

No Place Like Home  
by NSyncGrrl

Let me just say up front that this is a stupid story. It's silly and irreverent and not meant to be true to life or realistic or any crap like that. I had it in my mind and I had to write it out.

Also let me add that the world used in this story belongs to L. Frank Baum. Me and my boys are just passing through.

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No Place Like Home  
Part 1  
by NSyncGrrl

Justin knew Lance would be angry before he even opened the front door to the small townhouse they shared in Orlando. He would be angry because it was after seven in the evening and Justin was due home two hours earlier, at five o'clock. He was supposed to be at home already when Lance came back from the studio -- he left ten minutes before Lance did and told him he'd meet him back at the house. Lance had smiled and said sure, see you there, and gave Justin one of his little winks that meant I love you before turning back to the sheet music JC was trying to go over with him. The promise wrapped up in that little wink made Justin giddy, and he couldn't wait to get home now. They'd cuddle on the couch, watch Jeopardy! maybe, and play that game they had where whoever answered wrong had to take off a piece of clothing, and because Lance knew all the answers Justin knew he'd be naked in no time, and then the fun would really start. Lance would push him to the sofa and cover him with kisses, starting with his nipples and working his way down, until Justin screamed for more, and that thought made him ache because they'd make love in front of the TV and then fall asleep in each others' arms. That was worth going home for.

But on the way back to the townhouse, Justin thought maybe he should swing over and see Britney, she was just moving into her new apartment and had been pestering them to stop by, and he had the time now. Lance was still at the studio. He could say hi, take the obligatory tour of the place, and then head on home. It wouldn't take too long.

Only Britney was in the middle of wallpapering her foyer, and Justin helped her get the trim up, the two of them covered in glue and laughing like fools when the paper peeled away from the wall in long thick strips. A glance at his watch told him that Lance was probably already home by now, he had to get moving, so a quick goodbye later he was back on the road, heading to the house and the promise of Lance on the sofa, cuddling with him and kissing the day away.

He hadn't realized it was rush hour.

After sitting for twenty minutes in bumper-to-bumper traffic, he took the first exit he could find and promptly got lost. All of the suburban streets looked the same, and he drove up and down every one, looking for a gas station, a convenience store, someplace he could stop and ask for directions to Route 4. And now it was getting late, now it was dark outside, and Lance would be worried. I'll be home in a little bit, Justin promised himself. But as the minutes ticked away and nothing around him looked familiar in the growing dusk, he didn't think he'd make it in time for Jeopardy!

Finally he found the right exit, and by the time he merged onto the highway, traffic had thinned out a bit. Once he saw the

billboard advertising the new condos going up near their townhouse, he couldn't suppress a relieved grin. He'd make it in time for Wheel of Fortune, in plenty of time for Jeopardy!, and he'd still get to cuddle with Lance and feel his hungry kisses and make love to him before they fell asleep.

But those thoughts left him the minute he opened the door and saw Lance standing in the hall, his arms crossed in front of his chest, anger and worry warring on his face. "Where have you been?" Lance asked as Justin tossed his keys onto the small table by the stairs.

Justin sighed. "Out," he said. Wasn't that obvious? "I'm sorry I'm late --"

Lance rolled his eyes. "Sorry," he said, his voice hard. "Sorry you couldn't call me? Sorry I sat here for the last two hours wondering where the hell you were?"

"Lance, I said --" Justin started, but Lance cut him off.

"You said you were sorry," Lance reminded him. "Do you even know what has been going through my mind? You could've been dead for all I knew. In a car wreck, killed, broken down on the side of the road ..." He took a deep breath to steady himself, but Justin could see the twin spots of flame coloring his cheeks, and he knew he was in trouble. Lance only got flushed like that when he was livid, and maybe Justin should've called but it slipped his mind. He hadn't thought about it -- he had been too busy trying to get home. "Jesus, Justin," Lance was saying, and Justin reached out to touch his lover's arm but Lance knocked his hand away. "You have a cell phone. Why didn't you call?"

Justin shrugged. "I don't know," he said, pouting. He didn't know. "I went to Britney's --"

"I know," Lance replied. "I called there looking for you."

Anger flared through Justin. "Lance, I said I was sorry. I am. What else can I say?"

For a long moment they stared at each other, Lance biting the inside of his cheek, Justin pouting ignobly. Just when he thought Lance would give in -- he always gave in, pulled Justin into a tight hug and whispered that he loved him, and Justin so wanted one of those hugs right now, he needed one after the time he'd had trying to get back here -- Justin could already feel Lance holding him again and he wanted him to touch him, to love him, to tell him everything would be alright and he wasn't mad anymore, he was just scared and he could never stay mad at Justin -- just when he thought Lance would smile and everything would be okay again, Lance sighed and said, "You pull this shit every time."

Justin jerked back as if slapped. "What do you mean?" he asked, frowning.

Lance ran a hand through his hair, the blonde strands sticking up from his forehead in disarray. "I mean," Lance explained, the anger still in his voice, "that no matter what happens, what you do,

you think you can just apologize your way out of it. A few I'm sorrys and that pretty pout of yours, and you think I'll forgive you. You think that will make everything all better."

"Doesn't it?" Justin asked, but the pain that flashed in Lance's eyes told him otherwise. Sighing, he said, "Lance, I said --"

"You're sorry," Lance replied, "I know. See? You think you can just keep saying it until I give in. Do you think I'm stupid? Do you think I can't see past your little boy act?" When Justin didn't answer, Lance laughed, a hard sound that scared them both. "You think I'm stupid enough to accept your apologies all the time, is that it? You think I'll just take whatever you say because I have to have you back, isn't that right?"

"No," Justin cried. That's not what he thought, not at all. But right now he didn't know what he thought because he was hungry and he was tired and he wanted nothing more than to bury his head into Lance's shoulder and hear that deep Southern voice call him his baby boy, because it wasn't an act, not when they were together, it wasn't an act because he wanted Lance to take him back. He wanted Lance to get this anger out of his system and he wanted to just lie down on the couch with him -- was that too much to ask? "I don't think that at all, Lance, you know I don't. I stopped by Britney's to see her place and I helped her hang some wallpaper and then I got stuck in traffic and then I got lost ..." He trailed off when he saw the way Lance frowned at him, as if he wasn't buying it. You're sleeping on the couch tonight, that look said. Alone.

"Fuck this," Justin growled. He didn't have to put up with this. He didn't have to answer to Lance, to anyone but especially not to Lance, who was supposed to love him no matter what and so what if he made a few mistakes here or there? No one was perfect. Snatching up his keys again, he opened the door and said, "You don't believe me? Fine. Maybe I'm the stupid one, Lance. Maybe I'm the one who isn't smart enough to be the perfect boyfriend or whatever it is you want me to be, but I'm not up to dealing with this tonight. I'm just not."

"Where are you going?" Lance wanted to know.

Justin stopped in the doorway and looked back at him. "Out," he replied, and then he slammed the door as he left. He hoped Lance would come out and stop him -- he stormed to the car and fumbled with the key, giving Lance plenty of opportunity to open the door and call him back. When he got the car door open he threw himself into the seat and waited a full minute, but the door to the house stayed shut. Well, fuck you too, he thought bitterly, twisting the key in the ignition. As the car flared to life, he expected the door to open, Lance to come out and tell him to stop acting childish, come back inside and just please, Justin, come back inside ...

But Lance wasn't playing his part, not tonight. He wasn't going to save Justin, not this time. Justin turned the key again, scraping the engine, and then he backed out of the driveway, the tires squealing into the night. Guess there will be no Jeopardy! tonight, he thought bitterly as he turned onto the empty street. No kisses, no hugs, and why didn't you come out and stop me from driving

off, Lance? Why didn't you at least come to the door?

Here he was, driving away, and who was the stupid one now? Where the hell did he think he was going? Without Lance with him, where was there to go?

Justin didn't know. He didn't think he wanted to know. But he couldn't just turn around and go back, could he? That would admit defeat. That would prove he had been wrong. And he didn't have the heart or the courage to admit that he had been stupid for leaving home ... for leaving Lance. Right this second, he couldn't admit that.

So he drove off into the night and tried to tell himself that he held onto his anger because he was the one who was right. Wasn't he?

No Place Like Home  
Part 2  
by NSyncGrrl

Justin found JC back at the studio. As Justin shoved through the door to the recording booth, JC looked up at him, frowning. "What's your problem?" JC asked as he plopped into one of the high-backed chairs in front of the console. "Lance is looking for you."

"He found me," Justin replied. He leaned back in the chair and turned it from side to side, trying to let the anger out through the nervous action, but it wasn't helping.

"Where were you?" JC wanted to know. He shuffled some papers around on the top of the console as if trying to look busier than he really was. What did he do in the studio all day and night? Justin didn't know. He didn't think JC had much of a life outside of his music. It was the only thing he loved. "He called and said you weren't at the house --"

Justin sighed lustily. "Fuck, JC," he said, picking at the buttons on his jean jacket, "do I have to give everyone a rundown of where I'll be? I went out for a drive, that was it." Pouting, he added, "If I had known I'd get the third degree when I got back, I would've never left the damn studio in the first place."

JC sighed. "Grow up, Justin," he said, bending back over the sheet music he was working on. "Being in a relationship means being considerate enough to tell the other person where you're at. He was worried --"

"He's always worried," Justin interrupted. He didn't come here for this. He didn't need JC's advice on how to fix things between him and Lance. JC, of all people. The thought made him laugh. "He always wants to know where I am anymore, what I'm doing."

"Because he loves you," JC pointed out. "And if you loved him, you'd tell him."

"I do love him!" Justin cried. "Who the hell are you to tell me what love is? Christ, Josh, you can't get your ass out of the studio anymore -- you don't know what's it like to be in a relationship."

JC glared at him. "I have Bobbee --" he started, but Justin laughed.

"You call that a relationship?" Justin wanted to know. Pushing himself up from the chair, he said, "That's just convenience. That's just because she gives you the time of day. You're just a prize to her, Josh. Just another notch on her bedpost. That's not love."

JC stared at him balefully. Come on, Justin pleaded. Get mad and yell at me and then I'll yell back, I'll get all this anger out of my system and I'll go crawling home to Lance because I was wrong and I just want him to hold me and if I can only get this pissy feeling to go away then maybe he'll take me back tonight.

But JC wasn't up for a fight. Sighing, he turned back to the sheet music and said bitterly, "So not everyone has what you have, Justin. Don't gloat about it."

"I'm not gloating --" Justin started.

JC began scribbling on the paper, the scratch of his pencil loud between them. "If what you and Lance have is so damn special," he wanted to know, "what are you doing here with me instead of there with him? Answer me that."

Because I'm an ass, Justin wanted to say, but he wasn't going to tell JC that. He'd never live it down. Instead he said, "I'm leaving."

"Goodbye," JC replied, and the tone of his voice ticked Justin off, made him angrier, if that were possible, and he slammed the door behind him as he left. The glass window in the door rattled slightly in his wake. He half-expected JC to come out behind him and apologize. "What are you doing here with me instead of there with him?" Fuck you, Josh, Justin thought, stalking across the windy parking lot to his car. Fuck you.

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At Joey's apartment, the door opened before Justin even got the chance to knock and Joey stood there, blinking at Justin for a minute as if surprised to see him. "Hey," he said, stepping aside as Justin pushed past him. "I was just leaving --"

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Justin wanted to know. Lance's words still bit into his mind, and no amount of driving seemed to lessen their sting. He glared around Joey's living room before turning to where Joey stood in the doorway.

Joey shrugged. "You mean right now?" he asked. "Or stupid in general? Because I'm supposed to meet Marie at the club in twenty minutes --"

"I mean stupid," Justin said, planting his hands on his hips. Joey saw the resolution in his eyes and sighed, closing the door behind him. He knew he wasn't going to be leaving any time soon. "Lance said I thought he was stupid and I don't think that at all, so maybe he meant to say I was the stupid one. What do you think?"

"I think you're blowing this all out of proportion," Joey said, rubbing his eyes. "Did Lance find you? He was really worried --"

Justin laughed. "Did he call here too? Fuck, I got lost, Joe. I was on my way home and got lost and now he's mad at me."

"Because you didn't call," Joey pointed out. "He loves you, Justin. He worries about you. You should've called and told him you were on your way."

Great, Justin thought, first JC and now Joey. Like YOU can offer any advice on love, Fatone. Like a relationship to you is something

more than just sex. "I forgot to call," Justin said softly. Was that such a crime?

"You forgot," Joey said, and when Justin nodded, he laughed. "Lance is your heart and soul, Justin, and you forgot to call and tell him you were running late? No wonder he's pissed at you."

"I don't need to listen to this," Justin growled. Pushing past Joey, he threw open the door and stepped out of the apartment. Why was everyone suddenly against him? Why didn't anyone see it his way?

Joey followed him out into the hall. "Why are you doing this, Justin?" he asked, and Justin stopped at the top of the stairs, unsure of what he meant. "Just go home and tell him you're sorry."

"I did that," Justin replied. "It didn't work."

Joey grinned. "Well make it work. Unless you're scared --"

Justin glared at him. "Is that why your relationships never work?" he asked, and the look on Joey's face told him all he needed to know, told him he should've shut up and left when he had the chance but he hadn't and now the words were spoken and he couldn't take them back. "You're too scared to make them work out? You don't have the courage to stay with the same girl for more than a few months?" Justin laughed. "And I came here to ask you for advice? What was I thinking?"

"I can't imagine," Joey said, his voice hard, and before Justin could apologize, he slammed the door to his apartment, leaving Justin alone in the hall.

