died, I’d looked for him. I expected to see his car turn into the driveway at dinnertime. I expected to see him in every room inside the house. I expected to hear his voice when the phone rang.

Unmet expectations were a terrible thing. They destroyed my heart, and the broken parts of it clanged together like cymbals that didn’t make music, only noise.

“You can do that too after the formal memorial service,” my mother said, and the new crease between her eyes and the lines around her mouth deepened.

“My pain is private.” My eyes filled. “I don’t see why—”

“Because this is the way it’s done, Claire,” she snapped. “I’ll meet you downstairs. Finish getting dressed and come on. The driver’s waiting.”

I nodded. Dislodged, a tear slid wet warmth down my cheek, but I swept it away. When I refocused on the doorway to my room, my mother was gone.

My heart thudded dully in my chest. Mom and I were more at odds this past week than ever. But I didn’t want to lose her too. I couldn’t weather any more losses. She was all I had left.

Giving up on makeup, I stood and went to the bed. Frowning at the black

dress laid on it, I picked it up and pulled it over my head. It was new, scratchy, and uncomfortable. All wrong, like every day had been since Dad died.

I frowned as I looked down at the dress I'd agreed to wear. It was velvet, with long sleeves and a high neck, not because of the temperature outside but because of the chill inside me. I was cold all the time now. I couldn't get warm. I felt like a dry leaf clinging to an icy branch during the dead of winter.

Inside, I could barely keep it together. All it would take would be a stiff wind, one more devastating blow, and that would be it. I would fall. And I wasn't sure I could get back up if that happened, or if I'd even want to.

I longed for warmth, for someone to hold me so I wouldn't fly apart. My father had always reassured me before. I wished—

Quickly, I shut that down. My dad wasn't coming back. Neither was anyone else. Tears of loneliness filling my eyes, I sank onto the bed and wrapped my arms around myself.

“Daddy,” I choked out. Tipping my chin up, I blinked at the ceiling. “I need you. Why did you have to go? What am I supposed to do without you?”

Only silence and the sound of my own heartbeat answered me.

Then a sob . . .

The logo features the words "ROCK AND ROLL" in a stylized, pink, distressed font. The word "ROCK" is larger and more prominent, with "AND ROLL" written in a smaller font above it. Below this, the words "CHAPTER 24" are written in a bold, pink, sans-serif font. A thin, grey, hand-drawn line loops under the text, resembling a guitar string or a decorative flourish.

## ROCK AND ROLL CHAPTER 24

*Claire*

After the memorial service conducted by a minister I barely knew, those in attendance filed up to the front pew where my mother and I sat. She and I were an incompatible pair among people who knew my dad but didn't really know him. Not like my mom did. Not like I did.

It was horribly wrong.

One by one, people stopped in front of us, offering condolences. My father's coworkers. My mom's friends. My friends from Lakeside High. Ella with her grandparents. Rhonda with her brother. They each took my hand, bent down to awkwardly hug me, and said they were sorry.

I was sorry too. Sorry to be here, beneath a roof with shiny wood planks and rafters that blocked the sky. Between stained-glass windows that diluted the warmth of the sunlight. Inside a structure, instead of outside where everything my dad devoted his life to was.

Agitated, I twisted my hands together after the last person had given us their condolences. The music started again, and everyone stood.

My dad wouldn't have wanted this. He would have preferred a simple ceremony outside with my mother and me remembering him, the only music the chirps and warbles of his beloved songbirds.

When the organist stopped, ushers came forward, acquaintances of my mother. She didn't have any male family members to ask to carry the polished ebony casket since she and her sister were the last of the Footit line. There was no one on my dad's side to ask to be pallbearers either. He was an only son, and his parents had turned their backs on him when he married my

mom. Tragically for all involved, they had died without attempting to mend a rift that was unmendable now.

*Every choice has a consequence, songbird. Never forget that.*

Even just hearing my dad's voice inside my head made me sad. The interior of the church swam before my eyes.

It didn't matter. There was no decision for me to make. If I had a choice, it would be for him to still be here. It would be for the doctors to discover that he had a congenital heart defect sooner. All the best doctors in Seattle, yet here we were without him.

More tears blurred my vision, making it waver, but I held on to the traces of him.

*I remember you, Daddy. I remember everything you taught me. I'll never forget.*

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## ROCK AND ROLL CHAPTER 25

*Claire*

“Claire,” my mom called, and I stopped. “Can you come in here for a second?”

“Sure.” Dutifully, I turned and entered my dad’s office.

My chest immediately squeezed. My barely functioning heart struggled to pump blood for the next beat as I inhaled the scent of his cologne, which lingered the most in this room. The apple notes that took precedence in the winter. The citrus ones that shone in the summer. Perfect all year long, just like he had been.

Three weeks had dragged by since we buried him. Three weeks of barely breathing or wanting to. Three weeks of avoiding everyone. They didn’t understand. How could anyone?

