

a *going for the gold* novel

Perfect Ten

sean michael



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Perfect Ten: Going for the Gold
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Chapter One

Brian stopped in front of the diner and just looked at the door for a moment.

It was one of those silver bullet, old-style diners, the chrome dull with age, the windows shining clean and bright. It was a strange place for a job interview, but that's essentially what this was.

He'd heard through the grapevine that Christopher Allen was trying to make a comeback after his vault accident, despite the fact that his coach and corporate sponsorship had bailed on him. He'd also heard it was a long shot, that the guy was lucky he wasn't in a wheelchair, let alone even thinking about competing again. Scuttlebutt said Christopher was too old to start over, too injured, too past it.

And too stubborn to admit it.

Brian liked that in an athlete.

So he'd called and asked for a meeting. He hadn't told Christopher he'd have to fly in just for this meeting. He'd kept it casual -- let's have lunch at that little place on the corner of Smith and Fifth.

This could change his whole life. Not that he didn't like coaching the girls at the private school where he was working, but he missed men's gymnastics, missed being involved, the feeling of the powder on his hands, the shaking in his muscles as he pushed himself past the point of his endurance...

His own glory days, such as they were, were over, but he had a chance to coach someone else into that sweet place where hard work and achievement met.

He just had to convince Christopher Allen that he was the man for the job.

He took a breath and went in, the sounds of the street replaced by the sound of people talking, china and silverware clinking, the smell of grease filling his nose.

He scanned the booths, looking for Christopher.

It took him a second to find the guy, the signature blond hair dull and overgrown where it was bent over a menu, the square jaw hidden by a scrappy beard. The man had lost some weight, some form. Brian could see the musculature still evident through the tight T-shirt.

He made his way over slowly, that feeling coming over him, the one that said this was a moment he wanted to remember, one he wanted to be sure to live in.

He stopped at Christopher's booth and cleared his throat. "Christopher Allen? Hi, I'm Brian Rainings."

"Hey there. Call me Chris." Chris stood, unfolding himself from the booth, the motion a little awkward, a little stiff. "Nice to meet you. How's it going?"

"Good, thanks. What about you? How're you doing?"

"Doing good. Doing real good." One square hand was offered over. "Have a seat, man."

He shook Chris' hand. The man had a good grip, warm and firm, not overbearing.

"Thanks. And thanks for agreeing to see me."

Chris might have been on the injured list and abandoned by his people, but the buzz around him had been incredible before the accident, and Brian figured he couldn't be the only one who wanted this job.

"Sure. You and I competed together once, a long time ago. Back when I was a junior and you were on top."

"Yeah, I do remember. The buzz in the locker room was all about this blond kid who was going to just smoke everyone in a few years." The vinyl seats were surprisingly soft, like they'd been well taken care of.

"Yeah. Talk's probably still the same, just for another kid." It was a little unnerving, looking at Chris. One eye was a bright blue, the other a deep, dark green.

"It always is. Everyone wants to discover the next big thing. Of course, I might just be sitting right in front of him." Brian grinned, knowing he was laying it on thick.

Chris chuckled, eyes dancing. "You do know I had back surgery, yeah?"

"Oh, you're *that* Christopher Allen." He winked and nodded. "Yeah, I know. I also know you're looking to come back."

"Looking to, yeah. I've been working on the trampoline, stretches, getting up to speed. I want to be ready."

"Sounds good. You tried any of the equipment yet? The vault?"

"The rings. The bar. No landings yet."

"How's it feel?" He still worked out using some old routines himself -- it was a hard thing to give up, pushing your body to its limits and beyond like that, feeling high and free.

"Stiff. I'm loving the tramp work. I can't do much else -- nowhere wants a guy without a coaching staff doing much training."

He nodded. "Yeah, they don't want the responsibility. So you still need a coach, then?"

"Yeah, Harry and Jeff moved on. They got Les Martin and both Evvie and Jean Parsons. Three for the price of one, you know?"

"Sounds like a good deal. For them. Kind of left you in the lurch though, yeah?"

Man, that was a practiced shrug. "It's a business. I'm not a sure thing."

"Neither are they. What if there's another accident? Harry and Geoff going to move on again?" He held up his hands. "Sorry, loyalty's just a dying art, you know?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I know. You want a burger? Chili dog?"

"Chili dog. With fries. And I hope they're greasy." And a milkshake. He loved diner food. "What about you? Burger? Chili dog? Coach Rainings?"

Those eyes just caught his, curious, questioning. "You haven't even seen what I can do yet."

"No, but I know what your heart is. You had every reason in the world to give up -- between the surgery and losing all your support -- but you didn't. You're still out there working, getting ready. I know I'm not a big name coach and I haven't proved myself yet. I'm sure you've had a number of offers, but I promise you, I will meet you heart to heart and I won't let you down."

Chris nodded, stopped as the waitress came up. "I want a cup of black coffee, two beef patties with cheese and a salad."

"Chili cheese dog, fries, and a chocolate milkshake, please."

"Mmm. Chocolate." Chris chuckled, winked. "Where do you like to work?"

"Well, frankly, I'd prefer somewhere small, quiet. You don't need the pressure of a high profile gymnasium with big names. There'll be pressure enough without that."

"Yeah. I'd prefer to fall on my ass in private the first few zillion times."

"There's a facility in Monterey. I know the guy who owns it. It's a beautiful town,

weather's nice, and it's off the beaten path as far as gymnastics goes, but it's still close enough to a lot of the big meets."

"Monterey? Like California? Man, I don't have any sponsors. I can't afford an apartment out there."

"Well, all it takes is one. Have you made any calls?" He started sorting names through his mind. Mars used to sponsor him; he bet if he gave Bob Silmon a call, he could work something out -- they were good people.

"No. No. I... Well, I sort of hoped that Harry and Geoff would..." Christopher stopped, blushed. "No, not yet."

The waitress came with their drinks and he said, "Thank you," waiting until she'd gone again before answering. "They aren't going to, though, are they? But I'm here."

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm not caught in the past, man. I'm not."

"Well, I don't know if anyone could blame you if you were, but in order to get past what happened, you are going to have to face forward, reach for that brass ring and not live in I-used-to-be-somebody land, you know?" He leaned forward. "You also need to do this because you *have* to. If you're not going to put two hundred percent into it, you're not going to come back."

Chris met his eyes, gaze still, steady. "If I give it five hundred percent, there's a good chance I won't come back, but that hasn't stopped me yet." Jesus, Brian thought, there was some fury right there, just under the surface.

"I'm glad you know that. And now you know that I know it. So it's all out in the open. And I'm still here."

He took a sip of his drink, the bubbles fizzing in his mouth. He bet that anger alone would push Chris far. But it wouldn't be enough on its own.

"So what do you get out of this? You looking for a springboard to the big leagues? Because I'll be honest, I've just finished being that and it sucked."

Chris finished one cup of coffee, motioned for another, offering the waitress a half smile of thanks.

"Well, I've got a job right now. Coaching gymnastics at a girl's private school. The money is good. It's steady work. And the girls are great, they really are. But it's not... Men's gymnastics is where my heart is, but I don't want to be some assistant coach for some big club or school. I want to work hands on with someone." He gave the waitress a smile of his own as their food came. "I want a challenge. I want to believe in someone."

"I hear that." Chris dug into his burger, slathering it with mustard and using lettuce leaves for the bun.

Brian grinned as he dug into his fries. That was one thing he *didn't* miss about competing -- the constant need to watch your carb intake, to chart body-mass indexes, watching every pound you added, making sure it was *all* muscle.

"I can tell you this, Chris. If you agree to let me coach you, you will always have someone in your corner. Someone who will push you when you can't push yourself, who will believe in you. Someone who will be in your corner no matter who or what else is around."

Chris nodded, stared at the table. "I need to think about it. I have to finish this semester before I can do anything, before I can make plans."

He nodded. "I'd heard you were back in school. How close are you to graduating?"

He hadn't given up his day job. Hell, he wouldn't be giving up his day job to train Chris, not to start with anyway. He had a few contacts in Monterey, knew there was a phys. ed. teaching position for him if this worked out. Until Chris had proved himself, sponsorship money was going to be damned tight.

"I have my bachelor's in May. Then I have to decide where to go from there. There are lots of options." Chris had a reputation for being driven, for being stubborn and one-track minded. Brian could so see it.

Chris was going to need that, coming off an injury like his.

"If you're going to come back, though, you don't want to wait too long. Once you're an old man like me, you're washed up, injury or no injury." He grinned wryly, recognizing the irony of being not quite yet thirty and over the hill.

"Shit. I'm trying. I'm fucking trying, but no one lets me on the equipment. I need somewhere to train, to take chances."

"Well, why don't you come out to Monterey for the summer? I have a teaching position and no other commitments until, possibly, September. That would give us a few months to work together, let you push it, see how you're feeling." There it was. He couldn't lay it out there much plainer. Come and train.

There was a spark in those eyes, a sudden hunger. "I... Is there a place I can stay? Rent a room?"

"Well, Monterey has this private school. Kind of a sister school to the one where I'm currently working. They run a summer program for the girls and the job's mine if I want

it. I could use an assistant coach, someone who knows what they're doing. Pay should cover room and board, and the equipment would be ours as soon as the girls clear out." It wasn't a big facility, or unlimited time for training, but it was workable.

"That sounds like a damned sweet deal..." Chris drank another cup of coffee, starting to bounce a little.

"That's because you've never worked with teen and pre-teen girls." Brian winked, but then grinned, finishing up his fries. "So should I tell my friend he's got a coach and assistant coach?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I could. I can do that. Hell, worse comes to worse, I can run on the beach."

Brian nodded. "A change of scenery can be a great boost, but you'll get time on the equipment. It'll be part of our contract." He'd make sure of that.

He kept his knees from bouncing by sheer force of will, eager for a definitive yes.

"Okay. Okay, I can do that. I graduate the twelfth." Brian got a half grin, a bittersweet smile. "I can tell my folks I already got a job."

"Oh, you're good at the putting a good spin on things. One of the first lessons, isn't it?" Brian held out his hand. "Shall we shake on it? On new beginnings?"

Chris stared at him for a long, slow minute, then took his hand, shook it. "I don't know whether to feel sorry for you or not."

Brian shook his head. "I'm a big boy, Chris. I make my own decisions. And I'm not here for altruistic reasons. I'm here for me." He held onto Chris' hand a moment longer and then let go. "I'm just lucky what I want and what you want are the same thing."

"Yeah. Yeah, okay. Do... What all paperwork do you want? Doctor stuff? Therapy? I have it all in a box at my apartment." Chris started eating again, just chowing down.

"Yeah, that would be good. Would it be possible to take it with me today? I'm on a flight back home tonight, and it would be cheaper for me to take it than for you to ship it. I'd like to get a look at you, too, if I can. See what you can do, where you're at." That was likely more important than anything papers could tell him.

"Sure. I can probably get a spot at the university gym. When's your flight?"

"Not until 9:40, so we've got some time. I'm really looking forward to seeing your form."

It would let him put together a game plan, get started on paper. Hell, it would tell him just how far Chris had come since the injury and how much further he had to go.

He drained his drink and wiped his mouth with his napkin. Damn, there was nothing quite like greasy food. It had always been one of his downfalls.

"Cool. I'll make some phone calls, see what Coach Farris can do. Excuse me." Chris slid out of the booth, pulling out a cell phone as he walked away. Brian just heard, "Steve? Hey, man, this is Chris, you got a minute?"

Brian pulled out his wallet and looked around for the waitress, signaling that they wanted the bill, then he just kind of sat there, still not quite sure he believed it.

He'd made his pitch, and Chris had gone for it. He'd pinned his hopes on this trip and it had worked out for him. He chuckled, the way he felt just too big to hold it all in.

Chris wandered back, nodded a little, and dug out his wallet. "Steve says we can have the place in a half hour. We just need to meet him there."

"Oh, that's excellent! I'm glad they could be so accommodating." Brian nodded toward Chris' empty plate. "You going to be okay so soon after the heavy meal?"

"If not, we'll find out." Chris shrugged. "It isn't like we have a ton of time."

He laughed, nodding. "There is that. I really don't want to re-see that meal, though."

He gave the waitress his card. "Why don't you leave the tip?" After all, he'd invited Chris out and he imagined that, with the injury and all his backers pulling out, things were tight.

"Yeah? Okay. Thanks. I'll buy us something to drink for the gym. I'm always thirsty as hell after." Chris put a five on the table, face showing a bit of animation.

Oh, the man was hooked on it; Brian could see it.

In fact, Chris' enthusiasm was contagious, and when Brian got his card back and they headed out, there was a definite bounce in his step.

"If they aren't letting you do much on the equipment, as you're coachless, what have you been doing?"

"Studying. Working. I sold all my furniture and bought a weight set, and my GPA jumped to a 3.9."

Chris led him out, straight toward a little old green Honda. The walk was a little stiff, but not bad. Not impossible.

"What equipment was it you've been on again?"

It was one of the things he liked about teaching, getting to show the girls stuff, being able to use the equipment now and then.

Not that they had rings at his current job, but they did have a pommel horse. It wasn't like he still had decent strength in his upper body anymore, anyway. It was amazing how quickly that faded. "And have you been working on your upper body, keeping your strength up?"

"Rings. The bar. I haven't hit a landing. No one wants me to try yet." Chris opened the car door, slid in. "I do weight training five hours a day."

Brian put on his seatbelt. "Have your doctors prohibited you from landing?" If Chris couldn't land, he couldn't compete. It was as simple as that.

The strong hands clenched around the steering wheel, the leather around it creaking. "I haven't been cleared. I can't land if I can't train. I can't train if I don't get a coach. I can't compete if I can't land."

Brian nodded. "Yeah, that's pretty much the way of it. But we're about to break that vicious circle, yeah? We did shake on it, right?"

"Yeah?" Those two-toned eyes looked over at him. "I... Man, I thought you were about to tell me you'd changed your mind."

"Oh! No, no. I'm sorry, didn't meant to stress you out. I mean, back surgery, I knew it was going to be a long haul. Hell, Chris, you're probably taking a bigger chance on me -- I'm totally untried in coaching men's gymnastics."

He got a quick look as they backed out of the parking lot. "Well, then, I bet I can come up with a list of gymnast demands."

Well, well. Look there.

A sense of humor.

Brian laughed. "Hey, as long as it doesn't cost money, you just might be able to talk me into that list." There was a surprising amount of traffic as they drove out onto the highway -- it'd been too long since he'd been in the big city. "It always busy like this?"

"Yeah, pretty much." Chris drove with confidence, changing lanes, zipping down the highway. "I'll grab my box and then we can head to the school."

Chris drove them down to a little dragged-down section of town, the old houses made into dozens and dozens of student apartments. Dingy and tired, but solid. Comfortable. Lacking in terrible scariness.

"You gonna mind sharing digs with me in Monterey? We don't have to, but there'll be more money for other stuff if we share." He wasn't too sure about the "didn't have to," either, but he didn't want to force it on Chris.

He got another quick look. "Look, man. I don't know what you've heard, but I know how to stay in my own bed and I haven't ever been inappropriate with a team mate."

They pulled into a driveway, the engine coming to a stop.

"Um... I'm not quite sure what you're talking about." Though from what Chris had said, he could guess. "I was more thinking about you being uncomfortable living with a stranger, sharing digs. Or what you might have heard about *me*."

"Oh." Chris looked at him, mouth opening and closing like a fish. "I'll get that stuff for you."

He chuckled. "I think we both need our gaydar tweaked." To be honest, he'd just been so focused on seeing Chris, convincing the man to accept his offer of coaching...

"Yeah. You need to catch up with the latest gossip, too." Those sharp cheekbones were painfully red, eyes on the steering wheel. "You want to wait here or come up?"

"Well, that depends. Are you going to catch me up with the gossip?" He bumped their shoulders together. "I'll stay here." Give Chris a few minutes to compose himself.

"Okay, I'll be right back." Chris headed upstairs, disappeared behind a little red door.

Lord, a guy with a reputation.

He just wished he knew *what* that reputation was. He really was out of the loop at Mrs. Kernicke's School for Girls. And now he was curious as hell.

It had him chuckling at himself. He wasn't even back in the scene for a half hour and already he was eager to hear the gossip.

Back on the scene.

Wow.

Too cool.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Chris sat on the weight bench a minute, head in his hands.

Okay.

Fuck.

It was bad enough that he'd tumbled from the top of his fucking game. Bad enough that he'd lost the coaches that he thought he'd had forever. Bad enough that he was a has-been at twenty-one.

But he'd just outed himself in front of the one guy who wanted to take a chance and pretty much admitted that Harry and Jeff's new golden boy was going around saying he'd been... inappropriate.

Fuck

Okay.

Okay.

Look. Get your shit. Stand up. Get downstairs. Show off at the gym and get to California.

Then, at least if he fucked up royally, he wouldn't be *here*.

Chris grabbed the box of his medical stuff and stood. He'd taken the recommendations from the orthopedic surgeon out when he picked up the records so that no one saw them. No one but his brother. He knew there was a chance he could die if he fell wrong again.

He knew.

He didn't fucking care.

Better dead than a quitter.

He locked the door behind him and headed downstairs.

Brian had gotten out and was leaning against the car. The man was good looking. Not quite as tall as he was, but with the same gymnast's build, blond hair just a touch too long and curling over ears and collar.

And blue eyes that lit up with a smile as Brian saw him. "Hey, there you are."

"Yeah." He found a smile of his own, handed over the box. "Sorry." Chris wasn't one for lying, really.

"No problem. I'll go through this later. I want to see you on the equipment first. Make my own assessment before I see what the doctors are saying."

Brian put the box in the back seat and then leaned against the car again. "Look, obviously whatever it is, you don't want to talk about it, but if I'm going to be your coach, I should probably hear it from you -- what is it that you think I've heard about you?"

"There's... there's a rumor going around that I have been inappropriate with some of the guys in training camp. It isn't true." He'd shared one quick kiss that had been arranged.

Brian winced. "Christ. Who started the rumor?"

"It doesn't matter. It's out there. It's not true." That was that. Besides, if he came out with it, it just made him look like a whiny little sour grapes asshole.

"You must have scared someone pretty fucking bad, if they started floating rumors like that. Nobody makes up shit about the guy in third place." Brian frowned. "That didn't have anything to do with why your coach decided to move on after the accident, did it?"

Chris headed down the street, motoring toward the university. "If I was winning gold medals, no one would have cared."

"Is there more?" He could feel Brian's eyes on him.

"More what?"

"Gossip. Rumors. Things you think I should know. I mean, that sucks, but I had imagined all sorts of shit while you were inside."

"There's nothing important, man. Just the normal political shit." He didn't sleep around, he didn't dope, he didn't play the game anymore. He just wanted on the fucking board again.

"Now, I don't miss that, though let me tell you, teenaged girls? They've got a whole set of politics all their own, and I will be damned if it isn't all Greek to me." Brian chuckled, seeming happy to let the topic of gossip and rumors drop. "Thank God, I'm not the guidance councilor." He paused, then changed topics. "So if I remember correctly from my last year of competition, the rings were your best event."

"Yeah. I took a silver at Nationals once." Rings and parallel bars. He hated the fucking vault.

Of course, it hated him, too.

"Have you been back on the vault yet?" It was almost as if Brian had read his mind.

"No. They won't let me on it." Not after the fall. Not after slipping and landing and hearing that dull crack and someone screaming and... Chris forced himself to breathe, to ease up on the gas. "We're almost there."

"Hmm..." Brian was quiet a moment and then asked, "Do you *want* to get back on it?"

"Yes." No. No, he didn't, but he wanted to compete more than the fucking thing scared him.

"Good. You need to get back to it soon, too. The longer you stay away from it, the harder it's going to be."

Brian watched as he pulled up at the gym parking lot and stopped the car. "I mean all you have to do to start off with is sit on it. But the longer you wait, the harder it's going to be."

"Yeah. I know." He killed the engine, grabbed his bag. Steve was standing at the door, the big man frowning and looking at his watch. Must have a date with Irena. "There's Steven Jackson. He'll let us in."

"Cool." Brian got out and followed him in. "He looks familiar. He do coaching at the junior level?"

"He used to. He's building the University team now. He's a bit of a bear, but the kids like him. Steve? This is Brian. Brian, Steve."

Brian held out his hand and they shook, Steve tilting his head.

"Brian Rainings? Where have you been hiding yourself the last few years?"

Brian grinned. "Coaching. I just couldn't leave the life entirely when I retired."

Steve laughed. "I hear that." The man was shooting speculative looks between him and Brian, working out what they were doing here together.

"I'll lock up, Steve."

"Now, Chris..."

Oh, for Chrissake. "I promise not to break anything and I promise not to get hurt."

"He's got someone spotting him, Steve. We'll be fine. It was nice to see you again." Brian nodded once at Steve and then went in. "Come on, Chris."

Chris sort of blinked. Well. Okay.

Okay.

"I'll lock up."

That was... unexpected.

Steve looked rather surprised, but he shrugged. "Okay. Just make sure you do. And if you get hurt, it's on your coach." Checking his watch, Steve shouldered his bag. "I've got to be somewhere."

"Tell Irena I said hi." His coach.

The words didn't hurt as bad as he thought they might.

He locked the door behind Steve and headed down the hall to get changed.

Brian was waiting in the locker room, looking at home on one of the benches. "That the kind of reception you've been getting since the injury?"

"Yeah." He stripped off his shirt, pulled out an old singlet. It didn't fit as well as it used to, but with the shorts, the bagginess didn't show. Of course, Brian'd be able to see that his jeans weren't skin-tight. Hell, they sort of... collapsed off him as he undid the fly.

"I can see why you've been frustrated, if they're barely even letting you in the door." Brian looked around and grinned wryly. "Man, I didn't think it would be weird being here as a coach instead of a gymnast, but it is. It feels like I should be changing with you and going out there, chalking up, doing some routines..."

"I'd offer you something to wear, but I only brought one." He got everything straightened and put where it belonged and all, then pulled his shorts on.

"Nah, I'm good. Besides, this is your show, right?" Brian reached over and tugged on his singlet. "How much weight did you lose after the injury?"

"Forty pounds, altogether. I've gained twelve of that back." He'd been flat on his back for too fucking long.

"I know you haven't had a lot of chance to work the equipment, but have you noticed differences since that could be attributed to the weight loss?" Brian got this really intense look when he asked these questions, the same look he'd had earlier when... well, being the coach, Chris guessed.

"What do you mean? Like not being hungry?" He headed out to the training center, bouncing a little, starting to warm up.

Brian chuckled. "No, I meant on the equipment. Is the weight loss making a difference on any of your moves? Easier to get up and over? Harder to do stuff? I'm just trying to take in all the variables, you know? So I can put together a schedule." Brian followed behind Chris, looked around, and whistled. "Wow. Well, where we're going isn't nearly this nice. I mean it's a good facility, but not all the equipment is brand-new. The gym itself is fairly ancient; old mats. You know how it is with high school equipment. Even the good stuff's no match for a training facility like this."

"I've lost a lot of strength on the right side, some serious flexibility, but not beyond that, no." He bent over, stretching out. "And I'm graduating. Just a private girls' school is better than nothing."

Brian bounced on his toes and then went over to the bowl of chalk, rubbing it between his hands. "Tell me about it. It's kept me in the game, gotten me to this point where I can offer you something as a coach." Brian gave him another wide grin. "I can't wait to see you fly."

Yeah. He couldn't wait either.

He started on the pommel, beginning with some false scissors, legs swinging as he let himself feel it, relax into it. He could feel Brian watching, the man slowly walking around him, giving him a wide berth, just watching.

Scissors turned to swings, swings to circles. They still felt rough, but he had been working them hard, forcing his right arm to cooperate.

"Nice. You branched out from there yet?"

Chris rolled his eyes, started moving along the horse, throwing in some flairs, managing a tong fei that still looked damn good. He traveled back, spinning around the handles a few times.

"Woo! Excellent!" Brian laughed, the sound happy, excited. "Save something for the other equipment. I want to see what you've got across the board."

Chris dismounted clean, feeling pretty good, pretty strong. "What next?"

"You're looking pretty good," Brian said, echoing Chris' thoughts. I was expecting more stiffness, to be honest." Brian nodded toward the high bar. "Let's see you on the bar. I'll help you down when you're done. We'll save landings for when we're set up in Monterey."

"Sure." His bar work was a little shaky still, but he freshened his chalk, looked over for a hand up.

Brian's hands wrapped around his waist, large and firm. "On three."

"One, two, three." His hands clapped on the bar and he stemmed, legs swinging. The giant felt okay, the handstand solid. His right arm started aching about halfway through a series of release moves, but he held on, only missing one hold.

Brian helped him down, hands warm, sure. His eyes were bright, shining. "Not bad at all. You're favoring your right side a lot. You okay to keep going?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good." Feeling it. But good. "Floor next?" Sweat was starting to bead on his skin, heart thumping good and hard.

Brian nodded and bounced on his heels. "Yeah. Yeah, floor's great. I could just watch you all day."

"I've been trying to gain lost ground." Chris stretched out some more, working through a muscle cramp as he stared at the spring floor.

"You've got to get back on that horse sooner or later. So to speak," Brian told him, voice sympathetic.

"I'm ready." It wasn't the floor exercises that scared him. Those he could fuck up just as well now as he ever did. Graceful and light on his feet? No. Powerful and athletic? Go him.

"All right, show me what you can do." Just as he got to the edge of the mat, Brian added, "The floor was my second favorite."

"Yeah? I hate it, but it's necessary." Okay, focus. Tumbling.

One tumbling pass went okay, the second less well, and his shoulder couldn't handle the Stalder press and he hit the mat. Dammit.

Brian was right there, hands moving on him. "You okay? Hurt anything?"

"No. I don't think so. I just..." He hadn't gone one after another like this, not since before the accident. "I'll try it again."

Goddamned lazy, broken fucking body.

"You sure? If you need a break..." Damn, Brian's hands were warm, strong as they wandered his body.

"I still have parallel bars, rings and vault left."

Brian helped him up. "You're going to do the vault for me? Cool. Let's skip the parallel bars -- I've seen you on the high bar, it'll do. How about the vault first and then you can strut your stuff on the rings?"

"Yeah. That works." He headed over to the end of the run, staring at the vault.

Christ.

He hadn't hit a vault since.

Shit.

Brian came and stood beside him, hand on the small of Chris' back. "Why don't you walk the mat and put both hands on the vault and then come back and do a simple handspring?"

"No. No, I'll either do it or I won't." No bullshit psychology. No thinking. Just fucking do it.

He could hear Harry's voice echoing in his head. "Focus, kid. Focus and don't fuck up." He headed down the run, hitting the vault and pushing himself over and landing on his ass.

Go him.

"There you go -- that wasn't so bad, now was it?" Brian jogged up to him and crouched next to him. "The landing sucked ass, but you did it."

"Go me." Any eight-year-old could pull that fucking vault off.

"Go you." Brian nodded. "Now come on, stud. Show me the ring master."

"Yeah. Let me hit the john real quick, grab a sip of water, and I'm there."

He needed a second.

Maybe a minute.

Needed to let his hands stop shaking.

Brian rubbed his shoulder, fingers finding the muscles and working on them. "You okay?"

"Uh..." His eyes rolled. Oh. Oh, fuck. Don't stop. Right fucking there.

"Damn, you're tight." Brian moved to kneel behind him, knees pressing against his hips as both hands started working on him, concentrating on the right side.

He couldn't even say anything. He just whimpered, nodded, head falling forward.

"They give you any massage therapy after the operation?" Brian asked quietly, finding a particularly stubborn knot and just refusing to give up on it.

"I had a P.T. guy until the sponsors left." Once the sponsors had left, he'd been on his own there.

"That sucks. How long was it after the operation that they dropped you?"

Seven weeks, four days, and about thirteen hours. "A couple of months."

"Man, they didn't waste their time, did they? What about your coach?" Brian's fingers slowly expanded out from his right shoulder, working magic.

"They tried to stick around. This is their livelihood." They couldn't keep a dead weight around.

"They could have made it work if they wanted to." The "I am" was unsaid, but it hung in the air for a moment before Brian continued. "Of course, then the door wouldn't have been opened for me." The massage gentled, Brian just rubbing now.

"They went for the sure thing." He could just melt into the mat.

"Now, where's the challenge in that?" Brian laughed. "Where's the *fun* in that?"

Chris surprised himself by laughing -- really laughing, hard enough that he felt it in his gut.

Brian chuckled, moving to settle next to him, legs stretched out in front. "It's hard work. Painful -- especially if you're coming off an injury. But it's fun, too, right? I mean, if there's no joy in it at all, you should find something else to do."

"I just want to be back on plan." Back on the track. Damn it.

"Well, you've got a coach now, right? One step at a time." Brian patted his leg, grinned. "Gonna show me what you can do on those rings?"

"I intend to." Brian spotted him as he swung up. This was his home, right here on the rings. Chris didn't think about it too much, throwing in the easy skills first.

Then he started playing.

A Nakiamma, maltese, then his super E -- fuck, it felt good.

"Woo!" He couldn't miss Brian's shout, the laugh. "Fucking beautiful, man!"

That felt good. Better than good. That felt like he might just make it through.

He dismounted carefully, settling on the mat.

Brian came over and gave him a bear hug, laughing and clapping him on the back. "That was just awesome. The rings, man. You are the king of the rings."

"Still competition-worthy?" He needed to hear it, needed to know someone thought he wasn't washed up.

"Are you kidding? Most guys out there wish they could do a super E half as good as that one." Brian laughed, face just lit right up. "I can't believe your coaches and sponsors dumped you. They are going to be eating crow when you wipe the floor with the competition."

He grinned, bouncing a little on his toes. "They had their reasons, man. I'm no sure thing."

Brian laughed again. "I'll take the possibility of you doing that in competition over a sure thing every day."

"Fucking A." He did a little somersault, pleased as punch. California, here he comes.

"Yeah. Oh, man. I can't tell you how glad I am you accepted my offer. I mean, I knew you were good. I knew the potential was there, but now that I've seen you in action! I can't wait to get you to California, get started! This just rocks."

He felt the briefest twinge of guilt about not telling Brian about the prognosis, about not sharing what the doctor said, but goddammit, if he didn't re-injure it, it wouldn't matter.

And it he did? Well, then, it wouldn't matter either.

Chapter Two

"Well, thank you, Mrs. Dibson, I'm happy to be here. And your daughter Jennifer, she's got a lot of potential." Brian shook Mrs. Dibson's hand. "Speaking of, I think she's ready to go." He nodded toward the door, where the young redhead waited with her friends.

Mrs. Dibson laughed. "Oh, they're so impatient at this age. Will you be at the fundraiser next weekend?"

"The headmistress did mention it." He nodded again and tried not to shove her out the door after her daughter. *Come on, people. The day job is over. I have a gymnast to train.*

Chris had flown in late yesterday, and they hadn't really had time to discuss training at all. He'd brought Chris up to speed on the job, and they'd both hit the sack. Now he was eager to get to it.

Mrs. Dibson finally headed off with a last wave, and Brian followed to lock the door behind her.

Then he turned back to the gym. "All right. The place is ours!"

Chris still looked a little shell-shocked. The man's hair was ruffled and dark circles showed under his eyes, but he was smiling. "Okay. How do you want to do this?"

"Stretch out and loosen up, and then let's play for a bit. Then dinner and we can talk game plan."

The gym was quiet without a dozen teenage girls in residence. "You like music while you train?"

"Sure. I'm a fan. There's always noise at a meet." Chris started stretching, using the wall to support himself, to let his muscles pull.

Brian went over to his boombox and pulled out the boy bands medley he'd had on for the girls, stuck in a little CCR, and started stretching himself. "You been able to do any training since I last saw you?"

"Not officially. I paid the janitor to let me in the gym." Chris started working his glutes, eyes closed, focusing.

Brian chuckled. "I like your initiative. Or is it stubbornness?"

"Does it matter?"