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How long had Chris and Dani been together? Justin couldn't even remember. As long as he knew Chris, there had been Dani, even when they weren't dating yet. How did they manage to stick together through it all? Maybe he could tell Justin what to do, what to say, to make this anger go away and to just let Lance be right. Couldn't he do that? Hell, couldn't they both be right? Or maybe he was a little bit wrong and Lance was a little bit right, and maybe they didn't have to be picky with who was what right now. Maybe they could just forget about the whole thing.

But JC said he wasn't committed enough ... hadn't he said that? Or at least implied it. And Joey said he was scared -- of what? What did Joey think he was afraid of? He didn't know. And Lance thought he was stupid ... he had to think Justin was stupid, because he didn't come after him when he walked out, as if he didn't even care. Maybe he should just draw the line here, say he'd had enough and leave. Who would stop him? Who would care, if Lance didn't?

As Justin pulled into Chris's driveway, Chris came out on the porch, the anger on his face mirroring Justin's own. Justin slowed the car to a stop behind Chris's car and climbed out. "Hey --" he started, but Chris barely spared him a glance.



"Hey yourself," Chris muttered. "Move your car. I'm leaving."

"I need your advice." Justin followed Chris around the side of his car, frowning as Chris scraped up the door in an effort to fit the key into the lock. "What's wrong?"

Chris sighed. "Nothing's wrong, Justin," he said, throwing the car door open wide. The soft light inside spilled into the night, illuminating the gravel drive. He turned to Justin and asked, "Well? What do you want?"

Crossing his arms, Justin leaned back against the side of the car and said, "Lance is mad at me."

"Again?" Chris asked before he could stop himself. At Justin's frown, he said, "Sorry. He called here looking for you. Call him back and tell him you're here, okay? Just go on home, Justin. That's where you belong." He slid behind the wheel of his car and asked, "Can you move your car? I'm kind of in a hurry here."

"Where are you going?" Justin wanted to know.

"Dani's waiting for me at the theater," Chris explained, slamming the door as he started the car. Rolling down the window, he added, "I'm running late. But I called her and told her I would be there in ten minutes, so if I leave now I won't be sleeping on the couch tonight, you know?" He sighed. "Go home, Justin. Tell Lance you're sorry and just go on home."

Justin stepped back as Chris rolled up the window, and when Chris honked the horn, Justin trotted back to his own car. So much for help from Chris. Just go on home ... what kind of advice was that?

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The last resort. Justin pulled into the parking lot at Britney's apartment complex and wondered if he really should go home. But it was after ten now and he didn't think any amount of begging would get him in the door, let alone into Lance's bed, not tonight. He'd crash at Britney's and crawl back to Lance in the morning. A night apart never hurt anyone. Not yet, he thought, taking the steps to her apartment two at a time, but I don't want to chance it, either. I want him to hold me tonight, and how can I say I'm sorry enough to get that back?

Britney opened the door with a frown on her face. "Justin, what the hell are you doing here?" she asked. "You turn right around and go home, do you hear me? Lance is worried sick about you --"

"I'm not going back tonight," Justin replied. "Are you going to let me sleep here or not? I can stay in the car."

She sighed. "Get in here," she said, standing aside to let him enter. Before the door was even shut, she started in on him. "You're a fool, Jay. Don't you think about how Lance feels at all? Don't you think about his feelings? He's out of his mind with worry and you just --"

"Brit, please," Justin said, pressing his hands to his forehead, where a sudden headache blossomed. "It's been a long night, okay? I just want to go to sleep and forget about it all right now."

"Call him first," she said, but Justin shook his head.

"I can't," he whispered. He wasn't up for another lecture.

Britney cried, "Justin!"

Heading for the spare bedroom, Justin said, "In the morning, Brit. I'll call him when I wake up."

Before she could reply he closed the bedroom door and flopped down on the empty bed. God, he thought, closing his eyes. If he was such a horrible person, such a lousy boyfriend, why did Lance want to stay with him in the first place? Was he even worth it?

He didn't know. Rubbing at his temple, hoping to will away the pain curled behind his eyes, he fell asleep thinking that maybe Britney was right. Maybe he should've called Lance after all.

No Place Like Home  
Part 3  
by NSyncGrrl

The first thing Justin heard before he even opened his eyes was girlish laughter. It was bright and bubbly and the way Britney used to laugh before the hectic schedule of her tour began to get her down. The sound washed over him, as gentle as a spring rain, and he smiled in spite of himself. Maybe she was talking with Lance and they were both in a good mood now, they'd both forgive him for whatever it was he had done. That would be nice -- to wake up and not be the villain anymore, to wake up loved and to have Lance there beside him, kissing him awake ...

Something wet and soft brushed along his face, bursting with a tiny pop that made Justin's lips slick with a thin film. He licked the dampness away and grimaced, a soapy taste stinging his tongue. "He's alive!" Britney cried, and then that laughter cascaded around him again, and was she laughing at him? He didn't know.

Suddenly he felt a barrage of tiny bubbles burst along his face and he twisted away from them angrily. "Brit, stop it," he growled, wiping his wet face with the sleeve of his jacket and glaring at her. "I'm up, okay? I'm awake."

Only the Britney who stared back ... that wasn't his friend, was it? This girl looked younger almost, carefree and happy in a way that Britney sometimes looked in publicity photos but never really seemed to look like in real life anymore. This Britney had a mess of hair that screamed for a comb, and there were bubbles and brambles and twigs caught in the golden locks, curls and crimps and seashells ... she looked like a nature sprite, with that glossy lipped grin and those sparkling eyes, and the tiny little slip of a dress that was just a few torn pieces of cloth strategically tied into place, leaving nothing to the imagination. In one hand she held a small wand and in the other, a bottle of bubble solution, and as he watched she blew another flurry his way, tiny soap bubbles glistening in the sunlight around them, twinkling with a childlike opalescence that left him breathless. Sunlight ...

Well, they weren't in her apartment anymore, that was for sure. Justin felt thick grass beneath his hands and looked down to find himself sitting in an open field somewhere. Where the hell am I? he wondered, jumping to his feet and trying to look everywhere all at once, taking everything in. "Britney ..." He saw dark trees and patchwork fields and an endless blue sky dotted with puffy white clouds and ... "This is a dream, isn't it?" Only he'd never had dreams this vivid before. Not even his wet dreams with Lance were this real.

She laughed again. "If this is a dream," she said, standing beside him, "then you could wake up. But you just woke up, didn't you?"

Maybe I'm still asleep, he thought. "If I close my eyes, all this

will be gone," he said, and to prove his point he did just that, closed his eyes tight and prayed he'd open them to find himself lying on Britney's spare bed. He didn't care if Lance was still mad at him -- at least he'd know where he was. "When I open them again --"

Britney stepped up beside him and whispered in his ear, "It'll still be the same."

Cautiously he opened one eye. She was right -- it was all still the same. The same trees, the same grass, the same cobbled road running along the edge of the meadow, winding away into the distance. Turning to her, he frowned and said, "This isn't funny."

With a sound like tinkling bells, Britney laughed and asked, "Is it supposed to be?"

That laughter made him angry. "Where am I?" he asked. He had had quite enough of this whole dream, he was ready to wake up now. You hear me? Justin told his mind, his body. I'm ready to get up now. Come on, wake up. Only his mind wasn't listening to him -- it was barely comprehending this meadow surrounded by these trees -- and his body wasn't talking to him, not since he had made Lance mad. "Britney, where --"

Clearing her throat, Britney said, "I'm not Britney. Let's clear that up right away, shall we?" She smiled daintily at him and closed her eyes as if trying to remember some grand and important speech she had memorized just for this occasion and she didn't want to mess it up. "I am the Good Witch of the North." Then she opened her eyes and laughed again. "That's witch, not ... well, you know, not that. The word that starts with a B. That's not me."

"Britney?" Justin asked, confused.

She laughed again. "No, silly, the B word that rhymes with witch." She rolled her eyes, exasperated, and when she saw he wasn't getting it, she waved her hand dismissively. "Nevermind. Let's just leave it at the Good Witch part, shall we?"

Justin pouted slightly. "Can I wake up now?" he asked. With nimble fingers Britney pinched his wrist before he could move out of reach, sending a flash of pain through his arm. "Hey!" he cried, rubbing the bruised area. "Fuck, Brit, what's your problem?"

"You're awake," she said, stomping her foot for emphasis. "Justin, hello? You're awake, get it?"

"Fine," he muttered, "I get it. I'm awake." Looking around him balefully, he said, "So show me how to get home already. Lance is pissed to all hell as it is. I have to get back to him."

Britney laughed as if that were the funniest thing she'd ever heard, and Justin frowned at her, suddenly worried. He doesn't want me back, he thought, the words whispering through his mind before he had a chance to stifle them. "You want to go home," Britney said, and he nodded. She smiled brightly. "I thought you'd never ask." Pointing at the cobbled road that divided the meadow, she said, "That way."

"Which way?" Justin asked. The road probably stretched out in a million different directions -- he couldn't just follow it back to his house, could he? "Britney, where --"

"Start here," she called, racing out to the road. Because he didn't know what else to do, he followed after her, the tall grass swishing around his legs. At the edge of the road he looked down and saw her standing on a small spiral -- the road literally started at the tips of her toes, and then curled around and around itself before continuing in a straight line for the horizon. It wasn't a cobbled road at all -- this close up, Justin could see each brick individually set into the ground, level and smooth and ...

And yellow. "You're shitting me," he whispered, looking up to find Britney giggling again. "Yellow? Brit --"

She laughed. "Follow the yellow brick road," she said, as if he didn't know.

"No, really --"

With one hand on her hip, she sighed. "Justin, you want to get home, right?" He nodded. "Well, you follow the yellow brick road. Duh."

Duh. "I'm definitely still asleep," he said, letting Britney guide him to the center of the spiral, where the road started.

"You're in Oz," Britney corrected, watching closely as he followed the road around and around. "As in the Wizard of. You follow this road to the Emerald City. You find the great and wonderful Wizard. He sends you home to your Lance and you both live happily ever after."

"Where are my ruby slippers?" Justin asked, laughing. He looked up but she wasn't smiling back at him, not this time. The grin faded from his own face. "Sorry."

"Red's not your color," Britney said sagely. Pursing her lips, she blew into her wand, releasing a million bubbles into the wind like a blizzard. "Remember Justin, follow the yellow brick road. You'll get home."

When he managed to swat away the bubbles, she was gone.

It was just him and the road, stretching out for as far as he could see. How did the movie end? He forgot. Did the girl in the film get home again? Didn't she have a dog with her?

He had no one. No one but himself and the road, and he considered standing still and letting himself wake up again. It had to happen eventually. But this was only a dream, right? Just a dream. So he might as well go along with it, find out where it took him.

Putting one foot in front of the other, Justin followed the yellow brick road.

Justin didn't know how long he had been walking already but the sun hadn't moved across the sky one inch and his legs were about to fall off, they were so tired of moving, and all he saw around him was the same meadow, the same trees, the same road reaching out from beneath his feet. The horizon stayed the same distance away, and he was going to walk himself to death before he ever woke up. Unless this isn't a dream, he thought, but if that was the truth then ... well, he just didn't want to go there. It was a dream -- it had to be. Despite the sweat plastering his shirt to his back, despite the quiver in his aching calves, despite the cool breeze that stung his eyes ... despite all of that, he was still in Britney's apartment, asleep on the spare bed. He didn't know why he was dreaming about the Wizard of Oz, he hadn't seen the movie in years, but he was and the best thing to do would be just go along with the dream until his mind got tired of it and he woke up.

That was the only thing he could do, wasn't it?

"What happened next?" Justin asked out loud. He meant in the movie. He couldn't seem to remember how it went exactly. He could recall bits and pieces but nothing that made any sense. A lion, a scarecrow, a tin man ... but in what order? Who would he meet first? At this point, he thought, kicking at the road as he walked, it could be the wicked witch, I wouldn't care. This sucks. No one to talk to -- what the hell kind of dream was that? Where was Lance? He was in all of Justin's dreams anymore. Was he mad at him in this world, too? Did he even exist here?

Justin hoped so. A world without Lance wasn't a world he wanted to be in for very long.

There were monkeys in the movie, weren't there? He wasn't sure but he thought so, ugly things with wings. Was that how the girl -- Dorothy, his mind whispered, her name was Dorothy, and finally some part of him was beginning to cooperate -- was that how she got to the Emerald City? Flying monkeys?

Somehow Justin didn't think so. But his feet hurt and he was tired and how could he be tired in a dream? He didn't know. "How much farther?" he sighed to no one in particular.

No one answered him.

No Place Like Home  
Part 4  
by NSyncGrrl

After another hour or so according to Justin's watch, if it was still working, the road divided. Twin branches stretched out to the horizon, splitting off in different directions, and what was he supposed to do now? Britney the Good Witch hadn't mentioned this. For a long time Justin stared down one side of the road, wondering if the glimmer he saw in the distance was the Emerald City or not, and just as he was about to head down that way, he decided to look at the other road and damned if he didn't see the same twinkling in the distance there, that could be a mirage or could be the spires of towers twisting into the sky, he didn't know which. He just knew he wasn't up for walking all that way just to find out he was chasing sun dreams and have to turn around and come all the way back here, where a small cornfield grew between the branches of the road, the corn thick and ripe, the heady scent cloying in the air. Corn ... so it was the scarecrow she met first? Maybe. But there was no scarecrow here, just a stick in the middle of the field where one should be.

Throwing himself down to the side of the road, Justin picked at a blade of grass and frowned at the clouds rushing past him overhead. "Those damn shoes got her home," he said. He had taken to talking to himself because there was no one else around to listen, and the sound of his own voice made him feel less alone. "I don't have those shoes. So how am I supposed to get home?"

