

SHORT STORIES:

The stories marked with a **S** aren't your regular "happy ever after" tales. Basically, if they don't end up together, it's not a happy ending to me.

Hollow Man

I love this story, which might be egotistical but tough shit. I wrote it, you know? Justin's insecure about himself, his career, and his relationship with Lance, who is a hard man to love.

Devil of a Night -- JC/Joey short story

On a trip back from Atlantic City, Joey tells JC the legend of the Jersey Devil. JC doesn't believe there's any truth to the tale until they almost hit a man on a lonely stretch of road that runs right through the Pine Barrens. When they get out of the car, however, there's no one there ... A lame attempt at horror, I know, but it's not my forte.

Picture Postcards

This story came to me while listening to Joshua Kadison's song, "Picture Postcards from L.A." The band broke up shortly after Justin's marriage to Britney, but a one-night stand with Lance has haunted him ever since. Lance doesn't realize that Justin has feelings for him until he gets a postcard from his friend after he's convinced himself that they're better off apart.

There Is No Arizona **S**

Another "after the band disbands" story. Lance sends Justin a letter that brings back a flood of memories, and when Justin never hears from him again, he tracks down the return address in the hopes of finding something he lost long ago when they fell out of touch.

Lover's Cross **S**

Hmm, how to explain? There's an accident, but Justin's doing fine. Or is he? This was an attempt to try my hand at a plot technique I first encountered when I read a book called *The Other* by Thomas Tryon.

Star Wars: Bounty of the Heart -- JC/Eminem/AJ McLean short story

Take two boy band members and a rapper, toss them into the Star Wars universe, stir 'em up and dump 'em out and see what you get. In this case, Joshua and Marshall are bounty hunters after Gardulla the Hutt, but they run into Marshall's old partner Alex on Tatooine, who's after a bounty of his own.

Something Different -- JC/Fred Durst short story

Something way different. I thought of this story the night I got drunk at the 'N Sync concert. JC's a little depressed and in an effort to cheer him up, Chris and Joey drag him to a Limp Bizkit concert. Somehow he ends up having more fun than he expected.

Strong Enough

This is my favorite story that I've written, and even though it's sad, I don't think it has a sad ending. Justin's been married to Britney for ten years when his world comes crumbling apart. The only one strong enough to hold Justin and his two children together is Lance, who steps in when no one else is there.

Maybe

The tour was too much for Lance, and it strained his relationship with Justin to the breaking point. Now he wants Justin back, and Justin thinks it was all his fault in the first place because he wasn't there when Lance needed him the most.

Sea Change

This is a strange tale, I don't know what else to say about it. It was loosely inspired by a poem called "Krinken" by Eugene Field and sounds like a lot of my stories and poems I wrote before I started writing slash. Lance lives on a lonely stretch of beach where it never rains and the sun never shines, not since he lost half his soul. But when the rains come again, they bring with them memories of the boy with the summer smile.

Toy Soldiers

The title for this story comes from a song, "Toy Soldiers," by Martika. While on tour, Justin discovers that Lance is hiding something from him. He's afraid to confront his boyfriend, though, and tells himself he'll step in when things get too deep.

I'll Take the Rain

Another story whose title comes from a song, this one "I'll Take the Rain" by REM. I suck at descriptions so until I think of one just read the damn story.

My Words

People ask where I get my ideas. I don't always know. But for this story I was driving home and flipping radio stations and heard a song by Blues Traveler. It made me think of my favorite song of theirs, "Sweet Pain," and the line about Cyrano de Bergerac. And that's where this story came from. Cyrano à la 'N Sync.

The Last Thing on My Mind

Okay so I'm driving to work the other morning and I almost run off the road, and then I think if I'm going to die, I might as well hit another car and take someone out with me, and one thought led to another and here's what I came up with. Remember I'm not saying it's the best thing I ever wrote. Hell, I'm not even sure it makes sense. But who cares?

In Control

It's not who you think.

We're Not Fighting

Wade's cousin takes a liking to Justin, and he can't see what Lance's problem is about that.

One More Try

When the band broke up, Lance told Justin he loved him. They spent one night together and then Justin left. Lance has been trying to get over that for the past six years and thinks he's succeeded until his friend comes back again, looking for another chance.

Gone S

Just a little story, something sad because that's how I was feeling when I wrote it. I sort of got the idea while listening to the song "Melancholy Blue" by Trisha Yearwood.

You Think We Don't

This is an odd story, mostly done as an experiment in point of view, so if you get lost in it, blame me. Basically, Justin's afraid of telling Lance how he feels and Lance thinks as long as they don't talk about it, neither of them will get hurt. This is another story idea I got from a song -- "If I Wanted To" by Melissa Etheridge this time.

Surrendered

Justin's not sure if he's ready to take his relationship with Lance to the next level.

You've Got Mail

Or, Justin and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day. One of Lance's friends is sending him stories in his email, only they're not really all that fictitious and he can't figure out who it might be.

Hollow Man
by NSyncGrrl

This is the way the world ends ...

It's late, too late. I hate when he does this to me, takes off after a show to hang out at the clubs with Joey and Chris. Like I don't matter. Like I don't lie here in his hotel room, in the bed we share at night, and clutch the sheets around me because I want him so bad.

Last time he did this to me, I stayed up until four in the morning waiting for him to return, and the minute he walked through the door, I jumped all over him. "Where have you been?" I wanted to know. "Do you know what time it is?"

He glared at me with those celadon eyes. When he spoke, his voice was hard and uncompromising. "What the fuck's your problem, Justin?" he asked, and I bit my lip like I always do when I get upset. I know he hates it, but I couldn't stop myself. Watching me, he sighed, pissed to all hell. "Don't play this stupid game with me, not tonight. I'm not in the mood."

"What game is that?" I asked, though I knew perfectly well what he meant.

He tossed his jacket on the sofa and headed for the bathroom. I followed. "I'm not going to listen to this," he growled, leaning over the sink. He twisted the knob so hard I thought it would snap off in his hand. "This jealous boyfriend act of yours needs to stop, right now." When I didn't say anything, he looked at me in the mirror, the anger in his eyes simmering in the reflection. "You think I'm fucking around on you? Is that what this is all about?"

I didn't say anything, because I know he wouldn't do that. But sometimes it all gets to me and I lie awake at night and wonder how I could make it without the group, without Lance. And that's when the doubts start to creep in, whispering into my mind, invading my heart. What if this all disappears tomorrow? I think. The fame, the fans, the group? That's when I need him the most, and I reach out to find him sleeping beside me, so warm, so close, so alive. I snuggle into his arms and he kisses the back of my neck. He whispers my name and tells me everything will be alright, and in those moments I believe him.

But he's not here, is he? It's late and dark, and some little voice inside tells me I'm not Justin Timberlake, golden boy of 'N Sync, voted Male Hottie of the Year by the fans. Here in the dark I'm only nineteen years old. I'm just a little boy struggling to grow into who the world wants him to be, and I'm scared. I want him here with me, right now. I don't want to share him with Joey or the group or the rest of the world. I don't want him out at the club, drinking. I hate when he drinks. He forgets who he is, who I am, and he

becomes someone else. Someone petty, someone mean. Someone who forgets that he loves me. And I have to tell myself that in the morning, he'll remember. I cry myself to sleep and pray that he remembers.

This is the way the world ends ...

The door opens and laughter spills into the room. I hear it through my restless sleep and glance at the clock. After three in the morning. I close my eyes as he tells them to keep it down, I'm trying to sleep, and then the door latches as he comes inside. He stumbles to the bed. Even though I left the bedside lamp on for him, he still hits his knee against the end table. "Fuck," he mutters, his words slurred but low. He doesn't know I'm awake. With my back towards him, he doesn't see the frown on my face, the crease in my brow. I don't want him to see that. I don't want to make him mad again.

He sits on the edge of the bed and sighs. I almost turn at the sound, but I tell myself I'm asleep. I'm supposed to be asleep. His shoes fall to the floor one at a time as he pulls them off, and the bed moves as he shrugs off his shirt. Then he stands and slips out of his pants, the buckle jingling as it hits the floor. He cuts off the light and slides beneath the covers. I try not to stiffen when he curls up against me. "Justin," he breathes into my ear, his teeth nibbling just above my earring. His hands trail down the flat of my stomach, reaching for my dick. I tell myself I'm not in the mood. I tell myself I'm angry that he's so late, that I'm not going to put out for him, not tonight.

But my body has different plans, and beneath his familiar touch I grow hard. His tongue licks along my neck, the coppery stench of alcohol thick on his breath. Another smell tingles my nose, something sharp and unfamiliar, but I know what it is. I heard Joey tell him earlier that he had some pot. I don't want to believe that he stayed out all night smoking that shit and getting drunk, so I ignore his touch, his scent. I pretend I'm still asleep.

His kisses become demanding, insistent. "Justin," he whispers again, a little louder this time. "Wake up and let me fuck you."

Tears prick my eyes. "No," I reply, but I don't move out of his arms. I've waited for him for too long. I can't pull away now.

"What did you say?" he murmurs into my neck, his lips hot. Where his tongue touches me, my skin burns. His hand cups my balls and squeezes gently. It hurts, but there's a part of me that likes the pain. It makes this real, makes me believe he's finally here with me.

"I said no," I whisper, but I don't sound very convincing, even to myself.

He chuckles against my throat. He's leaning over me, turning me onto my back, straddling me. I tell him no again but his lips cover mine, stifling my protests. I'm weak against him, I always

have been, and when I can't push him off, I stop struggling. My hands rest on his chest, keeping us apart. His own hands entwine in my curls, holding my head back against the pillows as he enters me. He kisses away the tears that trace down my cheeks.

This is the way the world ends ...

When he comes, he always says he loves me. I don't know how true that is but I believe him. I have to believe him. And tonight is no different. He holds me in his strong arms and nuzzles my neck, his fingers brushing the dampness from my cheeks. "I love you," he whispers. "You know that."

"I know," I reply. I love him, too. Desperately. I love the way he looks at me when we dance. I love the way he smiles in the morning, slowly at first, when I'm waking up. I love the way he holds me and loves me and promises never to let me go.

But I don't love this stranger in bed with me, who smells of booze and pot and whose rough hands and hard body frighten me. I pout as he kisses me carelessly, sleepy now that he's gotten his piece of my ass for the night. "Stop it," he says. He means the pouting. I do it often enough that he knows the way it feels to kiss the pout away. I don't know what to say so I say nothing at all. The tears swell again, choking my throat. "Justin, stop it now. What the fuck do you have to be upset about?"

"I don't like you like this," I whisper, and regret it instantly.

"Like what?" he wants to know. He shifts off of me, and suddenly I'm cold and alone and terrified.

I shrug helplessly. "Nothing," I say. I want him to touch me again. Anything for those hands, that body ... "Lance, please. Like nothing. Please."

It's too late. He rolls over on his side of the bed, muttering darkly. "Fuck this shit," he growls into his pillow. He's turned away from me, and I know from experience that nothing I can say or do will get him back into my arms tonight. "You have nothing to pout about. You're the one everyone loves. The fans scream loudest for you, there's nothing you can't have. And still you lie here like a child, pouting and crying yourself to sleep. What the fuck's your problem now?"

I sigh. "Lance, please," I manage to say before the tears sting my eyes and clog my words. I know the fans love me, but that's not what I want to hear. I want to hear that he loves me. I want him to tell me without the alcohol in his system, without his dick softening along my thigh. I want him to love me the way he does when we're not on tour, when it's just him and me and the rest of the world disappears.

"Grow up, Justin," he tells me, and I turn away from him. I want him to hold me, but I'm not going to beg. He's drunk. In the morning, he won't remember the sex or the fight, and he'll tell me he loves me.

And in the morning, I'll believe him.
Not with a bang but a whimper.

The End

The italicized scene breaks are from the poem
"The Hollow Men" by T.S. Eliot.

Devil of a Night
by NSyncGrrl

JC stared out of the window at the passing night and the pine trees hemming in the narrow two-lane highway, deserted at this late hour, and he prayed Joey knew where he was going. This was New Jersey, Joey had reasoned, he knew this part of the country like the back of his hand, never fear. But the last vestige of civilization JC saw had been an old rundown gas station set back in the woods a bit, just off the side of the road about three miles back, and he was beginning to suspect that maybe, just maybe, they were lost. "Where are we, Joe?" JC asked softly, glancing over at his friend in the driver's seat.

Joey frowned at the road ahead. "Jersey," he replied. Since the bright lights of Atlantic City had faded behind them over an hour ago, the air in the car between the two friends had grown strained and tense. JC wanted to ask Joey what had happened to them lately -- they used to be good together, with comfortable silences and flirty laughter and sweet kisses that passed the time away. But since the tour wrapped up, Joey had grown distant and quick to argue, and JC didn't know what he had done or didn't do to turn their relationship awry. He wanted his boyfriend back; he wanted to see Joey's eyes crinkle when he smiled, to taste Joey's lips again, to feel Joey's hands on his body. Yet every word they spoke twisted into something more, and JC found himself biting his tongue to keep from lashing out at Joey whenever they were alone. And Joey's sharp retorts and scathing replies didn't help matters any. Tonight they had gone to a club together, JC eager to mend whatever it was that seemed to be tearing them apart, and for the first half of the evening, things had gone smoothly between them. JC almost believed there was hope of salvaging their relationship. When they left the club, Joey had kissed the back of JC's neck and murmured that he wanted to share a bed tonight, for the first time in weeks, and JC's blood raced at the soft voice, the eager words, the tender kisses.

But they must have taken a wrong turn somewhere, because the city was gone, replaced with endless woods that edged closer and closer to the road with every mile they drove, and the only lights illuminating the darkness were the headlights of their own car. They had seen no one else on the road for the last half hour, and it was getting late. Joey's previous ardor seemed to have cooled, and JC didn't really want to ask if they were lost, but he was really beginning to wonder now. "I was hoping this was still Jersey," he said, instantly regretting it. The words, once spoken, were harsher than he intended, and Joey's brow creased at them.

"We're almost there, Josh," he replied, chewing on the inside of his cheek. "Just a few more miles and we'll clear these trees, I just know it."

Yeah, right, JC thought bitterly. He stared at the trees balefully and muttered, "Great. I was beginning to worry you didn't know where the fuck we were."

Joey sighed. "Josh, don't even start --"

"I'm only saying --" JC countered.

"Well don't," Joey said, the hint of anger in his voice deterring any additional argument.

JC bit his lower lip and glared out the window. "Do you even know where we are?" he asked softly.

"Yes I do," Joey replied, but he didn't elaborate. Instead he clicked on the radio and began pressing the seek button, searching for a radio station to fill the uneasy silence between them.

"Well," JC sighed, "would you like to tell me?"

"The Pine Barrens," Joey said. He found a station that played hard rock music and he turned the radio up a little, his sexy voice singing along with the song easily. "The devil inside, the devil inside." He grinned at JC, winking at him. "Every single one of us, the devil inside. Remember this one, babe?"

JC laughed in spite of himself. "Yeah," he said, happy to see Joey's smile and laughing eyes. "Whatever happened to that group?"

"Lead singer hung himself," Joey said. His hand eased off of the gearshift to rest on JC's knee.

"Hanged," JC corrected. He covered Joey's hand with his, slipping his fingers into Joey's palm. "Pictures are hung, people are hanged."

Laughing, Joey said, "My bad." After a few minutes, the song drifted off and an announcer's voice filled the airwaves, citing the current temperature and the Yankees' final scores. Softly, Joey admitted, "Maybe we're a little off course."

"I thought we might be," JC said, but Joey's hand was warm in his and he didn't feel like arguing right now. "You said we were where? The Pine Barrens?"

Joey nodded. "Ever heard of the Jersey Devil?" he asked, grinning wickedly at JC.

JC laughed. "You're kidding me," he said. "You mean like the hockey team?"

"I mean like the Jersey Devil." Joey stared at the road ahead and thought for a moment. JC knew him well enough to know he was warming up to a story, and he waited while Joey gathered his thoughts together.

When he couldn't wait any longer, JC prompted, "It's not the real devil, you know that, right?"

"No, it's the Jersey Devil," Joey said. He squeezed JC's fingers and smiled. "Legend has it that years and years ago --"

"Back when Chris was born?" JC offered, and Joey laughed.

"You're bad," he said, raising JC's hand to his lips to kiss his knuckles.

"But you love me like that," JC said coyly.

Joey nodded. "I do. I love your wicked ways."

"So, legend has it ..." JC let his voice trail off, eager to hear the story.

"Long ago there was this lady," Joey said, his eyes growing distant as he tried to recall the story, "named Leeds. Mrs. Leeds. She had a shitload of children, like fourteen or fifteen, or something like that. And she was so tired of taking care of them all, feeding them and having them --"

"She should've kept her legs closed," JC replied. "Easiest form of birth control there is."

Joey nodded. "But some people just like it all the time," he said, winking at JC. "Like you."

Laughing, JC reached for Joey's crotch and cupped his thick cock through the denim of his jeans. Joey thrust into JC's hand, his eyes slipping closed briefly. "Watch the road, Joe," JC admonished, but he was thrilled to find that despite whatever tension there was between them, his boyfriend still hardened beneath his touch.

Joey slapped his hand away. "Then stop touching me," he said, but the smile on his face stayed, and when JC tried to pull his hand back, Joey held it tight. "Can I tell you this story or what?"

"Go ahead," JC said, his hand resting high up on Joey's thigh. He didn't really care about the story, but he liked the sound of Joey's voice and the way it filled the night around them, and maybe if they kept talking, they would work things out between them. "This lady had a lot of kids ..."

"And she was sick of them," Joey continued, "so when she got pregnant again, she cursed the unborn child to Satan. Nine months later when the child was born, on a dark and stormy night --"

"It's always dark and stormy," JC pointed out. When Joey frowned at him, he grinned sheepishly and said, "Sorry."

"It was a dark and stormy night," Joey repeated, glancing at him before concentrating on the road again, "when she gave birth. The child was hideous, with cloven hooves and pointy horns, and a tail like a whip. It was --"

"A devil?" JC asked.

"Am I telling this story?" Joey asked, and JC nodded. "Yes, it was a devil, because she cursed it to hell, remember? She took one look at the child and fainted dead away. And before anyone could do or say anything at all, the child flew up the chimney and disappeared into the night. Ever since then it has haunted these very woods, waylaying travelers and preying on the innocent."

Even though he knew better, a chill ran down JC's spine. "We should be safe then," he said, grinning past his unease, "because we sure ain't innocent." His hand strayed to Joey's crotch again, stroking the thick erection confined in his jeans, and hoped Joey got his point.

He did. Turning towards JC, he leaned over and kissed the corner of JC's mouth, his lips warm and damp. JC closed his eyes and squeezed the thickness at Joey's groin in his hand gently, eliciting a slight moan from his lover as the car veered to the right. Opening one eye, JC saw the bare road stretch away beyond the windshield, and he ran a hand along Joey's chest, pushing him up. "Joe," he warned.

Joey kissed him again. "We're the only ones on the road," he murmured, easing his foot off the gas. The car started to slow down as Joey headed for the shoulder. "Once we stop, we can --" Suddenly a tall figure leaped out of the trees in front of their car. "Look out!" JC cried, and Joey slammed on the brakes, swerving off the road.

"Oh fuck," Joey swore, twisting the steering wheel as the car skidded along the gravel shoulder. JC covered his face as they ran into the low underbrush hugging the side of the road, branches breaking along the windshield, leaves crumpling over them in a loud crackling sound that drowned out the radio and the rest of the world. The squeal of the brakes burned in JC's ears, the seat belt bit into his chest, and he had one bright thought -- at least he was kissing you, at least things were starting to turn around for you two -- before everything went still and silent and black.

* * *

"Josh?" Joey's voice was soft in his ear, and JC could barely hear him beneath the silence that deafened him.

"Yeah?" JC asked, afraid to move.

"You okay?" Joey's hand fumbled along his thigh, reaching for him.

JC caught the hand in his own. "Did you hit that guy?" he asked, fear thickening his throat. He had seen someone tall and dark and so damn fast jump in front of the car, and then the world had crashed down around them. "Is he dead?"

"I don't think I hit him," Joey replied. He squeezed JC's hand in his and reached up to turn on the overhead light. Pale washed out light filled the interior of the car, pushing the darkness of night back outside the cracked windows. Joey looked at JC critically. There was a slight cut above Joey's eyebrow, bright red beading in the wound, and JC reached out to wipe the blood away. "I didn't feel --" He swallowed and looked at JC with wide, frightened eyes. "I don't think --"

"I don't think you hit him, either," JC replied. Joey brushed the hair back from JC's brow and straightened the thin wire-frame glasses on his lover's face. "You okay?"

"I think so," Joey said, nodding. "You?"

JC stretched his legs experimentally. The windshield in front of him was a spiderweb of shattered glass, held in place by the thick pine limbs shoved against the outside of the car. "I don't think anything's broken," he said cautiously, but his back was sore and his neck starting to ache, and he didn't know how the hell they'd ever get back to the hotel now. Where the others are waiting, he thought sourly. Probably won't even start to worry about us until tomorrow afternoon, when we don't show up for rehearsal. Fuck this shit. "Joe?"

"Yeah?" Joey asked softly.

"Next time watch where you're going," JC said, rubbing his temple with one hand. His fingers came away bloody, and he pulled down the visor to look at his head in the mirror. Blood smeared along his forehead, but when he wiped it away, he couldn't find a cut anywhere. Must be Joey's blood, he reasoned, though there was a slight knot on his head where Joey must've bumped against him as they crashed.

"I'm so sorry, Josh," Joey began, sighing. His hands shook slightly, and he placed them on the steering wheel to steady himself. "Fuck. I didn't mean --"

"I know," JC said gently, placing a hand on Joey's shoulder. "Just calm down, Joe. We're fine. Both of us are fine. It could've been a lot worse."

Nodding, Joey whispered, "Okay. I know." He glanced out at the road and frowned. "Where did that guy go? I didn't hit him. I know I didn't ..."

"I don't know," JC admitted. He tried to think of what they should do. They were in a rental car, miles from the hotel, probably miles from anywhere at all. Should they call the cops? He could almost see the headlines now. Call the guys? "Is there a car phone in here?"

Joey pointed to the cellular phone mounted between the front seats. JC looked at the cracked casing and wondered if the phone would still work. Dialing the number to the hotel, he listened to the low ring fill the car and tried to remember what he knew of road

safety. Stay with the car, that was the first rule. But what if there was a gas leak? Couldn't the car explode then? Suddenly the ringing stopped as someone answered the phone. "Hello?" Chris asked sleepily.

The overhead light dimmed, and JC frowned at Joey, worry written plainly across both of their faces. "Chris?" Joey asked, picking up the phone. "Chris, we sort of ... well, there's been an accident ..." JC heard Chris's loud curse as Joey held the phone away from his ear. "Chris, calm down --" Joey started, and then JC took the phone from him.

"Chris, listen," he said, not sure what to say.

"JC, what the fuck happened?" Chris growled, and the lights around them dimmed again, casting the car with an eerie orange glow. Chris's voice grew faint. "Where are you guys?"

JC frowned at the light above them. "Chris? You're fading away, man. Can you hear me?"

"JC --" The name was a whisper in his ear as static filled the line.

"Chris?" JC called, raising his voice as if that would help. It didn't. "Chris?" Static erupted in his ear. He cringed and pulled the phone away. When he put it back to his ear, the phone was dead. "Hello?" he asked, even though he knew it was futile. "Hello? Chris?"

"Fuck," Joey whispered beside him as the overhead light winked out. "The battery's dead."

"Why the hell would the battery be dead?" JC asked, frowning as he replaced the phone in the cradle.

Joey grimaced. "We crashed the car, Josh. We're lucky to be alive." Releasing his seat belt, he blinked in the sudden darkness and tried to open his car door. It wouldn't budge. "I don't know a damn thing about cars, except that don't they explode or something when you wreck? Maybe we should get out and take a look at the whole situation."