Brian considered that a moment. "As long as you get the job done, no." Some days it would be like flying; other days it was going to take pure fucking stubbornness.

He had too much spare energy himself today, and he took off across the mats, doing a couple of flysprings, some tumbles, just playing around.

Chris focused, stretched out, and then headed for the horse, chalking up his hands.

Brian did a couple of somersaults and then settled on the floor near the horse, just watching.

Damn, as much as he loved moving, doing, being a gymnast, there was something about watching someone like Chris move. Someone who could make it look so fucking easy.

Chris still favored that right side. He'd looked into all the records -- Chris' springboard had malfunctioned in a training vault. The left ankle had snapped, along with his right collarbone and shoulder, and three discs had herniated.

The discs had probably been about to go for months. Hell, most gymnasts at Chris' level fought that, but it was normally in the lower back, not in the middle. It was amazing Chris could run through drills, let alone make it look so fucking good.

It meant the competing, the flying -- they were in Chris' blood.

"Let's see the backwards scissors again."

Chris nodded, started traveling, fighting to get those legs up.

Chris was compensating for his right side, and it worked okay on the front scissors, but it was letting him down going backward. "You can't favor the right side, Chris."

"I'm not trying to." Chris pushed harder, frowning.

"You are, though. Stop a sec." He stood and made his way over. "Let's see if it's actually weaker or if you're just unconsciously protecting it."

"Okay..." Chris watched him, curiosity in those odd eyes. "What do you want me to do?"

Brian held his arms out. "One hand on each of mine and try to press them together, as hard as you can with both."

"Sure." Chris pushed and yeah, yeah, that right side was weaker. Either that or it hurt like hell.

"Is it hurting?" he asked, starting to push back a little, watching Chris' face.

"It aches." Uh-huh. That's what that tic was from. Aches.

"Tell you what. Take your shirt off and let me go at it for a while. Then we'll do supper and get an early night. And I want to know when something aches, when it hurts."

"But I haven't worked out..."

"I say you need the massage, food, and sleep more than you need to push it right this second." Brian grinned. "And I'm the coach, which means we do it my way." And wasn't that sweet? There were definitely advantages to working the coaching side of things.

"Are you sure about that?" Chris winked, then turned to let him see that sore shoulder.

"Hey, that's the way it always worked when I was the gymnast." He helped Chris get his singlet down and got his first look at Chris' back.

There were two little scars on the right shoulder, then a series of surgical scars alongside Chris' spine. He could see the tension in the right side, those muscles tight, hard compared to the other side.

He dug in with his thumb. Damn. "Oh, yeah. A massage is definitely going to do you more good than trying to work out like this. You want to settle on the mats, go to the change room, or go home first? This is going to take a while."

"I... I feel like a slacker, giving up my first night, man."

Brian shook his head. "So I can see that my main job isn't going to be pushing you, but making sure that you don't push yourself too hard, isn't it?"

He turned his fingers into a claw and just dug into the hard-packed muscles. "You want the relief right here, right now, or you want it at home where you can just relax and enjoy it, and be a zombie or whatever after?"

"Oh." Chris' knees actually buckled, the sound the guy made close to bliss. "I... Home. God."

Brian nodded. "Yeah. We'll pick up some Chinese takeout or something, and you can just let go." Christ, how long had Chris needed someone to take care of this shoulder for him? It sucked that he hadn't been getting proper care. Brian was going to have to find room in the budget for a physical therapy session or two, get them to do that ultrasound and electric therapy.

"I found this great little place a block and a half from the apartment. Food's awesome."

He did a quick visual check, making sure the place was neat for tomorrow, and then grabbed his bag and led the way to the change room. "How often does it hurt as bad as it does right now?"

"Late in the day. It's usually better in the morning. I'm jet-lagged, too, a little. New bed. I'm not too bad off." Fuck, it was almost painful, the way Chris needed him to believe that he could do this.

"Well, you'll be better off if you admit it when you need some work done on your shoulder and back. I'm not going to disappear just because you're not a hundred percent yet, okay?" He looked Chris right in the eye. "I'm not Harry or Jeff. And I'm not looking for the next big thing, because you *are* the next big thing."

"Yeah. I know. I just... I... Fuck. I don't want anyone to think I'm not committed. I don't want you to change your mind on me." Chris tugged on a shirt, leaving on the pants. "I need to call my folks tonight. Let them know where to get hold of me."

"I'm not going to change my mind, Chris." He grabbed Chris' bag, as well as his own, as soon as Chris was done with it, leading the way out to his little beat-up red bug. "You got other people you need to call, too?"

"No. Mom and Pop will call my sisters. Robin I called from the airport."

Brian unlocked the passenger door and stopped. "Robin?" Wow, why hadn't it even occurred to him that Chris might have a boyfriend? And why was the idea vaguely disquieting? The man was obviously extremely committed to getting back in the game.

"Uh-huh. My brother. Med student at John Hopkins." Chris grinned suddenly, eyes rolling. "We're twins, so the names are a joke, yeah? Christopher Robin. Too bad the nurses put the wrong name with the wrong baby, huh? I'm the baby, but I got the Chris." Chris winked at him. "Only time I *ever* got to be the first."

Brian blinked. "You're kidding me." He started to chuckle, the sound turning into a full-blown laugh.

It sobered him, as he climbed in behind the wheel, to realize just how relieved he was that Robin had turned out to be a brother. "Twins, eh? You two close?"

"Oh, yeah. He flew in from Maryland for my surgery, was there for a month. He's my best friend."

"That's awesome, having someone you can count on like that." Brian started the car and headed them out toward home. "Is he specializing in sports medicine?"

"He hasn't decided yet. He's just started the whole thing a few years ago." Chris chuckled a little, stretched. "He's still hung over from my graduation party, I bet."

"Oh-ho. Suddenly your 'jet-lag' makes a lot more sense." Brian grinned.

"I actually didn't get drunk, believe it or not. I had two beers and crashed like a lead balloon."

"You're a cheap date," Brian noted, chuckling. He turned onto their side street, the leaves blowing in the breeze.

"God, yes. Rob is way better at drinking than I am. He started earlier and didn't have to deal with random drug testing."

"Yeah, that does put a damper in the experimenting with mind-altering stuff, doesn't it?"

He pulled up in front of the old converted apartment house that housed their place. It was a nice short commute, one of the reasons he'd found a place here, even if the neighborhood was... dilapidated.

"Come on, I'll order supper, you can strip and get the laundry going. I'll meet you by the couch for your massage."

"Works for me." Chris followed, flipping his cell phone open and pushing buttons. "Hey. Mom? Yeah. No. It's Chris. Is it? Oh, he's a little ass. He's always pulling tricks..."

Wondering idly what that was about, Brian dumped their bags by the door to the closet that held the washer and dryer and grabbed the landline phone. He found the magnet from the Chinese food place on the fridge and made a mental note to add it to the phone's memory as he dialed.

Making a quick calculation of how much cash he had on hand, he ordered enough for leftovers for at least tomorrow, if not the next day as well.

A half hour. Perfect.

He changed quickly into sweats and a comfy T-shirt with *Property of UCLA Gymnastics* on the front and wandered back into the living room with its big, ugly, but comfy as sin wine-red couch.

He could hear Chris' voice, low and husky, amused. "Robbie? You're a shithead. You took my phone. Yeah. I've got yours. No, I don't guess it does, asshole, but before you call phone sex lines, Mom already knows we're switched."

Brian chuckled and settled on the arm of the couch, waiting patiently. He figured it must be nice to have siblings. On the other hand, as an only child, he'd had his folks' full attention, help, and money for pursuing his gymnastics. Though he'd been nearly twenty

before his father had stopped trying to convince him to go out for hockey, or football, or baseball, or wrestling, or boxing; one year it had been snowboarding.

"...No. No, man. Well, yeah, he's cute. I showed you pictures of him, but you know me. Never again." Chris chuckled. "No, dickhead. You can't pretend to be me and seduce him. I need to go. Supper. Yeah. Love you, bro. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Brian blinked and fought a blush. He hadn't meant to be eavesdropping. And he certainly hadn't meant to listen in while Chris called him cute.

He was very busy examining the TV listing in the paper when Chris came into the room. The fact that they didn't actually have a TV didn't need to be mentioned.

"Laundry's started." Chris plopped down at Brian's feet, stretching. "Mom says my stuff should be here day after tomorrow."

"Cool. Does one of us need to be here to accept delivery or will they just leave it? The lady on the first floor corner -- Mrs. Anson I think was her name -- seems like the local gossip, but I bet she'd let them in if we asked nicely."

He encouraged Chris to shift slightly and then straddled the muscled ass, focusing on that mass of tight muscles on the right side of Chris' back.

"That's cool. There's a TV, some DVDs, that sort of thing. Nothing... oh, don't stop... nothing earth-shattering."

"Oh, a TV, cool. We should join Netflix. And I'm not stopping until I've got this tightness all worked out." He pressed and pushed, kneaded and rubbed. Chris' skin warmed right up under his attentions, the muscles slowly loosening for him.

"Okay. I can handle movies." Chris groaned, sinking into the cushions. "Oh, man. That feels amazing."

"I knew those electives in massage were going to serve me well." He shifted up a bit to really get at the ball of Chris' shoulder and was suddenly conscious that his groin was snugged into the small of Chris' back.

"Oh. Oh. Oh." Brian wasn't sure if it was pain or pleasure or a mixture of both.

"This is the spot, huh?" He alternated soft with hard touches, keeping the skin and muscles warm. They needed a heating pad. His had given up the ghost a few months ago and he'd not bothered to replace it.

"Don't let it get this bad again without saying something." Not that he wasn't going to make this a regular part of their routine, but there was no reason for Chris to be suffering like this.

"Uh-huh." Chris was still, panting beneath him, hands opening and closing over and over. That panting was loud in the apartment, his own breathing a slower counterpoint to it.

He rolled a little, getting his whole body into it as he kneaded as deep into the muscle as he could. He almost heard it when Chris went boneless and melted and just let go. Oh, yeah. Good man. He didn't say anything, though, just let Chris ride the moment, keeping the touches good and strong, making sure that Chris' muscles were going to stay loose for a while.

Yeah, they'd do this every couple of nights. He had a hunch Chris was going to be surprised by what a big difference it made in keeping the "aches" away.

He was almost in a trance, rolling, rubbing, digging in, rubbing again, when the doorbell sounded, and he jerked hard, totally startled.

"Good timing," he noted, giving a last pat to Chris' relaxed form before heading for the door. Where'd he leave his wallet?

Chris didn't move, didn't even shift as Brian answered the door, paid the cute little twink, and got their food. He put the food on the table, looking over and chuckling. That was a fabulous look on Chris.

Completely fabulous.

He opened the bags and started taking out the little boxes of food, the sauces and chopsticks, spreading their feast out for them. Oh, yeah, plenty of leftovers.

Then he settled on the floor with his back against the couch and grinned over at Chris. "Do you do chopsticks? Hell, do you even have motor functions at the moment?" he asked, chuckling some more.

"Not hungry. I'll just die happy." Chris almost opened his eyes, and Brian chuckled as Chris' stomach growled loud enough to hear.

He snagged a bit of Szechwan chicken with his chopsticks and held it out to Chris. "Eat. I happen to know your coach is going to really put you through your paces tomorrow."

"Yeah?" Chris opened his mouth, groaning as he chewed. "Oh. Yum."

"Yep." He had a bite of the Szechwan himself. Oh, yeah. That little Chinese place was going to get a lot of business.

He grabbed an egg roll and offered it up to Chris as he had a mouthful of noodles and snow peas.

Chris actually sat up, peeled the skin off the egg roll and snarfed up the insides. "Is there beef?"

Grinning, Brian grabbed the box of beef and broccoli and passed it back with a set of chopsticks.

He was more a grazer when it came to Chinese, going for a bite of this and then a bite of that, slowly tasting his way through all the dishes.

Chris ate well, avoiding the rice, eating the veggies and the strips of beef. "Fucking good. Thank you. How much do I owe you?"

"Ten bucks'll do it. We'll set up a grocery fund. Hell, we need to put together a budget for rent, utilities, and crap, pool together what we've got to make it stretch." He tossed his chopsticks on the table and passed Chris a fortune cookie. "But not tonight. Tonight's for relaxing, getting unjet-lagged."

"Kay. Mom and Pop gave me a little to start on, so I'm okay." Chris crushed the fortune cookie in one hand, digging out the fortune. "'Your life has just begun.' Cool. Go me."

"Oh, that's excellent!" He grinned, feeling just stuffed and completely lazy. He split his own cookie in two. "'Your search for love is at an end.'" He snorted. When exactly had it begun? He'd been in the closet so long, he hadn't had a date in forever.

Chris hooted. "See? I *knew* that Mrs. Haverton woman was the one for you."

"Oh, ew! She's got tits, man!" He laughed. Man, he was glad he'd told Chris about the gay thing. His mouth snapped closed. Or had he? He'd never actually said, just sort of danced around it, and Chris had been busy doing dancing of his own.

Shit. He risked a glance over at Chris.

"No drag queens for you, huh?" Chris grinned, one eyebrow arched, looking wicked as shit.

Oh, thank goodness he hadn't put his foot in it. He grabbed a pillow from the end of the couch and tossed it at Chris' head. "That would be a no. I like all the bits... male."

Chris caught the pillow, flung it back. "Dangly bits!"

He ducked, but shot his hand out so the leftovers didn't go flying. "The danglier the better!"

And damn, that was a nasty image and not at all what he'd meant, which had him making

faces and laughing harder. "No. I mean... Never mind." He reached for the pillow and aimed it at Chris' head again, watching it sail over the back of the couch.

Chris laughed hard, knees drawing up as he rolled. "Shit! I'm glad you're not a baseball coach!"

"Oh, God! All those bats and balls? I'd be in so much trouble." He fell back against the couch, giggling like crazy. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had so much fun just hanging out.

Chris snorted and cackled. "Yeah, but think of sliding into home..."

He had a sudden vision of doing just that, Chris spread out beneath him and he made himself laugh some more to cover the blush that was fighting to heat up his cheeks.

"I should get this cleaned up and the leftovers in the fridge so they don't spoil. You want a drink while I'm up?"

"I'll help." Chris grinned and started gathering containers. "I brought some iced coffee in a cooler. You want some?"

"Cold caffeine? You betcha! It's my drug of choice, and I love it cold."

The kitchen was small, but they worked around each other, putting away the leftovers and finding a couple of glasses from his mismatched dishes. "I don't suppose you've got plates and stuff? I've got this real hodgepodge thing going." A plate from Friendly's, taken on a dare, a couple of big plastic cups from some Burger King promotion, two bowls from his mom's set when she'd replaced hers. He could tell you where each dish had come from, though, which was kind of neat in a dorky kind of way.

"Yeah. My folks sent this whole 'gee, you're a bachelor with your own place now' thing. Pots, a pan, four plates and glasses and forks and all. There's also a shower curtain and this weird welcome mat my sister Trina made."

"Oh, cool. Looks like we'll actually be fairly well equipped between the two of us."

It had never been much of a priority, but he had to admit, living with a roommate, being so far away from home as they were here, it was nice to have the place done up right. And God knew he was getting old enough to stop living like a college kid in a dorm room anymore.

"Cool." Chris poured two iced coffees, heavy on the milk, passing one over.

"I've always been either in the dorms or at the coaches'. They had a good place, but I just had a bedroom, so it was kinda like being at home. Oh, there's no sugar in it; if you want some, you'll have to add."

"Nah, I'm good. The sweet'll keep me up, which I know is fucked. It's the caffeine that's supposed to do it, but I'm fine unless I have sugar in it." He shrugged and headed back into the living room to settle on the couch, leaving plenty of room for Chris. "It's not like we need the place to look like *Better Homes and Gardens* or anything, but it's nice to have it feel like home and not something temporary."

"Yeah, well..." Chris blushed a little, shrugged. "When my folks come? Mom'll get stuff for it. I know, 'cause Rob sent pictures of his apartment."

"Well, not to be mercenary or anything, but that's cool, yeah? When are they coming? We'll have to make sure we clean up the day before." Because underwear on the doorknobs and parents just didn't mix well. He'd found that out the hard way. Of course, it was his mother's fault for showing up unannounced...

"Probably in July. They're going to drive from Kansas City over to Phoenix to see my sister next weekend and are staying until the baby comes. Then they'll head here."

"A baby? Wow. Is it their first grandkid? I think that was the hardest thing for my mom to accept about me being gay. No grandkids. But I guess your folks have lots of other kids to pick up the slack there, so no guilt for you."

His mom'd come around, but the first couple of years had been hard, and he hadn't had anyone to lean on. And now he was feeling sorry for himself, which was a load of crap, because here was Chris, who'd suffered a near-career-ending accident, and he was pressing on.

"Well, I have three sisters. All three are married. Trina has three kids, Suzy has one and is just newly pregnant, and Carol Ann is having her first." Chris grinned, shrugged. "Me and Rob, we were the babies, and we're kind of the black sheep, you know?"

"Wow, that's a ton of family. I haven't even got a lot of cousins -- my mother was also an only child and my father has a sister with four kids, but her husband's in computers and working in Saudi Arabia, so we never see them."

He stretched out, laying his head down on the back of the couch as he looked over at Chris. "And black sheep? Does that mean Robin's gay, too?" He'd heard that twins were really similar, that even those who'd been separated at birth had the same childhood diseases at the same time, went for similar types of women, same jobs.

"Yeah. Yeah, he's uh... very into sex." Chris' cheeks were bright red.

"Yeah? Does that mean you are, too?" And his own cheeks were starting to heat, but he wanted to know so he didn't take it back.

And just like when thinking Robin was Chris' boyfriend had unsettled him, so did the

thought that Chris might want to bed a different guy every weekend. And, yeah, too much focus on getting laid would seriously fuck with Chris' training, but something told him it was more than that, but he didn't know what.

"No." That was short and flat and sure. "After that last deal, I decided I wouldn't... indulge until I retired."

"That last deal? You mean the rumor that you were hitting on other gymnasts? I thought you said that was just rumor?" He grinned wryly. "Or am I still missing half the details? I really haven't kept up on the gossip."

"I wasn't hitting... I mean, I'd been seeing another gymnast and I thought it was something. You know. He was just playing politics, though. Setting me up to get caught in a compromising position."

Brian sat up straight, anger going through him. "What? He set you up?" He was nearly growling, just plain mad that someone would do that to another gymnast. That someone would do that to *his* gymnast. "I hope his dick rots and falls off! People like that don't deserve the good things in life."

"Well, he got what he wanted, I guess." Chris looked a little wounded, a little ashamed.

"You didn't turn him in, did you?" He shook his head and reached out, hand on Chris' thigh, squeezing a little. "I'm sorry you got hurt. I mean, it's one thing if things just don't work out, but that... well, it sucks big time."

"No, man. I... That happened around my accident. I had other shit on my mind." He got a quick, sudden grin. "Besides, Rob dealt with it for me."

He couldn't help smiling back; Chris' smile was infectious. "Your black sheep twin? This I have to hear."

"Oh, I was in the hospital, on my stomach, trying to heal, and Rob showed up at this guy's door, looking like a goddamn ghost. Apparently the guy almost peed himself."

He laughed. "Oh, man. I'd like to have seen that. Asshole deserved more than that, but I sure would like to have seen that. He sounds like a real card, your twin."

"We get along great; he's a good guy. I'll probably fly out to see him on our first break, just so that we can visit, screw off."

"Break? Someone told you we were taking a break?" He winked and stretched back out on the couch. "We have four days without work for the July 4th weekend. If you promise to do workouts, I can let you go." He didn't have any plans himself -- his folks spent most of the summer on cruises, had ever since he was sixteen.

"That's when my folks will be here. I was thinking between summer and school starting." Chris shrugged and winked. "I might con him into coming here."

He didn't examine why he was so pleased to know that he wasn't going to be on his own for the holiday, because he wasn't sure if it was just that or if he was specifically glad that Chris was staying. "Oh, so the two of you can play tricks on your old coach?"

"I bet you'll be able to tell us apart by then. Rob's a different kind of athlete -- he got his scholarship in tennis."

He had a hunch he'd be able to tell them apart already. Chris had the build and carriage of a gymnast. Not everyone was built like that. "That sounds so... upper crust," he teased.

"Doesn't it?" Chris chuckled, moving to the floor to stretch out, slowly working his hamstrings with a lazy familiarity that spoke of real habit. "My dad was a dentist until he retired, and my mom is a piano teacher. We were stuck firmly in the middle class. But the local tennis coach was Catholic and had nine kids and one old piano. So anyone who wanted them got personal tennis lessons for free."

"Quid pro quo, huh?" He watched Chris moving, enjoying the easy play of the man's muscles. He liked it, the friendship, the easy companionship... He hadn't expected this when he'd gone to ask Chris to let him be the guy's coach.

"Yeah. We did lots of stuff that way. My mom likes it. Rob blew out his Achilles tendon three years ago in a tournament, so he's in med school now. He's a hell of a lot smarter than me."

"Wow, med school as the fallback? I've gotta admit, that's pretty impressive." He chuckled, stretching out on his belly on the couch and just watching. "If he's the smart one, that makes you the good-looking one."

"We're identical. I'm the driven one. He's considerably more laid-back." Speaking of laying back, Chris rolled to his back, one leg lifting up to stretch beside his ear.

Brian reached out and put his hand on Chris' leg, giving him something to press up against. He used to be able to do that. Maybe still could if he worked up to it. And it still made him feel guilty now and then that he wasn't still training, still pushing himself hard. It had been such a huge part of his life. "You've got to be driven to get to the top."

"Thanks." Chris nodded, eyes closing. "Yep. I just want to go until I can't anymore. Then I'll find a place and put my degree to work."

"Hey, what's your degree in?" And did that make him super-focused or a jerk, that he hadn't asked before? That he'd all but memorized Chris' medical records and stats from the last four years before the accident, but hadn't a clue what Chris had been studying.

Chris changed legs, looking over at him quickly. "You swear you won't laugh?"

"Why would I laugh?" He reached over and put his hand on Chris' other leg, to give him that resistance.

"Because I have an art degree. Painting, even." Chris pinked, leaning into the stretch. "Fuck, that's tight. Push harder."

"You paint? That's kind of cool." He pushed harder, hand wrapping around Chris' calf, feeling the muscle working against his palm. "What kind of stuff do you paint?"

"I..." Chris was starting to sweat some, and Brian frowned. No heavy workout, now. Light, easy stretching. "I like to do portraits. I did a series of sports images for my honors class."

"Oh, now, that sounds cool." He slid his hand away, petted Chris' shoulder. "Enough with the stretching. It's time to relax. You play Go? I have a board."

"I don't know how, but I can learn." Chris rolled over and back, pressing into a handstand.

Show off.

Brian rolled off the couch and resisted the very strong urge to do one as well. He wasn't competing with Chris -- he wasn't competing with anyone.

He grabbed his Go game from the shelf and set the board up on the coffee table, explaining how you used your own stones to surround and capture your opponent's pieces. It was a fun strategy game that could take ages to play, and it had been a while since he'd had a regular playing partner. And, just maybe, playing would keep Chris from pushing himself when it was time to relax.

Maybe.

Chapter Three

He fucking hated candlestick extensions.

He rolled up on his shoulders, arms back to support him, toes pointed.

"Eighty-nine."

Yup.

Hated them.

He held the stretch for a count of fifteen, rolled back down, considered beating whoever invented these things to death, and rolled up again.

"Ninety."

Brian was still sound asleep. Chris couldn't hear him snoring, but the door was closed and it was still early for a Sunday.

They'd settled into a thing -- workouts five nights a week, and then he put in a solo twelve-hour day on Saturdays while Brian did... stuff. He wasn't sure that Brian knew he was doing the twelve-hour workout, but it was different, being with Brian. Before, the coaching was 24/7, no breaks, no time off.

This was...

He felt like a slacker.

"Ninety-one."

Which was why he was up on a Sunday, doing conditioning rounds, driving himself crazy.

"Ninety-two."

"Good grief, you haven't really done ninety-two of those, have you? Don't you *ever* sleep in?" Brian yawned, his hair all mussed, eyes blinking sleepily.

"Sorry, didn't mean to wake you." He only had eight left, then he'd move to piked leg lifts.

"Oh, you didn't really." Brian stretched and then crouched next to him, watching him. "How long have you been up?"

"What time is it?" Ninety-four.

"'Bout eight thirty. Damn, you look good doing that. Good *at* that. It looks like you're good at that." Brian stood and headed toward their little kitchen. "You want some coffee?"

"Sure. I hate them. An hour and a half." Ninety-five. Coffee. Four more of these; a hundred leg lifts. Coffee.

"I don't think you're supposed to like them. I don't think you're supposed to like any of them. You're just supposed to do them."

He could hear Brian putting coffee in the filter, filling the pot with water.

"I like some of them." Ninety-eight. "These? No."

Ninety-nine.

"How's your shoulder?" Brian asked, wandering back and crouching next to him again. One of Brian's warm hands landed on his back just above where his shoulders were on the floor.

"It's okay. These are tough on the back." He let himself rest against Brian's hands a second.

"They are. I'm sorry we couldn't get you in to see the PT before next week. He should have some strengthening exercises you can do. For it and your ankle."

The warm hand disappeared, Brian sitting down and stretching out, leaning over his legs. "God, I feel like such a slacker."

"You do?" Chris let his legs drop out, forcing the split. Oh. Stretch.

"I feel like I should be stretching and doing drills and all that shit, too, you know? Of course, then I'd pop my knee out again. But, still, I remember that drive, that need to be on the top of your game *all* the damned time. It's a hard thing to let go of."

"Well, can't you do some? Be careful on your knee?" Hell, most coaches he knew were on the top of their game all the time. It was just a different game.

"Well, sure, and you've seen me -- I keep it up, kind of. But you're at it all the damned

time." Brian shrugged, sighed. "I'm sorry. The last thing you want to hear is your coach having an existential crisis."

"It's cool." Oh. Damn. Maybe he should do the rest in his room. "I hear you. Let me get some jeans on and I'll come pour cereal."

"Wait. Chris. Shit. I'm sorry." Brian touched his arm and then took his hand away again. "I just worry sometimes that I'm shortchanging you, you know? You've got so much fucking talent and you should have a top-notch coach. Someone who's brought winners to the circle already, not someone who's unproven."

"Look. I..." Chris took a deep breath. "You picked me. I picked you. If you don't want to be my coach, I'll be cool, but I'm here."

"Oh, I want to be your coach. It's practically all I think about." There was no hesitation there; Brian met his eyes as he spoke. "I just had a bad night and haven't had my coffee yet. Blame it on me being a first-time coach."

"A bad night? Is something up?" Leg lifts. He settled back on his butt, legs spread, hands out.

One. Two. Three. Four.

"No. Well... Oh, fuck it. I should just tell you." Brian took a deep breath. "Chris, Baxter Serens called and, well, he didn't outright offer to take over as your coach, but he sure as hell inferred that he wanted to. That you deserved someone like him over an unknown like me. And he's right, you do -- I mean it would suck like hell for me, but you deserve a coach of Baxter's caliber on your team. He can give you stuff I can't. And as much as I told myself I didn't *have* to tell you, you deserve to know that that opportunity exists."

He went stiff, fucking ice-cold. "You can tell that smarmy motherfucker that he needs to stay the fuck away from your gymnast."

Bastard.

Serens thought he could call here? Interfere with training?

Brian blinked. "That's not exactly the reaction I was expecting..."

"Yeah. Well, it's what you got." Twenty-five. Twenty-six. Twenty-seven. Fucker.

"Yeah, but why?" Brian's hand landed softly on his stomach, stopping him. "Don't get me wrong, I'm happy as I can be that you aren't in the least bit interested, but I feel like I'm missing something here."

"Serens coaches the guy who set me up. You watch; those rumors about me? Lead right back to him every goddamn time."

"Oh, fuck! He set me up and I walked right into it -- swallowed it hook, line, and sinker." Brian shook his head, got up and started to pace a little. "Damn it. They are fucking low to keep pulling this shit." Brian stopped suddenly, a grin slowly dawning over his face. "But I tell you what -- if he's calling here and trying to shake me up? He knows that you're serious fucking competition. You've got them running scared, Chris."

"Is it going to work, man? Is it going to shake you up?" He liked Brian. He wasn't sure about the coaching yet, but he knew personally, he and Brian could be friends.

Brian came back over to sit next to where he was stretching out. "It almost did. He hit right where my own doubts were, that maybe I was holding you back, that someone with more experience would go better by you. But you know what? I believe in you. And I'm not coaching you for my glory -- I'm coaching you because I want to see you soar like I know you can."

Brian gave him a wild grin. "We're going to show assholes like Serens that they're right to worry. We're going to show Harry and Jeff that they were so fucking wrong in letting you go. Just you and me. You're hurt and I'm nobody, but we're going to show everyone just what two people with the same goal and a whole lot of determination can do. I am taking you all the way to the podium, Chris. All the way."

He lowered his legs, held one hand out. "Then let's do it, man. I've got nothing to lose."

Brian took his hand in a strong grip and they shook, eyes holding. "I'm behind you one hundred percent, Chris."

"Cool. Does that mean I can do my stretches in the living room?" Hell, yes. Chris felt that little rush, the spark of excitement finally. Maybe he *had* made the right decision.

"Uh-huh." Brian got up and pushed the big couch back a little, the coffee table going in the other direction until it was flush against the wall next to his small television stand complete with TV. "We'll liberate a couple mats from the gym tomorrow. In the meantime you're stuck with the floor."

Then Brian headed back to the kitchen. "I'm making you a shake instead of coffee."

"What? I thought we were having coffee and Froot Loops!"

Brian laughed. "I found this recipe site on the net last night while I couldn't sleep. Tons of high protein recipes. I think we've got the ingredients for the strawberry banana one. I won't tell you what the strawberry and banana flavors are hiding."

"Yeah? Not too high on the carbs, though?" He was trying so hard to not get flabby, to keep himself in shape. Of course, he needed a cup of coffee, too.

"You were going to have Froot Loops and you're worried that a bit of fruit might have too many carbs?"

Chris could hear things coming out of the fridge, a knife cutting stuff up. "You're going to be working hard enough it shouldn't matter how many carbs you have, Chris. The only thing we need to watch out for is you feeling logy. I'm going to start a diary. List what you've eaten and how you feel working out. See if there's a correlation, like between milk products or fruit and a good or bad day, that kind of thing."

The blender turned on, putting an end to any conversation for a couple of minutes. Brian spoke again once it shut off. "Have you noticed anything like that on your own?"

He shrugged, tried to think. "I don't eat pasta or bread, anything with wheat. I can have corn stuff for breakfast." He'd just been trying to do what he'd done before, as best as he understood it.

"Cool. I'm not going to change your diet so much as fine-tune it, you know? Some stuff is going to give you energy for longer, which'll be good for practicing. Other stuff will be a higher boost for a shorter time period, better for competing."

Brian wandered back with two glasses full of a thick, pink liquid. "Let's give it a try, shall we?"

"It's pink." Still, it smelled good, and God knew he wasn't picky. He slurped it and hummed. Yeah, that worked. It had that weird clinging protein aftertaste, but it wasn't terrible. "Can we do strawberry pineapple next?"

Brian grinned. "We'll need to revamp the shopping list, but yeah. And mango orange, papaya pineapple. There was a bacon one, too, but I'm thinking bacon and milk or yogurt blended together is just wrong."

Chris gagged, looked at Brian in horror. "No pig smoothies, dude. Gross. Now, I need my coffee."

"I'm thinking we could drive down to the piers. Go jogging. Buy our groceries at the market, and then come home. You can have a coffee after our jog." It seemed that once Brian had decided he was back on track, he was really back on track.

"You are an evil man. I want good coffee, then, if I have to wait." He leaned forward, balancing himself on his arms, slowly raising himself off the floor.