"Follow the yellow brick road," came the cryptic reply, and because it wasn't his voice and because it was unexpected, he jumped to his feet and looked around suspiciously.

The only living thing he saw was a crow, pecking at the corn by the side of the road and eyeing him warily. "Who said that?" he asked. He felt stupid but this was Oz, wasn't it? This was a dream. So maybe the crow did say something, he didn't know.

Before he could ask the bird, a rustling through the corn rows caught his attention, and he turned to find ... "Lance?" he asked. It looked like Lance. The same sun straw hair, the same grass green eyes, the same hint of a smile on those berry pink lips. "Oh God, Lance, Jesus, thank the Lord it's you." In two steps he had his arms around his lover, hugging him close, and forget that this was a dream and forget that Lance was mad at him, thank the heavens above that finally here was someone he knew, someone he loved. His lips found Lance's and he kissed him greedily, hungry for him, unable to get enough --

Strong hands came up between them, pushing him away. "I'm not Lance," Lance said, smiling at Justin winningly, "though right now I wish I was. Right now I'll be whoever you want me to be, mister, if you just keep kissing me like that."

Justin laughed, happy for the first time since waking up in this

strange land. "You're not Lance," he repeated, and that made sense, didn't it? Britney wasn't Britney, Lance wasn't Lance, of course, he got it now. Did it matter that he tasted like Lance or felt like Lance in his arms, and even in the ragtag pants and straw-stuffed shirt, even with that silly straw hat cocked back on his head, even standing here in this field of corn, he smelled like Lance, and Justin pulled him close, inhaling that sweet musk scent that he loved to breathe in, that warm smell that made the rest of the world melt away. "Jesus, I missed you. Are you still mad at me?"

Lance laughed and pushed Justin away gently. "I don't even know you," he reminded Justin, "but I don't know how anyone could be mad at someone like yourself."

Justin sighed and let this scarecrow-Lance go. "I'm an ass sometimes," he admitted. Maybe this wasn't Lance, but he could still apologize, couldn't he? "I didn't mean to get you mad, really. I know you were worried, and I just wanted ..." He sighed. "I don't know, I just wanted to make a scene, I guess, and I wanted you to come out and stop me from driving off. You always stop me, Lance ... why didn't you stop me last night? Then I wouldn't be at Britney's having this stupid dream --"

"This is a dream?" the scarecrow-Lance asked, and when Justin nodded, he added, "Yours or mine?"

"Mine," Justin replied, frowning.

Lance's forehead cleared. "Whew," he said, relieved. "For a minute there you had me worried. Because I'm fairly certain I'm awake. So you're right, it must be your dream."

Justin laughed again. He liked this scarecrow, probably because it looked like Lance, only this was a Lance not encumbered by the daily routine of appearances and managing his own record label and being one-fifth of a popular boyband. This Lance didn't have any cares in the world, and his brow was smooth, unwrinkled, his eyes twinkling with mirth, his smile quick and childlike. Justin thought he could easily fall for this Lance all over again, because this had been the Lance he fell in love with the first time around. "Well," he said, placing his hands on his hips and studying the scarecrow openly -- those raggedy pants were tight in just the right places, he had to find a pair for his Lance to wear some day -- "even if this is a dream, I have to get home. I have to tell my Lance that I'm sorry." My Lance ... he liked the sound of that. "Because you might not believe it, but he's mad at me. And I'd give anything to make him love me again."

"Oh, I'm sure he loves you," Lance replied offhandedly, and Justin smiled at that.

"I want him to love me again," Justin said, raising his eyebrows in the hopes that this Lance would clue in to what he was saying.

But no such luck. This Lance just smiled brightly and Justin could almost see the innuendo flying over his head like the crows gathering around the corn. "So you're going to the Emerald City then?" Lance asked, and Justin nodded. "To see the Wizard, of



course. Everyone who passes through here goes to see him."

"Which way do they go?" Justin asked, looking down first one stretch of road and then the next.

Lance shrugged. "Some go this way," he said, pointing to the right, and Justin nodded again. That's the way he had wanted to go at first. Just as he started in that direction, however, Lance pivoted on his feet and pointed down the other way. "But some go this way, too."

"Well, which way is it?" Justin asked.

Lance shrugged again. "I don't know," he said, staring at Justin with those large crystalline eyes of his. "No one ever comes back from either way, so I guess they both lead to somewhere."

I guess, Justin thought, sighing. "That doesn't really help me a lot," he said, his voice a little short.

"I'm sorry," Lance replied, and then he sighed, a sad sound that tugged at Justin's heart. "I just don't know. No one tells me anything. I'm just the scarecrow, and I don't even scare crows very well." He motioned behind him, where the field was alive with black birds, calling to each other in raucous tones. "Maybe I'm just not smart enough to keep them away. I mean, how hard could it be?" Halfheartedly he shooed at the crows, who took flight and then resettled on the corn, glaring at him balefully. "See? I suck as a scarecrow. I can't even give you directions because I don't know which way to go."

Justin narrowed his eyes and frowned. "Don't start this bullshit," he said, growing angry. "Fuck, Lance, you aren't stupid. You're the smartest one of the whole bunch, I swear it. You're smarter than me, you have your own business, you should be the Wizard here. You're the one who can take me home, the only one. Without you there is no home for me."

"You're talking about your Lance again," Lance pointed out, but the thoughtful tilt of his head told Justin that he was at least thinking about what he was saying. Lance had that same way of cocking his head to one side when he mulled over something Justin told him.

"You look like him," Justin said, "if he wore old hand-me-down clothes and straw in his hair. You smell like him, you taste like him ... you even feel like him, and this is my dream, so for all intents and purposes, you are him. And if he's smart enough, then maybe you are, too." He frowned at Lance, dressed as the scarecrow, and said, "Shit, I don't know why you got stuck in this role. You want stupid? Give that part to Joey, he plays it well enough. Or JC, he'd look great in this field, with that pole up his ass. Or Chris, most days he's scary enough to chase anything away. You think you're stupid just because you get mad at me from time to time? That's my fault, Lance, not yours. I'm the one who's stupid. I'm the one who should be stuck out here because I'm too stupid to know how lucky I am to have you."

Lance smiled up at him. "You should remember that," he said.

"Tell that to your Lance when you get home, and I just know he won't be mad at you anymore."

"If I ever get home," Justin muttered. "I don't even know which direction to go anymore."

"Well," Lance offered, "pick one. They're both fairly popular. They both lead somewhere, right?" When Justin nodded, Lance said, "Just pick one."

"Like it's that easy," Justin said. He stared down both roads and debated which one to take. Suddenly he said, "Come with me." When Lance shook his head, Justin pleaded, "Come on, please? I don't like being by myself, and I love you, Lance, I love you, and I can't just pick a path and not know where I'm going without you there with me. Show me the way. Tell me which one to follow and I'll follow it to the end, as long as you're beside me." Lance stared at him, unsure. "Please?"

Lance sighed. "Well, if you don't think I'll be a burden ..."

"Oh God, no," Justin said. He caught Lance's hand in his and squeezed it gently. "Come on. You don't have anything better to do around here, do you?"

"Not really ..." He looked up at Justin and nodded curtly. "Right. I'll go."

Smiling, Justin asked, "Now you pick a path. Which way do you think we should go?"

Lance frowned. "I told you I don't know --"

"Well, neither do I," Justin reminded him. "So we're damned if we do, damned if we don't. Pick a road and that's the one we'll take, okay?"

Dubiously, Lance agreed. Pointing at the right branch of the road, which looked to be downhill and a little easier to travel, he asked, "This one?"

"Why not?" Justin countered, and he let Lance lead the way, his hand warm in Lance's. I'm not skipping, though, he thought, enjoying the smile on Lance's face. And I'm not singing shit. So just get us to the Emerald City in one piece, without the music, okay? That's all he was asking for at this point.

And thanks for giving me Lance, he added, not sure who he was talking to but glad they had an understanding, whoever it was. Even if he's not MY Lance, it's Lance and he makes this whole fucked up place better just because he's here.

No Place Like Home  
Part 5  
by NSyncGrrl

So what if this isn't my Lance? Justin thought, watching as the scarecrow bent over to dip his hands into a rushing brook, his pants pulling tight across his round buttocks. The fields around them had given way to dark trees, a thick forest through which the road wound like a ray of sunshine, lighting the way onward. Beside the road, the brook sparkled invitingly, and Lance wanted to stop for just a minute, just to get a drink of water, and how could Justin say no to that? He LOOKS like my Lance, and this is my dream so even if he doesn't THINK he's mine, he really is, isn't he? And DAMN but he doesn't KNOW what that does to me, seeing him like THIS ... Justin stepped up behind him and ran one hand along the curve of his butt, tracing the hidden flesh beneath the worn pants before easing his fingers between his lover's thighs, and he smiled at Lance's small gasp as he rubbed gently. He knew Lance loved to be touched here, and this Lance was no different, was he? "Justin," he whispered, pressing down until he sat in Justin's palm. Justin ran his other hand along Lance's back, and Lance arched into the touch. "We should keep moving."

Right now Justin didn't care about the Wizard. He didn't care that this was a dream, because he felt the thickening in his groin, the sweet ache that throbbed in time with his heart beat, and maybe if he took care of that ache, he could make this dream a little better. "Please, Lance?" he asked, pouting slightly. Lance looked over his shoulder, indecision wavering in his eyes, and Justin ducked his head a little, looking up at him with wide eyes that he knew Lance fell for every time. "Just a little love, please?"

"I'm not Lance," the scarecrow said, but Justin's fingers stroking between his legs made his lips part in a moan, made his eyes slip close in sudden desire, and he didn't sound too sure about who he was right now. "Maybe a little bit," he conceded, and Justin leaned over him to kiss the color blooming in his cheeks.

"Just a little bit," he agreed. He couldn't wait to get these ratty clothes off of Lance, to see him naked in the tall grass, the sunlight shining through the leaves overhead to dapple on his golden skin ... easing his arms around Lance's waist, Justin pulled him close, kissing his throat tenderly. "Oh Lance, I'm sorry," he mumbled, happy just to hold his lover again, even if it was only a dream. "I'm so sorry, please, just please ..." His lips found Lance's, a velvety crush that didn't taste like any dream he'd ever had before, a sweet press of flesh that made his crotch ache fiercely, and that was no dream, either. That was real, and he wanted this man in his arms, he wanted Lance so bad, because he was real too, he wasn't a figment of a dream, even if everything else around them was.

"Justin," Lance moaned, but his foot slipped on the damp grass and he stumbled in Justin's arms. "Whoa," he laughed as Justin hugged him tighter.

"Whoa," Justin whispered, grinning. He kissed Lance softly, pulling him close as he stepped back from the brook. There was a nice spot of grass amid the trees, just off the road where he wanted to lie down, press Lance to the earth beneath him and shout his name into the clear blue sky when he came. No one would see them -- there was no one on the road, he hadn't seen anyone else but Britney and he didn't think she'd be back any time soon. Didn't the Good Witch only show up again at the end of the movie? He didn't remember, but he was fairly sure she wasn't throughout the whole picture.

And he knew for damn sure that Dorothy and the scarecrow didn't get it on in the film, but this was his version of the script, wasn't it? And in this scene, he and Lance would make love. This dream was getting better by the minute. Taking Lance's hand in his, Justin led the way off the road and up into the woods, kicking aside a few apples fallen from the trees to clear a spot on the ground. "Here," he said, but before Lance could sit down, Justin pressed him back against the trunk of a nearby tree, leaning against him so he could feel how much Justin wanted him right now, and when Justin thrust his hips against Lance's, kissing him hungrily, the hard erection he felt against his thigh was all the encouragement he needed to continue. "Lance," he breathed, Lance's hands between them, rubbing along his chest and pinching his nipples until he moaned his name again. If this wasn't his Lance, he sure touched him like his Lance did, knowing exactly where to rub to make him hard and leave him wanting for more. "Oh Lance, please --"

"Get a room already, boys," someone called out behind them.

Justin whirled around angrily. "Who's there?" he wanted to know. He felt Lance's hands fist into his shirt, pulling him closer, his lips brushing along Justin's neck softly.

"There's no one here but us," Lance whispered, moaning as Justin shifted his knee to press sweetly against Lance's groin. "Justin, now."

Justin turned back to Lance, and there was the shimmer in his eyes that he loved to see, that glossy look he got when he was in the mood. But as Justin kissed him again, his lips closing over Lance's tenderly, someone laughed, right above him, and he pushed away from his lover to see a face in the gnarled bark of the tree, dark eyes staring at him from the wood. Fear gripped his chest, and he pulled Lance away from the tree and into the safety of his arms. "What the fuck --"

And then the tree winked at him. "Go on, boys," the tree said, Justin could see the ruts in the bark move as wooden lips formed the words. "Put on a good show for us."

"Give us that loving," someone else cajoled, the tease accompanied by an insidious rustle of leaves. "Oh yes, oh please, oh big boy, take me home --"

"Shut up," Justin growled, and suddenly every tree had a face in its trunk, carved in bark and leering at them, and he hugged Lance closer. "Just shut the fuck up, all of you." Was he really

shouting at the trees?

"Oh come on," the tree they had leaned against said, bending its branches down low to brush its leaves along Lance's back, and Justin slapped the deciduous hands away. "Just pretend we're not here. I bet it's a glorious sight, the two of you locked together in the throes of passion ... my roots tingle at the thought."

"I said shut up!" Justin cried. This wasn't a dream, it was a nightmare now, the forest around them suddenly dark and dangerous, the trees glaring at them hatefully, taunting them, baiting him ... he looked around wildly, stumbling back to the road, out of reach of the limbs that stretched towards them, the leaves a maddening rush like a monsoon, drowning out all other sound.

