

Playing For Keeps  
by NSyncGrrl

The year is 1996. Five friends have just signed an unbelievable deal with a German record company and are on tour overseas to promote their first album. For all of them this is the first time so far away from home, and they have no one but each other to turn to. Um, is that enough? I don't want to give the whole thing away!

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For those of you who are always asking where I get my ideas from, this story came to me while I was at the 'N Sync concert in DC on August 13, 2001. It was during the number for "The Game is Over," the second verse, when Justin and Lance and Chris were onstage together, and this is what my addled brain came up with.

Some people have pointed out that this story isn't a very accurate portrayal of the group's European tour. I know that -- I took liberties with the facts since this is fiction. And no, I don't think Chris is evil in this story. I don't think he's a dirty old man, either -- he's 24 and sexy as hell and if you think that I don't like him because of the way I portray him here, then you haven't been reading a word I've written since day one.

Playing For Keeps  
Chapter 1 ~ Lance  
by NSyncGrrl

The club was crowded and dimly lit, which was probably a good thing. That way no one could look at any of them and realize just how young they all were. But this is Europe, Lance thought, staring down into the dark soda he was sipping. It tasted more like rum than Coke, even though he told Chris not to get him anything alcoholic. He wasn't old enough to drink. None of them were, except Chris, but somehow he managed to get drinks for all of them. Because this is Europe, Lance thought again. God, he wanted to go home.

He took a sip of his rum-laced soda and looked up at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Upbeat techno music blared through the club, so loud Lance couldn't even make out the song itself, just the driving rhythm that pounded into him like furious ocean waves, over and over again until he was reeling from the lights, the sounds, the people. The place was packed with kids -- mostly an older crowd, Chris's age and up, but there were a few real young ones who managed to fake their way in.

Like they had. At the door Chris told them to play dumb, he'd get them all in, and somehow he sweet-talked the bouncer into looking the other way as the five of them slipped into the club. Chris himself didn't look a day over twenty-one, even though he was three years older than that. But he had a quick laugh and a childish sense of humor, and a boyish face framed with long bangs he parted down the middle -- he wore a folded bandanna to keep the hair out of his face. And he had no hair on his chin at all. Lance spotted him in the mirror, his arm draped around Joey's shoulders as they flirted with a couple of girls seated at a table by the dance floor. He wondered if Chris even had to shave yet.

His gaze shifted to Joey, five years younger than Chris and taller -- they were all taller than Chris. Joey was slim, with long arms, long hands, a long face. When he laughed, his lips formed a perfect heart shape that Lance found enthralling. Of everyone he had met since they started this group, Joey was the one he became fast friends with, even though they were complete opposites. Lance was quiet, reserved, shy. Joey? Mr. Party Animal, always flirting, always talking, always laughing. With his Italian good looks and his unflappable charm, the ladies loved him. Hell, the whole group loved him. Even Lou Pearlman, who Lance was beginning to suspect might not really like any of them much at all, loved Joey. Well, after Joe got rid of that eyebrow ring Lou thought wasn't healthy for their clean cut image.

When Chris looked over Joey's shoulder and met Lance's gaze, Lance looked away. Chris was fun, yes. Chris was great to talk with, a real pal, always there for a friend, but lately he made Lance uncomfortable in an odd way that he couldn't quite pin down. It was in his eyes, maybe, the way he seemed to look right through him and see what he was thinking. Lance hated that. He didn't

want Chris to know his thoughts, his hopes, his dreams. He wanted to stay the bass of the group, the backup singer with the deep voice, that was it. He wasn't ready to let the others in and know the real Lance Bass. He was so sure they didn't want to know that guy.

So Lance swallowed the rest of his soda and studied the crowd swirling across the mirror until he found Justin. Justin. The whole reason he agreed to come out with the group tonight was out there on the dance floor, living it up. Justin was going so Lance couldn't stay back at the hotel. He'd hate himself if he passed up a chance to watch Justin dance, and in this crowd he was just another set of eyes -- no one knew he was watching his friend move, watching the way his shirt pulled across his chest, his pants flattened over his butt. Here at the bar he could see Justin's reflection, his short blonde curls shining in the glints of light refracted from the disco balls, his body moving like seaweed in water, that graceful. Lance could close his eyes and Justin still danced in his mind, so beautiful it made his heart ache. Fifteen, that's all he was, and just two years younger than Lance and already so cocky, so confident, stronger than Lance thought he would ever be. I love him, he thought as Justin danced in the mirror, lost in the mindless rhythm of the club. It's that simple, I love him. And God, what in the world am I supposed to do about it?

The answer was clear -- nothing. If an eyebrow ring was enough to mar their clean cut image, he couldn't begin to imagine what Lou would say if he found out how Lance felt for Justin. He was all Lance thought about -- he was the only one of the group Lance watched during practice, memorizing the way he moved, swooning when he spoke. What would Lou have to say if he knew Lance jerked off in the shower thinking of Justin's curls, his lips? God, what would his friends say?

Lance heard someone call his name and he looked away from Justin with a guilty start. His own reflection stared back at him from the mirror, his light eyes wide, his hair ... he hated his hair. Bleaching it had been a bad move, and it was too thick to do anything with, it poofed up all over his head even though he kept it short -- it made him look like a lightbulb. Behind him Chris was heading his way, weaving through the crowd to the bar, and when he saw Lance glance at him he called out his name again. Lance raised his glass only to find his hands suddenly unsteady, because Chris was giving him that I know what you're thinking look of his and Lance was so sure he knew about the thoughts of Justin already making him hard. Stop it, he warned himself. He set the glass down on the bar, gripped it with both hands. He can't read your mind so just stop it right now.

He almost jumped when Chris's arm slid around his shoulders.

"Hey," Chris laughed. He nudged Lance with his hip playfully. "You need a refill?" Raising his voice, he called out to the bartender, "Another one for my friend here, whaddya say, bud? Fix him right up."

Lance covered his glass with his hand. "I'm fine," he muttered. He didn't want another drink. Before he could stop himself, he admitted, "I want to go home."

Chris laughed at that. "Home?" he cried, incredulous, as if he'd heard the word once or twice before and wasn't quite sure what it meant. "Damn, boy, the night's still young. Have some fun already."

Lance didn't mean back to the hotel -- he meant home. Mississippi, with his mom and dad and sister. Down south where he was the perfect son with the perfect grades and the perfect voice in the church choir. Home where he didn't have to see Justin every single day and he didn't have to feel his heart twist in his chest with every little thing his friend said or did because he was too damn shy to tell Justin how he felt. As if it's that easy, he thought wryly. As if he'd ever feel the same way. He downed the rest of his soda and choked on the spicy rum that left his tongue feeling too thick for his mouth. He didn't look at Chris, staring at him as if he could see through him down the length of the bar.

"You really want to leave?" Chris asked. He gave Lance's shoulder a tight squeeze and pulled him into a one-armed embrace. "You're doing okay, kid. I know it's hard. This the first time you've been overseas?"

Lance felt his lower lip tremble. He swore he wouldn't cry. Because he didn't trust his voice, he just nodded.

Chris smiled sympathetically. "You just have to find something to hold onto," he said. His voice was soft and gentle. For once he seemed to be six years older than Lance instead of just a kid himself. "It's going to be bumpy, Lance, I won't lie to you. But we can make it. Just find something to keep you steady." With a wink, he added, "Or someone."

Forcing a laugh, Lance thought, I found someone. Only it's just me, he doesn't feel the same, I know he doesn't, and I don't want to say anything because I'd rather have him as a friend than nothing at all. But instead of saying that, he just shrugged and whispered, "Yeah, I guess you're right."

With a laugh, Chris said, "Of course I'm right. I'm always right." He touched Lance's nose with the tip of his finger and added, "And don't you forget it."

Now Lance laughed again, and he twisted his head away from Chris's finger. "That's a scary thought," he said, grinning at his friend, but Chris was already losing interest in him. His gaze had drifted past Lance to settle at the end of the bar, and Lance turned to see who it was that caught his eye.

JC sat by himself near the pay phone, nursing something bubbly and golden that Lance suspected wasn't ginger ale. He stared at the bar, lost in thought, and if he felt his friends watching him, he didn't look up. Lance wondered how JC ever managed to get the drink he was sipping -- he was only two years older than Lance, not yet twenty, and with that super-short monk haircut, his hair so dark against his pale skin, he looked almost prepubescent. Chris must've hooked him up with that, Lance thought. Like he had hooked Lance up with the rum. "You just gotta hold on," Chris was saying, only his voice sounded distant, as if in his mind he was

already miles away. Then he patted Lance's back as he pushed away from the bar. "Chin up, dude. We'll leave soon enough."

Lance was about to ask if he meant they'd leave the club soon or if he was talking about heading home after the tour, but before he could say a word Chris drifted away, his sights on JC. As he approached, JC looked up, saw Chris and broke into a quick grin. "Jayce!" Lance heard, and then Chris sidled up next to him, his arm circling JC's waist with a friendly ease he envied. Why couldn't he touch Justin like that? Even just as friends -- Lance wasn't that bold.

Then Chris laughed and sat down on JC's knee, sipping from his glass. Lance looked away. Why is it so easy for some guys? he wondered. Just walk up, start talking, laugh and goof off -- he makes it look like there's nothing to it. Lance wished he could be confident enough or funny enough or even flirty enough to just drape his arm over Justin's shoulder, hug him real quick, stare into his eyes and not look away when Justin stared back.

I want to go home, Lance thought. He frowned into his glass and wondered why, despite the crowd, he still felt so alone.

Playing For Keeps  
Chapter 2 ~ Chris  
by NSyncGrrl

JC leaned against the door to his hotel room and giggled as Chris ran the key card through the lock. "You gotta keep it down, Jayce," Chris muttered. He pulled up on the handle but the door didn't open. JC giggled again. How many drinks did he have? After the second one Chris had stopped counting. None of these boys could hold their alcohol. He swiped the key card again, jerked on the door handle as hard as he could. "Jayce --"

The door opened abruptly, tossing JC into the dark room. "Oops!" JC cried, and somewhere ahead of him Chris heard him stumble, hit the floor, and giggle again. "Oh jeez, Chris, I shouldn't drink."

Chris laughed at that. "No," he agreed, "you shouldn't." He closed the door behind him as he stepped into the room. "You gonna get up, boy? Or just lie on the floor all night long? It's your call."

"I want another drink," JC whispered. "Help me up."

"You don't need another drink," Chris told him. He took another step and felt hands brush against his thighs -- JC had his arms in the air, waiting for Chris to haul him to his feet. He reached down and caught JC's hands, so warm in his own, and for a moment he just stood there, holding on. All those drinks are gonna pay off tonight, Chris thought. How much had he spent on the club? God, he went through money tonight like he hadn't gone hungry a day in his life. It felt like such a waste, throwing it into drinks for the group, but he was looking for some action and if it got him off, then it was worth it, right? They were on their way to becoming big stars -- he'd have plenty of money in the future, wouldn't he?

It wasn't a waste, he reminded himself as he pulled JC up off the floor. His friend staggered against him and laughed again. In the darkness his hands touched Chris's chest awkwardly, then pulled away. His breath was hot against Chris's cheek. "No more drinks, huh?" JC asked. Suddenly his voice was low and thick, and Chris could smell the alcohol on his breath. "I'm still thirsty."

Chris laughed at that. He took a step back and reached for the light. Closing his eyes, he flipped the switch. "Ow!" JC groaned, and Chris waited a few seconds before opening his eyes again. When he did he saw JC, his face in his hands, trying to filter the harsh glow of the overhead bulb. "You could've warned me."

"Sorry," Chris said. With JC's eyes hidden, he let his gaze linger over his friend's thin body. The boy was cute, Chris would give him that. He had cheekbones that would cut glass, a quick smile, blue eyes the girls would be swooning over when their songs finally hit the States. But tonight? Chris thought with a slow smile. Tonight you're mine, bought and paid for. Not bad for the price of a few

drinks, eh? "Jayce? You okay, man?"

JC yawned and rubbed at his eyes. "Fine," he muttered. He sounded sleepy, like the buzz was finally getting to him.

Can't have that. Moving around his friend, Chris picked up the phone by the bed and dialed room service. "What about some brewskies?" he asked. He ordered two six-packs of beer without waiting for JC's reply.

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Chris sat on the floor and nursed a can of beer as he watched JC. The overhead light was out, replaced with the softer, diffused tones of the lamp by the bed. His friend was lying on the couch by the window, just a little two cushion loveseat, stretched out and on his third can of Coors. He stared at the ceiling and was talking in a whispery voice that Chris had to strain to hear. "You know," he was saying, gesturing with the beer can as he talked, "I thought Europe would be different somehow. Older, maybe? It looks just like it does on TV. Like London? I mean, I didn't know they really used double decker buses. And the palace guard -- what's up with those guys? Can't talk, can't breathe, can't do shit."

JC giggled and covered his mouth, as if his mom might overhear him cuss. Then he started to sing, softly, in that heartthrob voice of his that the girls loved. "England swings like a pendulum due ..."

Chris rolled his eyes and tuned him out. Cute as he was, JC was turning out to be an annoying drunk. I could've had any of them tonight, Chris thought, watching the lamplight bounce off JC's beer can as he swung it from side to side. Only that wasn't really the truth, was it? He had started out thinking he'd try to get Joey alone, see if that Italian Stallion was really all he claimed to be between the sheets, but a girl at the club caught his friend's eye and Joey lost interest in Chris before he started to flirt. He didn't even want to touch Justin yet -- that boy scared him, for some reason. He was too self-assured for someone his age, too full of himself. Chris had his sights set on conquering that one, but it would take a while. He had to keep in mind the kid was jailbait.

And then there was Lance, so obviously in love with Justin and so in denial about the whole thing. Chris wondered if he was the only one who saw it, the way he stared at Justin like a schoolboy crushing on the lead cheerleader in class. When he first met Lance, he thought it would be easy, getting with him, since he was obviously into guys even if he refused to admit it. But when Lance had looked at Justin, Chris almost saw him fall, heard his heart stop in his chest and he knew it would never be easy. Of the four of them, Lance would be the hardest to hook up with because he was already so far gone on Justin.

So that left JC. Not a bad thing to settle for, Chris thought, though he could do without the drunken banter. JC was wired too tight, that was his problem. Give him a little drink and he became unhinged, uninhibited. Then again, that was exactly where Chris

wanted him.

Rising to his feet, Chris swayed over JC for a moment, hoping he looked drunker than he was. He didn't want to get wasted and miss this -- he hadn't had anyone for a while now, not since he started this group and found four sexy hot boys he wanted to freak. Some nights it had been so hard to keep his hands to himself when they all bunked down together in the bus, or stretched in one bed, so damn hard. But now they were in Europe, away from home and alone and they only had each other, he was counting on that. They only had each other.

JC looked up at him with sleepy eyes. "You leaving me?" he asked. His words were slurred.

Chris laughed. "Not yet," he whispered. He leaned down over JC and set his beer can on the table at the end of the couch. Then he took JC's can, set it down beside his. Sitting on the edge of the sofa, he smiled at his friend and took JC's hand. He began to stroke along the inside of his friend's wrist, just barely brushing his fingertips along JC's skin. JC closed his eyes and smiled. "You like that?" Chris wanted to know.