And try to find that guy we almost killed, JC added, but he kept his thoughts to himself. Unbuckling his own seat belt, he kicked open his door and climbed out of the car. Branches snapped beneath his feet, leaves clung to his legs, and he held onto the car to steady himself. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness around him and he saw dents in the body of the vehicle, the wrinkled hood pushed back against the windshield, trapping more pine boughs against the car. Taking a few deep breaths, JC tried to sniff for gasoline, but all he smelled was the sappy scent of pine, heady in the crisp air. Cars don't explode without a gas leak -- "Joe?" he called, leaning back into the car. "I don't think it'll blow up or anything. Come on out here with me."

"My door is stuck," Joey said, and JC could hear fear creeping

into his voice again. "Josh --"

"Climb out this side," JC suggested. Joey clambered over the seat and grabbed the hand JC offered him.

Stumbling out of the car, he glanced back and sighed. "There goes our damn deposit," he groaned.

"You said yourself we're lucky to be alive," JC reminded him. He wrapped his arms around Joey's thick waist and hugged him tight, trying to ward off the sudden chill that clung to his bones. "But our phone's dead, and no one knows where the fuck we are, not even us --"

Joey laughed, a rumbling sound that echoed through his chest. JC hugged him tighter, resting his head on Joey's shoulder, and Joey slipped his arms around JC to hold him close. "We passed a gas station a while back, didn't we? Maybe we can use the phone there."

JC sighed. The idea of walking down the dark, narrow street didn't appeal to him any, but they couldn't just sit here waiting, could they? "It was a few miles back," JC said, remembering the dilapidated service station tucked away off the road. "Joe? I'm glad you're here. Even though we're lost, and we're probably going to have to spend the night out in this cold, bashed up car, I'm glad you're here with me."

"You're not mad?" Joey asked. "I thought you were a little pissed. I mean, it was my fault we crashed --"

JC shook his head. "We've been letting everything else come between us lately," he whispered. "If this is what it takes for us to spend some time alone together again and get back what it was that we used to have, then so be it."

Joey touched the back of JC's head, and JC raised his face to smile at his boyfriend. Joey's lips brushed his with the gentlest of touches, and suddenly JC didn't think he wanted anyone to find them anytime soon. "Come on," Joey said, pulling away. He took JC's hand in his and led him around the side of the car. Beneath their feet leaves and gravel crunched as they made their way back to the road, JC following Joey's lead. The road stretched away in either direction, lined with dark trees that rustled ominously with each breath of wind that blew through their leaves. JC tugged his coat closed around his throat and, his hand warm in Joey's, started back the way they had come, their shoes ringing loudly against the hard tarmac of the road.

"I don't see that guy anywhere," JC said, looking around. It was dark, but out of the woods he could see fairly well, the full moon overhead illuminating the empty road. He and Joey were the only people for miles around -- a hushed stillness pressed against them, the typical city sounds of traffic gone out here. "You say this place is called the Barrens?"

"The Pine Barrens," Joey said, nodding.

"Good name for it," JC muttered. Despite the trees closing in on them, there was nothing else for miles around. He hoped the station was closer than he remembered.

* * *

"This place is deserted," JC said, cupping his hands to his face as he peered through the dusty windows of the abandoned service station. A quick glance at the prices posted on the sign proved it had been a long time since customers bought gasoline from these pumps. Joey walked around the side of the building, and JC called out nervously, "Joe? Where you going?"

"I'm right here," Joey called back. He stuck his head back around the corner and grinned at JC. "Just checking the bathrooms."

"They're probably locked," JC replied. Shoving his hands deep into his pockets, he shivered in the cool night air and sighed. The silence of the woods unnerved him. "Joe? I think maybe we should stay together --" He looked up as Joey approached. "Well?"

"You're right," Joey said, nodding. "The place is locked up tight." He draped an arm around JC's shoulders, pulling him close.

JC rested his head on Joey's shoulder. "So now what?" he asked.

Joey jerked a thumb at the side of the building. "There's a pay phone over there," he said. "I checked -- it has a dial tone. You have a quarter?"

"It's thirty-five cents now," JC reminded him, digging into his pockets. He pulled out a handful of change and frowned at the silver coins. "You don't have any money?" he asked.

Joey kissed his forehead and picked out a quarter and dime from JC's palm. "It's in the car," he said. "I'll pay you back."

"You don't have to," JC said, smiling as Joey led him over to the phone booth. It was one of the old booths that JC had only seen in movies and over in Europe, and the glass was smeared with dirt and grime. The accordion door stood open, and when Joey pushed his way inside, rusty hinges creaked into the night. "It probably doesn't even work," JC muttered.

Joey picked up the receiver and placed it against his ear. "Don't be so damn positive," Joey said, sliding the coins into the slot. He flashed a quick grin at JC. "Thank you for using Verizon," he intoned in a freaky imitation of James Earl Jones. "What's the hotel number?"

Reaching past him, JC pressed the number for Chris's room. Joey hummed tunelessly as he waited, his hand toying with a button on JC's jacket. "You know," he whispered, running a finger

that trailed fire up JC's chest and fluttered his heart, "I was really hoping we'd be in bed by now. Naked, sweaty, pleasantly exhausted --"

"You're getting me horny," JC said, grinning.

Joey kissed JC's neck, just below his ear. "We can take care of that right here," he murmured, his breath hot against JC's cool skin.

JC laughed but didn't pull away. "Joe, we're in the middle of nowhere ..."

"My thoughts exactly," Joey purred. "We can screw out here and no one will know. Doesn't that turn you on? The thought of us doing it here, in this phone booth for instance? When will we get another chance like that?" Before JC could reply, Joey pulled away, turning towards the phone. "Hello? Yes, I'm looking for Chris Kirkpatrick."

JC sighed and thrust his hands deeper into his pockets. The thought of having sex right this second did turn him on, and his cock ached fiercely at the thought of Joey's warm, tight ass. Add the cold night air, the crisp scent of pine, the rustle of leaves enveloping them. JC had to admit he always wanted to fuck outside. And this would be the perfect place, miles away from anyone or anything else --

Suddenly the tiny hairs on the back of JC's neck stood up as a chill ran down his spine. Someone's out there, he thought absently as he glanced behind him, scanning the dense woods. Joey talked quietly to the hotel operator, asking if she knew when Chris left or if there were any messages, and JC stepped away from the phone booth, listening. The only sounds were the leaves and the wind, but he couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching them. Or something, he thought, frowning. He wondered if that man they almost hit was out there somewhere, even though they hadn't seen anyone else since leaving the safety of the car. He had even begun to wonder if there really had been a man, or if it had just been a figment of his imagination. If it was that, he thought, then we both imagined it. And I seriously doubt that. "Hello?" he called out softly.

"Who you talking to?" Joey asked, hanging up the phone.

JC shrugged. "No one," he admitted, watching the trees suspiciously. "You get in touch with Chris?"

"He's left the hotel," Joey replied. "Give me some more money. I'm going to try his cell."

JC came back to the phone booth, counting out thirty-five cents from the change in his pocket. As Joey dialed, JC glanced behind him again, feeling a hot, steady gaze linger on his back. He stared into the shadows that clung to the corners of the building and draped the pine trees, but he couldn't see anything. We're the only ones out here, he reminded himself, frowning. Then why do I feel

like someone's out there watching us?

"Lance!" Joey cried, touching JC's shoulder. "Hey, man. Where are you guys?" JC listened halfheartedly as Joey told their friend what had happened. Around him the night was too quiet, and he felt dread curl heavily into the pit of his stomach. Fuck this, he thought, edging closer to Joey. JC wanted to leave this place, get back to the car, wait for help to arrive. He just wanted to leave right now.

Joey touched JC's shoulder, and JC jumped. "Let's get going," he whispered, throwing another glance behind him. They were still alone. "Come on, Joe. Tell them where we are and let's get out of here."

"Hold on a minute," Joey whispered back. Talking into the phone, he said, "We're at an old gas station right now. Something called Schneider's? The car's like what, two miles away?" He raised his eyebrows at JC, who shrugged. "Maybe three? We passed a sign that said Leeds' Point, ten miles, and then New Gretna beyond that."

"We were coming from Atlantic City," JC whispered.

"I told him that," Joey said, nodding. "Justin? You still there? The last road I remember was --"

"Route nine," JC replied. "We turned off the Garden State Parkway and now we're lost. The last sign I saw said nine. Tell them to hurry the fuck up."

"They're on their way, babe," Joey replied. Into the phone, he said, "Okay, sure, we'll wait at the car. Get here soon. Okay, bye."

As he hung up the phone, JC asked, "Where are they?"

"Just outside of Atlantic City," Joey said. He wrapped an arm around JC's waist and kissed him, his lips lingering over JC's own. "You sure you don't want to get in a quick one before they show up?" He pulled JC into his embrace, his other hand straying towards the slight bulge in JC's jeans.

JC pushed away, uncomfortable. "Joe, I don't think that's such a good idea ..." He trailed off, looking around them nervously.

"We're alone, baby," Joey growled, his voice low and sensual in JC's ear. His teeth nipped at JC's neck, and JC giggled at the touch. "No one but you and me and the trees. And what are they going to say?"

"I don't know," JC admitted. He liked Joey's hands, groping his crotch and waist. His fingers trailed down JC's zipper, poking in just the right places to turn JC on. Waves of pleasure trilled through his body at Joey's touch, and he moaned breathlessly into Joey's mouth as they kissed. Running his arms around Joey's neck, JC cradled Joey's head in his hands and gave into the moment.

From the far side of the parking lot, an empty trashcan tumbled noisily to the ground.

Joey's hands froze on JC. "What the hell?" he asked as JC pushed him away.

Turning towards the sound, JC watched the trashcan roll across the tarmac. Something in the hollow way it bounced along made JC's throat dry up. "It's not windy enough to blow that down," JC whispered.

"What?" Joey asked, tightening his hold on JC.

"Nothing," JC said, shaking his head. "Do you think that guy --"

"We're alone," Joey said.

JC tried again. "But that guy we almost hit --"

"I don't see him," Joey said, his voice tense. "Josh, we're alone. You and me. In the middle of fucking nowhere ..."

"Then why do I feel as if we're being watched?" JC asked softly.

Joey looked at him, a troubled expression in his dark eyes. "I don't know," he whispered. Taking JC's hand in his, Joey led the way back to the road, glancing around as they left. "Let's get back to the car, babe."

"Okay." JC stepped up the pace, and together they started down the road in silence. After a few minutes, JC squeezed Joey's hand and asked, "What's happened to us lately, Joe?"

Joey shrugged. Draping his arm over JC's shoulders, he hugged JC to his side and admitted, "I don't know. I thought you, I don't know, I thought you were maybe losing interest in me, or something. You're so distant when we're on tour."

"I'm sorry," JC said, resting his head on Joey's shoulder. "God, Joe, I want us to be the way we were before, you know? I miss that."

"You get too wound up, Josh," Joey said, sighing. Their footfalls clicked along the road and echoed off the surrounding trees. A lull seemed to descend over the world, and right now the stage and the fans and the hectic everyday life that seemed to eclipse them was gone. Nothing mattered but Joey, holding him close, and the sharp bite of the chilly air, the sweet ache in his groin, the promise of Joey's kisses still drying on his lips.

"I'm sorry," JC said again. "Just don't leave me, Joe. Tell me when I'm ignoring you. Tell me when I'm being an ass. Just please don't let me go."

"I won't," Joey promised, placing his lips on JC's forehead. "I'm glad this happened, you know? Not the wreck, and not the getting lost part, but you and me. I've been wanting this for so long now."

From somewhere behind them, JC heard a soft clomp like the hoof of a horse in the graveled shoulder. "What was that?" he asked, spinning around. The road was empty, and moonlight winked off of the soaped up windows of the gas station in the distance.

Joey frowned. "I didn't hear any--" he started, and then JC heard it again, in front of them this time. He whirled back around, fear gripping his throat. The road stretched away, their car off to one side like a discarded toy.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered.

"Yeah," Joey whispered back. He started walking again, pulling JC towards the car. His steps were slow and deliberate at first, but when they heard a skid in the gravel behind them, he sped up a little. JC looked over his shoulder. Still nothing. Laughing, Joey said, "Maybe there's something to those silly legends after all, eh?"

"What?" JC asked. He frowned at Joey. "You're not suggesting ..." He trailed off, not able to bring himself to ask what Joey was thinking.

"I'm not," Joey said, shaking his head. Then he looked at JC, his eyes glassy with a dull panic that JC recognized all too well. "But would you think I'm a fool if I ran?"

"No," JC replied. Taking Joey's hand in his, he started to run himself, his eyes fixed on the car ahead.

* * *

"I'm cold," Joey complained. They were in the back seat of the car, shivering in the chilly air. Joey sat with his hands between his legs, trying to warm his fingers. JC leaned against the door, his legs stretched out along the seat, his toes curled beneath Joey's leg. He stared at the dark trees beyond the back window and wondered if they were drunk. Did they drink at the club? He thought so but he didn't feel drunk anymore. The only thing buzzing through his veins right now was fear, fueled by exhaustion and the haunting echo of gravel that rattled in his mind like a snake. He still felt unseen eyes watching them, and he prayed the others would hurry up and find them already. "Josh?" Joey asked quietly, breaking into his thoughts. "I'm cold."

"Come here," JC said, spreading his legs so Joey could snuggle up against his body. "I'll keep you warm."

Joey crawled into the space between JC's legs and rested his head against his boyfriend's chest. JC's arms encircled his shoulders, hugging him tightly. "Josh? What the fuck was that back there on the road?"

"Nothing," JC whispered. He kissed the top of Joey's head and sighed. "I didn't see anything, did you?"

"No," Joey admitted. "But we both heard --"

"Let's not talk about it, okay?" JC asked nervously. He didn't want to even think about what they had heard.

Joey shifted in JC's arms, inadvertently leaning heavily into JC's crotch. JC closed his eyes and moaned slightly. Smiling up at him, Joey began to rub JC's stiffening erection through his jeans. "Well," he drawled, watching JC bite his lip in pleasure, "maybe we don't have to talk at all."

JC thrust into Joey's hand. "Maybe not," he whispered. He ran a hand through Joey's disheveled hair, pulling him up for a kiss. As their lips touched, Joey's tongue licked into JC's mouth with a familiarity that JC had almost forgotten. His hand squeezed JC gently, and the sound of JC's zipper was loud in the car as Joey worked it down over the bulge in JC's pants. His cool hands quickly heated along JC's hot flesh, and JC slipped further down onto the seat, hungry for Joey. "Joe --" he whispered as Joey eased his hand into the tight confines of JC's underwear.

In the front seat, the phone rang, a shrill sound that shattered the stillness around them.

Joey looked at JC, his eyes glistening with lust. "Fuck," he whispered, scrambling for the phone. JC pushed himself up and frowned as Joey answered it. "Hello?" he asked into the receiver. For a long moment he didn't say anything, and then he looked at JC and repeated, "Hello?"

"Who is it?" JC whispered, but Joey shrugged and hung up the phone.

"No one," he replied. He pushed JC back to the seat and leaned over him. "Just static. Chris is probably trying to call us but the phone's not charged, or something. Where were we?"

JC smiled. "I think we were right here," he said, pulling Joey down on top of him, his lips eager on Joey's own. Joey's hand found JC's crotch again, and after a few fumbling moments, he managed to slip JC's hard cock out from his underwear. The night air was cold against his skin, but Joey's hand was warm and kneaded him with an expert ease that made JC lie back against the seat, his eyes half-closed in desire. "Please, Joe," he whispered, and Joey's mouth closed over the tip of his dick, warm and wet. His tongue twirled down JC's thick length, his saliva cooling on JC's flesh, and JC thrust into his mouth, the harsh words and awkward moments between them dissolving as they gave into their passion for each other. "Oh God, Joe," JC moaned as Joey licked along his cock, kissing his balls. "Joe --"

Something heavy landed on the hood outside, sending a jolt through the car. Joey's lips stopped halfway down JC's dick, and he raised his eyes to look at him, the fear back in their chocolate depths. "Fuck no," JC cursed. It was probably a tree limb, broken off when they ran off the road, now settling against the car --

Glass creaked as the leaves outside pressed against the windshield, testing the cracks. JC felt his erection go limp in Joey's hand as his balls shriveled up in terror. The creaking came again, and this time he saw the safety glass bulge, one or two small squares popping out beneath the crackle of leaves and branches. They pinged off of the dashboard, tiny sounds that chipped at the tension in the car. "Josh, what the fuck ...?" Joey asked softly, his hand still on JC's cock as if he had forgotten he held onto it.

JC tucked himself back into his underwear quickly, his fingers catching in the zipper painfully as he tried to pull it up. "I don't know," he mumbled. He watched the windshield pucker again, thought he saw a hand behind the leaves, pressing to get in, to get them, and his mind screamed at him to run. But there was no way in hell he was leaving the car, not when something out there wanted to get in at him. As he pushed Joey off of him, whatever it was on the hood leaped onto the roof above them. Hooves clicked along the metal roof, clomping around just inches from their heads. "Fuck this shit," JC growled, slipping onto the floor of the car. Joey sank to his knees beside him.

"Maybe it's a deer," he suggested.

"On top of the fucking car?" JC cried, incredulous. "I seriously doubt that." Something thin and long whipped against the window above them, and JC closed his eyes to keep from seeing it. To keep from thinking it. Goddammit the fuck, he thought, trying to swallow around the lump in his throat. You had to wreck the car, Joe, after you told me that goddamn story about the fucking DEVIL like he's alive and well and living in the woods outside of Atlantic City ... what the FUCK would he be doing in New Jersey, of all places? What the fuck would he want with US?

The hooves clicked like high heels above them, tapping out a rattat pattern that tattooed itself on JC's brain. "Josh, I'm sorry," Joey whispered, hugging him tightly. "For everything. For not spending the last few nights with you, for yelling, for everything I ever said that I didn't mean to say. I love you. Please believe me, I love you."

"I love you, too," JC whispered. Where the hell were the others, anyway? Above them, the pacing stopped. The car grew deathly still. JC looked at Joey with wide, frightened eyes and whispered, "You think it's gone?"

The car shook as the thing on the roof jumped. The metallic ring of hooves echoed around them, and JC bit his tongue to keep from screaming out. Fuck oh fuck oh fuck, his mind whispered until the word held no meaning for him anymore. Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck --

The thing on the roof jumped again, this time landing on the trunk. It looks like Justin did in that stupid video of ours, JC thought wildly. It was a human shape, tall and thin but hunched down over the back of the car. Glistening eyes stared in at them, everything else draped in shadows, the moon heavy behind it. Like

Justin, JC thought, and suddenly it dawned on him. It was one of the guys, it had to be. Who the fuck believed in that devil shit anyway? It was one of the guys, they had driven up while he and Joey were fooling around and they didn't notice, and now they were trying to scare them. That was it. That was it. "It's them," JC muttered.

"Who?" Joey replied.

But JC pushed himself up, anger clouding his face. "They are so fucking dead," he growled, ire replacing the fear that ran through his blood. "Playing us like this -- what the fuck is their problem?"

"Josh," Joey said, grabbing JC's arm. When JC glanced back at him, Joey frowned. "You think it's the guys?"

"Well, don't you?" JC asked, straightening his rumpled shirt. "Don't tell me you think it's that Jersey Devil crap you were feeding me earlier. Who else did you tell that story to? Chris? He'd pull something like this. Justin?" Yeah, Justin would do it. He had been pissed earlier in the week when JC pulled that prank with the Nair in his shampoo. Lance caught it in time, but Justin was still livid about it, JC was sure. "Come on, Joe. I'm sick of this shit."

"Josh, wait," Joey called, but it was too late. JC kicked open the car door and stumbled out into the woods, his lips already humming with the words he would rain down on his friends. You think that's funny? You think that's a fucking riot?

The blaze of headlights cut into the night, pinning JC where he stood. He shielded his eyes with his arm and frowned, blinded. He heard the squeal of brakes and the slamming of a car door, and then Justin's voice called out, "Josh? Shit, it took us forever to find you guys. Is Joey okay?"

Something brushed past JC and disappeared into the woods. As the others approached, Chris cursing their getting lost, Lance relieved they were alright, Justin talking nonstop to hide his worry, JC turned towards the woods, confused. His shoulder burned where he was touched -- Justin, his mind insisted, it was Justin, nevermind the fact that they just pulled up, nevermind the fact that Justin just climbed out of the car, it was Justin on the roof, Justin on the hood, messing with you for putting Nair in his Herbal Essences and it was him, it was him, it was HIM -- "JC?" Justin asked, frowning at him. Joey climbed out of the car and hugged JC, his hands solid and real and comforting on JC's waist. "You okay?"

"Fine," JC mumbled. He stared off into the woods, but Joey had been right -- the trees weren't saying anything, not tonight.

The End

Picture Postcards
by NSyncGrrl

The postcard is waiting for me when I get home from work. It's tucked in with a few bills, a letter from my mom, and an ad from Wal-Mart that I just toss away. The letter I put aside, and I shuffle through the bills, disinterested. Then I see it. A glossy beach at sunset, a couple holding hands, walking along the surf. Love in L.A., it reads in a flourish script across the orange sun. I don't know anyone in L.A. I turn the postcard over, and my heart freezes at the tight black words scrawled on the other side.

I miss you. Everything about you. About us. I hate living this lie.

My address in the block letters I remember so well. A smudged thumbprint beneath the stamp. The cryptic message -- I miss you -- nothing else. No return address. Nothing to tell me who it's from, though I know. My throat closes up as I read the message again. I miss you.

Jesus, I think. I miss you, too, Justin. Where the hell are you now?

* * *

Lance had plenty of time to get used to the idea of Justin getting married. Too long, actually, since he was the first one Justin told. Before he even asked Britney, he had come into Lance's hotel room, his eyes wild, his curls awry. Sitting on the edge of Lance's bed, he looked at his hands and asked softly, "Can I tell you something, Lance?"

Lance's heart skipped a beat. "Anything, Justin," he replied, turning off his laptop. "What's on your mind?"

Taking a deep sigh, Justin said, "I'm in love."

Please, Lance thought, and suddenly he forgot how to breathe. He stared at his friend for a long moment, not daring to hope. Sweet Jesus, please.

Justin met his level gaze and smiled in that gorgeous way of his that shone like the sun. "I'm so sure of it, Lance. I know this is what I want. I mean, I ..." He sighed.

"It's okay," Lance whispered. He reached out and placed a hand on Justin's knee. Beneath his touch, Justin felt warm and so right -- please, he thought again. Justin, please just tell me. "Justin, if it makes it any easier for you, I --"

"It's Britney," Justin gushed, and the room around them drained of color. Mistaking the look in his friend's green eyes, Justin hurried on. "I know you think I'm too young. I know that's what you're thinking right now --"

"That's not what I was thinking --" Lance stammered, but Justin continued over him, excitement filling his dark eyes, turning them a deep azure. Lance stared into their depths and wanted to cry.

"But I think I'm ready, Lance. Really I do." Justin laughed. "I bought a ring. Can you believe it? A ring. I'm going to ask her --"

The rest of the words tumbled into meaningless noise as Lance felt the walls of his heart shake beneath them. He bit his lower lip to keep it from trembling and promised himself he wouldn't give into the tears that threatened to fall. At least, not until Justin left.

And then he cried himself to sleep.

* * *

I can't get the damn postcard out of my mind. That couple on the beach, that orange sunset. I miss you in those black letters, inked on my eyelids whenever I close my eyes. I miss you. When was the last time I saw Justin? I can't remember. It was after the wedding, but I don't recall the date. I don't remember what was said or what we did. I know it was at a dinner party Johnny threw for us, a farewell bash after we disbanded. The others were there, and I couldn't get him alone to apologize. I couldn't even catch his eye.

I wonder if the post office could trace the return address down for me, but the only clue is the blurry postmark that I think says California. I read in *People* a few weeks back that they lived out there, Los Angeles or Beverly Hills, or someplace like that. I hate living this lie -- I wonder what he means by that, but I don't want to think about it. I don't dare to hope. Not anymore.

A few weeks later I get another postcard. This one is a view of Bodega Bay, tall boats with folded sails resting in tranquil waters. When I pull it out of the mailbox, I don't want to turn it over. I don't want to see that chicken-scratch written on the other side. Who am I kidding? I can't not look.