"Justin," Lance said, burrowing his head into Justin's chest, "maybe this wasn't such a good idea ..."

No shit, Justin thought wryly. Then he saw a gleam of silver, an axe stuck in the stump on the other side of the road, and that was just what he needed, wasn't it? An axe -- he didn't know if he could actually attack a tree, not with those faces staring hatefully at him, but he could at least brandish it as they followed the road through this forest, couldn't he? Give those mighty oaks a fright. "Stay here," he said quietly, and Lance nodded. "Right here, in the middle of the road, don't go near those trees, you hear?"

"Okay," Lance said. He watched as Justin hurried across the road, jumping over the small brook and climbing up a short hill to reach the axe, protruding from the stump. Up close, the axe looked ancient, and an oilcan sat beside it, corroded with rust. Justin thought he could put that oil to some good use, give the lubricant a real purpose, if he could just get out of this forest and away from those trees, and get Lance alone again. He had quite decided he didn't like Oz all that much anymore. "Justin?" Lance called.

"Just a minute," Justin replied. Placing his hands on the axe handle, he tugged at it, hard, but the blade didn't budge. "I can't quite get this out," he said, tugging again.

"Sounds like a personal problem to me," one of the trees snickered, and damn he wanted to get out of this place now.

"Shut up," Justin muttered. Maybe he could oil the blade a bit, work it free that way ... picking up the oilcan, he squirted the amber liquid around the blade, watching it drip down the rust and into the wood. When he pulled at the axe again, it moved slightly, which was more than it had done before, wasn't it?

He yanked on it again, and this time the blade slipped free, only he wasn't expecting it to come loose so quickly, and he staggered back, the heavy axe in both hands. Just let me fall to the ground, he prayed as he swayed on his feet, and not into the branches of one of those damn trees, and please oh please oh PLEASE don't let me chop my foot off, even if this IS a dream, because that would hurt like a bitch --

Metal arms caught him, and the axe clattered to the ground harmlessly. "Watch it, kid," someone said, a tinny voice that

sounded so much like someone he'd heard almost all his life ...

"Josh?" Turning, Justin stared at JC, it had to be JC, who else had those vibrant blue eyes, that sculpted nose, those high cheekbones? And that smirk -- that I'm busy, leave me alone, you're interrupting genius at work smirk that pissed Justin off whenever they were in the studio and no one's ideas were half as good as any JC came up with on his own. Only this was Oz, and JC wasn't really JC -- he was a tin woodsman, wrapped up in a shiny silver suit like aluminum foil, the breastplate like a sardine can, complete with a tiny tin hat on his silvered hair. His skin was painted with a glittery silver, only the blue of his eyes and the red of his lips giving any color to his face at all. "Jesus, they gave you this part?" Justin asked, pushing JC's arms away from him. "Thank God you're not the Wizard. I'd be in a shitload of trouble then."

The tin man who was really JC smiled at him sardonically. "The Wizard?" he asked, bending awkwardly to retrieve the axe that had fallen to the ground. He looked past Justin and nodded at Lance, still in the middle of the road. "You guys going to the Emerald City?"

"Yeah," Justin replied. Pointing at the axe, he said, "I pulled that loose."

"And that makes it yours?" JC wanted to know.

Justin shrugged helplessly. "I guess not," he mumbled. Now how would they make it through these jeering trees? He didn't know, he didn't want to think about it. Could he just fast forward to the end now?

"You need some help? Someone to chase away the trees?" JC sneered, and Justin said, "No," just as Lance called out, "Sure."

Turning back to Lance, Justin corrected, "We're fine. We don't need anyone else, JC, believe me."

The tin man started, "I'm not --"

"JC, I know," Justin replied, hopping across the brook to the road again. "But we're fine, really. Carry on with whatever it was you were doing. We're fine."

Beside him Lance whispered, "Maybe he should come along with us. I mean, if he's offering --"

"We're fine," Justin repeated, nodding at Lance to reassure him, but from the fear in Lance's eyes, he didn't think it worked. They didn't know this part of Oz, did they? Well, Justin didn't -- it was his first trip here, and even if this was his dream, he still didn't know what to expect. And Lance was from the fields -- these woods terrified him. Justin could see it in the way he frowned around them as they walked, and even if Lance never said the words out loud, Justin knew his lover well enough to know when he was bothered by something.

Sighing, Justin said, "Fine. Get your tin ass over here. You can come with us as far as the Emerald City but that's it."

JC laughed. "You're all heart," he replied, picking up his oilcan before stepping across the brook.

Can't I wake up sometime soon? Justin wondered as they started down the road again.

No Place Like Home  
Part 6  
by NSyncGrrl

JC the tin man walked stiffly on the other side of Lance, the axe swung over one shoulder, but Justin didn't see any more faces in the trees and he wondered how bad it would be if he asked him to leave now. The danger was past, wasn't it? They didn't need him anymore. And now that he was with them, Justin could see a million places he and Lance could lie down, just grab those few minutes they wanted alone before they had been so rudely interrupted ... his crotch still ached something fierce, and exactly how long did an erection last when it wasn't taken care of immediately? Justin didn't know, and right now his head throbbed in rhythm with his groin, he was tired of walking, he just wanted to rest for a minute, was that so bad? To rest on the side of the road and let Lance's kisses and hands wash away the past few hours, and this had to be the longest dream he'd ever had, ever. "He calls me Lance," the scarecrow was saying, his hand holding Justin's tightly as they walked, the three of them taking up the entire span of the road. "He thinks I'm his boyfriend --"

"And this is okay with you?" JC asked, frowning past him at Justin.

Lance shrugged. "Nice benefits," he replied, grinning foolishly, and Justin could tell by the way he ducked his head and glanced at him from the corner of his eye that Lance was horny, too, that they could do some wicked lovemaking if JC would just disappear. Lance added, "He thinks this is a dream."

"Oh really?" JC asked. "Yours or his? Or maybe mine?"

"His," Lance said, nodding sagely. Not MY dream, Justin thought sourly, not anymore, because MY dream wouldn't have you in it, Josh. It wouldn't have those pissy trees, either. It would be just me and Lance and the cool grass, the warm sun, and we're still stuck in these damn woods only they're getting darker and this is NO dream of mine. Turning to Justin, Lance asked, "Isn't it your dream?"

"Maybe," Justin muttered. Sighing, he stopped in the middle of the road. Lance took another step and then stopped as well, turning back to frown at Justin. JC walked another two or three jingling steps before he stopped, too. Looking from Lance to JC and back again, Justin asked, "Look, can't we ditch the tin can? I mean, no offense, Josh --"

JC glared at him. "I'm not Josh," he said. "Or JC, or whoever else it is you think I am. I'm a woodsman, albeit tin. I live to cut trees. You wanted protection, didn't you? You wanted me to come along."

"Well, the trees aren't bothering us anymore," Justin said, angry because how stupid did that sound? "So you can go back to



chopping wood or whatever it is you do, you know? I've changed my mind."

"Justin," Lance warned, tugging at his hand gently. "He can come with us if he wants." In a softer voice, he added, "Have a heart. Maybe he's lonely? Maybe he wants to come with us."

"Maybe I'm lonely," Justin pouted, pulling Lance closer. He ran one hand down the soft skin of Lance's cheek and sighed. "Is it too much to ask, just a few minutes alone with you? After that fight we had --"

"You had," Lance corrected. "It wasn't with me." He let Justin slip his arm around his waist, his lips brushing along Lance's cheek while his fingers delved into Lance's thick hair. "Justin," he whispered, nodding back at JC, "we aren't alone ..."

JC cleared his throat. "Oh, don't mind me," he said sarcastically, swinging his axe around in a wide arc, pretending he didn't see Justin's hands curved around Lance's buttocks. "I'm just the tin man, remember? I'm not the one who matters here. This sure isn't my dream." As Justin nuzzled against Lance's neck, JC added, "Don't pay me any attention in the least. I'm only here to keep the big bad trees away. Just continue on with what you're doing --"

"Shut up already, will you?" Justin growled against Lance's throat, and Lance laughed, pulling away from him. Sighing lustily, Justin said, "This isn't a dream anymore, okay? I just want to get home. Is that too much to ask?"

"Then keep walking," JC replied, and to prove his point, he started off again, heading down the road without turning to see if they followed him or not. "You coming?"

"Not anytime soon," Justin muttered under his breath as Lance took his hand again, pulling him after JC.

\* \* \*

The forest grew darker, the trees dense, and the path shone dully, cutting through the woods that hemmed them in on either side and didn't look like they would end anytime soon. Justin listened as Lance and JC talked quietly, their voices muffled in the closeness, the three of them keeping to the center of the road and as far away from the trees as they could. Justin held onto Lance tightly, their fingers entwined together, his other hand on Lance's elbow as he glanced around them nervously. Suddenly the whole place had taken a turn for the worse, and he hated to admit it because this was just a dream but he was scared. Shit, he couldn't wait to wake up now. Please, he thought, praying to God, if there was a god in this strange world, please let this be over soon. I promise I won't be so pissy anymore. I promise I won't spend another night apart from Lance. Just please let this end? Like now?

No such luck. "This place is getting spooky," Lance said softly, squeezing Justin's hand in a comforting gesture.

JC nodded. "Be careful. I'm sure the trees aren't the only things

here that are dangerous. There are probably lions --"

"And tigers," Lance added. JC nodded again, and they both looked over at Justin, who scowled to hide his own fear.

"I ain't saying it," he growled.

Lance frowned. "Saying what?" he asked.

"And bears," Justin said, and dammit but he just said it. Only he knew the story. There were no tigers, no bears, not even a lion to speak of, just a cowardly cat afraid of his own tail and who cried when Dorothy hit him on the nose ... just then a low, loud rumbling filled the air around them, a sound that numbed his bones and made his feet falter, because he heard it once before. When they had a photo shoot at the zoo with a few large white tigers, the one Justin posed with growled continuously, a steady grumble that scared him shitless because he just knew the damn cat would turn around and bite his hand off, he just knew it. On the bus back to the hotel that day, Joey sat behind him, kicking the back of his seat and imitating that growl with an eerie accuracy that kept Justin up most of the night. That was before he and Lance hooked up, before he could have crawled into the comfort of Lance's arms and let those strong hands soothe away his fear. He had wanted to go to Lance, but that was when neither of them knew the way the other felt, and how long had that gone on? Too long, Justin thought. But they were together now, and that growling pricked at the hairs on his arms, making them stand up because it terrified him and fuck JC, fuck Oz, fuck it all, he didn't care anymore, he just wanted to go home. "Jesus," he whispered, slipping his arms around Lance's waist and hugging him close. "You had to open your mouth, didn't you, Josh? You had to mention lions."

"And bears," Lance reminded him, his hands easing beneath Justin's jacket to hold him tighter. "And tigers."

"I get it," Justin replied. Glancing at JC, he hissed, "You have a weapon. You go chase it away."

"Screw you," JC said, glaring at Justin. "What happened to you not needing my help anymore? Didn't you tell me to leave?" As the roar came again, louder this time, he backed away from them, his tin suit clanking noisily, and added, "Maybe it's about time to get back to my work, you know? You guys have fun, take care, say hi to the Wizard for me --"

That growl again, impossibly loud, right in their ears and when Justin turned around he saw the lion, only it was Joey, dressed in a castoff costume from Cats but it was him -- golden fur in ragtag patches and thick paws, long tail, unruly mane, his goatee, his face, everything gold and tan and impossibly warm shades that made the forest a little less cold now, a little less scary -- but he was snarling and baring his teeth and just looking like he could tear into them at any moment, and suddenly Justin wanted to take back all the cracks he had ever made about Joey's weight or his women or his partying ... take it all back and apologize profusely and anything to keep that ferociously painted face with that grimacing scowl away from him and from Lance --

Joey caught JC, his bearlike arms draped in burnished fur and ending in large paws where his hands should be, and JC twisted in his grip, trying to break away. "Let go!" he cried, hacking at the air with his axe, fear and concern mingling on his face. "Let me go, get off me, you guys get him off of me!"

It's only Joe, Justin thought. He pushed away from Lance, anger clouding his face to cover his fright. "Joey, stop it," he growled, and Joey released JC, backing away in surprise. "Just stop it right now. God, you guys grow up already."

"I'm not Joe --" the lion started, but Justin turned away, he was sick of hearing that.

"You're one to talk," JC muttered, brushing at his chest as if wiping at cat hairs. "You're the one who won't accept that this is real, Justin, this isn't a dream, and you can't keep your hands off of that boy. You're like a teenager in heat."

Lance grinned wolfishly at Justin, but when he saw Justin's frown he turned away, clearing his throat slightly and covering his lips to hide the smile. "I'm not --" Justin started, but Joey growled again, a low sound that rumbled from deep within him.

"You guys aren't scared, are you?" he asked hopefully.

"Not anymore," Lance replied, squinting at Joey. "You're not very frightening in person."

Joey sighed. "Fine. What's the use of being a lion if you don't scare anyone? Answer me that."

"It's his dream," JC said, pointing at Justin. "Take it up with him."

"It's not --" Justin started again, and then he sighed. What was the use? No one was listening to him. Narrowing his eyes at Joey, he asked, "Are you tagging along too?"

Joey shrugged. "Where are you guys going?"

"The Emerald City," Lance said.

JC added, "To see the Wizard and get this kid home."

Joey frowned at Justin for a long moment before saying, "I can see why you want to get rid of him."

"Hey!" Justin cried, and Joey grinned. "Sure, I'll come along," he said. "Why not?"

JC smirked. "You can scare away the trees."

Glaring at him, Justin said, "That's not funny."

"The trees picking on you, man?" Joey asked, and the tone of his voice made Lance laugh. "I hate when they do that."