JC nodded. Slowly, carefully, Chris moved his fingers up JC's arm, along the inside of his elbow, beneath his t-shirt sleeve and along his bicep, up into the cool darkness of his armpit. Then he spread his fingers over JC's shoulder and began a gentle massage, watching his friend's face closely. He guided JC's hand to his crotch, where he was already hard for him, already aching for release, but when a slight frown crossed JC's lips, he stopped. "It's okay," he sighed. He slipped his hand out of JC's sleeve and began to stroke his chest, his hand flat against JC's shirt. He watched his hand caress between JC's nipples that poked into the fabric of his shirt and then he moved lower, rubbing JC's stomach. JC moaned softly, a small sound like a cat might make. His eyes were still closed but now his lips parted and Chris could see the tiny pink dot of his tongue inside and he wanted to taste it so bad, he wanted to take this boy and rock his world and he wanted him now --

With a sudden intensity he grabbed at JC's crotch, feeling the hard thickness stiffen in his hand. He pressed his mouth to JC's, forced his tongue between his friend's lips as he held JC's hand between his own legs. A little fast, true, but it was what he wanted. Beneath him JC moaned again, tried to push him away, but Chris kissed him harder, pushed him into the sofa and climbed on top of him, straddling his legs, and he couldn't get away. When Chris unzipped JC's jeans and cupped his friend's erection through his underwear, JC groaned into his mouth. His hand clenched into a fist at Chris's crotch. A little breathless, Chris broke their kiss. "Don't fight me," he whispered. "God, Jayce, I'm not going to hurt you. This'll be fun, you'll see. Trust me."

"Chris --" JC sighed. Chris kissed him again, tender this time, and a thrill ran through him when JC began to respond. He was too drunk to resist.

JC bucked beneath him, arching his erection into Chris's hand. "Don't fight," Chris murmured. He kissed along JC's chin, down his throat, and smiled when he squeezed JC's dick and his friend



moaned in reply. With one hand he eased JC's underwear down, pulled his hard length out of its confines, encircled it and began to stroke. From the fumbling at his crotch he assumed this was JC's first time feeling cock, and he whispered, "It's just like you're jacking off, Jayce. You've done that before, right? Just pump your fist, that's it. I get off the same way you do."

Beneath him JC laughed. Chris unzipped his own pants, grabbed himself, kneading as he pulled his dick out. Trepidatiously JC ran his fingers lightly over the skin and Chris shivered beneath the touch. "Yes," he moaned, wrapping JC's fingers around his length. "Just the way you like it, that's it."

JC giggled. "Oh God," he started, but Chris cradled his balls in the palm of his hand and the words dried up in JC's throat. He leaned down over him again, pressed their erections together, wrapped his hands around them both and began stroking them in the circle of his fingers. "I've never --"

Chris cut off his words with another kiss. JC trailed his hands up Chris's chest and over his shoulders, curling them around his neck, pulling him down as Chris's hands worked between them. Chris thrust into his palms, rubbed against JC's dick, humped above him, JC's hands fisted in his hair, his lips hungry on Chris's own. "Chris," he sighed again, moving beneath him, against him, into his hands. He made little sounds in the back of his throat, little uh uh uh noises that drove Chris harder, made him hornier, heated the air between them. When he finally came, it was with a long, drawn out sigh, and then Chris came, covering his hands and JC's stomach with his juices.

"See?" Chris asked. He kissed JC but his friend's lips were growing slack. He was already half asleep, the beer and sex taking its toll on him. "Told you," Chris murmured. He kissed JC's lips again, and then his cheek, and then his forehead. He climbed off the couch and wiped up the mess as best he could, tucked them both back into their pants. "Told you I wouldn't hurt you."

And see? he told himself as he tiptoed from the room. Those drinks paid off after all, didn't they?

Behind him JC started to snore softly.

Playing For Keeps  
Chapter 3 ~ Justin  
by NSyncGrrl

At fifteen, Justin couldn't believe his good luck. He came off a two year stint with a popular kids' show and straight into one of the hottest up-and-coming bands in the world. Well, they would be one of the hottest as soon as they got some airplay back home. So far they were only pretty well known in Europe and that wasn't anything to brag about. The Beatles were just four guys from Liverpool until they hit the States.

And we're going to be bigger than the Beatles, Justin thought. He lay in the darkness of his hotel room and stared up where he thought the ceiling should be. During the day it was easy to lose himself in his friends and the music and the crowds -- he loved the crowds -- but at night, alone, he was all too painfully aware that he was only fifteen and so far away from home. He wondered if it was too late to call his mom.

You have four friends here, he told himself, blinking away tears that pricked at the corners of his eyes. Just thinking about his mom made him homesick, the distance separating his family and him so great that it pressed against his throat and choked away his breath. You have four guys you can talk to at any time -- they probably all want to go home, too.

And they're probably all asleep. He squinted at the clock on his bedside table and thought it read a little after two, but he wasn't sure. It wasn't a digital clock and he couldn't quite see the hands in the dark. If it was only after two, then someone should be up --

He heard a door open out in the hall and he held his breath, listening. The door shut softly, a faint sound, but this was an old hotel and the walls were so thin, Justin could hear every little noise beyond his room. Footsteps crossed the hall, the floor boards creaking beneath unexpected weight. Then another door opened, further away, and closed just as quietly. So someone was awake at this hour. I don't have to be alone if I don't want to be.

But who would he go to? Chris would laugh at him -- God, if he knocked on Chris's door he'd never hear the end of it from the older boy. Nearly ten years his senior, Chris would rib on him for the rest of the tour if he knew how much Justin wanted to go home. And Justin was too damn proud to let that happen. He wasn't homesick, not really ... he was just lonely because it was dark and this was a strange town, the streets outside were full of strange noises, he wasn't afraid and he could stay on his own but he just wanted someone to talk to him, that was all. He wasn't homesick. Chris would never understand that.

There was Joey, who had led a buxom blonde back to his room after they left the club, but Justin didn't want to interrupt that. The girl had been intimidating, busting out of her tight halter top and her mini skirt, boots up to here -- Justin didn't want to see her

again. He didn't see what Joey saw in someone like that.

And JC had been more than a little plastered when Chris helped him from the club. Justin had known JC a while now and knew he was a sloppy drunk. He'd be snoring off those drinks by this hour, passed out on the floor of his room if he hadn't made it to the bed. Justin didn't think all the knocking in the world would wake him up tonight.

That left Lance. And admit it, Justin told himself as he crawled out of his bed, you were holding out for him all along.

And why shouldn't he want to talk to Lance? They knew each other through their voice instructor, but Justin had only met the boy once or twice before he flew into the studio to record their demo. Still, there was something about him that made Justin's mind keep wandering back to his friend at odd moments throughout the day. He would dwell on the little things -- the way Lance smiled slower than the rest of them, the way his gaze lingered on Justin after everyone else looked away, the way he seriously thought about anything Justin had to say. No matter what came out of his mouth, Lance never berated him for it. Not like JC, who would tell him he sounded childish and stupid, or Chris who thought everything Justin said was a joke, or Joey who told him once that he always opened his mouth and just let the words tumble out without even thinking about them -- that had hurt. When the others picked on him, Lance would laugh at him, true. But he didn't start the teasing, and sometimes? Sometimes he even told the others to lay off, which Justin would never do because it would ruin his image, but he breathed easier knowing their harmless pranks would never go but so far. Lance was there to watch out for him. Lance would talk to him now.

In his boxers and thin t-shirt, Justin left his room and tiptoed across the hall. He knocked on Lance's door and waited. After what seemed like forever, he knocked again. He was about to knock a third time when he heard the door unlock and it eased open a crack. Lance blinked out at him, blinded by the light in the hall. Behind him his room was dark. "Justin?" he muttered. He rubbed at his eyes and yawned. "Jeez, what time is it?"

"Let me in," Justin said. He didn't wait for a reply, just pushed his way past his friend into the room. He held his hands out in front of him, feeling his way to the bed. "Were you sleeping?"

Lance closed the door behind him, extinguishing the light from the hall. "No," he replied, facetious. When Justin sat on the edge of his bed and clicked on the bedside lamp, Lance squinted and asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I can't sleep," Justin told him. He crossed the room and turned on the television that sat on the dresser, then opened the small refrigerator, suddenly hungry. "You still have any of that pizza left?"

"So what, you're going to keep me up, too?" Lance asked. He turned the volume down on the TV and watched Justin rummage through his fridge. Then he yawned again and crawled back into bed, fisting the covers beneath his chin. "You know it's after three

in the morning, right?"

Justin pulled the half-empty pizza box from the fridge and returned to the bed. It was just a full-sized mattress but it would fit the two of them easily enough. He climbed up beside Lance and sat cross-legged on top of the blankets, the pizza box open in front of him. "I thought you'd be up," he said, biting into a cold slice of pepperoni pizza they had ordered the night before.

"I am now," Lance mumbled, buried beneath the covers.

Justin chewed the pizza thoughtfully and stared at the TV. Some infomercial was on, and the sound was up just enough that he could hear the announcer rattling off her spiel in rapid-fire French. Justin had no idea what she was saying, and he didn't much care. He wasn't even sure if she was selling the pots or the food processor, because the camera kept switching between the stove and the counter top. "Do you have to have the TV on?" Lance asked. His voice was thick with sleep.

"Is it bothering you?" Justin asked. Of course it is, you idiot, he thought. He wouldn't say anything if it wasn't. Any of the other guys would've kicked him out by now, told him to turn the damn thing off and get the hell back to his own room, but not Lance. This was why he liked him. Lance let him just come in and take over if he wanted to, and he just hung on for the ride.

But it was late. Now Justin was starting to feel tired, and he wasn't so lonely anymore. He watched another five minutes of the infomercial, finished off his pizza, and then climbed to the end of the bed. Stretching as far as he could without straining anything, he managed to hit the power switch on the TV with the edge of the pizza box, so he didn't actually have to get up. Then he tossed the box onto the floor and crawled back to the head of the bed. He leaned against the pillow and looked at Lance, his shoulder hunched over because he was turned away from the light, his bleached hair almost white where it peeked out from beneath the covers. "Can I call my mom?" Justin asked.

Lance sighed. "Justin," he started, and then he rolled over just enough to glance at his friend. His eyes were as light as his hair in the faint glow from the lamp, so translucent Justin thought he was seeing through them to the pillow beneath his friend's head. "Why can't you use your own phone?"

Justin shrugged. "I don't know," he said, picking at the edges of the covers, where the hem was beginning to fray. "If you want me to leave ..." He trailed off, hoping he didn't have to say more.

Lance studied him a moment longer, then turned away. "Fine," he muttered. "Just keep it down, okay? I'm trying to sleep."

Justin picked up the phone on the bedside table and dialed his home number, adding the number to get an outside line and all the international codes to call stateside. He heard a phone ring and a deep sadness settled in his chest to think that it was an ocean away, he was so damn far from home ... he moved his leg until his knee pressed against Lance's back, and the warmth from his friend's body was a small comfort. At least I'm not all alone, he told

himself. At least I have friends here. Lance is with me.

After a half dozen rings, an answering machine picked up. He bit back a sob when he heard his mom's voice telling him to leave a message at the beep. He hated the way his own voice sounded, so tiny, so young, when he whispered, "It's just me, Mom. Just calling to say hi." He hung up the phone before he could start to cry.

When he wiped at his eyes, Lance rolled back over and stared at him. Justin met his frank gaze, relieved to see that there was no judgment in those crystal green eyes. Lance wouldn't call him a baby just because he missed his mom -- he wouldn't tell the others Justin got all teary-eyed just from calling home. "Sorry," Justin muttered with a snuffle.

"I want to go home, too," Lance said gently. Justin forced a smile and sighed. "We've only got a few more weeks, Justin. That's it."

"I know." Justin rubbed his face with his hands, trying to rub away the pain in his heart. "I'm sorry I woke you up."

"It's okay," Lance told him. He slipped a hand from beneath the covers and it hovered above Justin's thigh as if afraid to land. Touch me, Justin thought. He held his breath and watched Lance's hand from between splayed fingers. Just touch me, please.

When Lance began to pull away, Justin grabbed his hand in both of his own and held it down on his leg. He laced his fingers through Lance's and felt better than he had all night. It was one thing to be in the same room with someone -- it was another thing entirely to have them touch you. Then the sadness didn't seem so piercing, so poignant. Another's hands pushed it back, held it at bay. Lance's hands did that. Justin squeezed his friend's hand between both of his own. "Can I stay here?" he asked, surprising himself. When Lance didn't respond immediately, he amended, "Just for tonight. I'll sleep on the couch if you want."

"We can both fit on the bed," Lance whispered. "Unless you want to sleep on the couch ..."

Instead of answering, Justin slipped beneath the covers and clicked out the light. Snuggling into the pillow, he rolled on his side and backed up to the middle of the bed until his butt rested against the warm bulk of Lance's body. "I can sleep here," he said, closing his eyes. Maybe he'd be able to get some rest tonight after all.

Playing For Keeps  
Chapter 4 ~ Joey  
by NSyncGrrl

Joey learned early on in the tour that Lou Pearlman hated him to play around with the fans. "Keep your damn pants on, boy," he had said the first time he heard about the latest fling Joey woke up with one morning. Could he help it if he liked the girls? Hell, he just liked the sex, it wasn't even about the girls, and they were so damn far away from home and his girlfriend and a man has needs, isn't that what they always said in those Lifetime made-for-TV movies? He was nineteen, in the prime of his life, and for once he didn't need to flirt too hard to get between the legs of sexy girls. For once they were screaming his name, begging him to pick them out, give them a whirl, rock their world for just one night ... how could he say no?

So he always set his alarm an hour earlier than everyone else's. At five on the dot, not even three hours since he fell asleep after a bout of furious sex with the blonde still lying beside him, he shook her awake. "Hey," he whispered. In the early morning light that seeped through the curtains, her hair looked like straw where it lay spread across her pillow, dried out and overprocessed and so obviously dyed. He tried to remember her name and couldn't. He didn't even know what city they were in. Was this Munich? No, he told himself, shaking the girl's shoulder. Munich was Anke. Tall brunette with green eyes, remember her? So this isn't Munich. How sad, that he remembered the tour just from the fans he fucked along the way. Maybe this was Berlin.

"Hey, baby doll." He shook her again and she stirred from the depths of the blankets, moaned something that sounded French. That would make this Lyons, and she would be ... "Solange," he tried -- that sounded right -- "babe, get up. You gotta get going. Come on." At least he hoped it was Solange.

She insisted on a shower -- they always did. In her school taught English she suggested they have sex again -- "making love," she called it. She looked at him with a petulant pout and mascara-rimmed eyes and in a thick accent any Hollywood actress would envy, she asked, "Won't you make love to me again?"

Was that what you'd call it? Joey wanted to know. It wasn't love, it was sex, plain and simple, but he didn't have the patience to explain the difference to her. Love is my girl Kelly, he'd say, and sex is just someone I'll never see again. Love, Kelly. Sex, you. But he never broke their hearts. Always leave them begging for more, that was the Fatone motto. Joey was rather proud that he thought that one up himself.

