



Indigo Knights 1:
Squire

Jet Mykles



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Chapter One

This was going to be great!

Rabin Squire drove his truck up the road, far more energized than he had been all of last year. But this year was his year; he knew it. Things were going to turn around, and the Indigo Knights would finally get what they deserved. He laughed at his thoughts, combing a hand through his short, wind-tossed hair to get it out of his face, elbow braced in the open window. He wasn't normally so dramatic with himself, but the situation warranted some melodrama. This chance could be his last chance at the life he'd always dreamed of living.

The need to pay attention to his printed-out directions distracted him. Brent had said the house was easy to find, but Rabin hadn't expected all the trees. He wouldn't have pegged either Brent or Hell for the type who wanted to live in a rural area. If asked to guess, he'd have put them in an apartment in the city, not a house on a couple of acres of lakeside property. But it was gorgeous, and there was no doubt that he was now driving through a high-quality area. He could only imagine what a place out here would cost.

His phone rang. Keeping the hand holding the directions on the wheel, he picked his cell up off the passenger seat with the other and set it to speaker without looking. "It's Rabin."

"You there yet?"

He smiled. Zane. "Not yet."

"Jesus, didn't you get in town like an hour ago?"

"I told you, they don't live in town."

"Fuck. Is the studio out in the boondocks too?"

“Nope. Studio’s in the city. Brent says we shouldn’t have any problem finding an apartment.”

“Good deal. Damn, I wish I could have come with.”

“Yeah, me too.” Zane had been his best friend, roommate, and bandmate for seven years, ever since they’d met in college. School had gone by the wayside, but they’d stayed together since, through a dozen different living arrangements. It would be weird looking for a place to live without him. “But I’ll see you at the end of the month.”

“Right.”

Rabin stopped at a four-way stop, wondering if he was still even outside Chicago or in a completely different city. “Oh man, this place is surreal.”

“Their house?”

“No. I’m not even there yet. I’m talking the trees. It’s like I’m in the middle of a forest.”

“Whoa. They must have some bucks.”

“You know it.”

“That’ll be us someday soon, my brutha.”

“You’re bloody well right it will.” He laughed. “Listen, I’m gonna cut you off before I get lost. I’ll call you tonight.”

“Okay. Don’t do the fun stuff without me.”

“You bet.”

He shut down his phone and proceeded at just below the speed limit down a paved road lined with tall bushes and trees and no streetlights. Gates would break the greenery every now and then, all of them closed and all of them with a security system in plain view. Each gate showed a driveway beyond, but only a few houses were visible. Mostly the driveways just kept going. Occasionally a break in the foliage would show him the great expanse of Lake Michigan to his right. He grew more and more envious of Brent and Hell the farther he went.

Music. Music and too much fucking talent had landed them where they were today—rich, successful, and happy. That’s what Rabin wanted. What Zane wanted. What Brent had very graciously agreed to help them with.

When Rabin finally found the gate with the number Brent had given him, he was fairly bouncing with excitement. This place was fucking unreal. He leaned out his window to press a button on a pad mounted in front of the gate.

“Hey, Rabin.” Brent’s voice was crystal clear.

“How’d you know it’s me?”

“Cameras everywhere.” Brent laughed as the gate in front of Rabin began to slide open. “Come on up. Front door’s open.”

Daylight was slowly fading to twilight as Rabin parked his truck beside a dusty black Corvette and a recently washed white Mazda under the shade of a spreading tree. Rabin knew fuck all what kind of tree it was, but it sure was pretty, matching many of the other trees that surrounded the house and the embankment that led down from the house to the water. The house itself was two levels and looked like a huge cabin, complete with all the rustic finishes. *Gorgeous*.

After hefting his guitar case and the largest of his three suitcases from the truck, he headed toward the front door and found it open as promised. “Hello?” He stopped at the threshold. Loud pop music and a truly heavenly scent of some sort of cooking poultry lead him to his right and what he thought might be the kitchen.

Kitchen it was, all done up in dark colors to match the rural feel of the exterior of the house. The appliances were state of the art, lining the wall to the left of the opening that led into the room as well as the wall in front of Rabin. A huge island dominated the center of the room, complete with copper pots hanging above it. A four-seater table was built into a huge bay window overlooking the lake to Rabin’s right.

There was a young man who was very obviously neither Brent nor Hell busy at the sink, his back to Rabin. He was on the short side, closer to Hell’s diminutive height than he was to either Brent’s or Rabin’s size. His hair was shining black,

pulled into a tail that hung in gentle waves halfway down his back. He was singing and jiggling to the music, shaking slim shoulders, a trim waist, and a pert little ass. Reaching the chorus of the song, he belted out in a very nice if slightly off-key tenor. Tugging a towel from where it hung at the waistband of his jeans, he turned around, eyes closed as he sang into an imaginary microphone. Rabin grinned, enjoying the show. The kid was incredibly pretty. A softly rounded jaw and high cheekbones gave his face a gorgeous shape, and a long, thick fringe of that black hair hid his forehead, brows, and part of his eyes. Seen from the front, his snug, lime green T-shirt proclaimed *Straight? So is spaghetti until you heat it up*. Once the chorus was done, his dusky pink lips curled up in a smile and his eyes opened. Amazing eyes. Big and almond shaped, with irises as dark as chocolate bonbons and lashes any woman would die for.

Finally seeing Rabin, the young man stopped, eyes and mouth open wide in surprise. "Oh. Hi."

Rabin felt like applauding but didn't, since he still held his bags. "Hi."

The kid's mouth closed and his throat worked over a swallow while an embarrassed flush colored softly rounded cheeks. "You must be Rabin." Tucking the towel back into his waistband, the young man hastily circled around the island toward him. One hand extended to go with a wide, welcoming smile. "I'm Izzy."

Rabin set his suitcase down and switched the guitar case to his left hand. "Nice to meet you, Izzy." If he hadn't heard Brent's voice at the gate, he'd think he was in the wrong place. Although Izzy did look a little familiar.

Izzy stepped back. "I'm Brent's cousin. I'm staying with them for the summer."

"Ah." Rabin kept his grin, although he had the weirdest feeling that he was drowning in big brown eyes.

"Hey!" Brent's voice and slap on his shoulder shocked him out of his trance. Brent took a step into the room so Rabin could see him properly. A few months hadn't changed him much. His pitch-black hair was shorter, perhaps recently cut, so the curls stopped just below his ears. Rabin had never seen him unshaven before,

but Brent's afternoon shadow wasn't all that dark. He wore jeans that had seen better days and a threadbare button-down over a white T-shirt. The clothing and the lack of shoes showed that he was right at home. Rabin was profoundly glad to see Brent without a brace on his right hand. They'd last seen each other when Brent had fractured his hand and needed Rabin to fill in for him when Heaven Sent played a New Year's concert. Since Rabin hadn't been called to substitute in Japan in March, he could only assume Brent was all healed. *Thank God*. Great as it had been to play with Heaven Sent, he wouldn't wish further injury on a man who'd become a very good friend.

"I see you met Izzy." Without a word, Brent picked up Rabin's suitcase. "The brat's staying with us for the summer. Lucky us, he's an amazing cook."

Not until the mention of "brat" did Izzy's wide eyes stray from Rabin's face. He gave his cousin a narrow look and stuck out his tongue.

Brent laughed. "See what I mean about the brat part?" He spun Rabin around by the arm. "Come on. Let me show you to your room."

"Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes," Izzy called after them.

Rabin glanced over his shoulder to find Izzy's gaze roaming down his body. Caught checking Rabin's ass, Izzy flushed, then grinned and winked before retreating behind the kitchen island.

"Don't mind Izzy," Brent said, leading the way up a wide staircase of polished wood. "He's a good kid and mostly harmless."

"Mostly?"

Brent waited for Rabin to catch up with him on the landing. "He's gay. Could you tell?" Dark eyes were filled with mirth under a long fringe of hair the same shiny black as Izzy's.

Rabin pretended shock. "No. Really?"

Brent snorted, proceeding down the hall. "My aunt figured Hell and I would be a good influence on him."

“And why she would think that, we don’t know,” came a musical voice from down the hall. Hell stepped out of an open doorway, dressed as casually as Rabin had ever seen him in a loose T-shirt and snug jeans. Like Brent, he was barefoot, and Rabin thought he even detected a bit of a tan to that normally porcelain skin. The hair that had been faded lavender when Rabin last saw him was now stark white. Not the white of age. Either the shoulder-length curls were bleached, or that was his natural color.

“Hey, Hell,” Rabin greeted, accepting an air kiss with a brief hug made a little awkward by the guitar case. “You going blond these days?”

A graceful hand strangely bereft of all but one gold ring lifted to comb through said curls. “I cannot be bothered with color these days,” he proclaimed, his German accent clipping his words. “Too much to do.” He turned back into the room he’d come from. “Here, this is your room.”

“He just does it because I like it,” Brent announced, following them both into the room.

To that, Hell’s only response was a snort.

Rabin grinned, enjoying their banter. He’d never been close to an openly gay couple before them. It was nice to see them so comfortable together. And to be comfortable *with* them. He’d never say it to their faces, but Rabin had been kind of leery of gay men before—a product of how he’d grown up, he supposed, since there weren’t any homosexuals he could remember. But he’d known Brent before he’d known Brent was gay, and spending time with Heaven Sent over New Year’s had shoved aside all of Rabin’s ignorant doubts.

He set his guitar case right beside the bed, then did a slow turn around, whistling as he stopped. “Wow, all this for me?”

There was a wide window overlooking a lawn and trees. He’d get to see some amazing sunsets if the last vestiges of the sun he could see in the sky now was any indication. The walls of the room were papered in a white and green pattern with a little bit of gold laced in. Two dressers, a table, a large reclining chair, and the bed’s

head- and footboards were all solid, heavy pine. The bedding was green and white, with one gold throw pillow perched at the head. He appreciated—and coveted—the framed vintage tour posters for Pink Floyd, the Stones, and The Who that graced the wall. But for those, Rabin had to wonder who'd decorated. Hell might have the touch for it. Doubtful Brent did.

"This is your bathroom," Hell told him, indicating the open door. "The cleaning crew keeps the closet stocked, but if you need something, let us know."

Brent pushed back the heavy green curtain that had obscured half the window. "Sorry, no lake view, but the only rooms with views are ours and the one across the hall, and Izzy claimed that one already."

Rabin nodded, noting that Izzy would be close. Good thing he'd gotten a good initial vibe. "Anyone else living here?"

"Nope." Brent sat on the arm of the heavy chair. "Just the four of us. Cleaning crew comes in once a week, and Hell's been trying out gardeners for the wilderness outside."

Shaking his head, Hell wandered close enough to press himself against Brent's side. Obediently, Brent circled his slim waist with one arm. "*Someone* must care for the trees."

"I know." As Hell's arm draped his shoulders, Brent focused again on Rabin. "So, this'll do for a while?"

"Are you kidding me? This is great. Though you should've put me in the basement or something. I might never leave digs like this." He made sure to emphasize the joke with his tone.

Hell smiled. "You might prefer the basement. That is our studio."

Brent grinned when Rabin's face lit up. "I'll show you that later. And no worries—stay as long as you like. We'll let you know when you've overstayed."

Rabin didn't really doubt they would. "It'll just be for a month or so. As soon as I find a place, Zane'll be out to join me."

Brent nodded. "And then we can get the Indigo Knights up and going again."

"Damn straight."

With an indulgent smile, Hell pulled away from Brent. He pointed at the one suitcase Brent had set down beside one of the dressers. "Is that all your luggage?"

"I've got two more in the truck, but that's it."

"You should bring them up." Hell headed for the door. "And we should join Izzy. Dinner should be ready."

Rabin smiled after him, then startled when he saw that Brent hadn't moved.

"A word of warning about my cousin."

"Oh?"

"Nothing bad, but..." Brent stood, then shoved his hands into his back pockets. "He *will* flirt. Shamelessly. He only recently came out, and I think he's feeling the freedom of being around people who understand. It's harmless, and he wouldn't *do* anything, but if he makes you uncomfortable, let me know, okay?"

Rabin blinked. "Oh, hey, no worries. I'm fine. Besides"—he put on a big grin—"he's cute. What is he, like, twelve?"

Brent chuckled. "Try twenty-two."

"What? No way." Twelve was a stretch, but Rabin hadn't pegged him for more than eighteen.

"I know. He looks young for his age."

"I could see how that could be a problem."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know he'd be staying with us until a few weeks ago, but when my aunt called... Who knows—maybe we can help him."

"Hey, really, no worries. I understand about family. Got a few cousins of my own who I'd go out of my way for."

"Cool. Thanks. Let's go get the rest of your stuff. You're gonna *love* Izzy's cooking. He's going to school to be a chef."

“Really? Brilliant.”

The summer was looking even better.

Chapter Two

“So, are you English?”

Rabin suppressed a grin, badly. “What gave me away?”

Izzy set the casserole dish on the kitchen table, then took his seat across from Rabin and Brent, who sat on the bench with their backs to the bay window. The youngest man propped an elbow on the table, chin on his palm, and gazed adoringly at Rabin. “You have that überlovely accent.”

Hell, sitting beside Izzy, raised an eyebrow. “And I do not?”

Izzy grimaced at Hell. “Different! Besides, you’re taken.”

Brent caught Izzy’s eye as the younger man turned back toward Rabin. “And Rabin’s off-limits.”

Izzy sat back, spreading both palms on the table to either side of his empty plate. “I wasn’t suggesting anything.”

“You most definitely *were*, and I’m telling you to lay off. Rabin’s straight.”

Izzy made a moue at his cousin. “He said on the Wade Jenkins show in January that he was undecided.”

Rabin sat back, laughing aloud, delighted that anyone would remember that.

Brent answered for him. “That was just kidding around. He was playing a gig with *us*.”

As Rabin calmed, Izzy playfully pouted. “No fair.” He gave Rabin a coy glance. “Are you sure you’re not just a *bit* curious?”

Hell tweaked Izzy’s ear. “Behave.”

Izzy yipped and turned the pout on Hell, who blithely concentrated on dishing casserole onto his plate.

Amused, Rabin spread out a napkin on his lap. "I will admit to being a bit curious, sure."

"Nyah." Izzy stuck his tongue out at Brent, then Hell. "See?"

Brent shook his head, accepting the spoon from Hell and leaning toward the deep dish in the center of the table. "All right, dude. I tried to help you. You're on your own."

"Oh poo on you." Izzy spooned corn colored with what looked like green and red peppers onto his plate. "I'm not *that* bad."

Both Brent and Hell snorted, which made Rabin laugh and Izzy growl.

But Izzy wasn't one to hold a grudge long. By the time their plates were filled and after a few compliments on the mouthwatering casserole, he was all smiles again.

"So, Rabin, since I never got my answer, are you English?"

"Half. My mother is from Brighton. My father is from Virginia."

"How did they meet?"

Rabin glanced at Hell and Brent, but they both showed moderate interest, so he continued. "Dad's an astronomer. He spent some time at Nottingham, teaching, and met my mother there."

"Did you grow up here or there?"

"Both, but mainly there. They never married, just sort of shared me."

Like most people, Izzy hooked on to the never-married bit. "They never married? Oh man, what was *that* like growing up?"

"Tedious. I spent a lot of time on airplanes. Mostly with Mum for the school year and Dad for the summer. To their credit, they both tried their best by me and each other. It was all very fair."

"Where are they now?"

“Dad’s transferred to Montana and works for NASA now. Mum’s back to Brighton. She’s married with two other kids.”

“Oh, how...melancholy.”

Rabin chuckled, amused by Izzy’s word choice. “It could have been worse. I get to enjoy dual citizenship, which is fun sometimes.”

Izzy cocked his head to the side, toying with his food but most of his attention on Rabin. “Have you traveled much?”

“Not really, to be honest. I went back and forth from home to home, but we never traveled much else.” He shrugged. “I saw more of the States last year when the record label sent us on the tour of the west. Not that I got out much.”

Brent chewed thoughtfully. “That was a pretty big tour, wasn’t it?”

“Good-sized. We covered California, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado. And Vegas. Vegas was the only town I really got to see any of.”

Hell raised his glass. “One must see Vegas.”

Brent and Rabin toasted with him.

Izzy frowned. “I don’t get it. You went all those places and didn’t get to see anything?”

Brent pointed his fork at Izzy. “If you’re on tour, you have to *make* time to see anything.”

“And time is not always available,” Hell added.

Brent gave Rabin a sidelong glance. “You guys were on a pretty tight schedule, weren’t you?”

“Really tight. But that was the best month of my life.”

“Month?” Izzy’s jaw dropped. “How many concerts is that?”

“Twenty-four, I think.”

“In one month? That’s insane.”

“That’s rock ’n’ roll,” Brent drawled.

Izzy glanced between Brent and Rabin, then at Hell. “You’re all insane.”

“No doubt,” Hell agreed.

Izzy sat back. “All that to play music?”

Rabin grinned. “It’s the best high there is. When you’ve got a huge audience all dancing to your tunes and following your vibe, there’s nothing like it. Better than sex.”

Izzy’s grin twisted, his eyes narrowing. “Nothing’s better than sex.”

Brent bumped Rabin’s shoulder. “Watch it.”

Izzy sighed, sitting forward to commence his meal. “I just don’t think I could stand going to all those different places and not *see* anything.” He glanced at his cousin. “You got to see a lot the last time you were on tour, didn’t you? You told me all those stories about Japan.”

“My situation with Heaven Sent is different now. We schedule in some free time. But when we were struggling, it was pretty awful.”

“Please. You guys were never struggling.”

Brent rolled his eyes. “Okay, sure. I’ll just forget those first few years living in vans and playing nightclubs.”

“Okay, okay. But it’s hard to believe that when you’ve got what you have now.” Izzy waved his fork up to indicate the house.

“If you think we don’t work for what we have,” Hell told him mildly, “you’re sadly mistaken.”

“All right, I’m sorry. No offense.”

“None taken.”

There was a moment of awkward silence as they all continued to eat. Then Izzy’s attention snagged on Rabin again. “I know you probably hear this a lot, but I love ‘Simplicity.’”

Rabin smiled. “Thanks.” “Simplicity” was the Indigo Knights’ hit single. The one song that had hit any chart. The song that had landed them the opening spot on

Jade Cruiz's comeback tour. The song that had gotten them the record deal. But the record company had kept the option for a second album, and when the second and third singles from the first album tanked, they'd let the Knights go. One month, they'd been on their way, opening for a well-known band, and two months later, they were on their own, back to square one. Despite that, he was proud of "Simplicity," a devilishly catchy tune.

"Is it the Knights you guys are going to work with?" Izzy asked, looking to Rabin and Brent.

"Yep," Brent answered, setting his fork down on an empty plate. "Rabin and I have some ideas."

Rabin grinned so big his jaw hurt. "Yep."

This was it. With Brent's help and some changes within the Knights, Rabin and his band were going places. He could *feel* it.

Chapter Three

“Oh man, this is great!”

Rabin turned a three-sixty in the middle of the largest of three studio spaces in the place Brent and Hell now owned. One wall was still unfinished, a mess of insulation, wires, and equipment, but Rabin could see how slick it'd be when it was done. Hardwood floors, recessed lighting, plenty of hookups for mics, amps, and instruments. If you didn't mind the massive board mounted underneath the window, the console room felt like a living room, complete with dark blue carpet and wood paneling.

“Nice, huh?” Brent leaned in the doorway between the studio and the console room, a satisfied grin on his face as his dark gaze took everything in. “Ever since I saw my first real studio, I wanted one of these.”

Rabin grinned. “So is this one of those promises you made to yourself before you got famous?”

Brent nodded slowly, quiet pride showing. “Yeah. It is.”

Rabin took a few steps closer. “Well, I'm happy to help your dreams come true.”

That got Brent's attention. When he saw Rabin was joking, he laughed. “Whatever you say, man.” He turned back inside. “C'mon, we should be getting back home. If we're lucky, we'll get some time to work before dinner.”

“Oh man.” Rabin followed Brent through the carpeted room and beyond to the hallway. “Between your personal studio and Izzy's cooking, I'm kind of disappointed I found that flat.”

Brent laughed as they passed by the open doors that led to two more console rooms with smaller studios beyond. “Did you sign the lease?”

“Yeah, it’s a done deal. That Realtor you hooked me up with was great.”

Nodding, Brent held the door open at the end of the hall. “I’m glad she could help.”

“She did. And with all the help you’ve given me already, I’m quite spoilt.” He stopped to face Brent in the middle of the small, carpeted reception area. “How can I pay you back?”

Brent patted his shoulder. “Don’t worry about it.”

“No, I owe you.”

“Fine. Pay me back by making the Indigo Knights’ next album a success.”

Rabin rolled his eyes as he followed Brent out the front door. “That’s not enough.”

“That’s plenty. Remember, I get a part of that success.”

They hurried down a flight of stairs. “There’s got to be something I can do.”

Brent stopped at street level to unhook black sunglasses from the neck of his T-shirt and put them on. “You haven’t been any trouble, really. We’ve enjoyed having you at the house, and you and I have gotten a shitload of work done.”

That was for sure. Rabin’s heart surged with pride to think of the five songs the two of them had written in just the two weeks Rabin had been staying at the house. A few of the songs were in better shape than others, but three of them were good enough that he’d sent the tracks to Zane for a listen, giving him a head start on coming up with lyrics before he got to Chicago. “Well, that’s just been fun.”

Depressing the handle of the outside door, Brent gave him a grin. “My point exactly.”

“Okay.” Rabin followed Brent down a short flight of cement steps, then headed for the passenger door of Brent’s Corvette. He opened the door and stopped,

catching his friend's gaze over the roof of the car. "But as soon as we make gold, I'm buying you that slide guitar."

Laughing loudly, Brent descended into the driver's seat. "Deal."

Satisfied, Rabin settled himself into the passenger seat, and they were off. Brent made a call home to tell Izzy they were on their way and found out that Hell was back in town—having gone to Miami for a few days—and would be joining them for dinner as well.

"So, this weekend," Brent started after shutting down the car's Bluetooth receiver, "Hell and I were thinking of heading to New York. There's a band there he wants to see."

"Nice. Who?"

"I don't remember their name. They're new." He glanced at Rabin, but his eyes were hidden by the sunglasses. "Will you be okay without us?"

"With moving? Sure. Zane'll be here Monday. I just need to go out and find a bed."

Eyes on the road, Brent shook his head. "That's not what I meant. Will you be okay in the house alone with Izzy this weekend?"

Startled, Rabin stared at Brent's profile. Then he laughed. "I'm okay if he is."

Brent sighed. "You know what I mean. You can't have missed that he has a thing for you."

Rabin smiled, facing forward. "You think?"

"Please. It's not like he tries to hide it."

No, he didn't. It wasn't that Izzy ever did anything to make Rabin uncomfortable, but he had made his admiration obvious. "Sorry about that."

"Not your fault. I should have known better. And you've been great about it."

"No trouble at all. Doesn't upset me." He thought it was cute, actually.

"Good. But will you be okay with him? If not, I can send him out of town, or we can take him with us."

“No way. That’s ridiculous. If anything, *I* should vacate if you think there’ll be a problem.”

Brent stopped at a light. “I’m not going to ask you to get a hotel the last weekend before you move into your new place.”

“Thanks for that. But no, I’m good if he’s good.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine with it. You just watch yourself.”

Rabin chuckled. “You think he’ll jump me?”

“Seriously? I wouldn’t put it past him to try.”

“You worry too much.”

“If you say so.” Brent’s tone said he wasn’t convinced. But he dropped the subject and cranked up the satellite radio.

Amused, Rabin was quiet for a while, wondering why it didn’t bother him about Izzy. Aside from passing curiosity, he’d never been that attracted to men. Izzy was certainly cuter than most. If he *was* going to do a guy, it’d be a guy like Izzy or Hell. He had no desire to hook up with someone like Brent, for instance, or any of his other bandmates. But he wasn’t going to hook up with anyone. Izzy was Brent’s cousin and under his care. It wouldn’t be right. Besides, Rabin did just fine with women.

Thinking of... If he was contemplating doing it with a guy, he needed to hook up with a member of the opposite sex and get himself laid. It’d been three months since he’d had sex, and that was way too long. A night with a willing body would be just the thing to celebrate right before he went back into the studio.

Chapter Four

“Are you going out?”

Rabin glanced aside from his reflection in the dresser mirror to see Izzy leaning in the open doorway behind him. The waist of his snug jeans was covered by an untucked blue button-down, and his black hair was loose and curling around his shoulders.

Rabin looked back at himself, running fingers through the longer hair atop his head. “I thought I might check out a club, yeah.”

“Can I go?” Before Rabin could think up a response, Izzy was a few steps into the room. “Please? I don’t want to be in this big house all by myself.”

Rabin wouldn’t admit to himself that part of the reason for going out was to get away from Izzy. Wasn’t true. Why did he need distance when Izzy had been perfectly well behaved all day? Rabin wasn’t at all uneasy at the prospect of spending the night alone with him in the house. “I don’t know if it’d be your kind of club.”

“My kind?” The open cuffs of Izzy’s shirt fell back from his forearms just before he folded them across his chest. “What? You mean a gay club?”

“Yeah.” Done spiking his hair, Rabin turned around. He pretended to ignore Izzy’s dark gaze checking him out from head to foot and back again, but did wonder if Izzy liked the leather pants and red silk T-shirt. “I wouldn’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“Why would I think you were going to a gay club?”

Rabin shrugged.

“Oh, I get it. You’re looking to get laid.” It wasn’t a question.

No sense denying. “I am.”

To his surprise, Izzy smiled. “That’s okay. I know how to call a cab for a ride home.” He stepped closer, opening his eyes big like a puppy dog. He folded his hands under his chin. Scratch the puppy dog—make that a five-year-old determined to get what he wants. “Please? It doesn’t matter to me if it’s a gay club or not. I promise I won’t embarrass you. I just want to go dancing. It’s been a long time since I got to get out and let loose.” With an impish smile, he raised his arms in the air and did a little dance in a circle to demonstrate. Not bad, in Rabin’s opinion.

“Are you sure?”

Like a kid on Christmas who just got permission to open his first present, Izzy clapped his hands and jumped up and down. “You’ll take me with you?”

“Yes. But you make sure you’ve got cab fare. Just in case.”

Izzy was already rushing out the door. “Of course. Wouldn’t want to cock block you.”

Cock block? Strange to think of another guy as an impediment to getting a girl. Wouldn’t be an issue with any of his other friends. *Isn’t an issue with this one.* They were going to be fine. And hey, if he didn’t get laid tonight, that wasn’t a big deal. Zane was due in on Monday, and they were going into the studio middle of the week. That would be his prime focus for the foreseeable future. He’d gone long stretches without sex before.

He thought he was going to have to wait forever for Izzy to get ready, but the younger man was actually waiting for him when he gathered the rest of his things and stepped into the hall. The button-down was gone, replaced with a snug gray shirt that stretched very nicely across his chest and abs. The jeans were the same he’d been wearing, and he had low leather boots and socks in hand, ready to don.

Izzy beamed at him. “Ready to go!”

“Wow.”

“What?”

“You don’t have to take an hour to get ready?”

Izzy’s arms fell to his sides. “I thought you were ready to go?”

“I am.”

“Oh, I see.” Rolling his eyes, he turned toward the stairs. “Because I’m gay, I take a million years to get ready?”

“Well...” Rabin laughed. “Yeah.”

“Not *all* gay men are obsessed with their looks.”

“You are.”

Halfway down the stairs, Izzy stopped to round on Rabin. “I’m not!”

For safety’s sake, Rabin backed up two steps out of Izzy’s arm range. He grinned. “You are.”

“Hmmm. And which one of us is wearing eyeliner, hmmm?”

Rabin’s eyes narrowed. “Hey, I’m a rock star. It’s part of my look.”

“A rock star.” Another eye roll. Then Izzy was headed down the stairs again. “A rock star without a band and one hit single.”

Bristling, Rabin followed. “All right. Almost a rock star.”

At the front door, Izzy opened it and motioned him through. “A rock-star-in-training?” The harsh porch light threw crazy shadows onto Izzy’s profile, and for a moment, the soft lines of his jaw and brow looked just like a girl’s. A really pretty girl.

Shaking the thought, Rabin puffed up his chest and thumped it as he passed by Izzy into the night air. “A rock-star-to-be.”

Behind him, Izzy laughed. “All right.”

Rabin turned and walked backward toward the car. “All the doors are locked?”

“Locked.” Both shoes in one hand, Izzy raised the other to rattle his keys. “Keys in hand.”

Rabin nodded, his own spare keys in his pocket with his wallet. “Let’s go, then. I’ll show you how a rock star parties.”

“Oh.” Izzy followed after shutting and locking the front door. “I can *hardly* wait.”