"Shut up," Justin muttered. Taking Lance's hand, he pulled him away from the others, once again heading down the road. "You guys want to come, fine. I don't care. I just want to get home,

okay? So if you're coming, pick up the pace, because I'm not enjoying this place one bit." As Joey and JC hurried to catch up, JC's tin clinking like ice cubes in a glass of lemonade on a hot summer day, Justin warned over his shoulder, "And no more cracks about the trees, you got it? I'm sick of that shit."

In a loud whisper, JC told Joey, "He's pissed because he can't get his boy alone for five minutes." With a laugh, he added, "He tried but the trees were watching."

"Doesn't he know their bark is worse than their bite?" Joey countered, and JC giggled madly. Joey growled again, a rough little sound that made JC laugh harder.

"Shut up," Justin pouted. Where the fuck was that Emerald City anyway?

No Place Like Home  
Part 7  
by NSyncGrrl

Justin was tired. Of walking, of hearing JC's armor-like suit clink and crinkle like a party favor, of listening to Joey growl low in his throat, a sound that still raised the hairs on the back of Justin's neck, even if Joey was walking behind him now and not hiding in the bushes, waiting to attack. Damn but Joey knew that made him nervous. He was just doing it to be cute, and it didn't help that every time he did, JC laughed like it was the funniest thing he'd heard all day, even though by the time they saw the small house set off of the path it seemed as if they had been hearing it all day. Lance watched him from the corner of his eye, frowning slightly and trying to distract him with small talk that Justin only grunted at in response. As they passed by the house, back in the woods a bit and obviously deserted, Lance turned around and asked the others, "Do you guys think we could stop and rest? Just for a minute?"

"Sure," JC said, shrugging, and Joey agreed.

Lance led Justin up the slight hill leading to the house and pointed at one of the short stumps in the front yard. "Here you go," he said as Justin sat down. "Rest a few minutes, okay?"

"Thanks," Justin replied, smiling up at Lance. "Now if you can just find us something to eat --"

"You want everything, don't you?" Joey asked, helping JC clamber up to them. "If you're hungry, get your own food."

"I don't mind," Lance said. He nodded across the road and said, "There's a few apple trees around, I'll just pick some --"

JC pushed Justin over and sank down to sit beside him on the stump, the axe resting between his knees. "Let him get his own food," JC said, appraising Justin thoughtfully. "He's a big boy."

What the hell's YOUR problem, Josh? Justin wondered, but he scowled and stood up, angry again. He was always angry anymore -- he couldn't remember not being angry since he woke up in this dream. "Fine," he muttered. "I'll get my own damn apples. You happy?"

"Sit down," Lance said quietly, placing a hand against Justin's chest. When Justin frowned at him, Lance whispered, "I'll get them, really. I don't mind."

"You sure?" Justin asked, and Lance nodded. Glaring at JC, Justin sat down again on the stump and watched Lance walk back to the road, and it was such a lovely sight, wasn't it? He certainly thought so, with those faded pants pulling along Lance's thighs and hugging his buttocks and damn but he was horny again, only now they had two traveling companions to contend with, and if he couldn't lose JC how did he ever hope to ditch both him and Joey? Give me some time alone with him in this dream, please, Justin

thought, picking at his jeans, where the denim bit into a budding erection that he hoped no one else noticed. Some time to find the right words to say to smooth over the rift that's opened between us, and maybe I can mend things in real life once I wake up again. Is that too much to ask? He didn't think so.

Joey trotted off after Lance. "Hey, wait up, man," he called, swatting at the long leonine tail that twitched nervously around his feet. "I'm hungry myself. I could go for some apples, too."

JC laughed, and because it wasn't aimed at him, Justin allowed himself to smile at the sound. When was the last time he heard JC laugh like that? He was always so wrapped up in the studio anymore, giving everything he had to the music and how could that make him happy? As Joey followed Lance across the road, JC asked softly, "Do you really love that boy? Your Lance?"

"Of course," Justin answered without even thinking about it. He loved Lance, he'd do anything for him, anything.

With a smirk JC asked, "Is it love or simply lust, Justin? You can't seem to keep your hands to yourself."

Justin felt his face flush with anger. "It's not just the sex, Josh," he said hotly. Why couldn't their friends see that? They only saw what they wanted to see -- they saw the way Lance made Justin feel, giddy and light-hearted and free, and he couldn't stop touching him because he loved the way Lance felt in his arms, he loved Lance's skin against his, his lips, his breath, his hair. Lance was like bottled faery dust, shimmer and gossamer and so ethereal that it ached to look at him, he was so beautiful, and Justin had to touch him to reassure himself that Lance was real, was his and with him -- no one could be like him, so loving, so rare, so wonderful, but somehow he was alive and he was with Justin and the touches solidified that. Justin was afraid not to touch Lance sometimes, he was afraid to let go because what if the bottle spilled and the faery dust blew away? What then? Without Lance -- where the hell would he be?

"Do you tell him you love him?" JC wanted to know.

Nosy ass, Justin thought, but he shrugged and said, "Sure I do. All the time."

"Do you show him?" JC pressed.

Justin's reply was on the tip of his tongue -- of course I do -- but did he? Did he really? "If you loved him, you'd tell him where you were going ..." I DO love him, Justin thought, watching Lance and Joey laugh as they threw apples at each other. I love him so much it hurts. "What do you mean?" Justin asked softly. Maybe I don't show him enough. Maybe he doesn't KNOW ... "Josh, how do you think I can show him?"

JC studied him for a moment before saying, "I can't answer that for you, Justin. It's not that easy."

Why not? Justin wanted to know.

They ate the apples as they walked, Justin lagging behind so Joey and JC could get ahead a little bit and give him some time alone with Lance. Didn't he show him enough how much he loved him? He thought he did, but JC's words left him thinking. He should've called home, he realized that now, but maybe it was more than small shit like that. Maybe it was more than cuddling on the couch and making love in front of the TV. When they were on tour, they didn't get those moments to themselves -- after a show they just collapsed into bed, entwined in each others' arms, and slept like the dead. But they still managed sex in the mornings, before they had to get packed and back on the road. Wasn't that love?

Justin thought so. He was twenty years old -- sex and love were too wrapped up in each other to disentangle, there wasn't one without the other, not in his mind. But maybe Lance doesn't know that, he thought, tossing his apple core to the side of the road. Maybe I need to show him in other ways.

But like what? He didn't know. More kisses, maybe. Roses. Cards, tons of them, one for every day of the year, a different one in the mail every morning to remind Lance how much he loved him. Breakfast in bed. Cool showers together on hot sunny days. Lying side by side in the grass and watching the stars come out at night. Holding hands in the car. Maybe those were the kinds of things JC meant. Things that were more romance than sex.

"Are you okay?" Lance asked cautiously, looking over at Justin.

Justin forced away the frown clouding his face and smiled at Lance. Raising his lover's hand to his lips, he kissed Lance's knuckles and said, "I'm fine, really. Just thinking."

"Oh now that's scary," Joey called back to them, grinning over his shoulder through his whiskers. "And you thought the trees were frightening."

"Shut up, Joe," Justin growled. If he heard one more thing about those damn trees ...

"I'm not --" Joey started, and then he sighed. "Forget it. Call me Joe, I don't care. It's better than here kitty anyway."

They lapsed into a wary silence that filled the air around them, and Justin tried to remember what was supposed to happen next. Didn't Dorothy get attacked in the woods by the witch? He seemed to remember a fireball, but that might have been something his mind was making up as they went along. No one had mentioned a witch yet, so maybe there wasn't one in this version of the story. But they did get out of the woods eventually, right? And find the Emerald City, and the Wizard was really just a regular dude -- gotta remember to check behind the curtain when we first get there, Justin told himself. Cut to the chase and blow away the smoke. It's all an illusion, isn't it? So I'll just tear aside the curtain and be like look, send me home, okay? End of story, I wake up, and as Britney said, live happily ever after.

Softly Lance asked, "What's on your mind?"

"You," Justin replied. It was an automatic response anymore, because he only thought of Lance, but he had to make sure he said it more often. Then Lance would know how much he loved him.

Lance sighed happily. "Your Lance must be really special," he said, and Justin grinned. This was all a dream, this scarecrow was Lance, didn't anyone else get it but him? "You're always talking about him, always thinking of him, always wanting him --"

"I don't think he knows how special he is," Justin said, frowning because didn't that feel odd, talking about Lance as if he wasn't talking to him? "Sometimes I don't think he knows how much I love him."

"How can he not?" Lance asked.

Justin shrugged. "I think I have to show him more," he said, his voice low. He didn't want JC to overhear him -- then he would know Justin was thinking about what he said and he'd never live that down, he'd never be able to wipe away that smug I told you so smirk that JC perfected over the years they'd known each other.

"When you wake up," Lance suggested, "tell him first thing. Lance, I love you. Say it before you even begin to apologize, Justin, and keep saying it, in everything you do. Not just in words but with touches and kisses and dreamy stares that make his stomach flutter and his heart skip and his cheeks blush. Then he'll know."

"Are you sure?" Justin asked dubiously.

Lance nodded. "I'm sure. You have to show him that he's the only thing in your heart and he'll know."



No Place Like Home  
Part 8  
by NSyncGrrl

Justin didn't think he could walk any further -- how long had he been on this road anyway? How far did it go? And when the hell would he wake up? He was ready to just call it quits, sit down on the side of the road and wait for the Wizard to come to him, it was his dream, surely the Wizard would get tired of waiting and show up eventually, and when would this day ever end? Since they had entered the woods, time lost all meaning, stretching out like the road itself, not quite day and not quite night but nothing in between, either. That's how he knew this was a dream, besides the fact that this was Oz and all the people he met in this strange fabricated land were his best friends in real life ... it was the way the sun kept above them at all times, and they'd already walked forever and still the sun didn't move, didn't even budge, so that made this a dream, didn't it? Justin thought so.

He even moved to one side of the road, pulling away from the others, and he was about to plop down to the ground and pull Lance into his lap and let his hands talk for him, tell his lover how he felt and how much he loved him, loved touching him, when JC turned back and grinned at him. "I think we're coming out of the woods now, guys."

"You're joking," Justin whispered, and he'd kill JC if this was his idea of fun, but a few minutes more and they were out of the woods, the trees falling away behind them like remnants of a bad dream, drifting away by morning's light. Ahead the blue sky was dark and vivid like wet paint, and the yellow road wound away through a field of vibrant red poppies, twisting to the horizon where crystal green spires scraped at the sky, jaded towers the same color of Lance's eyes when he was angry or upset. It was a scene from a picture book, so real that Justin wanted to reach up and scratch at the sky, expecting his fingers to come away marred with blue paint, wisps of white clouds caught in his nails. As they started through the flowers, he kept to the middle of the road, afraid to brush against the blooms for fear of leaving red smears along his legs. No place was this alive, no dream, no reality, nothing. Suddenly the world around him was in Technicolor, and he felt like he did the first time he ever went to the movies, five years old and staring up at the magical animation of *An American Tail* on the big screen -- he hadn't believed something could be so much larger than life, so much more real than what he knew of the world.

And this world was like that, grand and so unbelievable because it wasn't on a screen, it was all around him, and he could breathe in the thick scent of the poppies, he could feel the soft breezes against his face, and wherever he looked the colors were so bright that he had to squint, they hurt his eyes, and there was no way in hell this could be a dream. "Jesus," he whispered, trying to stare all around and take in everything at once. "Lance, have you ever seen anything like this? Ever?" Beside him, Lance shook his head numbly. Joey and JC stopped in front of them, gaping at the

flowers, the distant city, the sky. Placing a hand on Joey's fur-covered back, Justin gave him a slight push. "Move it, pussycat," he said, smiling because he was happy, the city was up ahead and his soul soared with this luscious landscape. "We got a hot date with the Wizard, and I think he's waiting."

JC laughed amicably. He had his axe resting on one shoulder, and once out of the dense trees the clink-clank of his tin armor didn't grate on Justin's nerves like it had. "What's the first thing you'll do when you get home, Justin?" he asked, leading the way along the road where it cut through the flowers.

With a quick smile at Lance, Justin said, "Kiss my boy silly. I miss him something fierce."

Joey grinned back at him. "Well, there's not much farther to go, is it? I haven't been to the Emerald City in years. I remember back when I was just a cub, and I used to meet this kitten at a club right outside the city. Over the Rainbow, the place was called -- everyone hung out there ..."

Justin let Joey's lilting voice wash over him as they walked. His mind couldn't comprehend the flowers and the colors and the sky, let alone listen to Joey ramble on about the dance scene in the city, and he knew he was squeezing Lance's hand too tight, but he couldn't help it, everything here amazed him, everything. I could stay in THIS part of Oz forever, he mused, his own thoughts distant, hidden beneath the barrage of sensation, colors and scents and feelings that threatened to swallow him whole. The only time he ever felt this alive was when he and Lance made love, and then the world around him took on this sharpness, this vivacity, and this place was so orgasmic he never wanted to leave. He had his friends here, didn't he? JC and Joey, and Lance -- as long as he had Lance, he could live here forever, even if his mind was numb from the world around him. He could live here.

Maybe he didn't need to wake up right this second. Maybe he didn't have to go home just yet.

"Can't we just stay here a while?" he asked softly, stopping in the middle of the road. He wanted to lie down in those flowers, feel Lance above him and the sky, the sky stretching away forever ... "What's the rush, you know?" He looked around at the others, staring at him strangely. "I mean, really?"

"You need to get home," Lance reminded him, and he knew that but right now it wasn't high on his list of things to do today. Right now he wanted to run through those poppies, he wanted to get drunk off of Lance's scent, he wanted to feel Lance crush him into the petals and push him to the ground and feel the world explode around him when he came. "Justin?" Lance asked, concerned when he didn't answer. "You need to get home, remember?"