"Yeah, there's that coffee shop down by the market." He could feel Brian's eyes on him, watching, assessing, sliding over him.

"Okay." Chris leaned forward, legs stretching back, muscles shaking as he fought for balance.

"You're favoring your right side still. You're going to have to trust it to hold you, or you're always going to be a bit off-balance. Not a lot, but enough."

"I just don't want to overextend it." He let himself push a little harder on the right side before losing the hold.

Brian helped him sit back up and slid his hand over the muscles. "Yeah, but sometimes you hold back because it aches, needs a little heat and pressure to loosen it back up. You've got to be able to push past some of the pain. Just not to the point of overextending." Brian laughed. "It's such an exact science, isn't it?" Brian's hand lingered, not really massaging, but warming, touching, easing the pressure a little.

"I guess." Oh, man. That felt so good. Easy. "Every day, I try to push a little farther."

"Good. That's good." Brian kept touching, both hands moving on his back now. "I'm thinking we should make the massages once a day instead of every three days or so. It really seems to make a difference on the muscles." Brian shifted, legs bracketing his ass, body warm behind him.

Oh, man. He... Whoa. Think about mud. Worms. Gross things. "You'll spoil me."

"The good coffee is spoiling. Making sure you aren't hurting is part of the job as coach."

Brian pushed in a little closer, fingers starting to massage now instead of just warming. He could feel Brian's breath against his neck. Chris closed his eyes, the sensations driving him a little nuts, making him hard. He didn't stop Brian, though. His muscles needed it.

His muscles.

Yeah.

Brian worked his shoulder until there wasn't a single ache left. At least not in his shoulder.

When Brian stopped, it was rather abrupt, Brian scrambling up. "Better?" He sounded a little hoarse.

"Uh-huh." Better. Hard as a rock. Wanting. "You ready to run?"

Brian cleared his throat, nodded. "Yeah. Let me, uh... get changed."

Changed? The man was wearing a T-shirt and sweats...

"Changed?" He turned and half stood, almost rubbing his cheek against a hard cock.

Brian stumbled back, cheeks flaming "Um. Yeah. Changed. Or... something."

"Kay." He bit his lip, scrambling up for his room before he... uh, yeah.

Celibate.

He was celibate.

Damn it.

The door shut behind him and his hand dropped, working his aching prick.

Celibate.

Brian was in trouble.

And he was digging in a little deeper every day.

He'd been around gymnasts since he was, like, eight. And sure he'd had the odd crush, admired the occasional body. Okay, lots of bodies. But it had never been anything permanent, never been a problem.

But Chris... well, Chris was hot. He was cute. Funny.

And the attraction was getting deeper, not fading away.

His stupid prick was refusing to be good and stay down, no matter how many lectures he gave it, no matter how often he'd take a walk and thump it.

So far, it hadn't affected his coaching, but he had to be careful not to get too comfortable when giving Chris his massages, because he invariably finished up with hard, aching wood.

And he wasn't sure what to do about it.

How to fix this.

Hell, he wasn't sure he wanted to. He liked Chris as a person, not just a gymnast, and under different circumstances, he might have asked for a date.

So he just soldiered on, made sure he was being professional, that he was giving Chris the best damned coaching he knew how. And he worked out a lot. He split his time in the evenings between watching Chris work, spotting him, and working out himself, keeping his body busy and tired.

Tonight they were working on landings.

They started slow, simple releases from the bar, and when that seemed to be causing no panic or trouble, Brian upped the ante by getting Chris to release, somersault, and land. Chris was graceful and gorgeous, flying through the air and just sticking the landings over and over again. Brian was hard as a rock, but ignoring it, keeping his focus on Chris, watching for any sign of weakness, of hesitancy.

Chris landed, landed, landed. Then the cocky son of a bitch threw a double layout, flying through the air before hitting the ground.

"How'd that one feel?"

He got a grin. Those mismatched eyes danced. "Good. I want to do it again."

He grinned back, Chris' enthusiasm as infectious as always. "Well, don't let me stop you. Show me what you've got." Given how well the landings were going, he was going to move the training on the vault up.

Chris got up there, started to do a routine. Over and around -- a nice rear-piked Stadler, a couple of release moves, a giant. Then a Kovacs, Chris hitting the somersault and missing the bar altogether, hitting the mat hard.

Fuck.

He made it to the mat in seconds, kneeling next to Chris, hands on his back. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Let me do it again." Chris struggled to his feet.

He nodded, stayed down to run his hands over Chris' ankles. Everything seemed okay.

"All right, chalk up and do it again. Pay attention to each move as you do it -- don't anticipate the landing."

Two more times up, two more down. The third time Chris caught himself with one hand, entire body jerking.

"Okay. Okay. Stop. Come down." He went over and wrapped his arms around Chris' waist, helping him down.

"Okay, talk to me. What went wrong? Is your shoulder bothering you again?"

"I... No. No, it's just been too long. My timing's off." He could feel Chris vibrating, knew that frustration. Maybe they needed some trampoline time.

"Okay, let's leave it for now. The landings aren't going anywhere." He winked and nodded toward the trampoline folded up at the other end of the gym. "Let's go fly."

"Let me do a few more on the bar. I can get it." Right, before or after tearing all those muscles to hell.

"You can get it right tomorrow. We're doing trampoline now."

Chris growled, looked at him, frustration visible. "I can figure it out."

"I know you can. But your body's had enough tonight and I say we're moving to the trampoline. Tomorrow we'll start on the bar instead of doing it several hours in." It was the first time he'd had to put his foot down, first time Chris had fought him on anything.

"I... Okay. Okay. I hate giving up. Tomorrow, first thing, right?"

He put his hand on Chris' shoulder, looked into the amazing, weird, two-colored eyes. "You're not giving up, Chris. It's first on our list tomorrow, as soon as we see the girls off."

"Okay." He got a wry grin, a nod. "Yeah, coach."

He bounced on his toes and nodded. That's right. He was the coach. "Come on, the trampoline is *fun*."

"Goofball." Chris helped him get the trampoline down and set up.

"Up you get. Before I decide I ought to show you how it's done." He'd always loved the trampoline; it'd always felt like playing, like being free of the earth and gravity.

"Oh, listen to you..." Chris laughed, climbed up, giving him a great view of that nice ass.

He pressed his crotch into the side of the trampoline, trying to keep his cock from putting on a show of its own. It didn't get any easier as Chris started to move, body flying through the air, somersaulting, twisting.

"Throw some seat drops in there. Mix it up." There. He wasn't gawking -- he was coaching.

"Kay." Chris was getting tired, clumsy, the twists almost not making it around.

He let Chris jump a couple more minutes and then called a halt to it. "Time to call it a night. Let's go home and I'll rub you down. Those muscles have to be pretty tired."

"Uh-huh." Chris bounced a couple more times and settled, breathing hard. "Supper? Soon? I'm hungry."

"Yeah, I've got a couple power bars to hold you till we get home. Unless you want to go out?" They'd just gotten paid, and he had to admit a nice steak dinner would go down well. He was not asking Chris out on a date. Not.

"Ooh! Let's go out." Chris bounced down, overshooting it and landing against him with a thud.

His arms automatically went around Chris, steadying the long, lean body. And he didn't want to let go. He met Chris' eyes, lips parting, but he had no idea what to say. He knew he should step away, let go, turn away. But he didn't.

"I don't..." Chris pushed closer, the scent of pure male heady. "You're hard for me?"

He licked his lips, trying to catch his breath. "All the fucking time. I'm sorry. I won't. I don't... It won't affect my coaching. I won't let it." He wouldn't. He hadn't yet.

"You're sorry? Really?" Chris groaned, rubbed those lean hips against him.

"I thought I was." He'd thought it wouldn't be welcome. God, Chris' eyes were fascinating this close.

And the body he'd been admiring for weeks felt so fucking good against his. Groaning, he pressed their lips together.

Chris made a sweet, deep sound, hand wrapping around the back of his neck and holding on. That sweet mouth opened up, tongue just touching his bottom lip. A shudder went through him and he touched Chris' tongue with his own, felt lightning shoot through him, straight to his cock.

"Not here." Chris pulled back, staring at him. "Not here. Not in a school."

He nodded, managed to let his hands drop away -- the hardest thing he'd ever done, letting go. He was gasping for breath, almost lightheaded.

What if Chris changed his mind by the time they got home?

What if he didn't?

Chapter Four

Brian pulled up into the little parking lot for Andine's Restaurant and turned off the engine. "We should talk, yeah? And you need to eat. So here first. Because if we just go home, I'll... We'll... We won't talk. And I think we should." He met Chris' eyes.

"Yeah. Talking." Chris nodded, squeezed his wrist.

He almost leaned in and took another kiss first, but he wasn't going to be able to think if they did that. So he just nodded, turned his hand and squeezed back, then got out.

Restaurant. Eating. Talking. Yeah.

The hostess sat them and they ordered right away. Two big steaks with salads, mushrooms and onions, milk for Chris and a pop for him.

Once she'd gone, he looked around. They'd never been here before, but it was supposedly the place to go for steaks. He'd expected something fancy, but it was homier, checked tablecloths on the table, old family pictures on the walls, and lots of folks with kids patronizing the place.

He finally brought his gaze back to Chris and cleared his throat. "So..."

"Yeah. So. I... Is this a good idea?"

"I don't know? Probably not. Maybe." He gave Chris a wry smile and sighed, sat forward. "All right, let's look at the facts, okay? I've been attracted to you from the start. I mean at first it was just an almost abstract thing, you know? Oh, he's cute, has a great bod. I've roomed with other gymnasts before, worked closely with coaches and guys, and I've never felt like this with anyone.

"So it's not just a proximity thing, you know? It's not just because you're the nearest warm body. It's *you*. I like you a whole lot." Cards on the table. He figured upfront and honest was going to be the only way to deal with this.

"I'm not sure that it's good for your reputation, you know? To be with me? I'll not be the last gymnast that wants to work with you..." Chris looked so damned *earnest*.

"I'm not worried about my reputation." He just wanted to coach Chris, to make Chris the best. Okay, obviously not *just* that... "How's it going to affect you if it gets out and those rumors start up again?"

"I'm an outed-gay wash-up with a broken back. How's it going to get worse?"

"You're not. A wash-up, I mean. And we're going to prove that." His words were fierce, and spoken without thought. "Maybe it's not a great idea to go forward with... this, whatever it is, but I'm not sure ignoring it is going to work." He thought maybe trying to ignore it was going to be more distracting in the long run. "I mean, if you're interested, if you want to..."

"I'm interested. I'm just..." Chris shrugged. "I haven't ever slept with one of my coaches. I don't know how it works, you know?"

"We don't let it interfere with the business of gymnastics; that's how it works." But he wasn't going to push it, wasn't going to let it happen if Chris didn't want it like he did. "We don't have to let it happen at all, Chris. We can have our dinner and then go back home and get your muscles relaxed, and then go to our own beds and go on like we have been." He should never have let it come to this. Chris had enough on his mind.

"We could, but..." Chris stopped, looked over at him. "Are we supposed to be talking each other out of this?"

If he was smart he'd say yes, and put every single bit of his energy and sexual frustration into coaching Chris. "Probably."

"Okay. Here comes the steak." Chris unrolled the silverware, meeting his eyes. "It smells good."

"It does. Man, I'm starving."

Yeah, they'd eat and talk about working on the landings off the bar tomorrow, about working the vault next week.

And if he was still half-hard just from a single kiss, there wasn't any need to mention it.

They ate and chatted and didn't say anything important, and Chris thought his fucking head was going to explode from the tension.

So he did the only logical thing; he excused himself and called Rob.

"Yo, bro. What's up?"

Chris leaned against the counter, grinning at himself in the mirror. "Rob, I... we kissed."

"You and Coach McStudly? No! Man, I was going to seduce him for you. You ruined my plan! What did you do?"

"Fell off a trampoline." He chuckled, rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I'm at a steak house, Rob. I need your help."

"My help? Chrissy, you know what happens next. I know you do. I've seen you put the moves on a man."

Little jackass. "It's complicated."

He had this whole celibacy thing.

"You're making it complicated. Let me talk to him."

"What? No! I'm in the bathroom."

"Dork."

"Bitch."

"Weenie."

"Am not."

The door opened and Brian's head popped around it, eyes sweeping the john, coming to rest on him. "Chris? Everything okay?"

Shit. "Yeah, I..."

"Let me talk to him," Robin demanded.

"No, man."

"You're not okay?" Brian frowned and came in, letting the door close behind him.

"Yeah!" Rob started hollering. "BRIAN! COACH! I NEED TO TALK TO YOU!"

"I'm fine. My brother. Ignore him." God.

Brian didn't look convinced. He also looked sexy, the little frown bringing his eyebrows together, wrinkles on his forehead. "You're sure you're okay? You kind of left abruptly..."

"BRIAN! COME ON! I NEED TO SAY HI!"

"Yeah, I'm good. Honest. I..." He hung up the phone with a click. "Rob thinks we both think too much."

"Well it's complicated." The frown was gone, but now Brian was *looking* at him. Just... really looking. Like it was a touch.

"Yeah. I know." His cock was rock hard and his fucking phone was ringing.

Brian swallowed, whole body stiff, tight. "Are you going to answer that?"

"It's just Rob. He wants to talk to you."

"Uh-huh."

Brian stepped forward suddenly, hands reaching for his head, mouth crashing down on his.

Oh, sweet fuck.

Chris opened right up, this kiss completely different from the one at the gym, hard and deep and needy. Brian's groan filled his mouth, their teeth clicking together as the kiss went on and on, the need growing stronger.

The phone stopped ringing, but he barely noticed, lips swollen and hot, aching with the kisses. Brian's hips pushed into him, pressing him against the counter, hard prick solid and hot.

Oh, fuck. He wanted. Right now. Heat rushed through him, his cock throbbing, aching in his jeans. Brian's fingers twisted in his hair, tugging his head back, the kiss deepening further. Their hips ground together, cocks rubbing through too many fucking layers.

Chris wrapped one leg around Brian, pulling them tighter together. Yeah. Yeah, he... Oh. Oh, fuck.

Brian sawed against him and a strangled sound pushed into his mouth, the tang of blood sudden and strong as his lower lip caught on Brian's teeth. His hips jerked, muscles going tight and his balls drawing up. Shit. Soon. Damn.

One of Brian's hands slid away from his hair, pushed between them, Brian fumbling with his own zipper before suddenly grabbing at his arm. Brian stiffened, a shudder moving through him. "Chris! Fuck!"

"Uh. Uh-huh." He could smell sex now, sex and need and hunger.

"Oh, damn. Sorry. Long time. Sorry. God. Uh. Your turn," muttered Brian, breathless, still shivering, shuddering. Brian's hand started kneading the front of his pants, tongue fucking his mouth.

"Please..." He bucked, undulating and rolling up into Brian's touch, his eyes rolling.

Brian managed to get a hand into his jeans, fingers wrapping around his cock, holding it tight. The zipper was tugged the rest of the way down, Brian's hand beginning to move, to stroke him.

"Oh, God. Good." He fucked Brian's hand furiously, letting himself go, letting himself move.

Brian's free hand pushed under his T-shirt, fingers finding his nipples, ratcheting everything up yet another notch.

"Wanna feel it. Wanna feel you come."

"Uh-huh." He went up on his toes, balls going tight. Fuck. Fuck, yes. Brian stared at him and fuck, it felt good. Good enough that he shot, thighs shaking.

Brian whimpered softly, mouth meeting his in a kiss as gentle as the first ones had been hard. The hard grip on his prick barely loosened, Brian still stroking slowly, tugging out one more shudder and then another.

"Oh. So good." He blinked, head rolling on his shoulders. "So good."

Brian leaned against him, pushing his ass against the counter as they caught their breath. "Yeah. Man. Wow."

His phone suddenly started ringing again and Brian jerked, took a step back, looking around a little wildly. "Oh, man. We need to... Before someone comes in."

Brian grabbed a couple of paper towels from the dispenser and cleaned Chris up, fumbling fingers doing his button back up before Brian shoved some paper towel down his own pants, trying to deal with the mess in them.

"Oh. Oh, shit. I... I'm sorry. I forgot." He hadn't even *thought*.

"Me, too."

Brian leaned in suddenly and took a hard kiss. "I mean, I forgot, too. I'm not really sorry. Except maybe that it was over so quick."

"The next time doesn't have to be." He turned his phone off with a growl.

Brian's smile was slow and warm, and long fingers moved through his hair, sort of combing it. "Yeah. Yeah, we'll take our time. I like how that sounds."

The door opened and Brian's hand jerked out of his hair, Brian turning to the sink and running his hands under the water as a man in a light colored suit gave them a glance on his way to the urinal.

"I've already paid the bill," murmured Brian. "I'll meet you at the car."

"Okay. Okay. Be right there." Chris washed his hands, the scent of soap slowly taking over the smell of sex.

Wow.

Just.

Wow.

He headed out for the entrance, wondering what the fuck they were supposed to do next.

The drive home had passed in relative silence, Brian's brain rabbiting between "Oh, wow, that was amazing, have to get home quickly so we can do it again," and "Oh, my God, what have I done?"

It kept coming back to one thing for him though -- the genie was out of the bottle now, and he was pretty sure it wasn't going to go back in. They couldn't undo it. And he wasn't sure he wanted to.

The trick would be making sure it didn't interfere with Chris' training. That came first. And as long as he stuck to that, and as long as Chris didn't change his mind, they were gold.

They got home and he closed the door behind him, locking it. Then his eyes found Chris' and he took a step forward, wanting nothing more than to jump the gorgeous body again. Do it right this time.

Chris reached out, fingers trailing along his arm, encouraging him to move closer.

Smiling, he did, moving until he and Chris were toe to toe. "Hey," he said softly, his own fingers sliding along Chris' cheek, over Chris' lower lip, red and swollen from their kisses.

"It's cool. We're going to be cool." Chris leaned into the touch, nuzzling and humming.

Something inside him loosened at Chris' words, and he nodded, bringing their mouths closer and flicking his tongue out to follow in the trail of his fingers. He groaned at the taste, at the warmth and softness of Chris' skin.

"Do I taste good?" Chris' voice was so raw, so husky.

"Yeah, you do. Makes me want to taste more. Everywhere." He wanted to taste it all: Chris' skin on his neck, his nipples, cock, ass, Chris' come. He licked again, meeting the mismatched eyes; funny how that seemed sexy now and not odd. He swallowed. "The couch? Bed?" He didn't want to wind up humping fully dressed against the wall.

"Bed. I can handle a bed." Chris leaned against him more fully, hips rocking. "Unless you're not going to respect me in the morning."

"I'll still respect you. Tomorrow, the next day. Always." He wasn't like that. Never had been. His hands moved to cup Chris' ass and then he grabbed one of Chris' hands instead. "Come on, before I forget all about the bed idea."

"I sort of like the bed idea." Chris squeezed his fingers, holding on tight.

He grinned and led them toward his room. "Me, too. A whole lot." He stopped suddenly at the door. "Is my room okay? My bed is bigger." And did that prove where part of his head had been the last few weeks? That he knew that for sure?

"Yeah. Yeah, I'd like to see your bed." They shared a quick smile, and then Chris tugged him toward the bedroom.

That made him feel good, too, that this wasn't all one-sided. Well, it was pretty clear it wasn't, but each new bit of evidence to that made him feel lighter.

His bed wasn't made, and there were charts and lists and spreadsheets covering his little desk, clothes hanging over the back of his chair, but Chris wasn't really here to *see* the bed or his bedroom.

He toed off his shoes and his hands slid to Chris' waist, tugging up the blue T-shirt, sliding his hands on Chris' skin as he pushed the shirt up and over his head.

Oh, pretty. Stunning, really. And he'd seen it before, but now he could touch and taste and feel.

"Tell me we won't be doing handstands in bed."

He tilted his head, and started to chuckle, the image -- of the two of them, butt-assed naked and doing handstands on his bed, kissing and touching like that -- tickling him. "No handstands. Only what people who don't know better call gymnastics in bed." He

winked and moved in, mouth wrapping around one pink little nipple, tongue flicking across the nub as it drew up tight.

"Oh." Chris' hand wrapped around the back of his head, chest rippling, pressing up into his lips.

He hummed, sucking hard on the little bit of flesh as his hands explored Chris' chest. His fingers slid along Chris' ribs, found the ridges of the impressive six-pack. Chris' skin was smooth and warm, felt so good beneath his fingertips.

Chris made soft, surprised sounds, like he couldn't believe this was happening. Brian might have felt that way himself, except that Chris' nipple was hard and tasted like the best kind of candy in his mouth, and the sweet muscles he'd admired forever were firm and warm under his fingers.

He finally let Chris' nipple go and slowly licked his way across to the other one, whispering softly against Chris' skin all the things he wanted to do once they were both naked.

He could smell Chris -- the need, the heat, all the want. Everything he said made Chris move faster, rock a little more. He slowly went to his knees, tongue dragging over skin. God, Chris tasted even better than he smelled.

He swirled his tongue around Chris' navel, dipped it in, teased and played, while his fingers tugged open the button of Chris' jeans. The scent got stronger when he got it undone, and he moaned, whispered, "Gonna suck you."

"Yeah. Yeah, man. Want." Fingers dragged through his hair, petting him.

Yeah, he wanted, too.

He got the damned zipper undone, and tugged both jeans and underwear down enough that Chris' prick popped right out -- almost slapped him in the face. He rubbed his cheek against it, taking his time, resisting the urge to just swallow it down without preamble. He was going to take his time, savor every fucking inch, every damned second.

God, the smell was amazing.

"You... you're so sexy. So fine."

Rich, musky, all male. It was heady.

He looked up along the muscled belly and chest, met those strange, sexy eyes. "Yeah? You think so?" He could live with that. He could so live with that.

He pushed gently. "Bed." His eyes were hot as he watched Chris push his jeans off and lie back on the bed. He climbed up between Chris' legs, eyes on that beautiful, hard prick. Turning his head, he wrapped his lips around the side of Chris' cock, licking the velvet skin, feeling the hardness beneath it. That earned him a low desperate cry, Chris' legs beating against the bedding.

Chris' skin tasted of heat and salt, of something he already had ingrained in his memory as *Chris*, something deep and musky. He nibbled his way up to the tip of Chris' cock and lapped at the head, tongue collecting the sweet-salty drops that leaked there.

Chris sat up, staring at him, eyes huge. "Hot. Fuck."

He beamed. "It's just going to get better," he promised, and then set about keeping that promise.

He slid his tongue over the head of Chris' cock again and again, every now and then pushing the very tip into Chris' slit. The flavor of Chris' pre-come kept exploding across his tongue, making his own cock throb in his jeans.

While his tongue played, his fingers found Chris' balls, explored the way they felt when he cupped them, when he rolled them. The skin was soft, covered in a light fuzz, and they were so warm. It made him moan.

Chris murmured, falling back against the mattress, chest heaving. Those muscled thighs shifted, spread, opened for him. The scent of need was stronger now, darker, fuller. Chris' body offered up its secrets to him and he wanted to explore them all.

Taking one last teasing nibble from the tip of Chris' cock, he moved down, lips caressing Chris' balls before he licked the soft, fragrant skin behind them. So fucking hot, it felt like it should have burnt his tongue.

"Brian... Brian, man... I... Come here. We can both get off, both taste."

His cock throbbed at the thought and he nodded, pulling off his jeans with fingers that suddenly didn't seem to want to work. He got them off, though, and tossed them away, before moving, lying down on his side with his cock eagerly pushing against Chris' face.

Chris' mouth was just as hot, just as hungry as he could hope for. Whimpering softly, he went back to what he'd been doing, exploring and licking, pulling the heat and flavor of Chris into his mouth. It was too good, though, and it wasn't long before he wrapped his lips around Chris' cock and went down on it, sucking strongly the whole way.

Chris sucked him deep, throat working around the tip before backing away, tongue working the tip fast enough to make him cry out. A shudder rippled through him, as Chris' mouth, lips and tongue ratcheted the heat right up. It was all he could do to keep his own suction tight, to move up and down on the hot prick in his mouth.

He wrapped one hand around Chris' hip, fingertips digging into Chris' ass cheek as he held on tight. Any thought of taking his time, of slow explorations, gave way to the suck and slurp of the double blow job.

His balls were rolled and stretched, the sensitive wrinkled skin behind them teased by Chris' fingernails. That sweet mouth dragged over his shaft, teeth teasing him. Damn, Chris was good at this. Good enough to make him whimper and really work not to just start fucking Chris' mouth.

He slid his free hand between Chris' legs, teasing the hot little hole, stroking the wrinkled skin around it, never letting up on the suction he had around Chris' cock. Each little cry vibrated around his cock; each little jerk of Chris' hole made him press harder.

He shoved his finger into his mouth along with Chris' cock, sliding it along the velvet-covered hardness and getting it good and wet. Then he returned it to Chris' hole, pushing the tip in as he swallowed around Chris' cock. He felt Chris' cry, Chris' jerk. He pushed his finger in a little further. The heat around it was echoed in the heat around his prick, Chris' mouth and ass both grasping at him, pulling him in.

God, it was... Just -- God.

He whimpered around the hot prick in his mouth, his finger and cock pushing in and out together, finding the same rhythm. His head bobbed in time, drawing Chris' cock in deep over and over again.

The world was so small now, collapsed down to heat and suction, soft skin, hard flesh and pleasure. Just the two of them wrapped together in a circle of so damned good. Chris' nose pushed against his balls, throat swallowing and closing against the tip of his prick. Those long, lean muscles jerked and rolled beneath him, moving them both.

His body started to tighten, his balls drawing up against his body as his climax bore down on him. He concentrated on Chris' pleasure, on curling his finger and pushing it deep, on flicking his tongue across the tip of Chris' cock every time he drew up. If he focused on that, maybe he could hold off the orgasm, stay here in this moment of shared pleasure longer.

Chris groaned, cock swelling, salty heat splashing into his lips. Brian cried out around Chris' prick, his own hips snapping, pushing his cock deep as he came as well, spilling his spunk as he swallowed down Chris'. He hummed as his body went lax, slowly letting go of the sweet dick in his mouth.

"Oh. Wow." Chris licked and nuzzled, cleaning him off.

He chuckled and nodded. "Yeah. Wow."

Oh, he was feeling good now. Unbelievably relaxed.

He put a last kiss on Chris' cock and shifted around so they were lying face to face. Bringing their mouths together, he kissed Chris with a lazy happiness.

"Mmm." Chris moaned, tongue sliding along his bottom lip.

He wrapped his arms around Chris, leg thrown over both of Chris', their bodies kind of tangling together. They fit well together. "God, you taste so good."

"I didn't think this... I mean, I didn't try to seduce you."

He blinked. "What? No. No, I didn't think that." He started chuckling. "I didn't try to seduce you either."

Taking another kiss, he rolled Chris beneath him, smiling down into one green and one blue eye. "I think we should keep not trying to seduce each other -- I like the results."

Oh, man. That laugh was like eating dark chocolate -- rich and wicked and heady as hell. He'd have to make sure he heard it a lot. A real lot.

He licked at Chris' lips, loving the way his body fit on Chris'.

"Mmm. You're a snuggler." Chris chuckled, relaxed against him.

"A snuggler? Yeah, I guess I am." Kind of hard to deny when he was all wrapped around Chris.

He slid a hand down along Chris' side. He was a toucher, too. Hell, he'd been touching Chris right from the start, before he'd even realized how attracted he was to the guy.

The fact that this was complicated began to go through his head again, and he pushed the thoughts away. Tomorrow would be here soon enough; for tonight he wanted to enjoy the afterglow, cheesy as that sounded.

The phone rang, interrupting that cheesy afterglow, and Brian considered ignoring it, but it was late enough it wasn't likely to be a salesman, so he leaned over and snagged the receiver, smiling at Chris as he answered. "'Lo?"

"Hey. Brian? You should so go for it with Chris. He needs a good fuck."

Brian nearly choked on his tongue. "Robin?"

It was an easy guess, since the voice was enough like Chris', and, really, who else could it be, saying things like that?

"Good guess! Look, man, Chris is shy and all about the prim and proper, but he likes you. For real. Don't blow it."

Chris opened his eyes, frowned. "My Rob?"

He nodded at Chris and leaned up on one elbow. While he was pleased to hear that Chris liked him, he'd kind of guessed that, and he wasn't sure he liked Robin giving away Chris' secrets.

"Shy? Are we talking about the same Chris?"

"Well, yeah. I've known him since the beginning of fucking time. He's a good guy, Brian. Really. A little hyper-competitive, but good." Well, he'd give Rob props for loving Chris. No question.

"I know he's a good guy. Look, it's complicated." He sat up, leaning against the headboard, his hand dropping to pet Chris' shoulder. It freaked him out just a little. He and Chris hadn't talked about this, hell, they'd hardly started this, and already someone else knew about it, was giving him advice.

He glanced at Chris' face and smiled. Okay, this was a good thing, no matter who knew and what they thought and how pushy they were. "So, yeah, it's complicated, and now you're telling me I can't blow him?"

"What?"

"Huh?"

Oh, God. That was funny. Twins in stereo.

He chuckled and winked at Chris. "You told me not to blow it. I'd say you were too late on that front."

"Oh. Oh, fucking hell. Too cool! Okay, dude. I'll let you get back to it. Tell him I love him. Bye!"

Click.

Chris was just staring at him, eyes huge.

He hung the phone up and shifted back down to lie next to Chris. "That was your twin. He said to tell you he loves you."

He pushed Chris' hair back off his face, fingers lingering. It was real now. Someone knew. Not just was guessing and teasing and giving advice, but *knew*.

"I... I'm sorry. He's a fuck-head, but he's harmless."

"S'okay. Now we don't have that awkward how do we tell your family stuff to deal with - he is going to tell your folks, right?"

"Rob? Has already called. Twice."

He chuckled. "So we don't answer the phone until morning, then." He tugged Chris in, holding the long, warm body. "I don't mind them knowing. I just want some time to enjoy it. Get used to it, you know?" It was like that cheesy afterglow thing he liked so much.

"Yeah. I... They're very active, my family. You're going to be stunned." Chris kissed his chin. "Hell, I'm stunned."

He nuzzled into the soft kiss, and settled more comfortably against Chris. "I'm stunned without any family involved."

He didn't want Chris to think he was regretting it, though, because he wasn't. He wasn't one hundred percent sure how things were going to work with this complicating it, but he knew he was still determined to get Chris back in the thick of the gymnastics world. Hell, they were pushing for gold here, and that wasn't going to change.

But he wasn't regretting what had happened between them. "Stunned, but happy. It was good. Is good. This. I mean us."

"Yeah." Chris chuckled. "Real good. Dude, we humped in a restaurant bathroom."

He groaned. "Oh, God, don't remind me. Someone could have come in!"

Of course it had been the hottest thing he'd done since... well, maybe ever. Up until the sixty-nine between him and Chris right here on his bed. He chuckled, too, and teased, "Next time we make sure the door's locked first."

"That's a plan." Chris snuggled in a little closer. "This okay?"

"It's more than okay." He dropped a kiss on Chris' forehead. "I'm not your coach in this room, 'kay? Never in this room." The rest of it they could start figuring out tomorrow, but that was important. Here they were just Chris and Brian.

Chris nodded, humming as Brian's fingers trailed along the series of scars on Chris' back.

The sound made him smile and he let his eyes close, not to go to sleep, but to better enjoy the way Chris felt in his arms, the smell of him.

Wow. Just wow.

Chapter Five

Up.

Down.

La la la.

Twelve more and he'd be on the equipment.

Stupid warm-ups.

Stupid injuries.

Stupid body.

Still, the rings were waiting, and if he hurried, he could be done warming up before Brian finished dealing with the girls' mothers, and Brian wouldn't add anything extra.

Chris finished his leg lifts and headed for the rings, dragging the springboard over to help him up.

"You're an eager beaver today." Brian headed toward him, pulling off his warm-up jacket. "You warmed up enough to let loose on the rings?"