* * *

Rabin had never had a particular problem picking up girls. He was reasonably good-looking, fairly charming, and the English accent usually cinched the deal—the main reason he’d never tried to lose it. He wasn’t terribly good at long-term relationships, but he excelled at short-term and usually managed to stay friends with a good number of his one-night stands. Good enough that some of them became regular one-night flings. Unfortunately, all of them were back in Virginia or New York, so they couldn’t help him out tonight.

The club was hopping. After he purchased drinks for himself and Izzy, Rabin gravitated toward the band. They weren’t bad, although their arrangements were a little slow for his tastes. He lost Izzy after a song, then spied him a little later on the dance floor, bouncing with the crowd in front of the stage. If he didn’t know any better, he’d say Izzy was all of eighteen, *maybe* twenty, especially with his long hair tumbling about his shoulders. Strangely, it turned out that Izzy was a chick magnet. Rabin gradually lost interest in the band in favor of watching Izzy draw them in, bumping into them, smiling, then dancing side by side. By the time the band took a break and a DJ took over, Izzy had at least five girls giggling and fluttering around him. The gaggle of them made their way to one of the small booths that lined the wall beside the dance floor.

“Time to find someone,” Rabin told himself, abandoning his long-finished drink on a side table and wading into the crowd.

But he wasn’t up for it. The urge for sex wasn’t gnawing at him, and without that, he wasn’t much in the mood. He made eye contact and smiled at a number of lovely girls but never found himself gearing up to talk to any.

“Well, bugger me.” His lack of interest stranded him near one end of the bar, staring at the empty stage. His mind wandered as he listened to the music that surrounded him, mentally rearranging the chords how he might have worked them.

A hand closed around his upper arm, startling him. He turned toward it and down and felt his heartbeat kick up to see Izzy’s dark gaze through the lacy filter of shiny black fringe. The lighting wasn’t great in Rabin’s corner, but he could see the telltale flush of exertion over Izzy’s cheeks and neck and a dark patch at the collar of his T-shirt indicating he’d worked up a sweat.

Izzy tugged, and Rabin obediently bent his ear nearer so Izzy could be heard over the music. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“I see that. Why?”

Rabin shrugged. Why indeed? He hadn’t been able to answer that one himself. Judging by the way he was hungrily staring at Izzy, his priorities of the night seemed to be off. “I think I’m going to take off.”

Izzy’s jaw dropped, and Rabin knew he had to clear his head when he caught himself trying to catch a glimpse of Izzy’s tongue. Shadows only let him see the darkness of Izzy’s mouth surrounded by soft pink lips. Okay, the pink he recalled—vividly—from memory, since the lighting currently made them dark gray.

“Really?” Izzy was evidently unaware of Rabin’s scrutiny—thank Christ. He cast a glance over his shoulder. “Okay. Let me say good-bye, and I’ll come with.”

“No no. You’re having fun. You should stay.”

“What, the girls? No. It’s fine. They’re on the prowl anyway.” He hesitated, giving Rabin a look. “You want me to introduce you? They’d *love* you.”

Although the girls Izzy had been with were all perfectly lovely, Rabin recognized that he’d now completely lost interest in hooking up. Best to leave. “Nah.”

“You sure? I’m positive any one of them would be a sure thing for you. They’re really nice.”

“Nah. Thanks, though.” He was *not* going to let a gay friend set him up with a girl. That was just wrong.

“Okay, give me a few.”

Rabin held up his valet ticket. “I’m gonna get the car. Meet me outside if you really want to go home.”

Izzy nodded, then was gone. Only when he stepped away did Rabin realize Izzy had held his arm the entire time. He missed the warmth. “You’ve lost it, old man,” he told himself, wading through the crowd to the main entrance.

The night air felt good after the cloying heat from inside. Rabin was surprised when a glance at his cell phone told him it was only midnight, much earlier than he’d thought. The valet was just stopping his truck at the curb when Izzy appeared with a girl in tow. She was slightly taller than him—probably the heels—with curly brunette hair. From a distance, they’d look like brother and sister. Close up, not so much. She was quite a bit darker of skin and not as young-looking. But she did have big brown eyes, now slightly glazed from alcohol. By that and the way she wove as she walked, he knew she was drunk.

Izzy gave him a sheepish grin. “You mind if we drive Tina home? She says it’s not far.”

The girl gave Rabin a weak, watery smile. Then she squinted, and her smile grew as she really saw him. “Hi.”

Rabin shrugged. “Sure. Hop in.”

It took Izzy’s help to boost the girl up into the passenger seat. Luckily, they were both small enough to fit in the one seat, although Izzy had to hug her close to keep her from pitching forward. Tina was aware enough to give Rabin good directions, though, and she was true to her word about it not being far. Ten minutes later, she had Rabin stop in front of a brick apartment building.

“You guys wanna come up?” she asked, doing her best to focus on Rabin’s face. She’d tried to talk more during the ride, but giving directions had maxed out her ability to concentrate.

He smiled and reached up to brush the back of one finger down her cheek. “No, thanks, love. Will you get upstairs okay?”

She just stared hungrily at him.

“I should probably walk her up,” Izzy suggested from behind her.

“Good idea. I might have to drive around the block”—there was nowhere to park on the street—“but I’ll meet you back here.”

He did indeed have to drive around the block once, but Izzy was waiting for him on the curb when he reached the building again.

“I’m sorry about that.” Izzy climbed into the passenger seat. “I couldn’t let her stay there, and her friends weren’t going to help her out anytime soon.”

“No problem. Glad we could help.”

Chuckling, Izzy held up a small slip of paper. “She wanted me to tell you that you’re *‘fucking fine’* and are welcome to call her anytime.”

Surprised, Rabin glanced over to watch Izzy tuck the paper into one of the cup holders. “You’re joking.”

“Nope. In fact, I have the number of another one of her friends on my phone, and I was told to let you know she’s available. She’s cute too. If you like blondes.”

That made Rabin laugh. “I never even met her.”

“Didn’t matter. I pointed you out. They were all gaga over you. I was coming to get you for them when you said you wanted to leave.” Big eyes met his over the truck’s console. “Sorry. Should I have mentioned that back at the club?”

He didn’t really seem sorry, but Rabin let that pass. “No. I wasn’t into it.”

“That’s what I thought. What happened? I thought you were all set to get laid tonight?”

"I was. Just..." He shrugged. Maybe it was because Zane wasn't around. Usually the two of them went out together, even if they rarely came home together. "But what about you? No interesting lads?"

Izzy sighed happily, settling down in his seat. "I do love when you turn up the accent. Is it conscious or just this time of the night?"

"You can't have missed that he has a thing for you," Brent had said.

"Both." Rabin kept his eyes on the road, wondering if he was giving off the wrong signals.

"I'll bet it works like a charm on girls."

I bet it'd work on you. That was *if* Rabin was interested. He cleared his throat. "But what about you and the lads?"

Izzy gave a wistful sigh. "Didn't meet any tonight."

"Could be that you were surrounded by girls."

"Could be. But I wasn't looking for anyone." There was a hollow note to his words.

Just like that, the mood in the truck changed. "Have you dated since you got to Chicago?"

"Me? No."

"Why not? School doesn't keep you *that* busy." Izzy's classes were only a few hours during the day, and he spent a lot of time at the school with his new friends. He also did some work around the house, mostly in the kitchen, despite Brent and Hell's protests. But they let him do it so he felt he was paying them back for staying with them. In the time Rabin had been at the house, he could only remember Izzy going out at night with his friends twice, and he hadn't stayed out that late.

"That's not it." His voice trailed off, and Rabin glanced over to see him turned toward his window. "Did Brent tell you why I'm here? Why I left home?"

Oh. "No. Just that you had some trouble, and your mom thought spending some time with Brent and Hell would be good for you."

"I guess that's one way of putting it." He sighed, adjusting in his seat to lean a shoulder against the door. "It's so cliché. I slept with one of my teachers."

"Wow."

"That's not all. He was also married, so he was very much in the closet. *And* he's really well known in my town."

"I take it it was a small college?"

"Tiny community college. Tiny little town. Practically everyone knows everyone." Izzy folded his arms over his chest, drawing into himself. "We dated for three years. But we finally got caught by another teacher."

"Ouch." Rabin did some mental calculations. If Izzy was twenty-two, then the affair started when he was nineteen?

"Yeah. The other teacher told, and it was all over the school in no time flat. I got suspended; he got fired. Last I heard, his wife had left him and took the kids." He sighed. The words were said by rote, like they were engraved in his brain. "My mom tried to be supportive of me, but my dad, not so much. He works for the school board and has a lot of ties to the college."

Rabin raised his brows and nodded. "I can see how that would be awkward. He didn't know you were gay?"

"I wasn't out. Some of my friends knew, but..." He shrugged.

Rabin wondered how much Izzy had changed that no one had known he was gay. Maybe they'd suspected but never talked to Izzy about it. "Damn. That's harsh."

Izzy propped an elbow on the door, watching the sights whiz by. "Awful part is that if it hadn't been for all that, he'd have been fine with me being gay. He told me so." Izzy shook his head. "I didn't expect that."

Rabin's heart bled a little. He could only imagine what it was like to land that big of an announcement on your friends and family.

“Anyway, Mom got in touch with Brent, and here I am. But Gregory...” He shrugged again. “I haven’t been much interested in anyone else.”

“Understandable.” What else could he say? At a guess, the bright T-shirts with gay slogans were part of Izzy’s reaction to a bad experience. Rabin couldn’t say he blamed him.

“What about you?” Rabin could hear in Izzy’s voice that he was pulling himself from melancholy. “Any heartache in your past?”

“Not really. I’ve never had a lasting relationship.”

“Never? Is it because of your music?”

“Mostly, yeah. Zane and I have been pushing the Knights since we were in college. That’s over six years now.”

Izzy twisted to watch Rabin’s profile, leaning his head sideways against the headrest. “So the Knights is your first love?”

His small, romantic sigh made Rabin smile. “Music, yeah. Through the Knights.”

“You must be good if Brent’s impressed. Everyone tells me he’s a genius.”

Rabin chuckled. “He is.”

“Yeah, I believe it. I don’t know much about music; I’m sure you can tell.” A giggle, almost back to his normal level. “I just know what kind of songs that I like. I can’t even stick to one genre.”

“That’s not so bad. I’m the same way. I just like music.”

“Yeah?” Izzy pulled one knee up and hugged it, continuing to face Rabin. “That’s what I think. Music is just music, some good, some bad, but just because they’re the same *kind* doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

* * *

They had a good talk about music for most of the ride home. Rabin even amused Izzy by admitting he had a few polka records loaded on his laptop. Izzy hooted with glee, but he made Rabin promise to let him listen sometime soon.

They'd fallen silent by the time they reached the house. It wasn't an awkward silence, but Rabin could practically hear the buzz of Izzy's thoughts. He couldn't tell what they were, though, and he didn't think it was his business.

He followed Izzy up the porch and into the darkened house but felt oddly reluctant to head to his room. He'd been having a good time with Izzy.

"Want a snack?" Izzy stood, just a silhouette in the entrance to the kitchen, backlit by the moonlight from the bay window.

Given an excuse, Rabin decided it was just that. "Nah. I think I'm just going to head on up to bed." *Bed*. The word had a charge to it that made him look away. Even if he *was* feeling attraction—and that's probably what it was, strangely enough—he wasn't going to do anything about it. It was a weird night. One that should end before anything happened. "Night."

"Night."

Izzy didn't move as Rabin headed up the stairs. It was a relief to walk into the darkness of the hallway. Rabin walked into his room, closed the door, and didn't bother with a light. There was enough moonlight coming through the open window to see just fine. Besides, the chancy dark went with the feeling that he was missing something. It wasn't even sex. It was... He shook his head, unable to come up with anything. Maybe he should head down to Brent's studio and play for a while. Brent had told him he was welcome, and the guitar often helped him to make sense of his thoughts—or at least calm them. *Yeah, do that*.

But first, he needed to change. The leather pants and boots were stylish but not all that comfortable. His shirt was off, and he was sitting on the edge of the bed to remove his shoes and socks when the knock sounded at the door. He froze.

"Rabin?"

Don't answer. Stupid. Izzy knew he was there. "Yeah?"

Without waiting permission, Izzy opened the door, a ghostly blue figure draped in the shadows that were his loose hair and dark jeans. His shoes were gone. He stared at Rabin, expression blank, unreadable.

“What’s up?”

Izzy approached, and Rabin had to force himself to remain seated, torn between equally strong desires to stand up and flee, or stand up and reach for the smaller man.

Izzy stopped at his knees and tried a smile. Long, thick fringe mostly hid his eyes. “Thank you for tonight.”

Rabin summoned a smile back for him. *Nothing out of the ordinary here, nope.* “You’re welcome.”

Izzy searched his face—for what, Rabin tried not to know. “Rabin, I...”

Rabin frowned, forcing his gaze from Izzy’s. “Look, Iz, we should call it a night.” He’d stay in his room; he’d go to sleep and not go downstairs. He’d do that as soon as Izzy left.

“You’re right.” A palm cupped Rabin’s jaw. “You’re right.”

Startled by the touch, Rabin tilted his face back up. Izzy was right there, swooping down like a falcon catching a meal. Lips. Soft lips. Eager lips. Pressed against his own. At first, Rabin’s eyes stayed open in shock, but the blurred sight of Izzy’s long eyelashes caressing the soft ridges of his cheeks was too much to focus on when sensation ruled. He opened instinctively, his tongue seeking more. With a soft, happy moan, Izzy invited him in, tongue caressing tongue to coax Rabin to explore. *So sweet.* Rabin forgot he was kissing a guy and just concentrated on the mouth that easily melded with his. When Izzy straddled his lap, it was only natural to take hold of slim hips to pull that warm, solid body close. He fit so well, his slight weight perfect. Rabin slid one hand around back, teasing up the shirt hem to caress soft skin, encouraging gorgeous little moans he could barely hear. Fingers tightened in his hair, that little bit of pain egging him on to tilt his head and open wider. His blood heated with a fine tremor of pleasure.

Slowly, as the kiss calmed, proper brainwave function reasserted itself. Rabin opened his eyes and tilted his head back, but not far enough to lose the little nips and licks Izzy gave his lips. Rabin’s cock was rock hard and uncomfortable in his

leather pants, and Izzy's body pressed warm and willing against him didn't help matters any. "Wait."

Izzy didn't stop, his fingers warm against either side of Rabin's neck. His hips rocked forward.

Rabin dug his fingers into Izzy's waist and turned his head. "Wait."

"No no no." Izzy's breath caressed his lips, fingers tight on his skull behind his ears. "Don't think. Please...just..." They were kissing again. God, it was fantastic. How could Izzy taste so good?

Wait. "Izzy, no. This is—"

"This is fine." Tender kisses along his jaw. "It's okay."

"No. I'm not—"

"It's fine. I promise. Just this—no promises, no expectations, I swear." Finally dark eyes focused on his from inches away, pleading. Izzy was trembling—not a lot, but when he was pressed this close, Rabin could feel it. "I need to be close to...someone tonight. And I think you do too."

Rabin smoothed his hands over Izzy's back, trying to still the shaking. "But I'm not—"

"Gay. I know. It's okay." Another kiss, a tongue tip dragging his lip. "But this is nice, isn't it?" Teeth bit gently into his bottom lip.

Oh man, he did love that. "Yes." The admission bled from him without his permission.

"I can make it good. I swear." More kissing. Intense. Like Izzy was sipping slowly from his heart. "Please?"

He knew it was wrong. It couldn't be right. Not given what he wasn't, what he knew, and what Izzy had told him tonight. But that all seemed so far away, and the bundle in his arms was so desperate, so needy. For the first time in a long time, Rabin felt certain that he had *exactly* what someone else needed. He let Izzy keep

kissing him, let his hands roam up Izzy's back. He could provide comfort. He could accept pleasure. *Yeah.*

When Izzy's palm pressed his cock through the leather, he had to admit defeat. Comfort or lust, whatever it was, he was lost. He *wanted* this. His groan announced it for him, and Izzy's groan confirmed that the information had been passed on. Trembling subsided as eager hands yanked open his fly and rummaged inside to fish out Rabin's cock. Rabin sucked in Izzy's tongue when a fist closed around his shaft. Izzy swallowed Rabin's curse as the fist stroked up to squeeze the head. *Fuck.* Izzy knew what he was doing, finding the right places to rub and squeezing with just the right pressure.

They kissed while Izzy worked Rabin's cock. But then, in a flurry of movement, Izzy shoved out of Rabin's lap to sink to the floor between his knees. *Stop him.* Rabin fell back on his elbows, staring blearily at the ceiling, amazed by the heat surging through his veins. Stopping Izzy just wasn't going to happen. His body was completely in tune with the other man, who now had the leather pants all the way open and was pressing one cheek to the length of Rabin's erection. "Oh fuck."

"Yes." Izzy growled, now kissing up the shaft as his hands yanked Rabin's pants down his hips as far as they would go.

Rabin had to clutch the bedding, stifling a shout when Izzy's warm, wet mouth closed over the tip of him. Obviously it'd been too long since he'd had sex. That was the only possible explanation for how damn *good* it felt. His hips thrust up, hindered by the palms Izzy pressed to Rabin's thighs to support himself as he slowly took in most of Rabin's cock.

"Fu-uck." Rabin groaned, going cross-eyed from the gorgeous sensation.

He glanced down, and the look of pure bliss on Izzy's face as he tilted his head was almost Rabin's undoing. Black hair fell in loose curls to either side of his face and over Rabin's hips, darker shadows in the surreal light. Groaning, Rabin let his head fall back again, lost to Izzy's expertise. Izzy wrapped one hand firmly around the base of Rabin's cock to hold it while he bobbed his head up and down. Lips met

fist, then dragged back up, coating Rabin's cock with saliva so that both lips and fist could work together on the next stroke.

"Christ, you're gonna kill me." He fucking near whimpered, then gritted his teeth as Izzy worked his cock like a pro. He was trying to last as long as he could, but it just wasn't possible. That tingle was in his balls and was only going to keep going until he blew. "I'm gonna go."

With a wet slurp, Izzy's mouth released him, and his fist throttled the base of Rabin's shaft. "Not yet."

Rabin uncrossed his eyes and popped his head up to see Izzy draw away to stand by the side of the bed. Wet, swollen lips smiled at him before Izzy ripped off his shirt, then started on his pants.

Shit, this is happening.

"Just relax," Izzy crooned softly, pushing jeans down his slim hips. If there was any underwear, Rabin didn't see it. Izzy's cock sprang free and full from a dark nest of curls at its base. Damn it all if Rabin wasn't of the opinion that even Izzy's cock was pretty. "You don't have to do anything." Naked, Izzy knelt on the bed, reaching for Rabin's waistband. "I'll take care of everything."

Rabin fell back on the bed to lift his hips so Izzy could get his pants off. He was beyond stopping now, but that didn't mean he had to cop out and let Izzy run the show. Izzy dropped the leather, then knelt over his own jeans, pawing through the pockets. Sex was a two-person activity, or at least it always had been in Rabin's philosophy. Just because it was with a guy this time didn't mean that had to stop. Decided, Rabin sat up abruptly, grabbing Izzy's hand when he stood. Izzy's dark eyes widened in surprise.

"Who says I don't want to do anything?"

Before Izzy could protest, Rabin hauled him by the wrist onto the mattress and flipped him onto his back. A small tube fell from Izzy's hand, and Rabin recognized that he'd pulled lube from his jeans.

He rolled to kneel over the smaller man. "You came prepared?"

With his hair fanned across the pillows, Izzy looked like a fallen angel, spread out and naked underneath Rabin. His arms had landed above him, exposing pale forearms and stretching the sides of his torso. He wasn't sculpted, but he wasn't without tone, his muscles smooth with gentle curves. Tiny nipples peaked in the heated air between them, and his cock lay like a dark snake across his lower belly.

Izzy grinned, eyes still wide with delighted surprise. "I was hopeful."

Fuck it. Rabin's cock told him he wanted the body beneath him, whether it be male or female. It was inviting, and it was willing. Braced on one elbow, Rabin brought his free hand up to cup Izzy's jaw, watching the grin fade to an optimistic parting of lips. He kissed those lips, coaxing them farther open with his tongue so he could get a proper taste. With his sigh, Izzy's arms came down and wrapped around Rabin's neck, pulling them flush together as they kissed. Rabin let his hand wander down Izzy's neck, across his chest, and down his side until he found the sharp bone to one side of Izzy's hip. No swell, no cushion like on a girl, just that thrust of bone beneath silky-soft skin. Not to mention that something decidedly not female pressed eagerly against Rabin's belly. Rather than be turned off, it intrigued him, an obvious and somewhat familiar sign of Izzy's arousal. At first, Izzy's bent knee blocked Rabin from reaching between them, but Rabin firmly pushed it aside.

Izzy pulled from the kiss, anxious. "You don't have to."

Rabin grunted and recaptured Izzy's lips while he wormed his hand between them to wrap his fingers around Izzy's cock. *That* should let him know that Rabin was all the way into this. Izzy moaned, the eager sound goading Rabin on. He might have never done it from this angle, but he knew how to yank cock well enough, and the pleading that oozed from Izzy's throat told him what felt best. Intrigued and more turned on than he ever recalled being, he commandeered Izzy's mouth and jacked his cock as the man underneath him came apart.

"Wait—" Izzy tried to stop him, pushing at his shoulders.

Rabin growled, unaware of what came over him. He wasn't usually this demanding. "Come for me."

Izzy's eyes rolled up into his head, and his mouth went wide. Dark hair stuck in clumps to the sweat on his forehead and cheeks. Just a few more pumps and Izzy cried out, fingers digging into the meat of Rabin's shoulders while wet warmth spurted all over Rabin's hand and their bellies. *Well, that's different.* Yes, but then again, no. Exciting, just like sex should be.

"Damn." Izzy closed his eyes and dug the heel of one palm into the bridge of his nose.

Absurdly proud of himself, Rabin propped up on one elbow to watch Izzy's panting recovery. Quite deliberately, he smoothed his wet hand up Izzy's chest to dry it.

Swallowing, Izzy brought down his hand and finally focused on Rabin. His little smile was adorable. "That was awesome."

"Thank you."

Sated eyes narrowed, and Izzy's short nails raked down Rabin's chest. "Now you."

Rabin tilted his head back, sighing as both of Izzy's hands wrapped around his cock.

"What do you want?" Izzy murmured, nibbling at Rabin's jaw as his grip slowly dragged upward. "My mouth or my hands?"

Startled, Rabin blinked, then looked down at Izzy. "I thought we were..."

What he couldn't say must have shown in his eyes, because Izzy blinked back, showing similar surprise. "You want *that*."

Rabin swallowed, the grip on his cock making it hard to concentrate. As good as it felt, as heavenly as Izzy's mouth was, instinct told him that burying deep in Izzy's ass would be mind-blowing. Still... "No. Not if you don't."

"Oh God, I *do*, but I didn't think..." One thumbnail gently teased at the tip of Rabin's cock, thoroughly scrambling his brain. Lips brushed the pulse at his throat. "Roll over, and I'll ride you."

“No.” Rabin didn’t know what had gotten into him and, at the moment, couldn’t care. “You roll over.”

Hesitation. “You sure?”

“Yes.”

Hands were gone, and Rabin had to push back onto his knees to give Izzy room to roll over. He took the time to grab the lube. It’s not like I haven’t done this before, he told himself. Anal sex, that is. He’d been with girls who went wild over it. It couldn’t be that different, could it? But then he took a good look at the perfect twin globes of Izzy’s ass, topped by two adorable divots, and he knew that it wouldn’t be the same.

No turning back.

He unscrewed the top of the tube and squirted some of the cool liquid onto his fingers. Aware that dark eyes were watching him over Izzy’s shoulder, he leaned down to brush his lips over one side of Izzy’s back while his fingers traced the crack of Izzy’s ass. Sighing, Izzy relaxed, drawing one of his knees almost up to his side, opening himself, making it easier for Rabin to tease him open and find that tight little hole. Rubbing slowly, Rabin thoroughly wet the outside and took time for another squirt of lube before returning to ease the tip of one finger inside.

Izzy let out a little squeal, hugging a pillow to his chest. “You don’t have to be so careful,” he whispered.

Rabin smiled against the skin of his back. “I like it this way.” Encouraged, he let his entire finger slide slowly in before drawing it out.

“Okay by me.” Izzy sighed. “I’m just saying.”

Slipping the finger in again, he slid his nose up Izzy’s spine until he could whisper in Izzy’s ear. “Stop talking.”

Even though there was a veil of hair covering Izzy’s face, Rabin saw the grin. He rewarded it by pushing two fingers inside Izzy’s ass.

“Ah!”

Rabin froze, afraid he'd gone too fast. But then Izzy bit his lip and pushed his ass back into Rabin's hand, rolling his hips a little. Rabin smiled and twisted his hand, this time reading the squeak as one of pleasure. Suppressing his own urgency underneath the fun of finding a lover's hot spots, he took the time he could to prod and rub. But he could only put off his cock for so long. The three fingers buried tightly inside, together with the push of Izzy's hips and the gorgeous, wordless pleas that pushed from his throat, convinced Rabin it was time to move on.

"Don't move," he whispered into Izzy's nape, pulling back.

Anxious eyes found him over Izzy's shoulder. "Where are you going?"

"You forgot a condom."

"Oh. Right."

Rabin went to the dresser to open his wallet and pull out the strip of two that he'd been carrying for the night. He returned to the bed, aware Izzy was still watching him through that veil of hair. Did he think it hid the twinkle of his eyes or the curve of his chin? If so, he was badly mistaken, but Rabin wasn't going to correct him. Rabin ripped open a condom and dropped the second on the mattress before rolling lubed latex onto his erection. Izzy had been obedient enough about not moving, one knee still bent near his side, the other stretched out at an angle. Rabin could just see the curve of his balls underneath the winking pucker of his hole. Balls. Strange. But they didn't bother him. Rather, he thought they were cute, all dark and drawn up.

He knelt on the bed and put his hands to Izzy's ass, taking a moment to squeeze both sides. Izzy squeaked again, and then Rabin was done stalling. Kneeling over Izzy's back, he braced one hand on the mattress and used the other to aim his cock at Izzy's opening. He pushed, Izzy arched to roll his hips, and then Rabin was sinking into tight, hot heaven.

"Oh fuck." Izzy breathed it for him.

Rabin's forehead pressed the back of Izzy's shoulder as he used his hands to pull the smaller man up a little to ease the angle of their union. It felt too good. "I'm sorry," he rasped. "I'm not going to last long."

"S okay." Strong fingers reached back to twine around his neck. "Fuck me."

Groaning, Rabin lifted his face enough to bury it in the back of Izzy's neck. Smothered in damp, floral-scented curls, he bit down at the join of neck to shoulder and shoved his cock in to the hilt.

"Oh God, yes!"

Relieved by Izzy's shout, Rabin pulled out and shoved in hard. Once inside, he lost his finesse and couldn't find control to go slow. He could only hope that Izzy could take it as he slammed in hard enough to hear the slap of Izzy's ass against his hips.

Izzy writhed beneath him, pushing up, arching, crying wordlessly as his body sucked Rabin in. Rabin grunted and dropped down flush atop him, not so much thrusting as rolling his hips hard into Izzy's. He hooked an arm around Izzy's chest and pulled them both partially onto their sides. Izzy kept his knee bent and grappled with the bedspread in his desperation. Through a haze, Rabin realized that part of that grappling was Izzy's hand furiously pumping his own cock. Christ, he was hard again?

That was it. Rabin lost his rhythm and his control at once. Release exploded at the base of his spine and flooded over his senses. He pressed his cheek against the back of Izzy's skull and held on to his chest for dear life. Coherent thought was almost back when Izzy cried out. His arm stopped pumping, and the grip on Rabin's still-hard cock pulsed, making him groan in painful pleasure.

Izzy wilted in his arms, but Rabin was unwilling to let him go. They stayed, interlocked like pieces of a puzzle, for long moments as a square of moonlight inched off the bed.

With a groan, Rabin slowly unwound his arm from Izzy's chest. "You okay?"

"Mmm." Izzy slumped forward, face in the pillows. "M great."

Smiling, Rabin rolled away, letting his cock ease out of Izzy's ass. He smoothed a hand down the long curve of Izzy's spine until he could lightly smack one swell of his ass. *Beautiful*. He groaned again, arm coming up over his head as he swayed onto his back.

After a quiet moment, Izzy stirred, pushing up onto his elbows and turning to face Rabin. He had to scrabble with the mess of his hair to clear it from his face. Then he studied Rabin carefully. "You okay?"

Rabin gave him a smile. "I'm great."