As he zipped up his jeans, he shook his head. "Sorry, sweetie," he told her, tossing her the scarf she had tied around her ass last night and called a skirt. "My manager gets up in thirty minutes and you have to be out way before then. He'll chew me up and spit me out if he found you here." When she pouted harder, he winked and

grinned at her, an infectious smile few could ignore. "You don't want me to get in trouble now, do you?"

"No," she mumbled. "Will you call me tonight?"

"Sure," he lied. It became easier each time he did it, looked into wide, trusting eyes and promised he'd call. He kissed her, a quick peck that barely touched the edges of her lips, but when she reached for him, he turned away. To him, she was already gone.

\* \* \*

At ten to six, Lenny knocked on his door, a discreet tap that wouldn't carry to the other rooms. Joey led Solange out into the hall, where Lenny took her elbow and steered her towards the exit. "Call me," she said over her shoulder.

Yeah, right, Joey thought. "Tonight," he promised. When he saw Lenny again he'd slip the security guard a fifty dollar bill to keep his mouth shut. It was a small price to pay -- Joey had enough trouble rounding her up this morning, getting her ready and keeping her hands off him. He didn't want to ruin last night's hot memory with a messy goodbye.

By six-thirty he figured the others were probably still sleeping off their drinks from the club. He hadn't had much alcohol himself -- too busy trying to get laid -- but Chris had kept asking him, just to make sure. "You need anything, man, you let me know." Joey decided early on he liked Chris, liked him a lot. The guy was in his mid-twenties and still carried on like he wasn't out of high school yet. It gave Joey hope that growing up didn't mean you had to act so damn serious all the time.

But he was awake, already showered and dressed, and he was starving. That wasn't unusual for Joey -- he loved to eat. Growing up Italian in the Bronx, it would've been downright sinful if he didn't enjoy good food. The thought of eating breakfast alone saddened him, though. He couldn't think of anything worse than sitting on an unmade bed in an anonymous hotel room, watching foreign news on the television as he ate a bowlful of cold cereal. No, he'd wake the others up, see what damage the five of them could do to the breakfast bar the hotel had set up downstairs. He'd start with JC --

No, better not. JC had been wasted last night, drunk off his ass, and Joey didn't relish the thought of waking him up. JC was a bear in the mornings anyway, hated anything that interrupted his precious beauty sleep, and truth be told, Joey wasn't up for his friend's growling this morning. He'd wake up Lance, get Lance to wake up Justin, get Justin to wake up JC. Somewhere along the way he'd shake Chris out of bed and they'd hit the bar. The breakfast bar, this time.

Lance's room was right next to his -- Joey stepped out and turned and there was the door, side by side with his own. His knuckles rapped loudly against the wood until he was sure he'd wake up the whole floor with his knocking. At least Josh would be

up then. He grinned at the thought.

When he knocked again, the door opened and he found himself face to face with a sleepy Justin. The boy rubbed his eyes and yawned so cavernously, Joey thought he saw tonsils. "Damn," he said, laughing as Justin blinked owlishly at him. "You and Lance switch rooms or something? What're you doing here?"

"Couldn't sleep," Justin muttered. "What are you doing here?"

"Waking you two up," Joey told him. Justin turned and padded back to the bed, where Lance was sleeping on the side away from the door, rolled tightly into himself. Justin climbed back under the blankets and huddled up to Lance, already falling back to sleep. "Come on, guys," Joey said, slapping Justin's butt through the thin covers. "Time to get up."

"Hmm," Lance moaned. He rolled over and smiled at Joey as he stretched. When his arm touched Justin's curls, though, he started as if burned and almost tumbled out of bed in his haste to get up. "Whoa," he said, holding his head as he stood. Joey noticed he didn't look at Justin, still huddled up in his bed.

With a wink, Joey nudged Lance and joked, "Looks like I wasn't the only one getting some last night."

A thin blush colored Lance's cheeks. "Jeez, no, it's not --"

"I'm just kidding," Joey told him. To be honest, it didn't surprise him in the least to find Justin sleeping in Lance's room. They were the youngest members of the group, and probably so homesick it made them nauseous. Despite the front he put up, the tough act he liked to play at, Justin was only fifteen. Joey had never spent more than a week away from home when he was that age, let alone a whole summer without at least one other relative around.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Joey poked at Justin beneath the covers. "Come on, boy wonder," he said. "Get your lazy ass outta bed."

Lance was still blushing as he headed for the bathroom. "Wake up, Justin," he muttered on his way past the bed.

"I'm awake," Justin grumbled. He clutched the blankets tighter around him and moved away when Joey poked at him again. "Stop it, Joe, or you lose that finger."

"You talk tough for a kid who used to wear mouse ears," Joey replied. He poked at Justin once more, just because it was fun to get under his friend's skin. And easy, too -- sometimes Justin was too cocky for his own good. His ego would be out of control if they didn't all make sure they kept him in check. "Don't make me kick your ass, Timberlake."

Lance disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door as Justin slapped Joey's hand away. "I'll take you on," he said with another yawn, "any time, anywhere."

With a laugh, Joey stood up, out of reach when Justin tried to punch him in the leg. "Just get up, dude. I'm hungry."



"You're always hungry," Justin told him. He stretched, taking up most of the mattress as he did so. "Go wake up JC and leave me alone already."

Joey laughed again. "I'll tell him I found you sleeping with Lance."

"Better than that slut you had," Justin replied. He kicked at Joey as he skirted around the bed. "At least I know where he's been. Get out."

Joey caught Justin's ankle as his friend kicked at him. "Or what?" he countered. He held Justin's leg up as high as it would go, high above the bed, and Justin kicked at him uselessly. "If I don't get out, what are you going to do about it, Juju?"

"Don't call me that!" Justin lashed out with his other leg, catching Joey in the thigh. "Let me go." When Joey didn't listen, Justin raised his voice. "Lance!" he called. Joey grinned at the frustration on his friend's face as he tried to twist free from his grip. "Let me go. Lance!"

The bathroom door opened and Lance leaned out, toothbrush in his mouth and white foam toothpaste flecked on his lips. He stared at Joey's hands around Justin's ankle and ducked back into the bathroom. Joey heard him spit into the sink and then he came to the doorway and leaned against the doorjamb, toothbrush in hand. "Leave him alone, Joe," he said softly.

Joey held Lance's gaze for a minute and then dropped Justin's foot. His leg fell back to the bed and he glared at Joey before he tried to kick at him again. "Hey hey hey!" Joey cried, moving out of reach. "I'm done picking on you, Justin, so be good, you hear me?" Justin kicked at him again but Joey blocked his foot with his hand before it could reach his crotch. "Lance!" he cried. "Get him off me."

With a laugh, Lance pointed his toothbrush at Justin and said, "Down, boy."

Pouting, Justin buried himself beneath the blankets again. "Go wake up the others," he growled, "and leave me alone."

On his way to the door, Joey punched Lance in the shoulder playfully. "You go, kid," he said, his voice low.

Lance frowned at him. "What?" he asked.

What, Joey thought, shaking his head. As if he didn't know Lance had the hots for Justin. He knew what smitten looked like and it fit Lance like a glove. So what if he was a boy in love with another boy? It didn't mean they couldn't get it on. Joey knew lots of guys who hooked up with other guys -- he had spent too many years in theater productions not to have met his fair share of people like that -- and he didn't see anything wrong with it. Sometimes he even thought Justin might be curious, if not as interested, and he didn't understand why Lance didn't just go for it, already. When Joey saw a girl he liked in the clubs, he hooked up with her. It wasn't that hard. And Lance was already friends with

Justin -- it should be even easier, right?

But there was Lou to think about, who probably wouldn't like it none if he knew the boys in his group were freaking each other. And there were the other guys, as well, who might not be as understanding as he was. Still, he liked Lance and he wanted him to be happy. And maybe they hadn't been getting it on last night but Justin did stay with him, so that was something, at least. "What, Joe?" Lance asked again.

Joey shook his head. "Nothing," he mumbled. Opening the door, he called over his shoulder, "I'll get Josh up, don't you all volunteer at once."

"Shut up," Justin called out to him. Joey laughed again and closed the door.

Playing For Keeps  
Chapter 5 ~ JC  
by NSyncGrrl

The first thing JC became aware of when he woke up, before he even opened his eyes, was the cold dampness at his crotch. God, he thought. How long had it been since he had a wet dream? Wasn't he too old for that crap? Remnants of the dream still clung to him, the half-remembered press of ghostly lips on his own, his arms around someone's neck, hands at his waist, unzipping his pants, stroking him until he came ...

That was a dream, right? He hoped so, because the more he tried to hold onto the sensations, the more they slipped away, and he got a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach every time he tried to recall the face of the person who straddled him while he slept. It WAS a dream, he told himself. Just a dream, you had too much to drink last night and you know alcohol makes you horny and depressed and that's all it was, a dream, nothing more. Just to be sure that he was alone in bed, JC rolled over and opened his eyes.

Only he wasn't in his bed, he was on the tiny couch by the window, and he rolled right off the cushions onto the floor. Empty beer cans scattered as he pushed himself up on his hands and knees. "Jesus," he whispered, surprised at his own hoarse voice. Then he flushed. I'm in bad shape this morning, he thought, sitting back on his knees. He wiped his sticky hands down his thighs and squinted across the room, but his bed was made, unslept in, no one there. Thank God. For some reason he thought there should be someone with him right now. Who had helped him from the club?

Chris. JC stared at the dark stain circling his crotch and frowned. He remembered Chris unlocking the door to his room, helping him off the floor, calling room service for more beer. He remembered lying down on the couch now, too, and what had he rambled on about? You should never drink, his mind whispered. He knew that, though. Alcohol made him loosen up, made him a little bit spastic, sort of the same high he got while onstage, and in front of a hundred screaming fans was one thing but to be that stupid in front of his friends? In front of Chris? He'd never be able to live something like that down.

With the slow care of an old man, JC pushed himself up off the floor. He wavered a little as he stood, just until he found his balance, and he grimaced as he unzipped his jeans. They were so cold, so damp, almost clammy, and he had never wanted a shower so bad in his entire life.

Through the open zipper of his fly, his underwear was pushed down below his balls, his penis limp and bared and had he pulled them down like that in his sleep? Or when Chris was with him ... no, he thought, shaking his head. Oh God no, tell me we didn't, tell me it was just a dream, we DIDN'T --

A heavy knock rattled the door to his room and JC jumped.

"Josh?" Joey called from out in the hall. "Wake up, man. Time to eat."

"I didn't mess around with him," JC told himself, his voice a harsh whisper, and it felt good to say the words out loud because that made them true, right? "I didn't --"

"Josh?" Joey knocked again, harder this time, shaking the whole door as he pulled on the handle. "Get up, get up, get up."

"I'm up!" JC cried. He ran a shaky hand through his short cropped hair and pushed his jeans off completely. He peeled off his underwear and shrugged out of his tight t-shirt, but even nude he felt rumpled, as if he were still dressed in the clothes he had slept in. When Joey knocked a third time, JC yelled, "I gotta take a shower! Leave me the hell alone."

"Jeez," he heard Joey mutter. "Bite my head off, will you?"

"Just go away," JC said. "I'll be out there soon enough." He hurried to the bathroom -- he hated standing in his room buck naked. It made him feel too vulnerable, and he hugged himself against a sudden chill that worked its way up his spine. I didn't do anything last night, he told himself. Chris helped me to my room and that was it. He ordered some beers and we drank and I passed out and he left, that was IT. He slammed the bathroom door shut behind him and didn't look in the mirror as he leaned over the sink. He splashed cold water on his face, cool against his heated cheeks. If that was all you two did, a small voice inside his head wanted to know, then why are you already half hard again just thinking about him?

I'm not like that. Leaning into the shower stall, JC turned on the hot water and stepped under the driving spray. Tiny droplets pelted him like a furious rain, pounding his body, flattening his hair. He stood beneath the shower and pressed his fingertips against his eyelids and tried not to think about Chris. What if those lips in his dream were really his friend's lips, kissing him so hungrily? What if the hands on his cock had been Chris's hands? What if -- God forbid, but what if the cum staining his jeans wasn't just his own?

I'm not like that, JC thought again. "I'm not," he whispered, but the words were lost in the rush of water that cascaded over him. Even the shower, so hot, so steamy, so clean, couldn't wash away the bitter years spent in public school, before the Mickey Mouse Club and way before the group. Kids could be evil, JC knew that first hand. He had never been into sports, loved to read, loved math, loved learning, and there were boys at his school who hated him for that. Even though he always listened in class and turned in his homework and kept to himself, there were a few kids who made him terrified to go to school. They always managed to catch him alone in the hall or in the restroom, followed him off the school bus, hit him in the stomach, in the arm, took his lunch and knocked his books on the ground. They would laugh at him until hot tears stung his eyes and they called him gay and faggot before they even knew what those words meant. They just said those things to be hateful, to be mean. And those were the worst words JC had ever heard. He wasn't gay, he wasn't a faggot, he wasn't.

He wasn't.

Chris and I did nothing, he told himself. When he felt a heaviness settle into his groin at the mere thought of his friend, he shook his head to clear his mind. I was drunk, okay? That's all. Drunk off my ass and he was drunk, too, we were both pretty wasted, it meant nothing to either of us. Nothing at all.

But if it meant nothing, then why couldn't he just let it go?

\* \* \*

His friends were waiting for him in the hall when he stepped out of his room. Justin leaned against the far wall, his arms crossed and his chin down like he was falling back to sleep. Joey stood to one side of him, laughing at something Chris just said. Lance squatted on the floor between them and looked up as JC turned to lock his door. They're talking about me, he thought wildly. Chris told them he got freaky with me last night and that's why Joey's laughing, they all KNOW --

"You ready?" Joey asked. Beside him Chris watched JC closely, trying to catch his eye.

JC frowned at the floor as he slipped his key card into the back pocket of his jeans. "Yeah," he mumbled, joining his friends. He didn't look up at any of them, least of all Chris. They know.

"You okay, Josh?" Joey wanted to know. He touched JC's shoulder and it was all he could do not to pull away. "You don't look too good. Maybe you should lay off the booze."

JC forced a laugh at that. "You think?" he asked, teasing. He hardly ever drank. And I'm not drinking again, not if I can't keep my pants on around my friends. "I'm just a little woozy still," he said.

Joey clapped him on the back and laughed. "I think I hear breakfast calling," he said, leading the way to the elevators.

Lance stood up and nudged Justin. "What's it saying?" he wanted to know. He fell into step behind Joey, Justin right on his heels. JC glanced at his friend as he passed and was surprised to see his eyes were still closed. So he wasn't the only one who had a rough night. When Lance stopped at the elevator, Justin bumped into him, then rested his head on Lance's shoulders as if too tired to hold it up. With a breathy laugh, Lance shrugged him off. "Justin, wake up."

Justin let his head fall onto Lance's shoulders again. "I'm not going to wake up until we get to the food."

A twinge of envy hummed through JC at the easy way his friends interacted. They were just boys, after all. Best of friends, comfortable with themselves and with each other. Justin thought nothing of leaning against Lance, and when the elevator doors opened Joey didn't even stop to think before he took Lance's wrist and pulled him into the car, laughing when Justin stumbled in after

them. "You guys coming?" Joey called out. He kept one hand on the elevator doors to keep them open.