I don't sleep with her anymore. I don't fuck her. She thinks I'm cheating on her, but believe me, Lance, only in my mind. And only with you. Do you remember that night? Or is that another lie I'm telling myself? That you still care ...

I choke back a sob and crumble the postcard up in my hand. I don't want to remember but it still keeps me up at night. I still wake with the scent of his hair in my nose, the feel of his arms around me. And only with you.

Inside the house, I smooth out the creases in the postcard and

stick it in the frame of my mirror with the other one. When I lay on the bed, I can see them above the dresser, my reflection staring back behind them. How will I ever sleep again, knowing he thinks of me still?

* * *

When Justin asked him to be in the wedding, Lance wanted to say no. But how could he look at that pretty pout and those uncertain eyes and turn down the one man he ever loved? Even though it hurt to hear the excitement in Justin's voice every time he mentioned Britney, Lance knew he couldn't stay away from the wedding. He would be there, and he would be strong, and Justin would never know the way he felt for him, the way he had loved him these past five years. He would never know that sin, and whenever he thought of Lance, it would be as the greatest friend he ever had. Lance vowed that much.

But it was so hard sometimes, and at night Lance lay in bed, his eyes open, tears spilling down his cheeks silently. Why hadn't he said something sooner? He just always assumed that Justin would wake up one day and see the way Lance felt for him. And he would confess that he felt the same way. Lance was so sure sometimes that Justin was falling for him -- it was in the little things he said when they were alone, the way his gaze lingered when he didn't know Lance was watching, the way his hugs lasted longer than the others'. They were so close, the best of friends, together constantly. There were no secrets between them. Then why couldn't Justin see the way Lance felt for him? Why couldn't he feel the same way?

Joey decided to throw a bachelor party for Justin, and it turned out to be the largest gathering of boybands anyone had ever seen. The teeny-bopper magazines clamored for press passes, but it was a closed affair. Booze and strippers and everything he always thought bachelor parties should be, Joey managed to roll into Justin's. When Lance arrived, Justin sought him out, grinning easily. Lance could smell the alcohol on his breath and knew that Justin would be drunk before long. "Hey, Scoop!" Justin cried, pulling him aside. "What d'ya think?"

I think this is stupid, Lance wanted to say, but Justin was having fun and he wouldn't let his disappointment show. "Nice," he said, shrugging. Pointing at the cup in Justin's hand, he asked, "Where's the beer?" Suddenly he wanted to get shit-faced himself.

Justin jerked his thumb towards the kitchen. "Couple of kegs in there," he replied. Then he looked at Lance with large, childlike eyes and whispered loudly, "Stay with me, okay? I don't know half this crowd. You'll stay with me, right?" Before Lance could reply, Justin slipped his arm into Lance's.

"Sure," Lance replied. He really needed that beer. Now.

* * *

I tell myself not to get my hopes up, but I look for a third postcard any day now. I even come home at lunch some days to check the mail. When it finally arrives, I can't believe it's here, real, in my hands. I study the trolley car driving down the streets of San Francisco and wonder how he buys these things. Does he have a pile of old postcards at the house already, and just writes on them when he wants to twist the knife in my heart a little bit more? Or does he tell her he's going to the store for gum or cereal or beer, and when he's there he buys another card on the spur of the moment, standing in the checkout line? I would really love to know what he's thinking -- does he wonder if I'm getting the cards? Does he wonder if I read them, or if I just toss them away?

I should throw them out, unread. I shouldn't do this to myself. I don't need this pain.

But the words on the other side of the card burn my fingers, and I have to read them. The same black letters, the same block print.

I never told you because I didn't want to admit it to myself. I didn't want the world to know. So I lied to you and I lied to myself, and then I lied to her when I said I do because I don't. I never will, not with her. You think I'm saying this now just because of that night, but it was always you, Lance. I just never wanted to tell you. I never wanted you to know. And now? I can't not tell you. I can't keep it inside anymore. I miss you. I'm stupid and I miss the hell out of you.

Stupid? Maybe. I lied to you -- he never lied to me. He just never said anything, and that silence hurt more than anything else. It was always you, Lance. It was always you.

Fuck you, Justin. Tears burn in my eyes and I blink them away. If it was always me, why am I so alone now? Why haven't I seen him or talked to him in over six months? Why do I miss him more and more every fucking day?

* * *

By midnight, the party was still going strong, and Lance had enough beers in his system to dull the ache in his heart. He's doing it again, he thought as Justin's hand trailed down his thigh absently. Fuck, can't he see that he's flirting with me? Can't he see how much it's tearing me up inside? Leaning closer to Justin, Lance inhaled the fresh scent of his hair deeply before he shouted over the din of the crowd, "I've got to get going now."

Justin turned to him with large, watery eyes. "No," he pouted. He pinched Lance's nose playfully. "You can't leave."

Why not? Lance wanted to ask. Because you're drunk and even though I know it's wrong, I'm loving the attention you turn my way? "Justin, it's getting late --"

"Come on," Justin said, standing. He swayed a bit on his feet, and Lance placed a hand on the small of Justin's back to steady him. The brief touch ignited Lance's blood. Grinning down at him, Justin tugged on Lance's arm. "I need some air. Come on, Poofu."

Lance rolled his eyes and followed Justin out of the den, heading for the back door. No one noticed them leaving, as yet another stripper had taken the makeshift stage in the living room, and wild catcalls and shouts followed the two friends down the darkened hallway. Suddenly Justin stopped and leaned against the wall. He looked at Lance with glassy eyes and smiled. Lance cleared his throat. "Justin, you okay?"

"Fine," Justin replied, his gaze wandering around the hall before settling on Lance again. He ran one finger down the buttons on Lance's shirt. "Can I tell you something?"

Lance took Justin's hand away, but when he tried to let go, Justin held on tight. "What is it?" he asked, frowning slightly.

Pulling Lance close, Justin whispered, "I'm drunk."

Lance grinned. "No shit," he replied, and before he could stop himself, he touched Justin's cheek. Justin closed his eyes and leaned into the touch.

"Kiss me," Justin whispered.

Stepping back, Lance shook his head. "Justin, I don't think that's such a --"

Justin sighed lustily. "I'm getting married, Lance. It doesn't matter now. I can kiss you now because I'm getting married."

"Your logic escapes me," Lance replied, his voice hardening. His lips tingled at the thought of kissing Justin, his body ached for the chance, but he didn't want to tease himself with something he wanted so badly and could never have.

Justin took Lance's collar in both hands and pulled him closer. Lance tried to step back, tried to remain the one in control, the one who wasn't drunk, the one -- and then Justin's full lips closed over his with a warm softness he had always imagined and never really thought possible, and Lance couldn't stop himself from leaning his body against Justin's. "Stay with me tonight," Justin whispered, and even though Lance knew he shouldn't, nothing in the world could make him say no.

* * *

There isn't a fourth postcard. I tell myself that I'm not waiting

for it, I'm not looking for it, I don't care if I never hear from him again, but they're all lies. Like the one he's living now, or so he says. God, I wish I had had the courage to tell him how I felt all those years ago when I had the chance

All the nights I slept in my narrow bed and dreamed of him. All the days I watched him dance and heard him sing and wanted to make him mine. All the words I could have said and never did.

When I'm alone, I remember the way his hands felt along my body that night, so tentative and yet so sure, so eager. I still feel his touch, his kisses, his curls in my hands. I still taste him on my tongue, his body on my lips. I still smell the intoxicating mix of his own musky scent mingled with alcohol and sweat and sex. Sometimes in the morning, before I open my eyes, I pretend I can hear him breathing beside me, his arms holding me close, his body pressed against mine.

And then I wake up and he's gone -- back to her, back to his real life, wherever that is now -- and I'm left alone and aching, and it's all I can do to force myself to crawl out of bed and into my day. Without him. His postcards watch me as I dress, constant reminders that somewhere he's out there, and once in a while, he thinks of me.

I stay at work later and later every evening, trying to drive him from my mind. I bury myself in contracts and negotiations and budgets; I lose myself in the studio and the paperwork and try to forget about him. But every time I close my eyes he's there, those golden curls, those aegean eyes. And it's my fault, all my fault ...

* * *

Lance woke slowly to the unfamiliar sensation of a warm body cupped against his. Strong arms wrapped around his waist, damp lips kissed the back of his neck, and he moaned as he rolled over in Justin's embrace. This is heaven, he thought lazily, smiling when he saw Justin's angelic face, so innocent and young in sleep. He kissed those pouty red lips and whispered, "Wake up, Justin."

Stretching awake, Justin burrowed closer to Lance and opened his eyes. "Lance," he murmured, still half-asleep, "I think I love you."

You don't know how long I've waited to hear you say that, Lance thought. He kissed Justin again and sighed.

And then he remembered the party from the night before, a room full of their friends who were probably now getting ready for the wedding. He thought of the guys in the band, so happy for Justin, so supportive of his decision to marry. He thought of Britney -- Justin loved her. He wanted to be with her. Lance had only gotten in the way. He had taken advantage of Justin when he was drunk and horny and needed a friend. Lance had used him to get what he had always wanted, and when Justin realized this, he

would be angry. He would know he didn't love Lance, not the way Lance wanted him to. And there was nothing Lance could say or do now to make him feel that way. So he hardened his heart and turned away. "No, you don't, Justin," he said. "You don't love me."

"Lance --"

Lance crawled out of the bed, out of Justin's reach. "You have to be at the church in an hour," he said, not looking at his friend. He tried to ignore the sweet ache in his groin when he thought about the nakedness that had pressed against him. "We're running late." Each word was a nail driven into his chest, and he couldn't turn back to see those sad eyes. He didn't want Justin to see the tears coursing down his cheeks.

"Lance." Every time Justin spoke his name, Lance knew he would die for him over and over again. "Tell me just one thing. Do you love me?"

"I always have," Lance whispered as he got dressed. He rubbed his eyes brusquely. "And I always will."

And then he walked out of the room, out of the house, and out of Justin's life.

* * *

It was for the best. I kept telling myself that, and it made the days bearable. It was for the best ... and then I got the first postcard, and I knew I should have stayed.

One night I come home later than usual. The streets are dark and unlit in my subdivision, and I want nothing more than a glass of whiskey and the comfort of my cold bed. With the whiskey, perhaps I can forget him long enough to fall asleep without dreaming of that night, but I doubt it.

As I turn down my street, I notice the cars lining both sides of the road. One of the neighbors must be having another party -- they always invite me but I never come. I navigate around the car parked in front of my house and pull into my driveway, my mind already on the whiskey and the bed. I will drink myself to sleep staring at those postcards and wondering what the fourth one would have looked like. I will tell myself he could no longer confine his emotions to those black, block letters, and that's why there are no more postcards. I will tell myself he thinks he loves me, because I can still hear the words echo in my ears. I will remember his curls and his smile and the fact that for one night, I held forever in my arms and was happy.

I fumble with the key in the lock when a soft, low voice from the shadows says my name. "Hello, Lance." I drop the keys and turn to find him standing there, waiting. For me. He hasn't changed a bit, and even though his memory is sharp in my mind, his beauty still numbs me, a shock like cold water. I can't speak -- there are

no words to say. "Lance?" he asks, unsure. "Please say something. Please."

"Justin," I manage, and then I clear my throat. Bending to scoop up my keys, I ask, "You want to come in?"

Of course he does. He didn't drive all this way just to stand on my porch. I want to groan at how stupid this sounds. This isn't what I hoped for at all. But Justin simply smiles and says, "Sure." He follows me inside. It's dark -- I should've left the light on in the hall but it's only me and I never leave it on anymore. That way I don't have to look in the mirror when I come home and see the loneliness staring back at me.

The door closes quietly behind us, and then strong hands are on my shoulders, rubbing my arms. I drop the keys again and choke back a sob. "Justin," I whisper. "Please don't do this. Please --"

And then his lips touch my neck, soft and warm and damp, and I want to cry. I can't give in, I can't do this to him, to myself -- but I can't say no. Jesus Christ, I have never been able to tell him no. "I want to ask you something, Lance," he whispers into my ear, and I shudder at his breathy voice. "Do you love me still?"

As his hands slip around my waist, I whisper, "I always have, Justin. And I always will."

The End

There Is No Arizona
by NSyncGrrl

It's been five years, but when I see the slant of your script on the envelope, it all comes rushing back at me as if it was only yesterday when I last looked into your crystal green eyes, as sharp as shards of shattered glass, and said goodbye. The postmark across the stamp reads Phoenix, and despite the time and the distance and the fact that it's been forever since I've heard your deep voice or seen your slow smile, I can't stop my heart from rising within me, dusting off the ashes that have cooled since we parted and the group disbanded, the hope that this is really from you making my fingers tremble as I tear open the envelope and fumble with the letter inside. I read your signature first -- yes, it is from you -- and then I delve into the letter breathlessly, scanning the easy writing quickly, trying to devour every single word all at once.

I miss you. The first words -- God, even before you wrote my name, you wrote those words. Seeing them in the thin black lines makes them real, gives them weight, and they sink into my brain like lead pellets. I miss you, Justin. Your eyes and your smile and your curls. The soul in your voice, the rhythm in your walk, every fucking thing about you. I miss it all. And it hurts.

In my mind I'm already writing back. I see myself writing the words, my fingers holding the pen so tightly they cramp, messy scribbles falling to the paper in a jumble of emotion as I try to get it all out, everything I want to tell you, everything I never said. Five years, Lance. Five long years. Has it really been that long?

I guess it has. Your letter confirms it, speaking of things you've done, people you know who I have never met, your family and your friends and the way they've moved on, the things they've done, since we last spoke. Five pages of your life, one for each year we've been apart, and when I finish reading it I want more. I want to laugh and cry and call you up to ask you the million questions rattling around inside of me right now. I turn the last page over, looking for a phone number or an email address or some way to get in touch with you again, to tell you all the things I've always wanted to say. But there's nothing there, and right above your signature I read your words again. I miss you.

On the front of the envelope I find a return address. No name, just a house number and a street name, a city I've never heard of in AZ. Arizona. So that's where you are now. That's where you've been hiding.

And now I've finally found you again. I'm not going to let you get away this time.

I go through half a ream of paper trying to start my letter back. I'm sure you're not expecting one, and that makes this harder somehow, because I know it will be a surprise for you and I want a phenomenal opening. But every sentence I write sounds trite and overblown and weak -- there's no emotion there, or too much, and I crumple up the sheet of paper and throw it away, already starting on the next. In the end I decide to follow your lead and start it simply, I miss you, too.

I do. Oh God, Lance, I miss us and I miss the guys and the tours and the studio. I miss the fans and the appearances and the way the girls would scream themselves silly when we stepped out of the limo. I miss the sequins and the glitter and the make-up and the hair gel, the things I never thought I could miss. I miss rushing to the airport to catch our flight. Crawling into the cold hotel bed at four in the morning for a mere two hours' sleep before crawling back out again. That time Joey got sick on the tour bus and couldn't stop throwing up. Those smelly dogs Chris insisted on taking with us when we were on the road. The way JC could just sit down for a minute to rest and be sound asleep in no time at all. And you.

I miss you most of all, Lance. I miss your smile and your laugh and your dry wit, your quick mind, your warm hands. I miss your tousled hair and your sparkling eyes, and the way it seemed you were always looking at me, your mind working on something I could never understand. Hell, I even miss your damn ferret. Remember that time it bit me? You said it wouldn't, it was harmless, just pet it, Justin, it's only a ferret. So I reached out and stroked its back, the fur coarse and long, and damned if it didn't turn around and sink its little weasel teeth into the back of my hand. It hurt like a bitch, but you cleaned the cut and wiped away the blood and put a Band-Aid over it, making it all better with your apologies. I'll never forget when you bent down and kissed the Band-Aid, your chin barely touching my knuckles.

In my letter I want to tell you what I've been up to lately, but all that comes out are memories of things I'm sure you've already glossed over in your mind, things I know you've probably forgotten. Like the time we went to that club in Knoxville after the show, just you and me and the bodyguards, and you kept whispering something to me but I couldn't hear what you were saying over the din of the crowd. When we finally got back to the hotel and left the bodyguards behind, I tried to ask you what you wanted to tell me but you said it was nothing. I've always wondered about that. Do you still remember what it was you were going to say?

I sign the letter Love, Me, because that's what I always hoped you'd ask me one day, and I was so ready to reply, the answer on my lips every moment we were alone, in the hopes that you'd say it. But you never did. So I write it now and I add my phone number at the bottom and a note to call me, collect if you have to, because I have to hear your voice, Lance. Your letter told me you were still

alive and now I need to hear your voice and then I'll want to see you again, but there's no more room on the paper to write all of that down, so I mail the letter and I hope you're surprised when you get it. I hope you wanted to hear back from me. I'm already waiting to hear from you again.

* * *

I've read your letter over and over, a dozen times a day, first thing when I wake up in the morning and last thing before I fall asleep at night. The sheets of paper are thin and flimsy now, worn through from my constant touch, and the envelope is torn at the edges because I keep taking the letter out to read it again. By the end of the week, your writing is smudged on the outside, and I'm wondering if I got the address right, because you haven't written back and I can't imagine I read it wrong, but the print was a little tiny and the two might be a seven, in the right light, maybe.

So I write another letter. This time I know what to say, and right up front I write I miss you, not because that's the way your letter starts but because it's true. For the last week you're all I've thought about -- I find myself staring blankly at the TV and wondering what you're doing right this moment; I hear a song on the radio and I remember the way you used to love to sing along in the car, even when you didn't know the words. That always made you just sing louder, your deep voice filling deep inside of me, filling places I didn't know existed until you came into my life. I wonder if you're somewhere, thinking about me. I hope so.

I try to tell you what's been happening in my life in this letter, since I didn't really get a chance to in the last one I wrote, but it's harder than I thought because the last week of my life has just been you and there's nothing else to write about. Five years later, Lance, and there's nothing but you in my thoughts, in my mind, in what I eat and say and do. Remember that time -- God, how long ago was it now? I don't remember -- but we were on our first tour and you were so damn sick, only you didn't tell anyone because you didn't want to ruin the hectic schedule we kept then, and you'd sing and dance and pretend everything was fine when it wasn't. Every time I close my eyes I can still see us at rehearsal, like it's a dream or something, all five of us on stage before the show, and you collapse like a rag doll. Jesus, my heart fell to my knees when I heard you fall, and I turned and saw you just lying there -- I know you're okay now but my hands still shake at the memory of your ashen skin against the pale white sheets of the stretcher. I have never been more terrified in my life as I was when I saw the medics around you, bustling to revive you, and your still body, unresponsive in their arms. Your eyes closed, your face oddly peaceful amid the battlefield around you, doctors and friends and parents and me, each of us scared, each of us alone, each of us praying to God and Jesus and all the saints above for one more chance to see that light sparkle in your green eyes.

I never told you that before. We stayed by your side, all of us

did, and none of us said a word about what would happen if you didn't wake up. And when you did recover, you told us to perform without you, so we did, because that's what you wanted, but I stayed in the room after the others left, wanting to tell you something more, wanting to talk to you alone, wanting that small piece of you for myself. You were weak and drained, but your hand was strong in mine, and there were a million things I wanted to tell you, Lance, a million words I didn't know how to say. So I stood there looking down at you in that hospital bed, unable to speak, and after a few minutes you just smiled slightly and squeezed my hand and told me that the others were waiting.

I fill up three sheets of loose-leaf notebook paper, front and back, with all that I had to say that day. How I almost died when I saw you on the stage, fallen like a broken toy tossed aside. How I felt so damn unimportant and insignificant and useless among the doctors who rushed around you, trying to save you, pushing me out of the way. Who the fuck was Justin Timberlake to them? No one but a hindrance. How I wanted to crawl into the hospital bed with you and cover you with the warmth of my body and make the shivering go away.

Jesus, Lance -- if you get this letter, please write back. Please tell me that I'm not alone anymore. Please tell me that you're thinking of me, and maybe it'll make things a little easier for me. Maybe I'll be able to leave the stardust and the gold glitter behind, and move on. But I don't want to move on without you here with me. Maybe that's why I've been stagnant these past five years -- I've been waiting for something to kick me into gear, living in suspended animation until something triggers me, starts me up again, winds up the key and sets me down so I can walk away. That something was your letter. I know it. So please write back and tell me that you're feeling the same way. I know I never said it when I had the chance, and maybe I'm saying too much too late, but I need to tell you this now.

This time I sign it I love you because I do, I always have, and I always will. You have to respond to that. How can you not?

* * *

Arizona is just a short flight from Orlando, really, and I haven't heard from you in weeks now, nothing since that first letter. I keep telling myself that maybe I've frightened you somehow, with those two letters crammed full of emotion and ink that just overflowed from the pen and spilled all over the paper, but I couldn't contain it. I couldn't not say everything I did, because I've kept it all inside for way too long, and maybe you don't know how to respond to it. Maybe it's not the Justin you remember -- that Justin was probably the golden one, the crown jewels, the superstar, and this Justin, the one I wrote out so sloppily on those sheets of stationary, this Justin is human and fragile and weak and oh so alone. And in love. Jesus, Lance, I never told you how many nights I laid awake in bed thinking of you in your own bed. During the day it was easy to hide

away the feelings you aroused in me, the way your simple touch or your sweet smile or your laugh or your eyes awoke in me something I couldn't explain, something I never wanted to explain. But at night it was so hard, and I lost count of how many groupies I tried to lose myself in, or how many times I buried myself in Britney and told myself I wasn't wanting you.

And now I'm in Phoenix, looking for you, to tell you these things myself. I hope I haven't lost my chance.

The stewardess on the plane isn't from Arizona. She looks at me like I'm speaking Greek when I ask her about Tolleson, the city of your return address. At the rental car counter, they're a little more helpful, and I head out into the city armed with a map and a cheap Hertz car that sounds like there's more sand in its gas tank than there is on the road. It's dry here, dry and dusty and hot, as if the world has ended and civilization dried up and blown away. Everything is white, blinding in the sunlight, or muted colors that look as if they've been blasted by years of harsh sand. How can you live in a place like this, Lance? I guess you're a lot like the small flowers blooming on the cactus plants -- bright spots of beauty in the dry wasteland of this arid desert, clinging to life, their moment in the sun, before they fade away like everything else. You always were the strong one. I don't care what the others say, what anyone says. JC was the recluse, Chris had his own life outside of the group, Joey had his women and his booze and his partying, and me? Well, I had you. And you were the glue that kept us together. And now I want you back.

Tolleson isn't far from the airport, just a small suburb really. I find the street of your return address in the map, just a small strip on the paper, but it's a fairly large road that runs through the center of the town, leading the way from Phoenix to Peoria, and there are no houses that I can see. I check the address again -- I check the map again. I drive down the road three times, driving as slow as the people behind me will allow before they blow their horns and swerve around me, shouting angry curses out their windows that I ignore. This road is full of strip malls and shopping centers and car dealerships. This isn't where you are.

I stop at a gas station and ask the attendant what the street number is for this Amoco. When I ask about your address, he points up the road and says, "That's where the old Econo Lodge used to be. I'm sure of it."

"Used to be?" I ask. You wrote me from a hotel room? You're living in a hotel? Christ, Lance, I want to rush in and rescue you now, bring you back home with me and live forever with your eyes and your hands and your smile.

The attendant shrugs. "It's gone now. Some two months, I think. Three, maybe. Built a parking lot in its place for the new mall."

I slide behind the wheel of my rental car and stare at this strange city around me. Where am I again? Gone. Was it ever

really there? Where were you when you wrote I miss you? Where were you when you sent the letter, postmarked Phoenix, that's now the last thing I have of you, crumbling and dingy like my sepia-toned memories of you and me and the way things used to be?

I drive past the parking lot just to make sure. You never wrote back because you never got those letters I sent, did you, Lance? You'll never read my words, you'll never know, you'll never ...