"Really?" One palm hesitantly rested on the near side of Rabin's chest. "You're not freaked or anything?"

Rabin pretended to think about it, then shook his head, resuming his smile. "Nope." Which, in itself, was kind of freaky, but he was too worn out to worry about it.

"Oh good." Izzy slumped toward him and hid his face against Rabin's side for a moment. Then he peeked up again, this time with a smile. "I'm hungry, though."

Rabin barked a laugh. "*Hungry?*"

With the boundless energy of the teenager he resembled—but *isn't*, Rabin assured himself—Izzy scrambled up onto his knees. "Starving." He pushed forward to press his lips briefly to Rabin's. "You took a lot out of me, old man."

"*Old man!*" Rabin grabbed for him, but Izzy scampered from the bed with a laugh.

"C'mon downstairs. I'll make you something to eat."

Smiling, Rabin watched Izzy's very naked ass disappear through the bedroom door. Izzy didn't seem the worse for wear, and he was pretty sure they'd both enjoyed what they'd just done. He'd been in this position before with girls and hoped he could keep things on a friendly basis. And if it happened again...?

He had to think about it, staring at the ceiling. Did he want it to happen again? Truth? Yeah. Might just be the afterglow, but fucking Izzy had been mind-

altering. He hadn't come so hard in years. Maybe he *had* been missing something with guys all this time. Did that mean he was gay? Bisexual? He had to think about that one too, about Brent and Hell, about Brent's band members. Most of them had been with women before and settled on a man, and they were some of the happiest couples Rabin had ever met. Was he gay? Maybe, maybe not, but it was certainly not something to dread.

Chapter Five

Come for me. God, he'd actually *said* that. In context. And meant it. Most surprising of all, Izzy *had*.

Rabin was thinking too much. He acknowledged that to himself as he grabbed a pair of shorts from his suitcase, but he had to get his head on straight before he went downstairs. He'd heard Izzy leave his room already, presumably hosed off and dressed in something. Rabin hoped he wasn't naked. Although... The thought made his balls tingle. Damn, what was wrong with him? He could only wonder as he stepped into the bathroom and grabbed a cloth. He watched the water soak it, then glanced up at his reflection. He looked fucked. His pale skin was flushed, his chestnut hair was more of a mess than usual, and lube shone all over his lower belly. But it was his eyes, he decided, that gave away the level of his excitement. They only got that particular shade of deep blue when he had really good sex. He shook his head, using the wet cloth to swipe at his chest and groin. It was because the sex was new. That was it. Sex was always exciting when it was new. New person, new position, new places. Tonight he'd had all that *plus* a new gender. That made him laugh, and he heard the edge to it. *I'm losing it.*

Wiped down, he rinsed the cloth and draped it over the side of the sink, stepped into his shorts, ran his hands through his hair, and left the room. He headed straight for the hall, then the stairs. He wasn't going to hide. There was no *reason* to hide.

The sharp snap of a knife hitting a chopping board sounded from the brightly lit kitchen. Izzy was at the island, a bowl in front of him and at least five different kinds of fruit assembled on the tile around the board. Rabin was relieved to see that

he was dressed, wearing lightweight blue-and-white-striped drawstring pants that hung low on his hips. He gave Rabin a grin, then concentrated on his chopping. “I can make more than this, if you want. A sandwich or an omelet? Or”—he brandished the huge knife toward the refrigerator—“I can reheat some of the pasta from last night.”

“Whoa.” Rabin froze well beyond the knifepoint, hands up, palms out. “No, fruit’s fine.”

Seeing his reaction to the knife, Izzy grimaced mildly, rolled his eyes, and went back to his chopping.

Rather than give in to his instinct to go to Izzy’s side and snag something from the bowl, Rabin went to the table to wait. Being right next to Izzy just yet might not be a good idea. There were a few moments of awkward silence while Izzy chopped and Rabin stared at the table, unsure what to say. This was that same after-sex moment that he had with girls. Where it was important to point out that what they did was fun, but it didn’t mean they were a couple. Could he handle it the same way with a guy?

Izzy broke the silence. “So what time does Zane come in Monday?”

Startled by the subject, Rabin decided that was safe enough. “Late morning, probably. He’s staying in Cleveland Sunday night. It’s only five or six hours from there.”

“He’s got both your stuff in one truck?”

“There’s not much. His bed, a couch, and some chairs. Our TV. He might salvage his dresser and a couple of tables. That’s about it except for dishes and stuff. Not even sure he didn’t toss all that crap.”

“What about your stuff?” Izzy set the bowl of sliced fruit on the table and sat on the edge of one bench, catty-corner to Rabin. “From your bedroom?”

Rabin plucked a slice of peach from the top. “I didn’t have much of anything. I’ve got the stuff with me that really matters. The furniture wouldn’t survive the move. I told him to toss it all. I’m going to shop for a bed tomorrow.”

“Everything you have is in those three suitcases upstairs?”

“And the guitar case, yeah. Everything I care about. I sent some stuff to my dad to keep for me, but that’s about it. We never made enough to buy a hell of a lot.” He laughed at Izzy’s half-appalled look. “What? I’ve never had a ton of stuff like you do.”

“I don’t have a ton of stuff. Okay, yeah, I do. There’s even more at home. At my parents’.” He bit into an apple wedge, frowning at Rabin. “Why couldn’t you afford to buy stuff? What about the royalties from ‘Simplicity’? That was, like, a huge hit.”

Rabin tossed a few grapes into his mouth. “We’ve probably seen all the money we’re going to get from ‘Simplicity,’ and that’s almost spent.”

“But that’s a relatively new song. It just came out year before last.”

“That’s a lifetime in rock ’n’ roll. We got a pretty good advance off the album, but that’s it.”

Both elbows on the table, Izzy held a section of orange before him, dissecting it slowly. “I don’t understand. What about royalties?”

“We might not ever see any.” Rabin tried not to watch the orange juice dribbling down Izzy’s wrists.

Or the juice on his lips as he licked them.

“What?”

“It’s tricky.” Rabin leaned forward on one forearm, picking at the fruit in the bowl with his other hand. “See, the record company signed us, gave us some money to do an album and live and such. We did that and released ‘Simplicity.’ That did really well. Our next single, ‘Don’t Believe,’ tanked. Even so, they took a chance on us and put us on tour opening for Jade Cruiz. We finished the tour, and it didn’t do well enough for them to extend it beyond the Southwest. We released the last single, ‘Ginger Lee,’ right after that, and it did worse than ‘Don’t Believe.’ So they decided to option out of a second album—even though we’d already started writing—and released us from our contract.”

“But didn’t you get paid for the tour?”

He peeked up, glad to see Izzy had finished the orange, distressed when Izzy poked a finger in his mouth to suck it clean. “No. All that was covered by an advance too.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Yep, but pretty typical. But it lasted Zane and me until now.”

“That’s something, I guess.” Izzy plucked up a strawberry and held it to his lips. “And now?”

Rabin looked away before the strawberry passed Izzy’s teeth. “We’re both okay for a few months. But we’re going to need real jobs or another album advance soon.”

Izzy grimaced. “Why the hell would you want to get involved in a crazy business like that?”

Rabin laughed. “I wouldn’t do it without the music. And the performing. There’s nothing like it.”

“So, this thing with Brent...? He’s not a record company.”

“No. He’s agreed to help us finish recording our master tracks. If we’ve got the tracks for a whole album ready to go, a record company is more likely to sign us.”

“Why?”

“Because we’ve done most of the work. They get to listen to a finished product and decide they like it. Brent’s name on it as producer makes the deal sweeter.” At least, that was the plan. He sent up a quick prayer to the gods of music that it would work.

Izzy shook his head, sucking the pad of his thumb. “I guess all that makes sense to you.”

“Kinda.”

Izzy pushed to his feet. “Want some juice?”

Juice? Not after eating half a bowl of fruit. “Nah. Water?”

“Sure.” Izzy waited until he’d opened the refrigerator before asking his next question. “Is your friend Zane as crazy as you? About music?”

“Pretty much. It’s all we’ve ever wanted.”

“Does he write the lyrics?”

“Most of ’em. I’ve written some.”

Glass on the counter, Izzy poured. “Does he play an instrument?”

“A little rhythm guitar, a little piano, but he really likes to be the front man.”

Izzy considered that while putting the juice bottle away. “What about the rest of the band?” He stuck a second glass into the door of the refrigerator for water. “What happened to them?”

Realizing he was watching Izzy too closely, Rabin scooped up the grapes that were at the bottom of the bowl and finished them off. “After the record company let us go, we decided it was a good idea to go our separate ways.” That was a nice way to put it. Markus and Sam had left with bad blood between all of them, most of it laying blame for their failures.

“But you and Zane stayed together.”

“We’ve been friends a long time, and we started the Knights. It’ll take more than that to break us apart.”

Izzy set the glass of water in front of Rabin, then resumed his seat with his juice. “So. What would your friend say to what we just did upstairs?”

Rabin froze, the glass at the level of his lips. He stared at Izzy over the rim for a few seconds before lowering the glass. “Truth? He’d freak.”

Izzy swallowed calmly and set his own glass down. They might have been discussing the weather for all the emotion he showed. “Homophobic?”

“Not so much. He’s okay with gay men as long as they don’t get too close.”

“Will he be okay working with Brent?”

“He says he will.” Rabin wouldn’t dwell on his own misgivings about that. What would be would be. As far as he could tell, the fact that Brent was in a

successful rock band outweighed the fact of his sexual orientation, in Zane's eyes. Besides, Zane had been a fan before Hell had joined the band, long before Brent came out publicly. Back in the days before the members of Heaven Sent had all settled down with other men.

Izzy sipped his juice. "But he'd freak because you're his best friend."

"Pretty much." Rabin cast his glance aside so he wasn't looking at the sweet oval of Izzy's face or how those mussed black curls caressed his pale shoulders and teased the sharp line of his collarbone. Such soft skin.

"He'd wonder how often you'd been checking him out or fantasizing about fucking him."

Startled, Rabin laughed. "Like that'd happen. But yeah."

Izzy smiled with him. "All the more reason to keep what we did a secret. Don't you think?"

Rabin just looked at him. Had Izzy just given him what he'd been working up to ask for?

"From Zane *and* from Brent and Hell." Izzy picked up his juice. "I don't think anyone needs to know about it."

Rabin found himself nodding. "That's...probably a good idea."

"I mean, I hate to keep something from Brent, but it's probably best. Given the reason I'm here..."

Oh man, Rabin hadn't even thought of that. The broken relationship that had brought him here was because of secrets. "About that..."

Izzy shook his head. "It's nothing. *Totally* different. I thought I loved Gregory. We're just having fun." He grinned at Rabin. "Besides, you're not even gay."

Rabin had to laugh. "That might be debatable after what just happened."

With confidence, Izzy shook his head. "Sex doesn't make you gay. Gay is a way of life, an acceptance of who you are and what you like. What we just did was fabulous—amazing, stupendous—but it was just sex." He spread his palm on the

table and stared into Rabin's eyes. "And we should keep it that way." He shrugged, relaxing a little. "Besides, you didn't do anything with me that you couldn't do with a girl."

A strange lump thudded at the base of Rabin's throat. Izzy was saying all the right things. He agreed wholeheartedly. So why...? "Except for jerking you off," he said with a try at a smile.

Izzy laughed. "Okay, there's that. But you've done *that* with yourself."

"True."

"So, good, we're agreed. There's no reason to involve anyone else. And *good* reason for your friend not to know."

He was right, but Rabin had to wonder at Izzy's conviction. Such a strange mix of confidence now when he'd been trembling when he'd first approached Rabin. Was there more behind it, or should he just take it all at face value?

Izzy shrugged. "It makes sense. Besides, you need to concentrate on your music, not on the trouble telling anyone would cause. It's not like we're dating or anything."

Rabin decided to give Izzy the benefit of the doubt and believe he meant what he said. Rabin had given similar speeches to women in the past. Maybe it was just easier with a guy. Or at least *this* guy. "My thoughts exactly."

Izzy nodded, standing. "So..." He left his glass on the table and took the step that brought him to Rabin's side. His open palm smoothed over the curve of Rabin's shoulder, then down to the center of his chest, leaving goose bumps in its wake. "While we're having fun..."

Eyes straight ahead as Izzy stepped behind him, Rabin curled his fingers around Izzy's slim wrist. "Yeah?"

Behind him now, Izzy leaned in to brush lips along the back of his neck. "Up for another go?"

He should just say no. Once could be an experiment. Twice? But Izzy's lips on his skin sent a sizzle down his spine to his balls and woke his cock up. The fingers of the hand he held curled in to scrape the skin right above Rabin's left nipple, and he didn't know the moan was coming until it bled from his throat.

"Come upstairs, and let me suck your cock."

What man in his right mind could turn that down? He let himself be pulled from the chair and led upstairs. Izzy held his hand and didn't look back all the way up the stairs and down the hall. He gave Rabin one brief glance when he reached their opposite open doors, then turned right into his room.

His room was far more lived in than Rabin's. Izzy had actually filled the dressers—and some of the floor—with his clothing and personal items. *Tons* of personal items. The top of one of the dressers was covered with more hair products and cosmetics than Rabin had ever owned, interspersed with a few odd and colorful toys. A line of stuffed animals occupied the top of the taller dresser. He kicked aside a wayward pair of jeans as he led Rabin to the unmade bed. The darkness was banished when he switched on the lamp mounted beside the bed.

Smiling, he turned in to Rabin, bumping chests as he lifted his arms over Rabin's shoulders. Their lips met in a slow, wet kiss as Rabin's hands slid around to span Izzy's back. Izzy melted into him nicely, tall enough that Rabin didn't have to crane his neck too far to reach his lips but short enough that Rabin could fold him close. The ridge of Izzy's erection pressed Rabin's thigh, and he lowered his hand to cup one side of Izzy's ass so he could grind it harder.

"Mmmm," Izzy pulled away just enough to murmur against his lips. "You're a quick learner."

Rabin smiled. "You make it easy."

One of Izzy's brows rose. "Oh?"

Rabin squeezed his ass, watching Izzy's eyelid's flutter a little. "Not hard to tell what you like."

"Mmmm. That's because I like it *all*."

Izzy folded his arms between them to get leverage to push Rabin back. With nowhere else to go, Rabin tumbled into the tangled mess of sheets and bedspread on the mattress. Which was exactly where Izzy wanted him, it turned out, because he reached for the waistband of Rabin's shorts and made quick work of pulling them down and off. He lingered over his drawstring pants, letting his gaze roam slowly over Rabin's naked body. Rabin lay quietly, hoping Izzy liked what he saw. Rabin thought he was on the skinny side, but he did jog and sometimes lift weights to stay fit. Maybe his stomach could have been more toned, but at least it was flat. The hair over his chest was nothing to speak of and quite a bit darker than the hair on his head. Even the curls at the base of his cock were rather sparse. Izzy didn't seem to mind, grinning big when he finally let his pants fall to the floor.

"Oh." He held up one finger that, to Rabin, was an insane parody of the cock that stood straight up from his crotch. "Lube's in the other room."

Rabin chuckled and stared at the ceiling. The quiet of the house descended on him with Izzy gone, and the light scent of another man surrounded him, infused in the bedding around him. *What are you doing?* Yes, he'd wanted to get laid tonight, but they'd already done that. Now? This was because he liked it and wanted to do it again. Did he buy Izzy's conclusion that this was just sex and he wasn't gay? He certainly couldn't imagine only seeing guys for the rest of his life. This was great, but no women? No way. *Right?*

Izzy was back, cock bobbing as he hurried. "Oh good, you're still here."

Rabin glanced at the lube and the single condom packet that landed on the blue sheet beside him. "Where would I go?"

"I don't know." Izzy giggled. "I'm being silly." He flapped his hands, shooing Rabin up the bed. "Sit up against the headboard."

Obediently Rabin scooted back, then farther, arranging himself with Izzy's help until he lay half spread-eagled in the center of the bed with the backs of his shoulders pressed against the headboard, propped up by two thick, firm pillows.

“Mmmm.” Izzy knelt between his legs, sliding warm hands and moist lips over his chest. Rabin closed his eyes and let it happen, enjoying the way Izzy lingered around his nipple before he sucked it in and took a bite, shuddering when Izzy nipped at the dip of skin just under his rib cage. He gave in to the temptation to thread his fingers through the soft curls of Izzy’s hair as that head slipped lower to tongue his navel. If he wanted, he could pretend Izzy was a girl. Even with his eyes open, there wasn’t much difference at this angle. But it wasn’t possible. Izzy was Izzy and definitely male, even pretty as he was. And nothing about his being male made Rabin enjoy the attention any less, especially not when hot breath, then wet tongue, found the head of his cock.

“Fuck.”

He had to close his eyes to appreciate Izzy’s skill. No doubt Izzy enjoyed his task as his lips slid down Rabin’s shaft until the tip hit the back of his throat. After some moments of smooth up and down, Izzy shifted to a slightly new position, and still taking it slow, Rabin found out exactly how deep his cock could go down that throat.

“Ah man.”

Too fucking good. Warm, wet, strong muscles closing in on him. Time shifted, and little panting moans drifted from him as he watched Izzy pull up until just his lips were around the tip. Dark eyes peeped up at him from underneath a fall of darker hair.

“Shit.”

Chuckling, Izzy closed a fist around Rabin’s cock, then lovingly worked with his teeth and tongue. Rabin normally didn’t like teeth at all, but he was too mesmerized to care. Besides, Izzy knew exactly what he was doing, just enough threat of teeth to make the sucking and licking that much sweeter.

“Fuck.” Rabin sank his fingers into the mattress, knowing his control was ebbing. “Not gonna last.”

With one last pop and squeeze, Izzy released him. Rabin's head whirled at the loss of sensation, and he watched through a haze as Izzy ripped open the condom packet and rolled it onto him.

He started to move, to shift, but Izzy pushed up to his knees and put a hand to Rabin's chest to stop him. "Don't move."

Dazed, he watched Izzy scramble until he faced the footboard. Rabin was confused at first but caught on quick when Izzy edged back until his ass was in Rabin's lap. He reached back and found Rabin's cock, lifting it so the shaft slid between the cheeks of his ass.

"Lube?" Rabin managed to mutter.

"Don't need it."

Izzy rolled his hips to let the lube on the condom wet him—and he seemed to enjoy it. After only a minute, he carefully shifted to guide Rabin's cock to where he needed to be. Rabin stayed very still as Izzy pushed slowly back, fascinated by Izzy's hole stretching to swallow his dick all the way in. Izzy tossed his head back with a low sigh. His hair fell down his back, nearly brushing the top curves of his ass as he arched. Rabin took hold of his waist, steadying him as he lifted himself up with just the strength of his thighs. The tight muscle clutching Rabin's cock pulled and stretched as Izzy rose and sank in smooth, slow glides. Now and then, Izzy would sway his hips side to side, just to give a little different feel, a slightly different angle.

Mind-blowing as it was, it was too slow. Rabin lost patience. He sat up, wrapping his arms around Izzy's chest to gather him close. Surprised at first, Izzy quickly adjusted and worked with Rabin to shift them both so that Rabin's back was braced against the headboard. Izzy continued to work his hips, but now Rabin could nuzzle his neck, could feel the soft tickle of curls over his shoulder. "Faster," he muttered, using his hold to help encourage Izzy.

"Yeah." Izzy gripped Rabin's wrist with one hand and reached the other back to grab the headboard. With Rabin to balance him, he was able to lift up and drop

down with precision, hitting something inside himself that made his slim body shudder. “Oh fuck yeah.”

Rabin bit into Izzy’s neck and kept an arm around him. He muttered encouragement into Izzy’s ear while he licked the shell of it, then sucked in the lobe with its single hoop. As Izzy grew frantic, Rabin slipped his hand down to find Izzy’s dick.

With a squeal, Izzy arched into his hand, nearly dragging his ass off Rabin’s cock. “Oh fuck. Rabin!”

Rabin shoved him back down, securing him with one arm while pulling on his dick with the other. Seemed like the most natural thing in the world.

“Rabin.” Izzy struggled, moving his hips as best he could. Rabin let up to give Izzy a little more freedom, rewarded when Izzy found a gorgeous rocking motion that worked his ass on Rabin’s cock and worked his cock through Rabin’s fist.

“Oh. Ah!”

Rabin hardly realized when his free hand came up to curl around Izzy’s throat, but he saw the result. His hold pinned Izzy’s skull to Rabin’s shoulder, Izzy’s temple pressed to Rabin’s throat. The arch of his body gave Rabin a clear sight of the curve of his flat chest, smooth skin sheened with sweat. Even pinned, Izzy continued to rock his hips, frantically seeking release. Rabin even found his own hips trying to help, trying to shove his cock even deeper into Izzy’s body.

Then Izzy shattered. A sharp cry deafened Rabin as the body in his hold jerked and shuddered. Spurt after spurt of thick, hot wetness coated Rabin’s hand. Most importantly, the sheath around Rabin’s cock clutched and gripped him, blinding him with sensation.

Izzy collapsed back into him, breathing hard, skin hot and flushed. Rabin held him as he calmed, loving the rhythmic squeeze of Izzy’s ass on his cock. Rabin eased the hold on Izzy’s neck to let him move his head, which he did, rolling his skull so he could nuzzle underneath Rabin’s jaw. When Izzy noted the tension, he stopped. “You didn’t come.”

Rabin gave one curt shake of his head, caught with an orgasm that wanted to explode but couldn't. "Don't think I can like this." It felt great, right on the brink of coming, but it was also torture. He knew he had to move but oddly didn't want to.

"Good to know," Izzy murmured. Then, without warning, he pushed forward, breaking Rabin's grip. Rabin yelped and grabbed for him, but his sweaty skin proved slippery, and he scrambled free.

Rabin's hips rose, free of the weight that had held them down. His being protested the loss of warmth. "Hey."

Ignoring Rabin's protest, Izzy spun around and proved stronger than he looked by grabbing Rabin's legs and yanking him down so that he was half lying in the pillows. Rabin hadn't accustomed himself to the new position before Izzy was on him, hovering over his cock. The condom was quickly removed and tossed, and then Izzy's mouth sucked him down.

"Christ! *Fuck!*"

Izzy's touch lit the short fuse on Rabin's orgasm. Shouting, Rabin arched, sensation rocketing through and out of him. Izzy swallowed it all down.

"Fuck." Eyes closed, panting, Rabin tried to catch his breath, flinging an arm over his eyes. "Fuck."

The bed jostled, but Rabin couldn't tell what Izzy was doing. "Good?"

"Oh man."

"I'll take that as a yes."

A sheet and the light cover settled over Rabin's hips and legs mere seconds before they lifted once more to allow a warm body to wiggle in next to him. Rabin managed to drop his head to the side and open his eyes to see Izzy on his belly, tucking a pillow under his head. Dark eyes shone with joy as they focused on him. Rabin smiled. Izzy smiled.

Rabin must have fallen asleep then, because he couldn't remember any more.

Chapter Six

Beer bottles clinked together in a toast.

“You done well, my brutha,” Zane complimented before taking a sip.

Rabin nodded, glancing around the living room that now had furniture. True, a lot of it was old and ratty, but it was familiar. “Yep. It’s a nice place. There’s a great bar down the street too.”

“Music? Women?”

“Yes and yes. They’ve got a stage but don’t use it much. The owner seemed open to it, though.” He laughed as he dropped onto the couch. “She’s pretty too.”

“Oh?” Zane perched on the couch’s arm. “Do tell.”

“Just your type: blonde, busty, and been around the block.”

“Sounds perfect. We should go tonight.”

Rabin sighed. “Tonight? Oh man, I’m beat. Don’t you have to turn in the van tomorrow morning?”

“Not due until noon.” Zane slid from the arm to the seat, one knee bent so he could face Rabin. “C’mon, this is my first night in Chicago.”

Rabin grinned at his friend. Zane had hardly changed in all the time Rabin had known him. Dirty-blond hair, thick with an insane kink that made it stick out from his head in tight curls. Even long as it was now, the ringlets kept it around shoulder length, with the sheer weight of hair making it straight around the part at the top of his head. Zane thought it made him look like Robert Plant; Rabin privately thought he looked like a poodle. But Zane had a good face and a big mouth that smiled a lot. He currently sported a rugged look with a perpetual shadow over

his square chin. Today his blue eyes were bright and cheerful, a far cry from the dark and depressed they'd been toward the end of last year.

"All right. We'll go." Again they toasted with their beers. "But we both need to shower."

Zane plucked at his open flannel shirt. "Yeah, I'm rank. Mind if I go first? Driving all day..."

"Have at. Then we can go get something to eat."

"It's a plan." Zane used his bottle to point at Rabin as he stood, then took the bottle with him down the short hall to the bathroom at the end.

Rabin stayed where he was, content to rest after a day of hauling furniture up three flights of stairs. Not that either he or Zane had much. Zane's futon, the couch, and the matching chairs were the big-ticket items. Rabin's bed wouldn't arrive until the next day. Feeling the springs of the old couch, he suddenly missed the bed he'd had at Brent's.

That wasn't the only thing he'd miss. Rabin stared at his beer bottle as he picked at the label. He'd miss Izzy. He couldn't believe how rough it had been to pack the night before, after they'd spent a surreal weekend in and out of bed. Izzy had even gone shopping with him for a new mattress. He still couldn't quite believe he'd slept with a guy. Had a harder time realizing that he really wanted to do it again. *Really*. He grinned. He might not believe it, but he certainly *liked* it. He glanced toward the bathroom, just able to spy it as Zane closed the door. "And what would you say to that, buddy?" he asked in a low tone. He shook his head. They'd deal with that later. Or never.

A knock sounded at the front door. Thinking it was the friendly guy down the hall they'd met earlier, Rabin answered without checking through the peephole. Because of that, he was surprised to see Izzy standing in the hall. He must have just come from school, because he wasn't wearing anything loud or tight. Rather, he looked almost sedate in a simple dark green T-shirt and jeans, with his dark hair pulled back in a tail.

Rabin's grin was instantaneous, his heart thumping up in his throat. "Hey."

Izzy grinned too, holding up a long dish covered in tinfoil. "I brought you dinner."

"What?" Rabin stepped back as Izzy pushed past him.

"I figured you guys were working hard all day, and I was off today, so I made you food. Since you wouldn't let me come and *help*"—he threw a glare over his shoulder as he rounded the counter that separated the kitchen from the living area—"this was the best I could do." He looked out over the spacious living room. "Oh hey, nice place."

"Thanks." Rabin glanced toward the bathroom as he approached the counter. Was he ready for Zane to meet Izzy? Not really, but looked like he wasn't going to have the choice. "You shouldn't have done this."

Izzy tucked a wayward wisp of hair behind his ear. "Did you eat?"

"We were going to go out."

"Now you can save some money."

Rabin narrowed his eyes and couldn't help another glance toward the bathroom.

"Where's Zane?"

"In the shower."

Izzy laughed. "Relax. I'm not here to out you. Just the opposite." His grin turned wicked. "I want to make sure Zane knows me as a friend."

"Why?"

Izzy's eyes went seductive, and the tip of his tongue peeked between his teeth. "Because then it's not out of the ordinary if we disappear together."

Rabin flushed but had to smile. "You're naughty."

"I am. I know it."

On impulse, Rabin finished his way around the corner and reached up to hook Izzy's neck. "Come here, you."

Purring, Izzy melted into a sweet kiss that heated up pretty fast. They'd left things open at the end of the weekend. Rabin knew he probably should have put an end to it and said as much, but he was reluctant to do so. All morning, he'd rationalized that he'd had plenty of female fuck buddies in his life, so why not one male?

Something banged in the bathroom, and Rabin jumped back. "Shit."

It wasn't the door. Zane must have dropped something.

Izzy laughed, wiping his lips. "Careful." He twisted to turn on the oven. "Are you *sure* you haven't been gay all along?"

"Who knows? It's never bothered me." Feeling bold, he pressed up against Izzy's back. "Just never had a golden opportunity with a hot guy like you before."

"Mmm, you probably were oblivious." He patted Rabin's hip. "Not that I mind. Now go into the other room before we ruin everything."

It was surprisingly hard for Rabin to make himself retreat into the next room, but Izzy was right. "Why no school?"

"One of my instructors had an emergency." He sighed dramatically. "I'm going to practice pastas in that big, empty house all by myself tonight."

Rabin sat on the couch to keep himself from returning to Izzy's side. "You'll be fine. Brent and Hell will be back tomorrow."

"Yeah. But I kind of enjoyed this weekend." Izzy opened the refrigerator. "Oh man, you need to go food shopping. *Promise* me you're not going to buy all frozen dinners. I will *die*."

Rabin laughed. "I'll do what I can, but no promises. Zane loves frozen pizza."