"Yep. No more warm-ups." He started swinging, just letting himself feel it.

Brian dragged away the springboard and added another mat to the ones beneath the rings, puttering around, making everything just so before starting to do some warm-ups of his own.

He could feel Brian's eyes on him, watching him. It wasn't anything new -- Brian always watched him. Still, now he knew Brian liked how he looked from more than just a gymnastics coach's perspective.

It warmed him right up, at least until the routine started and he only had the pull of his muscles, the burn and ache to fill his brain.

Brian's voice intruded now and then, reminding him not to favor his right arm and shoulder, correcting his hold, telling him to straighten his legs. The usual.

"Okay, you owe me some landings, and the rings are a good a place to launch them from

as anything else. Just a simple flip through the air and land. Make sure you have the mat in your line of vision before you begin the dismount."

He rolled up and over, straddling the rings with his legs in a split, chest heaving. Fuck, that hurt, but he could hold a Delchev for a while. "I don't need to practice junior dismounts."

Brian chuckled and stood, moving to get a better view of him on the rings and of where he'd be landing. "Hey, not to bruise your ego or anything, but why not start slow and work your way up? Do me a couple of the junior ones and then you can bring it up a few notches."

He stuck his tongue out. "Fine."

He unrolled and went for a full layout, adding a twist at the end before he hit the ground.

"Very nice. Now do it again, the way I asked this time."

"I did. There was a somersault. I hit it." He wasn't interested in wasting time.

"I asked you to do a simple flip and land. You did a full layout and then added a twist. Just do the landing like I want, and then you can start mixing it up."

Chris rolled his shoulders and bit back his growl. "You sure you don't want me on the floor doing somersaults to see if I remember how?"

Brian gave him a look, but answered evenly. "No. I want you to give me a simple dismount."

He dragged up the springboard, hopped up on the ring without waiting for Brian to answer. Hated. Wasting. Time.

Up. Over. Down. Go him. He could teach five-year-olds now. "Ta da."

"Thank you. Now go ahead and throw in your twists and crap. Or you can move to the bar, it's up to you, but I want you working on your landings for the next twenty minutes." Brian wasn't *quite* glaring at him.

He didn't bother snarling back. He didn't mind working his landings. He loved that part. He just didn't want to be treated like a beginner.

Of course, three landings into it on the bar and he'd forgotten about being pissed off, was just busy working his body and in the zone.

He lost track of time and would have just kept going, kept pushing, but Brian called out a halt. "Okay, that's your time. Spend ten minutes doing some stretches. That problem you

were having yesterday seems to have resolved itself. I figure we can spend the rest of the evening on landings in twenty minute increments on the various apparatus."

Go him. Resolving his problems. He let himself dangle on the bar, stretching himself out and down, then lifted his legs up. Oh. Good.

The sound that left him was remarkably sexual.

And loud.

Brian trotted over to him, hand sliding across the small of his back. "Hey, You okay?"

"Uh-huh." He grinned over, muscles starting to shake. "Feels good."

"That's what it sounded like." Brian grinned back at him, eyes dancing. He backed off again, but not before Chris noticed the way Brian's sweats were tenting.

"What's for supper tonight?" He could feast on that. Yum.

"We've got stuff for a stir-fry. You can help me make it." Brian's voice was husky, like maybe he'd been thinking the same thing.

"I like stir-fry." He hopped down, headed for the pommel, and started scissoring.

"Yeah, me, too, and you usually do better the next morning when you've had veggie meals." Brian would know; the guy charted everything except his bowel movements. And, hell, for all he knew, Brian was charting those, too.

"No rice, though." He and Brian did still butt heads a little on the carb front. Brian insisted the carbs helped, but his old coaches had had him strictly staying away from them.

"No rice. Just a few noodles. Oh, nice Magyar! How about some handstand dismounts. I love your lines on the handstands..."

"Mmm. Noodles." He swung up into a handstand, holding it before dropping down.

"Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. You're getting very comfortable with the landings. I'm thinking we work the vault tomorrow. I mean really work it."

Oh. Vault. Okay.

He started back on the horse again, but he wasn't there anymore, that vault just sort of... staring at him.

"Focus, Chris." Sometimes it was like Brian had a window into his head and knew exactly when his mind wasn't on what he was doing.

"Yeah." Fuck. He tried to push it, push the vault away, and he lost it on a Stockli, thighs hitting the end of the horse.

Brian was there right away, hands moving on his legs. "You all right? Anything hurting?"

"I'm fine. Fuck." Stupid and not focused, but fine.

"Maybe we should just face the vault tonight. I don't want you getting hurt because you're thinking about it and not focusing on what you're doing." Brian's hands were always so warm, and his fingers always managed to zero in right where his muscles needed the touches the most.

"I..." He wasn't ready yet. "I haven't done my floor work."

"Not doing it is distracting you, and the longer you put it off, the harder it's going to be."

"I know. I..." He was nerved the fuck out. "Let me hit the bathroom and I'm there."

He took off without waiting for Brian, just heading for the dressing room, his locker, his phone. He locked himself in a stall and hit two on speed dial.

"Hey, Chrissy. What's up?"

"How did you know?" Rob always knew. They both knew.

"Don't be a shit. Man trouble?"

"No."

"Ah, the vault?"

Chris nodded. "Yeah. I'm fucking scared, bro."

"Yeah. You gotta do it, though, if you're going to do it."

"I know."

He heard Rob sigh. "Look, Chrissy, you don't have to do it. You don't. You've done a lot. Everyone's proud. That vertebra's not going to hold forever."

"It'll hold long enough." Oh, fuck that. He didn't want to have this conversation.

"And what does your coach say? What does your lover say about one real bad fall leaving you in a wheelchair? Dead?"

"Shut up, man. He says I gotta do the vault tonight. He's my coach." Pure fury started blazing through him.

"Pretty shitty boyfriend, if you ask me."

"I didn't ask you. I gotta go."

He was lit up, shaking with it, ready to go kill that fucking vault. He slammed the phone in his locker, headed back out.

"I'm ready."

Brian stopped him and looked into his eyes. "Yeah? You're focused? You're head is *here*, on the vault? On *mastering* the vault?"

"I don't want to fucking talk. Just let me do it." He was pissed. Flying. He had the energy. Get out of the way.

Brian gave him a sharp look. "*Focus*, Chris." Then Brian grinned. "And go conquer the apparatus."

"Right." He didn't fuck around, didn't think, just fumed and went for a Yurchenko with a single twist.

He landed on his knees, then went to do it again.

And again.

"More height, Chris. Get your feet under you."

He switched to the Sukahara, hoping the change in hand placement would help.

Bang. Knees.

Bang. Knees.

Bang. Oh, feet. Ankle. Ow. Shit.

He shook it off, heading back toward the run with only a little hop.

"Whoa, okay, slow down. Let me look at your foot." Brian met him at the end of the run. "Sit."

"I'm good. Just twisted it." Ow.

"I said sit. Jesus, it's already swelling. Never mind." Brian slipped under his arm, and grabbed his waist, supporting him as they headed to the locker room. "I've got one of those shake-it ice packs in my bag. You think you can make it to the change room?"

"Sure I can. No biggie." Okay. See him. See him motivate. He was a macho bastard. Go him.

Of course, the gymnasium had never seemed so damned big, and he was more than glad when they got to the locker room and he could get off the ankle.

Brian grabbed a couple of ice packs out of his bag, along with an elastic bandage wrap. "How bad does it hurt?"

"It's okay." Like a sore fucking tooth.

Brian snorted. "It's okay. Right." Brian snapped and shook the ice packs, and then used the bandage to attach them to his ankle. "Hopefully that'll keep the swelling down and you'll be back on it by tomorrow." Brian looked up at him, eyes concerned. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. You sure we're done? I was getting it." He was.

"You go back out there and your ankle is going to get worse. We leave it till tomorrow and it should be fine. And, yeah." Brian gave him a grin. "You were indeed getting it."

"Yeah. I'm hungry. Let's go home." Yeah. Yeah, he was. He toddled over to the lockers, grabbed his bag and his phone. Rob had text messaged him with "you're welcome chrissy."

Bastard.

Yeah.

Brian fretted all the way home. He'd pushed Chris too fast on the vault. But Chris had to face it at some point, and he'd only twisted the ankle a little. Injuries like that were more than common among high-level gymnasts. Then he fretted that he should have just had Chris sit with it iced and elevated for a while, and then wrapped it and sent him back out onto the vault.

Had he gone easy on Chris because they were lovers now?

He shook his head as he parked. He had to stop second-guessing himself. He had Chris' best interest at heart, and if he felt Chris needed a night to rest the ankle, then Chris needed the night to rest the ankle.

"Want me to carry you in?" he asked, managing not to crack a smile as he looked over at Chris.

Chris popped his leg, hard. "Oh, yeah. Tease the gimp. Be careful or I'll switch places with Rob."

He chuckled, and rubbed his leg. "Ow. Are you two *that* alike that I wouldn't know? I mean, I know what you taste like now."

"You'd know. We're different. We just look alike." Chris' cheeks blazed, those weird eyes dancing.

"So he's cute, but he's not you." His hand slid across the seat to briefly touch Chris' leg, and then he got out of the car, slamming the door closed. Their little escapade in the bathroom at Andine's had proved how quickly touching could turn into far more.

He followed Chris up to their apartment, watching the ankle. Chris wasn't favoring it *too* much. Still, Chris headed straight into his own bedroom to change and the groan that Brian heard wasn't sexual.

Worry chewing at him, Brian changed with record speed, tugging on his sweats and not bothering with a T-shirt, and then knocked on Chris' door. "Hey, can I come in?"

"Sure." Chris was still on the bed, undressed, foot up in the air.

He went over and sat next to Chris, hand sliding over the ripped belly. God, he loved the warm, silky feeling of Chris' skin. "You want some ibuprofen or something?"

"Nah. I'm just elevating it." Chris smiled for him, leg resting against his shoulder.

Grinning, he turned a little so he could slide his hands along Chris' leg, massaging the strong thigh muscles. He let his fingers go right up to the join where thigh met groin. "You did good tonight, Chris. You really did."

"Thanks. That feels good." Chris' muscles jumped and jerked.

"Mmm. For me, too. Your skin is like..." He shrugged, feeling a little shy about actually saying it out loud. "I love touching you."

"Good." Chris stretched a little, sighed. "The landings were solid? You think I'll be good enough to get a sponsor?"

"Yeah, the landings were ace. And you're already good enough to get a sponsor. They're just all gun-shy because of the accident. I'm going to rent a video camera, and we'll get some footage of you on the rings, the horse. Your landings." He grinned and ran his hands over that amazing belly. "You think some of your old sponsors would come back? Or you want me to focus on new ones?"

"They weren't mine. They belonged to Harry and Jeff. We'll find new people."

"You have anybody you don't want for ethical or personal reasons?" A couple of his old sponsors had been really good people and he'd bet they'd be responsive to him getting in touch with them as a coach. He'd already thought a few times about calling Bob Silmon at Mars.

"I don't have any ethics. I just want a sponsor." He got a wink, a grin. "You think there are any gay porn sponsors out there?"

Brian laughed, just tickled. "I don't know, but I'm not filming anything in the bedroom."

"We could get double the money..."

He snorted and leaned forward, pushing Chris' leg back to his shoulder. "It would be fun, too," he murmured against Chris' lips.

"Uh-huh." Chris' balls were so soft, pressing against him.

"Yeah..." He breathed against Chris' mouth, looking into lovely eyes. He licked Chris' lips and then groaned, mouth descending on Chris' and pushing his tongue deep.

A moan pushed into his lips, Chris opening for him, suddenly hungry and heated.

His fingers slid over Chris' skin, one kiss pushing into a second and then a third, each one longer than the last. He could feel Chris' heartbeat against him, that leg still caught between them. Chris tugged him close, dragging them tight together.

There was a joke there, something about making love with a flexible gymnast, but Brian didn't want to make jokes, he wanted to touch and kiss and make Chris feel good. So he did.

His tongue slid against Chris', his hips making slow circles. The insides of his sweats were soft, but not as soft as skin. With an impatient hand, he pushed them down past his hips, groaning as their cocks slid together.

Chris brought his other leg up, hooking it over his shoulder so they were mashed together. A low moan dragged up from deep inside him, his hands opening and closing tight on Chris' shoulders.

Their cocks slid together, his balls nudging against Chris' as they moved slowly. And he held those amazing eyes as their mouths played and licked. It felt amazing, Chris shifting and undulating beneath him, using all those muscles to rock and slide.

He moved a little faster, meeting and matching Chris' movements, the heat generated by their bodies rubbing growing inside him. Chris' cock was heated silk, burning against his, against his belly. It felt so damned good.

Chris started panting, stretching underneath him, trying to buck and move in his bent-in-half position. Brian worked a hand between them, pinching at Chris' nipple, eager to give Chris more sensation.

"Sexy," he muttered, nipping at Chris' lips, the upper one first, and then the lower one. He took it into his mouth, sucking.

"Soon. Soon, huh?" Chris bucked, hips jerking up toward him as he pinched again.

He got his knees digging into the mattress, which gave him more leverage, let him grind down harder against Chris, and, yeah, it was going to be soon. He brought their mouths back together again, tongue pushing in, fucking like his hips were pushing against Chris', each movement from beneath him making him push harder and faster. God. Soon. Yes, please.

He felt Chris' thighs go rock hard, heard the desperate little cry as heat sprayed over his belly. God, the smell... A shudder went through him and he moaned as he felt his balls empty, more heat splashing between them.

Panting, he rested his forehead on Chris', tongue coming out now and then to lick at Chris' swollen lips.

"Was this enough of a cool-down stretch?" Oh, look at those eyes dance.

He laughed, leaning in to nip at Chris' jaw. "I don't think I've ever seen this particular stretch in any handbook I've read. We should write our own. Get that gay porn company to sponsor it."

"We could write a book." Chris eased his legs down, controlling the move. Nice. God, he did love the way Chris moved. Just loved it.

He shifted to the side, grabbing the sheet to clean their bellies up, before curling next to Chris on the small bed, his fingers finding Chris' thighs and massaging gently. "How's your ankle?"

"It hurts, but nothing serious." Chris relaxed into the massage, hummed.

"Cool. You should ice it while we're eating, and I'll wrap it for you tomorrow morning." He tried to work off his sweats the rest of the way one-handed, but nearly wound up falling off the bed, so he tugged them up instead -- half-mast just felt stupid.

Chris chuckled. "Dork."

He stuck his tongue out at Chris. "Maybe. But I'm the dork who's coaching Chris Allen. So go me." He chuckled and shifted closer so his ass wasn't hanging off the bed. "So how does it feel? Having finally gotten back on the vault?"

"Better than I thought it would. I'll probably have to call Rob for the next few times, but it was good."

"Yeah? What does calling him do for you?" "What can he do that I can't?" was what he really meant.

"Pisses me off." Chris pinked, but grinned, the look sheepish. "He knows exactly what to say to make me madder than I am worried."

"Christ, I'm not sure mad's the best way to approach any piece of equipment." He grinned himself. "But I guess if it gets you over the initial hump... You'll be sailing through it again like an old pro in no time, Chris. I bet it becomes your best apparatus."

"Not a chance. I'm a rings man."

"Yeah, I noticed." He nuzzled Chris' shoulder, nibbling the salty skin. "But if you can bring your vault up, you're going to be the one to beat for all around."

"That's what I want."

Brian knew that. Chris wanted it all.

"You'll have it, too. You nearly had the landing on that last one. I think you're still holding back just a bit -- which is why you kept landing on your knees instead of your feet."

His fingers wandered to Chris' belly, traveling over the ridges and hollows. "Was it distracting?" he asked, his fingers stilling. "Me, I mean. Or rather us. This."

"Us? No. No. Hell, I fought with you like I'd fight with anyone arguing with me."

He chuckled. "Okay. Good. Good. I'd hate to be a distraction on the mats. I don't mind being a distraction here." He nudged Chris' hip with his body. "Here it's okay."

"Good to know." Chris kissed him, then grinned as his stomach rumbled. "Food. Foouooooood."

He laughed. "And here I thought I was a distraction." He curled over to blow a raspberry on Chris' belly, then popped up and headed out to the kitchen before Chris could retaliate.

Chris' laughter followed him into the kitchen, Chris coming along behind, limping a little.

"Why don't you find a movie and get it set up while I throw together supper?" The longer Chris stayed off the foot tonight, the better he'd be able to work out tomorrow. And, frankly, the idea of sitting and watching a movie together felt good. Kind of like a date.

"You sure?" Chris moved over to the little cabinet that his parents had brought, filled with tapes and DVDs.

"Yeah, I promise not to throw in too many extra carbs while you're not watching." He watched Chris moving as he quickly threw together the stir-fry, getting the beef cooked off first. Damn, he did like the way Chris looked. He snorted at himself. Truth be told, he liked everything about Chris.

"Bitch. Remember noodles, not rice."

"Am not. And I will." He rolled his eyes. God, he wanted to find the coaches who'd told Chris he couldn't have *any* carbs and whip their asses.

By the time he dished up two big platefuls of stir-fry, Chris had a movie in. He handed over plate and chopsticks, putting a couple of forks on the coffee table, just in case, and settled in next to Chris.

It felt nice, not worrying about whether or not he was sitting too close, knowing he could touch if he wanted to.

"So what are we watching?"

"*The Matrix*. I like the music." Chris squeezed his thigh, smiled. "Smells fabulous."

"So do you." He grinned, nudged Chris with his elbow and dug in. Pretty good, if he did say so himself. And he'd been good -- taken the lion's share of the noodles for himself.

Chris ate well, devouring the stir-fry and even taking another half serving of noodles.

He cleared up the dishes when they were done, hurrying so he wouldn't miss the scene where Neo first went into the Matrix. "You want something for dessert?" The old adage, coffee, tea, or me, came to mind.

"Nope, I'm happy." Chris sprawled on the sofa, hurt leg propped up on the back, foot in the air.

"Cool." He came back and slid his hand along Chris' leg. "Happy's good."

He had Chris shift enough so he could sit at the end of the couch, Chris' head in his lap.

Happy was very good.

"When is it your folks are coming?"

"After the baby shows up. Sis is being stubborn."

He chuckled, half an eye on the movie, half watching Chris' chest rise and fall with each breath. He was happy, actually, about that. It would give him and Chris a little bit of time to settle into... this.

He snuggled in.

Those pretty mismatched eyes shut, a soft purr sounding as he stroked Chris' hair. Oh, man, that sound... he thought maybe he'd do a lot for that sound.

He kissed the top of Chris' head. "This is my favorite part," he whispered.

"Yeah. This is the real thing, man. The truth."

He nodded, not caring if they were both talking about the same thing or not. "Yeah."

The real thing.

Chapter Six

Chris woke up at three A.M., starving, and headed for the fridge.

One of the fucking problems with living so close to the bone was he couldn't sleep a whole night without needing something.

Nuts.

Tuna.

Salad.

Brownies.

Oh, God.

Chris groaned, looking for something to snack on. If Mom was here, he'd so get her to make him brownies.

With ice cream.

Yum.

Brian came padding up quietly behind him, arms wrapping around his middle. A warm, slightly scratchy cheek rubbed against his shoulder. "Hey. Can't sleep?"

"Hungry." He leaned back, stomach growling. "Didn't mean to wake you up."

Brian's fingers splayed over his stomach, stroking. "'S'okay. What are you hungry for?" Then Brian chuckled and bumped against his ass. "You should have had more noodles."

"Brownies." He hummed, leaned back against Brian's heat. "And ice cream."

"Mm... that sounds yummy." Brian's lips nibbled across his back. "I bet we have the ingredients. They're pretty easy to make."

"You know I'm not allowed to have brownies." God, that felt good.

"Not even just this once?" Brian's mouth found the top of his spine, lips wrapping around the skin there, sucking.

"Uh..." His head fell forward, heart pounding, fingers gripping the fridge.

Brian made a soft sound around his skin, cock firming against his ass. The sucking kiss went on, Brian's fingers sliding on his stomach and hips in counterpoint, teasing through the curly hairs around his prick.

He thought for a second about closing the fridge, but that required things like thought and sense, which he apparently didn't have.

"Sweet spot," murmured Brian, licking and nibbling, and then sucking again, working his skin hard.

The tip of Brian's cock slid over the lower end of his spine, so hot; his cock and mouth seemed almost connected along that line.

"Uh...uh-huh." It was almost enough to make him forget he was hungry.

God, Brian was just so hot against his back, warming him even as the air from the fridge cooled him down. Brian's hands curled around his hips, fingertips brushing his prick.

He spread a little, making sure Brian knew he wanted, needed, was more than willing. Brian whimpered, cock rubbing along his ass, the hold on his hips turning, one hand wrapping around his cock, the other cupping his balls. "Want you. God. Chris."

"Uh-huh. Want." His hips started rocking, slowly fucking Brian's hand.

"Got condoms and stuff in my room." Brian's thumb slid across the tip of his cock.

"Kay..." He went up on tiptoes, thighs and balls going tight.

"Oh, fuck, you do things like that and I'm gonna forget all about being safe." He could feel the wetness left on his skin as Brian's cock slid along his crack.

"You... you have my results, Bri." He was clean. He knew it.

A shudder went through Brian. "I've never... not without..." Brian whimpered, cock pushing past Chris' hole over and over again. "You haven't seen mine, but I'm clean, too, I swear."

"Then..." He pushed back, just right, the tip of Brian's cock nudging him hard. "We need lube."

"Olive oil?" Brian groaned and bit the back of Chris' neck, the same spot he'd just been sucking on.

Then Brian backed away, the sudden loss of heat making Chris shiver. "Come on. Bed. I'm not fucking you over the counter with olive oil. Not the first time."

"You have to feed me after." He followed, reaching for Brian, that heat.

"After," Brian promised.

He was tugged into bed, the covers still a little warm from their body heat, but nothing compared to the heat of Brian pressing him into the mattress. They fit together, hand in glove, and he slid his hands down Brian's spine, tugging them tight together.

Their tongues tangled together as they fed each other noises, moans and groans that vibrated between them. Then Brian slid away, fumbled in the side table before turning back to him, eyes shining, lips swollen.

"Can we do it like this?" Brian asked, hand sliding between Chris' legs, encouraging them to spread.

"Uh-huh. We can." He stretched one leg out, spreading wide.

Oh, that was a sweet noise, made him feel sexy and wanted. Brian slicked up the fingers of his right hand and slid them along his crack, one staying at his hole, circling, playing. Teasing.

"You like?" His hips rolled up, pushing right back.

Brian nodded, swallowed, finger pushing hard enough to just barely breach his hole. "You're so sexy. So hot." Brian's eyes met his. "Want you. So much."

"Take me, huh? I want." He moaned, squeezed Brian's finger. "More."

A soft gasp met his words, his actions, Brian's finger sliding deep, pushing right into him.

"Hot. God. Chris." In and out it slid, mimicking what they both really wanted.

"Uh-huh. More." He grabbed one knee, tugging it up to his chest.

"Yeah. Oh, yeah." Brian laughed softly, the sound sexy, happy, as a second finger slid into him. In and out again, and then Brian started stretching him, scissoring them apart, curling them. Moving them until Brian found it. His gland. Brian's fingertips slid right across it.

"Oh!" His eyes flew open, heart jolting. "Do it again!"

Brian laughed, the sound husky and happy and sexy as anything. Brian took direction

well, too, because those fingers found his gland again and again, nudging it, making him fly. Another finger pushed in almost without him noticing, stretching him wider as Brian kept playing that little spot inside him.

He couldn't catch his breath, his balls drawn up tight, entire focus on the pleasure pouring through him.

Then Brian's fingers slid away and he was left so empty. "I can't wait anymore," Brian told him, panting a little, gasping. Kneeling between his legs, Brian rubbed the tip of his cock against Chris' hole and then started pushing in, eyes on his.

"Oh, God." He arched and pushed, forcing Brian in deeper, harder, farther. More.

Brian pushed all the way in, one hand grabbing his hip, holding on. Finally Brian was all the way in. "Oh, God. You're tight. Hot." A nod, and then Brian started moving, cock like magic sliding inside him.

They stopped for a minute, hearts pounding together, then Chris groaned. "Move, man. Please. Let me feel."

Brian started to move, their bodies working against each other for a moment. Brian chuckled, grinning down at him, then bent to kiss him. As their tongues slid together, their hips got into sync, Brian's cock slowly filling him, sliding deep and then pulling shallow.

There. Oh. Yeah. That worked. He could feel fucking everything -- his sweat on his skin, Brian's eyelashes on his cheeks, the swollen tip of Brian's cock spreading him. The kisses got deeper as Brian's thrusts got harder, pushed into him, hitting his gland. Every jolt dragged a cry out of him, a needy groan and grunt.

Brian's fingers stayed curled around his hip, digging in as the thrusts got deeper, harder, Brian spreading him over and over again.

"Oh." He ran his hands down along Brian's spine, fingers digging in and hauling Brian in closer.

A sweet groan answered him, the pace increasing, their bodies slapping together.

"Gonna soon," gasped Brian, eyes wide.

"Uh-huh. Uh-huh. I. Uh." He wrapped one hand around his cock, jerking hard.

"Oh, fuck, look at you." Brian jerked into him a few more times, heat filling him deep.

Everything went tight and hot, spunk pouring from him in steady waves. Brian's mouth met his again, this kiss whisper soft, gentle, Brian's eyes smiling into his own.

"I... Wow." He was melty.

"Yeah." Brian grinned. "I keep thinking wow and then, the next time, it's even more wow."

Groaning a little, Brian pulled out and settled on the bed, one hand holding his head up as he smiled at Chris. Brian's free hand slid on his belly. "You're something else."

His stomach chose right then to snarl and growl, as if trying to eat Brian's hand.

Brian laughed and placed another kiss on his lips. "I seem to remember promising to feed you after we, you know, did this."

"Uh-huh. You did. I might starve." He started chuckling, nipping at Brian's lips.

"You won't starve. I'll make you brownies." Brian's fingers covered his mouth before he could protest. "You just worked them off, Chris. So don't argue with me."

But.

He.

Brownies.

He kissed Brian's fingers, nodded.

"Cool. Hot brownies, some ice cream. You wanna help me make 'em? We can lick the bowl together."

"God, yes. I've wanted chocolate all day." Even if he was going to feel guilty about it tomorrow.

"If I can talk my contact at Mars into sponsoring you, I bet you can have all the chocolate you want for free."

Brian got up and grabbed a pair of sweats, pulling them on. Then a hand was held out to him. "Come on. If we don't do it now, it'll be morning, and you can't have brownies for breakfast."

Right, all the chocolate he wanted for free.

Still, yum.

"I'm right behind you, man."

"Like the view?" Brian asked, grinning over his shoulder.

"You know it." He pulled on a pair of sweats. "I'll like it better stirring brownie batter."

Brian laughed. "Oh, now I see how it is." After a brief stop to clean up, he headed for the kitchen, and Chris followed him.

Brian started pulling ingredients down onto the counter, grabbing the little notebook he had all sorts of recipes in. "I had a roommate who made these amazing brownies."

"Yeah?" He dug out a block of cheese and some pickles and, oh...

Chicken breast.

Brian bumped their hips together. "What are you doing? We're making brownies."

"Uh. Snack? Pre-brownie snack." He grinned around the pickle in his mouth. "Want some?"

Brian grinned and nodded, leaning in to steal an end right out of his mouth.

Oh. Food *and* kisses. Good idea. "Keep stirring."

"Did anyone ever tell you that you have a one-track mind?" Brian bit at his bottom lip and started putting the ingredients together.

"Oh, yeah. Rob has the multi-tasking part of the brain." Chicken... oh. Mustard. Lettuce. Sandwiches.

"I suppose I can't complain; that focus is part of why you're so good. Oh, that looks good, make me one, too." Brian stirred, the chocolate concoction starting to look like brownie batter instead of goo.

"You want a glass of milk? Ooh... there's coleslaw." He started making them both a plate.

"Yeah, milk sounds good -- but I want it with my brownies more than the chicken, so if there's not enough I'll go with water for now."

Brian poured the brownies into the pan, put the pan in the oven, and then held out the batter-covered spoon. "Preview?"

"Mmm." He leaned over, balancing the plates, and licked.

Oh.

Oh, hell yes.

His eyes rolled back in his eyes from the pure chocoliciousness.

Was that a word?

"Oh, man. I'm not sure you look that blissed out when we make love." Brian's lips covered his, tongue sliding in briefly. "It does taste good, though."

"Uh-huh." He stole another kiss, and another. Sweet. Rich. Chocolaty. Chris approved.

Brian grabbed the plates from him, putting them on the counter before running his finger through the batter left in the bowl. They feasted on it together, more chocolate, more Brian. Yummy.

Then they ate the sandwiches, leaning against each other, both starting to blink slower and slower, getting sleepy again. Brian licked his fingers clean, and he returned the favor, the clean up turning into more slow kisses, the counter holding them up.

It was almost a shock when the timer went off, buzzing loudly.

The brownies were lopsided, one end a little... crusty, but the other end looked more than edible.

"Mmm. I'll pour us some milk. Oh. Hot. Hothothot!" He sucked in air, cooling off the bite he'd stolen.

Brian shook his head. "Impatient."

The glasses were put on the counter, Brian grinning at him as he cut the rest of the brownies and took a couple more out of the pan, hand waving over them to help speed the cooling process.

"Uh-huh. Good. Hot. Good, though." Oh. Cold milk. Better.

Brian nibbled, seeming more intent on watching him than eating. Oh, that grin was too much, Brian's eyes dancing -- laughing at him. Then Brian leaned in and licked at the corner of his mouth. "Tastes better from your lips." Brian's face got red. "Damn, that was cheesy."

"Yeah, but I won't tell." He scooted closer, fed Brian a bite and then kissed the man.

Mouth opening wide, Brian groaned and tangled their tongues together. The taste of the chocolate mixed with their own flavors, rich and good and sweet.

Oh. Oh, good. He crawled onto Brian's lap, hands framing the man's face. Arms wrapping around him, Brian gave back as good as he got, the kisses going deeper, harder, the chocolate just an added bonus instead of the point now.

"Mmm. Hey." He grinned and pulled Brian back onto the sofa, then dove back into the kisses.

Brian laughed, the sound filling the kisses until it turned into eager, hungry noises that matched the way their lips smacked together and the way Brian's fingers slid over his skin.

God, Brian felt so good. This felt so good.

He wasn't really desperately horny, but it really did feel good, just to snuggle, to press in and rub. He'd missed this with his other lovers, this sort of... lazy touching. Smiles and sighs and happy noises filled his mouth again and again, Brian making no bones about how he liked what they were doing.

Eventually their lips parted, Brian's mouth sliding on his skin. "I love the way you taste."

"Chocolaty." He stretched and pressed, finding the perfect places he fit against Brian.

A soft laugh was his answer, Brian's breath scooting across his skin and sending a shiver through him. "A little bit chocolaty. A little bit salty. And something else that I don't recognize but is good."

"Soap?" Brian's mouth hit a hot spot and he jerked, arching toward that tongue.

That earned another laugh and Brian's teeth scraped over his skin, tongue sliding to soothe and tease in their wake.

"Not soap. *You*."

"You... you sure?" Oh, that was cool. Do it again.

"Of course I'm sure -- soap tastes like shit. And I should know; my mom washed my mouth out with it once." Brian chuckled and scraped over that hot spot again, this time his lips nibbling it after.

"Bri. Oh, shit." His head lifted so he could watch, hips rocking a little.

Brian hummed, hands sliding to push their sweats down just far enough to release their pricks. Both hot and hard, they rubbed together as Brian's mouth kept sliding over that spot, teeth nipping, tongue and lips soothing in turn. More hums and moans kept his skin vibrating, sensitive.

"I... Damn, it's... Yeah." Good. Good was what he meant.