There is no Econo Lodge. The guy was right -- your return address is nothing more than a black top parking lot, the lines newly painted, the tarmac glistening with mica in the hot sun. There is no return address for you here in Tolleson, Arizona. Maybe I'm not here either, since I'm nothing without you, nothing, and you aren't here. Fuck, for all I know maybe there is no Arizona, because nothing exists without you, and I don't know where you are now. I'll never know.

The End

Lover's Cross
by NSyncGrrl

"You sure you're up for this?" Joey asked. He pulled into the driveway of JC's house, and Justin rolled down the passenger side window to hear the crunch of last night's snow beneath the tires. Cold air stung his eyes and burned his face as it curled into the car. Joey eased to a stop. "Justin?" he asked, pulling up the handbrake. "You okay?"

"Fine," Justin replied. He was fine. It had been a week since the accident, and even though his hip hurt from the snow, giving him a slight limp in the evenings, he was doing okay. The doctors thought a few more sessions with his physical therapist should work out the muscles a bit, but they cautioned against dancing or sports for another month or so. Justin was glad the wreck had happened in the winter -- by spring he'd be able to shoot hoops again as if nothing had happened.

The wreck ... Justin closed his eyes against the images that rose unbidden within him. Blinding snow, swirling around the car like a blizzard. Slick roads, the car's tires skidding on black patches of ice that winked in the headlights. The flash of silver as the guardrail loomed into view, the squeal of brakes, metal tearing against wood, limbs snapping away as the car plowed down the hill, screams and cries and then silence. Like the snow falling around them -- silence. Pain blossoming in his head, he couldn't see, couldn't feel, couldn't hear. His hands, numb. His legs, pinched painfully beneath the crumpled dashboard. His feet, frozen.

And then he could hear the radio playing faintly, a ghostly sound in the silent, snowy night. And Lance's hand found his, a comforting press of skin that warmed Justin's fingers back to life. And Lance had whispered everything would be okay, just hold on, Justin, everything would be fine.

And it was. It was still fine, a week later. He was fine, the accident a horrid memory that still clung to the edges of his mind and pressed upon him at odd moments ... like this one, Justin thought, climbing out of the car. He slammed the door shut behind him and shivered in the cold night air. As Joey walked around the car, he frowned at Justin, concern written plainly across his face, but Justin smiled at him easily. "It's cold," he said as if Joey didn't know it was January and snow covered the ground. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and led the way to JC's house.

"Justin," Joey started, following behind him. "We don't have to do this if you don't want to --"

"I'm fine," Justin repeated. He hurried up the steps to the front porch and rang the doorbell. It echoed away into the house and Justin huddled deeper into his jacket as Joey stepped up beside him. Flashing Joey a quick grin, Justin turned his attention onto the

window beside the closed door, the filmy curtain rosy and lit in the dark night. Behind the curtain Justin could see his friends -- JC in a black turtleneck and black jeans, Britney wearing a simple gray dress, Chris with his leather vest over a dark sweater, his glasses making him look older, more mature. Justin rang the doorbell again, and this time JC set down the tumbler in his hand and came to the door, glancing up to meet Justin's gaze through the gauzy curtain. Justin smiled brightly, but JC looked away. As the door opened, Justin pushed his way inside. "Hey, Josh," he said, slipping out of his coat.

"How are you doing, Justin?" JC asked, taking the denim jacket from Justin. He frowned at Justin's light colored turtleneck and brown corduroy pants before turning towards Joey. "Everything okay?"

"Fine," Joey said, glancing at Justin. He handed JC his own coat and headed for the bar, stopping to kiss Britney on the cheek as he passed.

Justin felt Britney watching him closely, and he looked away from the sadness he saw in her face. Couldn't they see he was doing fine? It had been a week -- he was great, really. Simply marvelous. Never been better. "Justin?" JC asked, breaking into his reverie.

"Hmm?" Justin asked, turning back to JC. "I'm sorry, Josh, you were saying ...?"

JC studied him for a minute before he sighed. Folding Justin's coat in his arms, he lowered his voice and said, "Justin, I know this is hard for you. What with the accident and all --"

Justin smiled. "We're fine," he said, touching JC's arm gently. "Really, Josh. We need to get another car, and I think it'll be a while before Lance drives again, it really shook him up --" He saw the look of anguish that crossed JC's face and sighed. "But we'll be okay. And we've got you guys to look out for us, right?"

JC blinked rapidly and, busying himself with hanging the coat in the closet, said gruffly, "Right."

Taking a deep breath, Justin steeled himself for the questions ahead -- everywhere he went anymore, someone was asking about the accident. He had his answers down to where he didn't have to think when he replied. Fine. I'm fine. We're fine. The car ... well, the car wasn't fine but they would go shopping for a new one soon. The beginnings of a migraine tugged at the back of his eyes, and he frowned as he rubbed at his temple. He just hoped the headache held off until the evening was over.

Otherwise it was going to be a long night.

* * *

In the car on the way home, Justin stared at his reflection in the window, the night passing behind his glassy eyes a blur of snow-covered ground and bare-limbed trees in the darkness. "You know what bothered me about tonight?" he asked softly.

"What's that?" Joey asked quietly. He kept his eyes on the road and one hand on the wheel, but when Justin didn't answer immediately, Joey glanced at him sharply. "Justin? What's wrong?"

"No one asked about Lance," Justin replied. The headache flared to life behind his eyes, sending a wave of nausea washing through him. He leaned his forehead against the cold window and waited for the sickness to pass.

Gently Joey said, "Maybe they didn't think you'd want to talk about it."

Justin frowned at his reflection. Talk about what? he wondered, before the pain seared through him and bright lights clouded his vision. "Well," Justin sighed, "they could have at least asked if he was okay."

"Is he?" Joey wanted to know.

"Yes," Justin answered, a little too quickly. Lance was doing fine. Like he was. Fine.

"Where is he right now?" Joey prompted.

The pain flashed through his head again, and Justin closed his eyes against the onslaught of images that flooded his memory. A white shroud of snow, covering the hood of the car like a blanket. Something wet and hot dripping into his eyes, the pain in his legs, the radio low. The clench of Lance's fingers holding his, keeping him warm. In the distance, a wail of sirens ... "Justin?" Joey asked, and Justin blinked away the visions of the accident. The sirens grew louder, somewhere out in the darkness of the night.

"He's okay," Justin whispered. Lance was fine. "Probably sleeping right now. He's ..." He frowned. Lance was okay. Just a little shaken up from the accident still, but he was doing okay. Justin couldn't wait to get home and hide away from the rest of the world, the staring eyes, the hesitant questions. He'd crawl into bed and into the safety of Lance's arms, and he'd forget the evening at JC's. Lance would kiss away the headache and make everything fine again. Make everything okay.

* * *

The house was cold and silent ... like the snow, Justin thought, closing the front door behind him. The latch clicked loudly in the foyer, and he tossed his coat into the chair, his keys landing on top. "Lance?" he called out, but there was no response. Must be sleeping, he mused, trudging upstairs.

But the bedroom was empty. Justin turned on the light and frowned at the bed, crisply made, the blankets tucked neatly beneath the pillows, one corner turned down. "Lance?" Justin called again, crossing the room to peek inside the bathroom, but it too was empty. A sudden fear coursed through Justin's veins like ice water. Where ...

"You're home." Justin whirled around as Lance entered the room. Relief flooded Justin, and he caught Lance in a tight embrace. He smelled wild and fresh and crisp like the woods outside covered in the snow. Lance hugged Justin close and breathed, "How was the party?"

"Okay." Justin kissed Lance tenderly, savoring the feel of soft lips beneath his. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," Lance replied. He sat down on the edge of the bed and sighed. "A little sick to the stomach, that's it. Did anyone ask about me?"

"Joey," Justin said, pulling off his sweater. "I told him you were doing fine."

Lance watched as Justin slipped out of his jeans. "Come here, baby boy," he whispered, tugging at the waistband of Justin's boxers. Justin laughed and fell to the bed as Lance rolled on top of him, the comforting weight of his body pushing Justin into the mattress. Kissing Justin's neck hungrily, he whispered, "I love you, Justin. Have I told you that today?"

"Just now," Justin giggled, pulling Lance closer. His fingers threaded through Lance's hair before trailing down the back of his neck, the smooth skin soft beneath his touch. "Lance?" Justin asked, and Lance sat up, a questioning look in his eyes. "Where's your necklace? Your cross?" Justin had given him the cross as a present years before, when they first started dating, and Lance was never seen without it. Just a small cross, silver and simple on a thin chain. When they made love Justin would grasp the chain in one hand, clutching it tight as Lance entered him, and the cross would settle into the hollow of Justin's throat as Lance cuddled close to him before they fell asleep. "Lance, where --"

"I don't know," Lance sighed. He kissed Justin's neck, his lips cool and damp on Justin's fevered skin. His hips ground into Justin's, making the dull ache in his joints flare to life, but he could live with this pain, this crush of Lance's body against his. Between kisses Lance whispered, "I think it broke off somewhere. I've tried to find it ..."

"I'll buy you a new one," Justin promised as Lance's mouth found his, kissing away the rest of the night.

* * *

Snow swirling around them, flakes cold and icy melting on his

cheeks, soft as a baby's breath, gentle as butterfly kisses. The windshield shattered into a million squares of glass, blue as ice, scattered in his hair, across the seat, down his shirt. He moves and glass slips down his back, falls in a shower around him. "Lance?" he calls out, fear lacing his voice. Lance has to be okay. Justin can't feel his legs and his hands are numb but Lance just HAS to be okay. "Lance?" Louder this time, sharp like the cold and the ice and the wind that has suddenly picked up around the car, whistling through the broken windshield and rivaling the approaching sirens.

The radio is the only answer he gets. "Oh my God, Lance ..." Justin struggles with the seat belt but it's a harness trapping him in the car, keeping him away from his lover, keeping him safe. It's dark, too dark to see anything but the faint glow of the lights on the dashboard, but Lance is leaning against the other window, an indistinct shape in the darkness, and Justin needs to reach him. He needs to hold him, to make sure he's okay, to feel his breath and taste his lips and he needs to hold him NOW, he needs to get out of this belt and he can't move, he can't breath, he can't do anything and it hurts, everywhere it hurts and tears sting his eyes and freeze on his cheeks and he's screaming now, "Lance, answer me, Lance please, oh God please Lance just please ..."

And Lance's hand slips into his, that deep throaty voice whispers that everything will be fine, calm down, Justin, everything will be okay. And Justin takes a deep breath, his lungs protesting, aching with the icy air, but everything will be fine.

Lance tells him everything will be fine.

* * *

Justin shivered as he rolled over in the bed, his arm reaching for Lance. All he found was empty space, and he grabbed Lance's pillow in one fist, pulling it into a tight hug as he curled into himself. "Lance?" he whispered, opening his eyes.

The room was empty. Bright sunlight crept through the closed blinds, and Justin watched tiny motes of dust dance in the rays slanting across the bed. It was cold, too cold, and Justin suddenly felt alone and scared. The dream came back to him, the same one he'd had for a week now, the dream where he relived the accident over and over again. "Lance?" he asked, raising his voice slightly. He wanted to feel strong arms around him, warming him. He wanted to hear Lance whisper that it would be alright now, everything would be fine. Where is he? Justin wondered, burying his head deeper into the pillow.

The phone rang. Go away, Justin thought. He didn't want to answer it. He didn't want to talk to anyone right now, no one but Lance, and where was that boy anyway? He knew Justin didn't like awaking up alone. Maybe he was downstairs, making breakfast. Maybe he would answer the phone.

By the fifth ring, Justin thought maybe Lance was waiting for him to answer it, so he reached over and snagged the receiver off the hook. Pressing it to his ear, he mumbled, "Hello?"

"Did I wake you up?" Joey asked.

Justin laughed. "What time is it?" he asked, sitting up in the bed.

"A little before noon," Joey replied. Justin could hear the worry in his friend's voice. "Justin, were you sleeping? This late?"

"Yeah," Justin admitted. He put Lance's pillow back in its place, fluffing it up before lying down on it. It still smelled of Lance's cologne, a spicy scent that brought tears to Justin's eyes. "I don't have anything planned for today," he said, trying to remember what day it was. Saturday? Sunday? He wasn't quite sure. "Just spend it in bed with my boy --"

"Justin," Joey began, but Justin laughed again.

"I know, I know," he said, pulling the covers up over his bare shoulders. "You don't want to hear all the sordid details."

Joey sighed. "It's not that. Justin, don't you think Lance --" Pain flashed behind Justin's eyes, drawing an involuntary grunt from his lips. "Justin?" Joey asked, concerned. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," Justin mumbled, even though his stomach twisted into sickening knots. The room swayed around him drunkenly, and he closed his eyes tightly to block it out. "Joey, I think I better go. I think I'm coming down with something." He swallowed against the bile rising in the back of his throat. "Whatever Lance has, maybe. I just feel sick on my stomach. Can I call you later?"

"Justin," Joey said sharply, "I wish you'd stop this. Lance isn't sick --"

The room dipped, and Justin squeezed his eyes shut. "Joey, really," he choked out. "I'll call you tonight. Please ..."

For a long moment Joey didn't respond. Then he said softly, "Fine." Justin fumbled with the receiver, trying to get it back in its cradle, but it slipped from his nerveless fingers and clattered to the floor. God, Justin thought, covering his fevered forehead with the back of his arm. Just make everything stop spinning. Make it all go away.

Faintly he could hear the steady beep beep beep of the phone, a busy signal to tell him he didn't hang it up properly. Then he heard soft footsteps and the phone settle into place gently, silencing its persistent song. A cool hand touched his, brushing away the sickness and pain as it trailed down his cheek to cradle his chin. "Are you okay?" Lance whispered, kissing Justin's arm where it draped across his forehead.

Justin sighed. "No," he whispered, but he was feeling better

now that the phone was hung up and Lance was here with him. "Lance, I don't know what's come over me. I feel sick, and tired, and I just want to sleep forever ..." His voice trailed off. He had no energy anymore.

The bed shifted as Lance laid down beside him. Strong arms enveloped him, hugging him close, and Lance pressed his lips against the back of Justin's neck. "You'll get over it," he promised. "It's going to be hard, Justin, but you'll get through. You always do. You have your friends. JC, Chris, Joey --"

"I have you," Justin admitted, snuggling against Lance's chest.

Lance laughed softly and ran his hand through Justin's curls. He kissed Justin's forehead, leaving a damp imprint of his lips behind. "You'll get over it," he promised.

* * *

Snow, blinding and white. Cold air, shattered glass. Lance's hand still warm in his, still holding on tight. The radio fading as the sirens wail closer. Footsteps crunching through snow, branches snapping away, angry shouts. Bright lights shining into the car, glaring off the snow as it falls, tiny sparkles like stars swirling around them. Someone banging on the car, calling out their names, the knocking filling Justin's head like a white noise, throbbing like his heart, knock knock knock ...

Justin blinked wearily but the knocking persisted, a steady pounding on the door. He pushed himself up from the living room sofa -- when had he come down here? He didn't remember leaving his bed, and he couldn't imagine why the sunlight shone low across the floor with that late afternoon orange glow that told him he slept most of the day away. "Lance?" he called out, but the house around him was empty. The pounding continued, a heavy knocking that demanded an answer.

Stumbling to the front door, Justin unlocked it to find Joey standing there, huddled in a bulky winter coat. "Justin," he said, pushing his way inside. Cold air curled around Justin's legs and feet, following Joey into the foyer. "Damn, you still asleep?"

"Not anymore," Justin said, yawning as he shut the door. "What are you doing here?"

"Your phone's busy," Joey replied, taking off his coat. He frowned as he watched Justin shuffle back to the sofa. "Is it off the hook?"

"Lance hung it up," Justin said, sitting down on the sofa. He leaned forward and propped his elbows on his knees, resting his head in his hands.

Joey sighed. "Justin, this has to stop," he said quietly.

Justin looked up at him, confusion plainly written across his face. "What?" he asked. "Joey --"

"You know what," Joey said, anger creeping into his voice. "I hate to see you like this. I know it's hard to get past the accident but you have to, Justin. You have to move on. Lance --"

Pain shot through Justin's head, blinding him. "God!" he cried, clutching his curls in tight fists. "Joey, please," he sobbed, rocking back. What the hell's wrong with me? he wondered, willing the sudden headache away. "Can you see if Lance is here --"

"He's not," Joey said, and the pain stabbed at Justin's mind. "Justin, he's not here, okay?"

"Where did he go?" Justin whispered. He drew a long, shuddery breath and tried to think around the pressure squeezing his skull. He wanted Lance to hold him now, to kiss away the pain and tell him everything would be fine. "Did you see him --"

"No!" Joey cried. In three steps he crossed the room and, grabbing Justin's wrists, pulled Justin's hands from his face. "Justin, look at me. Look at me."

Justin shook his head. "Joey, please," he begged, trying to twist out of Joey's sure grip. He wanted to call Lance -- he'd call his cell phone, he'd answer then, Justin knew it, and Justin would ask him to come home, please come back, he wasn't feeling good and he wanted Lance to love him and call him his baby boy and everything would be okay if he could just hear Lance's voice again.

"Justin," Joey sobbed, sinking to his knees in front of the couch. "Justin, please just look at me, okay? Please?"

"My head hurts," Justin whispered. Cautiously he opened one eye. Joey struggled against tears that reddened his eyes and threatened to fall, his hands uncomfortably warm around Justin's wrists, his chin trembling as he stared at Justin. Why was he crying? Justin was the one in pain. "Joey --"

"He's not here, Justin," Joey sighed. "You know that, right? Tell me you know it. Tell me, please tell me you know what I'm talking about, you hear what I'm saying."

"I know," Justin replied softly. He squeezed Joey's hands in a comforting gesture. "But he'll be back soon, though. Do you want to wait around --"

Tears spilled down Joey's cheeks and he laid his head on Justin's knees. "God, Justin," he breathed. "You don't understand. You won't understand, you won't see --"

"Just let me sleep off this headache," Justin whispered, closing his eyes again. "Wake me up when he gets back, okay?"

Joey muttered something into Justin's hands, but Justin was already slipping away, the dream catching up with him again. Snow

falling around him ... Lance's hand in his ... Lance will be back soon, Justin thought, drifting off. Wake me up, Joe, when he gets here.

* * *

Justin became aware of Joey's voice, low and concerned. Was he talking to Lance? Had Lance finally come home? Justin struggled to extract himself from the dream, but the snow covered his lap and he couldn't feel his legs, his feet -- his hands were numb. Even Lance's hand in his was cold, so cold, so impossibly cold ... "He's just not coping, Josh," Justin heard Joey say. He frowned and pushed at the gray blanket covering his senses, blinding him, keeping him down. Why couldn't he wake up? Where was Lance? "He insists that Lance is coming back. I don't know how much longer I can handle this. I don't know how to handle this anymore."

Lance? Justin thought, but the pain rushed at him suddenly, the nausea washing through him, and he clutched his stomach against the sickness. Lance isn't here right now, but he's coming back. What's Joey talking about? He's coming back.

"I just don't know what to do," Joey sobbed, and Justin opened his eyes to find Joey sitting on the coffee table, cell phone in hand, watching him with dark, sad eyes. "He's up. I'll talk to you later. Take care." Folding up the phone, Joey forced a smile to his lips. "How are you feeling, Justin?" he asked softly.

"Where's Lance?" Justin asked, rubbing his eyes. He wasn't home yet ... why not?

Joey sighed. "Justin --" He ran a hand down his face and sighed again. "God, Justin, I know it's hard for you. It's hard for all of us, but I can't imagine what it's like for you."

"What do you mean?" Justin asked. He sat up on the couch and frowned at Joey. "What are you talking about?"

"You love him so much," Joey choked, and Justin smiled, thinking of Lance's strong arms, his sparkling eyes, his infectious laugh. He imagined he felt his lover's touch on him, the ghostly memory of kisses tingling his lips.

"I do," Justin whispered. God, he loved Lance. With all his heart and soul, he loved that man. And he didn't know where he'd gone today, why he wasn't here, but when he returned Justin would cover him with kisses and hold him tight and love him all night long. He could almost feel Lance's hands on his body, the cold metal chain of Lance's necklace biting into the flesh of his palm ... but he lost it, Justin reminded himself. Have to go buy another. Maybe that's where he went. Wanted to surprise me by finding another cross just like the one I gave him. "He hasn't come back yet?"

Joey covered his face with his hands. "No," he whispered.

"Justin ..." Pushing himself up, Joey stood and looked down at him, that inexplicable sadness still on his face. "Come on."

Justin followed Joey to the foyer. "Where are we going?" he asked, taking the coat Joey offered him. It was Lance's coat, a barn jacket that still smelled of Lance's cologne. When Justin put it on, he felt enveloped with warmth and love, as if Lance himself were holding him close. Breathing deep the musky scent, Justin asked, "Joey? I don't think I should leave. I want to be here when Lance gets back."

"We won't be long," Joey assured him, slipping into his own jacket. "There's something I think you need to do, Justin. Something I think you need to see. Maybe that will make it real for you, I don't know. If it doesn't ..." He sighed and glanced at Justin to make sure he was ready, and then he opened the front door. A blast of cold wind whipped inside. "If it doesn't, then I don't know what else to do." He led the way to his car, Justin right behind him.

* * *

"What do you remember of the accident?" Joey asked. They drove down a long stretch of highway, the black tarmac lined on either side with freshly fallen snow. It was late afternoon, and the sun shone red and fiery behind them -- Justin could see its dying rays in the passenger side mirror, low bands of light bathing the snow and road in a crimson glow. The road twisted back on itself, the bare trees around giving a desolate air to the empty highway. No cars followed them, and none passed as they drove around the curves. The sun glinted off of guardrails they passed ... it seemed familiar somehow, like a scene from a dream, forgotten upon awakening but recalled in bits and pieces as the day wore on. "Do you remember anything, Justin?"

"It was a week ago," Justin said, rubbing at the pain lacing his temple. His stomach coiled like a serpent ready to strike. Thinking back, he remembered ... blinding snow, the screech of brakes, Lance's hand in his, Lance's hand ... "It was snowing pretty hard," he whispered. "Lance couldn't see very well, and the road was icy. I remember thinking we should pull over, wait out the storm, but Lance said we'd be okay. He promised me we'd be safe. I'd be safe. He said that, Joe. He said he'd get me home safely."

Joey bit his lower lip and watched the road, slowing down as he eased around another curve. "What else do you remember?" he persisted.

Justin frowned. The glint of the headlights off of a guardrail, the squeal of metal against wood, trees snapping away, the windshield shattering, snow cold like death covering us like a shroud ... "I couldn't feel my legs. When the car finally stopped, I couldn't feel anything, just an ache in my head and a numbness from my waist down. It was cold ... so cold ..." He rubbed his hands together for warmth and tried to blink away the pain behind his eyes. "I was

screaming, I know I was. I was screaming for Lance and he wouldn't answer me, he was hurt, I couldn't reach him and I just wanted to make sure he was all right, I just wanted to be sure ..."
Joey slowed the car as Justin trailed off, coming to a stop in front of a twisted guardrail. The trees here bent away from the road, their thin trunks snapped and broken. "Joe ..." Justin frowned.
"Where --"

"This is where it happened," Joey said softly. "Come on."

Justin shook his head. "No," he whispered. Turning towards Joey, eyes wide, he felt his lower lip tremble and he shook his head again. "I'm not getting out of the car."

"You have to," Joey said. "Justin, please -- it's the only way I can think of to show you --"

Justin closed his eyes. "I don't want to see," he said. He didn't. He didn't want to see the scarred earth, the crumpled snow, the cracked trees. He didn't want to remember anymore. He wanted to just go home and wait for Lance to get back and he didn't want to know --

"Justin," Joey persisted. "Justin, look at me."

"No," Justin whispered. He wouldn't look. He wouldn't see.

Joey sighed. "Justin, please," he sobbed, his voice cracking with tears. "Lance is dead."

"No!" Justin cried. He covered his ears with his hands and shook his head. Pain exploded within him, nausea making him weak, a million shards of broken glass twisting into his skull. "Stop it, Joey! God, don't say that. Don't even think that!"