An arm snaked around JC's waist and suddenly Chris was there, standing in front of him with a boyish grin on his face that made the blood pound in JC's groin. "You sure you're okay?" Chris was asking, but JC barely heard him. He couldn't see past those brown eyes, couldn't feel anything but that hand on the small of his back. "Jayce? Hello?"

"Fine," he murmured. What happened between us last night? he wanted to ask. What did we do? But he wasn't sure he was ready to hear the answer to that, and he sure didn't want any of the others to overhear, so he just shook his head and whispered again, "Fine."

Chris's hand slipped from his back and lower, just barely brushing along the curve of JC's ass. Oh no he didn't, JC thought, and then he lurched forward, out of Chris's one-armed embrace, as if goosed. His voice was unsteady and thick when he called out, "Wait up, Joe."

Even after he stepped away from his friend, though, he could still feel Chris's hand on his body, and he hated to admit that even that brief touch had been enough to turn him on.

Playing For Keeps  
Chapter 6 ~ Lance  
by NSyncGrrl

"So," Chris said, sinking down into the empty seat beside Lance's on the bus, "you doing better today?"

Lance looked up from the book he was reading and laughed. "I'm fine," he told his friend. He was more than fine, really, because he kept remembering the warmth of Justin's body curled up beside his in the bed and he couldn't even concentrate on the book in his hands. He only held it to look busy so none of the other guys would bother him. In his mind he was reliving what had happened last night, only as he dreamed through it this time, he wasn't sleepy at all when he answered the door and found Justin standing there. He was bold and confident and when Justin hung up the phone with his mom and started to cry, Lance took him in his arms and rubbed his back without hesitation. Then Justin hugged him tightly, turned his face up to Lance's, whispered that he was glad Lance was there for him. I'll always be here for you, Lance told him, and because he liked the way that sounded he played it back again, and their lips had been mere inches apart when Chris sat down next to him and ruined the daydream.

He was about to ask Chris if there was something in particular he wanted or if he was just hanging around to bug him, because he wasn't in the mood to be bugged, when Chris winked at him and said, in a dramatic stage whisper, "I hear you didn't spend the night alone."

Lance felt his cheeks flush. Oh God, he thought, turning away from his friend's knowing grin. He held the book up to hide his face and shifted uncomfortably in his seat, but his slight erection hurt no matter how he moved. "Chris," Lance moaned. "Oh jeez, it's not like that."

Nudging Lance in the ribs, Chris asked, "It isn't?"

"No," Lance told him. Go away, he wanted to say. Chris made him uneasy the same way a loaded gun made him nervous -- it seemed harmless enough at first but you never knew when it was liable to go off. And the last thing he needed was for Chris to tire of this easy joshing and start calling attention to him. They sat at the front of the bus and the others were somewhere behind them, Josh sleeping in one of the bunks while Justin played some video game with Joey, who was losing badly. All Chris needed to do was raise his voice and they'd hear every word. Lance thought if Justin overheard this conversation, he would be too mortified to even look at his friend again. So he liked him, what of it? The whole world didn't have to know, did they? Damn, was he that obvious about it?

Leaning closer, Chris whispered, "What's it like then?"

"It's not like anything," Lance said. He refused to meet his friend's steady gaze, kept his eyes on his book and didn't look

around, didn't want to look around.

"Did you two do it?" Chris wanted to know.

Lance turned bright red. Even the tips of his ears burned with that one. "Okay, you know what? This isn't funny." He stood up and started to kick at Chris's legs, trying to get past him to the aisle. "Let me out."

"Sit down," Chris told him. He caught Lance's wrist and tugged hard enough to pull him off-balance. Lance staggered back as the bus hit a small bump in the road and plopped back down into his seat. "Jesus, Lance. You don't have to freak out on me. I'm only kidding."

"It's not funny," Lance pouted. It wasn't. What if Justin heard that? He wouldn't come into Lance's room anymore, he wouldn't want to put up with the teasing, and Lance didn't want that to happen. Last night he had been surprised to find Justin on the other side of his door, too surprised to resist him when he pushed his way into the room ... admit it, he told himself, you wouldn't have said no anyway. You're the best of friends and you like him so much more than just that, so much more than he likes you back, and you don't even want to think about what'll happen if the others clue him in on how you really feel for him, because then what? Then he'll get all weird on you and he won't be able to be alone with you without wondering if you're thinking of him in THAT way, and you don't want that to happen. More than anything else in the whole damn world, you don't want to lose what he is to you just because you might like it if he were something more.

Chris held onto his wrist and tightened his grip until Lance looked up at him. He frowned at the serious expression on his friend's face, so incongruous with the impish glee that usually graced his features. "Look at me," Chris said, his thin voice soft. "Do I look like I'm trying to be funny?"

Lance tried to wriggle out of Chris's grip and couldn't. He was surprised by his friend's strength. "Chris --" he started, twisting harder.

"Do you think I'm doing this to be mean?" Chris asked.

"I don't know," Lance admitted. "Let me go."

Chris held on a moment longer and then released his grip on Lance's wrist. An easy smile played across his face. "Hey," he said softly, and he spread his hands out to show Lance he meant no harm. "I'm not going to go running to him about it, don't worry. So you like him. So what?" With a wink, he added, "He is a cutie. He has a great ass."

God. Lance felt his face flush at that and he turned to stare out the window. He could see his reflection in the glass, his skin red beneath his light hair, and he wished Chris would just go away already. Don't say a word, his mind cautioned. He's baiting you. You say yeah or you know and he'll whoop and tell them all you think Justin's got a cute butt. So don't say a thing --



He felt hot breath on his neck as Chris leaned close to him, and then he heard his friend whisper, "You do, too."

"What?" Lance asked, suddenly nervous. He whirled around and felt his heart skip in his chest when he saw just how close Chris was to him -- he could feel the air stir between them when his friend blinked.

Smiling, Chris said, "You have a nice ass. Don't tell me no one's ever told you that before."

Lance started to turn away when Chris pressed his lips to his cheek and gave him a loud kiss. He started to laugh as he stood up and with the back of his hand Lance wiped at the damp smear on his skin. "That's it," Chris told him. "Rub it in."

Then he left, smacking the backs of the seats as he headed for the back of the bus. Lance picked up a corner of his shirt and used it to clean the Chapstick off his cheek. Why couldn't that have been Justin? he found himself thinking.

\* \* \*

Somehow when they had been mapping out the tour, Lance hadn't realized they'd spend so much time in the bus. It got old quick, even with a television and enough video games and tapes to keep them glued to the set for years. He loved performing on stage but the actual driving from gig to gig he could do without.

They were halfway to the next city on their tour, Amsterdam, and because they had a tight schedule to keep, they didn't have time to check into a hotel for the night. That was another thing Lance didn't much care for, sleeping on the bus. The bunks were narrow and the mattresses thin, and by the time he woke up in the morning he could feel the vibrations of the wheels turning in his lower back. At least when they stayed on the bus, though, they were together. Even after the lights were out they would lie in the dark and talk. Lance imagined summer camp to be like that, just a couple of friends talking late into the night. Joey always complained about sleeping alone -- he liked his girls -- and Chris always asked strange questions, the kind of things you'd think about the later it got, like who believed in ghosts and what if the shit on The X-Files really happened, what then? JC fell asleep first, every time, and Lance would hold out as long as he could just to hear Justin's voice. In the close darkness of the bus it sounded like he was right beside him, lying in Lance's own bunk, even though Justin always took the one directly above his. That was the only thing he liked about sleeping on the bus -- that Justin slept over top of him.

Lance lay on his stomach, stretched out on his bunk, the book that he wasn't reading open in front of him. Chris was in the bus's tiny bathroom, situated between the bunks and the thin curtain that separated the sleeping area from the rest of the bus, and Joey kept knocking on the door every three minutes or so to remind him that the rest of them were waiting to brush their teeth, as well. The curtain was pulled open so Lance could see Justin, still playing that damn video game. JC sat on his own bunk, opposite Lance's, and

stared at the floor as if lost in thought. His towel was draped across his lap to hide his boxers and every time Chris said something from inside the bathroom, he'd look up at Joey with a slight frown on his face. "Come on, Christopher!" Joey cried, banging on the door with his fist. "Let me in. Your time is up."

"I didn't know we had time limits," Chris replied and JC looked over at them, his brow creased.

"Hurry it up," Joey said. He winked at JC. "Josh needs to take a piss."

"I do not," JC mumbled, but he didn't sound very convincing. He sounded tired and worn out, as if he just wanted the day to be over with already.

Clicking off the TV, Justin came over to the bunks and threw himself down across Lance's legs. "Justin," Lance complained, but only because he thought it would seem odd if he didn't. Truth of the matter was, he liked the feel of Justin's ass on the back of knees.

"Sorry," Justin said, sounding anything but. He scooted off, leaning against the wall of the bus with his legs still draped over Lance's. "What are you reading?"

"A book," Lance told him.

Justin kicked at him playfully, his knee bumping into Lance's butt. "I know that," he said, exasperated. With just that small push, Lance felt his dick come alive between his body and the mattress. Good thing he was on his stomach, because in the thin boxers he wore, all of his friends would see his hard-on and that wasn't something he wanted them to talk about tonight once the lights were out.

Unaware of the effect his body had on Lance's, Justin laid down alongside him, squeezing between Lance's arm and the wall. He didn't quite fit, and Lance had to move over a little as Justin pushed his way beside him. "What is it, though?" Justin wanted to know. He picked up the cover while Lance kept his finger in the book to hold his place. "Jurassic Park? Didn't you see that movie?"

"The book's better," Lance told him. He stared at the way Justin's hair curled against his tanned skin and gripped the book as tight as he could to keep from reaching out to touch his friend. He wanted to feel that skin beneath his own, to run his fingers through that hair. He barely noticed as Justin picked the book up completely, turning it over to read the back of it. They were close, so close, and if only the others weren't there ...

Yeah, right, Lance thought bitterly. Like you're brave enough to do anything about it. The boy's in your bed, practically in your ARMS, and you're too chicken to even smile at him. What the hell would you do if the others weren't here?

Just then the bathroom door opened and Chris came out. "About time," Joey grumbled, pushing his way into the tiny restroom.

Chris simply laughed. Coming over to his friends, he ruffled JC's hair. JC pulled away but Chris didn't seem to notice. Instead he saw Justin sprawled out beside Lance and he laughed again. Lance shot him a withering look. "Don't," he mouthed.

"Don't what?" Chris asked. When Justin looked up from the book, Chris asked, "What?"

Don't say anything, Lance thought. Please. He turned back to his book and let the words blur out of focus. All he concentrated on, all he wanted, was Justin's body against his.

Playing For Keeps  
Chapter 7 ~ Chris  
by NSyncGrrl

Chris always slept in the single bunk along the back of the bus. He liked it there -- no one over him, no one under him, and he could see each one of his bandmates in the other bunks lining the aisle. Sometimes when one of them couldn't sleep, they'd get up and go to the front of the bus for a drink, and he would lie beneath his covers and watch silently, his eyes wide in the darkness. Even if he didn't know where they slept, he could tell who was up just from the shape of their silhouettes against the curtain that hid the bunks. Joey had a big frame, with strong shoulders that Chris suspected he'd grow into as he got older. JC was skin and bones and lithe legs. Justin, he had narrow hips and flat muscles that would fill out some more -- Chris had to keep in mind the boy was only what, fifteen? He had plenty of growing left to do. And Lance ... of all his friends, Chris liked Lance's body the most, with those thick ankles and big hands and damn, that nice, round ass that he'd give anything to push into one of these days. He'd try to get him drunk but he knew Lance had a high tolerance for alcohol -- he could almost drink Chris under the table. Chris teased him about that, claimed it came from drinking too much moonshine in the sticks. "They put bourbon in the baby bottles that far south," Chris told them once.

Lance had laughed at that. "It's whiskey," he corrected. "You don't get bourbon until you're drinking from a sippy cup."

When they slept on the bus, Justin was always the first one awake. Most of the time he stumbled from the bunk above Lance's bed and fixed himself a bowl of cereal, the biggest one he could find, and then plopped down in front of the TV trying to find cartoons. There weren't very many stations they could pick up on the set, though, and all the cartoons were dubbed into the language of whatever country they were traveling through at the time, but that never stopped him. First thing in the morning, Justin wasn't the most coherent member of the group. He never even realized the cartoons weren't in English until Chris pointed it out. "So that's why I don't get it," Justin had mumbled into his Frosted Flakes.

Chris usually got up sometime after Lance and way before Joey or JC. Without an alarm to wake him up an hour before their manager Johnny, Joey didn't bother to get up so early when they slept on the bus. No need to -- there was no naked girl hidden between his sheets to kick out into the light of day. And JC ... well, that kid was born to sleep, no question about it. If they were super heroes that would be his secret mutant power. Sleep. They could call him the Somnolist, maybe. Chris liked the sound of that -- he had given the matter serious thought. He was going to suggest they dress up as super heroes for their next tour, complete with that rigging to let them fly.

This morning Chris woke up to the sounds of low voices arguing

in the bathroom. Lance was in the tiny room, trying to brush his teeth, and Justin insisted that they could share the sink. "Come on, Lance," he was saying as Chris climbed out of bed. He stretched, a bemused smile on his face, and watched as Justin forced his way in front of Lance. Leaning his head into the sink, he turned on the faucet and said, "We can both fit in here. I just need to wash my hair."

Lance caught Chris watching them and rolled his eyes. You're enjoying this, Lance, admit it, Chris thought. He looked at Justin, bent over the sink, his butt pressed up against Lance's thigh, and even though Lance wasn't facing him, he could still see the beginnings of an erection start to tent the front of his friend's boxers. With a wink, Chris pointed at his own crotch. Lance blushed and turned away. "Justin," he warned, as their friend splashed water up at him.

"Give me a towel," Justin said. His eyes were closed as he reached behind him. His hand snagged Lance's t-shirt and he pulled him down towards the sink. "I got soap in my eyes."

"Justin!" Lance tried to shake Justin free as he rubbed his face with the hem of Lance's shirt. "You're getting me all wet."

Chris laughed at that. "In more ways than one," he said.

"Get out," Lance growled. When Chris didn't move, he picked up a slim bar of soap from the counter and pegged it at him.

Chris dodged out of the way and went back to the bunks, still laughing. "I'll pee when you two decide to stop feeling each other up in there," he called over his shoulder.

"We're not --" Lance started, only to interrupt himself. "Justin! You're stepping on my foot. Move over!"

Sitting down on Lance's empty bunk, Chris looked across the aisle at JC, buried beneath his blankets. He considered snuggling up behind him the way Justin did to Lance the night before. They would fit, he was sure of it -- at one time or another along this tour, they had all squeezed into each of these bunks, and he could remember once when they all fell asleep in his bunk, all five of them, despite the awkward positions and the jarring springs beneath their combined weights every time the bus hit a bump. But JC had been distant all day, and Chris wondered if it had anything to do with what they had done the night before. Couldn't he see they were still friends? So they fooled around, got a little loving -- it was what they both wanted at the time. It didn't change things between them. In Chris's mind it only served to bring them closer. And they were friends. If they were lonely, any one of them, they had each other to lean on. He wanted them all to know that, no matter what, he was always going to be there for them. In any way they needed him to be.