Brian's hands slid to his ass and encouraged him even closer, their cocks rubbing together as Brian's hips matched his movements. More biting and licking and kissing, Brian straying from that hot spot, but always coming back to it, seeming to know just how good it was even if he couldn't articulate it.

Oh, damn. He was going to... Yeah. Uh-huh. He blinked, loving the way Brian's mouth looked on his skin. Brian's fingers dug into his ass, their movements getting faster, rubbing them together harder, quicker. Brian gave him a sharp bite, the low groan sounding like it came from deep inside.

The sudden zing made him jerk, made him cry out and shoot, spunk spreading between them.

"Chris!" Brian murmured his name, voice breathless, and pushed against him a few more times, before more heat sprayed against their bellies.

Oh, man. He was full. Sleepy. Comfy. Well-fucked.

Nap time.

Nap. Time.

Brian shifted them so they were lying together on the couch, their legs tangled, sweats back up where they belonged. Good thing the sofa was fair sized.

"Gotta get a blanket for in here," muttered Brian, hand petting his hip lazily. A moment later and soft snores started, Brian's breath wafting against his skin.

Yeah. A blanket. Maybe a pillow. Later.

After.

Way after.

Brian parked the car and all but ran up the walk.

He tried to slow down, tried to wipe the smile off his face. Just another day. Nothing special here.

He walked into the apartment, closed the door, and called out a casual "Hey."

The Mars bars in his pocket felt heavy. Could have been gold bricks for what they were worth. He had to bite his lip to keep from laughing.

"Hey." Chris was standing on his hands, doing push ups, skin sheened with sweat. "I put one of Mom's casseroles in the oven."

God, Chris looked good. Really good.

"Sounds good. Does it have chocolate in it?" He bounced a little on his heels.

"Huh? No. Chicken and cheese and those whole wheat noodle things."

"How many more of those do you have to do?" he asked. Not that he didn't like the view, Chris' muscles working as he did one push up after another. But he had news to share and, for some reason that he couldn't remember, he'd decided he wanted to surprise Chris with it instead of just coming out and telling him.

"Four." Up, down, up, down, up, down and then Chris' legs slowly came down, Chris controlling it the entire way.

"Man, if the sponsors could see you now." He shut his mouth, teeth clicking together. Hello -- what happened to just another day, nothing special here?

"Yeah, yeah. We have to get us one or two of those before long, or I'll be hunting another job." Chris rolled over but stayed on the floor, looking at Brian.

He nodded, and pulled a Mars bar out of his pocket and tossed it over. "Have a chocolate bar." He grinned, back to bouncing.

Chris caught it, stared, started opening it. "I can't have this, man..."

"Well, I don't think they're going to like that. I think they want you to at least pretend to like the product." He waited for the penny to drop.

"They want..." Chris blinked, stared. "No shit? Bri?"

He nodded and laughed, and pulled more bars out of his pocket, and the check that would be enough to cover them through to Chris' first real competition in the fall.

"If you impress them at the Regionals, they'll stay on. They were really impressed by the video, by your drive." And he'd called in a lot of favors.

"No shit?" Chris dropped the candy, eyes just dazed. "Really?"

"No shit. I almost took the check to the bank, but I thought you'd like to see it. You know, see it, smell it, take it to bed with us."

"No. I don't want to rip it."

"Okay, okay." He laughed and put the check into his wallet. "I could stick my wallet in the freezer. In case of a break-in," he teased.

"No. The bank. Oh, man. Wow. So? What next?" Chris bounced, staring at him, eyes lit up.

"What next is we keep doing what we're doing. And you smoke the competition in October. That's what's next." He laughed, just thrilled to pieces.

"Okay." Chris nodded, chewing on his bottom lip. "Okay. I'd better buckle down hard, then, huh? Win it."

He just grinned. Chris was damned focused already. Brian had to wonder just how much more he could buckle down. "Tonight, though, we celebrate."

"Yeah?" Chris looked at him, then jumped, landing right in his arms.

He staggered back a little, arms wrapping right around Chris and holding on tight as his back hit the door. "Yeah." He grinned and pressed their mouths together, finally doing what he'd wanted to do ever since he'd picked up the check -- kiss Chris hard, putting all his excitement into it.

Chris' legs wrapped around his waist, tongue pushing deep into his lips. Oh, hell. Somebody was stoked. He let the door support them and opened wide, letting Chris in, letting Chris have whatever he wanted. The long, lean muscles felt so good against him.

Chris rubbed and rocked, tongue fucking his lips, Chris on fire and wanting him. His own hips pushed, meeting Chris' movements. A low groan pushed up from his belly and filled Chris' mouth.

"Want." Chris shuddered, eyes huge. "God, I want you. I've been so worried."

He squeezed Chris' ass, would have shaken the man if he could have. "I told you I'd take care of it. Your job is the gymnastics, the rest is mine." He kissed Chris hard. "And I want, too."

"Then come on and take care of me." The words were half challenge, half request, Chris diving back into the kisses.

He managed to get himself up away from the door, but damn, he and Chris were close in

size and there was no way he was going to make it to the bedroom. Instead, he headed the three steps for the mat beside the couch where Chris did his exercises. He managed to make it, and didn't blow out his knee as he went down. Then he put Chris down on his back, following, not losing the kiss.

Chris moaned, tugged him in tight, rewarding him for his effort with a squeeze and a roll of those hips. Brian ground down against Chris, hands sliding up Chris' sides, thumbs searching for the little nipples through his clothes. Need lit up his nerves, made everything seem so big.

"Bri..." Chris tilted his head, the kiss going deeper, the lean body almost shuddering against him.

God, they were both wearing too damned many clothes. He sucked in his belly, getting his hand between them so he could push Chris' shirt up. Oh, that was better, and he could find Chris' nipples, fingers plucking at the hard little bits of flesh. He whimpered, hips pushing harder against Chris'.

"Good." Chris was pulling at his slacks, fighting the fabric and zipper and button.

He would have helped, but his fingers kept getting distracted by Chris' skin, sliding over the smooth warmth of Chris' belly and his sides, teasing over ribs. His mouth slid down along Chris' neck and over the sweet collarbones, searching for that sweet spot. When he found it, Chris arched for him, fingers digging into his hips. Oh. Right there.

He grinned and then stayed there, using his lips and tongue and teeth, loving how each touch earned him a reaction, Chris just going nuts beneath him. Finally, his hand slid down to get his zipper pulled down, his cock pushing out eagerly as soon as it was freed. Chris was right there with him, fingers wrapping around both their cocks, pumping good and hard.

"God. Chris." He moaned, a shudder going through him as his hips kept pushing, prick sliding through Chris' fingers and along Chris' cock. So hot, so good. He bit down on Chris' skin, sucking up a mark.

"Brian. Oh. Oh, do it again." Chris dug his heels into the mat and slammed up into him, lifting him up.

Oh, damn, for a reaction like that, he'd do it again, all right. He licked and sucked Chris' skin and then let his teeth scrape lightly. Then he bit, nice and hard.

"Bri!" Heat sprayed up against his hip, Chris wild beneath him.

Fuck, that was sexy. Brian drove hard against Chris, mouth sliding on the hot, marked skin. He cried out as his orgasm caught him, spunk shooting from him and joining the mess already between them.

Chris' face nuzzled into his throat, Chris panting and gasping against him. He laughed softly, feeling amazing. Just amazing. God, making love with Chris was wonderful -- it was like winning a meet. That same rush, same high, only better because it was shared.

"I... Hey." Chris kissed his jaw, his chin. "O bearer of great fucking news."

He raised his head enough to grin down at Chris. "Yep, that's me. Bearer of great fucking news, finder of the moneymen, coach, and all around stud."

"Yeah." God, he hadn't known how stressed Chris was until he saw those eyes really relaxed.

He kissed Chris hard. He was going to have to make sure he didn't let Chris get stressed like that again. Or at least learn to recognize it when it happened. Man, he'd thought all those tight muscles were from working out and the operation.

He rolled over to the side, using his shirt to clean their skin, and then tugging Chris close. "It's all clear sailing from here on in -- Mars is looking to be the main sponsor for someone who'll go all the way, so it's yours for the taking, Chris."

"Yeah? I hope. I want it. More than anything." Chris looked down, eyes staring at him, looking suddenly young.

He stroked Chris' cheek, smiled gently. "You can do it, Chris. You have no idea how truly good you are. I mean, I know you think you're good, but you're so much better than even you know. You take my breath away on the apparatus. You just keep doing what you're doing, keep practicing, keep pushing, give it everything you have and you'll come through."

"Yeah. Pushing I can do." Chris grinned, bright and sunny. Oh, yeah. That was a great look.

He leaned in and gave Chris a soft kiss before relaxing back on the mat. It really wasn't the softest or most comfortable place to lie, though it sure beat the floor.

"So where do you want to go for our celebratory supper?"

"We're going out? I want steak, man. A nice, thick steak."

"You bet we're going out. We'll get you the biggest steak this city serves, courtesy of Mars." His own stomach chose then to growl and he chuckled. "I might have skipped lunch." Too nervous to eat with that one P.M. appointment. So worth missing the meal, though.

"That's bad for you." Chris stretched, back cracking. "Should we jump in the shower? Mom's casserole will save for tomorrow."

"Yeah, I think I can wait long enough to get wet with you." He slid his hand along Chris' belly. He did love the man's skin. "And not to disparage your mom's casserole, but even if it wouldn't save, I'd rather have steak."

"Oh, God. Me, too." Chris turned bright red, and his eyes twinkled. "Don't you *tell* Mom."

He laughed at that. "Oh, I have blackmail material now!"

"Don't you dare." Chris goosed him hard, laughing and blushing.

He jerked and shrieked -- an embarrassingly girly sound -- and punched Chris in the arm. "I'll try to remember it's a secret."

"Good man." Chris rolled up, graceful as hell. "Come on. Water. Food."

He nodded, admiring, hoping he looked half as good as he clambered up.

He tugged Chris into his arms, and gave him a hard hug. "We're on our way, Chris. We're really doing it."

"Yeah? You think?" Chris grinned, rubbing a little as he bounced.

"No, I know. This is the start of something really good." He tugged Chris in a little closer. "Sky's the limit."

"Yeah. Yeah, Bri. I'm going to fly."

He'd been here for almost sixteen hours, between working and working out, and Chris was beginning to get tired.

Maybe even snarly.

Maybe more than snarly, because, damn, his back and shoulder were killing him.

Still. Competition in a couple months, and Brian was out of town with the A team at a day meet, so he didn't have anyone to tell him to slow down.

Don't try that.

Don't overextend that swing.

Endos, Kovacs, Super Es. Over and over and around and around until he thought maybe the bar would bend in the middle.

Now that would piss the school principal right the hell off, wouldn't it?

"Hey, Chris!" Brian's voice broke through his concentration. He could see Brian out of the corner of his eye, waiting by the apparatus.

"H...hey." He did another giant, looking for the dismount.

"I almost didn't come in and check for you, figured you'd have gone home. But I figured I was here anyway dropping the girls off, I'd double check. Glad I did."

Chris flubbed the landing, just not strong enough to stick it. "How... how'd they do?"

"Almost that good," Brian told him. "I hope that was just me distracting you?"

"Shut up." See him. See him stand up. "Not a great day, huh?"

"Just long. And not enough of those girls have your focus." Brian came over, hand going to his back. "Damn, Chris. It's like you've got bricks in your back instead of muscles. You haven't been going at it since I dropped you off this morning, have you?"

"Huh?" Him? Going? What?

"I dropped you off here this morning at the crack of dawn. That was like... a really, really long time ago." Brian shook his head. "Did you break for food at least?"

He nodded. "Power bars." Those counted.

Brian snorted but didn't call him on it. "Well, the bar work looked amazing until that landing. You've really stepped it up since we got the Mars sponsorship. Good work."

"Thanks. I'm trying." And stinky. Christ, he needed a shower.

"God, you look more tired than I feel." Brian gave him a weary smile. "You wanna push it? Give me a couple vaults? Or go home and get a massage?"

"I..." Okay. He could vault. He could. "Okay. I'll hit a couple."

"Okay." Brian put his hands on Chris' shoulders and leaned their foreheads together. "Okay. Focus, yeah? Just forget about it being a long day and forget about being tired. Forget about those tight muscles and just fly. Just fly."

"Yeah."

He hit two, one fair, one well, and then he went around for a third. He hit the vault okay, but his right arm gave out and he crashed and burned, slamming into the mat. Fuck.

Brian was at his side before he could even start to shake it off, those warm, solid fingers moving over him. "Anything hurting?"

"No." Just everything.

"Yeah? Really?" Brian didn't sound convinced, but those strong arms helped him up. "All right then. Give me one more and make it better than this last one. Just something simple, but clean. Shake off the fall and just do it."

Chris just sat there a second, heart pounding. Then he shook his head. "No. No, I think I'm done."

Brian looked shocked. "*You're* saying no? Shit, what's hurting?" Brian's fingers started moving over him again, slowly, carefully, testing his skin, his muscles, his bones.

"Everything." Damn, he shouldn't be this rattled.

Brian leaned their foreheads together again, just breathing with him for a moment. "Okay. It's okay. It's been a really long day and we should go home. A hot shower. Muscle rubbing." A soft kiss brushed his lips.

"Yeah." No. No, it wasn't okay. It *wasn't*. He was giving up.

"Oh, I know that look. You're already pissed at yourself for not doing it again. Look, Chris. Sometimes the right thing to do is to recognize that your body is tired, that pushing more right now is just going to get you hurt.

"And if you get hurt -- then what? Then you're done until you're healed, and that will mean we can kiss the sponsorship money goodbye and you have to start all over again with the training.

"So stop whatever it is you're thinking right now and let's go home. Tomorrow morning, first thing, we'll be right back out here, working and pushing just as hard as ever, because you've given your body a night to rest."

"I hate quitting." He stood, muscles shaking with fatigue. "I hate not being everything I need to be."

Brian's arm slipped under his waist, the support right there for him. "You're not quitting. Quitting is not still wanting it. Quitting is getting up tomorrow and saying you're too tired

and need a break. And I know you still want it. And I know you'll be here tomorrow morning, showing that vault who's boss. So I don't want to hear anymore of this quitting business."

"Pushy, pushy." God, it felt good to hear that. To hope Brian believed it.

"Oh, no. You're the one who pushes, remember?" Brian squeezed his waist and they left the gym behind them. "You want to get takeout or stop and eat somewhere?"

"Takeout? Burgers?" God, Brian was warm.

"Yeah, sounds good. Get you fed and then relaxed. See what I can do about those tight muscles." Brian gave him a warm smile. "I missed you today," he said softly.

"Yeah? It was weird working out alone." He smiled back, let himself lean harder. "I'm glad you stopped by."

"Me, too." Brian laughed and opened the car door for him. "I almost didn't. I almost went home, because, come on, it's late. Then I remembered it was *you* and I knew you'd be here."

"Are you saying I'm obsessed?" He groaned as he slid in, back killing him.

"You? Obsessed? No..." Brian shook his head. "No -- you're a winner, Chris. Through and through. Makes you push." He got a quick kiss and then Brian closed his door and headed around to the other side.

He leaned back, stretching out nice and slow, working his muscles.

Brian got in and squeezed his thigh before belting up and starting up the car. "So, honestly, what's just sore and what really hurts?"

"My back hurts. My shoulder hurts. Pretty much my right side. The rest is just achy."

"All right, I'll focus on that when we get home. Some deep massage, some stretching. Were they hurting before you took that last fall?"

"Are you going to bitch if I say yes?" They always hurt, sometimes just a little, sometimes a shitload.

Brian shot him a look. "I need the truth, Chris, whether that means you have to put up with bitching or not. If they were hurting before, then that means it wasn't because of the fall."

Brian turned into the drive-through and placed their order, more than familiar with what he'd eat and how he liked it.

"It was hurting before." He took his tea, drank deep.

Brian grunted and passed over the bag, putting his Sprite in the cup holder. "Well, I'm glad the fall doesn't seem to have caused any damage." He pulled back onto the road.

"No bitching." He picked at one of the hamburger patties, nibbling idly.

Brian gave him another one of those looks. "Am I bitching? And what you can't actually hear doesn't count."

They pulled up in front of the apartment and Brian turned to him. "And it's my job to worry. But I'm not going to bitch. I am, however, going to massage you within an inch of your life."

"Promise?" He could go for that. A long shower. A longer massage.

"I promise. No bitching tonight." Brian winked and leaned across to kiss him once on the mouth. "Come on. We should go in before the snoop in eleven decides we're necking."

"We can't have that." Chris grabbed the food and his drink and his bag. "Of course, they might like watching."

"Almost as much as they'd enjoy gossiping about it tomorrow." Brian shouldered his own bag and led the way.

"Shower first or massage?" Brian asked as soon as the door closed behind them.

"Food. Shower. Massage." He might die after the massage.

Hell, he might die after the shower.

"Sounds like a plan."

Brian sat close on the sofa, body warming his as they ate, Brian wolfing down his burgers like he hadn't eaten all day, either.

He pressed close, snarfing the food. "So? Did any of the girls place?"

"Suzanna managed to pull off that string of three tkatchevs in a row you showed her, and then she nailed the landing. It was damned sweet. She placed second overall. Might have done better, but her beam is still shaky. The rest of the girls fanned out from middle to bottom. They don't have enough all-around ability yet." Brian grinned. "But not one of them would have even qualified when we first started working with them -- we've done good work with them."

"Go us and our bad selves." He chuckled, shook his head. "You going to keep teaching once I start competing full-time?"

Brian shook his head. "No, I'm giving you one hundred percent of my attention as soon as we can afford it." The answer was immediate and sure.

"Yeah?" Okay, that was a good answer. An excellent answer.

"Absolutely. I enjoy teaching the girls, but you I believe in. You are the real deal."

Oh, man. That felt damned good and just sort of reverberated.

"Finish up," Brian told him softly. "You need your fuel."

Shoving in the burger with one hand, Brian slid the other across his back. "God, you must be hurting."

His muscles were cramping up, the touch making him aware of each individual muscle.

Brian frowned, fingers starting to dig in. "I can't remember the last time your muscles felt this tight, this hard. Don't move." Brian moved to sit behind him, legs on either side of him, crotch snugged up against his ass. But it was Brian's hands that held his attention, both sliding over his back, warming him before the massage started.

Chris actually whimpered, not sure if it hurt or felt good.

"I can't believe you..." The words faded away. "Right. No bitching. Just... next time don't let it get this bad before coming to me for help, 'kay?" Those fingers never stopped working his muscles.

"Uh-huh. Don't stop, please, love." He damn near started shaking.

"I won't. All night long if you need it, Chris."

Brian did stop, but only long enough to help him get his singlet off, and then those amazing fingers were back on him, skin on skin this time, warming and rubbing, slowly encouraging his muscles to unclench.

Leaning forward, he just let his eyes close, let Brian touch him. Every now and then a soft kiss would heat his skin, Brian's lips and tongue hot as they touched him.

His shoulders were worked until they began to loosen, Brian focusing on his right side, and then moving down along his spine. At some point, Brian started talking, telling him how good he looked on the rings, how amazing his bar work was. One compliment after another in a soft, low voice.

He turned, stretched out on the sofa, just floating, lost in it.

So good.

Brian's fingers slid over his ass and down the backs of his legs, and -- oh, God -- that was good, too. He hadn't even realized how tight and cramped his leg muscles were.

"Touching you's one of my favorite things ever," Brian said.

It was easy to spread out, almost asleep, almost lost to it. Eventually the touches stopped digging in, moved from massaging to just touching, and Brian lay half next to, half on top of him.

"Love you, Chris." The words were soft, he felt them against the skin of his shoulder more than heard them.

"Mmhhh." Chris nodded, pleasure replacing the aches and pains. "You, too, yeah? You know that?"

"Yeah? I do now." He could feel Brian's smile against his skin and the heat of Brian's need not quite digging into his ass. The hand on his back moved right down to his hip, pushing beneath his clothes to stroke and slide, fingertips warm, agile as they danced on his skin.

"Yeah." His thighs parted, hips rolling just a little.

Brian moaned softly, lips hot and soft on his shoulder. Then Brian shifted, moving just enough to bring their mouths together, feeding him another moan as their tongues touched.

He twisted, pulled Brian close and rubbed a little, letting Brian know he was tired, but not dead. Brian fed him happy little noises, rubbing back, fingers working to get them both free of their clothes now, so that their cocks could rub together. Hot and solid and so damned good; it was the slide of silk on silk, heated and velvet.

They murmured into each other's lips, quiet little love words that he'd never say out loud. It didn't get desperate or fast, they just rubbed and touched and loved on each other, the pleasure building in slow waves through his body. Brian's hands cupped his hip, his shoulder, moving him, supporting his muscles so that he could stay relaxed.

One of Brian's legs slid over his, tugging him a little closer as their movements got just a bit quicker. The pleasure got bigger and bigger, Brian's breath starting to puff into his mouth. "Oh, God. Chris..."

"Uh-huh. Need you, yeah?" He shifted, cock sliding alongside Brian's, both of them leaking, the heat easing the way.

"Yes." Brian nodded, too, laughing softly. He rubbed their noses together and dropped a hand down to take them together in his palm, thumb brushing over the tips, making sensation shoot up Chris' spine.

He could see the way Brian's eyes went dark, sliding from lazy, sweet heat to full-on hot.

"Uh-huh. Just. I. Oh..." His eyes wanted to close, but he kept them open, wanting to see.

Brian's hand sped, pulling him along for the ride. "Wanna see you come."

Chris nodded, heart pounding, toes curling. "Gonna. Love..." He bucked, hips jerking as he shot.

"Fuck, yes." Brian nodded, more heat spraying between them.

Hand still moving, Brian kissed him, tongue sliding in his mouth as that hand dragged one sweet aftershock after another out of him.

"Good." His eyes did close then, Chris just sinking into the cushions.

"Yeah, good."

The blanket they'd finally brought in to the couch was pulled over him, Brian's hands going back to the soft, warming, soothing motions on his back. He was given another gentle kiss, and Brian's breathing evened out slowly.

Oh, yeah. Good.

Chapter Seven

Brian took his time doing the groceries.

It wasn't that he was so fascinated by the shopping, but he was hoping to give Chris and Rob time to say their hellos before he joined in the mix. Of course, that was if Rob's plane was on time.

He was nervous. Maybe even more nervous than he'd been when he'd met Mary and Bill, Chris' folks. Sure they were Chris' parents, but Rob was his *twin*, and that was a special bond.

He'd finally stalled as long as he could without making it look really obvious, so he paid up, wincing at the bill. Shit, he'd bet Chris couldn't even eat half the stuff he'd thrown in his cart.

He took the long way home and then wasted another few minutes figuring out how to get all the bags in on one trip.

He gave himself a lecture as he headed up the walk, too. This was Chris' twin brother he was going to meet. He already knew the guy totally approved of their relationship; that had been made clear the few times they'd spoken on the phone.

He kicked the door, hands too full to get it open on his own. "Chris? It's me."

The door opened, blue and green eyes grinning over a trimmed blond beard. "Honey! You're home!"

He chuckled and decided that even without the beard, he'd have known it wasn't Chris, despite the fact that Rob really was identical to his lover. There was a different... energy to him.

"Hi, there. You can only be Rob."

"I am. Hey, man. Good to meet you. Chris looks fucking *happy*." Half the bags were taken, Rob's energy just *filling* the room.

"Good to meet you, too. And he *is* happy." It wasn't just looks; they worked well together.

He followed Rob into the kitchenette, dumping his bags on the counter, eyes sweeping the apartment for Chris.

Chris came out of the bathroom, wearing a pair of shorts, drying his hair. "There you are. Did you get lost at the store?"

He smiled over, admiring that gorgeous ripped belly. "Yeah, got lost looking for food I thought would appeal to someone who isn't an anti-carb freak."

"Oh. Did you get chocolate? I'm a huge fan." Rob laughed and Chris rolled his eyes, popping his twin on the ass with the towel.

"We've got Mars bars. Lots of them. Leftmost cupboard, bottom shelf. I went for stuff like chips, beer. So, did you have a good flight?"

He wrapped his arm around Chris' waist and took a quick kiss.

"I did. It's fucking cool; seeing the ocean as you get close is something." Rob grinned, starting unloading. "Thanks for inviting me, man. I've been wanting to come see my baby brother."

"Christ, seven minutes."

"Yep. Four hundred and twenty seconds."

"Wow, he can do math. You're right, Chris. He is the smart one." He leaned in and, under the guise of a kiss to Chris' neck, whispered. "You're wrong about you being identical, though. You're cuter."

He felt Chris' skin heat, strong hands wrapping around his waist for a hug as Rob laughed. The sound wasn't mocking at all, though. Instead it seemed joyful, honestly pleased. "You two are adorable."

That had him blushing a little and he moved over to the fridge, unloading the last of the groceries. "So, Chris tells me you used to be a competitive athlete yourself, Rob. Tennis, right?"

"Yep. Now I'm super resident-in-training. After I blew out my knee, I had to give it up."

"That sucks. Injuries are one of those things that can really ruin a promising career." Chris was fucking lucky. He knew that, but a reminder never hurt. "They really make you guys stay up all those crazy hours at the hospital?"

"They do. For a while there, I was sleeping two hours out of every twenty. I thought I was going to have a psychotic break with reality."

Chris nodded. "Rob wasn't the only one. Mom was worried."

"And when Mom isn't happy..."

"Nobody's happy." The last was said in stereo, both twins laughing.

Brian joined them. God, they must have been a handful when they were kids. Hell, he bet they still could be now. "So are we going to throw something together or go out for supper?" Of course he'd bought all those groceries... He didn't know why he'd been so nervous. Rob was great

"Oh, let's cook. I'll help." Rob started whistling and digging around. "Can we have pasta?"

"No pasta."

"Chrissy!"

"No."

"We've got Thai noodles though." There was no way any amount of begging and pouting was going to get Chris to eat pasta. "Carbs are evil," he added with a wink.

"Thai noodles work. They're not lasagna."

Chris groaned. "Shut up."

Rob's eyes lit up. "Cheesy, thick, spicy, meaty lasagna."

"Fuck-head."

"Oh, you fight dirty. Lasagna takes too long, though. Work on him for tomorrow." He bent and pulled the stir-fry pan out of the cupboard.

"That's your job, isn't it? Working on him?" Rob snorted and ducked as Chris swatted at him.

"Oh, Chris pretty much works himself. I just remind him to focus every now and then."

"He has a one-track mind, my Chrissy. Always has." Rob grinned over at Chris, winked.

"Oh, I think maybe two tracks." Brian grinned and winked at Chris himself.

He poured some oil into the wok and put the heat on under it. The beef was already cut, but the veggies needed doing. He grabbed the cutting board and a couple of knives, and pulled out the peppers, bok choy, carrots and bean sprouts, Chris already chopping by the

time he was done. It wasn't anything he'd really thought about, but with Rob there, how well they worked together, how seamlessly, showed.

Rob wasn't a terrible problem either, sliding in to work, laughing and teasing and telling filthy jokes that had them all rolling.

Soon enough, they had three plates heaping with food, light on the noodles for Chris, and were settled on the couch. "I could put a movie in if you want entertainment with your dinner," Brian offered.

"Whatever. I'm easy." Rob ended up settling on the floor, leaning a little against Chris' legs.

"Yeah, I've heard that about you." Chris reached out, ruffled Rob's hair.

"Shit. You've *said* that about me."

Brian laughed, it was nice, how close they obviously were, picking back up once they were together like it had just been yesterday.

"Anyone special in your life, Rob?" he asked, though from what Chris had said, Rob pretty much played the field.

"Hell, no. I have no time for a long-term relationship. I just have a bunch of friends with benefits."

He chuckled at that, but couldn't help but think it sounded a little bit... Well, not lonely maybe, but... Well, he wouldn't want to give up what he and Chris had, not for all the friends with benefits in the world.

He smiled over at Chris, let his hand slide along the muscled thigh.

"One day, he'll find the right guy and that'll change." Oh, Chris was... Wow. Okay.

He nodded, feeling his smile get wider as he looked into Chris' eyes. God, he probably looked like the world's biggest goof, but he was having a hard time caring.

His stomach growled and he rolled his eyes at himself, went back to getting food into his mouth.

"You two are adorable. I approve."

"Shut up, Robbie."

"I was being nice!"

"You are being a turd."

Brian laughed. Oh, yeah, a pair of holy terrors for their poor mom. He had to admit, though, Rob's approval meant a lot. Close as they were, if Rob had hated him, he couldn't help but think that it would have affected how Chris felt about him, "No turd talk while we're eating brown meat, guys."

"Yes, Mother." The boys spoke in unison again, two pairs of mismatched eyes twinkling merrily.

He popped them both in the arm. "Brats!" God, he was laughing, too, though, wasn't he?

"We are. It's a genetic thing."

Chris nodded, grinning around his chopsticks. "We get it from our dad."

"You should nominate your mother for sainthood." He tried to put a few extra noodles into Chris' bowl while he wasn't paying attention.

Rob noticed, but kept quiet, even distracting Chris as he did it. "Chrissy is a momma's boy. Me? I'm the troublemaker."

"Did you guys do a lot of 'pretending to be each other' stuff growing up? I never even had a brother to try to blame for stuff, but you guys could take that one step further if you wanted."

Funny, though, how only a little bit of time with both of them and he was sure he could tell them apart, even if they tried to fool him. Of course, that could have something to do with knowing Chris intimately.

"Oh, God. There were years one of us would take both math classes, the other both history. It worked perfectly."

"Oh, you cheated your way through school!" He laughed. "Considering you're the doctor, Rob, I hope you were the one taking the math classes."

"You know it. I'm the math and science brain. Mr. Wonderful wrote the papers."

"I bet you missed him when you both went to different colleges." And not just for the papers... "Has it been hard? Being separated?" Funny how he'd not even thought about it until he'd seen them together.

"Not really. I talk to him all the time. Every day." Chris grinned over, one foot nudging Rob, Rob's smile exactly the same.

"You don't tell him *everything*, though, right." He was close to blushing at that thought. "Right?"

"Huh?"

Rob grinned wide, just laughing at them.

"Oh, God." He blushed hard, shaking his head. He didn't want to know what details might have been shared. Just didn't. He searched his head for some change of subject while he finished up his bowl. "Hey, what do you want for dessert?"

"Is there any sugar-free pudding?" Chris looked hopeful as Rob gagged.

"Oh, don't look so grossed out. I have a few tricks up my sleeve to make it palatable. Unsweetened coconut, grapenuts, raisins." He'd also picked up a few carb-high treats, but Rob didn't need to know that yet. "Oh, and of course there's always Mars bars."

Rob just beamed. "Shit, yes. I won't buy anything but. After all the shit the doctors said in the hospital, I never thought anyone would sponsor him again."

Brian snorted. "It wasn't as bad as all that." Lord, what had they told Chris' family? He'd seen the records. It was bad, but recoverable. Chris was more than proof of that.

Rob blinked and opened his mouth, and Chris shifted, foot connecting with Rob's leg hard. "Oops. Shit, Chrissy. Sorry."

Brian frowned, looking from Chris to Rob. "Sorry for what?"

"Nothing. Just worrying about my baby brother." Rob stood up, grabbed the plates. "You want me to do dishes?"

"Sure." He nodded, focus turning to Chris. "What was all of that about?"

"Oh, nothing. Rob's a doctor, you know?"

"Yeah, he is, isn't he..." Which meant the shit they told the family... was maybe not shit. But he'd seen the files. He had. "I've seen your files. What he said didn't make sense. Not once you'd had the operation and got back on your feet. On the rings, the horse, all of it."

"I'm doing good. See me, see me vault." Chris hopped up, grabbed the glasses. "You want more tea?"

"Sure. And some pudding with coconut."

He watched Chris, loving the way he moved, almost distracted by it. Something was off,

though. He could hear voices in the kitchen, both guys muttering and chattering, could see their heads together. He chewed on his lower lip, his gut telling him that something was definitely going on, but he couldn't quite figure out what. He knew that before Chris had been operated on, they'd worried he'd never walk again, let alone do gymnastics. But the operation had been a success.