Taking Justin's wrists in his hands, his skin cold against Justin's, Joey said, "Justin, listen to me. Listen --"

"No," Justin said again, twisting away. He stumbled blindly from the car, doubled over against the pain eating away at him inside. "I just talked to him this morning," he choked, remembering Lance's arms around him, his tender kisses, his warm body pressed tight against Justin's own. "He told me he loved me. He told me --"

"He's dead," Joey said again, getting out of the car. The door slammed shut, and Justin gripped the twisted guardrail to steady himself. Lance wasn't dead. He wasn't. He said everything was fine, everything was okay, and how could it be if he wasn't there? So he couldn't be dead. He couldn't -- "Justin, I'm sorry." Joey squeezed Justin's shoulders but Justin twisted away. Somewhere out in the barren woods beyond the road, snow fell from a tree, the cracking of wood echoing back to where they stood. "Justin, please --"

"He's not dead," Justin whispered. "He told me he loved me. It was the last thing he said to me ..." He remembered Lance's hand in his, warm and alive and comforting despite the snow swirling through the shattered windshield. He heard the words again, the

deep voice echoing within him. "Everything's okay, Justin. Everything's going to be fine." The press of Lance's fingers against his, a soft sigh barely audible over the radio, somehow still playing, Lance's words soothing in the dark and the cold and the pain. "I love you, Justin. Remember that always. I love you, baby boy. I love you forever." Tears filled Justin's eyes at the memory of those words, and he looked down at the snow at his feet, black and dirty from the imprints of tires and bootheels. This was where they ran off the road. This was where the police had stood, looking down at their car. This was where the rescue squad worked frantically to get them into the ambulance, and Justin remembered hot hands pulling him free, out of the car, out of the snow, away from Lance, away ...

Something glistened in the snow, a flash of silver amid the dirt and ice. Bending down, Justin picked at the metal. It was freezing, biting into his skin with a cold so deep, it felt like fire searing his bones. A silver cross, small and intricate, the chain lost somewhere, gone now. Gone forever ... "No," Justin whispered. The cross burned into his palm. Lance's cross. The one he had given him ... "No."

"I'm sorry," Joey said again. Justin looked up at his friend, his face red from tears and the wintry wind blowing steadily around them. "Oh God Justin, I'm so sorry ..."

Justin sobbed. Gone. His fingers closed over the cross, warming the metal in his cold flesh. Gone forever ... Lance said everything would be okay, he'd get me home safe, he said he loved me ... Gone ...

Leaning against the icy guardrail, Justin felt the pain flare through him again, the nausea bunch his stomach like a used tissue, and he remembered Lance's hand in his. The cross burned in his hand as he realized Lance had kept his promise. He had kept him safe.

But nothing would ever be okay, nothing would ever be fine, ever again.

The End

Star Wars: Bounty of the Heart
by NSyncGrrl

NOTE: I didn't create the worlds, the weapons, the creatures, or the Force. It's George's playground. I just brought my own toys and tried to leave his where I found them when I was finished.

* * *

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away ...

As the twin suns hung low on the horizon of the desert planet of Tatooine, Joshua Chasez stood on a rugged outcropping and peered through his infrared goggles at the quiet town of Mos Espa, nestled in the dusty valley below. A scant breeze blew across the flat, dry land, hot and grainy with sand that stung Joshua's face with each gust. He wore a tight flimsy shirt, the sleeves tightened at his wrists, the long material belted around his narrow waist to allow for easy access to the blasters holstered on his hips. His loose dungarees were cinched into his calf-high boots to keep the sand out, and twin rows of ammunition crossed low on his waist. As he stared out at the town below him, he ran a hand through his spiked hair, windblown and unkempt. Weariness ached in his bones, and he grimaced at the unsavory thought of lying on the hard ground by tonight's meager fire. It would barely emit enough warmth to ward off the chill that settled on the desert once the suns went down. If the fire even takes, Joshua thought bitterly, listening to his partner curse at the low flames that the wind threatened to extinguish. "You get that fire going yet, Marshall?" Joshua asked.

"Shut the fuck up," Marshall growled, and Joshua laughed at the malice curled in his partner's voice. There was a reason why Marshall Mathers was one of the most feared bounty hunters in the galaxy, but Joshua had been with him long enough to know that his bad attitude wasn't directed at him. It was the fact that they spent most of the day in hyperspace, jaunting from Coreilla to Tatooine stowed in the hold of a cargo ship. It was the fact that their latest bounty was the infamous Gardulla the Hutt, a notorious gangster with a vast empire on Tatooine, and even though Marshall didn't say it, Joshua knew this one worried him. He could see it in the nervous way Marshall chewed the inside of his lip as he stacked the wood for the fire, the scowl furrowing his brow, the anger in his icy blue eyes. It worried him because neither of them knew who it was who hired them -- just a nameless courier, an obscene number of Republic dataries, and they were off.

And if it worried Marshall, then Joshua thought maybe it should worry the hell out of him, too.

Coming over to where Marshall struggled to keep the fire lit, Joshua tossed the goggles onto his bedroll and sighed. "Don't take it out on me, Marshall," he warned. "Who wanted to take this damn

job in the first place? You know we need the money."

Marshall glared at the small fire and didn't reply. Joshua watched the shadows from the flames play across his partner's face and wondered what Marshall would say if he asked to share his bedroll tonight. Like you have the courage to do that, he admonished himself. He had known Marshall for seven years now, ever since the bounty hunter had been double crossed by Jabba the Hutt and sentenced to die in the Sarlacc Pit, and in all that time he had never once shared his partner's bed. He wouldn't dare to ask, and he was just kidding himself if he thought otherwise. He doesn't know that I think of him at night, Joshua thought, watching Marshall covertly as his partner stared into the flames. He doesn't suspect that it's more than just a partnership to me, that I want so much more than he's willing to give. What would I say to him? I don't want to tell him that I want him as a lover because then I might lose him as a friend.

A small scurry of stones interrupted his thoughts, and Marshall rose to his feet, blaster already in hand. In the growing darkness, his light sleeveless top and baggy pants took on an ethereal gleam, the tattoos on his arms dark inky shadows, and Joshua wondered how he could stand the constant blast of sand against his bare skin. "Marshall --" Joshua started, standing as well.

"Shh," Marshall hissed.

Joshua strained to hear something other than the tinny spattering of sand against rock, and he was about to speak again when Marshall leveled his blaster and fired into the settling dusk. Chunks of stone erupted where the blast hit, and as he aimed to fire again, a soft voice called out, "Alright already, Marshall. Hold up, will you?"

Marshall frowned and glanced at Joshua. "Who's that?" Joshua whispered, but Marshall simply shrugged.

"Get out here," he called, lowering his blaster, but Joshua noticed he didn't holster the weapon.

Slowly a tall shape extracted itself from the shadows. As the stranger stepped into the circle of light thrown by their fire, a chill passed through Joshua. He took in the weathered cloak covering tight denim pants and a dark shirt, the long blaster rifle slung over one shoulder, the cowl pulled low over the stranger's face, and wondered how this man knew Marshall by name. A fellow bounty hunter? An old friend? The disgust that flitted across Marshall's face as he put away his blaster suggested otherwise. "What the fuck do you want?" Marshall growled, taking his seat again by the fire.

The stranger shrugged easily. When he pushed the cowl back from his face, he grinned wolfishly at Joshua, the trimmed goatee and dark glasses he wore adding to his lupine appearance. Pushing the glasses up onto his forehead, he drawled, "Where'd you pick up the boy, Marshall? He doesn't look your type."

Joshua blushed. The stranger was his own age, hardly anyone old enough to call him boy. Clearing his throat, he said, "I'm not a boy --"

"So I see," the stranger replied, his gaze lingering down Joshua's body. With a wink, he held out his hand and said, "Can't imagine Marshall here will introduce us. Niceties have never really been his strong suit. The name's Alex. Alex McLean."

"Joshua," Joshua replied, taking Alex's hand. The grip was strong and sure, but Alex didn't let go right away, and his palm burned in Joshua's, his wicked grin never faltering. Extracting his hand from Alex's, Joshua asked, "You know Marshall?"

Alex laughed easily. "We go way back," he said, sitting down by the fire.

Marshall glared at him distrustfully. "What brings you to this wasteland?" he asked, his voice as hard as the stone around them. "And, more importantly, when the hell are you leaving?"

Ignoring Marshall, Alex motioned for Joshua to sit down. "So the scoundrel Mathers has a boy --"

"Shut up," Marshall yelled, drawing his blaster. Aiming it at Alex, he glared down the barrel and said softly, "Another word, Alex, and the Tusken Raiders will be picking up pieces of you for weeks."

"We're partners," Joshua offered, hoping to diffuse the situation, but he knew Alex's sly grin only made matters worse. "Marshall, please --" He placed his hand on the barrel of Marshall's blaster, lowering it to the ground. "You think you can just blow him away up here? Half the town has already heard your first shot. Another one will just raise suspicions and Gardulla will know we're coming --"

"Gardulla?" Alex asked, turning his attention to Joshua. This close his dark eyes were mesmerizing, and Joshua couldn't look away from the flames flickering in their depths. "As in the Hutt? You guys after her too?"

Joshua started in surprise. "You mean you --"

"Shut up, Joshua," Marshall said. Glaring at his partner, he added, "You don't have to tell him what the fuck we're doing here."

"I already figured it out," Alex replied. He slipped out of his cloak, his bare arms etched with tattoos similar to Marshall's. Suddenly Joshua wondered if he were the only bounty hunter in the whole Republic without any ink stuck into his body. "Why else would you be here, Marshall? Since your run-in with Jabba, everyone knows you hunt the Hutts. If it's not Gardulla, it's one of the others. So who're you working for?"

Marshall scowled and busied himself with reholstering his blaster. When it was obvious that he wasn't going to reply, Joshua

admitted, "We don't know."

"Joshua!" Marshall cried, rage written across his face. "Keep your damn mouth shut."

Scooting closer to Joshua, Alex lowered his voice and prompted, "You don't know?" The intense way he concentrated on him made Joshua's stomach flutter, bringing an involuntary smile to his lips. "How's that work, exactly? How can you not know who hired you?"

"There was a courier --" Joshua started, and Marshall slapped the side of his head with the back of his hand. The blow stung but didn't hurt, not really -- it was meant to silence him, nothing more. But Joshua bit his lower lip to keep it from trembling because now Marshall was angry, and when he got into one of his pissy moods he was horrid for days, and it was all Joshua's fault this time, but he couldn't help it, not really, because this sexy stranger was staring at him with the most amazing eyes, leaning so close that Joshua could feel faint breath along his cheek, and he was grinning at him until Joshua thought he would just open his mouth and spill out his soul to this man, this Alex that riled Marshall so badly. When Alex licked his lips unconsciously with the tip of his tongue, Joshua swallowed thickly and turned away. Glancing up at Marshall, he muttered, "Sorry."

"What the fuck do you want, Alex?" Marshall asked, squatting by the fire. He watched Joshua with cold eyes that Joshua couldn't meet. Now he thinks you're an ass, he thought, smoothing out his bedroll on the hard ground. Falling for the first cute guy to come along. Even if you HAD the guts to ask to share his bed, there's no way in HELL he'd let you tonight. He'd tell you to roll up with this Alex kid instead. Though that wasn't such a bad thought either, was it?

Alex shrugged. "A blazing fire, good company, a warm bed ..." He winked at Joshua again. The nights just get so long, Joshua mused, returning Alex's smile, and seven years is a lifetime, Marshall. And I'm too damn cowardly to even TRY to broach the subject with you, so maybe it's best if I just let go. Maybe I should take Alex up on his innocent flirting, see where it leads me, because I'll never get it from you. When Alex spoke, his soft voice was low like the flames of their fire. "I was content to lurk in the shadows, 'til you routed me out." When Marshall didn't answer, he added, "I just want some talk, Marshall -- some food, some company, that's it. This is a hard planet. Shit, you think I'm going to rob you in the night? I know you ain't got no money, or you'd never take on a Hutt as large as Gardulla. And maybe ..." He shrugged again. "Maybe we can help each other out. Maybe I'm after Gardulla myself, and we can go in together on it. You, me, Josh -- we each get a cut of both bounties. What do you say?"

"I don't share bounties," Marshall replied. He tossed a thin stick into the fire, frowning as it popped loudly in the flames. "Joshua and me work together. There ain't a third cut."

Alex reached out and ran one long finger down Joshua's thigh,

leaving behind a trail of heat in its wake. Joshua jumped at the touch but didn't pull away. "What's wrong with sharing something three ways?" he asked.

Marshall frowned. "I don't share," he said. "You'd do well to remember that." Glaring into the fire, he added, "Stay the night, I don't care. Just keep to yourself. In the morning you get the hell out of here, and if you get in my way, just pray that the Force is with you."

* * *

The next morning Joshua opened his eyes to find Alex sitting by the smoldering remains of their fire, cleaning his dark nails with the edge of a wicked dagger and watching him closely. Pushing himself up off of the hard ground, Joshua crossed his legs and blinked the sleep from his eyes. "Where's Marshall?" he asked, looking around the small clearing where they had camped.

Alex shrugged. "He'll be back," he said, and Joshua shifted beneath his intense gaze. Softly, Alex chuckled. "You look like an angel when you sleep, do you know that?"

Joshua ducked his head to hide the blush creeping into his cheeks. "No," he whispered. He had heard of angels before, beautiful creatures the space pirates talked about. But no one had ever said anything like that to him before, had never compared him to one of these beings. I wonder if Marshall thinks I look like that, he mused, running a hand through his tousled hair, but he knew Marshall would never even admit to having such thoughts.

"You do," Alex said, sheathing his dagger. Stepping over the guttering fire, he crossed the space between them and eased down to sit beside Joshua. He leaned back, one hand resting behind Joshua nonchalantly, and asked, "How'd you get involved with this shit anyway, Josh? You don't strike me as the type out to rack up bounties. How do you know Marshall?"

Joshua smiled, thinking back. How long had it been? Seven years. "My parents were spice miners," he explained, his voice soft in the early morning air. He stared into the dying fire and tried to remember his life before becoming a bounty hunter. "Pirates attacked the settlement, killing most of the people and enslaving the rest for the Hutts."

"How old were you?" Alex prompted. His hand strayed from the ground to rest against the small of Joshua's back, his fingers rubbing gently through Joshua's thin shirt. The touch was hot through the fabric, burning like the suns above.

A pleasant warmth flooded through Joshua at the brief contact, and he found himself leaning into the gentle touch. "Six," he whispered -- he had been six years old when he was sold to Jabba the Hutt and forced to work in the kitchens of his palace. Joshua still remembered the weight of the shackles he wore around his

wrists and ankles, the choking collar chained around his neck. For eleven years he slaved for Jabba, and he had given up all hope of escape, all dreams of freedom. He forgot what the sun looked like, or how the wind felt against his face, or the way it felt to run barefoot in tall grass. He forgot everything but the drudgery of constant toil, the heat of the kitchens, the cold stone beneath his feet, the chains dragging him down.

And then he met Marshall.

Remembering the first time he ever met the bounty hunter, Joshua said, "Jabba hired Marshall to collect from a smuggler, someone who dumped his cargo and bailed at the first sign of Federation ships. The deal was to bring the smuggler back -- Jabba specifically wanted her alive. But Marshall ..." Joshua laughed. "Marshall has his own methods, you know, and somewhere between here and there, the smuggler was killed. And Jabba was pissed."

Alex grinned. "Never hire Marshall Mathers if you want your prey alive," he said. "He likes the kill as much as the thrill of the hunt, I think."

"I think you're right," Joshua agreed. "Jabba wanted blood, and with the smuggler dead, he decided to take Marshall's instead." Joshua had prison duty at the time -- he fed the unfortunate creatures Jabba kept jailed in the dungeons of his palace. He had stared at Marshall through the bars of his cell for a long time -- so this is the infamous Marshall Mathers, he remembered thinking. Gossip had it that Marshall was a bloodthirsty and evil man with a heart of stone, and when he turned those icy blue eyes onto Joshua for the first time, Joshua wondered if the rumors weren't true. "He was to die in the Sarlacc Pit. When I brought his last meal, I asked if he thought he could fight his way free if given the chance. He said yes. I asked if he would take me with him, if I helped him escape. He promised he would." Shrugging, Joshua said, "We've been together ever since."

Alex nodded. His hand trailed up Joshua's back until he draped his arm across Joshua's shoulders. "So you guys are what, just friends?" he asked, leaning closer, and suddenly his voice became throaty, his eyes burning, his breath just barely tickling along Joshua's neck. When had he gotten so close? "Partners? What's he to you, Josh?"

Not what I'd like him to be, Joshua thought, but when he turned and looked into Alex's deep eyes, the words dissolved and he couldn't think of what to say. "Friends," he whispered, watching Alex's lips pull into a slick grin. "Just friends. Partners. Nothing more."

"You sure?" Alex asked, shifting closer. His hip rested against Joshua's, the touch as vivid as a splash of cold water in this desert land. With his thumb, he smoothed down the faint beginnings of a goatee that shadowed Joshua's chin. "Nothing more?"

Before Joshua could answer, Alex turned his face slightly and leaned even closer. His lips brushed Joshua's mouth tenderly, and Joshua let his eyes slip closed. So this is what it's like to be kissed, he thought. He reached out to touch Alex's thigh, his fist bunching in the loose fabric of Alex's pants as Alex pulled back. When Joshua opened his eyes, Alex was smiling at him, that wolfish leer that made Joshua's heart flutter. "Marshall doesn't know what he's missing," he whispered. "If I traveled with you, Josh, you'd never spend a night alone."

The words trilled through Joshua, making him giddy. "Is that a promise?" he asked shyly.

Alex laughed. He let his hand drift down Joshua's chest to rest on the waistband of his dungarees. The slight pressure of his wrist against Joshua's groin made him ache to be touched there, but he didn't know how to ask and what if Marshall came back? Joshua didn't want to think about that. Right now he just wanted to think about how warm Alex's body was against his and how Alex stared at him as if he were the only thing that mattered on this whole planet -- hell, in this whole universe. He wanted to bottle that look so he could pull it out whenever he was lonely or lost or afraid, so he could always know that for a few minutes at least, he had meant the world to someone. "Josh," Alex started, tracing the pattern etched into Joshua's belt with the tip of his finger, "yesterday you said you were after Gardulla ..."

"Yeah," Joshua sighed. Kiss me again, he thought, watching Alex's lips closely. "Are you after her too? Didn't you say --"

"Yeah," Alex breathed, nodding. His hand slipped lower on Joshua's body, brushing against the throbbing in his crotch just slightly, just enough that Joshua wanted to close his eyes again and savor the sensation, but Alex's eyes held his gaze and he couldn't look away. "Why don't we work together on this, Josh? We can split the bounties ..."

Joshua shook his head. "Marshall said --"

"I know what he said," Alex whispered. His hand slipped again until it was pressed against the bulge in Joshua's pants and damn if that didn't feel simply amazing, having him touch him there, and Joshua couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't dare to hope for more ... "But what's the harm in it, Josh? Us teaming up, hmm? Would that be such a bad thing?"

"No," Joshua whispered. He didn't think so. Not in the least. And Alex smiled again, that Cheshire cat grin that lit up his eyes, and before he could stop himself Joshua leaned closer for another kiss.

* * *

Marshall was mad. No, Marshall was furious. Anger swirled through him like a maelstrom, tearing down everything inside of

him, blinding him with rage. How DARE Alex show up, he thought, firing his blaster at a flock of sand gorgs nearby. Three of the frog-like creatures fell in rapid succession, killed by Marshall's deadly aim. Who the fuck does he think he is? Marshall had no doubts that Alex had somehow followed them from the spaceport of Mos Eisley out here to the outskirts of Mos Espa -- there was no other explanation for his showing up in the middle of nowhere, was there? He had to be following them. Out to bag the Hutt himself, Marshall thought, crossing the dry stretch of land to where the gorgs he killed lay sprawled in the sand. Scooping them up in one hand, he reholstered his blaster and started back for the camp. Wants the bounty and doesn't care who he has to step on to get it. Typical Alex.

They used to be friends, he and Alex, back in the day before Jabba put a price on Marshall's head. They even worked together once or twice, Alex just a kid who didn't have what it took to make the grade at the Jedi Academy and eager to finally make his own in the world. He had a beguiling smile and witchy eyes, and exuded a confidence far above his years. Marshall took an instant liking to the boy, but Alex's charm wore thin after a while, his constant flirting with anything human an annoyance Marshall didn't need. The final straw came when they had been hired to kill an influential senator whose entourage was more formidable than they first imagined. When the guards opened fire, Alex ran, leaving Marshall in the midst of battle. Rule number one of partnerships, in Marshall's book, was never run. Never. Especially when the other partner is left behind.

Marshall just didn't work that way. And he had no patience for those who did.

And now Joshua was smitten by those pretty eyes and that crafty grin, he just knew it. He could see it in the way Joshua's eyes sparkled when Alex looked at him, and fuck Alex for preying on that. Joshua wasn't used to the attention -- of course he'd gobble it up, he wouldn't see it for what it was, he wouldn't have a fucking clue that Alex was just using his charms and that little bit of the Force he had to weasel his way into Joshua's bedroll. And what would happen when Joshua was so lost in the lust and the moment and the sex that he couldn't see Alex walking away ... what then? Marshall would be damned if he'd let that happen. He didn't relish the thought of mending Joshua's inexperienced heart.

Face it, Marshall, he told himself as he climbed the steep rocky incline leading to the outcropping where they had spent the night. It's been too long since you've had a lover, and you know Joshua is more to you than just a friend. You know you want him so badly, you stay up half the night watching him sleep. You just never knew if he was interested in what you wanted to give ... but maybe Alex's arrival is just what you need, because now you know he **LIKES** the attention, you know he might not turn you away if you **DID** come to him one night, you don't have anything to lose now, do you? Do --

He rounded the bend and the anger roared within him like a

tidal wave. Alex leaned against Joshua, grinning madly, one hand around his shoulders, the other -- don't think it, Marshall, you'll get mad if you think of where that hand is, what he's TOUCHING down there -- between Joshua's legs, and Joshua just stared at the wolf leering down at him, his lower lip caught between his teeth, uncertainty and lust mingled in his eyes. "I don't know --" he was saying, and that was all Marshall needed to hear. He doesn't know --

"What the fuck is going on here?" Marshall asked, storming into the camp. Joshua scurried out of Alex's arms, fear clouding his eyes as he glanced at Marshall before looking away. Marshall tossed the gorgs into the muttering remains of the fire and waited for an answer.

Alex rose to his feet, arms spread out in an innocent gesture. "Marshall, it's not what you think --"

"What I think," Marshall growled, pushing Alex back, "is that you haven't changed, have you, Alex? You're still the same asshole you were before, aren't you?" He pushed Alex again. "Aren't you?"

"Marshall --" Joshua touched Marshall's shoulder, pulling him back. "It's not --"

"Shut up," Marshall said, shrugging off Joshua's hand. He turned to glare at his partner. Couldn't he fucking see what Alex was doing here? Didn't he know it meant nothing to him? "Get your shit together. We're leaving."

He didn't miss the look that passed between them. When he bent to retrieve his bedroll, Joshua lowered his voice and asked, "Marshall? Can we talk a minute?"

He wants Alex to come with us, Marshall thought bitterly. He knew that petulant tone of Joshua's all too well. And he knew he wasn't strong enough to ignore it. "No."

"Marshall, I really think --"

"No." Marshall met Joshua's troubled gaze and scowled. Fuck this, he thought, wishing the stories were true and he was as hard-hearted as his reputation claimed. But this was Joshua -- Joshua. Who got him out of that damned pit all those years ago. Who asked if Marshall would set him free. Who trusted him completely, despite his reputation and the rumors and the gossip. Whose smile made the day brighter and whose pout made Marshall ready to fight to see that smile again. "Fuck."

"He's after Gardulla, too," Joshua said, squatting down beside Marshall. "I just thought maybe we could work together --"

"He's a prick," Marshall growled, loud enough for Alex to overhear. He shoved his bedroll into his pack and grimaced at the sand that spilled from the rolls of fabric. Fucking shit would be in everything before they got off this damn planet. "He's not what you think, Joshua. You don't mean shit to him."