In the bathroom, the water shut off. Rabin sat forward and watched the door.

"Relax."

This was too weird. Shouldn't it be him who was telling Izzy to relax? Still, he sat back and waited while Izzy put the food in the oven. A minute later, Zane opened the door, dripping naked and rubbing a towel over his abundance of hair.

Rabin coughed to cover up a bout of hysterical laughter. “Uh, Zane, we’ve got company.”

“Huh?” The towel came down, covering his groin as Zane blinked around the apartment. His gaze snagged on Izzy.

“Zane.” Rabin sat forward, elbows on knees, as Izzy came into the room. “This is Izzy, a friend of mine. He’s Brent’s cousin.”

“Hey, glad to meet you.” Rabin had to smile at the way Izzy tamped down his normal sunny inflection and didn’t flirt a bit.

Holding the towel at his waist, Zane extended a hand and tried a tentative smile. “Hey.”

“Sorry to barge in. I made some food and brought it over. Figured you guys would be hungry after moving stuff around all day.”

Zane’s head jerked up a little. “Food?”

“I’m a culinary student.” Izzy glanced at Rabin. “School’s not all that far away, in fact.”

Rabin saw the wicked glint in Izzy’s eyes, but Zane couldn’t.

The mention of food did break through Zane’s hesitation. “Yeah?”

Rabin sank back on the couch, trying to relax. “Oh yeah, Zane, you’re in for a treat. He’s good.” *And not just at cooking.*

Izzy grinned. “I hope you like manicotti.”

“Are you shitting me?” Zane was all smiles now. “I’m starved. Let me go get some clothes on.”

Once Zane disappeared into his room, Izzy smiled at Rabin. “The way to a man’s heart...”

* * *

Izzy stayed with them for dinner, and Rabin marveled at this person he hardly knew. It looked like Izzy and sounded like Izzy, but most of his customary mannerisms were gone. No flapping, expressive hands, no batted eyelashes, no

swaying in his chair or curling fingers in his hair. He talked and laughed, quizzing Zane about himself and the drive up from Virginia, and seemed to be having a good time, but it was like a different person. Or at least a different side of the same person.

Rabin kind of liked this side too. Seemed natural and less contrived. Rabin had to wonder if either face was a mask. Or both.

“Just keep the dish,” Izzy told Rabin as they dumped their paper plates into one of the giant black sacks that’d been stuffed with rubbish during the day. “I’ll come back and get it.” Since Zane was preoccupied with the trash bag, Izzy gave Rabin a knowing smile.

“You sure you don’t want to come with us?” Zane asked, coming to lean on the kitchen counter. “Rabin says this place down the street is worth it.”

“No, thanks. It’s a long drive back to the house, and I’m beat. And I’ve got school tomorrow.”

“Well, hey, you deserve an A-plus for that meal tonight.” Zane patted his stomach.

“Thanks. I wish my instructors were as positive as you.” They all laughed. “All right, I’m gone.” He held out his hand to Zane. “Nice to meet you.”

“Same here. Anytime you want to bring over food...”

“You bet.” He waved innocently at Rabin, who had remained in the kitchen. “See ya, Rabin.”

“Night. Thanks, Iz.”

Then he was gone. Just like that. Rabin rubbed at his chest, feeling a bit odd. The visit felt...unfinished. What did he expect? A kiss good-bye?

“He’s a little light in the loafers too, isn’t he?”

Rabin startled and looked up at Zane, who now leaned on the other side of the counter. “Huh?”

Zane jerked his head toward the door, wild hair bouncing with the move. “Izzy. He’s gay, isn’t he?”

“Uh, yeah. How’d you know?”

“Oh please, I can spot ’em a mile away. Nice guy, though, even if he looks like a girl.”

“Hey.”

Zane shrugged. “I call ’em like I see ’em. Besides, he can look however he wants if he cooks like that. Oh man.” Again he patted his belly, adding a smack of his lips to it. “You gonna get showered?”

“Yeah.”

Rabin went to his room to gather clothing. The visit had gone well and done exactly what Izzy had intended. Now Zane knew Izzy as a friend. School and food gave Izzy a reason to drop by unannounced. In one smooth move, Izzy had made it easier for him and Rabin to occasionally see each other with Zane none the wiser, as long as they were still careful. It was masterful, really.

So why did Rabin feel slightly...disappointed?

Chapter Seven

For the second time in less than a week, Rabin found himself out in public at a pretty rocking place with no desire to meet someone new. No, not true. He always liked meeting new people, and he'd met those here at Addie's. But he had no desire to take any of the lovely ladies he'd met home with him, and it wasn't just because he was tired from moving furniture for most of the day.

He sat at the table he and Zane had landed a few hours ago, alone with his third scotch and soda. His latest new friend had left him to join her friends on the dance floor and had probably given up on him. He didn't blame her. Although he'd read all of her very obvious signals, he hadn't responded to one. After a pleasant conversation and a drink—on him—she'd excused herself. Now he had only the dim bowl of light dangling over his head and a view of the minuscule dance floor for company. He watched the dancers and contemplated the small stage beyond them. Yes, he decided, they could play up there and fill the place with rock. The sound system was good, and the lights weren't too bad, not for a place of its size.

"All right." Zane dropped heavily into the padded bench across from Rabin, somehow managing not to spill his drink. It might have started out as a rusty nail—Zane's favorite celebratory drink—but by the look of it, the Drambuie was long gone and only watery Scotch remained. Zane took a moment to right himself and fold his arms carefully on the painted black tabletop, then blinked a few times to bring Rabin into focus. "What's up with you, man?"

Rabin shot back the last of his own drink and considered the glass, wondering if he wanted another. It was only walking distance back home, after all, no driving involved. "Wha'dya mean?"

“You should be cock-deep in pussy right now. I thought you’d leave hours ago.”
Not an unusual occurrence.

Rabin shrugged. “Not in the mood.”

“Not in the...?” Zane sat back, fingers of both hands up to dig into his considerable mop of hair. “I fucking hate you sometimes. There are at *least* seven girls here who’re dying to have you.” His hands slapped down on his thighs.

Rabin chuckled. “And you know this because...?”

“Because they asked me about you.”

“Ah. Sorry.”

Zane glared. “I haven’t skimmed your sloppy seconds in a *long* time, man.”

Rabin swallowed, twirling his glass. True. Zane used to call Rabin his lure. It wasn’t that Zane was bad-looking; he just wasn’t that good at starting things off. Once he got a girl who was interested, he was fine. After the Knights had their fifteen minutes of fame, Zane had found his own girls. It had lasted a long time in Virginia at their old haunts and in New York at the few bars where they tended to hang out. But it was all new here, and evidently Zane was striking out. Rabin knew from experience that the Knights were pretty much nonexistent in the local lexicon. “You want to just head home, then?”

“Fuck no.” Zane glanced toward the bar and the blonde behind it. “I got a definite shot with Addie, and she’s not off until two a.m.”

Rabin tilted his phone up to check the time. It wasn’t even midnight. “Fine. I’m headed home.”

Zane’s hand shot out to grab his wrist. “What for?”

“I’m beat.”

Zane clearly didn’t believe him.

“Aren’t you?”

“Well, yeah, but...” Zane let it trail, but he didn’t need to finish. Rabin knew. Zane hadn’t gotten laid for weeks. He’d said so himself earlier.

“Look, tonight’s not the night. Besides, we should take a look at those songs before we go into the studio on Wednesday. We don’t need to be shit-faced tomorrow when we do it.”

Zane’s blue eyes shuttered, watching his hand as he dragged it back to wrap around his glass. “Yeah. Right.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Fuck you.”

Zane shook his head, still hunched over his glass. “Those songs, man. I don’t know.”

Rabin leaned back against the battered leather seat. “What?”

“I’m not...comfortable with them.”

“*Now* you tell me this?” He tapped the table with the tips of two fingers. “What aren’t you comfortable with?”

Zane sipped his drink, buying time. “It’s not our style, man. It’s not the Knights.”

Rabin snorted. “It’s not our old style, sure. That’s the *point*. The old stuff wasn’t working.”

“Nah, you’re wrong. The old stuff works. The stupid record company didn’t have a clue what to do with it.”

Rabin was talking before Zane finished the word *stuff*. “We’re not doing this again, Zane. The old stuff didn’t work because it didn’t—”

“That’s what *they* said—”

“—work, and we need something new. That’s the whole *point*—”

“—and you’re right we need a new twist, but some of that new stuff we were working on before—”

“—of moving out here, of working with Brent—”

At the mention of Brent's name, Zane's lips snapped shut, and he glared at the fake wood paneling on the wall beside them.

"What?"

One side of Zane's upper lip lifted. "What is it with you all of a sudden? When did he become God?"

Rabin blinked. Okay, this was new. "What?"

Zane downed the last of his drink. "Ever since New Year's, it's been Brent this and Brent that. Jesus, if I didn't know you were straight, I'd think you were hot for the guy."

Rabin slammed his fist on the table, making the empty glasses jump. "Fuck you."

"Fuck you." Now Zane looked at him, eyes full of drunken fire. "When did you decide he was all that?"

Rabin's heart raced. He stabbed one finger into the table. "We *talked* about this. You agreed to this. We *moved*, for Chrissakes. What's this crap about Brent all of a sudden?"

"I know I agreed. Christ, what was I supposed to do? We weren't going nowhere, and this was *something*. But you need to *shut up* about Brent-fucking-Rose and concentrate on the *Knights*."

"Bugger me, I thought I was. *I* got us a studio. *I've* been composing." *What have you done?* But he didn't ask that. That question only ever started a bigger fight.

Zane shook his head. "Those songs, man, those weren't Knights songs. Those were Heaven Sent songs."

"Bullshit. Brent and I worked on those together."

"Yeah, sure. Can't hear much of you in 'em. Was that even you playing?"

"Of course it was. Fuck you."

Zane leaned forward, gripping the edge of the table. "I know you wanted to try something new, but that crap's too radical. Too different. We need to work on some real stuff. Get the right guys and do some real music."

Rabin stared at Zane, unable to believe what he was hearing. Here he'd been excited. He thought the stuff he and Brent had worked on had great potential. He drew in his anger, not exactly easy with a few drinks in his system. "I wish you'd said something before."

"Wasn't time. Figured it was better to talk to you in person." Zane wiped a hand over his face with a sigh. "Didn't mean to do it like this."

"Whatever." Rabin scooted to the edge of his bench. "We'll talk about it tomorrow."

Without another word, he stood and walked to the door, leaving Zane behind. Outside, the early summer air was mild and pleasant, at odds with his mood. He shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and took his time walking back, needing to think. The crap about the music pissed him off, but he was letting that go already. He and Zane didn't always see eye to eye about their craft, and plenty of arguments peppered their past. They'd work it out like they always did. But his accusation about Rabin being hot for Brent hit a little too close to home. *He was just being an asshole.* Making his point, jabbing at Rabin. Rabin tried to tell himself that. But Zane would freak if he knew the truth. He'd freak if he knew that Rabin had stopped himself from calling Izzy at least a half dozen times since they'd left the apartment, just to say hi. Even he didn't know what that was about.

Back at the apartment, he holed up in his room with the windows open to the night air. His beloved Stratocaster was out of her case and in his arms before long, and he tried to lose himself in finger work to distract himself and calm down. It worked, somewhat, at least distracting his brain from physical needs. But it brought up another gnawing ache. He hadn't been up on a stage playing music since New Year's with Heaven Sent. He hadn't played his own music for other people for

much longer. Other than the bits and pieces he'd worked on with Brent, he hadn't written anything in far too long to even think about.

And Zane was *wrong*—those songs were mostly his. Brent had been really good about not pushing the style. What Zane had heard was stuff Rabin had wanted to do for years but had known Zane wouldn't like. Punk and hard rock were Zane's thing and the veil over the Indigo Knights. Funny how Zane refused to realize that "Simplicity," their one hit, was far more of a pop tune than rock. That's *why* it'd succeeded. The style was much better for them, better for Zane's vocals even. Rabin had discussed this for hours on end with Brent and Hell. But he hadn't figured out how to tell Zane that. He'd so hoped that Zane would just go with the new songs and accept the transition.

Lights off, he was sitting at a chair in front of his one window, staring at the building across the street, when he heard the apartment's front door open. Fingers on the strings to still them, he listened. Zane wasn't alone. Whispering and a high-pitched voice along with his gave that away. Rabin waited until Zane's door closed. Waited and wondered if he'd hear anything. Then Zane's futon frame started creaking. Not so bad, then. If it weren't so quiet and Rabin hadn't been listening, he could've ignored it.

Good. He was glad Zane had hooked up with someone. Meant he'd be in a better frame of mind in the morning. They'd hash out their differences, come to a compromise, and be ready for Wednesday.

As his fingers trailed over the strings, Rabin's mind wandered to his own sexual pursuits. Immediately his mind filled with the image of a smooth back draped with shining black hair, of a gorgeous profile peeking at him over a shoulder, of dark eyes melting with desire. Rabin closed his eyes and could taste Izzy's lips on his, could feel the weight of that slight body in his lap. Lifting his right hand from the strings, Rabin clutched it in a fist that he could easily imagine gripping Izzy's cock.

Fuck it.

Carefully he set the guitar down on the floor beside him, then worked open the fly of his jeans. His cock popped out, already hard. Under cover of darkness, with just his own saliva for lube, Rabin fisted his shaft and closed his eyes, letting his mind fill with the honeyed tones of Izzy's moans and the sharp scent of his sweating skin. He lingered over his fantasy, making it last, but the orgasm wouldn't be denied. With a strangled grunt, he came in spurts over his T-shirt, despite having pulled it most of the way up his chest.

He leaned back in the chair, fly open, belly and chest striped with cum, and tried not to wonder what was going to happen next.

Chapter Eight

Rabin snapped his guitar case shut but kept his head down, not quite ready to show his eyes. He heard Zane ruffling papers about ten feet away, the nearer sound louder than the murmured voices in the console room. He contemplated the scuffed state of his boots and reached down to retie one of them. Once done, he thought he might have his expression under control.

He sat up. Zane looked to be engrossed in the pages of his notebook, but Rabin doubted that was the case. He'd know Rabin was pissed. When Rabin stood, Zane finally looked his way, stabbing a pencil into his hair right over his ear.

"Ready to go?" Zane asked, face as pleasant as ever. A mask Rabin wished he could see through.

"Sure." Wearing his own mask, he led the way into the console room.

Dylan was gone, and for that Rabin was grateful. Only Brent and Todd were left. Todd twirled one of his drumsticks around his fingers as he talked, but he shut up as Rabin came into the room.

Rabin set his guitar down in the corner. "Okay if I leave this here?"

Brent raised a brow. "Sure. It'll be all locked up."

"Cool." He dug his hands into his jeans pockets. "We're off."

Rabin looked at Brent, and Brent stared steadily back. Since Zane was at his back and couldn't see, Rabin blinked and lowered his eyes, as much of a nod as he'd allow himself.

"Right, then. See you tomorrow." That was it. Brent said nothing of what Rabin thought he must want to say.

Zane said nothing either, not even good-bye, as he followed Rabin down the hall and out the front door of the studio. The silence persisted until they were halfway to the train station two blocks away from the studio.

"You're pissed," Zane said, keeping his eyes forward.

"You think?"

"He wasn't right, man."

"How would you know? You barely listened to him."

Zane shook his head. "He wasn't right."

Rabin bit his tongue rather than spout any number of angry remarks that leaped into his mouth. Dylan had done them a favor, coming in to play bass with them today. After a week and a half, they'd had very little luck in finding anyone. Rabin knew Dylan's name from a short-lived pop band. He was pretty good, and he played well with Todd. Since Todd looked to be panning out as a good drummer for them, Rabin had felt a spark of hope that they could finally get some real work done. Until Zane shot it down.

"Whatever, man. He's the third guy you've said wasn't right."

"It takes time to find someone."

"We don't *have* time!" Rabin fisted his hands and sucked a deep breath in through his nostrils.

They crossed the street before Zane continued. "We can't just take anyone in. We tried Markus out for a few weeks and two gigs before we said he was part of the band."

Rabin bit the inside of his lip, hearing the accusation. That time, it'd been *his* fault. He hadn't liked Markus, and he hadn't been willing to let the asshole into the band. To this day, he still thought it'd been a mistake on some level. Their former bass player was poison.

He stopped, staring up the metal stairs leading to the train platform. "Whatever. We're gonna run out of money soon enough, and Brent's gonna run out

of patience.” He heard Zane’s little sniff and ignored it. “We need to find someone to at least fill in while we write some material.”

Zane hung on to the railing, staring in the opposite direction from Rabin. “I know.”

Rabin nodded. He discarded at least five parting shots before he finally gave up. He stepped back from the stairs. “I need to take a walk. I’ll see you at home tonight.”

“Christ, Rabin, don’t put this all on me.”

For the first time in the last hour, Rabin turned fully on his friend and let all of his anger show in his face. “I can’t talk to you now.” He held up a hand, then snatched it aside, like he was throwing something away. “Not. Now.”

Zane searched his face, then shut his own angry expression down. He nodded. “Fine.” He started up the stairs. “I may not be there when you get home.”

Was it bad that Rabin hoped like hell he wasn’t? Yeah. It meant he was way too angry. He turned on his heel and started walking. It was insanely early in the evening, afternoon really. Once Zane had discarded Dylan, it had been obvious they weren’t going to get any work done. Rabin’s dream shot at studio time was whittling away, and they hardly had anything accomplished. Zane only made halfhearted attempts at any lyrics and was quietly disdainful of the melodies Rabin and Brent came up with. Zane outright refused to sing when Brent was around. Rabin and Zane had already argued about it nightly for the past few days.

After a number of blocks, Rabin came up to another train station. He hadn’t learned all the streets yet, but he was smart enough to keep the tracks in sight. He stopped, watching a train whiz by. He needed something to do tonight. He needed to turn off and feel good.

Smiling, he dug into his pocket and drew out his cell phone.

Izzy answered on the second ring. “Hey, stranger.”

“Hey. You at school?”

“Yeah, just finished. What’s up?”

“You up for an early dinner?”

“With you?”

Rabin chuckled. “Yeah.”

“And Zane?”

He frowned. “No. Just me.”

“You okay?”

“Truth? Not really. I could use your smile right now.” He blinked into the breeze, wondering where the hell *that* had come from. Not that it wasn’t true, but why had he said it?

“Oh. How sweet.”

He hung his head, sheepish. “Thanks.”

“I’d love to go to dinner. What are you in the mood for?”

* * *

The pizzeria hostess smiled brightly at him. “You must be Rabin.”

He blinked and gave her wide eyes. “Um, yeah?”

She giggled and waved a hand. “Come with me.”

Perplexed, he followed as instructed. He saw Izzy right when they turned the corner, but that wasn’t hard to do. Once past the enclosed entryway, the small restaurant was an open space with about two dozen tables arranged artfully among huge potted plants and mounted wooden trellises. Izzy sat at what looked like a picnic bench, complete with red-and-white-checked tablecloth, picking apart a roll over a basket of more as he talked to a slim man in a dark dress shirt wearing an apron over his jeans. Izzy’s smile shone bright even in the muted light of the hanging globe over the table, and his pink T-shirt stood out against the dark wood surrounding him.

When he saw Rabin, he waved, spraying breadcrumbs all over the table. The guy standing by the table talking to him turned with a smile. Whoa, he was good-looking. Shiny dark hair like Izzy's but with more curls and mysterious dark eyes.

"You must be Rabin," he said, holding out his hand to shake. Then laughed at the look on Rabin's face. "Izzy's been talking about you."

"Oh please, I haven't talked him up *that* much." Izzy waved his roll at the bench opposite him. "Sit, sit. Rabin. This is Oliver and Amanda. Their dad owns this place. Sit."

Oliver patted Rabin's shoulder and used the hand to guide Rabin onto the bench across from Izzy. "We're also classmates."

"Yeah, that too." Izzy shifted, getting comfortable on his seat. "And I do *not* think it's fair that you've got a real restaurant to practice in."

Oliver laughed. "It's not all it's cracked up to be." He winked at Rabin. "Dad only lets me into the kitchen after hours. Says I'm not allowed until after I graduate."

Rabin smiled at the easy camaraderie. This wasn't what he'd had in mind when he called, but maybe it was better. He'd not been surrounded with many smiles in the last few days.

Oliver set a laminated single-sheet menu in front of him. "Here you go. Can I get you something to drink?"

"A beer?"

"Any particular? We've got Miller on draft."

"Sounds good."

"Coming right up."

Oliver left, and Rabin watched Izzy's lips curl around the straw sticking out of his soda.

Izzy caught him at it and grinned. “So...” He leaned over the table to point at the menu. “I can certainly recommend the pizza. They serve both thin crust and Chicago style.” He rolled his eyes and groaned. “The Chicago style is to *die* for.”

Rabin pushed the menu away. “Sounds good to me.”

Izzy stuck out his bottom lip, grabbing the menu. “You sure? There’s lots of other stuff.”

“Nope. Pizza sounds good. The works.”

“You *have* had Chicago style, right?”

Rabin grinned. “I have.”

“Oh good. We brought my mom here when she came to visit the week after I started school, and she just *hated* it.” He shook his head, placing the menu at the end of the table. “She’s the pickiest eater, I swear. That’s part of the reason I got good at cooking, because I had to figure out a hundred different ways to make chicken good.”

Rabin laughed, then settled in for throwing questions at Izzy to keep him talking. Didn’t matter what they talked about; Rabin just wanted to soak him in. He was so up and positive, nothing at all like any of the people Rabin had been in the studio with. By the time Oliver brought them their pie, Rabin was learning the many and myriad ways to make pizza according to what Izzy had learned at school.

“So.” Izzy washed down his second slice with the last of his soda and set the ice-filled glass at the end of the table. “Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?”

Rabin wiped his mouth with the red cloth napkin, stalling a little. “What?”

Izzy toyed with the spatula sticking out of the deep-dish pan between them, clearly contemplating another slice. “You sounded really down when you called.”

“Oh. That.”

“We don’t have to talk about it,” Izzy hastened to say. “But...if you did...want to talk, I’m happy to listen.”

The space around Rabin's heart warmed. He shook his head. "Just having trouble with the band. We're not finding the right vibe."

The spatula rose, laden with another slice that Izzy brought to his plate. "Something wrong with the music?" He smiled and nodded at Oliver, who came to whisk away the empty glass.

Rabin sipped his beer, deciding how deep he wanted to get into this. "No." He set the beer down. "Not really. We haven't gotten that far."

"Huh? You guys have been at it every day for a week and a half."

"Yep. And something's gone wrong every day."

"Ouch. No wonder Brent hasn't looked happy."

Rabin winced.

"For the record, he doesn't say anything bad about *you*." Izzy's eyes were on the knife and fork he used to cut into his slice. "He's just frustrated that things aren't moving faster."

Rabin wanted to ask if Brent had said anything about Zane, but decided he didn't want to know. "It's hard. Especially since we haven't found a bass player that fits in."

"That could be tough, I guess. You've had some guys come in, though."

So he has heard some details from Brent. "A few. Zane didn't like them."

"Zane."

Rabin nodded, having deliberately used his friend's name. "Zane."

"Why not?"

"Don't have a fucking clue, to be honest." He raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "He's being an asshole. Nothing new."

Izzy considered that, chewing slowly. "Nothing new?"

Rabin took a bite and waited until he chewed and swallowed to answer. "Zane took it hard when the original Knights broke up. He was really attached to the

lineup, and he misses the other guys. I didn't realize that he's not ready to move on."

"*Will* he be?"

"Who knows? If not, there won't be an album. If Brent gets sick of us and kicks us out, that's pretty much it. And *please* don't say any of this to him."

Dark curls bounced as Izzy shook his head. "No, no. I won't."

"It's just depressing, y'know?" Rabin watched his fork cut into the delicious red goop on his plate. "I don't know what I'll do if this doesn't work out."

"It *will* work out. It has to."

Rabin gave him a halfhearted smile. "Can we talk about something else?"

Big eyes studied him a moment. Then Izzy smiled. "Sure. I'm going to Taste of Chicago next week. Ever heard of it?"

"No."

Again Izzy's face lit up with a wide grin. "Oh man, it's the *best*! My mom used to bring me to the city to go every year. So much *food*!"

Chapter Nine

A warm breeze caressed them as they bid good-bye to Oliver and Amanda and left the pizzeria. Rabin stuck his hands in his pockets, a little depressed that the dinner was over. But no more bread or dessert could keep them at the table.

"You headed home?" Rabin asked as they walked down the block toward the train station.

Izzy didn't immediately answer, gazing up at the faded blue sky. "I could." He twisted to meet Rabin's eyes, then quickly glanced away. "Or we could...stay...together."

Rabin felt his neck flush and dropped his gaze to the sidewalk. "We can't go to my place."

"Right. Zane. Well..." Izzy's shoulder bumped Rabin's arm. "There's a motel down the street. It's nice. Families of students at the school stay there all the time."

Part of him thought he should say no. He wasn't gay—really—so he shouldn't be doing stuff with Izzy. No matter what Izzy said, he'd probably get the wrong idea. But he so very much did not want this pleasant time with Izzy to end. Not yet. "You sure?"

"About the hotel?" Izzy smiled, proving he was teasing. "Yeah." He bumped Rabin's arm again. "About tonight? Oh yeah. If you are."

Inside his pockets, Rabin's hands curled to fists. Then he felt himself nodding. "Okay."

"Okay." Izzy grabbed his arm and forced him to turn. "We need to go in here."

Surprised, Rabin looked up at the LIQUOR sign above them just before they crossed through the double glass doors. His suspicions of why they were there were confirmed when Izzy walked boldly up to the counter and leaned on it, pointing out the condoms and lube behind the clerk. Amused but a little horrified at Izzy's boldness, Rabin hung back, pretending to be distracted by the magazine rack. He flipped through the latest edition of *Guitar World* and even gave a thought to buying it, but when he heard Izzy's chipper thank-you, he shoved the magazine back. Izzy joined him, gave one glance at the magazines, smiled, then led the way out of the shop.

When they got to the motel desk, Rabin got his wallet out before Izzy could.

"You sure?"

"Yeah." Rabin gave the clerk a credit card that should have plenty for the night.

"Okay." Izzy didn't sound convinced, but he didn't argue further.

Rabin was glad, because he was busy staring down the man behind the counter who took note that they had no luggage. But he made no comment and was otherwise perfectly nice as he handed Rabin's card back with their key card. Izzy was humming slightly as they left the tiny office and approached the stairs. Rabin couldn't help but watch Izzy's pert little ass as he led the way up. Their room was three doors down on the left. Rabin opened the door and let Izzy precede him inside.

He got a brief impression of a bright orange wall and the orange-and-gray-striped bedding on the queen-size bed, but it was only brief. Izzy tossed his plastic bag onto the bed, rounded on Rabin, and slammed him against the wall near the opening for the bathroom.

Lithe arms wrapped around Rabin's neck, forcing him to bend. "I've been wanting to do this all night."

Then Izzy was kissing him—devouring him, really. Rabin had no choice but to open his mouth and wrap his arms around the eager body pressed against him. Not that it was a hardship. He was more than happy to do his own share of devouring,

tongue wrestling with Izzy's as one of his hands found rich, soft hair to sink into. He slipped a little on the wall, legs sliding from under him to put his mouth on level with Izzy's. The new position allowed Izzy to straddle one of his thighs, pressing eager hardness into his muscle.

Making adorable little whining noises, Izzy unwrapped his arms so he could paw at Rabin's shirt. "Off."

Rabin yanked Izzy's shirt up. "You too."

"Yeah." They were having trouble separating their mouths, though, so it took a few more minutes before Izzy finally tore himself away, even taking two steps back. "Enough." He stood there panting, dark eyes gleaming over a swollen-lipped smile. "You need to get naked." He grabbed the hem of his pink shirt. "Now."

Rabin's lips grinned all by themselves as he pushed himself off the wall. Izzy backed farther away from him, unbuttoning his jeans, as Rabin tore his own shirt off. Izzy managed his slip-ons while still standing, but Rabin had to sit on the edge of the bed to untie his boots. Izzy used the time to shimmy out of his jeans, leaving him in just some bright blue briefs.

Rabin tossed aside his second boot. "Come here."

Izzy hesitated by the desk. "You need to get out of those jeans."

"In a minute." He kept his voice soft and beckoned. "Come here."

Izzy blinked, then stepped toward him. Rabin gathered him closer with arms around Izzy's waist and shoved his nose into the soft dip right under Izzy's rib cage. He shut his eyes and just breathed for a second.

Hands stroked his hair. "Hey?"