"I remember," Justin said, yawning. Suddenly he felt exhausted, the whole day catching up with him in a rush, and he couldn't take another step, he just couldn't. "Let's just lie down for a minute, though, okay?" he asked, leading Lance off of the road. The minute he stepped among the poppies, his eyes slipped closed, and he blinked rapidly, trying to wake himself up. Had he always

felt this tired? Maybe. "I'm just so sleepy all of a sudden. Just a few minutes' rest, and then we'll get to the Emerald City, please?" He tugged at Lance's hand, pulling him out among the flowers, too. "The Wizard isn't going anywhere, I'm sure."

From the safety of the road, JC frowned. "You guys," he warned as Justin sank to the ground, "I don't think this is such a good idea ..."

But now Lance was yawning, and before Justin could lie down, Lance had already stretched out on the ground beside him, folding his arms beneath his head and sighing deeply. "I could use a quick nap," he said sleepily.

Justin laid down next to him and curled his arms around Lance's waist, hugging him close. Finally, he thought, finally I get to sleep with you again. Don't send me to the couch anymore, Lance. Please don't be mad at me. He didn't know if he spoke the words out loud or not, and as he snuggled his head against Lance's back, he didn't care.

"This isn't funny, boys," Joey said, leaving the road to get them back on their feet, but by the time he reached them he was crawling on all fours, yawning fiercely and growling in the back of his throat, trying to stay awake. Stretching out on the other side of Lance, he closed his eyes and the growls turned to a faint purring that made Justin clutch Lance just a little tighter.

From the road JC sighed lustily. "You guys," he sighed, coming after them himself. The last thing Justin heard was the clatter of tin as JC collapsed behind him, already snoring softly. We'll get there soon enough, he thought, and then he fell asleep, too.

\* \* \*

Justin felt someone kicking him in the small of his back. He rolled away from the kicks, closer to Lance, but then it started again, a steady thump thump of someone's foot, shoving him, pushing him, kicking -- "Stop," he muttered, slapping blindly behind him. His hand hit bare skin, a thin ankle, but it twisted away from his grip and the kicking started again.

"Get up," someone said, and it was Britney, exasperation in her voice. "Justin, get up, do you hear me? Get up."

"Stop kicking me," he said, scowling as he tried to crawl away from her. Was he home already? Lance lying beside him, Britney trying to wake them both up, maybe he was back at her apartment again and the dream was over, Oz was over, he could apologize now and make Lance love him finally. But when he opened his eyes, he found himself staring at straw sticking out of Lance's blonde hair, red poppies like rubies winking around them, the sun warming Joey's golden lion fur on the other side of Lance. Turning, he saw the glint of JC's tin suit, and there stood Britney, the Good Witch, pouting down at him. When she saw that he was awake, she gave him another swift kick for good measure before darting back out of reach. "I said stop it!" he cried, sitting up. He rubbed his

eyes and frowned. "Shit, I woke up in the same dream? Can you even do that?"

"You just did," Britney pointed out.

He shook Lance awake. "What are you doing here?" he asked as Lance stretched languidly beside him. Reaching across Lance's body, Justin caught Joey's tail in his hand and tugged at it until the lion moaned and rolled away. "Are you the Wicked Witch too?"

Britney laughed. "Get up," she said, dancing back to where the yellow brick road wound through the field of flowers. "The city's just up ahead. You're almost home now."

Lance stood up and helped Justin to his feet. With the tip of his shoe, Justin kicked at JC until he kicked back. "Get up, Josh," Justin said, letting Lance lead him to where Britney stood, hands on her hips, waiting for them. Joey roared as he shook his head, waking up. "Come on, Joe. How's this work, Brit? Is there even a Wicked Witch in this story? Someone I have to kill to get home?" Britney frowned at him, confused. "You know, throw water on her, melt her away, take her broomstick to the Wizard and he tells me to what, click my heels and say there's no place like home? Or is that your line? Why don't we just cut to the chase and you tell me how to get home now?"

Britney laughed again. "It doesn't work that way," she said. "So hurry it up, boys." With her bubble-blowing wand she pointed at the Emerald City, as far away now as it had been when they first left the forest. "The Wizard isn't going to sit around all day long waiting on you guys, you know?"

"It's Justin's fault," JC grumbled, smoothing out the wrinkles in his foil suit.

"It is not --" Justin started, but Britney smacked his arm playfully with her wand.

"Hush up," she admonished. Giving him a little push, she said, "Keep it moving, Justin. The Wizard's waiting."

Justin sighed. "Well, he can come to me," he mumbled, but the look on Britney's face told him that no, he couldn't. He was the Wizard, he wasn't going to hike out here just to see Justin. Can't wait to see who the Wizard turns out to be, he thought, a little glum because he thought he already knew who the Wizard was -- three of his friends stood here in the guises of the characters of Oz and there was only one person left who could be the Wizard, and how in the world did he land that role? Justin didn't know but he sure as hell wanted to find out. "Brit --"

"Go," she said, and then she blew a flurry of bubbles into his face. They popped along his skin, stinging his lips and eyes, and when he managed to swat them all away, she was gone again.

And Joey was already heading down the road, JC clanking along behind him. Lance took Justin's hand and smiled at him. "Come on," he whispered. "It's just up ahead."

Justin sighed as he started after the others, his gaze straying to

the green spires still so far ahead.

No Place Like Home  
Part 9  
by NSyncGrrl

Justin didn't know what to expect, but this coliseum, with its green spires twisting up into the sky, towering above them, the marquee flashing The Wizard is here! At the Emerald City Tonight! in garish neon letters ... this wasn't the Emerald City, was it? People everywhere, teenies mostly, pushing and shoving and screaming and shouting and laughing, like this was a concert they'd stayed up all night to buy tickets for, this was it, they could die happy now because they were here to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz, and there were cameras flashing, groupies singing, reporters trying to pin someone down, anyone, just to answer a few questions for our viewers at home, you'll get a free t-shirt, please? Justin frowned around in disgust. "You're joking," he said to no one in particular.

Lance grinned wildly, his eyes glassy as he took everything in. Joey roared in delight, dancing up to a group of giggling girls who fussed over his mane, and even JC managed a small smile, as if amazed by the lights and the people and the sounds, the music blaring from the coliseum and the lasers cutting across the sky. "I guess this is it," Lance said, shrugging, and Justin couldn't help but smile back. "Let's see if we can get you home, what do you say?"

"Sure," Justin replied. He followed Lance up the wide steps leading to the coliseum, pushing through the crowds and when was the last time he went to a show without VIP passes? He couldn't even remember. In the movie, wasn't everyone happy to see Dorothy arrive at the Emerald City? He sort of thought so. But these people weren't jostling and panting for him, were they? He wasn't the star here. And he didn't think he liked that very much ... no one seemed eager to help him, no one seemed to care that he didn't belong here, no one noticed he was out of place. Gripping Lance's hand tightly, he shoved through the crowds to the doors of the Emerald City. Just let me see this damn Wizard and get this shit over with, he thought, placing his hand on the glass door to push it open.

A thin strap of leather slapped his wrist, and he looked up to find a security guard glaring down at him, club in hand. "You need a ticket," the guard barked, his silver coated sunglasses reflecting Justin's frown back at him.

"A ticket?" Justin asked. That was just ludicrous, wasn't it? A ticket? "Look, I need to see the Wizard --"

The guard laughed, a harsh sound like a dog barking. "You and everyone else here, kid. You go buy a ticket and then come back. You've got a half hour until the show starts, anyway." He pointed to a small ticket booth at the bottom of the steps, off to one side. The line leading to the booth snaked its way through the crowd, and they'd never get a ticket in time, Justin knew it.

"The show?" Lance asked, confused. Justin looked back at him and shrugged. The show's just an illusion, he reminded himself, leading Lance down the steps again to the booth. He saw Joey talking to a pretty little cat, JC standing nearby like a sentry in his tin, staring at the sky and pretending he wasn't bored. "Justin, it's a show?" Lance asked as they stepped into line.

Justin shrugged again. "I don't think it's all that," he said. "In the movie it was a lot of smoke and noise but the Wizard was just this ordinary guy hiding behind a curtain. I'm sure it'll be about the same here."

"What movie?" Lance wanted to know, but the thought of explaining it all was too much, and Justin simply kissed his cheek in reply.

"Nevermind," he whispered, breathing in Lance's sweet scent. He nuzzled Lance's neck, kissing him tenderly, until Lance stepped up, the line started to move, and before he knew it they were at the counter of the ticket booth, the bored girl on the other side of the glass staring at them, waiting for their order. "Hey," Justin said, grinning disarmingly at her.

She cracked her gum and didn't smile back. "How many?" she asked, letting her gaze slide over Lance before settling back on Justin. "Two?"

"Four," Justin replied, and she frowned at him like he was stupid and couldn't count.

The girl pressed a button and four tickets spat out from a slit in the counter. She tore them off and said, "Forty bucks."

"What the fuck?" Justin glared at her. "You're shitting me." Whoever heard of paying to see the Wizard? He wanted to go home -- no one said jack about paying for it. "As in money?" he asked. This was a dream, and right now he prayed that he had that fifty dollar bill still in his wallet because if he didn't, he'd never wake up.

"As in cold, hard cash," she replied. "Cough it up, bud, or you don't get in to see the show."

"Do you have forty bucks?" Lance whispered as Justin dug into his back pocket. For one frightening moment he couldn't find his wallet, his heart froze in his chest and he'd be stuck here forever, he just knew it, but then his fingers closed over leather and ... thank you, God, thank you for letting me have the damn thing.

"Yeah," he sighed, relieved. Pulling the wallet out of his pocket, he opened it and handed the girl his fifty. When she gave him a ten and the tickets back, he stepped to one side and handed Lance the tickets. "Round up the others, will you? I'll wait here."

"Okay." As Lance set off into the crowd, Justin shoved his wallet back into his pocket and sighed. Not much longer now, he thought, crossing his arms in front of his chest. Then I can tell Lance I'm sorry and I love him and you know, maybe JC's right after all, maybe I'm not showing him I love him enough. I'll show him, with more than words, more than touches. I don't know how but when I

get back, I'll show him.

\* \* \*

Justin led the way into the Emerald City, waving his ticket at the guard smugly when he stepped forward to stop them. "I got a ticket," he said, and even if it wasn't a VIP pass, it would still get him in to see the Wizard because that was how the story went, wasn't it? And the story was his story, it was about him, so of course he'd get to see the Wizard.

But inside he looked around and suddenly everything came crashing in on him, he was nobody, nobody at all, just another face in this faceless crowd of hundreds ... no, thousands, thousands of people milling around and buying up souvenirs and shouting at each other, wolfing down hot pretzels and sodas and all of them wanted to see the Wizard? How was that even possible? They stepped into the arena itself, and even though they were only on the second mezzanine, the lower levels opened like a pit below them, row upon row of stadium seating and a large stage set at one end of the court. Justin craned his neck up, up, up ... the place was huge, enormous, bigger than any place they'd ever played at as a group, he couldn't imagine how many people this place sat, and every single seat looked like it was filled, despite the fact that the crowds kept streaming in. "Well?" JC asked, looking around. "Where do you guys want to sit?"

Justin glanced at his ticket. General admission, it read. Oh fuck. This was insane. "We'll never see him now."

Joey pointed down over the seats and said, "We can see him from here. The stage is right there --"

"Oh yeah," Justin complained, "that'll work. What do you want me to do, shout out to him? Fuck, we don't even have any signs ..." If he had known it would be a concert, he'd have made a big-ass sign like the ones the teenies brought to their shows. "He'll never see us up here."

"Then come on," Lance said, working his way down the steps to the lower levels. "We can at least get a little closer, you know? This is general seating."

Justin sighed. "I don't know --" he started, but JC pushed him along after Lance and to keep from tripping, Justin followed. At floor level, Joey took the lead, growling at people who stood in their way and clearing a path to the stage. But even up against the metal barricades, Justin thought he'd never get a chance to talk to the Wizard. He might as well give up now. What a waste of forty bucks, he thought, looking around the security pit. Stage hands dressed in black carried speakers into place, jumping over wires and testing the lights, and despite the number of fans there wasn't anyone with a yellow jacket that read SECURITY across the back, at least not as far as Justin could see. He had been in enough arenas and coliseums and show halls to know the layout backstage -- if he could just get back there, he knew he could find the Wizard. He was sure of it. He shook the barricade in frustration.



Something jingled beside him, metal against metal, and he looked down to see a thick chain linking two of the barricades together. A slow smile spread across his face. Of course ... "Josh, there," he said, pointing at the chain. "Cut that."

JC sighed. "We can't just --"

"Give me the axe then," Justin said, holding out his hand.

"It's my axe," JC said, frowning at him. He held the axe against his chest protectively. "I don't think it's a good idea to just break through, Justin. They have those things there for a reason."

Justin sighed. "But if we can see him now, before the show starts, maybe this can all be over with, you know?" He pouted. "Please, Josh?" Turning to Joey, he asked, "You see what I mean, don't you, Joe? Lance?" His lover shrugged and smiled in support. "Lance, please reason with him. We have to get through --"

"Fine," JC said, sighing lustily. "You want to whine about it? Fine. Stand back. I'll cut the chain, just stand back already." He pushed Justin out of the way and hefted his axe over one shoulder. Looking around to make sure no one was paying any attention to him, he said, "Get back." Justin caught Lance's hand in his and pulled him close, letting his arms slip around his lover's waist as he hugged him tightly, and Joey stood behind them, a small grin on his whiskered face. With a strong swing, JC let the axe fall, the sharp chink of steel biting into metal lost in the noise of the crowd, and the chain dropped to the ground, nothing but a bundle of broken links. "There," JC said, scowling at them. "You happy?"