Joshua sighed. "Marshall --"

"Can't you see?" Marshall asked, anger still sharpening his words. "Can't you fucking see this is just fun and games to him?" When Joshua pouted, Marshall turned away in disgust. "You don't know him the way I do. He's scum. We don't need his help."

Softly, Joshua said, "I want him to come." Marshall looked up in surprise, and although Joshua blushed under his scrutiny, he didn't back down. "This is a partnership, Marshall, isn't it? And if I want him to come, doesn't that mean anything?"

It means you're a fool, Marshall thought, but he didn't say the words. He didn't trust Alex -- he didn't know how he could get Joshua to see the man for what he really was, a wolf in sheep's clothing, a snake behind that oily grin. It means I'm a fool, because I can't say no to you, Joshua, and you know that, don't you? "Fine," he said. At least with Alex nearby he could keep an eye on him, make sure things didn't get out of hand. Make sure he stays the hell away from Joshua. Standing up, Marshall slung his bag over one shoulder and leveled his finger at Alex, who grinned knowingly. "You'll stay out of my way, you hear me?"

"Well, well," Alex purred, crossing his arms. "Mathers has a weak spot after all."

"And you'll keep your fucking mouth shut," Marshall added. He wouldn't put up with that shit. The sooner we cap Gardulla, he thought, kicking sand over their dying fire, the sooner he's out of here. And that wouldn't be soon enough.

* * *

The trek through the hot sand into the town of Mos Espa took most of the day. The hours burned away beneath the sweltering twin suns that steadily crossed the sky, but by the time they were close to setting, the three bounty hunters had reached the dusty outskirts of the bustling spaceport. Marshall walked ahead, Joshua slightly behind him. Occasionally Joshua tried to engage his partner in halfhearted conversation, but the heat kept them breathless and thirsty, and talk was sparse. Alex fell back and watched the way Joshua's pants pulled at his muscular thighs, each step stretching the thin fabric across his buttocks until Alex thought he would go mad from lust. He considered himself a connoisseur of the flesh -- there was nothing more exciting to him than a warm body curved against his, the tightness of skin or the smell of sex, and it had been a while since he last bedded anyone. This Joshua screamed to be loved, to be held and fondled and caressed, and Alex wanted to strip away the boy's innocence with his clothes until they both lay naked and sated in each others' arms. He could feel the need and ache radiating from Joshua as if he were a small sun, and the fact that Marshall seemed intent on ignoring the desire oozing from his partner made it all the more interesting. That makes it worth the

hunt, he thought, smiling to himself. He still tasted Joshua on his lips, still felt him in his arms, and he wanted more.

He would have it.

Mos Espa was a busy town, catering to gamblers and pirates and gangsters, and this late in the day the dusty streets were packed with unsavory types, aliens and droids, gorgmongers and vendors. Bounty hunters of all races leaned in the shade of adobe buildings, and tiny Jawas led huge lumbering Banthas through the crowded alleys -- tomorrow was the big podrace at Boonta Eve, and the town was already filled to overflowing with spectators and racers and visiting dignitaries. Gardulla the Hutt would be at the race, and Alex knew that's where Marshall would make his move. If he stayed close by, he could rack up the bounty without even wasting his own ammunition, and maybe get laid in the process. If I could just lose Marshall for a few hours, he thought, following Marshall and Joshua into the cool interior of a dimly lit cantina, I can rock Josh's world and he'd BEG to leave this dingy planet with me.

Inside the cantina, a Beshin band played strange music, a lilting, upbeat rhythm Alex hummed along with tunelessly. Marshall led them to a dark booth away from the crowded bar, standing aside to let Joshua slide into the seat. With a distrustful glance at Alex, Marshall said, "Sit your ass down. And don't pull anything. I'm watching you, McLean."

Alex grinned disarmingly. Winking at Joshua, he slid into the other side of the booth and asked, "Now what would I try here, of all places? I thought we were working as a team, Marshall." The hurt tone of his voice brought a slow smile to Joshua's face, and he turned to hide it from his partner.

"Just keep your mouth shut," Marshall growled, "and your hands to yourself. I'll be right back."

As Marshall stormed off, Alex leaned over the dusty table and whispered conspiratorially, "Is he always this bad?"

Joshua laughed, a quiet sound as delightful and rare as rain on this sand-blasted planet. "No," he admitted, his eyes lighting up. Alex could fall into that blue gaze and drown for days. "Sometimes he's worse."

"Josh," Alex started, and he dared to take Joshua's hand in his. This boy excited him in a way others did not -- it was the innocence in him, maybe, battered by his years as a slave but somehow still intact. Alex didn't know, but he knew he wanted another taste of him, and his entire body hummed with the way Joshua intoxicated him. With his most beguiling smile, Alex pinned Joshua with a steady stare and lowered his voice so he had to lean closer to make out what Alex said. Running his thumb along Joshua's wrist, he whispered, "You know you don't have to put up with him. You could, I don't know, you could always find another partner ..." He let his voice trail off, leaving the invitation open.

Joshua blushed but didn't pull his hand away. Frowning slightly, he said, "I owe a lot to Marshall. I'm not going to just leave --"

"Oh, I'm not asking you to," Alex said quickly. "I'm just saying maybe you can give me a chance to show you what you're missing." Slowly he eased his other hand beneath the table until it rested high up on Joshua's thigh, the hidden skin hot and a little sweaty in his palm. His fingers smoothed out the coarse fabric of Joshua's pants and he smiled to see Joshua's eyes widen at the bold touch. "I know you're lonely, Josh. I can see it in your eyes. I could feel it when we kissed. You want me to kiss you again, don't you? You want me to touch you --"

Cold steel pressed behind his ear, and he heard the insidious click of a blaster as the safety was thumbed off. "What the hell do you think you're trying to pull?" came the harsh snarl behind him, and Alex let go of Joshua's hand. With a quick squeeze of Joshua's thigh, he raised his hands up off the table in a complacent gesture.

"Marshall," Alex drawled, smiling at Joshua. "Can we put away the blaster? Aren't we working together here?"

"I don't know, are we?" Marshall replied. He stepped around the table, his blaster still aimed at Alex's head, and slid into the booth beside Joshua. "I thought I heard you asking Joshua here to what, leave? With you, no less? You plan on taking out Gardulla yourself and splitting the bounty only two ways? Is that the idea?"

Grinning, Alex shrugged and said, "Just offering the boy something he might like. Something he isn't getting from you."

"Shut up," Marshall growled. So that hit a nerve, did it? Alex thought. He wondered how much of Marshall's anger was because he had shown up out of the blue after all these years and how much was because his little boytoy seemed smitten with the legendary McLean charm.

"Put away the blaster," Alex cajoled. "C'mon, Marshall, you know it's just the way I am --"

"Fuck that," Marshall said, scowling. He lowered the blaster but didn't holster the weapon. "The Hutts will be at the race tomorrow -- Gardulla and her entourage." Turning to Joshua, he said, "Three divas, a Twi'lek advisor, and a smattering of guards. Gamorreans, nothing much. We should be able to get a clean shot from the stands."

Clearing his throat, Joshua laced his fingers together and studiously avoided meeting Alex's gaze. "A long range blaster rifle?" he asked. At Marshall's shrug, he offered, "A hi-vibro stun bow? Do we want her alive?"

"It's not necessary," Marshall said. He frowned at Alex. "Unless your employer has qualms about a dead bounty ..."

Alex shook his head. "None at all," he said. To be honest, his

only instructions hadn't included Gardulla at all -- the holocron message played only two lines, over and over again. Marshall Mathers will be on Tatooine for the Boonta Eve race. Make sure he gets his mark. He hadn't recognized the dark cloaked figure in the message, but he couldn't ignore the hefty pouch of Republic credits that the courier left behind. In these dying days of the Republic, few worked for credits, but not Alex -- money was money, regardless of the currency, and the more money he received, the more likely he was to take a job. He hadn't seen Marshall in years, and he had been wondering what the rascal was up to, anyway. And he knew that it would piss the living hell out of his old friend to see him again. The look of surprise on Marshall's face when he stepped into the light of their fire last night had been price enough. Plus there was Joshua, whom Alex hadn't counted on, but now that he was in the mix, there was no way Alex could leave without sampling a piece of him. He'd leave the boy begging for more, he'd see to that.

Marshall narrowed his eyes and glared at him as if reading the sordid thoughts crossing his mind, the visions of him and Joshua pressed together in a lustful tryst that flashed through him, leaving him aching and hungry. "I got us a room," Marshall was saying, and Alex concentrated on his words. Time enough to lose himself in flights of fancy later, when he could get Joshua alone and satisfy his need with quick, hard thrusts into him. "I want to take Gardulla out during the race, when she least expects it. But I want to be there at least an hour before the racers arrive."

Joshua nodded. Glancing at Alex, he asked, "What's the plan?"

"I'm still thinking," Marshall said, frowning as he watched Alex carefully. You got us a room -- you're making this easier for me all the time, Alex thought, trying to hide his sly smile. He'd wait until Marshall fell asleep and then he'd go to Josh. He'd smother him with kisses and what a rush it would be, to enter him with Marshall lying in the same room. He couldn't wait.

* * *

The only room available in all of Mos Espa was in a tiny adobe hovel in the Slave Quarters on the outskirts of town. Marshall had paid a young Rodian a handsome sum for the room -- it was a section of his own home rented out to people onworld for the race. The room was bare, but there was a hard-packed floor mostly swept clean of loose sand and Marshall didn't favor another night in the desert chill. In his mind he was already at the race, and as he laid awake in the darkness, listening to Joshua's soft breathing beside him and the rustle of Alex's blankets on the far side of the room, he plotted out attack plans in his mind. They'd position themselves across from Gardulla's box seats, maybe, or on top of the announcer's booth. Great angle of trajectory there. He just needed a clean shot to take down the Hutt, and then --

No, he thought, scratching the plan. He needed to get the tip of

Gardulla's tail as proof of his catch and only then would they get paid. That meant he would have to be inside the box when he made his shot, so he could hack off the tail and make a run for it ...

We'll disguise ourselves as ... well, as bounty hunters. There were always enough bounty hunters swarming around the Hutts to make that believable. He'd just have to hide his face or alarms would sound, because his reputation preceded him and everyone knew he specialized in Huttese prey. Alex now, the guards would probably let him get close enough to get off a clean shot ... But you don't trust him, he reminded himself. Even if he gets the mark, who's to say he won't take the tail and run? Leave you and Joshua behind.

Marshall only hoped Alex would leave Joshua behind. He seemed hell-bent on getting that boy fucked no matter what. And I'll wring his damn neck if he touches him again, Marshall thought, seething with anger. True, he had no claim on Joshua other than friendship, but was it so bad that he wanted more? Even if he wasn't one to pursue it, couldn't he keep Joshua from making the same mistakes he had? He loves the attention, I know it, Marshall mused. I know how it feels to have Alex look at you with those predator eyes and trap you in the prison of his arms. Believe me, Joshua, I've been there. But I know it means nothing to him. I fucking KNOW it, and I don't want to see you hurt. I'll slit his throat if he hurts you, I swear it.

A soft sound whispered in the darkness, a blanket being slowly and deliberately turned down. From the corner of his eye Marshall could see a wiry shadow rise from the bedrolls like a charmed snake. Fuck, he thought, rolling over onto his side silently. He eased his hand beneath his jacket, folded into a makeshift pillow under his head, and curled his fingers around the handle of his long hunting knife. Alex, I warned you, he thought, watching the shadow advance quietly to Joshua's sleeping form. Don't say I didn't warn you.

Marshall's hand tightened around the knife.

* * *

Joshua wasn't fully asleep yet when he felt a warm hand rub gently along his back. Marshall -- he thought, moaning softly. He hoped it was Marshall. Even if he was just waking Joshua up, it would be enough that he touched him like this, his hand caressing the curve of his spine, drifting lower, fumbling with the sash he wore as a belt before easing around his waist. Joshua could lose himself in such tender touches, and he felt his body respond as it had earlier when Alex had touched him so intimately. Alex ... Joshua didn't know what to think about that kid. He was sexy, no doubt, and damn flirtatious, and his quick grin and laughing eyes made Joshua feel as if he was all that existed. He wished he could see the same things when he looked at Marshall. If he ever smiled, he thought, or if he could look at me without that hateful stare he's

got anymore. It's as if he doesn't even want to put up with me sometimes ... "Josh." The word was whispered into his ear, warm breath curling around his cheek. It wasn't Marshall's voice.

Joshua rolled over quickly, trying to pull away from the eager hand, but suddenly it was at his belt and then it was lower, daring to touch him again there, squeezing and kneading and Joshua gasped from the sensation as damp lips closed over his to silence him. Alex! he wanted to scream, but Alex's mouth was on his, Alex's tongue in him, quieting him, and his hand was doing delicious things beneath Joshua's blankets, things that made him ache and throb and yearn for more, and he found himself thrusting into that hand despite the fact that it was Alex -- he grabbed fists full of Alex's shirt and tried to push him away but there was no strength in him and instead he pulled the man closer, starving for the touch and the kiss and oh so hungry for more.

"You want me," Alex whispered, the words spoken into the hollow of Joshua's throat, and Joshua nodded blindly. He wanted something, he knew it. He wanted this hand at his crotch and these lips on his skin, and he didn't care if it was Alex holding him and Marshall he saw in his head because he just wanted something, some relief, and he wanted it now. Passion and lust and desire whirled in him like a sandstorm, whipping around his soul until he was left blasted and raw. He wanted it now, and he nodded because Alex knew what he wanted, Alex would give it to him, Alex could show him what he had been missing all this time. "Tell me you want me, Joshua. Say the words out loud. Let me hear you say how much you want me to touch you. Tell me where to kiss you. Tell me to love you --"

"Alex," Joshua breathed, thrusting into the hot palm again. "I can't --"

"You can," Alex said, his voice barely audible in the darkness. "You want to. I know you do. I can feel it here --" He squeezed Joshua again, sending shivers of pure ecstasy through his body. "I can taste it here --" He kissed Joshua again, his lips sweet and alcoholic. Joshua could get drunk on those kisses alone.

True, he wanted this. He wanted this desire and these feelings and the sensations exploding within him. But he wanted them from Marshall, didn't he? And he was too weak and too inexperienced and just too damn unsure to say that. He couldn't say it, not when Alex was right here and so willing and wanting so badly to make him feel like this ... "Alex, I can't," Joshua tried again. This time he managed to lock his arms against Alex's chest to keep the other man at bay. "I don't want you to --"

Suddenly a dark shadow descended over them like a Sith Lord. "You heard him," Marshall growled. "He doesn't want you. So get your fucking hands off of him. Now."

* * *

Alex felt Marshall behind him two seconds too late. He managed to free his hand from Joshua's blankets and reach for his blaster, but then hard fingers dug into his shoulders, dragging him back. A hand like steel clasped around his throat, and the sudden bite of sharp metal under his chin made his eyes widen in fear. Fuck, Alex, he thought, staggering back against Marshall. His knees bent awkwardly and his back ached and he couldn't breathe, couldn't even think straight, because the knife was eating into his skin and Marshall was snarling in his ear. You had to try to do this, didn't you? You can't keep your damn pants on and now this ass is going to slit your throat and you'll die with a hard-on. What a way to go. "Marshall?" he choked, his fingers digging into Marshall's hand, trying to loosen his grip. "Marshall, I can't breathe --"

"You're going to fucking die," Marshall swore, drawing the knife deeper into his skin. Alex felt a tight pain in his neck as the knife scratched his flesh. "I told you keep your hands to yourself. You don't fucking listen --"

"Marshall, stop it. Now." Joshua sat up and ran a hand through his disheveled hair in a vain attempt to straighten it. "He's not --"

"Fuck, Joshua," Marshall spat, livid with rage. "You don't know who the fuck this bastard is. I used to run with him, back in the day. He played me the same way he's trying to play you, and I thought it meant something to him. I thought I meant something, but when the shit hit the fan, he ran. He ran, Joshua. From a bounty --" The knife dug deeper into Alex's neck, and he pulled back against Marshall in an effort to keep it from slitting into his skin. "From a partner --" Another jerk of the knife, another bite of steel into flesh. "From me." This time the knife drew across his neck, leaving behind a thin line of blood that Alex knew would probably scar. "He's going to do the same to you, Joshua. Can't you fucking see that?"

Joshua looked at Alex with wide eyes that glistened in disbelief. "You mean ..." He frowned, trying to work out Marshall's words in his mind. Yes, he means what you think he means, Alex wanted to cry, but the blade at his neck kept him silent. He means I tried to get him, too. The infamous Marshall Mathers. A bounty any hunter would prize. Only that hard-heart act is too deep to get through, and just when I was close to cracking it, so close to getting him to open up and let me in, I ran. But it wasn't the bounty or the fear of the fight -- it was Marshall himself, Marshall was the reason Alex turned tail and bolted, because he was close and he saw a glimpse of the man inside, and that glimpse terrified the shit out of Alex. He didn't know if he wanted to count that heart in with the others he'd broken along the way.

Because Marshall was too much like the man he could have been, deep down inside, down where it counted. And Alex didn't want to face that man. He didn't think he could take him as a lover and live with himself when he left.

"Marshall, I'm sorry," Alex gasped. Marshall's hand tightened, choking him. "Josh, please ... I'm sorry. I didn't mean -- I don't

want to ... please ..."

"I'll kill you," Marshall whispered. "I should've hunted you down long ago, Alex, but I'll fix that right here, right now --"

Joshua sighed, a shaky, unsteady sound. "Marshall, I don't think that's going to help us any."

Marshall frowned, perplexed. Keep talking, Alex prayed. Keep talking and maybe that knife will slip from his hand and I'll leave, I swear it, I'll leave right now and never look back and just please keep talking, Josh. He's listening to you. Can't you see how much he cares for you? He's fucking LISTENING. "Joshua --"

"The race is tomorrow," Joshua said. "Let's just get some sleep, okay? Get up early in the morning and just forget this ever happened. Forget any of it happened."

"But --" The knife eased up slightly, but Marshall didn't loosen his grip on Alex's neck.

"Marshall, please," Joshua said, sighing again. He stood up and gathered his bedroll in his hands. "We can get Gardulla tomorrow and split the bounty and we never have to see him again, okay?" Him -- he said him, Alex thought randomly. You don't exist for him anymore. He's talking about you like you're not even here. Because he's thinking that it's your fault Marshall is so closed and unresponsive and downright angry. He's thinking it's your fault Marshall never once came to him in the night, because you pulled this same stunt years ago and Marshall doesn't want to get burned again.

And Alex knew any chance he might have had with Joshua was gone when he heard the bedroll hit the floor on the far side of Marshall's blankets. Joshua was putting Marshall between them so Alex couldn't come to him in the night. Without saying a word, Joshua was telling him no.

Marshall let Alex fall to the floor and returned to his bedroll. "I'm not warning you again," he promised. "Next time you touch him, you die."

* * *

The next morning Joshua was packing up his bedroll in the gritty dawn when Alex hunkered down beside him. Marshall sat a few feet away, busy with his own blankets, but he watched the two carefully, ready to step in if needed. "Josh --" Alex started, placing a hand on Joshua's arm.

Joshua shrugged away. He still couldn't believe that Marshall once felt this way, this electrified by Alex's touch, this enamored with his close attentions. And then he gave up hope, Joshua mused, shoving his bedroll into his pack. When Alex left, Marshall gave up hope and let it embitter his heart and THAT'S why he's

never even ONCE looked at me in that way, because he thinks somehow I'm going to pull the same shit. And because of this MAN, there's nothing I can ever say or do to change his mind. "What?" he asked, his voice tight. He didn't want to deal with Alex right now.

"Listen, I'm sorry," Alex said, and Joshua wondered if this apology was heartfelt or just rote words by this stage of the game. How many times had something similar happened to the roguish McLean? How many times had he come to someone the next morning and said these same words?

Joshua snorted derisively. "I doubt it," he said, tying his pack together. When he stood, Alex rose with him, a frown on his face.

"Josh --" he started again.

Anger flared through Joshua, and he glared at Alex with all the strength and evil hatred he could muster. The surprised look in Alex's eyes was worth the pounding of Joshua's heart in his throat -- he had spent seven years with Marshall; he knew the effect a contemptuous glance could have on someone, particularly when it was least expected. "This is the deal," Joshua said, keeping his voice low so Alex wouldn't hear the fear lacing his words. Marshall looked up from his own bedroll, a slight frown on his face, but he didn't say anything. "We have to bring down Gardulla. We'll get the tail and rack in the bounty and split it three ways. Then you --" He poked at Alex's chest with one finger, and Alex was too unnerved to brush it away. "You will leave. I don't care where. I don't care how. I just don't want to see your face ever again. Don't touch me. Don't even talk to me unless you have to. Do you understand?"

Alex closed his eyes, but not before Joshua saw the pain flitter across them. "I just wanted to show you how good it could be," Alex whispered. "I wanted you to know that it doesn't have to be lonely all the time, Josh. I thought maybe you needed to know that. I thought maybe it was something Marshall would never tell you."

"Because of you," Joshua hissed, giving into the anger he felt. He jabbed at Alex's chest again. "Because you fucked with him once, Alex, and now he won't let anyone in. And it's too late to correct that now. Toying with me won't ease your conscience. It won't make things right."

Alex reached out to catch Joshua's hand but Joshua slipped out of his grip and stormed off. Turning, Alex saw the hint of a smile cross Marshall's face before the older man went back to his packing.

* * *

By early morning the Mos Espa Grand Arena was filled to overflowing. More than a hundred thousand race fans lined the stands, thronging the concourse and betting in the citadel. Marshall

managed to slip into the box seats where Gardulla's entourage was seated, his face partially hidden in a swath of dusty cloth covering his mouth, nose, and short blonde hair. Only his icy eyes peeked out from the material, hard and calculating as he took in everything around him. His mind already ran through and discarded ten different attack plans before he decided to send Joshua to assess the situation. Joshua was quiet and nondescript -- his years as a slave had given him an odd ability to blend into the scenery, and he could usually get into places Marshall would have fought to enter. Marshall waited with Alex by the betting tables, the two of them on opposite sides of a narrow, dimly lit alley leading out to the main circuit. They would wait for Joshua to return. He'd tell Marshall the layout, how the guards were posted, how many weapons -- stuff Marshall needed to work into the plan. And then he'd wait for Marshall's word, as he always did, and they'd attack during the race, when Gardulla least expected it. Marshall would go in firing --

"You're an ass," Alex said softly, and Marshall looked up at him, distracted.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Marshall asked, his voice low. He needed to plan out the hit, not sit here shooting the shit with Alex while they waited for Joshua to return. "Shut up and let me think --"

Alex laughed. Leaning back against the wall, he crossed his arms in front of his chest and leveled his steely gaze at Marshall, his eyes dark shadows in the indistinct light. "Don't tell me you never thought of him like that," he said, and Marshall didn't have to ask who he meant. He was talking about Joshua. "He's innocence and boyishness and raw sensuality rolled into one perfect package, Marshall. I know you ache for that. You have to. Can't you see the way he wants you? Can't you see --"

Without thinking, Marshall slammed Alex into the wall, his fists bunching in Alex's cloak. Leaning down until their faces were merely inches apart, Marshall snarled, "Don't tell me what I want, Alex. Don't fucking dare presume to know. You never knew."

Alex looked up at him with a slight frown on his face, and this close Marshall could see the depths of that chocolate stare, he could see himself mirrored in those dark eyes. He remembered warm kisses and rough hands on his body, bringing him to the edge of an abyss that spanned inside of him, over and over and over again, until he fell into that sexy grin and those wicked eyes, until he lost himself and thought he'd never want to be found again. And you left me, he thought, glaring at Alex. You fucking left and how the HELL do you think you know now what it is I want? When you didn't know then. Tell me that. "Marshall --" Alex started, bringing his arms up between them in an effort to break free of Marshall's iron grip. "I'm just saying don't let it be this way. I know I fucked you over but he's not going to do that to you. He's not like me --"

"He's nothing like you," Marshall spat. Rage rushed in his ears

at the mere thought of Joshua being compared to this this snake. "Don't even think you can hope to compare to him, Alex, because you can't."