Rabin stuck his tongue out to taste Izzy's skin, then tilted his head to lay on a wet kiss. Izzy shuddered as Rabin kept kissing soft skin, smoothing his hands over Izzy's back and sides as he kissed his way down. He tucked his hands into the back of Izzy's briefs, better to get two good handfuls of tight buttocks. Izzy sighed as Rabin eased the briefs down while sipping at Izzy's navel. He carefully eased the

briefs over Izzy's rigid cock, then let them drop down his legs while caressing his thighs.

Izzy jumped when Rabin kissed the tip of his cock. "Hey, wait—"

"Shhh." Rabin reached around to regain his handfuls of ass.

"But...?"

"S okay." He lapped at the tip again, tentative about the taste. Of all they'd done, putting his lips to Izzy's cock seemed like a big step. But he wanted to do it more than he was willing to admit to himself. With Izzy fidgeting under his hands, Rabin opened his lips and slipped them over the smooth head.

"Oh." Fidgeting shuddered to a stop, and Izzy's fingers tightened in Rabin's hair as he slowly slid his tongue around the head. Knowing how good it felt on his own cock, Rabin pointed his tongue and rubbed underneath the ridge.

"Okay, wait." But Izzy's sigh and the run of fingers through Rabin's hair were at odds with his breathy request, so Rabin ignored it. He played a little more around the head, then slowly slid his lips down the shaft, letting velvety skin rub his tongue. The tip pushed at the back of his mouth, and he carefully stopped when he felt himself start to gag. Even so, he could get most of Izzy's cock into his mouth, his nose just touching the curly dark hair at the base.

"Rabin, God."

He experimented with ways to squeeze with his tongue and suction, loving the impatient groans that spilled from Izzy and the way the ass cheeks in his grip tightened and relaxed. *Christ, I'm sucking cock.* He didn't let the foreign concept deter him, however, as he wetly pulled his mouth back up to the tip. A whimper from Izzy sent him right back down, and he set up a slow rhythm of up and down that he decided should feel pretty good.

Izzy let him go on for a while, but then he dug his fingers into Rabin's hair and pulled gently. "Rabin, please, stop."

Pulling away slowly, Rabin rolled his eyes upward. Izzy's hungry, dark gaze was fastened on his mouth.

Izzy licked his lips. "I want to come with you inside me."

Who was he to argue with that? He tilted his head and let his tongue swirl the head for one last suck, then released Izzy's cock. Hands cupped his jaw, angling his face for the desperate kiss that descended on his lips.

"I..." Izzy's breath warmed Rabin's lips, his brown eyes open and so close. Then he groaned, closing those eyes. "Oh God, stand up and get naked, would you?"

Chuckling softly, Rabin stood after quickly shedding his socks. While he dropped his jeans, Izzy knelt in the middle of the bed, rummaging through the plastic bag to take out the box of condoms and the lube. He had the little bottle of lube open and a condom unwrapped by the time Rabin joined him on the bed. Ignoring the paraphernalia, Rabin framed his face with both hands and kissed him. Loving the whimper, he used his greater size to coax Izzy onto his back so he could stretch out on top of him. Warm and slim and firm, Izzy's body was both exciting and comforting, a mouthwatering dessert after a bleak and awful day. The push of his cock into Rabin's belly was still new, but new like a delicious new icing on a cake.

"God, Rabin, please." Izzy turned his head aside to avoid Rabin's mouth. So Rabin traced the line of his jaw and sucked at the throbbing pulse underneath. Izzy whimpered, lightly punching Rabin's side. "Please, Rabin. *God*, fuck me, please. Fuck me now."

This time, Izzy's request was not to be ignored. Rabin slowly pulled back on his knees to sit on Izzy's thighs. As soon as there was room, the smaller man proved by holding it up that he'd held the opened condom the whole time they were kissing. Rabin plucked it from his fingers and rolled it on.

Izzy fidgeted underneath him, fingers digging into his thigh. "Let me turn over."

“No.” Rabin didn’t know what came over him, but he went with it. Condom on, he braced his hands on Izzy’s hips to keep him there, then maneuvered in between his legs. He grabbed one of Izzy’s knees and pushed it up toward Izzy’s chest. Looking down, he let the tip of his cock nudge the tiny little opening under Izzy’s balls. The condom was lubed, but he didn’t want to take the chance, so he let go of Izzy’s leg to grab the bottle. “Hey!” he protested as Izzy scrambled onto his side.

“Want it this way,” Izzy rasped, finishing the roll onto his belly.

Rabin was disappointed, but he didn’t make a thing of it. What did he know about gay sex, really? Maybe it didn’t feel as good face-to-face, although he was pretty sure it was possible. Unwilling to dwell on it just now, he let Izzy rise up onto his hands and knees, then poured a good gush of lube at the top of Izzy’s crack. He caught the liquid with his fingers as it got to Izzy’s hole, and smeared the skin, the rim, and then inside the hole.

“Rabin!” Izzy had his cheek pressed to the pillows, hair splayed over his face, fingers digging into the stuffing. “God, now, please.”

Rabin fell forward, bracing on his arm over Izzy’s back. With his free hand, he rubbed his cock over Izzy’s entrance. “You beg so pretty, Iz.”

“Whatever. Now. *Please.*”

Rabin pushed in.

“God, yes!” Izzy thumped the mattress with his fist, burying his face in the pillow as Rabin slowly speared into him.

So hot. Rabin smoothed his palm over Izzy’s back as it arched, muscles straining while Izzy pushed back. He combed Izzy’s hair free of his neck and leaned in to kiss the warm curve.

“Fuck, Rabin.”

Rabin eased out, then pushed back in, taking his time, amazed by the hot squeeze around his dick. Izzy’s pleading encouraged him to a little more speed. Still braced on one arm, he wrapped the other around Izzy’s chest, using it to hold his

writhing body close and almost still. The mild restraint drove Izzy crazy, making him rock and arch into Rabin. He moved so much, Rabin had to let go so he could lean on both arms, his thrusts picking up speed to match Izzy's.

"Fuck, I'm gonna—"

"Yes!" Face in the pillows, braced on one elbow, Izzy reached between his legs to pull on his cock.

They strained together in perfect sync. It was gorgeous, amazing. Rabin's lungs labored as he slammed into Izzy's willing body, spurred on by pillow-muffled cries.

Then he remembered. He leaned in as close as he could to Izzy's ear. "Come for me."

Izzy's neck arched, his temple rubbing against the side of Rabin's jaw. "Aw, fuck!" His entire body froze, trembling. A high, strangled cry ripped from his open mouth as his body jerked in a spasm. Then another. And another.

Caught off guard by the intensity, Rabin groaned when an orgasm tore through him, his dick exploding deep inside Izzy's shuddering body.

He collapsed onto Izzy's sweating back, panting hard and unable to move a muscle. Beneath him, Izzy was in no better shape, so only the sound of their breathing filled the quiet room.

Fuck. When finally he could think, move, he rolled his head so he could press his lips to the meaty spot between Izzy's neck and his shoulder blade. "Fuck." Yes, that needed to be voiced.

"Fuck," Izzy agreed, dragging one arm up to his face. "Oh man, fuck." He pushed sweat-damp hair from his face.

Rabin pushed up onto his elbow and blew on Izzy's face, trying to help cool him. He watched long lashes flutter as Izzy tried to open his eyes. *Gorgeous.* Overcome, Rabin leaned in to kiss the corner of his mouth. Izzy sighed, melted, and they managed to twist him enough onto his side so they could kiss full-on. Rabin's

cock had to leave Izzy's warmth for it, but it was an okay trade-off since his cock was well and truly spent. Rabin pushed Izzy all the way onto his back and framed his face, determined to explore every last centimeter of Izzy's mouth with his tongue.

It was he who eventually stopped, slowing his kisses and pulling back so it became a brushing of moist lips. When he did stop and open his eyes, it was in time to see Izzy slowly drag his own open. Chocolate brown surrounded by a lacework of shining black, framed by softly rounded cheeks and arched black brows. The face of an angel.

His angel.

Oh man.

He sighed and rolled to his side, still half draped over Izzy. "I'm worn out."

Izzy chuckled, wiggling out from underneath him. They lay on their sides, facing each other. "Not surprising with the way you fuck. *Not* that I'm complaining."

Rabin smiled, punching one of the pillows into place under his head. "I don't think I can get up."

Which made Izzy laugh aloud. He sat up, stretching. "You should at least get the condom off."

"What? Oh, right." As Izzy stood, he pulled the latex from his dick and tied it off, then dropped it into the plastic bag Izzy held up for him. "Thanks."

Izzy smiled, left the bag on the table, and disappeared into the bathroom.

Rabin lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. They hadn't even opened the bright orange curtains or pulled down the cover on the bed, too intent on fucking each other's brains out. And boy, had they. He'd even sucked cock. And liked it. Maybe there really was something to this gay-sex thing.

He startled, eyes opening when the mattress jounced.

"Sorry." Still naked, his wet hair finger-combed back from his face, Izzy held the remote. "Did I wake you?"

Rabin stretched. “Must have.”

“You need to sleep?”

His eyes closed. “Probably.”

“Mind the television?”

He shook his head, pulling the pillow free of the spread. “Nope.” Rolling mostly onto his belly, he hugged the pillow beneath his head. “I just need a little...”

Gentle fingers stroked his cheek. “No worries. I’ll keep the volume low.”

Rabin nodded. He intended to say thank you, but sleep claimed him before he got the chance.

Chapter Ten

The day dawned brighter. Even if that perception might have been his fancy, he did feel much better for the night with Izzy. Despite the fact that he wore the same clothes—or maybe because that fact reminded him of why, which warmed his heart as well as places a little lower—he felt pumped and ready to tackle the day.

Waking with Izzy had been a little weird but not too awkward. They'd had sex again during the night, but mostly they'd talked. The topics were varied and light, and Rabin was pretty sure Izzy had kept away from any hot topics on purpose. He had to admit that he appreciated it. They'd had breakfast at a coffee shop by the school, then parted ways with conspiratorial smiles.

Brent's car was in the parking lot when Rabin got to the studio, and he found his friend alone in the console room, working on a raw recording Rabin had never heard before. Brent looked up when Rabin entered, and stopped the playback.

"Want me to come back?" Rabin thumbed over his shoulder out the door.

"Nah. Just listening to a demo tape." Brent pushed out one of the chairs with rollers, eyeing Rabin up and down. "Those the same clothes you had on last night?"

Rabin ducked his head as he retrieved his guitar case from the corner. "Yeah."

"Good night?"

He sat. "Yeah." He felt a little guilty for not telling Brent that his cousin was the reason, but since Izzy himself had suggested the secrecy, Rabin respected his wishes.

"Good for you. Then I guess you don't know when Zane'll be here?"

"He's not here yet?"

“Not yet.”

Scowling, Rabin pulled out his phone and speed-dialed Zane.

“Yo.”

“Where are you?”

“Could ask you the same.”

“I’m at the studio.”

Zane grunted. “I missed the first train.”

“But you’re on your way?”

“Yeah. Be there in thirty.”

“Okay. See you then.” He hung up and glanced at Brent. “He missed the train. He’ll be here in a half hour.”

Brent shrugged. “Todd’s gonna be late anyway.”

Now that Brent mentioned it, Rabin recalled that the drummer had mentioned he’d be late. Was it uncharitable of him to wonder if Zane had missed the train on purpose so as not to chance being alone with Brent? He decided yes. Bending over, he opened his guitar case. “Wanna jam?”

Brent stood. “Sure. Let’s go in there.”

Bringing the case, Rabin followed Brent into the studio. After setting the case by the wall, he took his accustomed stool while Brent took a seat next to the keyboard set.

“So”—Brent turned on the board and flipped a bunch of the switches—“is this going to work out?”

Distracted by warm-up exercises for his fingers, Rabin wasn’t sure he heard him. “Huh?”

Brent watched his own fingers playing over the keys. “Zane doesn’t want to work with me, does he?”

Rabin played a sour chord. “Uh...”

The volume was low, but Rabin recognized one of Heaven Sent's songs, one Brent surely knew backward and forward and could play without thinking. "It's true. Not sure what I did, but it's obvious enough."

"He'll get over it."

"Will he?"

He'd better. "Yes."

Brent glanced at him. "Nothing's ever gonna happen if he doesn't let a bass player stay for the jam."

"I know."

"Maybe we should put things on hold. Give you guys a chance to shop around for someone Zane likes."

Rabin sat up, gripping the neck of his guitar hard. "You'd do that?"

Brent laughed, eyes still on his fingers. No, the song wasn't a Heaven Sent song; it was one of Hell's melodies from his pre-Heaven Sent days. Brent played it with the same careless talent he always showed, keyboard or strings. "Doesn't do me much good to force coming in here when we don't get anything done. I could hire out the place. Already have offers."

Rabin's heart sank. "Yeah, I guess." He pried his hand free and resumed his finger exercises. "Only problem is, if we stop, I need to get a job."

"Advance almost up?"

"Yep."

"I know of a few studio gigs coming up, if you're interested."

Rabin dropped his chin to his chest. "Damn, man, I feel guilty with you helping me so much."

"This one's no skin off my back. You'd be doing me a favor. There's a singer I want to produce, and she doesn't have a band. I've got Todd and Dylan interested already. And she's got money to burn."

Rabin stared at Brent's profile, wondering if the other man realized what he was saying. He wanted to get the lineup he'd proposed for the Knights together with another singer? Should Rabin be offended? If so, he couldn't manage it. "Thanks. Yeah, I'm interested."

Brent nodded. "Good. I'll set it up. Meantime, we'll need to rearrange the schedule for the Knights." All said without looking up, without stopping.

"Yeah." Rabin looked down at his own fingers. "We'll do that today."

Without any more talking, they both finished their warm-ups, then just kind of slid into a quiet jam. One of the many reasons he loved playing with Brent was that it was so *easy*. They just kept playing, working around and with each other, like they were dancing. It was like that when he was fucking Izzy. He played a sour chord thanks to that off thought, but he recovered before Brent remarked on it. But now he couldn't get Izzy out of his thoughts. Fucking him *was* like playing music—easy, exciting, and never got old. At least, not yet. He had no frame of reference regarding gay sex, but he knew enough about straight sex to know that it couldn't be easy with just anyone. It was Izzy that made it special, Izzy's willingness to give and take that was compatible with Rabin's mood and actions.

Lost in his thoughts and the music, Rabin didn't realize they had company until Brent's playing tapered off. He glanced up to see Brent looking toward the doorway. Zane was there, standing quietly. Listening.

Zane waved his composition notebook toward the hall behind him. "Todd's here. Stopped by the john first." His voice was subdued, and his eyes strayed low of Rabin's face.

Rabin glanced at Brent, but his friend had shut off the keyboard and was strolling toward the console room. "Cool. I'm gonna grab a smoke before we start."

Zane watched him go and waited until the door from the console room to the hall opened and shut before he came into the studio. "So. You got lucky last night."

Rabin tracked him across the hardwood floor to the couch. "Yeah." He stood, guitar strap still slung over his shoulder, and joined his friend. "You?"

“Nah.” Zane tilted his head to rest his skull on the back of the couch. His tight, abundant curls pillowed his head. “I stayed home. Did some thinking.”

Rabin stilled his strings by placing a palm on them. He waited.

Zane took a deep breath. “You’re right. I haven’t given this a shot. I just... It doesn’t feel like *ours*. Y’know?”

“Honest? No.”

Zane combed hair from his forehead, staring blankly across the room. “Some of the stuff you and Brent wrote is pretty damn good. I guess I’m jealous.”

“You shouldn’t be. It’s for the Knights. I *want* you involved.”

“I know.” Zane’s hand fell back down and slapped his thigh. “I guess... I haven’t felt right since... Well, you know. I guess it’s just...*big* to be back, doing this, with all new people.”

“Yeah, okay. I get that. But the old way’s not coming back. You know that, right? Markus and Sam are gone.”

“Yeah. I know.” Finally Zane twisted his neck to look at Rabin. “I know.” He bit into his lower lip, a sign of emotion that Rabin knew well. “I came up with some lyrics last night that might work.”

That made Rabin smile, which prompted the same for Zane. “Cool.”

He’d fill Zane in about Brent’s offers later. Right now, this tentative truce and the promise of forward movement were too precious and fragile to jeopardize.

Chapter Eleven

For two weeks, things worked.

Zane cooperated and came up with lyrics and suggestions for three new songs. He even seemed excited. Brent played bass for them for the first few days, but then a guy named Oscar Trent—preferably known as OT—came in. He wasn't perfect and didn't contribute much to the creative process, but he played whatever bass line they asked of him and was patient when they changed it up. It was an exciting time.

Rabin enjoyed it even more because he and Izzy met every two or three days. Rabin went to see him after school, and they most often ended up at the same motel, but two nights they went to the movies, and one night Rabin spent a few hours hanging out with Izzy and his friends at the school while they were practicing for an upcoming exam. Rabin never told Zane who he was going to meet, just let his friend think there was a girl he'd hooked up with. He felt guilty for that—and for not confiding in Brent—but Izzy didn't seem to have the same problem.

* * *

"What have you been telling them?" Rabin asked one night as they lay facing each other under the bright orange bedspread.

Head pillowed a few inches in front of him, Izzy dragged his eyes open. "Brent and Hell?"

"Yeah."

Izzy's eyes closed. "That I've been kind of dating a friend from school, and that he's got a place here in town."

Rabin slid his hand down Izzy's bare arm, his blood still simmering from the sex they'd just had. "They're okay with that?"

Eyes opened again, mostly in shadow since the only lit lamp was on the nightstand behind him. "Why shouldn't they be?"

Rabin fingered the sharp bone at Izzy's hip. "We should tell them about us."

Izzy frowned. "What for?"

"You shouldn't have to lie. Besides, they should know."

"No. They shouldn't. It's none of their business. And if they *did* know, that'd just make them all paranoid."

"Paranoid?"

Izzy sat up, profile to Rabin, and pushed a riot of hair from his face. "If Brent finds out that I'm in another secret relationship, he'll tell my mom, and she'll pitch a fit."

Rabin scowled, propping up on his elbow. "All the more reason to tell them."

Izzy sighed. "Why?" He rounded on Rabin, dark eyes unusually bright and serious. "Are you gay now?"

Rabin's jaw dropped. "I... Uh..."

"Uh-huh. You're not. Let's face it. We're having fun, but you don't want a real relationship. You don't need—or want—all the crap that comes along with living gay, so why bother piling on the guilt?" He told this all to the silent television rather than to Rabin, his tone more forceful than usual. "The minute we tell Brent, he'll give you pressure or, worse, tell you not to see me anymore for *my* own good." His hands rose and spread, emphasizing his words. "Everyone will convince you that what we have is wrong. It'll become a *thing* for absolutely no reason."

Agitated, Izzy shoved out from underneath the sheets and spun around so he knelt facing Rabin. He resembled a wild boy, naked and still a little sweaty, the curls of his hair drying in wacky formations. He reached out to stroke Rabin's jaw.

"I *like* what we are. I'm fine with it. I don't want to stop seeing you, and I don't want other people to convince you that you need to stay away from me."

Rabin blinked up at him, at a loss what to say. There was something wrong with what Izzy was saying, but it dangled just out of his reach, obscured by the bright distraction Izzy himself presented as he edged closer.

"Please?" Izzy wiggled back down to his side and snuggled up to Rabin. He kissed Rabin's parted lips while sliding his hand down Rabin's side. "Please, don't ruin this. It'll probably end on its own soon anyway. Let's enjoy it while we've got it."

End? Not that he wasn't of the same opinion, but hearing Izzy say it with that faint note of desperation was out of tune. "Iz..."

"No no no." Insistent lips took his, sharp little teeth biting away at the words he wanted to say. "We're fine like we are." Wonderful fingers wrapped around Rabin's cock, waking it up. "I... Yes."

He should stop this. He should make Izzy talk. But strangely, he didn't feel like he had the right. Like Izzy said, he wasn't ready to announce to the world that he was gay. Wasn't even sure that what he did with Izzy made him gay. Was it just the sex that did it? Like Izzy said, there was so much more to it. So if he wasn't prepared to come out, did he have a right to rouse the suspicion of those around Izzy? Given his past, Izzy's family and friends would be justified in their concern. He let Izzy push him onto his back and accepted the smaller man's weight atop him. All the while, they kept kissing. Rabin's mind wouldn't stop. Was what they were doing hurting Izzy, or should he trust that Izzy knew himself and knew what he was doing? Izzy, after all, was the one who kept pointing out that what they had was just fun and couldn't be long-term. That shouldn't bother Rabin, because it was true.

Frustrated with the rolling thoughts in his mind, Rabin growled and put all his attention into the physical act, pulling that darling body as close as he could and letting his hands roam the silken expanse of back. This was good. This couldn't be

bad. He lay there while sweet lips sampled his neck, his chest, his nipples, and he loved the way Izzy stroked his cock. He did have to stop Izzy to remind him about the condom when the other man reared up to impale himself, but Izzy just grumbled and scrambled for one of the little plastic packets on the nightstand. Rabin let the lapse pass while he sheathed himself, then put his hands on Izzy's hips to steady his lover as he sank down on Rabin's cock. He spurred Izzy on with words and a stroking hand on his cock, fascinated by Izzy's gyrations over him. Dark hair fell back from the face that tilted toward the ceiling, pleasure pouring groans from his open mouth. This time, Rabin lost it first, groaning and gripping Izzy's hips as the orgasm shook him. Izzy rode him through it, his own hand on his cock now to bring himself to come just moments after Rabin.

Rabin stared at the ceiling as Izzy collapsed into the bedding beside him. Worn out, he felt sleep coming on him fast. *We need to talk*. He thought it but didn't say it. Izzy snuggled up to his side, breath soft over the right side of Rabin's chest.

Nah, they were okay.

Chapter Twelve

Rabin was in his room on the phone with his mom when he heard Zane's rejoicing whoop from the direction of his own room.

It was loud enough that she heard it too. "What was that?"

Lying on his bed, Rabin stared at the closed door. "I'm not sure."

Rabin's door opened, and Zane rushed in. "Dude, you're not gonna believe—" He stopped at Rabin's held-up hand.

"Mom, I gotta call you back."

"I hope nothing's wrong?"

Judging from the grin splitting Zane's face, he doubted it. "I don't think so. I'll call you back."

"Okay, dear. I love you."

"Love you too."

"Bye, Mrs. Guardia," Zane called.

Rabin tossed the phone onto the milk crate that served as a nightstand. "What's up?"

Zane spread his arms, palms out, fingers splayed. "Dude! The *best* news."

Rabin had to smile. "Okay. What is it?"

"You remember Arthur Cardowski?"

"Worked A and R"—artists and repertoire—"for the record company, yeah." The man who'd pumped them up and made them feel good so they'd make money for the record company. One of the ones who'd dropped them like a brick when things hadn't soared. *Prick*.

Zane nodded. "Right. That's who just called me. He's with his own company now, and they bought the rights to our album."

The album that never was and probably never would be, since their former record company owned part of it. But if someone else bought it... Rabin sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "And?"

Zane plopped down next to him, bouncing the bed. "They want us to *finish it!*"

The ground dropped out from under Rabin, or so it felt. "What?"

"I know! His new label's called Cardamon Records, and they're looking to start up by buying out albums like ours. Arthur got ours because he worked with us before." Zane punched Rabin's arm. "Dude, we're back!"

Rabin scowled at the floor, thinking fast. "When do they want to do this?"

"Now." Zane laughed.

"Where?"

"LA."

"How are we supposed to get to LA?"

Some of Zane's zeal deflated. "Dude, what the fuck?"

"What? I'm asking, how're we supposed to get to LA?"

"I don't know."

Rabin pulled a knee up onto the mattress so he could face Zane. "You didn't ask?"

"No, I didn't ask. Christ." Zane scowled, digging a finger into one of the holes in his jeans. "He said he'd call tomorrow with the details."

"Who's in on this deal?"

"All of us."

"Who's 'all of us'?"

Zane sighed. "You're a fucking piece of work. You know that? *All* of us. He's already talked to Markus and Sam. They're in."

Rabin's eyes went wide. "They're in?"

"Yeah. Man." Zane reached up to grab his arm, blue eyes sparkling. "This is it."

Rabin heard the words but was reluctant to believe them. "But how do we get to LA?"

"I don't know how. We'll get there."

"On what? We've barely got the rent here for another month or so. We don't have the funds for another move."

He saw some of his concern reluctantly dawn on Zane. "They'll send us an advance."

"Did he say that?"

"Well, no, but..."

"Listen. I'm not saying this isn't good news." Rabin stood and started pacing the relatively empty confines of his room. "It could be. But we've got to be smart about this. I'm not moving the hell across the country on the promise of some record company douche."

"You sure that's it?"

Rabin paused on his trip back toward his bed. Zane sat there scowling up at him, a lot of his enthusiasm behind a dark cloud.

"What?"

"Seems like you've gotten real cozy here in Chicago with your new friends."

"Jesus Christ, are you gonna start this again?"

"I'm just sayin'. Maybe you're not so happy to leave."

"Would you give me a fucking break? I just uprooted my life two months ago to come here. Excuse the hell out of me if I'm a little cautious about doing it again so soon on the call out of the blue from a guy who worked for the company that dumped us last year."

Zane's gaze dropped down and to the side. "He says that wasn't him."

“And I’m *sure* he’d tell you the whole truth about it.” Rabin snorted and resumed his pacing. “Get a grip, Zane. We need to be smart about this.”

Pulling in a deep breath, Zane scraped hands into his hair to pull it back from his face. “Okay. Okay, yeah, you’re right. Sorry. It went to my head.”

Rabin smirked. “I know. But that *is* cool, if he’s on the up-and-up.”

Zane gripped his hair so hard that the corners of his eyes stretched to match the corners of his grin. “I think he is, man.”

Rabin nodded. “We’ll see.”

* * *

The next day was Fourth of July, so they were off from the studio. Brent and Hell had plans of their own, and Izzy was out of town spending the holiday with his parents. Rabin had planned to take Zane to the Taste of Chicago. After hearing Izzy talk about it, Rabin was pretty sure both of them would enjoy it. But instead they spent the day discussing the new deal from every possible angle. They didn’t expect Arthur to call back on the holiday, but since they didn’t know, they wanted to be prepared.

Through it all, Rabin kept thinking of Izzy. And Brent. But mostly Izzy. What was he going to tell them? Surely, they’d both see what a great opportunity this was, but... He couldn’t dwell on it. Not until he knew some details.

Arthur called Rabin the next day, and they had a long, serious chat. Rabin remembered Arthur as a prick, but he thought most of the people he’d dealt with at the record company were all pricks on some level. Once Arthur realized that Rabin wanted hard-and-fast details, they got down to the nitty-gritty. Rabin dearly missed having a manager who dealt with this stuff, but he did his best. Cardamon Records had some money backing them, so Rabin and Arthur were able to tentatively agree on an advance that would cover Zane and Rabin’s transfer to LA and living expenses for a few months. It even allowed enough to keep paying rent on the place in Chicago for the same amount of time, which Rabin felt even better about. Before

they got off the phone, Arthur agreed to draw up a proposal and e-mail it to Rabin and Zane for review.

"We can use the printer at the studio," Rabin told Zane as he wrapped up relaying the details to his friend. Rabin still had his laptop even though they couldn't afford Internet service at home. "As long as it's on the up-and-up, we should be golden."

He rejoiced with Zane, ignoring for the moment the sensation of tearing somewhere in the vicinity of his heart.

* * *

Telling Brent the next day was easy. Shortly after they showed up at the studio, Zane took Todd on a food run to give Rabin a chance to break the news to Brent in private.

He took it well. "That's terrific, man." Brent even stood up to give him a back-slapping hug. "You feel good about what he said?"

Grinning as they both resumed their seats behind the massive console, Rabin nodded. "I do. Talked his ear off yesterday about anything I could think of. I got a chance to skim over the agreement, and it looks good."

"You want me to ask someone to look at it? You need a legal eye."

He opened his mouth to decline but heard himself accepting instead. He'd be a fool not to let a disinterested third party see the agreement. "That'd be awesome. Thanks."

"Forward me the e-mail, and I'll see if Chris or one of Gretchen's people can give it a once-over. You should talk to her about managing, you know. Her people are good."

Rabin perked up. "You think she'd be interested?"

Brent laughed. "You've already got a deal, and she knows I've been working with you. I think you're good."

"Wow. Again, thanks, man."

“Don’t mention it.” Brent glanced at the closed door behind Rabin, then pursed his lips. “You tell Izzy yet?”

Rabin blinked, stunned. “Huh?”

Brent tossed silky black fringe from his face, then sat back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “You’ve been seeing Izzy for the past few weeks, haven’t you?”

Caught completely off guard, Rabin couldn’t think of how to dance around the subject. “You knew?”