A grizzly snore caught his attention and Chris let his gaze drift up to Joey, asleep on the bunk above JC's. One of his legs dangled over the side of his bunk, his arms and legs sprawled out over the covers, which had been tossed aside sometime during the night. His pillow had managed to cram itself beneath his neck so that his

head hung back onto the mattress, his hair falling away from his face. His mouth was open and with each breath he took, a low snore escaped between his lips. Every so often he'd snore real loud and then stop, shake his head, rub at his nose or his eyes and scrunch up his whole face, and then he'd find another position, this one more comfortable. After a few minutes his mouth would slowly fall open and then the snores would start up again, softly at first and then building in crescendo. Chris wondered how long Joey would stay asleep if he pinched his friend's nostrils together. Only one way to find out, he thought with a grin. He pushed off of Lance's bunk and climbed the short ladder that led up to Joey's.

But this close Chris could count each one of Joey's eyelashes if he wanted to, and suddenly all thoughts of holding his nose until he woke up left him. Joey's cheeks were flushed slightly, as if he had been out in the cold for too long, and his eyelashes fluttered as he dreamed. Chris dared to run a finger across his cheek, just beneath his eyelashes. They tickled his skin and Joey stirred, brushed his finger away. He frowned in his sleep and Chris grinned at the consternation that flittered across his face and was gone. Before he even thought about it, Chris leaned closer and pressed his mouth to Joey's pinked lips.

They felt as soft as his eyelashes. Chris licked his tongue along them and watched Joey's face. Another kiss, still tender, but this one a little more demanding as he tried to ease between the closed lips, and then Joey's eyelids flew open and those warm brown eyes stared into his. Chris couldn't quite read the expression in them so he smiled and whispered, "Morning, sunshine."

"What are you doing?" Joey asked sleepily. He stretched and yawned, but his gaze never wavered from Chris's. He didn't look particularly surprised to find his friend leaning over him, kissing him awake.

With a laugh, Chris said, "I thought you'd be lonely, waking up alone. You don't do that much."

"No," Joey agreed, "I don't." His hand drifted below the covers to scratch at his body. Chris wanted to pick up the edge of the blanket and see just where Joey was touching himself so early in the morning, and right after his kiss. He had his suspicions, and they made him want to crawl onto the bunk beside his friend and burrow beneath the covers, too.

But they weren't alone. So instead he smiled and asked, "You want me to get Lenny to throw me out now? Isn't that the way it usually works?"

For a minute Joey just looked at him and then he grinned. "Nah," he said, stretching again. "Throw yourself out. It'll save me fifty bucks."

"Fifty bucks!" Chris was impressed. He thought Lenny did it for free. "Hell, give me a fifty and I'll take his place. I can show them the door just as well as he can."

Joey laughed at that. "I'm sure you can," he said, running his hands through his tousled hair, "but Lenny is discreet."

"Hey!" Chris cried, indignant. "I can be discreet."

Narrowing his eyes, Joey asked, "You call kissing me awake on a bus full of our friends discreet?"

"You didn't like that?" Chris asked. He tried to sound hurt, but it was hard to look at Joey blinking at him sleepily and not want to grin. "Fine then, I'll take it back." And quickly, before Joey could pull away, Chris kissed him again.

Only this time it was Joey's tongue that slipped between his lips, and a strong hand came up behind him, fisted in his hair, pulled him down into a hungry kiss. He felt a sure tongue probe his mouth, the sensation making him as horny as Lance had been in the bathroom with Justin. He hadn't expected this.

When Joey let go of the back of his head and Chris could finally break away, he was flushed and breathless and all sleep had drained from his friend's face. "Now that's a good morning kiss," Joey told him.

"I'll keep that in mind," Chris murmured. Maybe he had been wrong about Joey from the start. Maybe it wouldn't take too much flirting to get the Italian Stallion to show him a wild ride one night after all.

Playing For Keeps  
Chapter 8 ~ Justin  
by NSyncGrrl

The next scheduled stop was the large summer home of one of Lou Pearlman's business partners -- the band would stay the night in something other than cheap hotel rooms for once, and they could practice the next two days in the basement, which had been converted into a dance studio/sound booth. And they needed to practice, badly. Of the five of them, only Justin seemed to have been born with any sense of rhythm. JC was okay, and Joey could fake his way through most of the songs, but Chris wasn't serious enough to learn the dance moves -- he kept trying to improvise, to the horror of their choreographer. And Lance ... Justin felt horrible for him. The boy, for all his sweetness and kindness and downright lovable Southern charm, had no right to be on the dance floor at all. It hurt just to watch him.

When Lance stumbled for the third time during their number for "I Want You Back," their choreographer Darren told him to take a break. "Just stop already, will you?" he asked, frustrated. Joey and JC stood to one side, hands in their pockets and shuffling their feet as they tried not to look at their friend. Chris was by the CD player, flipping through the songs on their demo disk and pretending he wasn't hanging on Darren's every word. In front of the lanky black man, Lance looked chastised, frowning at each of his friends in turn and finally at Justin, who stood near the mirrored wall with his hands on his hips, waiting. "You ain't listening to me, kid," Darren was saying. Justin thought he didn't have to do this in front of all of them. He thought Lance looked like he might cry. "You can't move like he can --" He swept a hand to indicate Justin, and a flash of anger trilled through Justin's body. "You ain't Fred Astaire. And if you can't keep your mind on the music, you're never gonna make it in this group. You need to --"

"Shut up," Justin said. Everyone turned to look at him. Joey and JC and Lance -- even Chris stopped messing around with the boom box and glanced his way. Darren frowned and opened his mouth to say something, but Justin didn't want to listen to him. "You have no right to tell him he doesn't belong here," he said. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I'm your choreographer," Darren reminded him. "You guys don't learn to dance without me. Remember?"

"You don't have to be so hateful," Justin spat. Beside Darren, Lance twisted his hands in the hem of his sports jersey, watching Justin with wide eyes. "Jeez, so he can't dance. Yelling at him isn't going to make him learn any faster."

Darren glared at him. "I'm not getting into this," he declared. He looked around him and must have seen something in the way the others stood, staring at him, that said they agreed with Justin because he just shook his head. "I don't get paid to fight with you guys. You come get me when you're ready to work." With that, he



turned and stormed out of the dance studio. They heard his shoes on the wooden steps leading to the rest of the house and then he slammed the door to the basement and was gone.

Softly, JC muttered, "Way to go, Justin."

"Where does he get off --" Justin started, but Chris interrupted him.

"Now how are we supposed to learn the routine?" the older boy asked. He crossed his arms in front of his chest and met Justin's angry gaze from the other side of the room. "Just cause you can shake your ass and look good doing it doesn't mean the rest of us don't need any help."

Justin was shocked. Hold up a minute, he thought, looking at his friends, but why am I the bad guy all of a sudden? "I was just trying to stand up for Lance --"

"He can stand up for himself," Joey said. He nodded at Lance, who looked at the floor and didn't say a word. "Darren's been on his case before."

"And I'm sick of it," Justin told him. "We pay him to teach us to dance. We don't pay him to make us feel like shit."

Chris laughed at that. "You don't pay him anything, sweetheart. That's Lou's job."

Justin felt an ignoble pout tug at his mouth. "I'm just saying --"

"We're just saying," JC interrupted, "you have to mind your own business. Now you go tell Darren you're sorry and beg him to come back down here so we can learn what we're doing before the show tomorrow night."

Stubbornly, Justin shook his head. "I'm not going to say I'm sorry because I'm not." Turning to Lance, he frowned. Why hadn't he said anything? Did he think Justin was wrong, too? "Lance --"

With a sigh, Lance mumbled, "I'll go." He started for the door.

"No," Justin told him. He caught Lance's arm as he walked by and stopped his friend. "He'll get over it."

Joey rolled his eyes. "So what are we supposed to do until then?" he asked. "Take lessons from you? I think not."

"No," Justin said again. Why couldn't they see he was only trying to take up for Lance? "Joe --"

"I'm leaving," Chris said. He clicked off the boom box and punched JC's arm on his way out of the room. "Come on, Jayce. I'll beat you at Mortal Kombat."

"I suck at that game." JC rubbed his arm where Chris had hit him playfully and glared at Justin. "We need to practice."

Joey gave Lance a long look that he didn't return and then grabbed JC's elbow and pulled him to the door. "You talk some

sense into him, Lance," he said as they left. "You guys come get us when we're ready to go again."

Suddenly it was just the two of them in the room, and Justin was all too aware of his hand on Lance's arm. His friend still wasn't looking at him, and Justin felt his anger fade as quickly as it had bloomed. "I'm sorry," he whispered. True, it wasn't to Darren, but he was apologizing, wasn't he? "It just pissed me off, the way he was talking to you. Lance --"

"Thank you," Lance said. His cheeks reddened but when he looked up at Justin, there was the hint of a smile on his lips. "You didn't have to do that."

"I know." Justin tightened his fingers on Lance's arm. He wondered how awkward it would be to just hug him now -- suddenly his arms ached to hold him. Why should it be awkward? he wondered. You're friends. Chris hugs everyone all the time. You've hugged him before. It's only Lance. So he pulled Lance to him, wrapped his arms around his friend's, hugged him tight. See? he thought as he felt Lance's hands rest lightly against his back. Not that hard at all. He laid his head on Lance's shoulder and sighed lustily. "Now everyone hates me," he said, "and I was just trying to be nice."

Lance laughed. "I don't hate you," he said. When he tried to pull away, Justin held him tighter. "Justin ..."

"Hmm?" Justin didn't want to let go. He liked the feel of Lance's body against his, and it made him feel better to hold him.

But Lance's hands slipped between them and tried to push him back. "Justin --"

"Don't," Justin said. He turned his head and buried his nose into Lance's neck. He had never been this close to someone, had never held anyone quite like this before, and he wasn't quite ready to give it up just yet.

"Justin," Lance protested. His voice sounded so quiet this close, and Justin could feel his words vibrate through his chest.

Justin sighed, his breath blowing the hair up from the nape of Lance's neck. "What?" he asked. His voice sounded thick to his own ears. "The others aren't going to see us, Lance. Don't worry. We're not doing anything wrong."

And out of nowhere he wondered what Lance's skin tasted like. They were already holding each other, or at least Justin was holding Lance, who was trying to let go but he wasn't trying too hard, and there was no one else with them, no one at all, and Lance's neck looked so soft -- this close Justin could see tiny hairs so light they were almost colorless, and without thinking about it he kissed just behind Lance's ear, just to see what his friend would feel like against his lips. And he was right, Lance's skin was soft, incredibly smooth and he smelled heavenly, a mix of soap and sweat that stirred Justin in ways he never thought he'd feel when he held a guy, held Lance ... but the awkwardness came back with Lance's sharp intake of breath and now Justin let him go. They

separated quickly, like two magnets repelling each other, Lance turning away before Justin could even catch a good look at his face. "God," Lance sighed. He ran a shaky hand through his hair, causing the blonde strands to stand up in spikes. "We better go find Darren."

"Yeah." Justin touched Lance's shoulder so his friend would look at him, but Lance had his professional face on now -- the distant eyes, the tight lips. It was the face he wore during interviews, one Justin recognized all too well. "I'm not saying I'm sorry," Justin told him, "because I'm not."

"You don't have to say it," Lance said. "I'll tell him."

I wasn't talking about Darren, Justin thought. "Smile," Justin commanded. He liked the friendship they had -- he could say jump and Lance would ask how high. He hoped that silly little press of lips against his friend's neck didn't change anything between them.

Lance forced a bright smile and Justin laughed, dispelling the awkward tension between them. "I only wanted to see what you felt like," he said. "I didn't mean anything by it."

Lance's smile faltered. "I know," he whispered.

\* \* \*

Later, after practicing until they were all utterly exhausted, Justin stood on the back deck and stared out at the growing darkness. When he heard someone come up behind him, he hoped it would be Lance. His lips still tingled with the kiss and he wanted to ask if maybe Lance wouldn't mind if he did it again. The only other kiss in his entire life had been Britney back in sixth grade, and that had been way too sloppy to even be nice. It hadn't made him feel the way he did right now. All he did was touch his lips to Lance's neck and that had been hours ago but just thinking about it still made his blood race. He wondered what would happen if he ever kissed Lance on the lips. The mere thought made his cheeks heat up and he buried his face in his arms. In his pants his dick began to rage against the confines of his underwear like an animal trapped in a cage.

But it wasn't Lance who joined him on the deck, it was Chris. Leaning against the railing beside him, Chris followed Justin's gaze out into the night and asked, "So why'd you do it?"

For a moment Justin thought maybe he somehow knew about the kiss. "Do what?" he asked, suspicious.

"You should've just let Darren have his say," Chris continued. So you mean THAT, Justin thought, relieved. "He only hollers for a little bit. Now you've pissed him off and he's going to be evil for days."

"He didn't have to pick on Lance," Justin said softly.

"You like him?" Chris asked.

Justin glanced at his friend, but Chris wasn't looking at him. "Yeah," Justin said, defensive. "I like him. Don't you?"

Chris laughed. "I mean like that." He punctuated the word with an elbow in Justin's ribs. "You know what I mean."

"Maybe I mean the same thing," Justin replied, trying to sound coy. His heart began to hammer in his chest. Maybe he did mean the same thing. The thought terrified him. He had never thought Lance was anything more than just a friend ... had he?

Chris studied him for a long moment. Then, turning back to the darkness around them, he murmured, "Maybe you do."

Justin didn't say anything else. He was too busy thinking of Lance and wondering if he might really like his friend more than he ever thought he did. He didn't even notice when Chris left the deck and went back inside the house.

Playing For Keeps  
Chapter 9 ~ Joey  
by NSyncGrrl

Joey sensed someone out in the hall two minutes before whoever it was knocked on the closed door to his room. He hadn't fallen asleep yet -- it was only a little after midnight and he had just hung up the phone after talking with his girlfriend, across the sea and back home in Florida. She told him she missed him and said she wanted something good when he came home. He laughed, told her he had bought her a ton of souvenirs, and she said she didn't mean that. "You know what I'm talking about, Joe." It was almost a relief to hear the Long Island accent in her voice after all these weeks overseas.

He rolled over and frowned at the swatch of moonlight spilling through his windows that cast itself across the door. He expected a harsh whisper, one of the guys calling his name, telling him to open up. Or maybe another knock, this one just as small and secretive. Instead, the knob began to turn slowly, oh so slowly, and Joey sat up in bed as he watched the door inch open.

Chris peeked his head into the room and almost jumped back when he saw Joey staring at him. "Jesus, Joe!" he hissed, and then he shoved his way into the room and closed the door gently behind himself. "Do you usually not answer the door?"

Joey grinned. "Do you usually sneak into people's rooms at night?"

"I don't sneak," Chris told him. He pressed the lock in on the door knob and crossed the room to the bed. "I was just coming to see if you were awake."

"Why?" Joey wanted to know. He watched Chris openly as his friend sat down beside him on the bed. He wore only a t-shirt and pair of boxers, standard sleeping fare for the group, because they had to pack light. The first night they all stayed together JC did have a pair of pajamas, but he only wore the bottoms with a tank top, and even then Justin wouldn't stop laughing at him. Since then it was an unspoken rule -- pajamas were for kids, not the members of 'N Sync. Most nights Joey didn't even bother with clothes, though. Tonight he was glad he at least remembered to keep his boxers on before crawling between the sheets. If he was going to get visitors in the night, a man's gotta be prepared.