"Then why can't you love him?" Alex whispered. The words were a blow to Marshall's mind and he staggered back against the opposite wall, stunned. Alex shrugged the wrinkles from his cloak, his voice a little stronger when he spoke. "You say he's not like me but you can't let him in because you think he'll do you like I did? How much sense is that? You're killing him, Marshall, you have to see that. You're making him ache and want and need for something that he wants from you, from only you, but if you won't give it to him, he'll find someone else who can. Do you want to lose him because you never let me go?"

Marshall narrowed his eyes. "I got over you long ago," he muttered disdainfully.

"Did you?" Alex asked softly.

Suddenly Joshua slipped into the hallway. He took one look at Alex before turning to grin at Marshall. "Found her," he said simply.

Shaking himself free of Alex's words, Marshall asked, "Well? What's the lay of the land?" Joshua closed his eyes and leaned against the wall beside Marshall. "Joshua?" he asked, concern in his voice. "What did you see?"

"Jabba," Joshua whispered. Marshall noticed how pale his skin was, almost translucent in the low lighting. "He's there, with Gardulla. Two divas, not three. The Twi'lek is Jabba's major-domo, Bib Fortuna. One bodyguard on the balcony, armed. Four Gamorrean guards by Jabba, but Gardulla is open for a clean shot if we use the service door behind their box. We can take her any time we want."

Marshall glanced at Alex, who was watching Joshua closely. "But?" he asked. He sensed Joshua's hesitation -- he knew the boy hated Jabba. This wouldn't be pleasant.

"But it feels like a set-up," Joshua breathed. He opened his eyes and met Marshall's steady stare with his own troubled gaze. "It's just too perfect, Marshall. I don't like it."

"It's just Jabba," Alex said, waving one hand dismissively. "We weren't expecting him."

"Maybe he's right," Marshall said, hating to agree with Alex but eager to be free of this damned mission already. This would be the last time he took an assignment from an anonymous courier, no matter how many dataries they got in payment. The Republic was falling to pieces around them and he needed something of value, something more real, to make a job like this worth his while. Leaning his shoulder against Joshua's, he lowered his voice and, locking Joshua's gaze with his own, said, "You helped me escape, remember? You gave me my life, Joshua, and in return I swore I'd set you free. I promised to keep you safe, didn't I?" Joshua

nodded. "So Jabba's here. Fuck that. We'll kill him too if he gets in the way. You don't have to worry about him anymore. Trust me."

"Okay," Joshua whispered. With a glance at Alex, he nodded again and said, "I do. It's just that I don't like this."

Marshall grinned. "I don't like it anymore than you do. After this we'll spend a week on Alderaan, right on the shore. What do you say?"

Grimacing, Joshua replied, "If I never see sand again, it'll be too soon."

Marshall smirked, part of his mind already working through the details Joshua had brought back from his scouting stint. But another part of him couldn't get past the image of Joshua on the white beaches of Alderaan, stretched beneath the mild sun, his tanned skin oiled and muscled and glistening and hard ... fuck this shit, he thought, glaring at Alex. How dare he give him hope for that, after all these years. How dare he.

* * *

It was a simple plan, really. They'd wait until the second lap of the race, when the Hutts would be distracted as they watched the pods on the vidscreens. Alex would use his meager grasp of the Force to divert the guards' attentions -- Joshua didn't know what he'd say but if anyone could talk their way around a Gamorrean, it was Alex McLean. Marshall would use that opportunity to sneak through the service corridors until he positioned himself on the other side of the door at the back of Jabba's box. He'd crack the door just slightly, just enough to see Joshua leaning nonchalantly against the far wall, right behind Fortuna, and he'd wait for Joshua's signal.

Alex did his part beautifully -- the guards never heard the small whoosh of air as Marshall overrode the circuits in the service door. The door popped open, letting a sliver of light into the dark hall, and Marshall peered out into the balcony seating. Jabba was gone, probably down at the betting tables, but Gardulla lounged obscenely nearby, close enough that Marshall could count the wrinkles in her sluglike tail. Just the tip, he thought, raising his blaster until the cold steel leaned against his fevered cheek. All I need is the tip and we can get the hell offworld. He couldn't wait.

Shifting, Marshall saw Joshua in position already, his arms crossed and one foot pressed against the wall as if he alone held it up. He watched Fortuna closely, his gaze shifting from the major-domo to the bodyguard out on the balcony, out of Marshall's line of vision. Then he glanced over at Alex, still talking with the guards. Three of the Gamorreans listened to him halfheartedly, their boarlike faces snarling but their beady eyes watching his animated hands as the bounty hunter spoke. The fourth guard looked at Joshua and then casually turned towards Marshall's

hiding spot. Shit! Marshall thought, throwing himself back against the wall. The last thing he needed now was to be seen.

When he dared to peek again, Joshua was frowning at the fourth guard, concerned. Then he glanced over at the door, and Marshall didn't like the look he saw in Joshua's blue eyes. He thinks this is a set-up, Marshall thought, aiming his blaster at the large bulk of the Hutt. Placing his eye to the sights, he told himself it would be just one clean shot and then they'd be in Alderaan. Just the tip of the tail ...

* * *

When the guard glanced at the door, Joshua felt his heart stop. They know, he thought, the words screaming through him like a falling star. They know, I don't know how they do but they do, they DO, they fucking KNOW and Marshall's in trouble, it's all a set-up, it's all --

Calm down. It was Alex's voice, the words imbued with Alex's own confidence, giving Joshua strength. Marshall had said Alex was Force sensitive, if even just a little, and somehow he was talking to the guards and speaking inside of Joshua's mind at the same time, telling him to keep his cool, not to blow their cover, just act natural. Joshua nodded as if the words were spoken aloud, but he held his breath until Marshall appeared at the door again, his outline faint in the darkness beyond the crack between the door and its seal.

Joshua saw the barrel of Marshall's blaster, the steel winking in a flash of sun, and then Fortuna turned away from the race, turned towards the door, his hand on his hip. For one wild moment Joshua knew it was a set-up, somehow someone told Jabba about the attempt and armed Fortuna with the blaster he was now leveling at Marshall, and Marshall was too wrapped up in the hunt to notice that he was now the prey. At this angle Fortuna's shot would tear into Marshall's chest. And Marshall didn't even suspect --

"Marshall!" Joshua's cry echoed through the box, distracting Fortuna. As the Twi'lek turned, Joshua launched himself at the major-domo, knocking the blaster from his hand. One single shot fired, ricocheting off of the adobe walls harmlessly.

Then Fortuna pushed Joshua away, his teeth wicked and sharp as he snarled at Joshua's neck. Joshua forced his arm up between them and those needled teeth sank into his forearm, drawing bright red beads of blood that splattered to the floor and stained the dirt. "Fuck," Joshua cried as his arm went numb, and he twisted out of Fortuna's grasp, staggering back. He whirled to find Alex struggling with the guards, nimbly dodging their vibro-axes as he tried to reach Joshua's side, but suddenly there were too many people, creatures and droids everywhere, and where the hell was Marshall? Did he get his shot? Cradling his wounded arm to his chest, Joshua wondered, Where the fuck --

Suddenly a sharp pain erupted across his thigh, fire licking into his flesh, and he fell to the ground, landing hard on his hip. The bodyguard from the balcony stood over him, a modified blaster rifle in his hands, and he grinned as he aimed the weapon at Joshua. Blinking away dust and tears, Joshua pushed himself up off the floor but his arm wasn't responding, it was icy and cold and his leg was hot, too hot, too damn hot and the world was dry, he was thirsty, so incredibly thirsty all of a sudden, and with a sharp clarity he saw it was all a set-up and he was going to die ...

A well aimed shot caught the bodyguard in the chest and he fell forward, landing heavily onto Joshua. Fumbling, Joshua pushed the dying man off of him, kicking the body away with his one good leg. And then warm hands were on his arms, pulling him close, and he leaned back against a hard body, felt strong arms envelope him, and he looked up into Marshall's angry face as the older man leaned over him protectively. "Fuck, Joshua," he breathed, wiping the dirt from Joshua's cheek. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"It was a set-up," Joshua choked. "He was going for you, Marshall. He knew --"

"Shut up," Marshall commanded as a Gamorrean guard towered over them, and for once Joshua obeyed.

* * *

Joshua's outburst shocked Alex into action. Swinging his blaster rifle around, he caught the closest guard in the stomach, doubling the Gamorrean over. He saw Joshua struggle with the Twi'lek and felt the stab of pain shoot through his own arm at the vicious bite before he managed to sever the tenuous mindlink he had opened to keep Joshua calm. As the closest guard activated his vibro-ax, Alex shook the numbness from his arm and ducked as the blade hummed inches above his head. "Josh!" he cried, trying to break through the barricade of guards blocking his path. Shoving through, he muttered, "Get the hell out of my way, you overgrown piece of pigshit."

One of the guards caught him in the side with the handle of his vibro-ax, knocking Alex to his knees. Shouts and cries erupted around them, plunging the small balcony into a flurry of confusion. The divas huddled together against one wall, watching with wide, kohl-rimmed eyes. Fortuna skidded past Alex as he raced to find Jabba, and Gardulla swung her lumbering weight around, knocking one of the guards down with her gargantuan tail. Bringing his rifle up, Alex aimed for the notorious ganglord. One shot, he prayed. Just one fucking shot, PLEASE --

And then Joshua stumbled back into the line of fire, and Alex pulled his rifle up at the last second, the shot lost. "Shit!" Alex cried, staggering to his feet. Behind him a vibro-ax sliced harmlessly through his cloak, and as he turned he saw the bodyguard from the balcony step into the fray, his weapon aimed

at Alex. At Joshua -- When Joshua crumpled from the shot, Alex realized a moment too late that the blast wasn't intended for him.

Marshall's blaster rung through the small room, and the bodyguard fell onto Joshua, dead from a well-placed hit. Alex raced for Joshua but Marshall got there first, scooping the fallen boy into his arms and holding him close. From the corner of his eye he saw Gardulla's back as she slipped from the balcony into the crowded concourse beyond.

Anger surged through Alex as he shot down the Gamorrean threatening his friends. Friends, he thought bitterly, kicking away the guard's lifeless body as he hunkered down beside Joshua. Looking into Marshall's pain-filled eyes, he knew he wasn't needed here. He wasn't welcome. And he had a bounty to catch. "Can you get the others?" he asked, nodding at the remaining three guards advancing on their position.

With a glance back, Marshall nodded roughly. "Yeah," he said, pulling out his blaster.

Joshua raised one arm weakly, his pale skin splashed crimson with his own blood. "Marshall, the Hutt ..."

"I'll get her," Alex said, meeting Marshall's stony gaze.

And then he was off, running after Gardulla, and even though he knew it was the right thing to do, he still felt as if he were running away.

* * *

Somehow they made it out of the arena, Marshall with blasters blazing, half carrying, half dragging Joshua along. The remaining guards fell in a heap at the service door, dead, and Marshall used the twists and turns of the dark corridors to lose anyone who followed. Joshua moaned with each step, his head lolling against Marshall's shoulder, his hot forehead burning through the thin material of Marshall's shirt. "Just hang on," Marshall whispered, shooting into the air to scatter the crowd. Out on the main concourse a speeder idled by a gorgmonger's stand, its young driver chatting with a pretty Twi'lek slave. Shoving his blaster into the youth's face, Marshall growled, "Get out."

"Hey man," the boy started, "this is my --" He took one look at Marshall's angry visage and fell over himself in his haste to climb out of the speeder. "Take it," he mumbled, eyes wide with fear.

"Thanks." Marshall eased Joshua into the front of the speeder and hit the thrusters. For a brief moment he wondered where Alex was, and if he had bagged Gardulla, or if he needed help. But a quick glance at Joshua's pale, blood-spattered face removed all thoughts but one -- find help. Immediately.

* * *

The medical droids orbited around Joshua's prone body, suturing his wounds as Marshall hovered nearby. He wouldn't let his mind focus on the blood or the gaping flesh or the torn clothes -- he watched Joshua's face carefully, willing those closed eyes to open, praying the labored breath to ease and even out. When the lead droid said there was nothing left to do, Marshall turned away in anger and disgust. Too late, he thought bitterly, heading for the nearest cantina. He'd lose himself in shisha oil dreams and drown the rest of the day away with the strongest liquor he could find. Too fucking late because I couldn't let him in, I couldn't trust him, even though I KNEW he wasn't like Alex, I knew it in my HEART, and if he dies then it's just over, isn't it? If he dies then that's it. That's it.

* * *

Throughout the night, Joshua tossed fitfully in the narrow bunk of the medical facility. A lethe ward surrounded his bed, easing the pain of his healing wounds, but he frowned in his sleep, chased by crimson dreams of pain and loss. In one he was back at Jabba's palace, still a slave, still in chains. He tried to run and couldn't -- the shackles held him down, and then Jabba was there, his huge bulk blocking out all thought as he attacked, tearing open Joshua's arm and hip and leaving him for dead. In another he was with Alex, clutched in the throes of passion, and the bounty hunter was biting him, his teeth sinking into Joshua's hip, his nails raking along Joshua's arm, leaving liquid fire in their wake. But in each dream Marshall was there, just out of reach, watching with his icy eyes, cold and hard and glistening like the frozen tundra of Hoth. And when Joshua opened his mouth to call to him, he stepped forward, reaching out ... but his fingers just barely brushed Joshua's before the dream would fade into the next, leaving Joshua aching and lonely and afraid.

* * *

Marshall sat beside Joshua's bed and watched him sleep. Sometime during the night, his breathing had eased and his fever broke, leaving him pale and weak but alive, and Marshall still couldn't believe it. Trepidatiously he took Joshua's hand in his, feeling the warm skin, and when Joshua's fingers curled around his, Marshall raised them to his lips. "Joshua," he sighed. They lost the bounty, they lost Alex somewhere along the way -- they had lost everything, it seemed, but each other.

"Marshall ..."

Turning, Marshall grinned slightly to see Joshua's bright eyes, a blue that rivaled the deepest sea on Coreilla. He had thought he'd never see those eyes again, or the smile lighting up his face. As his

friend struggled to sit up, Marshall pushed him back to the pillows. "Joshua, no," he admonished. "You have to rest."

"I'm sorry," Joshua whispered. He squeezed Marshall's hand in his and sighed. "We lost Gardulla, didn't we? Fuck, I'm sorry --"

"It's okay," Marshall said, and it was. "Let Alex have the damn money." Frowning, he added softly, "I'm just glad I still have you."

Joshua choked back a surprised sob. "Come here," he whispered, pulling Marshall closer. He patted the bed beside him. "Marshall, please? I know he hurt you and I'm sorry. I don't know how I can prove to you that I'm not like that, I'm not like him --"

"I know," Marshall replied. Carefully he climbed into the bed, lying down beside Joshua. He wrapped one arm around Joshua's shoulders until his head leaned against Marshall's chest. The other arm trailed down Joshua's bandaged arm tenderly, the gentlest of touches. Their legs entwined together, only the sheets covering Joshua between them. There would be time enough after he healed for something more intimate. "You're nothing like him," Marshall said, running his hand through Joshua's tousled hair. "I don't know why I never saw it before, Joshua. It's me who should be apologizing. I've been a jackass and I don't know why you put up with it or how I can ever hope to make amends --"

"Shut up, Marshall," Joshua sighed, and Marshall grinned. Leaning down, he kissed Joshua's forehead, the cool skin slightly damp against his mouth.

Then, taking Joshua's chin in his hand, Marshall turned his friend's face up towards his and before he could think to stop himself, he pressed his lips to Joshua's in a long overdue kiss that tasted as sweet and as promising as water on this desert planet.

The End

Something Different
by NSyncGrrl

Joey knocked on the door to JC's hotel room. "Josh?" he called.

There was no answer.

He knocked again. The past few weeks, JC seemed to be slipping further and further into himself, spending his days holed up in the studio, his nights locked away in his room. Everything was business -- he had to finish the album, he had to do this, he had to do that, and Joey was beginning to suspect it was wearing his friend down. He hadn't seen JC smile in days, and he hated the dull shine in his eyes, the way he didn't seem to live so much as to exist anymore. He had a feeling JC was in his room right now, sleeping away a perfectly good Friday afternoon just because their session at the studio had been canceled. JC slept way too much -- Joey didn't think it was healthy. "Josh?" he called again, this time trying the doorknob.

It turned easily in his hand.

Cautiously he pushed the door open. "Hey, man," he said, stepping inside the darkened room. "You in here?"

JC sighed from the bed, where he lay on his back and stared at the ceiling. In the dark, Joey thought. That's not a good sign. "What do you want?" JC asked. He sounded terribly bored.

"Just checking on you," Joey replied. He left the door open a crack as he navigated around the piles of dirty laundry littering the floor to stand by the bed. Shoving his hands deep into his pockets, he frowned down at his friend. "Are you okay?"

"Do I look okay?" JC countered. Before Joey could respond, he sighed and muttered, "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine," Joey said. He sat down on the edge of the bed and looked around the room. The place was a mess -- clothes everywhere, papers and books scattered along the floor, soda bottles crushed into overflowing trash cans ... and it was quiet, too quiet, especially for JC, who always had music playing. Always. But his radio was silent, the clock on the LED display blinking at 12:00 because JC never set the correct time. "What's wrong?" Joey ventured.

JC sighed again. "Nothing's wrong, Joe," he said. Why didn't Joey believe that? "I'm just ... I don't know. I'm not happy, okay? I'm not like the rest of you guys, always partying and hanging out and having fun. The studio is my fun time."

"The studio has been biting your ass lately," Joey pointed out. "Maybe you're spending too much time on this album --"

"Maybe I just need something different," JC admitted, his voice low in the darkness. "When this album's done, maybe I'll just take a few days, get away before the tour starts ... do something new."

Joey laughed at that. "You need something new now," he said. "You're scaring me, Josh. It ain't healthy doing the shit you do."

With a faint smile, JC asked, "What is it I do?"

Joey shrugged. "You know what I mean. You're too damn depressed anymore. Sooner or later it's going to start showing in the music and then --"

"You think it's showing in the new tracks?" JC asked quickly. He tore his gaze from the ceiling to frown at Joey. "You're saying you don't like the new stuff?"

"I didn't say that," Joey replied, a little defensive. "Jeez, Josh, put words in my mouth already. I'm just saying I don't like you like this. I want you happy now, not when the album's done. I want the old JC Chasez back."

JC stared at him for a long moment before turning back to his contemplation of the ceiling. "Maybe he's gone," he said softly. "Maybe he's grown up and all you have is me now."

"Oh God, no," Joey said with a giggle. "You're not grown up, you're half-dead." When JC grinned at that, Joey added, "Let's do something fun tonight, Josh. What do you say? Something we wouldn't normally do. Maybe you're just stuck in a rut -- you said yourself you needed something new."

"Like what?" JC wanted to know.

Joey shrugged. "A club," he suggested, but JC grimaced and shook his head. "A concert, then. There's got to be someone playing nearby. It'll be fun. When's the last time you went to a show that you weren't in, hmm? Or didn't help produce in one way or another?"

JC sighed. "I can't remember," he admitted. "But I don't feel like going out, Joe. Can't we do something fun without leaving the hotel?"

"How fun is that?" Joey countered. "Get your ass out of bed, Josh. You're letting life pass you by."

"I'm not --" JC started to protest, but Joey wasn't listening. He was thinking about how he'd find tickets to a performance this late in the day, but he knew the guys at the coliseum so they might be able to get him backstage at least, and maybe he should ask Chris because he knew that girl over at the stadium ... "Joey, no. I'm not going."

"You are," Joey told him, standing up. "Let me make a few calls and I'll be right back."

"I'm not ..." JC sighed again. "Joey, I'm not going."

At the door Joey stopped and pinned him with a steady stare. "You're going," he said. "End of discussion."

* * *

JC stared at the door, still open slightly, and willed it to close. It didn't. Dammit. He didn't want to go to a concert. He didn't want to do anything that involved moving from his bed, and he sure as hell didn't want to tag along with Joey, who'd only find a girl at the show and say they were going ahead to the hotel, if that was okay with JC, and of course it would be. Of course he'd end up alone. Again.

Maybe he won't find tickets, JC hoped. It was almost five ... maybe all the shows around here would be sold out. Maybe Joey would come back with his little boy pout and say, I'm sorry, Josh. There's nothing playing nearby or All seats are taken. Do you want to just order pizza and watch a few films? Willy Wonka's on TBS at nine. And even that would be too much, JC didn't feel like being social tonight, but it would be better than going to a concert.

He heard laughter in the hallway and sighed. I'm not going, he told himself. Joey can plead and beg and wheedle all he wants, I'm not getting out of this bed and I'm not going to some damn concert, not tonight. He didn't know what was wrong with him anymore -- the studio was his fun time, he hadn't lied when he said that, but lately even that didn't seem enough to get him out of bed in the mornings. Lately the thought of sleeping the whole day away was promising, and nothing he did seemed good enough anymore, nothing he wrote sounded right, he was worried this new album wouldn't be as popular as the last one -- how were they supposed to surpass that? He didn't know, and sometimes it scared him to think that maybe that was it, that was all they'd ever be known for, No Strings Attached was the epitome of their musical careers and years from now when people reminisced about 'N Sync all they remembered would be "Bye Bye Bye" and that song where they were dolls in the video, and that one they sang in Spanish, how did that one go again? God, JC thought, closing his eyes. They even had Barbie dolls with those singles in them. How could the new stuff live up to that?

When Joey pushed open his door, JC didn't even bother to look at him. "I'm not going," he announced. He heard Chris laugh and he frowned as the two of them stopped at the foot of the bed. "You guys --"

"You're going," Chris said. "We've got tickets to Limp Bizkit. Come on."

Oh God. "I'm not going to a Limp Bizkit concert," JC protested, but Chris grabbed his feet and pulled him off the bed. "Hey! I said I'm not going --"

"We heard you," Joey laughed. He grabbed JC's arms before he could fall to the floor, and together he and Chris carried him awkwardly out into the hall. As he blinked in the bright light, JC struggled to free himself from his friends but they held on tight. "We're not going to let you wallow in your self-pity --"

"I'm not wallowing," JC said, trying to twist in their hands, but Joey was a lot stronger than he was and even Chris was holding his own. "This is kidnapping."

"This is getting your sorry ass out among the living," Chris told him.

"You guys," JC pleaded as his friends carried him down the hall to the elevators. "Okay, this isn't funny anymore. Put me down." When they didn't listen to him, he tried again. "Chris? Joe? Please? I'm going to scream."

"Go ahead," Joey said. He hit the elevator button with his elbow. "Who's going to hear you? Justin and Lance are out with Britney. We already told Johnny we're taking you to a show. He'll think we're just goofing off."

JC sighed. He didn't have the energy to scream. "Put me down," he said wearily as the elevator doors opened behind them. Throwing his head back, he looked up at Joey as Chris hefted his legs up a little higher. "Joe? Please --"

They maneuvered into the elevator and Chris leaned on the control panel, but only once the doors slipped close and the lift started to move did they set JC down. Scrambling to his feet, he pushed Chris aside and pushed the button for their floor as he glared at his friends. "I hope you two had fun. I'm not going to this concert."

The look of disappointment on Joey's face was too much to bear, and JC crossed his arms stubbornly in front of his chest as he turned away. "I'm not going," he muttered again.

"Great," Chris cried. "This is fucking great." JC frowned at the sudden anger clouding Chris's features. "I break my back to get us three tickets and you're not going. What the hell am I supposed to do now?"

"Get your money back," JC offered. He wasn't going to let them guilt-trip him into this thing. He wasn't.

But Chris snorted derisively. "Money?" he asked, incredulous. "I had to sell my soul for these things. Three backstage passes -- I have to roast in hell for all eternity now and you decide you aren't going."

JC sighed. "Chris --"

"See?" Joey shook his head sadly. "How can you live with that on your conscious, Josh? You know they don't have air conditioning in hell."