Like he'd told Mars -- if he was a sponsor, he wouldn't be able to resist a story like Chris'. Kid comes back from near paralytic accident. And it was what had sold them. Well, that and the way Chris made the apparatus sing, made it look like he was flying out there.

He got up and made his way over to the kitchen.

"...tell him all of it. It's only fair."

"It's too late now. I can't go back and make it right. Just let it go."

He put his hand on Chris' shoulder, a sick feeling starting to build in his stomach.
"Chris?"

Chris jumped about two feet in the air. "Shit! You scared me."

"Sorry. Do you think we can talk? Come into the bedroom with me a minute?"

"Sure." Chris speared Rob with a look, and Rob's head actually dipped.

He managed a tight smile for Rob. "Excuse us."

Then he latched onto Chris hand and tugged him along to his bedroom, closing the door quietly.

And now that they were alone he didn't know what to say.

He paced over to the bed, Chris' pillow in here now permanently, next to his on the bed.
"So this is me overreacting to something silly, right?"

Chris met his eyes, cheeks flushed red. "No. No, but you have to understand, Brian. I was scared nobody'd take me on."

Jesus. Christ. That sick feeling got worse. He swallowed, held Chris' gaze. "Tell me."

"They... the doctors said if I hit wrong, if I hit my back wrong, it'll snap. That the surgery weakened everything in there." Chris stared into his eyes, begging him to understand.
"They were wrong. I know they were. I wasn't going to give up."

It took a moment for the words to sink in, for their meaning to register.

Chris' back could snap. Just like that.

All the times he'd pushed Chris or that Chris had pushed himself flashed through his mind. Every single fumble, every fall.

He was going to be sick.

He got up and pushed past Chris, throwing open the door and running to the toilet to throw up. He heard Chris talking, then the water turned on and a cold rag landed on the back of his neck. He flushed the toilet and stood, rinsed with mouthwash, and leaned over the sink for just a moment. The washcloth felt good.

God, he wanted it to be ten minutes ago.

He turned, met Chris' eyes.

"Do you want me to leave?" The words were quiet, solid.

"No." He didn't even have to think about it.

He was pissed. Oh, God, he was pissed. And God knew what else, but, no, he didn't want Chris to leave.

He stalked out of the bathroom. It wasn't exactly a huge apartment to pace, but there was a good stretch of hallway from the front door, along the back of the couch and to the rooms, and he paced it, too upset to just sit or stand.

"You lied to me," he finally said.

"Yeah." Chris nodded, not denying it.

He took another step and then stopped again. He didn't know whether to sit or stand or keep pacing, or look at Chris or not.

"You lied to me. And then when I officially became your coach you kept lying to me. And when we grew closer, you lied to me. And then we... And you... Even after." His mouth snapped closed on his scream, his cry, his shout.

"Yeah." Chris sighed, eyes on the ground. "By the time I knew I should tell you, I didn't know how to tell you."

"I could have paralyzed you. *Killed* you." Those falls flashed through his head again. Shit, he'd pushed Chris onto the vault. His stomach reared up on him again, but he breathed hard through his nose and willed it to stay put.

"No. They were wrong. They *are* wrong. I can do this, Brian. I *can*."

He closed his eyes, trying to push the anger and the fear away enough to think rationally.

"I want to see the records you kept from me. And I want you to have a check up. I want to be there to hear it from the doctor's mouth. No matter what he says." He had to know just how big a risk this was before they went any further.

"I'm not going to stop. I'm going to compete, Brian. I'll do it, but I won't stop."

"I need to know. I need to know exactly what the situation is. I *deserve* to know. I'm your coach, Chris. Hell, I'm your *lover*. What else haven't you told me? What else don't I know?"

"Okay. Okay, stop." Rob's face appeared beside Chris', making him see double. "Chris fucked up. You two have to deal with it, but he was scared. He still is."

"Shut up, Robbie." Chris didn't move away from Rob, though.

"No, he's right. I told you to stay. I'm still your coach. Your needs come first." He took a deep breath and got up and went over to Chris, met those eyes, ignoring the ones just like them. "I'm still your coach, okay?"

Scared as hell. Pissed off. Hurt. But he was still Chris' coach.

Still... more.

He wrapped his arms around Chris and held on.

"I can do this, but I have to have you." Chris was shaken, he could see it, could feel it. "I'm sorry."

"Me, too. God, me, too." He buried his face in Chris' neck, breathed in. God, he loved how Chris smelled. Loved Chris.

"You have me," he said quietly. "I said I love you. I didn't mean just as long as everything went great."

"Okay. Good. You two go to bed, okay? Tomorrow, we'll deal." Rob sounded as devastated as Chris, the guilt in the familiar voice miserable.

He nodded. There'd been enough drama for one day.

And it would still be there if he went to bed and held his lover through the night.

He couldn't sleep and finally, when he heard Rob wandering around at about four, Chris just got out of bed and went to talk.

Rob had already made two glasses of milk for them and was sitting on the sofa. "I'm sorry, Chrissy."

He nodded, sitting close and leaning. "I shouldn't have lied."

"No, but..."

"Yeah."

"I didn't mean to get you in trouble." Rob turned him a little, started rubbing his back, both of them just sitting there and comforting each other.

Chris chuckled a little, shook. "We never mean to; it just happens, huh?"

He felt Rob nod. "Yeah. You want me to go?"

"No." Chris reached back, grabbed one of Rob's legs. "No. You promised me a whole week." They weren't joined at the hip, but... Well. Rob was his twin and they had a week.

A whole week.

"Oh, good." Rob's forehead landed on the nape of Chris' neck and he grinned, the action familiar as breathing. "I like him, Chrissy. I really do."

"Yeah? I do, too."

"He makes you happy, yeah?"

Chris nodded. "Yeah."

"Cool." Rob's hands wrapped around his waist, squeezed him tight.

There was a sound from the bedroom and a moment later Brian came padding out, hair all messy, eyes blinking. Butt naked.

He stopped the second he saw them, blinking as his hands went to cover his bits. "Oh, shit. I forgot." They were treated to a glimpse of that butt as Brian turned and fled back into the bedroom.

Rob started chuckling, voice ringing through the apartment. "Don't worry. I'm a doctor!"

Chris started giggling, tickled deep down.

Brian came back out a moment later, wearing not only a pair of sweats but a T-shirt as well, face flaming. "You weren't in bed and I wasn't really awake yet and... God, I didn't mean to flash you, Rob."

"I've seen penises before, man. Really." Rob leaned back, put some room between them. "We couldn't sleep."

Chris opened his arms, wondering if Brian would come to him.

Brian did, hugging him hard and then sitting next to him and tugging him close. One hand wrapped around Brian's hip, holding on tight, the other went through Brian's hair, messing it up even more. "I can probably guess why."

Chris nodded and sighed, Rob's hand sliding once down his back, just barely lingering on the scars.

"I just wished you'd told me the truth from the start... I wish." Brian shook his head. "You didn't and it can't be changed. We'll just have to try to cope."

He didn't say anything. What was there to say? He'd done it, and he'd do it again if he had to, to compete. It was what he was meant to do.

Rob touched his neck once, then stood and left them there on the sofa.

Brian waited until they heard the soft click of his door closing and then he took a deep breath. "You're so sure the doctor's wrong? Or do you just want to compete so badly you don't care what you're risking?"

"I can't live like I'm broken, Bri. I started slow. I'm careful. It's worth the risk." He'd had this fight with Rob. He knew the risks.

Brian nodded, fingers starting to move on his skin instead of clutching. Just the gentle, almost random touches he'd gotten used to since they'd become lovers.

"I need you to make me a promise, Chris."

"Okay." He would. He'd try. He didn't want to lose this.

"When stuff starts hurting, I want to know. When you fall, I want to know how it affected you -- what's hurting specifically from the fall, what was tired to start with and got worse with the fall. I need you to talk to me and be up front with how much pain you're in. I don't care if you think I'm going to bitch or to stop you or anything. I need to know that this lie was a one-time thing, that you're being honest with me from here on out." Brian's

hold tightened. "If I'm going to knowingly let you push, if I'm going to push you myself, knowing the doctors said a bad fall could do some major damage, then I need to trust that you trust me to be there to help you make an informed decision about whether it's time to back off or not."

"I can do that." He met Brian's eyes and swallowed hard. "I didn't mean for it to last... No, I didn't think I'd get to the point where it would bother me, not telling you. I didn't mean to fall for you, man."

"Well, I think you should have told me whether or not we got involved. I'm your coach -- that makes me responsible for you. If you'd gotten hurt and I found out later... well, I'd have been devastated." Brian snorted. "Okay, so I'm likely to be just as devastated now, but I *know* and we're discussing it. I know the risks now, and that you're going to do it anyway. And I can do everything in my power to minimize those risks."

A soft sigh sounded, Brian's chest rising and falling. "I still want you to get checked out by a doctor, Chris. I need to know what your current status is, exactly what the doctor believes the risks are."

"I told you I would. You can come with me." He let himself lean in closer, eyes closing. "Just don't give up on me."

"I don't think I can," Brian whispered. "I'm pissed off at you for lying, for risking yourself. But you're still the most amazing gymnast I've ever seen and I want to watch you soar, watch you win competition after competition like I know you will. God, what does that make me, that I'm so willing to risk your health?"

"My coach."

"Yeah, I am. And I need to remember that when your lover wants to beat your coach up."

"You can still be my lover after I retire, yeah?" He liked that thought: after.

Brian's warm, solid fingers slid beneath his chin, tilted it up so they were looking into each other's eyes. "Just try and get rid of me. I'll be your lover no matter what."

"Okay, then. We'll be okay." Right? They'd figure it?

"We'll be okay, Chris." Brian brought their lips together, the kiss soft, Brian's tongue hot as it dragged over his lower lip.

Then Brian drew back. "That is it, right? I mean there's nothing else you're keeping from me?"

"That's it. That was big enough."

"Uh, yeah, it certainly was."

Brian's eyes held his for a long moment, just staring into him. Then their lips met again, a soft sigh filling his mouth.

"I'm sorry." There wasn't anything else to say. Well, maybe. "Love you, Bri, yeah?"

Oh, the way that lit up Brian's eyes, he knew that had been the right thing to say. "I love you, too." This time the kiss was harder, sure.

Oh. Better. He pushed into the kiss, humming, needing the reassurance. Brian's tongue parted his lips, the warm fingers sliding over his back as the kiss deepened. A soft, needy sound slid from Brian's mouth into his and the kiss got deeper still.

He scooted closer, one leg wrapping around Brian's hip. "Take me to bed. Please."

"Yes."

Standing, Brian's hands wrapped around his face, their lips joining in another kiss, and then another. They moved slowly down the hall, Brian backing up toward their bedroom, almost tugging him by his lips.

He went easy, wanting this like he wanted nothing else.

Brian pushed him down onto the bed, eyes holding him there as the sweats and T-shirt were pulled off, flung off in a corner somewhere. Then Brian climbed up on the bed between his legs. "Want you. Want to be inside you."

Chris nodded, spreading wide, offering himself right over. "Yes. Fuck, yes. Please."

Brian groaned, dropping a kiss on his hip, on the tip of his cock, and his navel. Stronger, biting kisses were placed on his upper belly, by his right nipple, and then Brian's weight was on him as Brian's lips closed over his.

He wrapped around Brian, hips rolling up a little, cock rubbing alongside his own. Brian's eyes bore into his, holding him right there as Brian's tongue fucked his mouth, the motions growing faster, needier.

Biting his lower lip, Brian broke the kiss for long enough to reach over for the lube they kept on the side table, the bottle slick and slippery, landing next to his head with a thump as it shot from Brian's fingers.

"Need one of those fancy headboards," Brian said as he squirted the slick onto his fingers.

"Uh-huh. Something with drawers." He blushed, leaned up to whisper. "Something to hold onto."

Brian froze for a second, a low, needy groan coming from him. Then Brian's mouth latched onto his neck, teeth and tongue working together on his skin as Brian's slick fingers slid along his skin.

One leg came up, spreading himself wide, baring himself to that touch, to their need. Two fingers sank into him, the more usual, careful preparation giving way to the heat he could read in Brian's eyes.

"Oh, God. So hot." Those fingers stretched and spread him, opening him up for the heated prick that slid along his belly.

"Uh-huh. Want you. Want to be yours."

"Already are." Brian's fingers curled as they pushed deep, brushing across his gland.

"Yes!" He couldn't hold the cry in, even though he knew Rob would tease him in the morning.

Brian pegged the spot again and again, eyes watching him, smile a little fierce.

Then Brian's fingers slid away and the wonderful hard heat of Brian's cock pushed at him, demanded to be let in.

"Yours. Please, Bri. In." His heart pounded, eyes rolling as Brian took him.

Groaning, Brian's lips covered his again, cock pressing in and in, until their bodies were as close as they could be. Tugging on his lower lip, Brian started to move, cock sliding, dragging along his body and pushing back in, waking every single one of his nerves.

He whispered against Brian's lips -- apologies and promises, love and need and want. Brian licked his lips and whispered back, forgiveness and love, adoration and promises of his own. Each thrust became harder than the last, jolting them together; he could feel them deep in his bones.

"Good. More, Bri. More. Please." He braced himself against the mattress, head rolling.

"For you always." Brian thrust harder, faster, giving him everything he asked for and more.

One of Brian's hands wrapped around his cock, tugging in time, pulling more pleasure out of him. Chris stopped worrying, let himself go and fly, seed pouring from him as Brian loved him.

"Yes! Chris!" Brian jerked into him a few more times and then froze, heat filling him in long pulses.

Groaning, Brian collapsed down onto him, nuzzling into his neck.

"Love you. For real." He held on tight.

Brian kissed the side of his neck, early morning whiskers scraping his skin gently. "Me, too. I do."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know." He yawned. Now he could sleep.

Brian stayed where he was, buried deep and heavy on top of him. *There.*

Brian saw the last of the girls off, trying not to be too rude as he rushed them off, waving parents away with a "I'll have time to talk tomorrow."

He wanted to get back before Chris had a chance to do more than warm up. In light of the recent revelations and Chris' doctor's appointment that morning, Brian wanted to be there to watch every move.

They'd taken two days off, too, giving Chris time to visit with Rob, who'd been sent out sightseeing on his own today. And if the two days off had also meant that Brian had a chance to get his athlete to the doctor before they hit any of the apparatus again, well, he hadn't made a point of it.

The doctor visit had been informative.

Chris' back had healed well, but the doctor was firm -- the surgery had left scars, left damage, and the wrong move, the wrong fall could paralyze Chris from mid-chest down.

Chris hadn't even flinched, just nodded and kept repeating, "But I can compete."

Brian didn't know whether to be relieved or worried.

Mid-chest down was better than completely paralyzed or death, but it was a scary proposition.

But he'd been a twenty-one-year-old gymnast himself. He knew that drive to compete, to push his body as hard as he could, despite the pain and the dangers. He understood Chris' need to compete. More than that, Chris was the best he'd ever seen -- that belief hadn't faded for a second -- and the coach in him insisted as hard as Chris did that Chris could compete.

So here they were. All the cards were on the table now, and they were going for it as hard as they could.

He just had to figure out how to do this without freaking out every time Chris stumbled. Because Chris was going to stumble, and fall, and hurt himself, it was just a part of the game.

He headed back to the far end of the gym, zeroing in on Chris on the bar, stretching and warming up.

Chris looked good, relaxed, arm muscles working as he did lazy pull ups.

He sat on the floor and stretched lazily, forcing himself not to stare too hard, not to be more stressed about things than he ever was.

Right.

Like either he or Chris were buying that one.

Still, he went through the motions, wanting Chris to be at ease, to feel this was just another day of practice, of pushing, of becoming the absolute best gymnast in the world.

Chris started doing leg lifts, moving slowly, forcing his muscles to stretch. Then he started spreading. "Where are we starting?"

"Well... how about we go ahead and attack the vault while you're still fresh?" He wasn't going to be able to think about anything else anyway.

"Okay." Chris dropped from the bar, bending over and stretching out. "I like getting it over with."

He grinned. "Good. Be..." he stopped himself from saying be careful, cleared his throat. "Good. Be good and stick those landings for me."

"You know it." Chris winked like he knew what Brian was thinking, then went to pull the springboard out for the vault.

Brian had to swallow a few times before he could get up and casually walk to where he'd have the best vantage point to watch Chris hit the vault, leap over the horse and land. His heart was racing like crazy, like he was the one who was going to be doing the run.

Okay, first one. Once Chris was through the first one, he had to relax or he was going to stroke out before they ever got near a competition.

Chris ran and jumped, throwing himself over the vault and hitting it perfectly.

Something in him eased at that, and he cheered. "Way to go!"

Chris bowed and grinned. "Another?"

"Yeah. You ready to throw in a twist for me?"

That's where things started to get iffy, if Chris didn't go at it with confidence.

"Sure." Sure enough, down the ramp, up and over, with only a couple steps on the landing.

God, Chris was good. "Again," he called out, moving to the left so he could watch Chris' approach from a different angle.

The third vault was a hit, as was the fourth. The fifth ended with Chris on his knees.

He was over there in a flash, like he always was, only this time his heart was in his mouth. "Chris?"

"Over-rotated." Chris hopped up, rolled his eyes. "Good thing I only have to throw two in competition, huh?"

"Yeah. You wanna do one more for me? And then we'll head on over to the bar and you can show me how your releases are coming along." One more, just to prove that a single bad landing didn't mean they were going to quit. God, he almost wished he didn't know, that he'd never found out.

"Okay." Chris stopped, gave him a look. "You're cool?"

"Working on it."

He met Chris' eyes. "I'll get there."

He wasn't sure how Chris had done it, that first time after the accident. How did you just throw yourself into something the doctors had warned you might paralyze you for life?

"Good." Chris squeezed his hand. "Thank you."

He squeezed back, nodded. "Just do me proud, Chris."

"I try."

Chris headed off, focused and staring before he hit the vault, just like he should.

Brian nodded. Good. Good, that one of them was focused and sharp, not distracted. Even

better that it was Chris. He could afford to worry and fret and have butterflies in his belly nearly driving him out of his mind. Chris couldn't.

It was so quiet in the gymnasium; he could hear his own breath, his own heartbeat as he waited for Chris to do the vault.

Chris' feet slapped on the ground, running toward the vault. He knew it wouldn't be a good vault when Chris' hands hit the vault too far to the front, but Chris tucked and somersaulted, keeping himself tight and landing in a ball. Safely. On his knees.

Just like they'd been taught.

He whistled. "All right, Chris. Way to work it out. Let's see you do it again. Watch your hand placement -- you've got to hit it just right."

Chris went through another dozen vaults, some of them good, some of them bad, and by the time Brian called for a break and some stretching, he was feeling a lot better about things. Chris was pushing hard, and the fact that he could get seriously hurt was *right there* in the front of Brian's mind, but he could plainly see that Chris was being smart, too, was doing the things he needed to keep safe.

He went over to the mat where Chris was doing the splits and sat behind his gymnast, fingers moving on the muscles of Chris' back. "Good stuff. Really. And you landed some good ones. How's your back? How are you feeling?"

"Really good. I have a sore spot where the scar's been pulling, but besides that? I'm good." Chris stretched for him, toes curling.

His fingers slid over the scars, rubbing more than massaging, just trying to warm and ease the skin. "I should find some cream, start using it on your back, help the skin where the scars are as much as possible." He didn't know why he hadn't thought of it before. Well, except that Chris had been downplaying all his aches and pains, hadn't he?

"Mmm. That sounds good." Chris crawled out along the floor, chest and belly sliding on the ground.

"God, I love the way you move."

That ass was sweet in the singlet, the tight material clinging to it, to the muscles of Chris' thighs.

"Yeah?" Chris pulled out even farther, ass tilting up so he could look his fill.

A low, needy groan came out of him. Shit. He tried not to think about Chris as his lover when they were in the gym...

"Yeah. A lot."

"You want me to stop... stretching?"

"No, you need to stretch. Another five, ten minutes, and then you can play on the rings. We need to start putting together your routines. You could play around a bit, see what feels good and I'll let you know how it looks points wise."

He got up and started walking, just little circles to try to distract himself from his stupid prick. He was not going to distract Chris.

Chris nodded, rolled over and started stretching out. Brian could see the man's hard, full prick throbbing under the singlet.

He kept moving, keeping an eye on Chris, and when it was clear Chris' cock wasn't going to go down any more than his own he went back over and crouched near Chris' head.

"What about a fifteen minute break? In the locker room. To refocus?"

"I... Yeah. Fifteen minutes. Yeah."

He held out a hand, helping Chris up, but then he let it go and headed for the locker room, refusing to start something out on the floor.

The minute they got there, he turned, pushing Chris up against the lockers and taking a hard, needy kiss. Chris groaned, almost crawling up his body, cock rubbing furiously against his belly. He pushed and pulled, tugged at their clothing to free them both.

A shudder moved through him as his cock hit the air, and then Chris' belly.

"Oh, shit. Yeah, man. I want." Chris' fingers were in his hair, tugging and pulling him close.

Their teeth clicked together, as their mouths met again, his hand wrapping around their cocks, working them together. He felt that same want, that same need, crawling along his spine and settling in his balls. They moved faster and harder, Chris driving against him, teeth dragging on his bottom lip. His hand squeezed, thumb brushing across the tips, spreading the leaking fluid around. Groaning, he pushed harder, Chris' ass hitting the lockers with a bang.

"Good. More. Fuck." Chris' eyes were huge, wide, staring at him.

"Uh-huh." He pushed again, the sound of that gorgeous ass hitting the lockers again ringing out.

His hand tightened, his thumb finding Chris' slit and pushing into it. Seed flowed over his fingers, wet and thick, enough to drive him mad.

"Chris!" He pushed again and again, the noise matching his heartbeat. The scent of Chris' come filled his nostrils, pushing him over the edge, more come spilling up over his hand.

Panting heavily, he leaned against Chris, his hand stilling between them.

"H...hey. Good break."

He grinned, taking a slow, soft kiss. "Yeah."

He gave them both another minute and then he backed off, grabbing a towel and wiping his hand off. "I think I can focus on the job now."

"Yeah? I think I need a nap." Chris winked, laughing at him.

He snorted and popped the side of Chris' ass. "Rings -- you can do those in your sleep, can't you?"

"I guess we'll see... coach." Chris winked again and shifted, scooting away.

He chuckled and followed more slowly, feeling more at ease than he'd been when the day had started.

They'd had a bump -- a fucking big one -- but they'd weathered it together. Just like they were going to continue doing.

Chapter Eight

"I want to go out, Chrissy. Let's go dancing."

Chris sighed, shook his head. "So go out."

"Bitch, I want you to come with me."

"I'm tired." And really trying to be perfect and not give Brian any reason to distrust him or doubt him.

"You're a pussy." Rob leaned over, head landing in his lap. "Is he taking it bad?"

"You mean the whole 'I'm a lying fuckhead' thing?" At Rob's nod he shook his head. "No. I think he's more wigged about the getting hurt part."

"Well..."

Chris rolled his eyes. "Don't start with me, Rob."

"It's my job."

"You're not my doctor." He didn't want to get into this with Rob right now, not with Brian in the other room.

"I'm your brother."

"No shit."

Brian came down the hall, running a comb through his hair. "Hey guys, I was thinking we could go out for dinner or something, seeing as it's Rob's last night. What do you think?"

"Sounds perfect." Rob held his eyes, the mixture of aggravation and love and worry zinging between them.

"Am I interrupting some sort of twin bonding thing or something?" Brian asked, looking between them.

"No."

Rob rolled his eyes. "Chrissy was reminding me we are related."

Brian laughed, eyes dancing. "Forget often, do you?"

"Chris does, yeah. Forgets how much we love him."

Chris rolled his eyes. What was this? Guilt Trips R Us? "I do *not*."

Brian came to his rescue. "He doesn't forget stuff. He just gets focused. It's part of what makes him so good." There was a whole lot of pride in Brian's voice.

"One-track mind."

"Two," Brian reminded Rob, giving him a wink. "So what do you guys want to do?"

"Let's go play. Have you two gone dancing much? Chris dances like a fucking dream."

"Oh, that could be fun." Brian smiled right at him. "We haven't danced at all, but given how Chris moves, I can believe he's an amazing dancer."

"Not at all? You have to be kidding. Chrissy! Take your man *dancing*!"

"Hey, focused, remember." Brian's hand landed on his shoulder, warm and solid, sliding over his muscles. "We've been kind of busy getting Chris ready to wow the gymnastic world."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. There is more to life than sex and gymnastics."

Chris got tickled, started laughing at his twin and Brian's face.

Brian swatted him gently.

"Don't get any ideas, tonight's an aberration. That more stuff? We can do that when you retire."

He was given a wink, Brian's fingers squeezing his shoulder.

"Well, then. Maybe I should get drunk tonight." He hopped up, kissed Brian hard. Hell, if they were going to go play, he was game. "Let me get changed."

"Oooh. Let me borrow something?" Rob was right behind him.

"There's a dress code for dancing?" Brian looked down at his own jeans and T-shirt. "I don't have anything fancy. And no getting so drunk you get hungover -- hangovers and the vault are a sucky combination."

"I have a couple of going-out-type shirts." He gave Brian a long, slow look, eating up the long, fine lines that still spoke of years and years of hard work. "You look fine."

Brian beamed at him and stood a little straighter, and was that a little flex, the tummy muscles all tightened up for him? "So do you."

"Yeah?" He reached out, stroked Brian's belly.

"No fair! No touching while the older brother's in the room!"

Brian smiled at that, but his eyes were serious as they gazed into his own. "Yeah."

His own belly was given a soft touch and Brian touched their lips gently together. "I can't wait to dance with you."

"Mmm. Then let's go. This T-shirt's clean." And tight.

"You ready, Rob?" Brian asked, eyes still on him, fingers just slowly circling his navel through his T-shirt.

"You two are obscene. I swear, I'd better find *somebody* tonight."

Chris felt his cheeks heat, but he couldn't hide his grin.

Brian chuckled. "You'd think we spent all our time making out naked in front of him, the way he goes on."

"He's spoiled rotten."

Brian laughed, eyes bright and happy, and gave him a quick kiss.

"We should go before I decide I'd rather stay in." Brian's eyes were enough to set him on fire. "Of course, I have no idea where we're going to go find this dancing..."

"You two are *hopeless*." Rob sighed and grabbed his laptop, tip-tapping and humming. "How about Zio's? It's got a pizza joint on the bottom floor, bar and dance floor on the second floor."

"Mmm. Pizza."

"I don't think we've had pizza since we came here. I live with a carb Nazi." Brian winked at him. "Zio's it is. Have you got an address, Rob?"

"It's over by that little strip mall on the highway. The GLBT news said new, trendy, gay-friendly."

"Cool, I can get us there." Brian slid an arm around his shoulders and headed them for the door. "Are you ready to be gay-friendly?"

Oh. Oh, maybe Brian was right. Maybe they shouldn't. Maybe... "You can dance with Rob, if you think that's better..."

"What?" Brian stopped at the door and frowned at him. "It was just a joke, Chris. I mean, I like Rob well enough, but you're the only one I want to dance with."

"Yeah? I mean, I know it can be an issue. I wouldn't want to ruin things for us."

"It can. But I haven't been deliberately hiding you away or anything. There just hasn't been time for going out. I don't want to try and hide like we have something to be ashamed of, or are doing something wrong. Because we aren't doing anything wrong. Are some people going to try and kick up a fuss? Oh yeah, the minute you go out there and start winning, assholes like Serens are going to try and stir up trouble, but coaches marrying athletes has lots of precedents."

Brian blushed suddenly. "Coaches getting involved with athletes, I mean. Just look at all those skaters."

He grinned, grabbed Brian's hand. "Okay, then. Dancing."

Married. Right. Still, long-term worked. For real.

Brian's hand squeezed his. "I won't even step on your toes."

They headed out to the car, Brian's hand still holding his. "I'm still stuck on you going for pizza without a fight." There was a teasing light in Brian's eyes.

"I'll just eat the cheese and meat off the top."

Rob groaned. "That's blasphemy."

Brian was laughing though, and he bumped their hips together. "There's the Chris I know and love."

They piled into the car, Brian heading east. After a couple of minutes, he asked, "Have you enjoyed your week, Rob?"

"I have. I maintain that Chris needs more carbs and a hobby, but besides that? It's good."

Asshole. Chris snorted, rolled his eyes. "I'm glad you approve."

"Oh, I so do."

Brian's hand slid over to squeeze Chris' thigh before slipping back to the wheel. "What's your hobby, Rob?"

"Men." They managed it together, their laughter filling the car.

"I hope we haven't cramped your style too much this week."

Brian pulled into the parking lot, and shot a grin at Rob. "I mean we must seem boring to you -- all work."

Chris almost choked. "Oh, God. Bri. He's pulling your leg. Honest. Robbie works eighty to a hundred hours a week at the hospital."

Nobody worked harder than Rob.

"Oh, you mean the pot's calling the kettle black, is he?"

Brian parked and stopped the car. "Not that I'm surprised to hear it -- no reason not to believe your twin would be as... focused as you are."

"I'm not focused. I'm just busy." Rob hopped out of the car, dragging Chris along with him. "C'mon, bro. Pizza."

He rolled his eyes, but followed. The place smelled fabulous.

They settled in a booth, Brian sitting easy and loose next to him, smiling almost indulgently at him and Rob.

Rob ordered sausage and mushroom and Brian got pepperoni. He grinned as he got the big salad, topped with all the meaty goodness. "God, I'm such a girl."

Brian gave him a heated look. "You don't look like a girl to me. But I will have to insist that you have at least a small slice of my pizza. It's a crime to come in here and not have at least that much."

Rob nodded. "It smells heavenly, bro. Honest to God, these breadsticks are better than sex."

"Then you haven't been having enough sex, Robbie."

He laughed as Rob stuck his tongue out, kicked him under the table.

Brian's laughter joined his, and Brian snagged one of the breadsticks in question, biting off the top.

"Oh, God, he wasn't that far off the mark. You have to have at least a bit of this. It's still warm, even." Brian held the breadstick up to his lips.

"I don't need it..." The bread was pushed into his lips and he moaned. Oh. Butter. Garlic. Good.

Fucking delicious.

No fair.

Brian took another bite and made little moaning noises, almost sexual, and then pushed the breadstick back against his lips again.

"Eat up and enjoy. I'll make sure you work it off later tonight, I promise." The words whispered in his ear, and Brian nibbled his earlobe for just a second, like a promise.

"Boys, boys. No dining table porn." Rob chuckled, grinning as their cute little waiter came back with salad. "We'll need more bread sticks. The boys think they're better than sex."

"Yeah?" The waiter grinned at Rob, giving him a look. "And what do you think?"

"I think I'd have to have a little more sex, just to make sure I made the right decision."

Chris blinked over at Rob. Little slut.

Their waiter grinned and leaned against their table. "That sounds prudent. Although you seem to be lacking the major ingredient. A partner."

"You noticed that." Rob shifted, tilted his head. "You're very observant."

Chris groaned. "I'm going to hurl."

Rob kicked him. Hard.

Brian coughed, though judging by the way he stuffed a mouthful of salad in, Chris suspected the choke had been a laugh in disguise.

The waiter just ignored them, flashing Rob a bright smile, almost, but not quite, batting his eyelashes. "I am. I mean, I noticed you, after all."

"You did." Chris tried not to gag as Rob started flirting madly, hinting about dancing upstairs and dark corners. The man was a horn dog.

Completely.

He leaned toward Brian, whispering. "I'm sorry. He's harmless, honest."

"I think our waiter's hoping otherwise," Brian whispered back, grinning.

"So I'm Stu, just in case you need anything else. I'll have your pizzas out in a jiffy."

Stu took a last lingering look at Rob and then headed back to the kitchen, ass sashaying.