Chris shrugged. He picked at the blankets that covered Joey's legs, his fingers tiny touches through the material. To Joey they felt like butterflies landing up and down his thighs. He watched as Chris thought of an answer -- Joey thought he could almost see the indecision flickering across his friend's face as he tried out a reply in his mind and discarded it for something else. Finally, with a sigh, Chris shrugged again and said, "Because I like the way you kissed me."

Joey didn't know what to say to that. He had expected because I couldn't sleep but that would've been Justin's line. Wasn't that what led to him staying with Lance at the last hotel they stayed in? Or maybe because I was thinking ... and then insert thought there, though that was something JC would do, wake up in the middle of the night and trot into his room to tell him some brilliant idea he just got for their show, as if Joey cared once he was lying in bed. Or even because I just wanted to talk, I don't know, and that would've been Lance's response, Joey had heard it often enough. How many times did he open his door to find Lance there, gnawing on his lower lip as if he wasn't sure he needed to wake Joey up at this hour, but he couldn't go to Justin because the idea of their friend in nothing but boxers and half asleep probably terrified him to death. Only Chris would've come up with something as original and as honest as because I like the way you kissed me.

With an easy laugh Joey managed to dispel whatever tension had crept up between them, and Chris grinned, ducking his head in a way that made him look so ungodly young. It was hard to keep in mind that he was the oldest one of them all. Some days Joey thought JC should have that title, and Chris would probably be happier being a twelve year old again. "So you came back for more?" Joey teased. He hadn't thought about that kiss since it happened. It felt good at the time and he had been surprised at how good his friend could kiss, but beyond that he didn't even worry about it. It was just one of those things, you know?

But now Chris laughed with him, and was that a light blush creeping into his cheeks? Joey thought it was, even though the lighting was poor and his friend was washed in pale blue moonlight. When the wind blew the tree limbs outside his window, their thick shadows undulated across Chris, draping half of his face into sudden shade as impenetrable as the Phantom of the Opera's half mask. "What if I said yes?" Chris asked softly.

An anxiousness ran through Joey's veins and curled into a heavy fist that gripped his balls. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling. "What if I said I'm not into guys?" he asked.

Chris shrugged. "You don't have to be."

Joey thought about it for a moment. He was a little bored, wide awake in a sleeping house, and it was getting a little too late to be making any more overseas phone calls home. He had just talked to his family the day before, anyway, and he was running out of friends he could pester just because he didn't feel like going to sleep. And it had been a few days since he had gotten any loving -- well, any that wasn't self administered, but he didn't call jacking off in the shower loving, not by any stretch of the imagination. Only it would be awkward now, wouldn't it? Like it was back in junior high when he kissed a girl for the first time and they both knew it was coming, they both wanted it, but they were both waiting for the other person to do it first. "Don't worry," Chris whispered. "I won't tell the others."

"I'm not worried about that," Joey replied. The last thing he cared about was what his friends would think if they made out. Hell, it would probably do Lance some good, kick his ass into gear about Justin. Joey thought he should talk to his friend about that,

give him some good advice, but he wasn't sure Lance would listen. He was likely to put up his I don't know what you're talking about act, the one Joey could see right through, and then he wouldn't want to talk about it. And they all thought Justin was the stubborn one.

With a start Joey realized he was stalling. It's just kisses, he thought. Even Judas kissed Christ when it suited his needs. Pulling down the corner of the blankets, Joey patted the bed beside him and asked, "Why don't you lie down?"

Chris crawled over Joey's legs, grinning. With a hand on either side of Joey's hips, Chris loomed over him, and something in his shiny eyes made Joey suddenly hard. At the thought of a kiss, even. When Joey realized he was holding his breath he let it out slowly. He's kissed you before, he reminded himself. Chris was watching him, silent, and Joey thought he'd grab his friend in a few minutes if he didn't kiss him soon. What was he waiting for? "Chris --"

And then Chris leaned into him, his lips brushing against Joey's so softly, it made him gasp. He brought his hand up and touched his friend's smooth cheek as those tender lips opened over his. Then an eager tongue licked into his mouth and Chris pressed him back against the pillows, back to the bed. He hadn't planned on this. He thought they would lie together for a little while, he'd lean over Chris and kiss him with tiny little kisses that gradually got more and more intense, and before they both went too far, they'd laugh about it and stop because this was Chris, he was always laughing -- it was against his nature to be serious about anything, wasn't it?

Joey brought his knees up, spreading his legs as Chris pushed him back to the bed with his hungry kiss. Above him Chris's erection filled the front of his boxers, pointing down at Joey's own hard cock. When he crawled closer, Joey thrust up against him, rubbing their erections together with a sweet crush that made him gasp again. It wasn't just a kiss he was interested in now. As he held Chris's face in his hands, he wondered vaguely where he had packed his condoms and how hard it would be to convince Chris to turn over.

But Chris was moving lower, kissing down his neck, his bare chest, his stomach. Joey hated his stomach, flat as it was, because he knew it was in his genes to be a big bear of a man one day and he knew that sooner or later he'd look like his dad and he'd have to put this playboy lifestyle behind him. But when Chris moved lower, kissing around his belly button and lower, he liked the way his friend's thick hair tickled across his stomach and he tugged at Chris's ears. He wanted another kiss. "Chris, I thought we were making out here."

"We are," Chris said. His breath was hot on Joey's lower belly and his chin rubbed against Joey's stiff cock lightly, so lightly Joey didn't know if he could stand it. It felt so damn good. "Only I'm thinking you want something else."

Joey forced a laugh. "You can't control what goes on down there, you know that. Come back up here and kiss me again."

But Chris wasn't listening. He unsnapped Joey's boxers and kissed the tip of his dick where it laid against his skin, red and swollen. His lips closed around it gently, as if he'd done this a million times before, and Joey let go of his hair to fist his hands into the bedsheets. He'd had his fair share of blowjobs but never like this, never with a guy, and just watching his friend's tongue lick down his hard length almost blew his mind. Chris eased his erection into his mouth, taking in more of it than Joey had imagined would fit, and with his hand wrapped around the base of his dick, his palm pressing lightly against Joey's balls, he began to suck and squeeze and pump until Joey thought he'd scream when he came. He thrust into his friend's hot mouth, loved the feel of lips around his cock, the soft tongue, the wet spittle that dripped down his length like candle wax. When he pushed his hips up off the bed, Chris's other hand cupped one of his ass cheeks and kneaded, his fingers rubbing around places Joey had never let a woman touch before. "Chris," Joey moaned. He wasn't a quiet lover. Lance often complained that he could hear all kinds of strange noises through the thin hotel walls the next morning. "Oh Jesus, Chris, yes God, oh Jesus Christ yes."

Then he came, an explosive orgasm so unlike any of the ones he'd had in the showers recently that he was left shaking and spent. Now Chris climbed up to lie beside him, his fingers still trailing in the hair at Joey's crotch, stroking softening flesh. When he grinned, Joey noticed his lips were wet, so wet and dark and Joey grabbed his chin, pulled him down for more kisses. "Chris," he sighed into his friend's mouth. He tasted bitter and sweet and sour and a million different things all at once. Was that how he tasted? Joey had never known. He kissed Chris again, and again, and his friend let his hand smooth along Joey's stomach as they made out.



Playing For Keeps  
Chapter 10 ~ JC  
by NSyncGrrl

It took two days for JC to gather up the courage to talk to Chris. He told himself he didn't want the others to overhear, so he was waiting for the perfect opportunity. He didn't want them to suspect anything had happened when he himself still wasn't sure what had happened. But the truth of the matter was, he was scared. Terrified. Let's say something DID go on between us, his mind whispered, something sexual, something that got us both off -- then what? Does that make those kids from school right? Does that make me --

No. It didn't. It couldn't. He still liked girls. One night did not mean he was going to call up his mom and tell her he was gay. They might not have even done anything at all.

But what if we did? JC didn't know what then, and the fact that he didn't even know how to feel about it tore him up inside. He didn't feel like eating, slept more than ever, and tried to avoid touching his friends as much as possible. Even little handshakes or quick hugs, the kind Joey doled out on everyone, even those JC managed to duck. He just had to talk to Chris.

He thought he'd talk to his friend their first night in the house, but when he finally found the strength to toss back his covers and tiptoe down the hall to Chris's bedroom, no one answered his knock. He wasn't bold enough to open the door and look inside. For all he knew, Chris might be down in the kitchen for a late night snack or camped out in front of the wide screen TV in the den. And what would happen if he came back to bed and found JC in his room? JC didn't even want to think about that. So he hurried to his own room before anyone could see him and ask what he was doing out of bed.

The next morning they all woke up bright and early to practice. Darren seemed to forget about Justin's outburst from the day before and the group worked out the kinks in their routine. By late afternoon JC felt confident enough that they could dance their way through the songs without making fools of themselves onstage. Well, Lance was still a little stiff, and every time Justin put his hands on his friend's waist to guide him along, he messed up even more. But at least he managed to stay on his feet today, and not everyone was born with Timberlake rhythm in their soul. JC thought Lance would do just fine. Even better if Justin would stop watching over him like a mother hen, too eager to step in when he felt he was needed. In JC's opinion, Lance didn't need any help from Justin, but he kept his mouth shut. He didn't want his friend to jump down his throat the way he had gone after Darren the last time.

After practice, they finally had a few free hours to themselves. Their manager Johnny wanted them to start packing -- they had to be on the road again in the morning, heading for their next show --

but JC decided to check out the sound studio instead. He didn't know much about music production yet but he was learning. His goal was to maybe help out on their next album, if he could only manage to talk Lou into letting him get out from behind the microphone from time to time.

"Come on, Josh," Justin said when he told them he'd catch up with them later. Lance stood behind him, waiting. "Star Wars is on, the whole trilogy. We haven't seen it in years."

"No, really," JC told his friends. Joey was already upstairs, and the familiar opening theme music wafted down to where they stood in the basement. Chris sat on the floor by the boom box, thumbing through Darren's CD collection. To JC, he looked as if he were trying too hard not to appear interested in their conversation. "You guys go watch it. I want to get a look behind the curtain. You know Lou never lets me in the sound booth."

"Maybe there's a reason for that," Chris said, not glancing up from the CDs he riffled through.

JC stared at him for a long moment and tried to will his friend to look at him. It didn't work. "Well," he said, turning back to Justin, "Lou's not here and no one's said I can't go in there."

From upstairs Joey hollered, "You guys coming or what?"

"You know it starts out slow!" Lance yelled back at him. Tugging on Justin's sleeve, he said, "Come on, Justin. You said you wanted to watch it." He shot JC a veiled look that said maybe he wanted to watch the movie with only Justin, and he was glad JC had something better in mind that kept him from joining them.

"I do," Justin said. He let Lance lead him from the dance studio, and over his shoulder he called out, "Chris? You coming?"

Distracted by the CDs, Chris murmured, "In a minute."

JC waited until he heard his friends' footsteps fade away upstairs and then he closed the studio door. He toyed with the knob and took a deep breath to steady himself. In the mirrored wall he could see Chris, looking up at him from the CDs in his lap, waiting. Waiting. "Chris," JC said, surprised when his voice came out as nothing more than a whisper. Clearing his throat, he tried again. "Chris. We need to talk."

Chris went back to perusing the CDs. "What's on your mind, Jayce?"

At his nonchalant tone of voice, JC relaxed. There was just something so disarming about Chris, something approachable, and JC didn't want to lose that, no matter what happened between them. He crossed the room and leaned against the mirror, looked down at his friend. The top of Chris's hair was parted straight down the middle. In the back JC could see the ends of the white bandanna that was tied around his friend's forehead to keep his hair out of his face. He wore a thin windbreaker that rustled as his hands flipped through the CDs, and his knee poked through a hole in one leg of his jeans. When he smiled up at JC, it was hard to

believe his friend was five years his senior. He looked so young and acted as if he never wanted to grow up.

Chris elbowed JC's leg playfully. "What's up?" he asked.

"I want to talk to you about ..." JC sighed. Chris looked up at him, expectant. "What happened the other night." Chris's expression didn't change and JC hurried on. "When I got drunk? I don't really remember what time you left. I mean, you did leave ..." Still no response. "Help me out here, Chris," he whispered. "You know what I'm asking."

Another long moment. JC stared into his friend's chocolate eyes and felt as if he were falling, falling, and he wasn't sure he wanted to hit the ground. Just as he was about to say forget it, nevermind, he didn't want to know, Chris asked, "What do you think we did?"

"I don't know," JC whispered. The energy left him and he sank to the floor, his knees pulled up to his chest, his face hidden behind his arms. "I'm thinking maybe I don't want to know. I'm thinking it wasn't anything I ever want to do again."

He squeezed his eyes shut and waited for the teasing laughter he knew was coming. But Chris surprised him. He set the CDs aside and reached out, touched JC's leg tenderly. "It wasn't anything bad," he said, his voice soft. "We were just fooling around, Jayce. I get horny when I drink."

"Me too," JC admitted. But damn, he didn't think he lost all sense of who he was. Unless he was really -- don't think it, he warned himself. You're not.

"This is why you've been so jumpy lately?" Chris asked. His hand stroked JC's calf, a soothing gesture that he barely felt through his jeans. Squatting like he was, his legs were already falling asleep, tingling as if a million pins were being stuck into him over and over again. When he nodded, Chris sighed. "Jesus, Jayce. Why didn't you come talk to me sooner? I don't like to see you like this."

"Do you love me?" JC asked suddenly. He looked up and frowned at Chris, as if he could read his friend's thoughts written out in his eyes. "Is that why you did it?"

Chris shrugged. "We're friends," he said, his voice cautious. "I love you because you're cool and you've got a great voice and you're just a kick ass guy to hang out with."

"But are you in love with me?" JC persisted.

"No," Chris said softly. "It's not like that. Not at all."

Relief flooded JC at the words. Not at all. He could deal with being drunk and maybe losing control of himself long enough to get it on with Chris, of all people, but if Chris liked him, if it had been more than the moment to him, then how would JC deal with that? How could they stay friends if he knew Chris had deeper feelings for him than he wanted him to have? "Thank God," he breathed.

"Hey!" Chris cried.

JC laughed in spite of the tension still running through his body. "I didn't mean --"

Chris straightened up and raised his head back, glaring at JC down the length of his nose. The effect made him look so roguish that JC buried his face in his arms as he giggled. "I'll have you know girls all over the world are going to cry themselves to sleep at night wanting me," Chris said in a haughty voice. "Once we become famous, that is."

JC giggled harder. "I'm just not ..." He stumbled on the word -- it wasn't him. "I'm not gay. I'm not." Before Chris could speak, he hurried to add, "Not that there's anything wrong with it if you are. It's just not me."

Now Chris laughed. "That's cool," he said. Narrowing his eyes, he asked, "This doesn't change things between us, does it?"

JC thought it over. His worst fear had been if Chris really liked him, if it was more than just a one night thing, then what? How could he focus on the group if he was always dogged with the notion that Chris got hard watching him dance? How could they still be friends if Chris wanted so much more? "So it meant nothing," he said slowly.