And during all that time, I didn’t receive a call or a visit from Kyle. Did he not know my father had died, or did he just not care? I was beginning to believe it was the latter.

“Can you have a seat?” From the high-backed leather swivel chair that used to be my dad’s, my mother gestured across his desk, now covered with several large stacks of papers.

“Sure.” I lowered myself into a club chair. Taking in the bird books on the shelves and the black-and-white photos of my dad’s favorite wildlife settings on the walls, my eyes misted.

“Can you focus on me for a minute, honey?” she asked gently.

Nodding, I returned my gaze to her.

Her blond hair was scraped back in a severe ponytail, her expression

pinched tighter than her hairstyle. My mother's gaze didn't sparkle. Not anymore. Why would it?

We both missed him terribly. His absence was a wedge between us now, not glue to hold us together. She remained beautiful, but she looked a decade older. I felt older on the inside, though outside I mostly looked the same.

I experienced a frisson of guilt. Maybe we should share our grief.

But I dismissed the idea as soon as it arose. I couldn't reach out to her, not when I could barely hold myself together. Mostly, I just wanted to rewrap myself in my insular cocoon. Withdrawing alone to my room or the treehouse, I could avoid reality.

"I'm worried about you, Claire." She sighed. "You're not eating properly or sleeping."

"How about you?" Defensiveness stiffening my spine, I glared at her across the desk. "I hear you wandering the house at night. Crying in your room. And when was the last time you ate an actual meal?"

"We're not talking about me." She frowned. "We're talking about you."

"There's no we here," I snapped, and she flinched. We were both negatives in this equation. Without him, there was no positive.

"Claire." Her eyes filled. "That wasn't nice."

"You're right," I said softly, immediately regretting my harshness. "I'm sorry."

I couldn't get anything right without Dad. It was me. I was the problem, the reason nothing added up. If there hadn't been all my end-of-the-school-year stuff to distract him, he probably would have gone to the doctor sooner.

Tears filled my eyes. My cheeks burning with shame and regret, I dropped my chin.

"It wasn't nice, but it's true, unfortunately." Mom shook her head sadly. "You and I are at odds. It's an unavoidable reality, one I can't seem to fix. Just like the rest of this."

"What do you mean?" My stomach swirling with dread, I lifted my head.

"I mean, we have a mountain of debt we can't pay."

"What debt?" I asked.

"Your father and I took out a second mortgage to remodel this house. Property taxes are due, based on the improved value. We have utilities to pay. Your school tuition. Payments to make on our cars." She gestured to the individual piles on the desk. "There's no cash to cover it. None. No insurance money. Your dad was always so healthy, we never thought to purchase any."

An icy chill swept over me. “What are we going to do?”

“We’re going to sell the house.”

“No.” I shook my head. All my memories of him were here. My treehouse sanctuary.

“That’s for starters,” she said firmly. “We’ll sell all the rest too, eventually.” Her gaze turning unfocused, she bit down on her bottom lip. “That will cover the funeral expenses. Barely.”

“But where will we live?” I whispered. The silence suddenly felt ominous. Oppressive.

Mom refocused on me. “With your aunt Addy.”

“In Southside?” My eyes widened. Southside was on the wrong side of Seattle. Dangerous. Rife with violent crime so commonplace, it didn’t even usually make the news.

“Yes.” Mom’s lips trembled. She knew all about Southside. After all, she’d grown up there. “Addy’s agreed to take us in.”

“But her place is small.” I protested, focusing on the impossibility of the living arrangement instead of my other fears. I’d only been to visit Addy’s place a handful of times because she and my mother didn’t get along. Addy disapproved of my parents’ marriage just like my grandparents had, although I never understood why.

“It’s a small one-bedroom apartment. She and I will have to share a bed. You’ll have to sleep on the couch.” Mom’s voice trembled like her lips had. She had a mountain of stress on her shoulders. The ground was quaking, but she wasn’t crumpling.

But I was.

She held my gaze with a determined glint in her eye I’d never noticed before. Had that determination been there all along, and I’d missed it?

“It’ll be tough. But Addy’s giving me a job waitressing at her bar. Free rent and income, both of which we will sorely need.”

We? Was there a *we* in this solution?

“We’ll get through it somehow, Claire.” Studying my expression, she said, “We’ve survived worse.”

Had we?

My mother had experience living in Southside, which gave her confidence that I didn’t have. She’d held herself together after losing my father, while I was totally devastated.

Could a crushed girl survive in Southside?



I didn't know, but I was about to find out.

End of book 1

The story continues in *Breaking Her Bad*. Click to it [here](#).



*Breaking Her Bad* is the conclusion to Claire and Kyle's story. Link to it [here](#).

Thank you for reading *Hot Summer School Night*. I loved writing Claire and Kyle's story. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. You can make all the difference in the book life of *Hot Summer School Night* by writing a review. Reviews are so important. I would love to thank you for writing one. Just email me at [authormichellemankin@gmail.com](mailto:authormichellemankin@gmail.com).



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