"You are *shameless*!"

"He's sexy!"

"He's twelve!"

"He's well-hung and interested!"

"He's willing to sleep with a guy he served pizza to!"

Brian chortled, just outright laughing at them.

"You're not helping, Bri." He reached over, goosed Brian's thigh.

"Sure he is. I hook up with Stu, you two can hump in the living room."

Brian yelped at his goosing and poked him in the side, still laughing. "Sorry, but the two of you are a hoot. And, I admit, I'm impressed -- I don't think I've ever seen anyone pick up the pizza boy before, at least not that fast."

"I am talented, man." Rob grinned and winked. "Besides, I'm a doctor. A catch. Someone you want to take home to Mother."

He almost choked on his beer. "For fuck's sake. You want a blow job in the break room, not a partner."

"Stu's mouth definitely looked fuckable," Brian noted, giving him a wink and trying to slide out of goosing range.

"Brian!"

He grinned as Rob hooted, all of them finally busting out with laughter.

They were still chuckling as Stu came back with his huge salad and the pizzas.

Stu served them and then gave Rob a long once-over. "I told the cook to make this one special. I think you'll find it nice and spicy."

He could see Brian biting his cheek.

"Mmm..." Chris looked away as Rob preened. God. Gross. Rob was... Ew. So not sexy.

Brian's eyes were just dancing, his lover smiling at him, looking amused as heck.

"I get off at nine." Stu chuckled. "Well, I get to leave here at nine. I'm hoping to get off upstairs soon after that."

Brian's eyes rolled at him.

"I'll be up there, looking for a dancing partner."

"Don't look too hard until I get there."

Stu gave Rob another scorching look and flounced off again.

Brian chuckled and pulled off a slice of pizza from his plate. "Okay, is it safe to eat now?"

"Maybe. I might still hurl." He picked at his salad, rolling his eyes. "Do you have to be so obvious?"

"Chrissy, I'm only *here* another twenty hours. I can't be picky."

"I guess this is what we get for keeping him locked in the apartment." Brian grinned, cutting a piece of pizza in half and sliding it over to him before taking his original piece and having a bite.

"Oh, wow. Maybe it's because I haven't had pizza in I don't know how long, but this is awesome. Eat some, Chris. Really."

He nodded, grabbed the slice and started eating, moaning around the cheese-sauce-meat-crust. Oh, Christ.

Brian grinned and slid the second half of the slice over. "We need to come to a compromise on this carb thing. Maybe a meal once a week where you indulge." Brian added quietly, "Because it's just wrong I'm getting hard watching you eat."

His cheeks flamed, but he ate the rest of his slice, didn't he? Moaning and humming over each bite.

Brian ate his own pizza, but he could feel those eyes on him, eating him up, every sound Chris made making Brian wriggle.

When they were done, Brian's hand came to rest on his thigh, the heat in Brian's eyes promising some very good dances to come.

"You ready to go up?"

Rob was almost bouncing. "If he's not, I am. It's ten till nine. Move. Move."

Brian's chuckle was husky as he laughed and nodded, leaving some bills on the table. "I'm ready." Those eyes met his again. "I'm very ready."

"Let's go play, then." Chris grinned over, hand on the cool vinyl as he leaned. "I hear gymnasts are very flexible."

Brian laughed, eyes dancing. "I *know* they are. God, I can't wait to see you move to music, to move with you."

Rob made a noise and Brian grinned. "After we had to watch you pick up our waiter, you can put up with a little bit of flirting from us."

"A little bit? I've been watching you two go at it all week!"

"Shut up, Robbie." Chris couldn't stop grinning. Dancing. Too fucking fun.

Brian just laughed and wrapped an arm around his waist, leading the way to the stairs at the back of the restaurant that boasted a sign promising dancing.

The music was booming and throbbing, his hips already moving as they walked in. He led Brian straight through the room to the dance floor.

Brian's eyes were still hot for him as they turned to face each other, bodies moving to the bass beat. He felt like the center of the room, like the sexiest guy there, the way Brian looked at him.

It worked for him, too. He closed his eyes, head thrown back as he shifted, hips moving to the beat. Brian's hands slid onto his waist, moving with him as Brian came closer. He could feel the heat of Brian's body as Brian came closer, almost rubbing them together. Oh, man. He hadn't been able to feel this, feel Brian move, feel the strength and flexibility outside of sex. He approved.

One song flowed into another, Brian moving with him, against him, sweat shining on Brian's skin.

"I could do this all night." He grabbed Brian's hip, drawing him close for a second.

"I don't have anywhere else to be." Brian's lips slid against his for a moment, hip bumping against him, rubbing up against his cock before Brian backed away again.

The music changed then, slowing, becoming sensual and slinky, and Brian once again moved in close, hands sliding around his waist as their bodies met. The lights dimmed, the crowd slowing, gyrating and rubbing, moving.

Their bodies moved like they were fucking, standing, hips rubbing, circling. It was sexy and hot, and it was more intense for being in a crowd of people. He slid his hands down Brian's belly, the sweat making the tight T-shirt cling to each and every muscle. Brian's breath panted against his lips, a low groan vibrating the muscles against his fingers.

"Hot." It was. So hot. So sexy. He started to ache a little, belly to balls, just a warm, good feeling that flooded him.

Brian nodded, the movement brushing their lips together. "Sexy."

One hand slid to the small of his back, Brian holding him close.

He groaned, gasped a little as his cock jerked and throbbed. "Yeah, Bri. We have to do this again."

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing." Brian swallowed, swaying them together. "Gotta admit I'm ready to get home, though. Want you."

"Yeah." He grinned a little, cheek against Brian's. "It's kind of nice, though. Waiting. Anticipating."

Brian nodded, the hand on Chris' back drifting down a bit to stroke the top of his ass. "It's nice, too, knowing I'm going home with you and waking up with you. You know what I mean? Not wondering."

"Mmhmm. Nothing like a sure thing." He arched a little, hips rolling a bit.

Brian groaned. "You're more than just a sure thing."

The music changed again, the beat picking up to something bouncy, but Brian stayed close, hips just moving a little faster now.

"Yeah? More than just your gymnast?"

"A whole lot more." Brian's lips met his again, the kiss holding for a moment or two. "You know that, right?"

"Yeah. I do." He grinned against Brian's mouth, heart pounding, just a little.

"Good." Brian had stopped dancing altogether, just sort of swayed against him, lips opening his for another kiss.

They could have stayed like that forever, had someone not pushed against them, reminding them where they were.

Brian gave him a wry smile and moved him closer to the edge of the dance floor. "You want to stay a bit longer? Or see if Rob's ready to go yet?"

"We'll give Rob cab fare." He was ready to get to bed.

"I bet he goes home with the pizza boy." Brian gave him a wink and grabbed his hand, leading him off the dance floor, looking around for Rob.

"I bet he ends up with rug burn in unmentionable places." Of course, just the thought of Robbie having to suffer sitting in a plane all the way back to Maryland was obscenely pleasant.

Brian grinned, and then frowned, tugging him into a corner where they had a good vantage over the rest of the club. "I can't see him anywhere, can you? Would he have just left without letting you know?"

"No." Rob was a jackass, but that simply wouldn't happen. Period. He squinted, staring at the flashing strobe lights, looking for his twin.

"Maybe he's in the bathroom..." Brian craned his neck and then pointed to a hall that presumably led to the bathrooms. Grabbing his hand, Brian tugged him along in that direction, pulling him close as they had to go through the crowded dance floor again, bringing him up against the solid back.

If he hadn't been worried about Rob, he'd have been able to appreciate the feel a little better, really. Brian was solid and strong, ass tight as hell against him.

They stumbled off the dance floor together and Brian headed toward the bathrooms, holding on tight to his hand. The lighting was dim along the corridors, couples necking and possibly more up against the wall.

"If we get somewhere quiet, I can call him."

"Okay, the bathroom should do. I mean, he could be in one of these couples, but I can't tell, and I don't think breaking folks apart to check would be appreciated." Brian gave him a wry grin and tugged him into the men's room. It was noisy with moans and grunts, and reeked of sex, and Brian actually blushed. "Reminds me of our first time..."

"Our first time was a little less... glory hole."

Brian's eyes met his, the look hot. "Yeah. More... sheer need. God, make the call already. I want to take you home."

"Kay." He punched speed dial, one finger in his ear. Come on, Rob. Answer your fucking phone.

Rob let it ring and ring, but finally he got a click and a "What?"

"Where are you?"

"On the roof, getting the world's best fucking blow job. What. Do. You. Want?"

"To go home and get the same, asshole. We're leaving."

"I've got cab fare. Go. Love you. Later."

Click.

"Are we good to go?" Brian asked, wincing as banging, and the most outrageous groaning noises, came from one of the stalls.

Brian wasn't even waiting for an answer, though, already tugging him out of there.

"What? You don't want to get porny with the bathroom boys?" He blinked as a camera flash caught him on the way toward the dance floor. Wow. Bright.

Still, he didn't miss the decisive shake of Brian's head, despite the spots in his vision. Brian spoke against his ear. "I'm not sharing you with anyone."

"No one?" That sounded just fine to him.

"Not one single solitary soul."

Brian practically dragged him back across the dance floor until they hit the stairs and headed down them.

"I don't mean to get all he-man on you, Chris, but the idea of anyone else touching you makes my skin crawl."

"Well, I'll make sure to tell all my other lovers." He looked up and winked.

Brian stopped and blinked at him for a moment, and then laughed, tugging him up against Brian's chest. "You do that." Their lips met on a hard kiss, Brian's tongue pushing in.

Oh. Yum. His world swung a little, tilting on its axis. "Better than pizza."

Brian beamed at him, and nodded. "Come on. Home. Before I decide I can't wait after all."

"I'm with you, man." He turned and headed back down, grin almost splitting his face. He'd almost taken a step when someone behind them came barreling along, catching him in the temple with an elbow, the lights suddenly bright and huge as he stumbled forward, feet searching for the next step.

The lights went out before he found it.

Chapter Nine

Brian paced up and down the emergency hall, fighting his stomach, which was trying to climb out his throat.

He wasn't going to give in to it, though, just like he hadn't back at the club when Chris had gone ass over tea kettle down the stairs and landed with a crunch at the bottom. The ambulance had been there in minutes, and they'd gotten Chris onto a backboard, with a collar around his neck, and Chris had still been out.

Brian paced a little harder and glared at the nurses' station, telling himself to go to the door and back one more time before he bugged them. Again.

What was taking so fucking long?

Jesus, he'd spent every day since Chris had told him the truth worrying that they were going to paralyze Chris with their pushing, and then Chris went and fell down the stairs while they were out having fun. They hadn't even been drinking.

If Chris' back was fucked up from the fall...

Screw it. Brian made a beeline for the nurses' station.

"Excuse me again. I need to know how Chris Allen is. Is he awake yet? Can I see him?" He wasn't going to let her fob him off this time.

"Sir, I..."

"Get the *fuck* out of my way." Rob hit the nurse's station with a growl. "I'm Dr. Allen, and I have Chris Allen's most current medical information. I need to speak with the doctor on call immediately."

Brian gave a little sigh of relief. Being able to bandy about the word "doctor" in front of his name could only help. He'd called Rob from the ambulance, and he had to bite back his "took you long enough." It wasn't Rob he was pissed at.

"Yes, doctor. Give me a minute and I'll buzz you in."

"Thank you." Rob looked at him, nodded once. "Fucking taxis were scarce as hell. Was he conscious at all in the ambulance?"

He shook his head and took a hold of Rob's arm. If they were letting Rob in, they were

letting him in. "He moaned some, and I thought he was going to come to. They haven't told me a fucking thing." And he'd tried throwing his weight around, too, told them he was Chris' gymnastic coach, but the little nurse hadn't been impressed. At all.

"Okay. Okay. I'll find out what's what, Brian. I'm a doctor. I'm family. I'm his fucking next-of-kin. I won't leave you in the dark."

"I'm going in there with you." He'd had enough of waiting around. He had to know if Chris was okay. Or... if he wasn't. He needed to know that, too. "Come on, Rob. I don't care what you tell them. I'm going in there with you."

"If it's not too serious. Was he bleeding?" The door buzzed and Rob started moving through, confident as anything. "This is his coach. He'll be the one who can answer any questions about what happened."

Rob was good; he'd give the man that.

"No. There wasn't any blood that I could see. He was just pale and so damned still." So fucking still. It had scared the shit out of him. It was still scaring him.

There was a shitload of hustle and bustle in the room where Chris was, and Rob paled. "You stand right here, Brian. I mean it. Don't give them a reason to eject you. I have to see him."

Brian swallowed hard and nodded. Shit. It didn't look good. Oh, fuck. Fuck. He wasn't religious, but he started praying right about then.

It took Rob about twenty minutes to come out, eyes serious and still. "They're taking him for a full-body CT scan and calling a neurologist. We're going to have to wait for the results. The good news is that his spine looks to be intact, his vitals are good."

Brian closed his eyes and swallowed hard. God, this sucked. So fucking hard.

He opened his eyes again, met Rob's. So like Chris', and at the same time not. Brian knew he'd never mistake them for each other. "What are the odds he'll be able to get back to training?" It would kill Chris if a stupid fall down the stairs sidelined him.

Rob blinked, stared. "What? Look, right now I'm working on, is there brain damage and will he be Chris when he wakes up. We'll worry about gymnastics after that."

"Brain damage?" The words ended up almost shouted. Brain damage? Fuck. Oh, God. He hadn't even... Fuck. His stomach was back in his throat, and this time he wasn't sure he could fight it back down."

"Easy. Easy. Breathe." Rob pushed him down, head between his legs. "Don't you fucking freak out on me, man. You have to get it together."

His hands clenched on his knees as he focused on just getting the breath in and out of his lungs for a moment or two. God. This wasn't happening.

He lifted his head again and nodded. "It's okay. I'm okay."

"Good man. He's going to be okay." Rob closed his eyes a second.

"He has to be." Which was probably a pretty stupid thing to say, but dammit, Chris had come through one accident, had pushed and shoved and brought himself back up. It was not fair if he was knocked down again. It wasn't. "How long is this CT thing going to take? Do they have any idea when he's going to wake up? Can I see him?"

"The test itself is short. They're admitting him and you can stay in the room. I'm going to go meet with the neurologist." Rob sighed. "You need to call our folks. Tell them what happened."

"Their number's on Chris' phone, yeah?" Rob nodded. "Okay. I'll do that." He was so not looking forward to this call. God, he wished he had something to tell them. Something positive. "Thanks, man. I was going crazy out there, not knowing what was going on."

"Tell them he's in good hands, you don't know anything, and not to come here." Rob stopped, took a breath. "And you're welcome. You'll know when I know. I'm heading up."

"Okay. Where do I find him?" Rob had said he could stay with Chris, but at this point, he had no clue where they'd taken his lover.

And he needed to see Chris again before he did anything else. He needed to.

"There's going to be a hospital person to get you, get his information and stuff. Mom has him covered by insurance until September. They'll tell you which room." Rob was up and going, looking completely at home in the hospital.

He leaned against the wall, wishing that was something he didn't know, wishing that this had never happened.

Okay. Enough indulging in wishes. Chris' phone was heavy in his pocket, and he took it out, searched for the directory for Chris' folks' number. Make the call and then go see Chris. He could do that, he could cope.

And through it all, he could pray.

Brian sat holding Chris' hand.

Still unconscious, but at least the collar and spine board were gone, making Chris look less scary. Less broken.

He was waiting. Waiting for Chris to wake up. Waiting for someone to come and talk to him. Waiting for Rob to come back.

Fucking waiting.

And there wasn't anything else he could do.

"Come on, Chris. Wake up and I'll get you chocolate. Brownies. Homemade ones, yeah? And we can add midnight runs to get pizza for those nights you get munchy."

Come on, come on. Just wake up.

"He's got a serious head injury, Brian. There's swelling and damage, but nothing's broken. There's a hairline crack in his skull." Rob stood at the door, face pale as milk. "I've talked to Mom and Dad. They say... Well, he's going to get better before they can move him back home, right?"

A hairline crack. Serious head injury. The words swirled around in his head. "No. No, that can't be right."

He held tight to Chris' hand. Please, wake up, he begged silently, not sure if he meant Chris or himself. If this was all just a bad dream...

"People come out of this type of injury every day." Rob stepped in, eyes huge. "Every day. Can... I need to... Do you mind if I..."

He looked at Rob, really looked, realizing that this wasn't just a doctor, wasn't just a guy. This was a man looking at his twin who was hurt, unconscious.

He nodded and made himself let go of Chris' hand, made himself step back and let Rob go to his brother.

As much as he was worried and hurting, it had to be even worse for Rob.

Rob stumbled forward, grabbed Chris' hand and started whispering. "Goddamn, Chrissy. Not like this. You can't fucking do this. We are going to be old and grouchy together, you and me and our lovers, right? Going skiing and boating and being trouble. Please, Chrissy. You gotta."

Brian blinked back the tears, hands curling into fists. This was easier when Rob was the doctor, all efficient and calm and reassuring.

"Come on, Chris," he said, moving to stand next to Rob. "You listen to us. You come back. Don't you dare quit on me now. You beat the fucking vault -- are you going to let a few stairs get to you?"

Rob nodded. "You gotta wake up, Chrissy. I know you can hear me. I saw your scans. I know you're dizzy and scared and probably can't figure out what happened, but you fell and you need to try to remember how to wake up."

"Just come back and we'll help you figure it out," Brian said. "You won't be alone, Chris. Not this time. Forever, remember?"

He'd promised to stick by Chris no matter what, and he'd meant it. He would. No matter what.

"The competitions are waiting for you. Brian's here. Mom and Dad said they'll come. I'll stay."

"So much love, Chris. You can't stay away in the face of that." Brian blinked, hand squeezing Chris' thigh. "And you've got something to prove to all those naysayers and doubters, I know you do."

He wasn't sure if Chris' sigh was an answer or just coincidence, but it made him feel better, made him believe.

"Yeah, they're still out there. Nothing's changed." He leaned in and whispered. "And I know you want to pick back up where we left off. We were on our way home, Chris. You remember that?"

He'd do everything he could for as long as he needed, to get Chris to wake up.

They kept talking, first Rob, then him, until the nurses came, to check this and change that. Rob stood back, sighed. "Do you want to go home and sleep?"

He shook his head. "No."

He wasn't going anywhere. He belonged right here with Chris. For as long as it took.

"No, I'm good. You go ahead. I'll let you know if there's any change."

"I won't leave him." Rob sighed. "There's a physician's lounge, though, and I need to find it. That chair there pulls out into a bed."

"Thanks." He nodded and, on impulse, gave Rob a hug, just holding onto the other person who knew how special Chris was, who needed Chris to come back as much as he did.

Rob's breath hitched, arms coming around him to hug him back. "He's going to be okay."

He held on tight. "Yeah. He is. He's Chris."

"Yeah. He's the baby. Seven whole minutes."

That had him chuckling. "Go tell him, maybe he'll wake up and growl at you for saying it."

"That would be good." Rob grinned. "I'd even let him win the argument."

"God, I'd like to see *that*."

He let Rob go and they turned back to Chris. "You hear that, Chris? He called you the baby."

He thought he saw Chris' fingers move. Maybe.

Maybe.

He nudged Rob. "Did you see that?"

"See what?" Rob moved over to the bed. "Chrissy? Can you hear me?"

He put his hand on Chris' thigh again, squeezing it. "Come on, Chris. We know you're in there. Chris? Come on, lover."

Chris' eyes moved under his eyelids once, then again, like he was dreaming. "Shit, I'm going to call the neuro," Rob said "You keep talking, man."

He nodded. "Until I'm hoarse."

He grabbed Chris' hand. "I know you're in there. Come on, Chris. God, I want to see those eyes of yours. One green and one blue. I never knew anyone with eyes like that before, and now I know two people. Of course there's only one pair I really want to see now. I mean I like Rob and all, but he's not you. I want you, Chris. I need you, yeah?"

He continued on, just talking about practicing and loving and things they'd done together.

He kept talking and praying and insisting -- to Chris, to God, to himself, to anyone that would listen -- that everything was going to be just fine.

He could hear voices chattering at him, low and constant, pulling him up and out of the fog he seemed to be in.

Chris wasn't sure if he wanted to wake up. In fact, he was pretty sure he didn't want to, but those voices wouldn't stop.

"Your folks are here. Rob just called; he's at the airport getting them. I need you to wake up before they get here, Chris. They want to take you home with them. I need you to wake up and tell them you're okay, that they don't need to drag you across the country to get well."

"Come on, Chris. Just open your eyes again for me. You did it that once yesterday. Come on now. I know you're in there. I do." There was a soft chuckle. "Do you really want me to go back to reading you stats?"

He felt his cheeks move as he grinned, the action feeling odd and uncomfortable.

"Hey! Chris? See I knew you were in there. Don't think I won't do it, either. Although I suppose it would be more fun to tell you what I want to do to you. Might be my last chance with your folks on their way and all. Although frankly, at this point, just being able to look into your eyes'll be enough." Brian's voice dropped low.

"I just want to get you home and pick up where we left off. You know, kisses and touches. God, I love touching you. Your skin is amazing and your musculature... the way you move under me..."

"Bri..." He frowned, trying to remember how to open his eyes, knowing that he knew *how*.

"Oh, God." He could feel a pressure on his hand now, Brian squeezing it. Why was he squeezing it so tight? "Yeah. It's me. You like that, yeah? Like the way I love you? I do, you know. And God, you're so beautiful. So fucking stunning. Let me see your eyes."

"Mmhmm." Chris swallowed, licked his lips. "Dry."

Brian laughed. "You want some water? I've got a cup here with ice. Well, it was ice -- it's cold water now. It's even got a straw."

Something pressed against his lips. "Can you suck?"

It was harder than it should be, but he could, gasping a little at the sensation -- cold and good and more.

"Not too much now. You have to sip slowly. I'm not sure why, but that's what they always say, isn't it?" The straw disappeared. "You gonna open your eyes for me?"

It was damned bright when he managed it, too bright, but he did it. He opened his eyes.
"Bri."

"Hey. Chris. Hi." Brian looked like he was about to start crying, but he was smiling and laughing, too. "Hey. Welcome back."

Welcome back from where?

"Hey."

Brian's hand took his again, squeezing. Brian's eyes held his. "How are you feeling?"

"Fuzzy? Throat hurts. Wha' happened?"

"You don't remember? I'm not sure if I'm supposed to tell you or not. I guess I should call the nurse." Brian leaned past him and pressed the call button lying next to him. "You hit your head and have been out for nearly three days."

"Three... Rob. Did he stay?"

"Yeah. He's picking your folks up at the airport. I don't know what I'd have done without him -- having a doctor to throw about his title really makes a difference."

"My folks?" Okay, now he was a little scared. Maybe more than a little. "Bri?"

"You got pushed at the club and fell down the stairs. You've been out of it since. I tried to convince them you'd come out of it soon and be right as rain, but they wanted to be here. Well... I'm pretty sure they're wanting to take you home with them. So I'm glad you've woken up and can make your own decisions." Brian smiled. "It's okay. You're awake now. It'll all be okay. I promise."

"No. No, I don't want to go back. I want to stay here with you."

Brian beamed at him, the blue eyes looking relieved. "You don't know how good that is to hear. And you kind of needed to be awake to say it." Brian leaned in over the side of the bed, hugging him. "I'm so glad you woke up."

Chris nodded, then winced as a dull pain started throbbing in his skull.

Brian backed off, hand sliding over his head. "You okay? Where's that nurse? They're going to want to know you're awake. Probably kick me out of there, though, while they look you over, so maybe I'm hoping they'll take their time."

"I'm right here. Is he awake?" Gladys, a big, wonderful, heavy-set nurse who always had a grand smile, came in.

"Yeah. Yeah, he is. Look." Brian grinned and squeezed his hand. "And he's okay. Tell her you're okay, Chris."

"My head hurts and I want something to drink, please."

He wasn't sure about okay, really.

Brian brought the straw back to his lips. "I only let him have a little bit when he first woke up."

Gladys chuckled and beamed at them both. "Oh, now that's a good sign, it is. Do you know your name, son? Where you are? The date?"

"Chris and I'm in the hospital and... August?" It was still August, right?

"August 22nd", actually." She took his hand and counted his pulse while looking at her watch. "You remember what happened to you?"

"No. Brian told me, but I don't remember. I remember dancing."

"Oh, dancing sounds like fun, honey. Was it Brian you were dancing with?"

He chuckled, groaning a little as that made him hurt again. "Brian doesn't share."

Brian's hand stroked his shoulder. "Oh, you remember just fine."

Gladys' eyebrow rose, and she chuckled as she put a blood pressure cuff around his arm. "I'll just get your vitals and then go get the doctor."

"Can I have some juice, please?" Chris asked as Gladys set about measuring his blood pressure and pulse.

Juice and a pain pill and sent home?

Now?

"I think you should just stick with the water until the doc has a chance to look at you, honey. It won't be long, I'll go fetch him right now. Things are looking good, though." She gave his arm a motherly pat.

"Thanks," murmured Brian, moving back to the chair pulled up close to the bed and offering him the straw again.

Gladys gave them both a wink and headed out, the door closing quietly behind her.

"I'm ready to go home, Bri."

"And God knows I'm ready to take you. I think Rob would kill me, though, if we didn't let the doctor look you over first. And I *know* your folks would."

"You're right there, Brian dear." Mom came in with a rush, a huge tote bag on one arm, knitting needles poking out. "You're awake!"

"Yeah. Hey, Mom."

"Chrissy. How long have you been conscious? How's your pain? Have you tried moving yet?"

Rob made his head hurt.

"Robin, let your brother be. Where's the doctor in charge? I'd like to speak to him immediately." Ah. Dad. Mr. In-Charge.

Brian stood, but kept a hand on his arm. "The nurse went to get him. She said Chris' vitals looked good, but the doctor had to take a look before he could have juice or anything."

Brian gave his arm a little squeeze. "But he's awake and he knows who he is and where he is. Isn't that great?"

"It is. Hey, baby." Mom sat on the other side of his bed, settling in with that "my son" look on her face.

Brian didn't back down at all from his mom, staying right there with a hand on his arm, even when his father cleared his throat rather obviously. Looked like Brian wasn't going to be pushed off to the side.

He sighed, searched for Rob's eyes. Rob saw him, nodded and grinned. "Okay, you two. The doctor's going to be in soon. Don't get settled."

"We only just got here, Robin." His father puffed up and patted his leg. "How are you feeling, then? Ready to come home? Your mother's dusted your room and washed your sheets."

Brian's hand tightened on his arm.

"No. I'm staying here. I have a competition in October."

See him. See him be an adult.

"A competition? You can't be serious. Son, has the doctor explained what happened to you yet? You won't be competing anymore."

Mom nodded in agreement with his Dad.

No. No. He looked over to Brian, looking for the truth there, searching.

Brian squeezed his arm. "I don't know, Chris. They said you had a hairline skull fracture. I'm not sure what that means. Let's see what the doctors say, yeah?"

Chris turned away from Brian. No. No, there wasn't going to be any let's see. No. He was going to compete. Goddammit.

Brian's fingers squeezed and Brian bent to give him a kiss above his ear. "It'll be okay, Chris. It's going to be okay."

"Wait and see?" His father's voice boomed. "I don't think so. You might have been killed! You can't honestly be thinking about risking a third time!"

"Mr. Allen, this accident had nothing to do with gymnastics; Chris fell down some stairs."

"Good God, what the hell is going on here?" The new voice belonged to the doctor, the man frowning at them. "There are way too many people in here. Why doesn't anyone who's hasn't just woken up out of a coma leave -- I need to take a look at Chris."

"You heard Dr. Fry. Move it or lose it." Rob sounded almost tickled. "Did you get some sleep, Vic? You looked tired as hell yesterday."

Christ, Robbie could get to know anyone.

"I did, thanks, Rob. You can stay if you like."

"I'd like to stay, too," Brian said. "I'll be quiet and stay out of the way, just like I have been."

The doctor started to shake his head.

"Vic. This is important. Please, just ask Chris what he wants."

Rob gave him a look and he nodded, trying not to wince. "He's my partner. Please, doctor."

"All right, but everyone else is going to have to clear out of here."

Robbie led Mom and Dad out, and the doctor moved in. "So, Chris, it's nice to finally meet you. I'm Dr. Fry."

"Hi. Can I compete? Can I go home?" Could he get up and walk around?

Dr. Fry chuckled. "Are you always this focused?"

"Yes," Brian answered quietly. "He's also the best damned gymnast there is because of it."

He nodded, the wince slipping past him. Robbie patted his shoulder. "It's okay that it's hurting, Chrissy. You're going to be sore, and you've got a drain tube to ease some swelling. It'll ache."

"Ignoring pain's another thing he's good at," Brian said quietly.

"Well, pain is your body's way of telling you to slow down, to stop for a bit."

The doctor shined a light in both eyes, probed his head, which hurt like hell, and looked at the notations the nurse had made on his chart.

"Gladys said that you didn't remember the accident, but that you were coherent, knew your name, knew it was August, that you were in the hospital. I need you to be honest with me now -- are you confused about anything?"

"I... Can I get up? I mean, I can walk?"

"Don't you remember how?" Rob touched his foot and his toes curled, leg jerking up.

Oh!

The movement felt good, right, and he nodded. "Yes. Yes, I do."

Now.

Dr. Fry chuckled. "Something tells me that you're going to be a hard patient to keep in bed. Are you really feeling up to trying to get up? Because if you are, I say go for it."

"I... I can try." He nodded, pushing himself upright.

Oh.

Oh, fuck.

Dizzy.

Dizzy.

Shit. He... Oh.

Hands helped him back down, that light in his eyes again.

"Maybe after a meal. He's under eight percent body fat; he's got no stores." Rob didn't sound scared, which made him feel better.

"Under eight percent body fat? You are dedicated, aren't you?" Dr. Fry turned to Brian. "The best, you say?"

Brian nodded. "Yeah. He's amazing. Natural talent and this unbelievable focus. He just pushes and doesn't give up."

"Well, Chris, the skull fracture in and of itself shouldn't stop you, but I've seen your file and you're already taking a huge risk. I'm not sure I can recommend that you continue following this course."

"Life is risk, doctor. Everything is. I need this." Yes. Yes, that was what he needed to hear.

"Yes, life is a risk, but there are ways to minimize that risk, Chris. I'm not trying to take anything away from you; I'd just rather not see you back here."

The doctor patted his shoulder. "I'll have Gladys make sure you get something to eat and then you can try getting up out of bed again, okay? You're doing great."

"When can I go home?"

Rob grinned. "The drain comes out in a couple of days, man, and we can keep Mom and Pop out of here every so often, huh?"

Oh. Yeah.

Dr. Fry nodded. "If you're doing well, I'll be by day after tomorrow to discharge you. You make sure you get plenty of rest until then. I'll prescribe you something for the pain, to take as needed, and I'd like to get another head scan, just to be sure we haven't missed anything."

"Okay. Can I have some juice?" He'd hate to have to kill someone for a drink.

"Yeah. You send your twin brother here out there to talk to your folks and get you your juice. No traveling for you until you've had something to eat."

Dr. Fry made some notations on his chart and then shook his hand. "Don't give the nurses too much grief, and I'll see you tomorrow."

"I promise." The room swam a little, and Chris closed his eyes. He could do this.

He could recover.

Again.

Rob and the doctor's voices faded away.

A moment later, Brian's hand slid along his arm. "Hey. That was better than I was expecting."

"Yeah? You're going to stay with me, yeah? Help me win?"

Brian sighed, fingers sliding on his cheek. "You're still determined to do this, are you?"

"Yes." More than ever. Hell, anything could kill you, this accident proved that.

"Well, I'm not letting anyone else stand with you. Not as your coach, not as your lover." Brian smiled. "I don't share, remember? I'll help you win."

"Good." Good. He relaxed deeper into the mattress, eyes getting wet as his tension let go.