Very little emotion showed on Brent’s face. “I suspected. Too many nights Izzy spent in town and you came in the next morning in the same clothes.”

Rabin winced. They hadn’t thought of that. “Right. Hey, listen—”

“I should kick your ass.” Brent held up a hand. “But, hey, you’re both adults. He probably told you not to tell me anyway, for fear I’d tell his mom.” Evidently Brent knew his cousin better than they’d expected.

“Did you?”

“Tell her? God no. It’s not her business. Not mine either.”

“Good. I mean, thanks.” Rabin’s heart raced. Brent had been so good to him, he didn’t want to get on his bad side. “It’s not a huge deal. We just...”

“Just?”

He took a breath, sitting forward to put his elbows on his knees. “I don’t know. I like him a lot.”

“You gay now?”

A breath exploded from Rabin’s mouth. “I don’t know. I guess?” He shook his head. “Or not. I like being with Izzy, but...”

“Not so much other guys?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve seen this before.”

“You have?”

“Sure. Darien got a taste of Chris and didn’t look back. Tyler with Johnnie too. Heck, I dated women for a little while.” He chuckled. “Liked it too.”

Rabin’s eyes went wide. Everyone Brent had just mentioned had ended up with lifelong commitments.

“Is it serious?”

He didn’t mistake Brent’s light tone. The other man was fishing for information and would kill him if Rabin answered wrong. “We’re just having fun.” He felt safe using Izzy’s own words, even if they sounded a little hollow.

“I hope you’re right about that.” His tone suggested Brent didn’t think so. “I don’t envy you telling him. I doubt he wants to find another playmate.”

Playmate. Rabin frowned. But that’s what he was. “I plan to tell him tonight.”

A pause while Brent studied his face. “Suggestion?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t tell him until you know for sure when you’re leaving.”

“Why?”

“Things are still up in the air now. Better to tell him when you’ve got some solid information.” He shrugged as he stood, picking up a pack of smokes and a lighter from the console. “But it’s up to you. Join me outside?”

Rabin nodded thoughtfully. “In a minute. I’m gonna check my e-mail.”

“Cool.” Brent patted his shoulder on the way out.

Rabin just sat there, staring at the floor. He’d worked himself into a lather the night before, thinking how to tell Brent and only superficially thinking of how to tell Izzy. Now that Brent knew, there was nothing to hold back the dread.

Izzy would be fine. They were just friends, having fun. Izzy was the one who kept telling Rabin that. He was even the one who’d mentioned things coming to an end. So, was Rabin’s dread even justified? Maybe he wasn’t so much worried over Izzy’s reaction as he was upset over his own?

Chapter Thirteen

Rabin took Brent's advice and didn't tell Izzy immediately. He felt bad, but Brent was right. You never knew what was going to happen from one minute to the next in the music business. It could easily turn out that the contract was bogus or the new record company changed their minds or things got delayed. Hell, it could even turn out that things moved to Chicago! You just never knew. It really was best to wait until everything was solid.

And if a part of Rabin hoped that things *would* fall through...? Well, he kept that to himself.

But the offer was solid. Brent couldn't catch Chris Faith, because he was out of the country with Darien, but hooked Rabin and Zane up with a guy who worked out of Chicago for Gretchen, Heaven Sent's manager. Gordon McCarty was a personable guy with black hair and icy blue eyes, who sat them down and gave them a good hour of straight talk. Rabin wasn't sure he liked Gordon at first, but after the meeting, he regretted leaving Gordon behind. The man must make a fabulous manager. Gordon suggested they make one alteration to the contract—that of getting their advance in full, up front—and both Rabin and Zane had missed the fine print on that one. That alone made the meeting worthwhile. Arthur from Cardamon Records hemmed a few days on the timing of the advance, but then he gave in. Rabin thought maybe he sensed that Rabin was more than ready to walk away from the deal, even if Zane wasn't. A second agreement was sent. Gordon was asked to read it and blessed it. Then Rabin found himself signing the damn thing Monday night and faxing it back.

The deal was done. He had an e-mail notice that his part of the advance would be electronically deposited in his account the next day. He and Zane had a week and a day to get their shit out to Los Angeles.

He couldn't delay telling Izzy anymore.

* * *

Tuesday night, Rabin met Izzy at their motel. He didn't want to tell Izzy about this in public, and he didn't think he could take the walk from school and dinner at the pizzeria before spilling the beans. So he was nervously pacing the narrow confines of the room when Izzy knocked.

Rabin opened the door, and Izzy grinned, breezing past him into the room. "Hey."

Trying to still his nerves, Rabin paid undue attention to closing the door. "Hey."

Izzy's backpack thumped onto the rug, and Rabin turned into Izzy's reaching arms. They met in a kiss that was now achingly familiar. He was going to miss this in LA.

"Mmm, I'm glad you suggested coming straight here," Izzy murmured, tugging Rabin by his T-shirt as he walked backward toward the bed. "It's been *days* since I've seen you." Stopping at the bed, he slid a hand down to cup Rabin's crotch. "I missed you."

Rabin gave him a groan and a smile against his lips. "I missed you too."

Izzy squeezed, and Rabin gave serious thought to having sex before he said anything about moving. But fairness won out. He grabbed Izzy's wrist just before busy fingers could loosen his fly. "Wait."

"What for?"

"Iz, stop. I've got something to tell you."

Like a switch going off, Izzy froze, and half the warmth drained from the air around them. Wide dark eyes stared at Rabin's throat. "Oh." He licked his lips. "Can it...wait?"

"No." Rabin ran his hands up Izzy's arms to his shoulders. "Hey. Look at me."

Izzy did, but only for a brief second. Then he shook Rabin's hold and sidestepped away from him. "What is it? Tell me, and get it over with."

Rabin scowled at his back, thrown off by the cold shoulder. "Iz..."

Taking a deep breath, Izzy turned and leaned back against the dresser that held the television. "What? It can't be good news, not when you start like that."

"It *is* good news." *Kind of. Mostly.* "I...that is, *we*, the Indigo Knights, got an offer from a new record company to finish the second album that we never got to record."

Dark brows crowded blinking eyes, showing Izzy's confusion. "That...is good news. Congrats."

Rabin put on a smile. "Thanks. We're excited about it." He *was* excited.

Izzy started to smile. "You should be. That's great. When do you start? Does that put your work with Brent on hold? Have you told him?"

Now Rabin did smile, loving how inquisitive Izzy was. "Brent knows. And yeah, we'll be putting that work on hold. We leave Friday."

There went the switch again, and all emotion drained from Izzy's face. "Leave?"

Rabin nodded. "That's the part I really needed to tell you. We have to move to LA."

"Los Angeles?"

"Yeah."

Dark lashes dropped down to shield Izzy's eyes. "Oh."

"Hey." Rabin went to him but stopped just a step away, halted by an invisible barrier that kept Izzy isolated from him. "I'm sorry."

“Sorry?” Izzy shook himself and tried a laugh that failed just short of real. “Don’t be *sorry*, you doof. This is awesome news for you.”

Rabin made so bold as to reach up to stroke Izzy’s cheek. Eyes squeezed shut, Izzy reached up to capture his hand, turning into his palm.

“I’m happy for you.” The choked sob didn’t go with his words. “That’s great.”

“God, Iz.” Rabin stroked his other hand over Izzy’s hair, fighting a lump in his throat and a burn in his eyes.

Izzy pushed out a breath and shook himself. “Don’t mind me. I’m just—”

Rabin kissed him, unwilling to hear any brave talk. When another sob shook Izzy’s body, Rabin shoved his arms around him to gather him close. Izzy kissed him back, desperately sucking his tongue, fingers digging into the back of Rabin’s shoulders even as his body continued to shake. He moaned a little and tried unsuccessfully to hold back more sobbing. Finally Rabin had to let his lips go, afraid he couldn’t breathe. Izzy bent his face into Rabin’s neck and clung to his shirt.

“God, Iz.” He held on tight. “Please don’t cry.”

“I’m not,” Izzy lied on a sob. “I’m happy for you.”

Rabin laughed, threading his fingers in Izzy’s hair to keep his head tucked close. “Okay. Thanks for that.”

A high, hysterical laugh turned into more weeping, and Rabin couldn’t do anything but hold him.

“Fuck. I’m acting like such a *queen*.”

Rabin kissed his temple. “It’s okay.”

“No. It’s not.” Izzy pulled his arms between them and braced against Rabin’s chest. “I’m feeling sorry for myself.” He pushed.

Rabin wouldn’t release him.

“Let go.”

Reluctantly, he did. Keeping his head down, Izzy pulled away and dashed into the bathroom. Afraid he might close the door, Rabin followed, but Izzy was just

standing at the sink, yanking tissue after tissue from a box on the counter. He shoved a great wad of white at his eyes, then used some of it to blow his nose, all of this with his back mostly to Rabin. It took him a few minutes, but he managed to collect himself—mostly—and turn toward the mirror.

“God.” His reflection showed red, puffy eyes, a redder nose, and a blotchy flush to his cheeks. Not his best look, although Rabin still thought he was adorable. Izzy glanced aside at Rabin, then raised more tissue to cover his face. “Don’t look.”

Without protesting, Rabin turned to prop his shoulder just outside the door frame. The water ran. A few minutes later, Izzy stood at the doorway. Some of the red flush was gone.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Rabin kept his arms crossed because he didn’t know what else to do with his hands. “I’m sorry.”

“No. You had great news, and all I could think of was that you were leaving me. Which is stupid because I knew this was coming.” He headed back toward the bedroom but stopped when Rabin grabbed his arm.

“What?”

Izzy kept his eyes averted. “We said from the beginning that this was just fun. Wasn’t right of me to make a big deal of your leaving.”

That’s it. With a growl, Rabin hauled Izzy around to face him fully and pushed him back against the wall. “Don’t fucking *do* that.”

Izzy’s eyes met his, wide, pink-edged, and still a little watery.

“Don’t make it into no big thing.” Rabin shook him. “I’m going to miss you too.”

Izzy swallowed, then summoned a little smile. He raised his hand to reach for Rabin’s cheek. “That’s sweet.”

“*Damn* it.” Not trusting himself, he snatched away from Izzy and stormed across the bedroom toward the drawn orange curtains. “Don’t you dare turn this into nothing.”

“Turn what into nothing?”

“Us,” he snapped, spinning around.

Izzy had his hands spread, palms out. “There is no *us*.”

Rabin stayed very still, battling an urgent need to punch something.

Izzy shook his head slowly. “We said it from the beginning. This was just fun. Now it ends.”

“Bloody hell. What am I supposed to say to that?”

“Nothing.” Izzy’s mouth worked, fighting what might have been a scowl. “You don’t have to say anything.”

“I care about you.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you?”

“Christ, Rabin, what do you *want* from me?” Anger started to show through as Izzy tore at his hair. “I’m trying to make this easy for you.”

“Don’t.”

“*Don’t?*” There was that ugly bark of hysterical laughter. “What do you want me to say? You want me to beg you to stay, beg you not to leave? Would it *work?*”

Rabin’s jaw ached from clenching. Even pissed as he was, not taking this chance in LA wasn’t an option.

“No. I didn’t think so. And it *shouldn’t*. You’ve got a dream, and this sounds like an awesome opportunity for you.” A tear spilled from one eye, but Izzy ignored it. “You wanted to experiment with me, and I let you. We had a good time. Now it’s over. *Deal* with it.”

“It doesn’t have to be over.”

“Oh yes. It does. I can’t... It’s better if it’s over.”

Rabin took a step toward him, but Izzy stumbled back.

“No! I mean it. This ends now.” He grabbed the strap of his backpack and backed another step toward the door. “Unless you...” He shook his head. “No. We’re done. Good luck in LA.”

“Izzy, wait. Don’t go.”

“Damn it, Rabin.” Izzy stopped him with a watery glare over his shoulder. “Please. Don’t.” He opened the door. “Bye.”

Chapter Fourteen

Rabin hated Los Angeles. He hadn't particularly liked it when they were there on tour, but he absolutely loathed it now. He hated the hot, dry weather, hated the noise, hated the freeways, hated the dingy brown air. But it wasn't just the city. He hated the tiny excuse of a two-bedroom apartment he and Zane had been put up in, even if it was about the same size as their place in Chicago. He hated that it was right next door to Markus and Sam. He hated the cockroach-infested building and the godforsaken, traffic-loud street. He hated that he'd sold his truck as part of the move. He hated the single minivan that had been loaned to *all* of them—one car for four grown men to use, in *Los Angeles* of all places.

Worst of all, he hated the music. It was *his* music. He'd been a big part of writing it. But now, a year later, it was so very wrong. It wasn't what he wanted to do or wanted to be anymore. To make it worse, the time in the studio was trying, at best. Rabin and Markus were the outspoken ones, the two who did most of the composing. They had barely managed to work together before. Now? It was nearly impossible to get anything done. As it was, they only moved forward when Rabin gave in.

And he didn't trust Arthur. A week into it, Rabin figured out that something wasn't quite right. The man was pressuring them to finish—and finish fast—and always had a wild look in his eye when he realized how little progress they were making. That in and of itself wasn't all that odd, since it was the A&R guy's job to make sure things were moving smoothly. But Rabin couldn't shake the feeling that something else was going on. He tried to keep his feelings under wraps. Kept reminding himself that this was a huge chance and a big opportunity. There were

thousands of bands who'd give their nuts for the chance they'd been given. He tried to enjoy being able to live his craft.

After three weeks, it was almost impossible to try anymore.

* * *

Rabin stood in the early twilight of a claustrophobic back-alley entrance to a seedy little nightclub, ignoring the reek of urine and refuse from the trash bins behind him as he stared at Arthur, dumbfounded. He wasn't alone. Zane and Markus stood beside him, Sam loitering somewhere a few feet away.

Zane spoke for him, for all of them. "What?"

Arthur, a generically good-looking man in his early forties, with light blond hair that disguised the touch of gray, had the grace to look ashamed. He leaned on the door frame, playing up looking dejected. "I'm sorry, guys. I had no idea. The owner double booked for tonight."

Disgusted, Rabin turned away, leaving Zane and Markus to talk to Arthur. The club behind him was supposed to be their venue for the night, a place to loosen up and start to get their name known again. It was one of the few things he'd looked forward to, because at least it was a chance to play in front of an audience instead of dealing with the frustration and isolation of the studio. But even that small thing had been yanked from him.

Sam appeared beside him and leaned on the dusty brick wall as he pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "Well, that bites, don't it?"

Rabin didn't look at him, afraid he couldn't hide his disgust. Sam had been a junkie when they were on tour, but Rabin had thought—had been told—it was under control, so he'd overlooked it. How stupid of him to believe. Now Sam showed signs of his addiction. His brown hair was lank, his hazel eyes droopy and glassy. The corner of his mouth had a funny twitch, and his skin color just did not look good. Rabin didn't know what Sam was on, but he would swear the man was dying from it. Sam could still play, thank God, but he wasn't much for suggesting anything new. In the studio, he sat at his kit—when they could get him to focus—

and played what he was told. At night... Well, Rabin had learned the first night that he didn't want to be in Sam's company when they weren't in the studio.

Footsteps sounded behind him, and Rabin turned to face Zane and Markus—or Zane, at least. Rabin tried not to make eye contact with Markus. The bass player had been self-righteous before, but he was insufferable now. Once they'd arrived in LA, Rabin and Zane had discovered that it was Markus who'd gotten in touch with Arthur and who'd sealed the deal with Cardamon Records. So now Markus believed himself to be their savior. He thought that gave him the right to drive the music as well, which didn't sit well with Rabin.

Zane was disgusted, hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans. He wore a black leather vest with chains dangling from all manner of fake pockets and seams. His wild hair was primped for performance, and he even wore a gleaming silver medallion that emphasized the sparse mat of dark blond hair on his bare chest. "Scheduling mix-up," he told Rabin. "Owner's sorry."

Markus laughed. "Our drinks are on the house for the night if we want to stay." He wasn't a tall man, but he gave the impression of being big due to a torso and muscles that were just thick. With long, straight black hair and bushy black eyebrows over dark piercing eyes, he looked like he belonged in a '70s heshier grunge band. Played like it too.

Rabin glanced toward the open door, not seeing Arthur. Beyond the door was the end of the alley, the last vestiges of sunlight streaming across the street beyond. *Escape*. But escape to where? That apartment? *God, please no*. He didn't want to face that place tonight. "What's Arthur say?"

Zane shrugged. "Nothing he can do. He says we might as well stay the night, see if we can talk to the owner about a gig some other time."

Rabin grimaced. *Do his job*. "Fuck!" He spun around and kicked the wall. It didn't help, so he kicked it again. And again. "Fuck!"

"Calm down, man." Markus's too-calm voice broke through his tantrum. "It's just a gig."

Rabin whirled, pulling back a fist, but Zane was there to catch him. Rabin struggled against his friend, glaring daggers over his shoulder at Markus. Right, the burly guy would probably kick his ass, but it might be worth it. He was angry enough that a little pain would be welcome. How sick was that?

“All right, all right.” Zane pushed Rabin back against the wall. “We’re all pissed.”

Rabin glared at him, and Zane’s blue eyes showed he knew Rabin wanted to rip Markus’s head off—and that he might want to join.

Sam pushed off from the wall, dropping his cigarette as casually as if the rest of them weren’t there. “Did you say something about free drinks? I’m all for that.”

“What about the truck?” Rabin asked, pining for his guitar even if there was no gig.

Markus turned to follow Sam inside. “We sent the truck back to the studio.”

Outraged, inarticulate bleats squeezed from Rabin’s throat at Markus’s retreating back. Zane leaned in to hold him propped against the wall.

“It’s okay,” Zane soothed, keeping his tone low. “It’s better’n keeping the equipment parked in an alleyway in this part of town.”

It was true, but Rabin was feeling obstinate enough to still be pissed about it.

Alone with Zane, Rabin shook off his friend and kicked the wall again. The rancid fumes from the trash bins were making him nauseated. “What the fuck, man? This is whacked.”

“I know.” Zane gazed off toward the end of the alley, thumbs hooked in the pockets of his jeans. “At least this place is better than the last one.”

Rabin shuddered. A few days previous, they’d played in an awful dump with a stage the size of a dime, no lighting, awful acoustics, and no audience to speak of. “You mean, *would* have been better.”

Zane slumped against the wall. “Yeah.”

Rabin braced both arms against the wall and leaned hard, hanging his head down between them. “We need to get a manager. It’s mad to think Arthur’s really looking out for us.”

“Yeah.” Zane sounded tired. “You’re right.”

But that didn’t help tonight, and none of this was Zane’s fault. Rabin was as much to blame for their being here. On silent agreement, they hadn’t talked about it. Rabin didn’t dare. If he started, he wouldn’t stop until he convinced himself to leave, and that probably wasn’t a good idea. At least, he told himself it wasn’t a good idea. The reasons why seemed less and less with each passing day.

Zane pushed from the wall and patted Rabin’s shoulder. “Let’s go inside. It’s a pretty nice club.”

Rabin stared at a smashed cigarette butt near his left boot. “Markus has the keys to the van?”

Zane hesitated, then sighed. “Yeah.”

“Fuck. Who the hell elected the alcoholic as our keymaster?” God, why couldn’t they be in New York or Chicago or any city with a decent public transit system?

“Van’s in his name.”

Rabin pushed from the wall so he could glare at his friend. “Don’t remind me.”

Zane avoided eye contact. “Look, you’re all wound up.”

Rabin heard himself snarl.

“I get it.” Zane shook his head, and Rabin knew from his expression that he was holding back some anger of his own. “Let’s go get drunk and find a girl and get laid, huh? There’s nothing else we can do tonight.”

Rabin considered being a hard ass. Then he sighed, letting the anger drain from him. Not that he liked the despair it left behind. “Yeah. All right. Fine.”

Zane patted his shoulder, then walked toward the door.

Rabin glanced up at what he could see of the darkening sky beyond the wires across the rooftops. *Whatever*. He followed Zane in.

It was early yet, so there wasn't much of a crowd. The walls were standard painted black, with most of the color in the place around the big corner bar. Two bartenders in white stood behind their gleaming electric blue station, the neon lights behind them shifting the color of their shirts. About a dozen people were gathered around the high stools, and there was still plenty of room. Seven small booths lined one wall, and a few small tables were scattered around the periphery, but half the floor was empty, clear in front of the small stage. Not the best of venues, but not bad either.

Rabin ordered a beer, then claimed an empty booth, ignoring Markus and Sam where they stood at the bar. Zane followed. They didn't talk at first, just watched the band setting up to play. Rabin was beyond even envying them. Then Zane started to comment on their equipment, and they dropped into a mild discussion that occupied them until the band was ready to play. By that time, a little bit more of a crowd had gathered, but the cleared part of the floor remained mostly empty.

When they started to play, Rabin forgot just about everything else. He sat forward and neglected his beer, fascinated. It wasn't the music. The tunes were okay but nothing to rave over. The lead singer, however, was absolutely exquisite. He was gorgeous, to be sure. Tall and slim, with shining, wavy strawberry-blond hair that a woman would die for. His face was long, jaw squared, chin cleft. Rabin couldn't tell the color of his eyes but thought they were a light color under dreamy eyelids and sculpted eyebrows. But it wasn't his looks that captivated Rabin so much as his voice and his presence. There was no way to concentrate on any of the other three members of the band. Rabin realized three songs in that he didn't even know what they looked like. The singer dominated and made mediocre tunes something special. It was almost enough for Rabin to forgive the absurd name of the band: Whispering Pole.

When the set ended, Rabin was a little surprised to see Sam seated at the edge of the booth, facing out, watching the crowd. He had not been aware of when Zane left or when Sam arrived. Still thinking about that singer—Danny, he'd said his

name was when he introduced the band—Rabin surveyed the crowd. Markus sat two booths down with a bunch of other people, clearly well on his way to drunk. Zane was at the bar chatting up a brunette who, by her body language, seemed open to him.

Rabin scooted out the other end of the booth and, without a word to Sam, headed for the bar.

“Hi.”

About to take his first sip of his fresh Scotch and soda, he paused to glance down beside his left shoulder. A pretty girl stood there, her dark eyes heavily lined and her lush lips glossy pink. The cleavage presented by her tight green tank top was impressive. She smiled big, and his response in kind was automatic.

“Hi.” He waved his tumbler. “Buy you a drink?”

“Sure.”

Amused that he didn’t have to pay, he ordered her a drink. Her name was Mary, and she warmed even more when she heard he played guitar. He explained that his band had been supposed to play that night but that there had been a scheduling mix-up. She’d seen Whispering Pole before at another bar and really liked them. He admitted never having seen them before, and she started suggesting other bands he might like. It was a good opening talk, the two of them maintaining eye contact as they gauged each other. He played the game, wondering if he really wanted to spend the night with her. He hadn’t been out with anyone since arriving in LA.

While she was talking, a familiar face came to the bar behind her and ordered a beer. Rabin politely waited for Mary to pause before he caught the lead singer’s eye. “Hey, man, that was a terrific set.”

The blond turned and flashed a smile. “Thanks.”

Mary turned and gave him a smile too. “Oh yeah, that was great.”

Yes, the eyes were a light color, maybe hazel or a deep blue. Rabin could tell this because they were fastened on him, even as Danny gave Mary his thanks. "You were with the other band, yeah?"

Rabin grimaced. "Yeah."

Danny stepped back so he could comfortably offer Rabin his hand. "Hey, I'm sorry about that. We didn't even know."

Rabin shook with him. "No sweat. Not your fault." He nodded as they released each other. "I like your style. Especially..."

He didn't mean to, really, but he and Danny started talking about songs and lyrics, and he kind of lost track of Mary. She faded off to the other end of the bar, and he and Danny adjusted closer so they could talk over the overhead music. Soon enough, they were both ordering second drinks, and they took them to one of the booths. Danny was easy to talk to and knew a lot about music and the local scene. He even remembered the Indigo Knights from when they'd played in LA before. It was nice to have a pleasant conversation about his passion without the tension that hovered over and around the Knights these days. Rabin even got to complain about LA, since Danny didn't like it any more than he did.

Much later, Zane dropped into the seat next to Rabin. "Hey."

"Hey." There was enough alcohol in Rabin's system that he easily found a warm smile. "Zane, Danny. Danny, Zane."

They nodded at each other across the table.

Zane held up his hand and dangled keys. "We're headed out. You coming?"

Rabin hesitated. "We?"

Zane jerked his head behind him, indicating Markus still in the same booth as earlier, although perhaps surrounded by a different crowd. "Markus is getting a ride from a friend of his. Sam's coming with me and Mandy."

"Mandy?"

Zane grinned. "Over at the bar."

Rabin glanced and saw it was the brunette, waiting patiently a few steps away from a very out-of-it Sam. "Nice."

"Thanks. So, let's go."

Rabin looked at Danny. Who grinned. "I've got my car. I can give you a ride home if you want to stay." Unlike Rabin, Danny had switched to cola a few drinks back.

"Cool." He smiled at Zane. "I'll see you later."

Zane hesitated, keys clacking on the tabletop. "Uh..."

"What?"

Chuckling, Danny slid out of the booth. "I'm gonna get a Coke. Need another beer?"

"Nah, I'm good." Rabin waited until his new friend was gone, then frowned at Zane. "What?"

Zane leaned in for a conspiratorial hiss. "Dude, he's gay."

"He is?" Rabin wasn't surprised. "How do you know, anyway?"

"You've been talking to him for hours, and you didn't know?"

"We were talking music."

Zane nodded, knowing Rabin well enough to realize that he really could talk music that long to the exclusion of all else. "But...you know."

"What?"

"Dude, don't be stupid."

For a second, Rabin honestly didn't see the problem. Then he saw things through Zane's eyes, with Zane's mind, and laughed. "What? You afraid for my virtue?" *Little does he know.*

Zane was clearly uncomfortable. "Dude, I know that doesn't bother you, but he was *hitting* on you."

"No, he wasn't. Even if he was, so? I can handle myself."

Zane scowled. "You serious?"

"Absolutely." Even more so because of Zane's hesitation.

His friend shook his head. "Fine. Fuck it. I tried to help you. Don't call me if you need a ride."

Rabin laughed as Zane stood. "I'll be fine."

He was still chuckling when Danny returned to the booth.

"Let me guess." Danny set a beer in front of Rabin, despite Rabin's earlier decline. "He was making sure you knew I'm gay."

"You got it in one."

"Yeah. It's not much of a secret around here." Danny sipped his bottle of Coke. "I completely understand if you want to go home with your friends."

Rabin scoffed, sipping from his half-empty bottle. "Dude, I spent the better part of a month living with Brent Rose and Hell Witting from Heaven Sent this spring. Your being gay isn't going to bother me."

Danny sputtered, light brows soaring high. "Brent Rose? Are you *shitting* me? You know him?"

"Not only know him—I filled in for him once. Over New Year's."

"New Year's. Oh. My. *Fucking*. God! You son of a bitch. I'm so jealous. I heard they had someone filling in, but... You lived with him?"

"At his place outside Chicago."

"Oh man!" Danny sat forward, his blond hair spilling off his shoulders. "Tell me everything that you can."

Chapter Fifteen

Danny opened the door and switched on the light. "Home sweet home. Sorry, it's a mess."

Rabin followed his new friend into the main room of a small but nice apartment. The walls were an odd peach color, but Danny seemed to feel that walls were meant to hang things on rather than be seen. Nearly every inch was covered with posters or pictures, mounted in a manner similar to a typical teenager's bedroom. All of the pictures were stars from various times and genres. There were even a few country stars in there. A glossy oversize poster of Heaven Sent commanded a prime position over a faded walnut upright piano. Clothes were strewn here and there, mainly shirts and jackets.

"No worries. Better'n my place. Oh sweet!" He noticed a Roland keyboard taking up the coffee table and immediately dropped down on the couch in front of it. "I almost got one of these."

Danny stood at the edge of the table, proudly smiling. "It's old, but I'm happy with it."

"Not that old." Rabin's hand hovered over the power switch. "May I?"

Laughing, Danny started to pick up assorted pieces of clothing. "Go for it. Just not too loud. It's late, and the lady next door has surprisingly good ears."

While Rabin doodled, Danny swiped up most of the clothes and took them down a short hall into what Rabin assumed was the bedroom. He declined Danny's offer of a drink and kept doodling until Danny sat on the other end of the couch. His shoes were gone.

"You don't have to stop."

Rabin shrugged and flipped the keyboard off.

Danny brought one knee up on the couch, leaning sideways against the back. Rabin noted the flash of a silver toe ring on one of his long, bare feet. “Was that one of yours?”

Rabin sank into the lumpy cushions and leaned his head against the back of the couch. “Yeah. Part of one.”

“It was nice. Is it for your album?”