"Very much so," Justin replied, grinning foolishly. "Thanks." He pushed through the barricade, Lance's hand in his, Joey and JC right behind him. Now he'd see this Wizard, and heaven help them all if Justin's fears were right and it was Chris, because what if he didn't know how to get Justin home? What then?

No Place Like Home  
Part 10  
by NSyncGrrl

Backstage. It was the same at every venue they ever played at, every show Justin ever saw -- even if this was Oz, he could pick out the security personnel, standing around with their arms crossed, huge men and women defying anyone to challenge them. He saw stage hands rushing back and forth, trying to tie up loose ends before the lights dimmed and the show started. Costumers, makeup artists, light techs and sound mixers and boom boys, cameramen and the floor director ... they hurried about, ignoring the four strangers because they could be anyone at all, they weren't important, and the show was about to begin, the show had to go on. Justin walked with his head up and a scowl on his face that deterred questions, and because he looked like he knew what he was doing, where he was going, because he knew who he was and he was someone important, he belonged here -- because of the way he carried himself, no one stopped them.

They found the Wizard's dressing room easily enough -- a bright yellow strip ran down the length of the hall, so much like the road they left behind at the doors of the Emerald City, leading up to a closed door with a large star nailed in the center. The words The Great and Wonderful Wizard of Oz were written in gilded curly script above it. "You think this might be it?" Justin asked, grinning at Lance.

"Do you think he can help you?" Joey asked, concern lacing his voice. "I mean, really? Think about it, Justin. He's a performer -- what's he do, anyway? Magic tricks onstage? Sing, dance, pull rabbits out of his hat? Do you think he can get you home?"

Justin shrugged. "Britney said I had to come to the Emerald City," he reminded them, raising his hand to knock on the door. "Find the Wizard, get home, live happily ever after. In that order." His fist rapped on the door with a hollow sound, but no one inside answered. He knocked again. "So I'm here, right? The Wizard is in there. And that just leaves getting home and living happily ever after."

"Sounds like you have it all figured out," JC muttered, and Justin shrugged again. He did have it figured out. He would get home and tell Lance he loved him and that would be that. Happily ever after. The end.

When Justin raised his hand to knock a third time, the door flew open and damn if Chris wasn't standing there, glaring back at them. He wore a green suit, tight pants and huge lapels and checkered vest, a watch chain strung across his stomach, he looked like the damn Mayor of those little people in the movie ... hell, he looked like one of those little people, his hair all spiked and gelled, his goatee slicked down -- he looked impish and wizardly but those were the same chocolate eyes blazing up at them, the same impish scowl. It was definitely Chris. "I hope you brought me some Evian,"

he said, pouting. "And that silver scarf I wanted. You know I don't go onstage without that scarf -- wait a minute. Who the hell are you guys? Where's my assistant?"

Chris. Justin groaned. "Dammit to all hell and back again, it had to be you," he muttered. "Why are you the Wizard, Chris? Tell me that. How did you get this part?"

"What part?" Chris glanced up at JC standing behind Justin, his gaze shifting next to Joey and Lance on either side, and finally resting on Justin himself. "What are you talking about? Who are you? I've got a show to do --"

Justin pushed into the room past Chris, the others filing in behind him. "Look, let's just get this over with, shall we? I want to go home. Brit says you can get me there."

"Brit?" Chris asked, frowning. He looked around -- Justin glared at him balefully, waiting to be told sure, I can help, here's the way home. Lance shifted from foot to foot, his hand clutching Justin's tightly, his gaze on the ground. Joey leaned against the wall, pretending to be overly enthralled with his claws, picking at them in an effort to look busy so he wouldn't have to meet Chris's stare. Beside him JC shook his head sadly. When Chris caught his eye, JC twirled his finger around his ear and then pointed at Justin. He didn't have to say a word -- his eyes said it all. He's a fruitcake, JC was thinking, Justin could almost hear the words as if they were spoken out loud. Off his rocker, man, send him HOME already, please. Get him out of here, just take him AWAY. "What are you talking about? Brit who?"

"The Good Witch," JC offered. "He calls her Britney. Don't even get me started on that whole name thing."

Justin sighed. "Chris, I just want to go home. You can do that, right? Send me home?"

Chris shook his head. "I don't know who you think I am," he said. "I'm not Chris -- I'm the Wizard of Oz. I put on a variety show here three times a week, just a little song and dance, some tricks, nothing much. It draws the crowds, though, and it's televised live all over Oz. You guys want free passes? Autographs? Pictures for the folks back home?"

"No!" Justin cried. "Fuck Chris, I want to go home. That's your job, isn't it? Granting wishes, or fixing shit, or giving people what they want, what they need --"

Chris laughed and shook his head. "You have me confused with someone else, kid. I'm not that kind of wizard. I can't give you anything you don't already have."

"I have a home," Justin said, anger seeping into his words. He had a home, he did, and he wanted to be back there now. "I need to be there, I want to be there, so tell me how to get back, Chris. Please ..." Tears glistened in his eyes -- it had been a long day, a long dream, and he felt so utterly exhausted and tired and drained that he just wanted everything to be over with, he didn't even want to go through the trouble of going through the motions, he just

wanted it to be finished. Over and done. "Just please give me back my Lance," he whispered, and he felt Lance's hand tighten around his, giving him strength. "Give me back my home, let me wake up and let me go, please let me go back to him --"

Sighing, Chris rubbed his eyes with one hand and said softly, "I can't."

Justin felt the pout tug at his lips, the tears spill down his cheeks, and he whispered, "Why not?"

Around them the lights dimmed for the top of the show, and Chris shrugged. "That's my cue," he said, flashing them a quick grin. With his forefinger he raised Justin's chin and the compassion in his dark eyes hurt to see. Justin blinked away his tears and sighed, but when he tried to turn away Chris held him in check. "You take care, kid, you hear me? You'll get home, I know it. You just have to find out what's keeping you here."

"But --" Justin started.

Chris ignored him. "There's something that's not quite right back home, isn't there?" He waited until Justin nodded and then he said, "Well, you know what it is. You know how to fix it. You know it in here --" He pointed at Justin's chest. "You know it here --" He tapped Justin's forehead. "I know you're scared but you have to face your fears. Then you can go home." His mouth twisted into a sad half-smile, and he glanced around at the others again before stepping back. "You'll see. It's in you, Justin, and I can't get you home. Only you can do that." Picking up a top hat from a nearby vanity, he tapped it open and set it on his head at an odd angle. "Take care, guys."

And then he was gone. And Justin still didn't know how to get home. He didn't even want to think about it anymore. Oh God, he thought, falling to the couch behind him and covering his face with his hands. Oh Jesus please.

He didn't even know what he was praying for anymore.

\* \* \*

Lance looked around helplessly, uncertainty written across his face. "Justin ..." he started, and then because he didn't know what else to say, he sighed and knelt on the floor beside his friend. Wrapping his arms around Justin's legs, he rested his head on Justin's knee and closed his eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Justin reached down to run his hand through Lance's hair. "It's okay," he replied. It wasn't Lance's fault. It was the Wizard's, and Britney's for leading him to believe the Wizard could help, and for all he knew maybe it was Joey's or JC's fault, too, but not Lance's. It was never Lance's fault.

Pushing away from the wall, Joey glanced at JC and then sat down on the couch beside Justin. For a long moment he just picked at the tip of his tail, caught in both hands, as if debating what to say. Finally he asked, "What are you afraid of, Justin? What's

keeping you here?"

"I don't know," Justin replied. He didn't. What was the Wizard talking about? "Spiders, maybe," he whispered, even though he hated admitting he was scared of spiders. Well, maybe not scared, but he didn't like them much.

"What?" Joey asked, confused.

Justin shrugged. "I'm afraid of spiders," he said, and then so it wouldn't sound so pathetic, he scowled and added, "Not like terrified, mind you, but I don't like them. I mean, I don't have a complex or anything --"

"Somehow," JC said quietly from across the room, "I don't think your fear of spiders is what's keeping you here in Oz."

You're right, Justin thought, but he wouldn't tell JC that. No need in telling him that he was always right. "So now what?" Justin wanted to know. "What do I do now?"

Softly Lance suggested, "You can stay here with us. With me."

What a tempting thought. Trailing his fingers down Lance's muscled bicep, so firm, so strong beneath his touch, Justin blinked back tears and whispered, "That's not so bad." This Lance didn't seem to get mad at him all the time -- he could do no wrong in his eyes. Maybe staying here wasn't such a horrible fate after all. He could adapt. Get a job, maybe sing in the Wizard's backup band, if he had one. Justin knew he could love this Lance, make him love him back. He didn't have to worry about coming home late and pissing the scarecrow off, or sleeping on the couch, or doing something stupid to make Lance upset, or saying something that angered him. God, he thought, frowning at Lance, who looked up at him with such trusting eyes, am I that bad? Why does he love me if I pull that shit all the time? Why does he STAY with me?

Maybe it's better this way, a small voice replied, and Justin felt the tears prick his eyes again. Maybe it's better that I never wake up, and he can just go on with his life and not have to worry about me all the time ... that was his fear, wasn't it? That Lance didn't want him, would grow weary of him, would never realize how much Justin loved him and would call it quits. When they were together -- when Justin hadn't fucked something up and Lance was smiling, holding him and whispering that he was his baby boy -- when things were good between them, Justin felt like the world was spinning around them and they were the only two things that were standing still, they were real, they were alive and no one else mattered. He felt as if he was holding his breath because nothing could be as beautiful as Lance in his arms and nothing could ever hope to compare to what they had, the love they shared.

But when Lance was mad, or angry, or pissed, then the sun hid behind the clouds and everything was gray, all the brightness and life in the world mixing together like watercolors in the rain, washing away and spiraling into drains, out of sight, gone. And he was scared -- no, he was terrified -- that one day Lance would just give up on him and leave, and take all of the color from the world with him, take all the life in Justin away. Some nights he even

woke in the grip of the thought, and he had to turn over and touch Lance and reassure himself that Lance was still there, still his. In a small voice, Justin said, "I'm scared of losing Lance forever."

"He'd never leave you," Lance assured him, rubbing a hand along Justin's thigh in a comforting gesture, but the look on JC's face suggested otherwise. That look said maybe if Lance got fed up one too many times, he'd leave, because Justin didn't prove his love to him enough, he didn't know how Justin really felt. I have to change that, Justin thought. If I ever get home again, that has to change.

Joey smacked Justin's leg with his tail and asked, "Why would you lose him?"

Justin shrugged. "I'm an ass," he said, and that was true, wasn't it? "I take him for granted, I know I do. I goof off and fool around and push him as far as he'll go, and he always snaps back like a rubber band. He's always there to pick up the pieces and dust me off and get me going again." Fear crept into his mind, chilling his blood. "What if he gets tired of that? What if he decides next time to just leave me?" He didn't want to think about it but what if last night had been the last straw? What if Lance wasn't coming to get him from Britney's and take him back? Then I'm not going home, Justin swore, because there is no home without Lance. I don't want to live in a world where he doesn't love me back.

Leaning close, Joey lowered his voice and said, "When you get home? Tell him that. Don't be afraid to say look, this is what I'm scared of. He'll never know unless you say it out loud, you know?"

"What if I never get home?" Justin replied.

"You heard the Wizard," Joey said, patting Justin's knee. "You will."

No Place Like Home  
Part 11  
by NSyncGrrl

JC cleared his throat, and everyone turned to look at him, standing by the door like an armored guard. "Not to break up the pity party or anything," he said, smiling sardonically, "but we paid for the show. Maybe we can continue this woe-is-Justin crap afterwards?"

Justin scowled. "I paid for the show," he said, but JC was right yet again, wasn't he? There was nothing else he could do right now, nothing else he could think of to do, so why not see the show and just forget about everything for an hour or two? He'd still be here when it was over, still stuck in Oz, but maybe his mind would be a little bit clearer and he could decide what to do then. I'll never see Lance again, I know it, Justin thought, pushing himself up from the couch. Not his Lance, anyway. The scarecrow Lance stood up beside him and took his hand again, smiling apologetically because there was nothing he could do to help. Justin forced a smile in return. I'll never see MY Lance again, I'll never tell him I love him, I'll never tell him I'm afraid of losing him ... how could I have been so blind? So stupid? How could I have not told him all of this before?

He didn't know. As he followed Joey and JC out of the Wizard's dressing room, he wondered if Lance was worried about him. He wondered if Lance even knew he was asleep at Britney's house, though he thought by now he probably did. Britney probably called him the minute Justin closed the door to the spare bedroom, told him to come over here, get his boy, and what would Lance say to that? No? Wait until morning? That's what I said, Justin reminded himself, and God, if he could only have that moment back, he'd pick up the phone and tell Lance he was sorry, he loved him and he was sorry, he was so afraid of sleeping alone and now he was at Britney's and could Lance please come and get him? Take him home? Please?

But that moment was gone. And he might never get the chance to wake up and tell Lance all that he wanted to say. Like I'm sorry, or I love you. He wanted to say that more than anything right now, to his Lance, and see those green eyes ignite like the crystalline towers above the Emerald City, flashing with the lasers and the lights and the sun, and to hear Lance say he loved him back.

In the hall people rushed around, scrambling for their places, checking and double checking and re-checking everything in the final minutes before the show started. "You know, Justin," JC said over his shoulder, grinning back at him, "if you don't get to go home, you can always be a woodcutter. You'll get your own axe, and you'll finally get the chance to show those trees who's boss."

Justin groaned. "Shut up about those trees already, Josh." God, if he stayed in Oz, he'd never live that down.