"I wouldn't say nothing," Chris told him. "I liked it. I thought you liked it --"

JC laughed. He remembered the pleasant sensations that lingered as he woke, before he realized his pants were cold and wet. "I don't remember much of it," he said, "but it couldn't have been too bad."

"See?" Chris asked, grinning.

"Just let's not make a habit of it, okay?" JC asked.

Chris nodded. "Sure." Then he turned back to the CDs and, holding up one of them, laughed. "You remember this?" He broke into song, showing off his great falsetto. "Shake your love, I just can't shake your love .... I was all about some Debbie Gibson."

With a smile JC folded his arms on his knees and watched his friend sort through the CDs. That wasn't as hard as I thought it would be, he thought, proud that they had straightened things out and were still friends. That was the important part -- they were still friends.

Playing For Keeps  
Chapter 11 ~ Lance  
by NSyncGrrl

Lance didn't remember the Star Wars trilogy being so long. It was on television, for one thing, so there were commercial breaks every fifteen minutes. And it was subtitled into German -- he never thought it would be so disconcerting to try and ignore the words at the bottom of the screen when the characters were speaking English, but it was. He kept finding himself trying to read the writing and guess which words meant what. The only word, other than names of people and places, that he recognized was Force. He wondered if maybe the whole concept of the Force was just something that defied translation.

JC never joined them. He spent all evening in the sound booth and when he finally came up his face was flushed with excitement. "I'm meant to produce," he kept saying, over and over again, until Justin reminded him they were trying to watch a movie. Then he flashed them one last grin before heading to bed.

Around the time Jabba the Hutt put in an appearance, Joey stretched and said, "I'm going to call it a night. I still haven't packed shit. What time are we leaving tomorrow?"

Without looking up from the TV, Lance told him, "Nine." He knew their schedule better than anyone else.

"Nine?" Joey asked.

Lance nodded and didn't look at him. He wasn't that riveted to the movie, but Justin sat on the floor by the TV, his legs stretched out in front of him, and as long as he was staring at the screen then Lance could stare at him. You have it bad, he thought. And since Justin kissed his neck the other day? It had only gotten worse.

So then it was just the two of them and Chris, who caught most of the first film, all of the second, and was just starting on the third when he looked around and must have realized that the others had gone to bed because he said, "Well," with such a satisfied smirk on his face that Lance almost blushed. "I guess three's a crowd."

"You can stay --" Lance started.

But Chris was already on his feet. "Have fun, kids," he said as he left the room. With a wink over his shoulder at Lance, he added, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Don't worry, Lance thought. We won't do anything at all.

Justin glanced up at Chris with a slight frown and then turned to look at Lance, who found the hem of his shirt much more interesting now that his friend's steady gaze was on him. As they heard the faint sound of a bedroom door closing down the hall, Justin pushed himself up from the floor and walked away without a

word. Lance sighed and rubbed his eyes. He was suddenly so tired. Great, he thought. Now I've chased him away, too. He didn't want to watch the movie anymore.

But he heard the refrigerator door open and then Justin came back, two long-neck bottles of beer in his hands. "Thirsty?" he asked. He handed Lance one of the bottles and twisted the cap off the other. Then he took back the first one and handed Lance the open bottle.

Surprised, Lance drank down half of the foamy cold brew as Justin stood over him, watching. "Thanks," he sighed.

Justin sank to the couch beside him. Opening the other bottle, he took a sip and then leaned across Lance to set the bottle on the end table. Lance stared at his friend, so lost in the fact that Justin was so damn close to him that he almost didn't feel the arm easing behind his neck. By the time Justin sat down again, his hip on top of Lance's as if the two of them barely fit on the sofa, his arm was completely around Lance's shoulders and his fingers were toying in the thick hair along the back of his neck. Lance stared at the TV, tried to concentrate on the movie as he picked nervously at the label around the beer bottle. "Lance," Justin whispered. His voice was so low Lance almost jumped.

"Hmm?" he asked. He took another sip of the beer because he was nervous as hell. He's just being friendly, he told himself.

Justin took the bottle from him and set it beside his own on the table. "Lance," he said again. "Look at me."

From the corner of his eye, Lance glanced at Justin. His friend's blue eyes were hypnotic, just staring at him as if he were the only thing in the whole world, he was all that mattered. Leaning forward, Justin rubbed his hand across Lance's stomach. The touch was cool and slightly damp from the beer bottles, but it sent a flame of desire into him that tumbled through his stomach and down, igniting his groin. The hand caressed around his side until it found a resting spot on Lance's hip, and he was in Justin's arms now, wasn't he? Where he wanted to be all along. "Justin," he breathed, afraid to say more, afraid this was just a joke or maybe even a dream and it wasn't really happening, he'd just wake up like he always did, hard and aching for his friend.

Justin smiled disarmingly and scooted even closer, if that were possible. Another inch and he'd be in Lance's lap, and God, no, Lance prayed, because then he'll feel how hard I am for him and he'll KNOW what he does to me, please don't let him do this, please. He didn't want just this stolen moment. What would happen when they woke up in the morning and he still wanted more? What then? "Justin," he whispered, and he managed to get his hands between them as Justin brushed his nose along Lance's cheek. He smelled wonderful, a mixture of sweat and a sporty cologne that was the sexiest scent Lance could imagine. It did wicked things to his body, dried his mouth and closed his throat and made his hands weak against Justin's chest. "We shouldn't --"

"I want to," Justin murmured. His lips grazed Lance's as he turned away, but Justin touched his cheek softly, turned his face

towards his. Lance watched, fascinated, as Justin's eyes slipped closed, his lips parted and glistening and mere inches above his own. "I know you want to. Don't you?"

Before Lance could reply, someone stumbled into the living room. He pushed Justin away and his friend fell back against the sofa, a frustrated look on his face. "Hey guys," Chris said, pointing at the kitchen. "Don't mind me. I just need to get something to drink."

Lance ran his shaky hands over his face and sighed. Great timing, he thought. But the moment was lost and Justin didn't touch him again, and together they watched the end of the movie in a silence Lance would've given anything to break.

\* \* \*

When the movie ended, Lance followed Justin down the hall to their rooms and wondered if he should invite his friend in for the night. He wanted to -- Justin was right about that, oh Jesus he wanted to so badly, it hurt -- and when Justin stopped in front of his room and looked back at him, it seemed the perfect opportunity to just say, you know, why don't you come in for a few minutes? How hard could that be?

"Well," Justin sighed, and he raised a hand in a halfhearted wave. "Night, Lance." He waited.

"Night," Lance mumbled. Without another word he stepped into his own room and closed the door behind him. Coward! a voice inside shouted at him. He had you in his arms and you can't find the courage to tell him to get in here? What the hell are you THINKING?

He wished he knew.

His whole body burned with the memory of Justin's arms and breath. Two seconds more and they would've kissed, not a little peck but an honest to God kiss, full on the lips, open mouths, tongues and all and he should just march his ass down the hall, knock on Justin's door, tell him he wanted his kiss now, no interruptions. But he didn't want it to be just a kiss -- he wanted it to move their worlds, change their lives, bind them together and never let them go. What if it was only fun and games for Justin? What if he wasn't serious about him the way Lance wanted him to be? So he couldn't do anything, he wouldn't, not until he knew exactly what was going on behind those stormy eyes.

A knock on his door set his heart racing. It's him, he thought, and when he opened his mouth to speak, nothing came out. He tried again. "Come in," he called, and this time his voice wavered slightly but at least it was audible. The knob turned and he held his breath.

Chris peeked into the room. He looked at Lance, grinning, then looked at the empty bed. With a sigh, he pushed the door open quietly and came in, easing it shut behind him. "Lance, my man,"

he moaned. "Where the hell is your boy?"

Lance felt his face flush. "In his own bed, I'm guessing," he replied. He turned away as he pulled off his shirt. Smoothing down his undershirt, he added, "And he's not my boy."

Walking around him, Chris held his forefinger and thumb an inch apart and squinted at Lance. "This close," he said. "You guys were this close, I saw it. You just have to take some initiative."

Yeah, Lance thought bitterly. That's just what I need to hear. "Go to bed," he grumbled.

"It's not that hard," Chris continued, as if he hadn't said a word. "I mean, you two are already friends. He likes you --"

"No, he doesn't," Lance said. He tried to turn away again but Chris sidestepped and managed to stay in front of him. "Chris --"

"He does," Chris told him. "What do you need, Lance, a freaking sign? God to send down bolts of lightning? Spell out Justin's name in your damn cereal bowl? The kid likes you. He was all over you out there."

Lance didn't reply because Chris was saying what he wanted to hear, wasn't he? With a slight pout, Lance looked up at him and whispered, "Do you really think this is easy for me?"

Chris sighed. "It's not hard at all," he said, and his voice sounded so much like a promise that Lance wanted to believe him. "You just have to wait for the right moment. You threw one away tonight but there'll be others." With a grin, he added, "If there aren't, then make one."

"How?" Lance wanted to know. This was all new to him. He had never felt this way about anyone before, let alone a friend, someone he saw day in and day out. Add the fact that Chris was telling him Justin liked him back and fear filled his heart, made his hands tremble, made him want to just forget about the whole damn thing. So he liked Justin, so what? He didn't have to do anything about it. He couldn't.

Taking a step closer, Chris reached out and ran his hands down Lance's arms. Lance could feel his own muscles bunched beneath his friend's palms and he tried to relax. "It's not that hard," Chris was saying, and he was staring at Lance as he spoke, as if studying the contours of his face. Up and down his hands rubbed, soothing him, comforting. "You just get him alone, and get close, real close ..." Chris's voice dropped to a whisper and Lance leaned forward slightly to hear him. He could feel Chris's breath on his cheek and he pressed his lips together, waiting. His heart thudded loudly in his ears. "Then, you just kiss him," Chris murmured. His eyes slipped closed. "Like this."

His mouth covered Lance's with a sweet crush. For a moment Lance was too startled to do anything -- he just stared at Chris, his dark eyelashes, his bushy eyebrows, the tiny stubble that grew in sideburns in front of his ear. So it's like this, Lance thought. It wasn't that hard after all, was it?



Then Chris's arms came up around him, his tongue pressed against Lance's lips, trying to part them, trying to get in, and Lance pushed his friend away. They broke apart, breathless, and Chris's eyes were unreadable in the dim light of the room. "Just like that," Chris said. His voice was like a sigh. "You try it. I'll let you practice on me, if you want."

"No," Lance told him. When Chris touched his arm, Lance shook his hand away. "I said no."

He thought maybe Chris would push the issue. He didn't want to fight. Not after that kiss, but it wasn't Chris he wanted, even just to practice, as his friend put it. He wanted Justin, not a stand-in, not a substitute. Justin. No one else would do.

Shrugging, Chris said, "Okay." He laughed and suddenly he was his old self again, not the man who had held him and kissed him but Chris, who laughed at everything and thought life was a game. "Just let me know if you need any more help," he said, heading for the door. "I'm here if you want me."

I want Justin, Lance thought as his friend closed the door. And it may be easy for you, Chris, but I'm not like that. I can't just walk in his room and kiss him. I can't.

Playing For Keeps  
Chapter 12 ~ Chris  
by NSyncGrrl

When Chris opened his eyes and saw it wasn't even four in the morning yet, he considered rolling over and going back to sleep. They had to be out of the house by nine, which meant Johnny would have them packed and on the bus by quarter after eight, so he still had hours before he technically had to be up. For long minutes he lay in bed and stared at the ceiling, his thoughts a foggy whirl of half-remembered dreams and memories that blended together until he wasn't sure what had really happened and what he wished had happened. Stupid shit, the kind he thought of late at night, like how he should've kissed that girl in his eighth grade pre-algebra class when she asked him to at the junior high dance -- he didn't remember her name but he wondered where she was now, probably married with kids, was it Candace? Was that it? He didn't know. Or how it felt to kiss Lance, and for a second there he almost thought his friend would let him go further, almost thought he'd be getting some tonight, a piece of Justin's action since the boy didn't seem intent on pursuing things himself. He hadn't known they were getting it on in the living room. He thought he'd just walk through there, suggest they sit a little closer, just embarrass them a little, make Lance blush, and he tripped on the carpet when he saw Justin had him in his arms and almost managed to kiss him before they heard him. He'd give anything to rewind the night. He felt so bad for ruining it for them.

And then Justin didn't have the balls to press the issue. Chris could just smack the kid upside his head. Couldn't he see how Lance felt for him? And Lance ... he wasn't helping matters at all. Chris had knocked on his friend's door earlier because he knew Justin wasn't in there but he hoped he might be wrong. Maybe Lance wouldn't be in there, either. Maybe he was in Justin's room and he was stronger than Chris gave him credit for ...

But no, he had been alone. Chris wanted to scream at him. "Go in there and get that boy!" They just frustrated the hell out of him. When he wanted to hook up with someone, there wasn't this wishy-washy crap. He got with them and that was that. If they said no, then fine. He could deal with that. He could appreciate the rejection -- it was the what might have been that he wasn't comfortable with at all. Take JC -- they got freaky together and then he was like look, that's not me, and Chris was fine with that. They were still friends.

He glanced at the clock. Surely he had been lying here long enough for it to be morning already.

Three minutes had passed. Three. How is that even possible? Chris wondered. Time stretched out in the night, that was how -- lost all meaning and pulled thin like taffy until it threatened to snap and would the morning ever come? Maybe if he found someone to sleep with. Maybe then he could get a few more hours shut-eye.

Silently he slipped out of his bed. Down the quiet hall, past Lance's room, JC's, Justin's ... he stopped in front of Joey's door. He raised a hand to knock before he realized what time it was. So he eased the door open just wide enough to fit through and crept inside. Joey was only an indistinct shape on the bed, rolled to one side. A faint stripe of moonlight cut across his legs where he had kicked the blankets off in the night. Chris closed the door behind him and crossed the room quickly, four steps that took him to the edge of the bed. Then he crawled in beside Joey, curled up beneath the covers, and closed his eyes.

The bed was warmer than he expected, and the pillow cool against his cheek. He backed up until he felt Joey's body press against his. Behind him, his friend snored softly, quieter than he was when they slept on the bus. When Chris snuggled up against him, though, he snorted awake. "Hmm?" he murmured, and the bed moved beneath his weight as he rolled over. "Hey. Chris?"

Chris rolled onto his back. In the scant light he could see Joey's tousled hair and bleary eyes. He looked so child-like, his mouth pulled into a sleepy pout, blinking as if he couldn't quite see. "What, Joe?"

"This is my bed," Joey whispered, as if Chris might not know this.

Chris laughed. "What's the excuse Justin uses for sneaking off to Lance's room? I can't sleep?"

Joey grinned at that. With a sigh he laid down and closed his eyes again, bunching the pillow up beneath his head. "Those boys," he mumbled.

When he thought Joey had fallen back asleep, Chris moved closer to him. He draped an arm around his friend's shoulder and laid his head on Joey's pillow, cuddling into the space beneath his chin. He pressed his cheek against Joey's warm throat -- his t-shirt was so hot against Chris's skin. "Joe," Chris whispered. He brought his knee up until it brushed along his friend's crotch. He felt the beginnings of an erection flare to life. "You want to wake up?" He kept his voice low and soft, and his fingers began to twine in his friend's hair, massaging his scalp. He wondered how far he could get before Joey woke up. He wondered if Joey would like to get up now ... in more ways than one. "Joe?"