“Nah. Not the one I’m in LA for. It was one of the pieces we were working on in Chicago.” It was much quieter in this part of town—or were the walls in Danny’s building just thicker? Rabin could actually see sky beyond the window and not just the buildings across the street.

“You sound like you miss it. You live there long?”

“Chicago? No. Just moved there myself.” Rabin stared idly at the ceiling, noting the little glow-in-the-dark stars pasted up there. *Seriously?* “But I liked it.”

“You have a girlfriend there?”

Izzy’s smiling face came to mind, thumping Rabin’s heart. “No.”

He heard the soft shuffle of Danny moving closer. “A boyfriend?”

He paused. *What the hell.* “Sort of.”

“Aha. I knew it.”

Rabin smiled. He’d known this was coming. Once the gay thing had been pointed out, he wasn’t so blind not to see that Danny was attracted to him. To be honest, he was attracted right back. Danny was the first positive thing he’d encountered in LA.

Danny’s face came into his peripheral vision, peering at him as Danny rolled onto his knee, closer. “And this boyfriend, does he miss you?”

Blue. Danny’s eyes were definitely and beautifully blue, light teal that was just bordering on green. “I doubt it.”

A tilt of Danny's head sent red-gold curls tumbling down his shoulder. "And why would you doubt it?"

"Things didn't end so well."

"Did it end?"

Rabin frowned. "Yeah. I think so."

One arm slid past Rabin to brace on the couch by his shoulder, allowing Danny to hover right in front of him. "Good."

Danny gave Rabin plenty of time to object as he leaned in for a kiss. Rabin didn't. Why should he? Danny was gorgeous, friendly, shared the same passions in life, and was clearly interested. The kiss was nice, lips soft and gently persuading him to open up. He did, accepting Danny's tongue, playing with it. He reached up to comb his fingers through Danny's hair, cupping the side of Danny's head. Soft, silky, almost familiar. But when he cracked open his eyes, the color was wrong. It should be black. And things were too quiet. Danny didn't make those adorable little sub-noises that Izzy couldn't seem to help.

Rabin dropped his hand to Danny's shoulder, pushing gently. "Wait."

"What's wrong?"

Rabin looked into Danny's eyes, saw the interest, knew he could have a good time with the man. But... "I can't."

Danny smiled, surprised. "What?"

Reluctantly, Rabin dropped his hand into his lap. There was a tingle in his balls. He could get hard if he wanted to, but it didn't seem worth it if he had to make it so. With Izzy, that hadn't been a problem. "I can't."

"Why not?" Danny only showed curiosity as he settled onto his heels at Rabin's side.

"I..." How could he say it? He didn't quite understand himself.

"Is it the boyfriend from Chicago?"

"Yeah."

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“You said it was over.”

Rabin scowled at his knees. “I know.”

“Huh.” Danny spread his hands on his thighs. “Are you in love with him?”

Rabin had done a great job at avoiding the *L* word. But when someone else said it, it just seemed so obvious. He stared at his hands, fingers loosely woven in his lap. “I think...so, yeah.” A weird weight lifted from his lungs, allowing him to take a strangely refreshing breath.

“‘Think so.’ You never told him?”

How long had he been holding that in? Since the beginning? Since the first time? Izzy had become as much a part of his normal thought process as the music in his head. “It’s weird. He was the first guy I slept with.”

“Ah. Are you sure it’s love?”

Rabin sat forward, elbows on knees, and turned the thought over and over in his head. The vestiges of alcohol in his system made the process both harder and easier. Harder because his thoughts were a floating jumble, but easier because he could see they all reached the same conclusion. He couldn’t stop thinking about Izzy, and the mere existence of him and what they’d shared kept Rabin out of willing sex with someone else. It fell into place like a picture puzzle. “Pretty sure, yeah.”

“Hmmm.”

“I’m sorry.”

Danny laughed, rubbing Rabin’s back. “Don’t be. I think you’re absolutely adorable.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Which made Danny laugh harder. “You are. There aren’t many men—gay or straight—who’d pass up sex because of someone they’re no longer with. And I *am* offering sex, in case you didn’t get the picture.”

Rabin chuckled. “I know.” He felt like a fool. Would Izzy really care if he slept with Danny? Did Izzy even think about him?

Danny leaned closer, his fingers toying with the back of Rabin’s neck. “Are you sure?”

It felt good. Danny’s touch was sure and firm. He gave thought to leaning into it, trying it out. Shouldn’t he have sex with at least one other guy? To compare? But it wasn’t the same. With Izzy, he’d touched because he needed to. With Danny, he could, but he didn’t *have* to. “Yeah. I’m sure. Sorry. Want me to leave?”

“No, don’t worry about it.” The hand slid from his neck. “You’re still welcome to crash here.”

“You sure?”

“Well, my pride is crushed”—Danny laughed to show Rabin he was kidding—“but I understand. This appeals to my huge romantic streak. Just please tell me you’re going to call this man soon so he knows what he’s got.”

Calling Izzy. He’d thought about it, sure, but he’d let the trials in LA distract him. “Maybe.”

Danny punched his shoulder lightly. “No maybe—do. No healthy man gives up sex without a damn good reason.”

Rabin had to laugh at that.

“So tell me about him.”

It was weird at first, but Rabin found himself pouring out his feelings about Izzy. It didn’t occur to him until now, but he hadn’t had anyone to talk to. Brent and Hell were biased—and Izzy hadn’t wanted them to know anyway—and Rabin had kept the whole thing from Zane. He found himself talking about that too, about how

all of a sudden he had this huge secret he was keeping from the one person he'd never kept secrets from. It hurt more than he was willing to admit.

It occurred to him that he shouldn't spill all this to someone he'd just met that night, but Danny was so easy to talk to and completely understood. He even interjected with some of his own experiences, trying to give Rabin some perspective. Danny had come out when he was a teen, but he knew how devastating secrets could be.

By three a.m., they were all talked out. Nothing was resolved, but Rabin felt like a huge weight had been lifted from his chest.

"All right, sorry to say, but I've got to get some sleep." Danny stood, stretching. "Couch is yours. Unless you want to share the bed with me." He gave Rabin a lascivious grin. "I can't say your virtue is safe in the bed, though."

Rabin laughed. "I'll take my chances with the couch."

He sighed and turned on the lamp on the end table. "Suit yourself. That blanket's there"—he pointed to the one draped over the back of the couch—"if you need it. My shift at the restaurant starts at noon, so we could get breakfast if you like." He paused at the hall to the bedroom, yawning. "I can drop you by the studio after."

"Sounds good."

He switched off the overhead light. "Night, Rabin."

"Night, Danny."

Twenty minutes later, Rabin lay wide-awake in the dark, staring at the dingy charcoal sky through the window, listening to the air conditioning whir. He'd allowed himself to think of Izzy much more in the past few hours than he had in the past few weeks. God, he missed him. He really must love him.

So...now what?

Chapter Sixteen

Danny smiled at him from the driver's seat of his Honda. "You've got my number. Call me."

Rabin grinned. "Yes, dear." On impulse, he leaned over and brushed a kiss on Danny's lips. "Thanks."

He was pleased to see the surprise on Danny's face, quickly followed by a mock-threatening growl. "Don't you tempt me."

Rabin laughed and opened his door. "See ya later."

"Good luck in there."

Rabin paused in the doorway of Danny's sedan, staring at the glass door that would lead him into the studio. Markus's van was parked a few spaces away, so he knew at least some of the band was already there. Zane was. Rabin had only responded to the first, but Zane had sent a stream of texts all morning.

"You okay?"

Danny's words startled Rabin, made him realize he'd been staring too long. He ducked his head down into the car and smiled. "Yeah, I'm good. Thanks again."

"Anytime."

With one more smile, Rabin closed the car door and stepped away. Turning to face the door to the studio was like facing his doom. *Since when are you so dramatic?* Steeling himself, he headed into the building, through the small reception area, down a dusty little hall, then into the console room. Larry, the engineer, glanced up and gave him a smile and a brief welcome as Rabin stepped up

beside him. The swivel chair creaked beneath Larry's considerable weight as he leaned back. He was bordering on fat, but a lot of it was muscle.

"What are we up to?"

Larry just pointed. Beyond the glass, Markus had headphones on, beating out a track on his bass. Sam was at his kit, also with headphones, playing along. Neither looked up, intent on playing.

"Where's Zane?"

"Coffee."

Rabin nodded. Unlike Brent, Larry wasn't much of a producer. Nice enough guy, but he was more of a techie monitoring the equipment than a creative contributor. Another mistake of Arthur's, in Rabin's point of view, because that left way too much room for him and Markus to fight.

He listened to what they were doing. Wasn't too bad. Needed some... *Wait*. "What're they playing?"

Larry wouldn't look at him. "Markus switched up the bass line for 'How We Roll.'"

"Who the fuck told him...?" Rabin trailed off, listening intently. That asshole had changed the whole fucking thing! He'd gone back to something they'd discarded last week. "He tell you to crank him up too?"

"Yeah."

"Bloody hell."

The door opened behind him, and Zane walked in. He startled on seeing Rabin, then frowned. "*There* you are."

Matching the frown, Rabin pointed at the big window. "What the fuck is this?"

"Where the hell were you?"

"What does that matter? Who said he could change up *my* song?"

“Your song?” Zane crossed the small room, getting into his face. “Hello, buddy, there are three other people in this band. And answer my question—where *were* you last night?”

“What the hell? I stayed at Danny’s.”

“Danny’s? Christ, you actually went home with him?”

“Yeah, I did. What’re you, my mother?”

The music behind him stopped, and Rabin abandoned Zane to storm through the door connecting the console room to the studio. Markus saw him and reached up to take off his headphones.

“What the fuck? Who said you could change my arrangement?”

The big man settled on his stool, sublimely calm, with one hand resting on the blue body of his bass. “I didn’t like it.”

“So the fuck what? We agreed on that one.”

“I changed my mind.” Markus narrowed his gaze. “Where were you last night?”

Coming from Markus, the question shocked some of the anger out of Rabin. “What the...?” It came right back in full force, though. “What the hell business is it of yours?”

Bushy brows lowered over Markus’s eyes as he slowly pulled the strap of his bass up and over his head. “It’s my business if you went home with that Wimpy Pole faggot last night.”

Rabin’s eyes went wide, his mouth dropping. “What?”

Markus stood, placing the bass in the stand beside his stool. “I can forget you spending time with those Heaven Sent queens.” He faced Rabin, disdain coloring his round face. “But there’s no *way* I’m playing in a band with a fag.”

It was too much. Without giving it a thought, Rabin rushed him. He caught Markus off guard, shoving both palms into the man’s chest. Markus stumbled back, knocking over his stool, but kept on his feet. Rabin started toward him, but Zane was there, holding him back.

“Rabin, man—”

“Say it again!” Rabin shouted, struggling against his friend. “I want to make sure I heard it right.”

“You heard it right. *Faggot*.” Markus had his balance back, and now Larry was at Markus’s side, watching him carefully. “Was it good when he reamed your ass? Did you swallow his dick?”

“Fuck yeah, it was good.” Rabin didn’t even know what he was saying, anger clouding his judgment. “And I’ll do it again. Wanna watch?”

Zane pushed him back toward the wall. “Rabin, chill.”

Markus roared, so red it looked like his face would explode. “Damn it, I *knew* it. I knew you’d gone soft.”

“Soft?” Rabin shouted back over Zane’s attempts to shush him. “Wasn’t anything *soft* about it. He was hard and better’n your stinkin’ arse could hope to be.”

“Rabin!” Zane snapped, gripping his arm.

Growling, Markus broke away from Larry and charged, arm swinging. Rabin tried to block but got tangled up with Zane, who didn’t see Markus coming. Rabin’s elbow clipped Zane’s jaw, tumbling him backward right before Markus’s fist smashed into the side of Rabin’s face. Rabin’s world exploded into a loud, crashing light as he flew sideways, plowing into a table and tumbling his guitar case to the floor. He barely heard the shouts around him as Markus’s meaty hand spun him around so he could land another solid punch to Rabin’s jaw. Rabin’s neck twisted with a snap. Blinded by pain, it was all he could do to hold on to the table as he tried to scramble away. All bravado drained away, leaving behind a need to avoid further pain. He could only assume that someone caught and held Markus, because the bigger man fortunately didn’t come after him. Rabin fell to his knees, then forward onto his hands, struggling to keep from passing out as pain thudded through his skull. The studio filled with shouts that rang behind his eyes. He blinked and realized that one-half of his vision was blurred and red, strobing in

time with the pulsing pain at the side of his jaw. *Shit*. A crash to his right had him twisting around. Too fast. He lost his balance and landed hard on his butt near the wall. It was a moment before he could focus on what he saw. Larry used brute force to hold a raving, shouting Markus across the studio. Zane stood between Rabin and the bass player, fists up, shouting right back. A few feet away from Larry and Markus, Arthur stood in the doorway, shell-shocked and confused by the noise. Sam hadn't moved from his drum kit, an avid—if slightly spaced-out—audience.

Finally Arthur stepped into the room, hands up, palms out. In a blue pin-striped dress shirt and red power tie, he strove to provide the voice of reason. “What’s going on here?”

“I won’t do it!” Markus roared, rounding on him, not at all impressed by his dress. “I won’t work with a fucking homo.”

Zane turned away from them to come kneel by Rabin’s side. He got a hold of Rabin’s shoulder and peered closely at his face. “Ah shit. You okay, man?”

Carefully Rabin braced the back of his skull against the wall and lifted his hand to prod at the two points of screaming pain. “I don’t know.” He winced over a swollen, split lip. “How do I look?”

He could tell by the expression on Zane’s face that it wasn’t good. “You look like shit.”

“Great.” It was easier to just close his left eye. Trying to see out of it wasn’t proving useful. He poked at the teeth on his left side with his tongue, but none of them seemed loose. He accepted Zane’s help in getting to his feet and tuned back in to the heated discussion across the room.

Markus was in Arthur’s face, cowing the other man back a few steps by poking a meaty finger at him. “I don’t care what fucking agreement we had. I won’t play with a fag.”

Rabin pulled away from Zane, testing his balance. Was good, even if the pain made his head spin. “Well, this *fag* won’t play with you either.”

At the sound of Rabin's voice, Markus rounded, fist up. Both Zane and Larry rushed to block his path.

"Let it go, man," Zane grumbled over his shoulder at Rabin.

"The *fuck* I will." Rabin winced as the volume of his own shout clanged in his brain. His left eye had swelled completely shut. The copper taste in his mouth was blood from his lip. He didn't know what he'd do if Markus charged him again, but the asshole had messed him up!

"Okay, okay." Arthur stepped farther into the room, positioning himself between them. "Let's all calm down and work this out."

"We need to take Rabin to a doctor," Zane piped in.

"Nothing to work out." On shaky legs, Rabin turned toward the guitar case that had spilled to the floor. "I'm out of here."

"Right." Arthur came and took the guitar case from Rabin. "Let's get you to someone to look at that eye."

"Good riddance, fairy boy," Markus snapped as Arthur and Zane led Rabin from the studio.

"Eat shit, asshole," Rabin threw back, adding a middle-finger salute to it.

Arthur drove Rabin and Zane to an urgent-care facility and managed to get them through relatively quickly. Rabin argued against going on the drive over, but Arthur quieted him by offering to pay. Rabin wasn't fooled, sure Arthur would get the money out of them somehow, but the swelling of his eye worried him enough that he gave up the fight.

He needn't have worried. The doctor proclaimed that it looked bad and it'd hurt like hell, but nothing was wrong. She told him the swelling might be worse the next day and he should ice it, but that he'd be healed up in a week or two.

The three of them were very quiet on the drive back to Rabin and Zane's apartment. Rabin didn't know what had been said between Zane and Arthur while

he was seeing the doctor, but he got the feeling words had been exchanged. Zane was practically radiating resentment in the backseat. Rabin put his head back and closed his eyes to enjoy the pain meds the doctor had let him have.

Arthur came up to their apartment with them and set Rabin's guitar down just inside his room as Rabin dropped onto the bed. "Zane? Could you give me a moment to talk to Rabin?"

Zane, who was hovering ineffectually in the doorway of the bedroom, looked to Rabin.

Rabin could only nod as he pulled off his shoes.

Clearly unhappy, Zane nodded. "I'll order us some pizza for dinner?"

Sighing, Rabin sank back onto his pillow. "Sure."

"I'll get you that ice pack too."

"Thanks, man."

Arthur watched him go, then shut the door softly behind him.

Uh-oh. "Look." Rabin pushed up onto his elbows. "I know you're going to try and talk me into making up with Markus, but there's a long hist—"

Arthur held up his hand. "I'm not going to do that at all." Determined, he crossed the room and sat on the side of the bed by Rabin's feet. He looked so out of place in Rabin's run-down room with his dress shirt and tie. "I have to remind you, though, if you leave, you're in breach of contract."

"Dude, look at my face. I. Don't. Care." Rabin took a deep breath, raising an arm up to his forehead. "Breach says I lose rights to the songs we recorded so far. Fine, they're all yours." Thank *God* he'd let Gordon read over that agreement and explain the finer points before he'd signed it. At least he knew exactly what he'd given up.

Arthur nodded. "I thought you might feel that way. I don't blame you. But here's the deal." His blue gaze speared Rabin. "We could give a shit about the

Knights in general. Cardamon wants *you*. We know you're worth more alone than any of the other guys."

With his one good eye, Rabin peered at Arthur from under his arm. Yes, he was flattered. But he couldn't silence the sneering voice that labeled Arthur and his company slimy sons of bitches. Of course, they ran a record label, so that went with the job.

Arthur wasn't finished. "Tell me what we need to do to make this work. We can get a new bass player, your choice. We can replace the whole damn band."

Rabin thought of Zane and immediately felt guilty. "I don't know."

"What do you need? Some time? Different venue?"

Chicago. Brent. *Izzy*. "Some time. Yeah. I can't think right now."

Arthur patted his knee. "Of course. You take a few days. Then we'll talk. Okay?"

"Sure."

Arthur stood.

Rabin stopped him at the door. "Thanks."

Arthur gave him a smile. "Don't mention it."

Zane came into the room with some ice in a towel a few minutes after Rabin heard the apartment's front door close. "What did he want?"

Rabin took the ice and lay back with a sigh. "Just reminding me that if I leave, it's a breach of contract." He kept the rest to himself for now.

"That was rough, man. You and Markus never got that bad before."

"Yeah, well, he's a raging homophobe, isn't he?"

In the uncomfortable silence that followed, Rabin realized what he'd said. He kept his eyes closed and let Zane chew on it, wondering if he'd ask.

"Yeah. Well, pizza will be here in twenty." The mattress swayed as Zane's weight left it. "We're out of Coke, so I'm gonna walk to the corner. You want anything else?"

“Nope.”

The apartment was surprisingly quiet after Zane left. Rabin tried not to move, letting the meds shut him off from the throbbing pain in his skull. Zane hadn't said it, but Rabin knew his friend too well—he thought Rabin had slept with Danny. He bought the nonsense Rabin had spouted at Markus. It was only a matter of time before he made Rabin confirm it. Rabin could hold back, admit that he hadn't slept with Danny. That'd make Zane feel better. He didn't have to tell his friend about Izzy. But the events of the past day had broken new ground for Rabin. He felt too big for his skin. His life had changed, and the things that used to satisfy him just didn't cut it anymore.

As he drifted to sleep, he wondered if his friend could understand that.

Chapter Seventeen

By mutual agreement, Rabin and Zane didn't talk about it that night. Pizza and TV, then Rabin crashed early. In the morning, Zane's bedroom door was shut when Rabin scrounged for breakfast. He wasn't all that hungry anyway. The swelling was worse in his eye, and his jaw ached. He managed some toast and coffee, then crawled back into bed.

Despite the pain medication, he couldn't sleep. His thoughts simply wouldn't settle. Within the hour, he was back up and on the phone.

His first call was to Gordon McCarty. A brief rundown of what was happening with Arthur and Cardamon Records, and Gordon agreed to represent him. Rabin gave him all the details he knew and Arthur's contact information. That done, he was as taken care of legally as he could be. Then he was on his laptop—at least the awful little apartment came with cable and high-speed Internet access—finding a flight back to Chicago. He didn't really have a plan, just knew that he had to get the fuck out of LA, and Chicago had the most appeal as well as an apartment for him to return to.

Zane still hadn't surfaced by early afternoon when Rabin took a bathroom break. Rabin had found a flight the next day that he could just afford with what he had left in the bank. He needed to check with his friend to see if he should make two reservations.

Rabin's second call of the day was to Danny. It went straight to voice mail, and he had to assume Danny was on shift, waiting tables. So he left a message for his new friend to call him. He wanted Danny to know he was leaving. He also had a vague notion of asking him to join them in Chicago. He'd have to see how that went.

Next he should call Brent—if he was going to make anything happen musically, he was damned determined that Brent would be involved. But he couldn't decide how to approach the conversation. He could keep it just business, but he was dying to hear news of Izzy.

Undecided and with nothing better to do, Rabin started packing. One way or the other, he was leaving the next day. He'd just finished sorting out what of his meager wardrobe needed to be washed when he finally heard Zane's door open. Well acquainted with his friend, he knew he had at least a half hour before Zane would be human enough to talk, so he went ahead and bundled up his clothes and headed for the building's laundry room. He met their friendly neighbor down there and told the story of his bruised and swollen face. A few hours and a few beers later, he returned to the apartment with clean clothing.

Zane sat on the couch in his shorts, watching television. "Yo. How you feel?"

"Like shit." Rabin passed him by to take his clothes into his bedroom.

Zane followed him, scratching his bare belly. "What the...?"

Rabin dumped his clothes on the bed and started folding.

Zane came to the foot of the bed, scowling at the bags that lay on the floor nearby. "What's with the packing?"

"I'm leaving."

"You talked to Arthur?"

"No. Gordon's talking to Arthur. But I'm leaving anyway."

"Well, thanks for telling me."

Rabin dropped clean jeans back on the mattress. "I've been waiting all morning to talk to you."

Zane frowned at the wall. "I went out last night after you went to bed."

"All right. Let's talk." Rabin resumed folding clothes. "I can't work with Markus anymore."

Zane folded his arms across his chest. "Yeah. I get that."

“And I hate LA.”

“You’re going back to Chicago.” It wasn’t a question.

“That’s the plan.”

“You’re hooking back up with Brent?”

“I hope so.” He paused, wanting to see Zane’s reaction to his next request.

Nothing. He just stood there with his hands deep in his pockets.

“Come with me.” Rabin sat on the bed and leaned forward so he could peer up into his friend’s face. “Seriously. Let’s get on a plane tomorrow and go back.”

“What about the Knights?”

“Arthur wants to make a deal with me. He wants me more than Markus.”

That widened Zane’s eyes. “He told you that?”

“Basically.”

“He’s behind you going back to Chicago?”

“He asked me what it would take.”

He had to wonder if Zane really heard him. Zane just stared at the mattress with the whites showing around his irises, nostrils flaring. “Dude. Did you really sleep with that guy?”

So that’s it. Rabin sat back. “No.”

Some of the tension melted from Zane’s shoulders. “Why’d you say all that shit to Markus, then?”

“He pissed me off.”

“Okay, he’s an asshole. But what the fuck? Don’t joke about things like that.”

Rabin saw that he could leave it there. Zane wouldn’t dig any further. But he was sick of hiding what he was realizing he was. “It’s no joke. I didn’t sleep with Danny. But I did sleep with Izzy.”

Tension snapped Zane’s shoulders right back up. “What?”

“You remember Izzy, Brent’s cousin? Yeah, well, the person I was seeing while we were in Chicago? That was him.”

Realization stretched Zane’s face, dropping his jaw and raising his brows. “What?”

Rabin nodded, relief and panic a strange mixture in his belly. “Yeah. In fact, I think I’m in love with him.”

Zane grimaced, fists clenching and releasing. “Quit it, man. You’re not funny.”

Damn, was he about to get into another fight? Rabin stood slowly. “I’m not joking.”

“You can’t be gay.”

“I think I am.”

“You’ve slept with plenty of women.”

“All right, I’m bi. But I’m pretty sure I’m in love with a guy.”

“Fuck you. This isn’t funny.”

“No. It isn’t.” Rabin shook his head. “I’m sick of hiding it.”

“Hiding it? No fucking way.” Zane’s hand sliced through the air between them. “You’re *not* gay.”

“Deny it if you want. Doesn’t make it any less true.”

“Fuck. Man.”

He stayed where he was, watching Zane back toward the doorway. “Doesn’t change anything between us.”

He wasn’t any closer, but Zane backed up like Rabin was right on top of him. “You bet it does! You slept with a *guy*! I mean, did you do...all...?”

Rabin’s heart sank, but he felt the need to be clear about this so Zane couldn’t excuse it away. “Yeah, the whole deal. And loved every minute of it.”

Zane shuddered, stumbling against the door frame when he missed the opening. “Shit.”

“Oh Christ, man, stop it. What difference does it make?”

“It makes a lot of difference. I don’t even know who you are.”

Rabin stared sadly at his friend of so many years. “Yeah. Well, maybe I’m finally becoming who I should be.”

Zane’s head snapped side to side, either a negation or a shaking of his brain in an attempt to dislodge nasty thoughts. “Fine. Go back to Chicago. Do whatever you want. Leave me out of it.” With that, he turned and fled into his room. A few minutes later, he dashed past Rabin’s door in jeans and a shirt. The front door slammed after him.

Rabin sank back down onto the bed, staring at his reflection in the big mirror over the bureau. The two bruised areas of his face practically glowed in the afternoon sun. “That’s it, then,” he told himself, oddly calm about having lost his band and his best friend all in the space of a day. He nodded, hoping the empty feeling in his chest would ease with time. “That’s it.”

Chapter Eighteen

At four o'clock, Rabin stood on the moderately crowded sidewalk outside Izzy's school. The air was thick with moisture from the thunderstorms that had hit the Chicago area in the last week, but today looked to be rain free. The people on the street hurried by, oblivious to the nervous pounding of his heart. He held a single, long-stemmed red rosebud that he'd bought on the way from the train stop. Maybe hokey, but it was the first time he'd ever wanted to buy flowers for anyone, so he'd gone with it.

Three days back in town. Three days to get situated in his mostly empty apartment. His eye was open again, and neither it nor the bruise on his jaw hurt much anymore, but both still looked pretty bad. The purple of the fresh wounds had developed that greenish healing cast. He looked awful, had no job, no band, and hardly any prospects, just a drive to make music and see the one face that brightened his life.

A stream of students started out of the front doors, and trailing the group with a backpack slung over his shoulder was Izzy. Rabin watched him clear the doors, eyes down, black hair loose in front to shadow his face. The rest of his hair was pulled into a wavy tail down the back of his black T-shirt. To Rabin, he looked odd in black with dark blue jeans that were on the baggy side. Where was the pink or blue that he was used to? Rabin waited, heart in his throat, for Izzy to look up. To see him.

He did. Stopped. Some of his classmates shuffled around him. Then Izzy took a visible breath and slowly approached Rabin. His mouth fell open a little as he studied Rabin's face. "What happened to you?"

"I got in a fight."

Izzy nodded slowly. "What does the other guy look like?"

Rabin had to laugh, a short, harsh bark. "Not a scratch on him."

Izzy didn't laugh. Because Rabin's eyes were downcast, he saw Izzy's hand start to lift before he stopped himself, curling his fingers into his palm.

"I look like shit, I know." Meeting Izzy's gaze, he tried a smile and held up the rose. "But I couldn't wait to see you any longer."

Izzy blinked, dropping his focus to the flower held toward him. "For me?"

"For you."

Izzy glanced both ways on the street, silently pointing out the strangers around them. When Rabin didn't lower the rose, Izzy reached for it, tentatively grasping the stem well below Rabin's hand. "Brent told me you were back." His voice was low, his attention on the flower he drew to his nose.

Rabin was momentarily distracted by the sight of velvety red rose petals caressing the rounded tip of Izzy's nose. He wanted his lips to take their place.

His distraction lasted long enough that Izzy looked back up at him. "I'm sorry things didn't go well in LA."

Rabin's head was shaking. "I'm not. I should have never left."

"You can't mean that."

"But I do." Rabin took a step forward, but Izzy instantly fell a step back, nearly colliding with a passerby. Even so, Rabin took heart that Izzy cradled the rose close to his chest. "Iz, can we go somewhere and talk? Please?"

Long lashes shielded Izzy's eyes from him. "The motel?"

"There. The pizzeria. Anyplace but the street."

"No."

"No?"

Izzy took a deep breath and used it to find the courage to look up at Rabin again. The muggy air plastered a few stray curls of black to his forehead and neck. “Rabin, I can’t do this again.”