Joey roared with laughter. "You know," he said, sighing merrily, "I missed the thing with the trees. When this show is over, do you think we can go back to the woods and you can show me how it went?"

"Oh, that's right," JC cried, laughing as well. "You missed it! Well, Justin was getting it on with his scarecrow there and these trees --"

"I said shut up," Justin growled, but JC walked away and Joey hurried to catch up with him, eager to hear the story. Turning to Lance, Justin rolled his eyes and complained, "I hate trees, you know that, right?"

Lance laughed and kissed the tip of Justin's nose. Justin studied Lance's wide eyes, his childlike grin, and he vowed to make his Lance's eyes sparkle like that, to bring this wonder back into the face he loved so much. If I ever get the chance again. Sadly, he stroked Lance's soft cheek, so tender beneath his touch, and whispered, "I'm going to miss you when I leave. More than anyone else, Joey or JC, Chris or Britney." He smiled. "Even the trees. I'm going to miss you most of all."

Lance covered Justin's hand with his own. "You'll have your Lance," he replied, his lower lip trembling slightly. "But I'll miss you, too, Justin. I'll never be the same again, I know it." Oh God, Justin thought, his eyes watering once more. Don't cry, not here, not now. Be strong, Justin, please ... but his heart wasn't listening to him, and he closed his eyes to keep from seeing Lance refracted through his tears. Leaning forward, Lance kissed Justin gently, his lips brushing against Justin's with a soft, bittersweet crush that made him choke back a sob. He'd miss this kiss, this press of flesh, if Lance left him in either world. "I could love you, Justin," Lance whispered, "so I know he loves you. He has to."

"Thank you," Justin whispered. When Lance pulled away, Justin sighed and glanced up at JC and Joey, waiting for them at the end of the hall. JC sighed dramatically and waved his hands, motioning for them to get a move on. Wiping at his eyes, Justin muttered, "I have to get cleaned up. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Lance replied. He pointed at a nearby door, the word MENS written across it in garish letters. "Go ahead," he said. "We'll wait."

"Okay." Justin pushed through the door and sighed at the dingy white restroom, the chipped urinals, the stalls covered with grafetti, the dripping sinks. Typical, he thought, stepping up to the closest sink. He leaned over and studied himself in the smoky mirror. Just another bathroom in another coliseum. Could be anywhere. He didn't remember this from the movie though, this mesh of his world and Oz, and he didn't think he liked it very much. If he had to stay here, little things like this would bother him, little glimpses of his life from before that would hit him with a wave of nostalgia and nausea that made his stomach clench into knots and his hands fist uncontrollably, and he'd remember Lance all over again, like he could ever forget, and it would hurt anew. It would ache, and it would throb, and how could he ever live with that pain? He gripped the sides of the sink, the porcelain cool in his



hands, and met his own gaze in the mirror above. I can't live with that, he thought. Without Lance. Without telling him all he needs to hear from me.

Frowning at his reflection, he took in the tousled curls, the dark eyes, the scowl across his lips like a dark red scar. "It's your fault I'm here," he said, and it felt good to admit it, good to finally say the words out loud. "Your own stupid fault, Justin. You made Lance mad. You can't show him you love him. You, you, you." Pressing his nose against the cold glass, he stared into his own deep eyes and breathed, "It's always you." The mirror fogged up beneath his nose, frosting his reflection. It's always me.

Suddenly the lights flicked off, plunging the restroom into a darkness so complete that for an instant Justin thought he was blind. A roar like the surf started up from the arena -- the show's about to start, he mused, listening to the din of the crowd. He had never heard of a place that turned off all of the lights before a show, backstage, bathrooms, everything. Maybe someone was playing a trick on him, cutting the lights off just to scare him. Maybe it was Lance, coming to sneak up on him, surprise him with warm hands on his waist, warm lips on his neck. Glancing around the room nervously, he called out, "Lance?"

No one answered. He was alone.

Justin sighed. "This is probably your fault, too," he muttered at the mirror, black and endless in front of him. He could see the faint outline of his silhouette reflected back at him as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, and it was like staring at a negative of himself -- his skin dark, his eyes glistening, his pout now sinister and wicked and ... I'm the witch, he thought suddenly, and it made perfect sense, didn't it? I'm the wicked witch, it's me, it's ALWAYS been me. In the movie it was the witch who thwarted Dorothy every step of the way, wasn't it? And in this dream that's been my job. From the beginning Justin didn't want to do this, didn't want to be here. He wanted to be home, and everyone told him what to do -- Lance and Britney and JC and Joe, even the Wizard, they all tried to tell him and he didn't listen. He didn't want to listen. So the witch was him.

My stupidity, Justin thought, staring at his dark reflection staring back. My lack of heart. My lack of courage. And they've kept me here, away from Lance, away from my home. And in the darkness he swore he saw his reflection smile because he was right, finally he knew, he knew he was right.

Justin sighed. I'm sorry, Lance. He didn't know if he was talking out loud or not and it didn't matter anymore, did it? Because Lance wasn't here, he was home, where Justin wanted to be. A quick pain flared through his mind and he closed his eyes, pressing his fingers against his forehead to squeeze away the sudden headache. I'm sorry, I am, I'm so sorry ... I've been selfish and I don't know how you can still love me if you even do, but I love you, I love you, I love you so damn much it hurts because you're not here with me and I might never see you again.

Around him the darkness began to spin, the distant cries of the crowd ebbing away like the tide. The blackness disappeared and he

was falling away from the mirror, from himself, from everyone and everything, the ground rushing to meet him with a suddenness he didn't like one bit. It's all my fault, Lance, he thought, and he had just enough time to think that maybe Dorothy had known all along there was no place like home before he fell to the tiled floor of the bathroom. All my fault.

I'm sorry.

No Place Like Home  
Part 12  
by NSyncGrrl

Justin woke with a jolt. He sat up and blinked in the darkness around him, and for a moment he still heard the crowd, far away and distant but ecstatic when the Wizard stepped on stage. Then he felt the soft mattress beneath him, heard the soft sounds of quiet talk beyond the closed door, and he was back, wasn't he? This was Britney's apartment -- even in the dark room he could see the glow from the clock by the bed, it was only after midnight, and he was home. Finally. Cautiously he ran his hands through his hair, smoothing down his disheveled curls, and when he closed his eyes again, he sighed. Home, he thought. I don't know how and I don't know why, but I'm home.

And he had something to do. Find Lance.

As quietly as he could, he crossed the room, the damn floor creaking softly beneath his feet. He hoped Britney was asleep, but when he pressed his ear against the door, he heard her lilting voice in the other room. Maybe she was on the phone. Maybe he could slip out without her noticing -- he didn't want to waste any more time here, he wanted to rush home and up the stairs and sweep Lance out of the bed, crush him with kisses and tell him over and over and over again how much he loved him. He'd stop somewhere and buy flowers first -- a convenience store maybe, or a gas station, someplace open late, and in the morning he'd bring him breakfast in bed, and they'd make love as the sun peeked into their room, the covers wrapped around their sweaty bodies. He'd tell Lance he loved him until his throat grew sore and his voice hoarse, and he'd apologize until Lance begged him to stop. I'll never stop, Justin thought, easing the door open. I love you, Lance, I'll never stop. You'll hear the words and you'll feel my love and you'll drink it, eat it, live it, BREATHE it, and you'll never doubt it again. I promise.

He tiptoed out into the hall and frowned at the light spilling from the kitchen. Damn. He had to cross that patch of light to make it to the front door, and he could hear Britney talking in the kitchen and she would see him walk by, he knew it. And then she'd want to talk and there was nothing to say, not to her, not right now. But maybe he could just sneak by and she'd never know -- "He loves you, Lance," Britney said, and Justin froze. She's talking to Lance, he thought, leaning against the wall to listen. "You know that."

A sigh, and fuck. Justin's mind whirled. He's here. He's here. Why didn't she TELL me he was here? Despite the fact she didn't even know he was awake. "I know," Lance said, his deep voice soft and so full of sadness that Justin closed his eyes against sudden tears.

"You love him," Britney said. It came to this? Her giving Lance advice on their relationship? He held his breath, waiting for Lance's

answer.

It was long in coming. Please, Justin pleaded silently. Please say yes, please tell her you do, please --

Lance laughed softly. "How can I not?" he asked, and Justin sighed, relieved. "Jesus, Brit, he's everything to me. My heart, my soul -- everything. And sometimes I wonder why I even bother." Don't think that, Lance, Justin thought. Please don't EVER think that. "He loves me, yeah, I know that. But sometimes I wonder ... I don't know, I just wonder if ..." He sighed again. "I don't know what I'm talking about."

"You wonder if you mean as much to him as he does to you," Britney said quietly, and Justin could almost see Lance's nod in his mind. "You do, Lance. You know you do. He's just ... well, he's just Justin, you know? That's the way he is."

Lance whispered, "I know."

Justin wanted to peek around the corner, see the expression on Lance's face, rush in there and catch him up in his arms and smother him with kisses. That's the way I WAS, he thought, resting his head back against the wall. But give me another chance, please, let me show you I know I was wrong, I can change, I can, I WILL, please let me show you. Please.

"Sometimes," Lance was saying, his voice carrying easily from the kitchen into the hall where Justin stood, listening, "sometimes everything's great. It's like a fantasy, or a dream, somewhere over the rainbow where the world is young and new and free, and we're all that exists. It's just the two of us, and he's just my boy, not Justin Timberlake from 'N Sync, and he doesn't care what others say or do, and he's so damn sweet it aches, Britney. Like lemon drops, he makes you want to pucker up and kiss him forever."

Britney laughed. "You can't have all of that sunshine without a little rain," she reminded him. "I don't know what to tell you, Lance. I'm sorry, I don't. Just love him and hold on for the ride. Maybe there is a place like that, somewhere where it is just the two of you, but it's not far away, it's here. You need to make it real here, you both need to work on it and that starts with you telling him how you feel. Don't think he just knows. Tell him that you think you need more, if he's willing to give more. I'm sure he is." I am, Justin agreed, nodding. I'll give you everything, Lance -- my heart, my strength, my LIFE, everything. You don't even have to ask. In a tiny voice, she added, "I don't know what else to say."

"Maybe there's nothing more to say," Lance replied. "Maybe I just need to talk to him."

"He's in the spare bedroom," Britney said quietly. "You guys can stay the night, if you want."

Lance sighed. "Let me just talk to him first," he said. Justin heard the scrape of a chair being pushed away from the kitchen table, and his heart quickened in his chest. He wants to talk about it, he thought, and that was good, wasn't it? It proved that Lance wanted to keep what they had together, he wanted to keep Justin,

he wanted to work things out. So they would talk. Justin debated on returning to the room, lying down and pretending to sleep again until Lance could kiss him awake.

But what if I slip back THERE again? Justin did not want that, that dreamworld, that Oz, not again. And then he saw Lance's shadow fall across the floor, blocking out the light, and if there had ever been a moment to hide, it was gone when Lance stepped into the hall. He stopped in the doorway, blinking when he saw Justin standing there, and the pain in those crystalline eyes, the pain Justin put there, it was too much, it was his fault, all his fault. "Lance," he whispered, reaching out instinctively to touch Lance's arm. "I'm sorry. God, I'm so sorry."

For a second Lance stared at him, a slight frown on his face, and Justin prayed he didn't shrug off the touch. "Justin --" Lance started, sighing.

Justin didn't let him finish. Stepping closer, he wrapped his arms around Lance and pulled him into a tight embrace. "I love you," Justin whispered into Lance's neck, inhaling deeply his cologne, kissing his ear, hugging him close. "Lance, I'm so sorry and I love you and I hope you can forgive me. I promise I've learned my lesson. I promise things will be different, I swear to you." Choking back a sob, he remembered Joey's words and added, "I'm scared, Lance. I don't want to lose you, not ever. I can't even imagine life without you, I love you that much." He sighed, and he felt Lance's arms slip around his waist. "I don't want to lose you," he breathed. "I won't be able to live without you if I do."

"Justin," Lance sighed against his neck, his breath hot and feathery, igniting Justin's blood. "I just --"

"It's my fault," Justin said. He rested his forehead against Lance's and stared into his lover's eyes, so endless, so deep, the crystal color of forever. Rubbing the back of Lance's neck tenderly, he pouted and whispered, "My fault, Lance. And I'm sorry."

"You don't have to say it anymore," Lance replied, smiling slightly.

Justin smiled sadly. "I can't say it enough. I love you. I'll show you, Lance, I will. In everything I do, everything I say and think and dream, it's you. It's always been you." Before Lance could respond, Justin kissed him hungrily, pressing their lips together with a kiss as soft as the petals of those poppies in his dream, as seductive as silk. "Only you, Lance. I missed you. It's been so long, so damn long ..."

Lance laughed breathlessly. "Just a few hours," he said, caressing Justin's back with eager hands. "Not that long, actually."

Maybe for you, Justin thought, staring into Lance's eyes, but it's been forever for me. How long ago had he awoken in that field? Had he met the Good Witch Britney and been set on the path to the Emerald City? Those towers have nothing on you, he mused, smiling at Lance. Your eyes outshine those spires any day. He felt like he'd been sleeping for years and was only now waking up, everything growing clear and he could see, he knew, everything

finally clicked into place and he knew there was no place like home, and home was anywhere as long as Lance was there beside him. As long as they were together, as long as they had each other, there was no place else he wanted to be. "I'm never leaving you again," Justin promised, "not ever, because you're my heart's desire, Lance, and I don't have to look anywhere else to find that out. I'll never forget it, and I'll never let you forget it, either."

"I love you," Lance whispered, but his words were lost in Justin's trembling kiss. Home, Justin thought.

He was home.

The End