"I'm sleeping," Joey muttered. He snaked his arms around Chris's body and hugged him close. "Shh."

In his friend's embrace, Chris felt safe. He slipped his hand between them and stroked at their erections, nothing to really turn them on -- he just liked the way it felt, and when he was a little hard he pressed his hips into Joey's, savoring the feel of his friend's cock against his own. "Chris," Joey sighed, but he didn't pull away. If anything, his arms tightened around Chris's waist, pulling him closer. Into Chris's hair, Joey whispered, "This is only tonight, you realize that."

"I know," Chris replied. He wasn't asking for more.

"Good," Joey said. His voice grew distant, and with a rumbling snore, he yawned. "I like my girls."

Chris laughed. And I like my boys, he thought. All four of them.

\* \* \*

So then it was on the bus and back on the road, and by the time the day was over with they were in Amsterdam, checked into a new hotel with just a few hours to go before their next show. JC was already slipping into his hyper mode, practicing their routine in the floor lounge -- that boy got freaky onstage, Chris would give him that. He knew how to put on a good show for the crowd. Joey had the phone book out, calling up clubs trying to find something that was open late. "It's got to be ladies' night somewhere," he reasoned. Lance was in his room sulking. He hadn't said two words to any of them all day. Chris got the impression he was still miffed about the night before. How had he supposed to know he'd walk in on something? All he wanted was a drink of water. Jesus, you'd think he saw flesh the way Lance was acting.

Chris left the lounge and headed for Justin's room. He should talk to the boy, he thought. Talking to Lance had done no good, obviously -- they would all grow old by the time he got around to telling Justin himself that he rocked his world. He thought maybe Justin wouldn't be such a chickenshit about making the first move, if he only suspected Lance would let him. He knocked on Justin's door and waited. "Yeah?" Justin called out.

"Open up!" Chris hollered. "We gotta talk, Timberlake."

"The door's unlocked," Justin told him. Chris pushed his way into the room, where Justin was dressing for their show. They weren't big stars yet, so their shows were very low-key, and their wardrobe mostly consisted of jeans and matching shirts, though it was chilly tonight and Johnny wanted them to wear windbreakers. Justin's was a shade of red that made him look so wholesome, so downright American, with his white t-shirt underneath, his jeans, his curly blond hair, his blue eyes. He was going to be the heartthrob of the group, Chris just knew it. The girls would all freak over this boy. Even at fifteen there was something about him that made everyone stop and take notice. He already had Lance wrapped around his finger, didn't he? First the group, then the rest of the world. Chris wondered what it would be like to be Justin Timberlake five years from now. Incredible, he suspected. "Hey, Chris," Justin said, looking up as he entered the room. "Hoped you might be Lance."

"Should I be?" Chris asked with a grin. When Justin shrugged, Chris offered, "I can go get him for you, if you want."

Justin shrugged again but Chris noticed he didn't say no. "What's up?" he asked, straightening his windbreaker. He stared in the mirror above his dresser and ran a comb through his gelled curls.

Chris stepped up to him and ran his hand over his friend's stiff

hair. "Hey!" Justin cried, slapping Chris away. "You're messing up the 'do."

"It ain't going anywhere," Chris told him. He laughed as Justin frowned at his reflection, trying to find a curl out of place. "You got enough shit in there to keep it in place for years."

"Shut up," Justin muttered. "What do you want? You just come in here to bother me or what?"

Leaning back against the dresser, Chris crossed his arms in front of his chest and watched Justin closely. "I want to talk to you about Lance," he said.

Justin glanced at him and tried to look indifferent, but there was nothing nonchalant about him. Chris could practically hear his heart beating in his chest, and his eyes were wide, his breath quickened, his hand faltered as he ran the comb through his hair and yes, he was falling, Chris could see it. "What about him?" Justin wanted to know.

"You like him, right?" Chris asked. When Justin didn't reply immediately, he reminded him, "You told me that a few days ago. Don't lie and say you don't remember."

"I remember." Justin glared at his reflection, his mouth drawn down in a harsh frown. "What of it?"

"Well," Chris said carefully, "he likes you, too."

Justin laughed. "I know that."

"He likes you like that," Chris prompted.

"I know," Justin replied. He rolled his eyes and said, "This is old news, Chris. Everyone knows he likes me."

And you're not doing shit about it? Chris wondered. "Why don't you get with him, then?" he asked.

Justin shrugged. "I don't know," he mumbled. The hard look was back in his eyes. "I'm just taking my time."

Taking a deep breath, Chris said, "I think you're scared."

Justin flushed, suddenly angry. "I am not --"

"I think he terrifies you," Chris continued, talking over him as if he weren't speaking at all. "I think you're so afraid of what he might make you feel that you tell yourself you're satisfied with just being friends. What if he gets tired of waiting, Justin? What if he finds someone else?"

"He won't," Justin said. He glared at Chris, his eyes livid with anger. "Just leave me alone. It's none of your damn business."

Chris took a step closer. "What if you find someone else?" he pressed.

"I won't," Justin promised him. "I'm going to talk to him."

"When?" Chris wanted to know.

Justin laughed derisively. "Leave me alone. I'm not scared. He doesn't scare me."

"Then you're afraid because he's a guy," Chris said. "And you're a guy. And the thought that you might be in love with another guy scares the living shit out of you."

"It does not," Justin replied, turning away.

Chris grabbed his friend's arms, whirled him around until they were face to face. Even at fifteen, Justin was already taller than him, and Chris could feel the anger hum through his friend's body beneath his touch. Before he could even think about what he was doing, he pressed his lips against Justin's and kissed him, hard. For a long moment they stood that way as if frozen. Chris didn't even think he was breathing anymore.

When he stepped away, he was so sure Justin would hit him. Just punch him in the face, he deserved it, but why couldn't he see how damn easy it was to get with Lance? Why were they both so stubborn? "Sorry," he muttered. He braced himself for the attack.

But Justin surprised him. "Do it again," he said.

"What?" Chris asked.

"Again," Justin told him. "I wasn't really ready for it. Do it again."

Trepidatiously, Chris closed his eyes and leaned forward until his mouth found Justin's. His lips were soft, softer than Lance's had been, softer than even Joey's. He felt his fingers dig into his friend's arms as he eased his tongue into Justin's mouth. But just as the tip brushed against Justin's own, though, his friend pulled away. "So," he sighed. Chris opened his eyes and saw Justin studying him intently. "Just like that? That's it?"

Chris nodded. "Okay," Justin said. He took a deep breath, steadying himself. "Okay," he said again. With a wink, he added, "Wish me luck."

"Good luck," Chris told him, but he didn't think he'd need it.

Playing For Keeps  
Chapter 13 ~ Justin  
by NSyncGrrl

Justin left Chris in his room and hurried down the hall to Lance's. His friend was right -- what was he waiting for? This was Lance they were talking about. If Justin wanted to kiss him, he'd let him. Damn, they almost managed it the other night, would've had a few dozen kisses between them if Chris hadn't showed up. When the room emptied out and it was only him and Lance, he didn't think anything of sitting beside his friend and getting a little friendly. He liked the way Lance felt against him -- when they were close, it seemed as if there was nothing between them, and Justin couldn't really tell where his body ended and Lance's began. Even just sitting beside each other, he wasn't totally convinced they were two separate people. In his mind he imagined they were like drops of mercury, beaded up when apart but bring them too close together and they meshed into one.

So he liked him. Hell, he knew Lance liked him back, had always known it, since the moment they met and he saw the way his friend's eyes lit up when he smiled. He was still young, they both were, they had years ahead of them, they could afford to take things slow, and he hadn't lied when he told Chris he was going to talk to him. He just wanted to be absolutely sure before he jumped the gun. He knew Lance liked him, yes, but he also knew that Lance was skittish -- whenever Justin tried something, he pulled away. In the dance studio when they hugged, it was Lance who had his arms between them, pushing at Justin. On the sofa, same thing -- he turned away and shoved Justin back when Chris walked in the room. So he'd have to be careful. The wrong word, the wrong moment, and Lance would turn him away. And Justin wasn't going to let him do that.

And then Chris kissed him.

That had been out of the blue, totally unexpected, wasn't even really all that great -- in Justin's mind Chris was an old fart and sure, so he kissed him, so what? It meant nothing because Justin had been too angry to enjoy it the first time. The second time he only thought of Lance. His lips will be softer, he had thought as Chris kissed him. More tender. Fuller. He's got a killer bottom lip. And he'll taste like mints, probably. He loves those little peppermint candies, always eating on them, he'll taste so sweet -- and what am I doing kissing Chris then? He wanted to be kissing Lance.

Well, he would then. He always got what he wanted.

Outside of Lance's door, he stopped. What did Chris say? "What if he finds someone else?" Anger rushed through him again. Lance wouldn't find anyone else, Lance liked him, but Chris suggested it so what if their friend was after him for himself? What if Chris was already hitting on Lance -- Jeez, Justin thought, his hands curling into fists at his sides, what if he's already kissed him? Suddenly he wanted to go back to his room and hit Chris upside the head, tell

him to keep his hands to himself and keep them off his boy.

He's not your boy yet, a voice in his head whispered, and that kept him from storming down the hall. He likes you but he's not yours yet. Aren't you going to fix that?

He raised a fist to knock, thought better of it, and simply grabbed the door knob. It twisted easily in his hand. Pushing the door open, he stepped inside Lance's room.

It was empty.

"Lance?" Justin called out. The bed was still made and his friend's bags were stacked in the chair by the window, but Lance wasn't there.

Crossing the room, Justin opened the tiny closet and looked inside. Nothing. Well, I'd hope not, he told himself. There was another door, this one leading to the bathroom, and Justin pressed his ear against it, listening. He heard the rush of a shower and Lance's deep voice as he sang softly. Grinning, Justin tried this door knob, but it wouldn't open. So he's in the shower. So I'll just wait.

He shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and walked around the small room. Was it just him, or were their hotel rooms getting worse and worse with each stop? One day they'd be big, the biggest band in the world, and they'd stay at the Ritz in every city. Hell, they'd only tour in cities that had a Ritz, and he'd make sure he and Lance got the presidential suite. No, the honeymoon suite. No, the penthouse suite. The whole top floor of the hotel to themselves. With a vibrating bed. Did places like the Ritz have vibrating beds? He wasn't sure but they'd find one just for him, he knew that much. "Oh, Justin Timberlake's here?" they'd say. "Find that boy a vibrating bed, pronto!"

Or maybe he and Lance could make the whole thing shake by themselves. He laughed. He shouldn't be thinking things like that, not yet. They were just friends, but if he had his way, they'd be something more by the time they both left this room tonight.

And he always had his way.

He was at the dresser, looking through Lance's toiletries, when the bathroom door opened and a blast of hot steam curled around his ankles. He put down Lance's deodorant and looked up to find his friend staring at him with nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist. His hair stood up in a shock of blonde spikes and a few drops of water runneled down his smooth, bare chest. "Hey," Justin said.

"What are you doing?" Lance wanted to know. He hugged himself and looked as if he wished he were fully clothed. "I didn't know you were here. What do you want?"

"I'm waiting for you," Justin told him. He put his hands in his pockets again and rocked back on his heels. He tried to keep his eyes on Lance's face but it was hard with so much naked skin below, flesh that wanted to be touched, toweled dry, kissed and



was it just him or was there a distinct bulge at the front of Lance's towel? Because Justin was already turned on just standing here and he wasn't even undressed. He could only imagine how Lance was feeling right now.

"What for?" Lance asked. He took a step back, towards the bathroom. "Justin, I've got to get dressed --"

"Wait." Justin closed the distance between them in two steps and caught Lance's arm before his friend could slip away. He'd lock himself up in the bathroom and get dressed and this moment would be lost. Justin didn't want that to happen.

Beneath his palm Lance's skin was damp and warm. He flexed his fingers, rubbing into Lance's arm, savoring the touch, and when he looked at his friend he found Lance staring at his hand where it held him. "What?" Lance asked. His voice was thick, throaty, as if he were suddenly going to be sick.

"Come out here," Justin told him. He didn't like that Lance had one foot in the bathroom. If he let go, he'd slip back into the tiny room and Justin would have to wait until he dressed before they could talk. He didn't want to wait. He wanted to tell Lance how he felt now.

"Justin," Lance warned. He tried to twist out of Justin's grip but it was only a halfhearted attempt. When Justin pulled him closer, Lance took a step towards him and then stopped. "I have to get dressed."

"This will only take a minute," Justin promised him.

"Can't I please get dressed first?" Lance looked up at him, fear shining bright in his eyes.

Justin pulled him another step closer. "I'm not going to hurt you," he whispered.

Lance's eyes were so huge, they seemed to eclipse the rest of his face. "I know that. I'd just feel more comfortable if I wasn't half naked."

With a smirk, Justin said, "You don't have to be the only one." Before Lance could reply, he slipped out of his windbreaker, tossed it on the floor.

Lance laughed. "Justin, what --"

Justin tugged off his white t-shirt, kicked off his shoes, and unzipped his pants. Pushing them down to the floor, he stepped out of them and faced Lance in just his white boxer briefs, where there was no mistaking the fact that he was already hard. "There," Justin told him. "Now we're both half naked."

For a moment Lance said nothing. He couldn't seem to take his eyes off of the erection that strained the front of Justin's underwear. But he closed the bathroom door behind him and at least he wasn't on the other side of it, right? At least there was that. "Justin," Lance sighed. He covered his face with one trembling hand. "Oh jeez, you know --"

That was as far as he got. Justin wrapped his arms around Lance's waist, still damp from his shower, and pushed him back against the door. He pressed his hips into Lance's, grinding their swollen cocks together, and one hand ran up Lance's back to twine in his hair, wet and already stiffening with gel. Lance's arms were the only thing between them, the only thing keeping them apart.

Justin leaned down and kissed Lance before he could turn away. His lips closed over Lance's, his tongue licked along the full bottom lip that was just as tender as he imagined it would be. Lance gasped as his knee rose between them, pressed into Lance's crotch, and Justin's tongue found its way inside. He stared into Lance's eyes, surprised, and then the fear dissolved and his eyes slipped closed, his arms came up around Justin's neck, over his shoulders, fisting in his curls to pull him closer. Justin hugged Lance to him and felt the towel between them come undone. It fell to the floor with a rustle that was lost in their moans.

He had been right -- Lance tasted like peppermints and his mouth was so soft, so loving, so damn hot and wet and Justin couldn't get enough of him, of his kisses. His hands roamed down Lance's smooth back, lower along his friend's buttocks, pliant in his palms. He imagined he left handprints all along Lance's body, marks declaring this boy as his, off limits to the rest of the world -- his. "Lance," he sighed, breathless, when they finally parted. He held onto him tight and nuzzled along his friend's throat. "Chris said you liked me and I just wanted to let you know that I like you, too. Don't push me away. I like you, okay? Don't fall for anyone else. Don't let someone else take you away from me. I like you." He kissed along Lance's neck, around his jaw, up to his ear. He whispered, "Tell me you like me, too."

"I do," Lance murmured. His hands cradled Justin's face as they kissed again. "Don't worry, Justin. It's always been you."

And it always will be, Justin thought, losing himself in Lance.

The End