A soft kiss brushed across his forehead. "It'll be okay, Chris. We'll stick it out together. I promise."

"I'm sorry." He started to float off again, letting go of his worries, his stress.

"For what? Getting pushed? Coming back from wherever you'd gone in your head? Being a stubborn ass?" Another kiss pressed against his skin.

Brian's fingers were so warm as they stroked his cheek. "I love you." The words floated over to him, wrapped him in Brian's warmth.

"Love you. Come hold me a minute?" Just a minute. Just so he could go back to sleep.

"Yeah. I'd like that."

Brian's leg slid against his, the warm arms wrapping around him. Holding him.

"Tell me about my new floor routine. Help me remember." He'd dream about it. Maybe, when he woke up, he'd get some juice.

Brian chuckled. "You're obsessed."

But Brian's voice continued, soft and even, as Brian went over the routine, chasing him into sleep.

Chapter Ten

Brian headed for Chris' room, eager to get back.

Once Chris had fallen asleep, Robin had convinced him to go home and get a shower, a change of clothes, a couple of hours of real sleep. He'd gone on the understanding that Robin would let Chris know where he was if Chris woke up again before he got there.

He was glad he'd done it -- he felt a hundred times better, though a good portion of that was knowing Chris was going to be okay.

Now he was eager to be back with his lover, to see if Chris was awake again. God, the last few days had been the longest of his life, and nothing had made him happier than seeing those mismatched eyes open up and see him, know him.

He rounded the corner just as Chris' folks came out of the room, and he stopped to give them a smile. "Hey, there. Is he awake again?"

"He is. He's in there being completely unreasonable." Mary looked over, eyes red-rimmed. "He keeps insisting he's going to go back to gymnastics."

He nodded and looked up at Bill's face, seeing the same worries and fears there, though Chris' dad held his cards a little closer to the vest than his wife. "Let's go sit and talk. There's a little sitting area just down the hall here."

He led the way, trying to figure out what to say to them, how to explain.

They sat facing him, and he bit his lower lip and then took a deep breath, letting it out in a rush.

"I know it's scary, but Chris is driven. You know better than I do that he's spent his whole life chasing this dream."

"Yes, but it's time for him to listen to his body instead of his heart." Bill sighed, hand rubbing his nape. "He isn't in good enough shape to compete."

"With all due respect, sir, that isn't your decision."

It wasn't easy to meet the man's eyes, especially given he had many of the same reservations, but he did it, knowing Chris needed him on this.

"No, but it is partially yours, Brian." Mary reached out, took his hand. "We aren't trying to make him unhappy. We aren't. We don't want to lose him."

He squeezed her hand back. "I know. I'm scared, too. But you know what? That fall -- that happened while we were out having a little fun. We were on our way home. We hadn't had any alcohol to drink. We weren't overtired. We were just headed down the stairs and someone bumped him, sent him down the stairs."

He swallowed. "He could have died. Hell, he could get hit by a car when we walk out of here tomorrow. He told the doctor that life is a risk, and he's right. And I know that he increases his chances by training, by competing. But right now, that's where he is, that's what he needs to do. And I'm not going to tell him he can't or that I won't stand with him."

"And if he doesn't die, Brian?" Bill's eyes were so serious, so still. "Are you willing to be his partner if he's in a wheelchair? If he needs constant care?"

"You don't think I haven't thought of that? That I didn't worry the last few days that it hadn't already happened?" He straightened up, nodded. "I'm not leaving him. No matter what. I promised him that, and I'm a man of my word."

"But, honey..." Mary shook her head. "He loves you. He trusts you. You and Rob. You two could convince him." She gestured at Rob, who was walking toward them.

"No, Mom. Chrissy'd rather die than quit. He needs to try. You have to let him." Rob looked exhausted. Completely and utterly worn out.

Brian nodded. "Rob's right. If I don't coach him, he'll find someone else who will. And I don't trust anyone else to take care of him."

"Boys, this isn't a *game*."

"Mom, we aren't kids anymore." Rob sighed, shook his head. "You think this is a game for him? Do you know how badly he hurts sometimes? How many fears he's had to overcome?"

Brian nodded in agreement. "He knows how serious this is. I know how serious this is. If it was just a game to him, he wouldn't risk his life, his mobility for it."

Brian searched for some way to reassure them, but he couldn't think of a thing. "I can't tell you he's going to be all right, but I can promise you that I will be at his side through every moment and that I will do everything in my power to make sure he takes care of himself and is careful. That he goes into every day as prepared as he can be."

Mary started to cry and Bill to growl, and Rob just shook his head. "You two are going to

your hotel room. You both need some sleep and some food. Chrissy will be released tomorrow night and then, after you get the weekend pampering him, we're all going home."

"I'm sorry, Mary," Brian said, "I truly am. Bill... I... I'm not doing this for me."

Bill looked over at him. "Of course you are. You want him to succeed as much as he does. If you don't, you would be a shitty coach."

Rob chuckled. "So they both want to be at the top of their game. Sue them."

"And we're both grown ups. This is Chris' decision, and I'm going to back him. If you could... you don't have to support him, but please don't tear down his confidence."

"What he means is, he doesn't need to doubt himself."

Mary's eyes flashed. "I'm fully aware of what Brian means, Robin Gregory Allen. I'm upset, not stupid."

Brian bit his lip before the surprised laughter could escape him.

Giving in to a sudden urge, he gave Chris' mom a quick hug. "I'm going to take care of him, I promise," he whispered.

Mary went still, then she wrapped her arms around him, squeezed tight. "You'd better. He loves you very much."

"I know. Feeling's mutual."

He wished he could be more reassuring, but it was the best he had to offer.

"Mom. Come on. You need some rest." Rob took her arm, handed her a handkerchief. Bill, on the other hand, didn't look ready to give this up.

"He's old enough to make his own decisions, Bill. All we can do is either stand behind or not."

He really didn't want to keep going in circles with this. He'd only been with Chris a few months, and if he knew how stubborn and determined Chris was, surely his parents were aware of it, after all, they'd known Chris all their lives.

"Pop. Come on. Really. You and Chris can fight tomorrow."

Rob looked like he was at the end of his rope.

Honestly.

"Look, you all look like I felt before Rob insisted I go home and get a shower and some sleep. You should do the same. I'm sure he'll sleep most of the evening anyway, so why don't you come back tomorrow morning when he's awake again and feeling up to seeing everyone? I'll stay with him tonight and make sure he's got everything he needs."

He all but gave them a little shove, using his best "Coach" voice that always seemed to work on the girls.

Rob helped and they got both parents moving and out the door, the nurses at the station giving Brian sympathetic looks. "You actually going to get to see him now?"

"Yeah, I hope he's still awake. Did anyone get him his juice?" He should have remembered to pick some up on his way over, but he'd been rather focused on just getting back.

"Yeah. He tried to eat some gelatin, but it wouldn't settle. He'll need to eat a meal before he leaves, hon."

"Hospital Jell-o? No wonder it wouldn't settle. And he'll eat." If Chris knew keeping food down was the only way he'd get out of the hospital, he'd do it, even if it meant taping his mouth closed with duct tape. Of course, Brian didn't share that with the nurses.

"Thanks." He gave her a smile and headed on into Chris' room, wondering what would tempt Chris' tummy and stay down. He *knew* pizza or chocolate would be tempting, as would steak and that really nice stir-fry they made together, but he doubted any of that was hospital approved...

Chris was stretching, one leg up near his ear, face red and flushed.

"Jesus!"

Brian went over to Chris, shaking his head. "Don't let your parents catch you doing that before you get out of here."

He slid his hands over the stretched out leg, nodding at the lack of hard spots. "It's only been three days; you shouldn't have lost any of your flexibility. How's it feel?"

Chris didn't need a lecture from him, just support.

"Good. Stretchy. I want out of here." Chris grinned up at him, winked.

Oh, wow. That smile and wink did wonders for him. Made him believe that Chris really was going to come through this, was okay.

"Yeah, you out of here sounds pretty damned fantastic. The nurse gave me the secret, too."

Apparently you have to eat a meal. I hear you rejected the Jell-o -- we'll have to find something that'll stay down."

"Jell-o is nasty." One leg went down, the other up. Chris' catheter had come out at some point during the night, and Chris was looking much less grumpy.

Brian watched carefully, looking for any signs of stiffness or soreness. "How's your head?"

"It itches where that thing is. I want it out." There were random bruises sprinkled over the long body, but nothing earth-shattering.

"They said tomorrow morning. And if you can keep something down, the doc'll let you out by tomorrow evening."

He looked at his watch. "It's nearly suppertime. If you could have anything at all, what would it be?"

"Hmm..." Chris closed his eyes, chewed on his bottom lip. "Homemade brownies."

Brian leaned in and licked at Chris' lip until he stopped biting it. "I could make you some, but then I'd have to leave again."

He licked again, managing to find a bit of Chris' flavor beneath the hospital taste.

"I don't want you to go." Chris hummed a little, eyes closing.

"No, I don't want to go either. You'll have to pick something else to eat. I'm sure the hospital could round you up some more Jell-o." He grinned and added, "Or maybe some tapioca..."

"Ew!" Chris pinched him, eyes just rolling.

He laughed. God, he'd missed this the last few days. Missed the teasing and the laughter, missed that incredible drive and focus that Chris brought to more than just the gymnastics. "How about some soup from Lo Chin's? Maybe one of their amazing magical eggrolls?"

"Yeah? You unhook me from this machine," Chris tugged the IV line. "And I'm there."

He chuckled. "I'm pretty sure they'll deliver to the nurses' station, and I'll tell them it's for me. Which won't be a total lie."

God, Chris wanted out of this place bad. Not that Brian blamed him.

"No fair..." Oh, man. The Pout.

He leaned back in, lips sliding across Chris', grabbing that lower lip and tugging on it. "Hey, I can't spring you, but I can get you spring rolls."

"That's not nearly as good, coach. I've missed six practices."

"Tomorrow, Chris. We get this food into you and you be sweet as pie to the nurses and you'll get out tomorrow. Well. Then you've got to let your folks pamper you for the weekend. We'll sneak a mat into our room, though, and you can do some practices in there when you're 'napping.'"

Chris' smile dimmed some. "They want me to move back home. Pop's really pissed."

He sighed and nodded. "They're scared, Chris. They love you and they just want you to be safe. All they can see is that you've been hurt again, that a bad fall isn't just dangerous for your back now, but for your head as well."

God knew, he was scared himself. But if Chris was going to do this, he was going to be there, doing everything he could to make sure that didn't happen.

"You can't live scared." There was something in Chris' voice that made him stop, look. Maybe his gymnast was a little bit scared himself.

He took Chris' hands and held on tight, looked right into one blue and one green eye. "Chris. I love you. Okay? No matter what. And I'm so proud of you. No matter what. Now I want you to remember that, and I want you to think about this before answering. Tell me why you want to go on."

"What? Because it's what I'm made for."

"And you can't imagine doing anything else."

He understood that. He'd felt it. He'd lived it.

"Why would I?"

He could see the heat rising in Chris' cheeks, the worry in those beautiful eyes.

"Because someone who didn't really want it, who wasn't meant for it, would let this stop them."

He held Chris' eyes. "I needed to know you were doing it for the right reasons. That you were doing it because you had to, because there was nothing else you could do. And you are. And I believe in you."

"This won't stop me. It can't." Chris reached out to him, squeezed his hand.

"Then it won't."

He pressed their lips together, kissing Chris hard, putting his passion and belief into it. "You just go out there and do what you do, and you let me worry about everything and everyone else."

"You're going to take Pop on, then?" Chris just held on, squeezed his hand.

"Your Pop, your Mom. Anyone else who has two cents they want to put in. I don't want you worrying about any of it, okay? Your job is doing what you're made for."

"Okay. Thank you. I just want to get back to it." Chris' stomach growled, loud enough for him to hear. "That and some hot and sour soup."

"The first you'll have to wait till tomorrow on. The second I can do."

He gave Chris another quick kiss and reached for the phone, dialing Lo Chin's number by heart.

Chris rolled out of the bed, heading carefully for the bathroom, IV stand in hand.

He watched the movement, assessing Chris, even as he ordered their supper.

Chris looked a bit uneven, the slightest bit unsteady. They'd have to be careful on the dismounts, on the vault at first.

They'd start back on the rings again. Let Chris live in his comfort zone for a while, let Chris get his confidence back.

He pushed his own fears for Chris away. There was no place for them here. He'd committed to helping Chris reach his goals, and that's what he'd do. A hundred and ten percent.

His head itched where they pulled the drain out.

A lot.

A whole lot.

More than he could explain.

Still, he was here. In the gym. On the rings.

Go him.

"That's it, Chris. Just watch that right arm, you're favoring it just a touch." Brian was there, watching him, helping him.

"My head itches." He straightened his arm, beginning his swings.

"Hurts -- stop and come see me. Itches -- ignore it and keep going. Don't let it break your focus."

"Easy for you to say. You're not itching." He rolled up into a handstand, holding it.

"No, I'm watching. You look amazing. Damn, Chris, you make it look so fucking easy."

Chris felt his cheeks heat, pleased all through. "You want me to try the dismount?"

He was still a little off, balance-wise. The doctors said it would take a day or two.

"No, I want you to focus on the routine itself, on how good it feels to be back on the apparatus."

"Okay." He rolled down, arms stretching, toes pointing.

"That's it. Let's see you do the first half of the routine, get the flow back. And whatever's still niggling at you, forget about it. Let's see some of that famous Chris Allen focus."

He nodded and worked it, let himself relax and stop worrying and just do his thing.

He went through the routine a couple of times and heard Brian's happy laugh. "That's it. Yes! That's what I wanted to see. Okay, full routine this time, no dismount. Do it just like that last time."

"Okay. No dismount." He was breathing hard, muscles starting to wake up and pay attention.

Brian started commenting on each move in the routine, voice low and reassuring, praising him, offering tips, little corrections as he moved.

It felt good, to move, to work, to feel his muscles doing what they should.

Brian had him run through the routine again and again, until he was sweating hard, muscles working harder and harder to keep up with what was demanded of them.

Finally, he slipped, dangling one-armed for a minute before dropping unsteadily to the ground.

"Okay, good. Good."

Brian was right there, hands sliding over his shoulders, warm and solid against his back. "That was great. You haven't lost very much ground at all."

"Yeah? Not bad?" He leaned forward a little, swaying.

Brian's arm came around his waist, tugging him back against the solid body. "It was good, Chris. Real good. Some stretches now, yeah? Cool down a little, let your muscles ease up. Is anything hurting?"

"My head itches and I'm tired, but that's all." That wasn't too bad, really. Not at all.

"So aside from the itching, business as usual." Brian's fingers slid over his scalp, not scratching, but rubbing softly around the area where the shunt had been. "Feel good to be out here doing it again?"

"Yeah. Yeah, a little unnerving, but good."

He stretched up, back popping and cracking.

Brian's hands slid down along his spine and then up, going right to where the aches bothered him the most. It was familiar and good, warm, easing his muscles.

"Okay, stretching. Nice and easy."

"Mmmhmm." He twisted, stretching down, sliding down Brian's body in a casual tease.

Brian groaned, hands landing on his hips. "Chris..."

They hadn't made love since he'd been hurt. Not with his folks hovering as much as they had been.

He stretched back up, muscles rippling. "Yeah?"

"Tease," Brian whispered, hands moving, sliding to touch his belly.

"I'm just stretching." Up and down again, making sure they kept in the closest contact. God, Brian smelled good.

"Uh-huh." Brian sounded a little breathless, cock becoming noticeable and hard against his ass.

"Stretching is important."

"It is." Yeah, definitely breathless now. Brian's hand started to slide along his spine as he moved, rubbing, stroking.

Chris bent at the waist, thighs spread wide, ass rocking in a slow, deliberate tease.

A low moan came from Brian, hard cock rubbing against him, sliding along his crack, hot even through their clothes.

"Mmm." He walked out, hips tilted up. "More."

Brian rubbed harder, hands landing on his waist and tugging his ass back. "God, Chris. We can't... not here."

"Okay." He didn't stop stretching, though. No. He needed to cool down.

And Brian didn't step away, kept them close so each movement rubbed them together. He could hear Brian panting, getting hotter as the moments passed.

He lowered himself onto the floor completely, hands stretching along the floor, entire body rippling.

"God, you're fucking gorgeous."

Brian's warmth came down on him, his lover's hands landing on either side of his head. Brian did a couple of push ups, rubbing against him every time he came down.

"Don't stop, Bri. It's good." It was. It was all good.

Brian groaned. "We shouldn't out here." But Brian didn't stop, kept pushing up and down, cock rubbing along his ass again and again.

"Okay. We don't have to." He spread, stretching his hamstrings to the point of ache.

"Turn over." The words were whispered against his nape, Brian's cock pushing up along his crack, their clothing sliding easily.

He rolled, the mats cool against his back. "Hey. Stretch me out, Bri."

It was cheesy as fuck, but heartfelt.

Brian came down, rubbing their cocks and their lips together before going back up again.

His body arched up, following, needing to feel more, feel Brian.

The push ups continued, though Brian wasn't going up very far anymore. Just up a little, then down and rub, and rub some more.

Yes. Fuck yes. Please, Bri. Just right there. He was hard and aching, needing something to prove he was going to be just fine; he was still what Brian wanted.

Brian's eyes held his, lips coming back to his again and again. "Chris. God. Need skin."

"Uh-huh. Want you to fuck me. You want to wait till we get home?" He'd wait, for Brian.

Brian nodded. "Just take the edge off now, yeah? Then home, bed, fucking."

"Kay. I need, yeah?" He pushed up, rocking faster, trying to keep the sore spot on his head from pushing into the mat.

"I know. Me, too."

Brian ground down against him, all pretence of doing push ups gone as their bodies pushed together, searching for their pleasure.

It worked for him, the ball of heat in his belly growing, spreading through him as his cock jerked.

Brian's tongue pushed between his lips, fucking his mouth as their hips danced together.

"Love," Brian breathed into his mouth, moving faster and faster.

"Uh-huh. Hurry." Fuck. Hurry, love. I need.

Brian nodded and moaned, hips grinding against his, their cocks rubbing together against his belly.

"Chris!" Crying out, Brian came, heat bathing his skin.

He grunted, cock jerking as he shot, balls tight as stones.

Brian lay against him, panting in his ear. "So good, Chris. Just... love you."

"Uh-huh." He reached up, scratched the side of his head. "I know."

Brian took his hand and kissed it and then stood, holding a hand out to him. "Come on. Home."

"Yeah. Home." He reached up, grabbed Brian. "Home. Fucking. More stretching."

He landed against Brian's chest. "Mmm. I like the stretching. I might in fact, be developing a bit of a thing for it."

"Yeah?" For the first time since his accident, he felt like maybe he could relax, could play.

Brian's hands slid over his hips and up along his sides. "Uh-huh. Quite the thing in fact." Rubbing their middles together, Brian laughed softly as their cocks bumped and slid. "This thing."

Chris chuckled, lips on Brian's cheek. "I like our... things."

"What do you say we take our things and get out of here before someone finds us with them hanging out?" The laughter in Brian's voice felt good, felt special.

"Yeah. School isn't the appropriate hanging out place." He tickled himself, the words making way more sense in his head than they did coming from his mouth.

Brian laughed for him, though, eyes dancing and happy, and warm hands slid him back into his clothes.

"You looked good out there tonight," Brian told him as they headed toward the locker room. "You felt even better."

"I was unsteady and I didn't hit a landing." He wasn't going to let Brian sugarcoat things.

Brian nodded. "But you were out there. Everything else will fall into place."

"You think so? In time for the competition?"

"With your dedication and focus? You'd better believe it. Sure, you were a little shaky today, but by the end of the week you'll be feeling strong and sure again, and the end of the week after, I bet you'll have totally caught back up on the ground you've lost this last week. You can do this, Chris. You can go out there and show everyone just who Christopher Allen is."

He just nodded. He knew this.

He did.

Really.

Honestly.

Brian's hands cupped his cheeks, brought his gaze to Brian's and held it there.

"Chris. I love you very much. Given the risks, do you think I'd let you do this for one more second if I didn't think you had it in you to compete and win? If I thought you were just going to show, I'd be the first one in line to talk you out of it."

Brian's eyes were intense, each word carrying weight. "But I believe in you, in what you can do. I *know* you can do it. And so do you."

"Yeah. I can. I want on that podium, Bri. I need that."

"It's yours, Chris. We'll be back here tomorrow and the next day and the day after that, and every day you'll believe it a little more. Now, come on. You've done enough for one day and I want you. I've been wanting you since we walked off that dance floor."

"I'm all yours, man. All yours."

"Mmm, I do like the sound of that."

Brian's arm went back around his waist and they started heading for the change rooms again. "I like the sound of it a lot."

Epilogue

Brian stood at his drawers, tugging out T-shirts and underwear, counting out enough for one per day plus one extra. Years of packing for meets made that an ingrained habit. His mom would be so proud.

Chuckling to himself, he tossed a bunch of socks at one of the two large gym bags sitting open on the bed.

Chris came back from his old room with a stack of clothes, and Brian waited for him to pack them and then handed over a bag from the local sports store.

"I wanted to mark the occasion." Chris' first competition. It was definitely worth marking.

"What's in it?" Chris didn't wait for him to answer, just opened the bag and grinned at the track jacket. Red and white with Team Allen across the shoulders, Brian knew it would look great on Chris, just like his looked on him.

"Oh, man. Man, this is cool."

He nodded. "Everyone who doesn't recognize you is going to want to know who you are as soon as you get up on the apparatus and start winning. And I've got one as well -- so they all know I'm with you."

"That rocks." Chris tugged the jacket on, turning to show it off. "What do you think?"

"I think it's awesome. Very professional." He grinned. "You look hot."

Chris grinned, eyes shining, blond hair cut short-short. "You like?"

He nodded. "I do. You want to see mine?" He wasn't so much into showing it off as he was trying to keep from jumping Chris.

"Yeah. Model it for me, stud." Chris' laugh made him goddamned happy.

Chuckling, he tugged it on and turned slowly, loving that they matched, that people would know they were together, a team. "Yeah? Does it look as good on me as it looks on you?"

"I like how it makes your ass look, man." Chris leaned back against the wall, licking his lips.

"Yeah?" He turned around again and wiggled his ass at Chris.

Maybe starting a little something was just what the doctor ordered to make sure Chris' nerves stayed at ease.

"Yeah. It's nice and compact, tight. I approve."

"Oh, good. I've been worried, you know. About whether or not you approved of my ass." He turned back and winked.

"Like the last time we got busy I didn't prove it." Chris pinked a little, thumbs caught in his jeans pockets, fingers framing his cock.

He licked his lips and groaned as the memories of last night flooded back. "Yeah. Oh, yeah. It did."

He moved slowly toward Chris, watching that pretty package.

"You going to prove how you feel about my ass tonight, coach?" One finger traced along Chris' shaft.

"I am. And your mouth and your belly and those pretty little nipples of yours. Oh, yeah. And your cock."

"Mmm." The cock in question jerked, a tiny dark spot becoming visible on the jeans.

"Oh, God, Chris."

He grabbed Chris' arms and tugged the lean body up against his, bringing their mouths together.

His lover's mouth was sweet as sugar and ten times as addictive, Chris crawling up along his body and humping against his leg.

Groaning, he staggered back toward the bed, going until it hit the back of his legs.

They went down with a thud, Chris staring down at him, hips still moving, begging him for more.

He pushed the bags off the bed with one arm and then rolled them, humping against Chris as he pushed his tongue deep.

Chris sucked his tongue, the tug and pull enough to make him crazed.

He pushed a hand between them, pinching Chris' nipples through his T-shirt, his cock just throbbing, needing.

They tightened right up for him, sweet and pink, hard as pebbles.

Pushing the T-shirt up, he broke the kiss, mouth moving onto the tempting little bits of flesh.

God, Chris tasted good.

His teeth scraped across the tip of one nipple, tongue following, circling and licking.

"Bri. Fuck. I need, huh? Please?" Chris scrabbled at his own jeans, freeing that heavy prick for him.

Groaning again, he slid down Chris' body, mouth biting and nipping at Chris' belly as he went. The belly he loved so much, the muscles jerking and jumping for him as his tongue played in Chris' navel and over the beautiful ridges.

Chris started babbling, moaning and twisting, cock slapping that hard belly.

He lapped at the wet spots it left, teasing them both until he couldn't stand it anymore, Chris' movements becoming frantic. Then he wrapped his lips around the tip, sucking hard, licking the liquid right off the tip.

"Bri!" Chris pushed into his lips, fucking his mouth with a single-minded determination, spreading his lips wide.

He tilted his head for a better angle and slid his hands beneath Chris' ass, fingers digging in as he encouraged the motions. Humming and sucking, he reveled in the hot silk that slid over his tongue.

"Gonna. Gonna, man. I can't. Fuck."

He nodded as best he could, hands squeezing Chris' ass tighter. Come on, give.

Give Chris did, spunk pouring into his lips, bitter and salty and male.

He swallowed it down, the flavor filling his belly, his mouth, his nose. Chris' pleasure was so good.

Moaning softly, he continued to suck gently, tongue cleaning Chris' cock.

"Love." Chris moaned, hand rubbing that flat belly, the T-shirt pushed up high enough that he could see Chris' chest.

"Yeah, love."

He tugged Chris' jeans off, watching the muscles of Chris' chest and belly move as Chris helped him, tried to wriggle out of the denim. He placed a sucking kiss on Chris' inner thigh, slowly spreading the long legs, moaning out his need.

"Want you in me. Want to feel."

"Uh-huh." He nodded, fingers sliding over Chris' balls, behind them, the heat hidden there incredible.

"Lube," he muttered, waving toward the side table.

Chris chuckled, handing the tube of slick to him, legs spread wide as that tight ring of muscle was exposed to him.

He held onto the tube for a moment, holding it tight in his hand as he surged forward and slid his tongue over Chris' skin. That chuckle faded into a moan and he licked again, then pushed his tongue right into Chris, wanting to hear the needy babble.

"Bri. Bri, please. Oh, God. Please. Fuck." Chris' hips tilted, body beginning to ride his tongue.

He fucked Chris' ass, fingers running over the warm skin, touching and stroking as his own hips humped the bed, rubbing his aching cock against the mattress.

"Brian. Get. Up. Here. And. Fuck. Me."

He would have laughed if he hadn't ached so badly, if he hadn't needed so much.

"Gimme your hand," he growled, slicking Chris' fingers up as soon as Chris did.

He guided them to Chris' ass, groaning as he pushed them in. It only took him a second to shimmy out of his own jeans, his eyes watching Chris' fingers spread that little hole for him.

"Yours, too." Chris raised one knee, spreading himself wider.

His fingers were trembling as he grabbed the lube and pushed more of the slick out. Then he tossed it out of the way and, moaning, he pushed two fingers in with Chris'.

It made him whimper, the heat and silkiness of Chris' body and the hardness of Chris' fingers in there with his own.

"Fuck. Full. Fucking full." Babbling. He loved Chris' babble.

He slid a third finger in, Chris' body just gripping their fingers, stretched so wide around them.

"Oh, God. Can't wait."

He pulled them out and settled between Chris' leg, cock bumping Chris' hand as he waited impatiently for Chris to pull out his fingers, too.

Chris stroked his cock once, then lined him up, that tight ring of muscles teasing the hell out of the tip of his prick, making him buck and jerk.

"Chris..." It was a whimper more than anything, and he shuddered, the movement pushing the head of his cock past the initial resistance. From there he sank right in, his eyes catching hold of Chris', connecting them more than just physically.

"Uh-huh." Chris smiled at him, bearing down and taking him deep.

Oh, God. Oh, fuck.

There was nothing like this, like being buried balls deep inside Chris. Not even the thrill of competing or of watching Chris really rock a routine came anywhere near this.

He panted, staying still and deep for a few breaths, and then he started to move.

Chris moved with him, hips rolling, head thrown back as all those muscles worked to pleasure him, to touch him.

Slowly at first, their bodies came together over and over again, Chris flesh holding him in, clinging to his cock with every tug away and welcoming him on every push in.

"Good," he muttered, the word fading into a sound that he couldn't contain as his hips picked up speed.

"Uh-huh. Uh-huh." Chris nodded and moaned. He slipped a bit on the bed, sliding out of Chris' hole and Chris turned to kneel, hands on the headboard. "Good and hard, Bri."

"Fuck, yes."

He nodded, moving forward and wrapping his hands around Chris' hips, holding on tight as he pushed back in. Chris' hole resisted for a split second, and then stretched around his prick and he sank all the way in, hard and deep. God, yes.

Chris groaned, head falling back against Brian's shoulder, lips open and eyes closed.

So fucking gorgeous. Even the scars that marred Chris' back added to his beauty, made what he was doing incredible as well as amazing.

He fucked Chris faster, fingers digging into Chris' hips as he pulled them back to meet his prick.

"Right there. Shit. Right fucking there." Chris groaned, fingers going white-knuckled on the headboard.

"Uh-huh. Right there." He fucked Chris harder, faster, making sure he kept that spot stimulated, wanting to light Chris right up.

God, it felt good. Better than good.

"Gonna." He didn't need Chris to tell him, he could feel it all along his prick, the sensations enough to drive him mad.

He managed to pry one of his hands away from Chris' hip and wrapped it around the long, hard prick. Thrusting hard, he started jacking Chris, upping the sensations.

Low, desperate sounds poured from Chris, that long cock jerking and swelling in his fingers.

"That's it." He could barely speak, but he managed to get the words out. Their skin slapped together noisily as he plunged into Chris over and over again. "Love you."

Heat poured over his fingers, Chris' ass rippling around him as Chris' cry rang out through the room.

It was all he needed, his hips jerking his cock as deep as it would go as he shot, spunk spilling into Chris.

Groaning, he half collapsed against Chris, head on the good shoulder as he fought for his breath.

"Wow." Man, he loved reducing Chris down to single syllables.

He kissed the warm, sweat-damp skin beneath his cheek, feeling fine from his head down to his toes.

It was with great reluctance that he pulled out of Chris, throwing himself down onto the bed next to his lover. "Hey," he said, smiling into blue and green eyes.

"Hey." Chris grinned over, nose rubbing against his own.

He tilted his head enough to share a slow, lingering kiss with Chris.

They cuddled together for a while, enjoying the lazy afterglow.

Eventually his mind turned back to the competition they were headed off to. Chris' first.

"You anxious about tomorrow?" he asked.

"Nah." Chris looked like a bomb could go off and he wouldn't stress it. "I'm melty."

He laughed. Mission accomplished. "Good. Good. It's going to be great. I can't wait."

It was what they'd been working all summer towards. What they'd almost lost when Chris had gone down those stairs.

"I've got a good chance to medal on the rings."

"No, you've got a good chance to medal on the bar and the horse -- you've got an *excellent* chance to medal on the rings."

He grinned, excitement starting to wind through him again.

"And my chances at the All-Around?"

He tilted his head and considered. "Damned good. And if you can land on your feet for the vault? It's yours."

When Chris was on his game, he was the best Brian had ever seen. "All you have to do is turn in your best performance and it's yours."

"Then we're gold, man." Chris rubbed against him. "I feel like it's time. Mom and Pop sent a card for luck, had \$100, too."

"Yeah? Cool. We gonna use that for our celebration dinner?"

His arms went around Chris, holding him close.

"You know it. Steak and brownies." Chris was fading, eyes closing like a tired puppy.

He pressed a kiss to Chris' lips, and then lay there watching, holding his lover, his gymnast. His Chris.

Tomorrow everyone else would find out what he already knew.

That Christopher Allen was the best damned gymnast in the world, and every coach, from

that asshole Serens to the idiots who'd given up on Chris, were going to be eating their shorts with envy.

And while that was going to be sweet, knowing that Chris was happy and was doing what he was meant to do, what he needed to do -- that was *his* gold medal.

His fucking perfect ten.

End.