“Izzy, I—”

“No.” Izzy stared at the rose with a strange look of longing. Then he drew himself up. “I can’t. When you left, I was devastated. At first, I couldn’t tell anyone. Then... Well, without Brent and Hell, I don’t think I’d have made it. I... It was worse than when Gregory left. So much worse.” He shook his head. “They helped me to realize I was cheating myself. I won’t be a secret anymore. Not for you, not for anyone.” He held the rose toward Rabin, offering it.

Evidently Brent hadn’t told Rabin everything. Just the day before, Rabin had poured his heart out to Brent, trying to convince Izzy’s cousin that he really was in love. He hadn’t intended to do so, but he hadn’t fought the words once they started. In the end, Brent had insisted Rabin needed to say the words to Izzy himself, thus today’s meeting. Rabin kept his gaze on Izzy’s face, even though those beloved eyes wouldn’t look at him. “I couldn’t agree more.”

Long lashes fluttered. Then blinked open. “What?”

“I don’t want you to be a secret. I don’t want *us* to be a secret.”

“But Zane... Your career...?”

“Brent didn’t tell you everything, did he?”

“No. Just that you had a falling-out in LA and you were back in town now. And”—he hesitated, eyes averted—“that I needed to talk to you.”

Before Izzy could protest, Rabin grabbed his arm. He used it to draw Izzy closer to the building, out of the main traffic on the sidewalk. Once there, he slid his hand down to twine his fingers with Izzy’s. “Do you see my face?”

“Yes.” The breathlessness in Izzy’s voice went straight to Rabin’s crotch, making his balls tingle, but he ignored that for now.

“I got this because my bass player wouldn’t be in a band with a fag.”

Izzy's eyes stretched open to match the fall of his jaw.

Rabin nodded. "He found out I'd slept with a guy, and went ballistic." Not exactly true, but close enough. He'd tell Izzy about Danny later, after he'd made his point.

The hand with the rose finally made its way to Rabin's face, fingers lightly trailing his jaw just underneath the bruise. "Oh, Rabin, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm glad it happened." He laughed. "Okay, I kind of wish I didn't get beat up, but the end result's the same."

"What happened with Zane?"

That one still kind of hurt. He hadn't seen Zane since his friend had stormed out of the apartment. Zane had stayed elsewhere that night, and Rabin had escaped the City of Angels the next day. Since then, no calls, no nothing. "He knows. He's not talking to me."

Izzy screwed his eyes shut. "Oh God, Rabin, I'm so sorry. I never meant for this to happen."

Rabin caught Izzy's hand before it could fall away. He made sure to press that palm to his injury, welcoming the little throb of pain. The stem of the rose dug into his skin and bumped his ear, but he ignored it. "But it did. And I wouldn't take it back."

Izzy stared into Rabin's eyes, both hands caught. "What...are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I missed you and I don't want to be without you. I'm saying I love you." *God!* That felt good.

Breath caught, and finally dark chocolate eyes searched his face. "What?"

"I love you so much, I can't think about anyone else."

Izzy's nostrils flared, and a bit of moisture pooled in the corners of his eyes. His quivering bottom lip worked twice before words could pass it. "What?"

Smiling, Rabin released one of Izzy's hands so he could reach forward to cup that beautiful face. He used a gentle hold to guide Izzy's lips to his. "I love you."

A sweet, soft whimper bled from Izzy's throat. The fingers of his free hand reached up to curl around Rabin's upper arm, right under the hem of his T-shirt. "God, Rabin." Izzy breathed when Rabin pulled back just a little. "Are you serious?"

"I couldn't be more serious." He brushed their lips together again. "What can I do to prove it to you?"

"I... I don't know. I..."

"I can take you to dinner." He kissed the upper curve of Izzy's cheek. "Or take you home so we can tell Brent and Hell." Once started, he found it hard to stop brushing his lips over Izzy's soft skin. "I'll do anything you want."

Izzy's fingers dug into the fabric of his T-shirt and yanked him close. "Take me to your place," came the demand, breathed into Rabin's open mouth. Then Izzy took a kiss with all the fierce pleasure Rabin could hope for while they still stood on a public street.

But they *could* only do so much, so Rabin did pull back. But he stayed close, cradling Izzy's neck with both hands. "With. Pleasure." One last kiss, then he drew back, sliding one hand down Izzy's neck, shoulder, and arm until he could twine their fingers together. Izzy watched his face with gentle astonishment, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Let's go."

Izzy giggled as they walked, poking the tip of his nose with the rose. "You're really here."

Rabin squeezed Izzy's hand. "I'm really here."

"Does it still hurt? Your face?"

He smiled, only now realizing that Izzy was on his left side. "Yeah, but it's better'n it was."

"I'm sorry."

He shook his head and pulled Izzy out of the way of an oncoming group of women. "It had to happen. Markus and I never really got on. I'm surprised we

lasted as long as we did.” He smiled when he heard the women whispering furiously as they passed.

Izzy didn’t even notice. “And Zane’s not talking to you?”

“Nope.”

“Because of me.”

“No. Because of *me*.” Rabin shook Izzy’s hand so he’d look up. “I don’t regret this, Iz.”

A wistful sigh. “Okay.”

Rabin pulled Izzy between two buildings, just out of the foot traffic. “Listen to me. If Zane can’t accept who I am now, I don’t need him.”

“He’s your best friend.”

“Then he should understand.”

Izzy nodded, but Rabin could tell that he still had his reservations.

“Fine.” He drew Izzy back into the street, determined to make it home quickly so they could be alone. “I’ll just have to spend the rest of my life convincing you.”

“The rest of your...?” Izzy laughed as Rabin tugged him along in his wake. “Rabin, you’re getting ahead of yourself.”

“Am I?” Was he? It certainly didn’t feel like it. He couldn’t stand the thought of being without Izzy again.

They didn’t speak for another block, each alone with their thoughts, connected by the press of their palms and the emotions ricocheting between them.

It was Izzy who broke the silence. “What happens with the Knights now?”

They’d reached the stairs leading up to a train platform. “I’m going to put together another band. The new Knights. And we’re going to do the music Brent and I were working on.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. Writing music and performing it in front of a crowd is all I ever wanted to do. Studio work is great, but it’s not the same.”

Izzy was quiet as they passed through the turnstiles and reached the platform to wait for the train.

Rabin caught up his hand again to turn them face-to-face. “What?”

Izzy blinked over the flower he held to his nose. “What?”

“What are you thinking so hard about?”

Perfect plump lips thinned in a grimace. “Nothing.”

“Tell me.”

Izzy sighed. He tried to slip his hand from Rabin’s, but Rabin wouldn’t let him. “Is it smart to do this when you’re thinking of a public career?”

He knew what Izzy meant, but he wanted it said, so he played dumb. “Do what?”

Izzy raised their linked hands. “This. Even Brent and his friends didn’t come out until they were already famous.”

“Stop trying to push me away.”

Gaze down and away, Izzy shrugged. “I’m just trying to be sensible.”

Rabin wrapped his free hand around the back of Izzy’s neck and used it to draw him close. “Listen to me. I could give a shit what anyone else thinks. Keeping you and me a secret is just wrong, and I won’t do it. I want us to be open and out.”

Izzy licked his lips. “You’re taking this coming-out thing rather well.”

Rabin rubbed the back of Izzy’s neck. “You make it easy.”

“Oh man.” Izzy tucked his head forward under Rabin’s chin, on the right side away from the bruise. “You say the sweetest things.”

He held Izzy close until the train came. Then they boarded and sat beside each other, holding hands. He asked about school and listened with interest even as he was aware of the looks they got from other passengers. He counted. Of the two dozen people on the car with them, only five took notice, and four of the five smiled.

It made it easy to totally disregard the one woman who scowled and sniffed in their direction.

Izzy called Brent after they'd left the train and were walking to Rabin's place. "Hey, it's me. I'm with Rabin. Yeah." He glanced shyly at Rabin, grinning a little. "I think so. Yeah." He laughed. "Okay, I'll tell him." Still chuckling, he shut his phone off.

"What was that?"

"Brent says this is your only chance. Don't fuck it up."

Rabin laughed, sliding his arm around Izzy to pull him close. "I don't plan to." At the bottom of the stairs leading up to his building, he stopped, turning Izzy so he could kiss him again. "I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you."

Izzy smoothed a hand down the injured side of his face. "I know you didn't. I knew that before." He giggled again and waggled his eyebrows. "We're not getting upstairs fast enough."

Laughing, Rabin unwrapped his arms, then pushed Izzy up the stairs ahead of him. He took advantage of his position to keep pinching the delectable ass before him, despite protests. Izzy paid him back, tickling and poking him while he unlocked the building's front door. The light mood stayed with them up three flights of stairs to Rabin's door.

"Wow." Izzy stumbled into the apartment and turned, taking a look at the barren surroundings. "This doesn't look any different from the first day you moved in."

"No. Still can't afford much." He only had the basic utilities—this time with Internet—hooked back up so far, saving the purchase of furniture and a new television for a later date. Rabin had left the air unit running low when he left, so at least the temperature was bearable. He crooked his finger at Izzy, smiling as he backed down the short hall and into his bedroom. "Come with me."

"Oh, now this is much better." Izzy stepped into the room that wasn't anywhere near fully furnished, but Rabin had taken special care with his bed in the

last few days. Still no headboard or footboard yet, but he'd taken pains to pick nice sheets, a smart-looking cover, and twice as many pillows as he needed. Izzy dropped his backpack just inside the door. "I like."

"Thanks." Rabin drew the light-blocking curtains almost all the way shut, dimming the room. There was another building just across the street, and he wasn't in the mood to give anyone a free show. "One of these days, I'll get a nightstand."

Izzy laid his rose on top of the blue milk crate. "There's time for that."

Rabin faced Izzy from the window. "Will you help me?"

That made Izzy shy. He ducked his head. If his hair had been loose, it would have shielded his face. As it was, only a few loose tendrils fell forward. "If you want me to."

"I want you to." He rounded the bed and plucked at Izzy's shirt. "I don't think I've ever seen you in black."

Izzy's eyes were still downcast, but Rabin could see a shy smile. "I've been kind of gloomy lately."

Rabin slid a hand up Izzy's side. "Can't have that." He leaned in to kiss Izzy's neck. "Leave the black to me from now on." He made Izzy laugh, so it was worth it. He nuzzled the soft spot underneath one ear, letting his hands roam down to Izzy's waist. "I love you."

Lithe arms wrapped around his neck. "God, Rabin."

"I do." He teased the hem of Izzy's shirt up. "Couldn't think about anyone but you."

"There was no one else in LA?"

A fleeting thought of Danny that quickly dispersed. If anything, that interlude had convinced him that there was no one for him but Izzy. "No. There's no one else."

"Me neither."

He found warm, satiny skin and caressed all that he could reach as he turned his lover and gently urged him to lie on the bed. Izzy loosened his ponytail and

finger-combed his hair, while Rabin quickly pulled off his boots and socks, then crawled onto the mattress to straddle Izzy. *So beautiful.* He looked his fill, brushing black silk from Izzy's face to let it fan the pillow beneath him. Soft lips, wide, dreamy eyes, just a hint of stubble on soft, rounded cheeks and jaw. They kissed, but Rabin's hands kept wandering, pushing up Izzy's shirt to bare his chest. He shifted to lick the line of Izzy's neck, then skipped down to taste one hard nipple, loving the way Izzy's back arched, pushing into him. He laved attention on that nipple, letting Izzy take care of the T-shirt that remained rucked up to his armpits. Rabin kissed his way down the ridges of Izzy's ribs until he reached the softer landscape of belly. He kissed around the dip of navel, then pushed his tongue inside to make his lover giggle. He unbuttoned Izzy's fly and nuzzled the sharp crease of his hip as he reached inside jeans and briefs to find the evidence of arousal.

"Rabin."

He glanced up to find glittering dark eyes watching him. Tender fingers traced the bruises on the left side of his face. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." He kissed the tip of Izzy's cock. "More than fine." He smiled, then opened his mouth and took the tip between his lips, letting Izzy watch. Those eyes narrowed but didn't close, zeroed in on Rabin's mouth even if he couldn't see Rabin's tongue rubbing underneath the head. He sure felt it, because the belly under Rabin's palm shuddered, and Izzy's grip on the bed cover brought it into a bunch at his sides. Wanting to concentrate, Rabin closed his eyes and let his mouth sink over Izzy's erection, swallowing the sweet, salty tang that dribbled from the tip over his tongue. A brief cry, and Rabin glanced up to see Izzy had given up the effort to watch and let his head fall back. His bare torso twisted, a pale, gorgeous line of muscle and skin that writhed because of Rabin. Without removing his mouth, Rabin managed to yank pants and underwear from under Izzy's ass and push them down his legs past his knees. It freed access to trim balls tucked up under Izzy's cock, the only lure that could get Rabin's mouth from the shaft. He wrapped a fist around Izzy's wet cock as he drew a testicle into his mouth and rolled it over his tongue.

Izzy groaned, legs pulling at the restraint of his pants, but he couldn't get out because he still wore his shoes. Rabin made a mental note to take care of that...in a bit. Now, he was far too interested in licking and sucking Izzy's sac to drive him crazy. When he slipped Izzy's cock back into his mouth, Izzy cried out again and curled forward, gripping at Rabin's back, pulling his shirt up to expose enough skin to scratch.

"Rabin, please, God, Rabin..." Panted syllables spilled from that precious mouth, not begging for anything specific, just begging.

Rabin wet two of his fingers and wiggled them down under Izzy's sac until he found that tight, gripping little hole. He pushed in, and Izzy's body accepted him easily, hips bearing down on his hand. He curled his fingers up, searching, finding that spot that gave Izzy so much pleasure.

"Fuck! Rabin, God..."

He kept sucking and pumping, two fingers now inside a grip so tight, it almost hurt. Half sitting up, Izzy rocked his hips between Rabin's mouth and fingers, his grip on the back of Rabin's head keeping his shaft deep in Rabin's mouth.

"Oh fuck. Oh fuck."

Rabin knew that tone. He wrapped his free hand around Izzy's shaft and pulled his mouth up until his lips and tongue just tormented the tip. Jacking, pumping, and sucking, he played to the urgent rhythm of Izzy's groans until Izzy's dance beneath him froze for one suspended moment before rich, salty cream spurted up and into Rabin's mouth.

With one last whimpering sigh, Izzy slumped onto his back while Rabin lapped him clean. Absurdly proud of himself for bringing his partner to bliss, Rabin quietly pulled his hands free and knelt by the side of the bed to remove first Izzy's shoes and socks, then the rest of his clothing.

Once his legs were free, Izzy drew his knees up and spread them, exposing his crotch. Seductive eyes watched as Rabin stood. "You're getting the lube now, right?"

Chuckling, Rabin ripped his shirt up and over his head as he headed for the crate. "Got it right here."

"Good."

Rabin tossed lube and condom onto the mattress. As he shucked his remaining clothing, Izzy rolled onto his belly and tucked a pillow under his shoulders. He giggled at the size of the bottle. "Went for extra large, did we?"

"Hey." Rabin tossed aside jeans and briefs. "I plan on using a lot of it in the near future."

Happily, Izzy tore the plastic off the top. "Works for me."

As Izzy wrestled with the two safety seals on the bottle, Rabin ripped open the condom and rolled it on. He knelt on the bed and accepted the open bottle from Izzy, but paused. Lovely as Izzy's slim back and trim little ass were, that wasn't the position he wanted. "Turn over."

"Huh?"

"Turn over. On your back."

Izzy kept his eyes open wide and innocent, but Rabin saw him clutch the pillow beneath him. "Why?"

He nudged Izzy. "I want to see you."

"Rabin, come on." He swished his butt to draw attention to it. "Fuck me."

"I plan to." Using his greater size and the element of surprise to his advantage, Rabin shoved a hand under Izzy's side and flipped him. Before Izzy could much more than yelp, Rabin was straddling the smaller man's thighs. "But I want to do it face-to-face."

Discomfort showed on Izzy's face as Rabin caught his wrists and pinned them to the mattress.

"What's wrong with doing it this way?"

Izzy licked his lips, gaze darting to the side. "Nothing."

"Iz, talk to me."

He grimaced. "Don't want to talk."

Rabin lowered himself until he could press his forehead to Izzy's temple. His cock pressed Izzy's thigh. Truthfully, he didn't want to talk either, but this felt important. "Please. Tell me why."

Izzy shivered, licked his lips. "It's just... It's embarrassing. I can't..."

"Can't?"

"I..." He huffed out a breath. "I've never done it this way."

"Never?"

"No. Gre—" He hesitated but then barreled on. "Greggory always took me from behind."

"What about your other lovers?"

Izzy shook his head, flushing from more than his recent orgasm. "I've never been with anyone else."

That took a second to sink in. "No one?"

"No one."

He released Izzy's wrists and propped himself on his elbows, freeing a hand to trace Izzy's jaw. "You didn't want me to know?"

"Not before. You'd never have slept with me."

They shared a warm chuckle. "And now?"

"I don't know. I just..." He shrugged, eyes still averted.

Rabin could barely stand how adorable Izzy was. So cocky and sure most of the time, but then he exposed an incredibly vulnerable side. Rabin vowed, right then and there, to make it his duty to shelter that softer side. "Hey." He licked the curve of Izzy's jaw. "Can we do it this way? I want to see you. All of you."

A sigh shuddered through Izzy. "O-kay."

Carefully Rabin lifted one knee, encouraged when Izzy's thigh slid sideways to give Rabin room to come down inside. They did the same with the other side,

positioning Rabin between Izzy's legs where he wanted to be. He lapped at Izzy's neck as Izzy bent his knees. Rabin sat up, letting his hands slide down Izzy's sides before he picked up the bottle of lube again. Izzy lay quiet in front of him, watching him pour liquid on his palm, then taking the bottle from him so Izzy could coat his own cock with it too. Izzy caught up his knee and pulled it to his chest, spreading his groin open to make it easier for Rabin to find his entrance. It was like coming home. Aim, push. Rabin watched Izzy's eyes flutter shut as that tight opening adjusted around his cock. He grabbed Izzy's shoulder, leaned on it, used it as leverage as he pushed steadily into Izzy's body. A gorgeous flush colored softly curved cheeks, and sweat glistened on his brow, plastering little tendrils of black hair to his skin. Rabin leaned forward as his cock reached its limit, embedded inside Izzy's body. He braced his hands on the mattress to either side of Izzy's head and just looked his fill. White teeth bit a plump lower lip to a gorgeous red, raven brows crowded down over tightly shut eyelids. But gradually Izzy's eyes blinked open. He sought and found Rabin's gaze.

Rabin smiled. "I love you."

The sigh swept through Izzy like the wind through a secret passage. He lifted his hands to wrap around the back of Rabin's neck. "God. I love you too."

The words he'd been waiting for. The words he'd known hadn't been spoken yet but he'd been willing to wait for. Sooner than he thought. Caught him off guard. Actually made his body buck, a quick jerk of his cock out, then back into Izzy's body. They both hissed at the intense surge of pleasure.

Rabin lowered to his elbows, close enough to kiss the mouth that had said the words, the only mouth he ever wanted to kiss again. Sliding his arms under Izzy's back to hold him secure, Rabin thrust steady and slow, wanting Izzy to feel every inch of him. Eager lips sucked at his, a willing tongue twining with his. Izzy's legs lifted and nimbly wrapped around Rabin's waist, his hands alternately grasping Rabin's hair, then his back, then hair again.

"Harder," Izzy finally demanded.

Rabin obeyed gladly, shifting his knees to a better angle. Back up to his elbows, curled over Izzy, he blinked sweat from his eyes so he could watch Izzy's face. More of a flush, mouth open now to help him breathe.

"God, Rabin, harder."

He reached down, intending to grip Izzy's cock, but Izzy stopped him, brought his arm back to where it had been. Brown eyes glittered feverishly. "Just fuck me. That's all I want." Exposed completely, eyes filled with love, Izzy kept his gaze steady under eyelashes that tried to flutter closed.

"God." Rabin was going to lose it. It was too much. The velvet squeeze around his cock, the tight wrap of legs around his waist, the hot, writhing body beneath him, and the look of love flooded his senses, took his control away. Growling, he thrust hard into Izzy's body, doing all he could to keep his eyes trained with Izzy's as the explosion started at the base of his spine. He cried out, lunging now, and it was Izzy this time who braced him, held him, spurred him on with words he only heard as driving, undeniable notes at the crescendo of a symphony.

He might have blacked out a little. He found himself with his face tucked into the curve of Izzy's throat, with his lover's arms and legs still wrapped securely around him, although now a little more loosely, more comfort than clutch. Rabin's breath labored in and out of his lungs, the sweat on his chest mingling with the heated moisture on Izzy's. Even as his breath calmed, Rabin didn't feel the need to move. Well, except for a small shift that straightened the arch of his back. It had the unfortunate side effect of sliding his cock out of Izzy's body, but he couldn't have denied the protest in his lower spine.

It wasn't until he heard the soft sniff that he realized Izzy was crying.

"Hey." He tried to pull away so he could look at Izzy's face, but the smaller man was wrapped so tightly that Rabin couldn't get free. He had to settle for nuzzling just under Izzy's chin. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," came the watery protest.

"Iz."

“Nothing, I swear. It’s just...”

“Just?”

“You’re serious about all you’ve said? All of it?”

This time he used a little muscle to free himself, needing to see Izzy’s eyes. A few tears trickled from the corners of those chocolaty depths.

“I’m serious. About all of it. I swear.”

“Even if it ruins your life?”

“It won’t ruin my life.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Hey. I’m not Gregory, okay? I want to tell the world about you.”

The smile that dawned on Izzy’s face was one Rabin wanted to cause for the rest of his life.

“I don’t care about the world.” Izzy gave him a brief kiss. “Just you.”

Epilogue

Rabin had only spent time with him the one night, but he'd know Danny anywhere. He watched his friend stroll into the O'Hare baggage-claim area, a backpack slung over one shoulder. His strawberry-blond hair was pulled into a loose tail, kept back from his handsome face. With the faded Grateful Dead T-shirt and ripped jeans, he looked every inch the California boy that he was.

"That's him."

Beside Rabin, Izzy stopped waving to a little girl tugging along a bright pink suitcase and lifted his head to scan the crowd. "Where?"

"The blond in the Dead shirt."

"Oh. *Oh*."

Rabin frowned down at the rapt gaze Izzy fastened on Danny. "What?"

"Mmmm. He *is* gorgeous. I see why you were tempted."

Impulse had Rabin's hand at Izzy's side, poking where he knew Izzy was ticklish. "Don't get any ideas."

Izzy laughed and danced out of arm's reach.

Rabin grinned, then turned to wave for Danny. But the blond had already seen them. They met with a hand slap and grip, then pulled into a hug and back slap. "Good to see you, man. How was the flight?"

Danny shrugged, letting his backpack slip to the ground. "Long. Boring. Pretty typical." He turned to face Izzy.

Who was smiling up at him. Danny wasn't as tall as Rabin, but he was still a few inches taller than Rabin's boyfriend.

Rabin made introductions. “Izzy Rose, Danny Champion. Danny, this is Izzy.”

“I’ve been looking forward to meeting you,” they both said, almost in unison. Rabin groaned and shook his head while they both threw back their heads and laughed. That effectively broke the ice, and they moved into a spontaneous hug. Some of the tension in Rabin’s shoulders eased. He’d been sure they’d get along; he just hadn’t been sure how long it’d take.

But he needn’t have worried. Izzy took charge like the bossy little thing he was and directed Rabin to stand to the side with Danny’s pack while he and Danny went to get Danny’s bags. Rabin didn’t quite get that, but he obeyed, then figured it out as he watched Izzy chatting away at his new friend out of Rabin’s earshot. They made a pretty sight, Danny in his colorful tie-dye and Izzy in one of his rainbow shirts, this one blazoned in gold with *It takes balls to be a fairy*.

Danny came back to Rabin with a large suitcase. “Dude,” he said with a grin, “your boyfriend’s a trip.”

Rabin pushed the case up against the wall beside him. “Yeah, I know.”

Danny slapped his arm once, then went back to join Izzy, who had managed to charm a young mother and her son.

Eventually the pair headed back Rabin’s way, Danny pulling another large suitcase behind him and Izzy tugging a slightly smaller one.

“...always knew he was talented,” Izzy was saying, as though he were catching up an old friend, “but we never thought he’d be famous. He didn’t like being around people, for God’s sakes.”

Danny laughed at that. “I can’t even imagine.”

“He *hates* crowds. He’s better at it now, but oh man.”

Rabin reached for the handle of the suitcase behind Danny while handing the backpack to his friend. “Are you talking about Brent?”

Izzy wasn’t remotely repentant. “Of course.”

Rabin shook his head as he and Danny made the switch. “He’s gonna kick your ass.”

“Pfft. Only if he can catch me. Besides, Danny won’t tell.”

Danny looked at Rabin, his blue eyes filled with mirth. “Of course not.”

Rabin could easily see that Danny had fallen for Izzy’s ebullience, just like everyone did. “Let’s go.”

They headed for the parking lot, conversation paused as they maneuvered through the crowd.

“So, hey,” Rabin started as soon as they were relatively alone, headed toward where they’d parked Izzy’s Mazda, “I talked to Gordon.”

Danny nodded. They hadn’t met, but that would soon be rectified. Rabin had talked about the Knights’ new manager enough when he’d spoken to Danny over the phone.

“Turns out he knows Lance Hoff.”

“The bass player from The Might?”

“That’s the one.”

“Damn, you run in the best circles.”

Rabin had to laugh. The car chirped when he pressed the key fob. “That’s not the best part. He says Lance and Noble both are leaving The Might. You know they’ve never gotten it together after that second album, right?”

Danny stopped, facing Rabin. “Dude, are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

Izzy popped open the hatchback.

“Probably. He wants to introduce us.” Rabin lifted the heaviest of Danny’s three suitcases into the trunk. “He sent Lance a rough recording Brent and I did of one of the new songs, and Lance liked it.”

Danny maneuvered the second suitcase in beside the first. “No fucking way.”

“Yep.”

“The fucking *Might*?”

“The best part of ’em, anyway.”

Izzy laughed. “God, I don’t even know who these people are.”

Danny shook himself and lifted the last suitcase into the trunk. “Most people don’t. They never made it anywhere on the charts. Most people think their music’s too complicated.”

Rabin grinned at his lover. “But musicians like them.”

Izzy rolled his eyes. “That explains it, then.”

They climbed into the car, Rabin driving, Izzy beside him, with Danny in the back. As they left the airport, Rabin filled Danny in on Gordon’s plans for the Indigo Knights as well as the tentative schedule Brent and Rabin had worked out for studio space. When Danny mentioned needing to find a job, Izzy suggested the pizzeria near his school and even offered to set up a meeting.

They took Danny to Rabin’s apartment, which was soon to be Danny’s apartment. Danny would be taking over the lease now that Rabin had pretty much moved in with Izzy at Brent and Hell’s. Izzy hadn’t wanted to move, and Brent and Hell both assured Rabin that it was okay. “We don’t want to lose our cook,” Brent had said. Rabin couldn’t blame them. So while some of Rabin’s stuff was still in the apartment, he’d cleared most of it for Danny.

Danny looked around and shrugged. “Chicago. Never thought I’d live here.”

“If you can stand the winter, it’s a great place to be,” Rabin told him, laughing because he knew Danny had never lived in snow. He grinned at Izzy, who sat on the stool by the kitchen counter. “Magic happens here.”

Danny saw the look and laughed. “I certainly hope so. Seriously, though, thanks for calling me.”

Rabin nodded. “Feels right.” And it did. He felt at home with Danny like he used to feel at home with Zane, better maybe since he was older now, without the teenage angst. “I’m glad you came.”

“You going to kiss now?” Izzy joked.

Rabin laughed. “No.” He pulled Izzy off the stool and into his arms. “All my kisses are for you.”

Izzy hugged him back. “Good.”

“Y’know, I’m really glad you two got back together,” Danny mused, watching them. “You make a good couple.”

Izzy leaned back enough to look up into Rabin’s face. “Yeah, me too.” He giggled. “He made it easy.”

 THE END 

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Jet Mykles

As far back as junior high, Jet used to write sex stories for friends involving their favorite pop icons of the time. To this day, she hasn't stopped writing sex, although her knowledge on the subject has vastly improved.

An ardent fan of fantasy and science fiction sagas, Jet prefers to live in a world of imagination where dragons are real, elves are commonplace, vampires are just people with special diets and lycanthropes live next door. In her own mind, she's the spunky heroine who gets the best of everyone and always attracts the lean, muscular lads. She aids this fantasy with visuals created through her other obsession: 3D graphic art. In this area, as in writing, Jet's self-taught and thoroughly entranced, and now regularly uses this art to illustrate her stories or her stories to expand upon her art.