This wasn't even funny anymore. "Joe, don't start --"

"No, that's fine," Chris was saying, and JC covered his eyes with one hand because he wasn't in the mood for this. "I see how he is. Some friend you are, JC. Joe tells me you're a little down so I'm thinking what the hell is my soul when your happiness is at stake? I can live with eternal damnation as long as you're happy. And now you're not going ..."

"Fine," JC said sharply as the elevator stopped. He glared at his friends' reflection in the mirrored doors. "I'll go. There, you satisfied? I'll go. But I'm not going to have fun."

Chris smiled sweetly. "You don't have to," he said. When the doors opened he took JC's arm, and with Joey's hand on his other arm, JC was hauled unceremoniously from the elevator.

* * *

I can still run for it, JC thought as he climbed out of the car, but the coliseum parking lot was packed with fans and cars and security, and he could just imagine it now if he tried to run. Joey would shout bloody murder, Chris would race after him, and he'd never make it past those guys skateboarding at the far end of the lot -- they'd tackle him and sit on his back until Joey and Chris caught up with him, he was sure. And then Joey's hand was on his elbow, steering him through the crowd, a rowdier bunch than the teenaged girls that came to their shows. Loud music blared from open car windows, smoke curled around groups of kids sharing joints, and someone handed him a half-empty bottle of beer that he passed back to Joey because he wasn't drinking out of that thing. "Joe," he protested, but it was no use. Joey took a healthy swig from the bottle and handed it to someone else, laughing and calling out to people he didn't even know. This isn't my idea of fun, JC thought balefully. His idea of fun was staying back at the hotel.

At the stage door Chris flashed their passes and led the way inside. The coliseum already shook with heavy guitar riffs from the opening act, and even backstage JC was pushed and jostled and shoved around like a ragdoll. Didn't anyone see him? Didn't they care? So much for being 'N Sync, he thought with a sigh. No one gives a shit about that here. This isn't about us. He didn't need that feeling -- it harbored on his previous fears, and he didn't need to be reminded of those. "Why can't we just sit down already?" he asked as they stopped by the dressing rooms. "I mean, just sit down somewhere and enjoy the show ..." If you CAN enjoy it, he added silently. He couldn't hear anything but thumping that he wouldn't have called music, but from the roar of the crowd, they obviously loved it. "Chris?"

Chris rolled his eyes as he pushed open a door at random and peeked inside. JC couldn't imagine what he was looking for -- just being nosy, he thought. "We get backstage passes," Chris told Joey, ignoring JC, "to one of the most popular bands in the world,

and he wants to sit out in the crowd."

"You don't have to talk about me like I'm not here," JC muttered. Joey smiled wanly at him. "This wasn't my idea, remember?"

"How could we forget?" Chris countered, closing the door. He crossed the hall and pushed open another one. "You keep reminding us --"

JC sighed. "Fine. I'm going back to the hotel."

Joey caught his arm as he tried to walk away. "You're staying here," Joey told him. "Chris, quit picking on the boy. He's depressed."

"I'm not --" JC tried to argue, but Chris closed the second door and raised his voice to drown JC's out. "You need to get laid."

JC flushed hotly. "I do not need to get laid," he scowled, twisting out of Joey's grip. When his friend's laughed, JC growled, "I'm glad you two think this is funny. I'm out of here."

"Josh, wait --" Joey called, but JC pushed past them and headed for the exit. Fuck this shit, he thought. He didn't need it. He didn't deserve it. So he was feeling a little down -- so what? Everyone got a little blue now and then. Why couldn't he?

He heard Joey call his name again, and because he didn't want to argue, he didn't have the energy to argue anymore, he ducked into one of the dressing rooms and locked the door behind him. I'll wait here til the show's over, he thought, plopping down on a sofa that stretched along one wall. Closing his eyes, he leaned his head back and sighed lustily. When Joey knocked on the door, he shouted, "Go away, Joe! Leave me alone."

"Josh," came his friend's voice, hollow through the wooden door. "C'mon, man --"

"I'm staying here," JC told him, rubbing his eyes. Suddenly he was exhausted and he couldn't imagine why -- it was a bone numbing weariness that clung to him and he hadn't done shit. He wanted nothing more than to be back at the hotel, in his room with the door locked and the lights out ... but he wasn't there, he was here, at this show, the walls vibrating against the back of the sofa in time with the echoing music, and he was just going to sit here and wait the whole thing out. Joey and Chris be damned. "Wake me up when it's time to go home."

* * *

JC heard a key turn in the lock and he shook himself awake. Opening one eye, he looked up as the lead singer of Limp Bizkit entered the room. Durst, JC reminded himself as he watched the guy towel sweat from his face. Fred Durst, isn't that his name? And

of course this would be his dressing room. This is going to go over big. When Fred tossed the towel aside and kicked the door closed, he glared at JC in surprise. "Who the fuck are you?" he asked.

Oops, JC thought of saying, wrong room. Instead he held up the backstage pass hanging around his neck and said, "JC Chasez." When Fred's frown deepened, he added, "From 'N Sync? Nevermind."

"What the hell are you doing here?" Fred wanted to know. "This is my fucking room."

"I was just leaving," JC said, pushing himself up from the sofa.

But Fred Durst stood in his way, scowling as he eyed JC distastefully. "You're in my motherfucking dressing room," he pointed out. In one hand he held a sports bottle and without looking away from JC, he swallowed the rest of the water in it. "I could have your ass arrested."

JC sighed. Great, he thought. Just what he needed. But right now a night in jail didn't scare him any -- maybe it'd be a relief, to not have to get up in the morning and mix the new songs and listen to his friends bicker about what they should work on next. Maybe it'd be the vacation he needed. A two weeks' stay at the local pen, all expenses paid. Do not pass Go, do not collect \$200 ... meeting Fred's level gaze, JC dared, "You do that."

For a moment he thought maybe the singer would take him up on it. Fred's light eyes flickered uncertainly, as if he wasn't sure whether or not JC was playing with him and he didn't want to say or do anything to break his tough guy routine. But when JC tried to move around him, Fred sidestepped and blocked his path. "What the fuck's your problem?" he asked softly.

"Why is everyone asking me that?" JC cried. He didn't have a problem. "Nothing's wrong, okay? Nothing. Not a damn thing --"

Fred laughed. "You're a freak," he declared, throwing the sports bottle onto the sofa. "I just wanted to know what you're doing in my dressing room, dude. I'm not asking for your life story. You don't have to jump down my fucking throat."

"Sorry," JC mumbled. He sighed. "You know, I'm sorry, okay? Call the cops if you want but I'm sorry. My friends thought it would be fun to come to your show and I just, I don't know, I'm just tired and this was the first room I entered, okay? That's why I'm here. I fell asleep --"

"You slept through our show?" Fred asked, the anger back in his voice. "Damn, I know we ain't the greatest but shit, we ain't that boring."

"I didn't want to come," JC admitted. Before Fred could question him further, he shook his head and explained, "I'm just not in the mood for a concert, okay? It's not your act. I'm sure you guys are great. It's just not my thing."

Fred laughed again. "What is your thing?" he wanted to know.

JC measured the distance between himself and the door, and decided he didn't like the fact that Fred was a lot bigger than he was, and much stronger, too, and he was still in JC's way. He didn't think he could dodge around the guy, not if Fred was intent on stopping him. Humor him, he thought, staring at Fred Durst's tattooed arm. Answer his question and he'll grow tired of you and then you can leave. That's the game plan here -- manage to leave without pissing him off. "I write songs," JC told him, his voice soft. "I hang out at the studio. That's my thing, I guess."

"What do you do for fun?" Fred asked.

JC laughed bitterly. "That's it," he admitted. "That's fun for me."

"Bullshit," Fred said suddenly, and JC looked up at him. "Maybe you write for fun, but the rest of it's work. What do you do to loosen up?"

JC shrugged. "Nothing," he whispered. "Sleep."

"Oooh, party animal." Fred squinted at him as if sizing him up, and then he announced. "You need a night out, man. My treat."

"No," JC said, shaking his head. Why was it that everyone thought they needed to show him a good time? He just wanted to go back to his room ... when Fred clapped one hand on his shoulder, JC shrugged it off. "No, really. It's kind of you but I can't ... I have to get back --"

"What did you say your name was again?" Fred asked.

JC groaned. "I have to go --"

"Shazam?" JC rolled his eyes as Fred laughed at that. "You can party with us."

"I don't want to," JC tried again, but Fred wasn't listening. First Joey and now you, he thought, slipping out from under Fred's arm when he draped it around JC's shoulders. God, how do I get out of THIS?

* * *

Part of him hoped they'd run into Chris and Joey somewhere between the dressing room and the limo. He'd grin at his friends, have a quick laugh because he was with the band, and then tell Fred that he'd had fun, he'd see him around, later. Only he didn't see his friends, and at the limo Fred pushed him into the back seat with the other members of the band. "This is Shazam," he said, and JC forced a grin when the four guys sprawled across the seats laughed. "Sha-zam."

"They get it," JC said. "It's JC --"

"Shazam," one of the guys echoed, and JC knew he had to get out of there. He'd go crazy if they called him that all night long. "Why'd your parents name you that?"

JC sighed. "Who knows?" What's the use? "Look, can you guys drop me off? I'm staying at the Embassy --"

But someone produced a bottle of vodka, and the guys ignored him as they passed the bottle around. The limo was small -- JC felt Fred's leg press against his, and every time the singer moved, JC slid closer to him. By the end of the night he'd be in the guy's lap, if he wasn't careful. "Have some," Fred told him, shoving the bottle into his face.

JC grimaced. "No thanks," he said. I'm not having fun, remember? he wanted to add, but he didn't think that would go over very well. "I'm fine."

When Fred sat up to pass the bottle to one of his friends, JC slipped into the space between the singer and the seat. "Shit," he muttered, trying to push himself up.

Fred turned around and winked at him. "You looking for something back there?" he asked, and his friends laughed.

God, no, JC thought. Heaven forBID -- as Fred helped him up, the limo hit a bump in the road and cold vodka splashed across JC's lap, drenching his jeans. Did I mention I'm not having fun yet? he thought, wiping ineffectually at the alcohol seeping into his pants. Because I'm not ... just want to make that clear. "Okay, you know? I can go home now."

"Nah," Fred said, leaning back. JC thought he felt the singer's hand picking at the waistband of his jeans, and then cool fingers slipped beneath his shirt to brush along the small of his back, and Fred laughed. "We're just getting to know each other, Shazam."

"It's JC," he corrected absently. The fingers on his spine were impossibly soft and gentle, stroking slightly. What the hell is THAT all about? he wondered, but the others were drinking and laughing and when he looked back, he couldn't read the expression in Fred's wide, light eyes, but the way he watched him made JC flush. The next time Fred passed him the bottle, he drank from it greedily, savoring the warm glass between his lips.

* * *

When the vodka was gone, there was champagne that fizzed all over JC's hands and legs as he popped the cork, but this time he laughed with the others as the alcohol seeped into his jeans. He smelled like a brewery, but Fred's hand was still on his back, still rubbing small circles into his skin, and when JC leaned back against the seat that hand slipped around his waist to rest on his hip. JC decided he quite liked the way it felt there. When the champagne was finished, someone suggested they stop at a club and that

sounded like a great idea. Watch it, Shazam, JC told himself as he followed the others into the club, Fred's fingers laced through one of the belt loops on his jeans. You're starting to enjoy yourself. Can't have that. He laughed.

"What's so funny?" Fred wanted to know as they entered the club. At the bar he stood close behind JC, too close, and JC told himself that wasn't an erection pressing against his ass, it couldn't be, but it sure felt like one to him. "Only freaks laugh at themselves."

JC giggled at that. "I am a freak, remember?" he asked. "You said so yourself."

Fred leaned around him and motioned to the bartender. JC pushed back and smiled at the sharp intake of breath as he shifted against the singer's erection. A quick look around assured him that the rest of the band had disappeared, lost in the crowd, and when Fred's hand eased up the front of his leg, JC caught it in his and held it against the bulge at his crotch. "My friends think I need to get laid," he said with a laugh.

Fred laughed with him. "You asking me to fuck you?" he asked.

"No," JC said. But now that you mention it ... "I'm just saying."

Fred squeezed his hard cock through his jeans. When the bartender brought them two mixed drinks, he tossed his back quickly. "Drink up," he said, glancing around the bar. His friends were nowhere to be seen.

JC fingered the rim of his glass. "I didn't mean --"

"Drink the motherfucking drink," Fred said, anger in his voice. "I didn't buy it just so you can piss in it."

With a sigh JC downed the alcohol. It burned a path down his throat and coiled into his stomach. "Fred, listen," he started, setting the glass on the bar. "I didn't ask you to fuck me."

Fred poked at the hardness in JC's pants. "What the fuck's this?" he wanted to know. JC blushed and turned away. "Come on."

"What?" JC asked. No, he thought. I should say no. I should tell him I'm only playing around, I get turned on when I drink, it has NOTHING to do with his warm body and his muscled arms and his hard chest pressing against me ... but that would be lying now, wouldn't it? When Fred started back towards the door, he tugged at JC's belt and pulled him along behind him. "Fred, this is crazy," JC tried again. "Look, we're at a club, alright? That's where you wanted to be. Where are we going?" Outside cold air hit his face, sobering him up, and he dug his heels into the soft gravel of the parking lot but Fred was stronger than he was, much stronger, and can you imagine that strength curled around you? JC thought. Those arms tight around your waist, those hands on your body, and this isn't helping, is it? This guy can break me in two and I've probably pissed him off, he's taking me back to the limo where he'll

beat the living shit out of me for even SUGGESTING we hook up -- "Fred, stop it, no," JC said as they approached the limo. "No. Okay? No."

Fred opened the door and looked at JC expectantly. "Get in," he said.

"No." JC shook his head defiantly. "I'm not -- no. Just no."

But Fred laughed and pushed him into the dark limo. "Get the hell in there, Shazam," he said, crawling in behind him. Had JC thought the limo was small before? Because now it was just the two of them and the seat stretched away forever beside him, and Fred was still sitting too close, so close his leg rested on JC's hip and his hand squeezed JC's thigh playfully. "Damn," he growled, his voice suddenly soft. "The fear in your eyes ..." He licked his lips as he studied JC's face. "You think I'm going to hurt you?"

"You might," JC conceded. In fact, that's exactly what he thought.

"I won't," Fred told him. His voice was still soft and low, and when he leaned his head on JC's shoulder, his breath tickled JC's neck and his hand slid to JC's crotch as if drawn by a magnet. "I like you, Shazam," he whispered, and then his tongue licked behind JC's ear, his lips latching onto the earlobe with a dampness that made JC moan softly. "You're fun when you're not so damn boring."

"Hey," JC protested, pulling away from Fred's insistent mouth. "I'm not boring --"

"Says you," Fred replied. As he unzipped JC's jeans, he laughed and climbed on top of him, straddling his thighs, his knees resting on the seat on either side of JC. With nimble fingers he worked JC's briefs down until he held the throbbing erection in his hand. He grinned as JC thrust into his hand, his eyes slipping closed at the sensation. "Sometimes you gotta do something different to break the monotony, you know? Just to know you're alive."

"Look," JC moaned, and he wanted to say that they were in a parking lot of some nameless club, the other guys would be coming back to the limo any second now, they could be caught, but that thought just fueled the sudden lust rushing through him. When Fred slid to the floor, JC caught him by the arms. "Where are you going?" he asked coyly. "Fred --" And then Fred's lips closed over the tip of his penis and JC's words were lost in a breathless gasp. He squeezed Fred's biceps as he thrust into the hot, wet mouth, the tongue swirling down the length of his cock impossibly soft, the hand stroking him harder, faster, taking him in deeper. Chris was right, JC thought wildly as he bucked into Fred's mouth, his fingers digging into the fleshy arms. I need this, I just need to get off and everything will be MUCH better now. Jesus --

He came explosively, his breath leaving him in a rush as Fred climbed back into his lap, his body a welcome weight that pressed

JC against the seat. He could taste himself on Fred's tongue when the singer's lips covered his, and he ran his hands down the strong chest to press at the erection in Fred's pants as they kissed. Almost reluctantly, Fred tucked his wilting dick back into his jeans. "My turn," JC whispered, tugging on Fred's zipper.

Suddenly laughter echoed through the limo, and Fred fell back against the seat opposite JC as the door opened. JC struggled with his zipper and for an awkward moment he knew those guys would climb in and see him, they'd smell the sex in the air and know --

But then the zipper closed easily and Fred patted the seat beside him as the others started to file into the back of the limo. "Shazam," Fred whispered as JC sank down beside him. "You're staying at the Embassy?"

"Yeah," JC breathed. He eyed the other members of the band distrustfully, sure they would suspect something, but no one said anything and he rolled down the window to let the cool night air dry the sweat on his face. If the others weren't there, he'd ask Fred to stay with him, or he'd say maybe he could sleep over, just this once. He didn't have to go back to the hotel now, did he? Did he really?

But they weren't alone anymore, and even though Fred's hand rested on his back again, JC knew he wouldn't ask. He knew he'd sleep alone again tonight, and he'd remember the damp lips on him, the warm mouth, and he hoped he got another kiss before the night was over. Just one more, he prayed to whoever was listening.

* * *

At the hotel JC staggered from the limo. "Shazam!" one of the guys called, and they all laughed at that. Even JC managed a grin.

Fred climbed out behind him and slammed the car door shut. "Shazam," he said softly, and when JC started towards the hotel, Fred caught his hand and pulled him back. "What, no goodbye kiss?"

"Fred," JC said, suddenly unsure. Had he really gotten a blowjob from this man? Less than a half hour ago -- did that really happen? His pants were damp from spilled alcohol and his dick ached, he felt happier than he had in weeks, and he hadn't gotten laid but it was damn close, wasn't it? It was something to remember. He squeezed Fred's hand in his and smiled wryly. "You were right," he told him. "I did have fun."

Fred winked. "I'm sure." Before JC could reply, he pulled him closer and kissed the corner of his mouth. JC still tasted his own juices on Fred's lips.

"Your friends," he said, pointing at the limo, but the windows were tinted and it was late, they were all drunk, he could hear music blaring through the closed door and he knew they weren't

paying any attention to the two of them. With a sigh, JC whispered, "Thanks."

"It's my turn next time," Fred reminded him. He kissed JC again, and this time his tongue licked into JC's mouth, his lips crushed JC's own, and this was what JC had been waiting for, this was what would keep him warm all night long. Is it too late to ask him to come up? JC wondered as Fred's tongue explored his mouth. Is it too late to tell him maybe I was asking him to fuck me after all?

But then Fred laughed, breaking their kiss and shattering the moment. "You're a cool motherfucker, Shazam. See you around."

With a slight half-smile that didn't reach his eyes, JC said, "Yeah. You too." At the door to the hotel he turned and waved, and when Fred climbed into the limo, the other guys called out his name. Shazam, he thought, grinning. God, how stupid is that?

Upstairs JC hurried down the hall to his room, hoping to avoid his friends. He didn't need to explain to them where he'd been all night. They didn't need to know ... he cringed as the door to the lounge opened and Joey stepped out into the hall. "Where'd you disappear to, Josh?" he wanted to know. Chris was right behind him, eyes blazing. "You ditched us."

Chris wrinkled his nose at JC's damp jeans. "Damn, you stink," he declared. "What gutter did you crawl out of?"

Smiling, JC said, "You know, thanks. Both of you. I had a great time. We should do it again." Chris and Joey shared a surprised look as JC unlocked the door to his room, and did he like that look, that surprise? He thought he did.

Chris caught the door before JC could shut it. "Hold up," he said, shaking his head. "Where the hell did you go? We got back hours ago."

"I had fun," JC said, shrugging. Remembering Fred's damp, alcoholic kisses, he winked at his friends and asked, "Wasn't that the plan?"

As he closed the door he heard Joey whistle low. "That boy got a piece of somthin' somthin'," he told Chris.

"See?" Chris asked, laughing. Through the door he called out, "Didn't I tell you, JC? Didn't I say all you needed was to get laid? Didn't I?"

"So you did," JC whispered. He wondered when he'd ever get a chance to take Fred up on that, though.

The End

Strong Enough
by NSyncGrrl

Justin stared at the wall in the darkness of his bedroom and didn't want to close his eyes, not even to blink. When he did he heard the words again, he saw the doctor's face and he felt his heart twist a little harder in his chest.

"Is Mommy okay?" That had been Sara, her innocent question bringing fresh tears to his eyes. How old was she? Five, he thought. Five years old and beautiful, just like her mother. Who's gone now. How will I raise her by myself? God, when I can't even get out of this bed ... how am I going to be strong for her, too? He didn't know.

"She's ..." He had sighed. He didn't know what to say -- how do you tell a little girl her mommy's not coming back? When he didn't even understand it himself? Cancer, the doctors said. "She's been sick --"

"She's not going to get better," Randy told Sara, and that made her cry. Randy, eight years old and his father's son in every way, and he hated the hospital, hated the doctors, hated Justin because his mother was gone and there was nothing any of them could do about it now. Cancer, Justin thought randomly. How can you explain that to children? How can you make them understand it's the way things go when you don't want to accept it yourself?

He sighed, a shaky, lonely sound that scared him because he was too old to sound that desolate, wasn't he? Too old -- but this morning the hospital called and told him to hurry, his wife was slipping away, he was needed at the bedside now, and by the time he got the kids dressed and in the car, by the time they reached the hospital, she was already gone. Gone.

How am I supposed to keep going? he wanted to know. How can I do this alone?

* * *

Sometime later he heard the door knob turn, and the hinges creaked as the door opened slowly. Have to oil that, he thought, but he had no energy to get out of bed right now. He just wanted to lie here and maybe someone else would oil the door, and fix the kids' supper, and carry on with his life because he was through with it. With all of it. He didn't want it anymore.

"Daddy?" It was Sara, his youngest, and the concern in her girlish voice broke his heart. "Somebody's here to see you."

"Daddy doesn't want company, honey," he said. Was that rasp

really his voice? He hoped not. All day long there had been visitors, ladies from church who knew Britney, bringing casseroles and cakes and he could hear their whispered voices from his room. So young, they said. So beautiful. Poor children, to lose their mother like that. Ovarian cancer, what can you do?

What can you do ... Justin didn't know, but Randy was out there in the kitchen, putting the food into the refrigerator and telling the women his father was lying down, and Justin heard their sympathetic clucks and God, he thought. "Daddy?" Sara asked again.

"Honey, Daddy can't see anyone," he whispered. He didn't have the energy to entertain. He just wanted to lie in the bed and let the world turn without him, was that too much to ask?

"Okay," she said, and he heard the door start to close. And then he heard her bright voice, so sweet, so innocent. "He's not feeling good."

"I imagine he's not," came another voice, deeper, thicker, a man's voice that Justin hadn't heard in months. Lance, he thought, staring at the wall. He should get up, tell his friend to come on in, say hi and be sociable -- how long had it been since they last talked? Justin couldn't recall. "Can I see him?"

"Well," Sara wavered. "He said he can't see nobody."

"Can I talk to him, then?" Lance asked. "Did he say he didn't want to talk to anyone?"

Justin could see Sara in his mind, shaking her head full of honey colored curls and grinning as Lance smiled at her. "Nope, he didn't say that." The door creaked open again. "You can talk to him," she whispered, "but you have to talk softy. It's dark and he's not feeling good, remember."

"I remember," Lance whispered back. The hinges creaked once more, and then the latch caught and Justin sighed. What was there to say? Nothing. Nothing at all. "Justin?"

"Yeah?" He didn't roll away from the wall to look at Lance, didn't move, didn't even blink. Sniffling, he asked, "How did you hear?"

The bed shifted as Lance sat down on the edge. "Your mom called me," he said. Justin felt his friend's hand rest on his leg, the touch comforting in the darkness. "I'm so sorry."

Justin sighed again. "It's not your fault," he whispered. He never had understood why people said that. I'm so sorry, as if they could've done something to prevent it. As if anything Lance ever said or did could bring her back.

Lance slipped off his shoes and crawled into bed beside Justin. Strong arms wrapped around Justin's waist, holding him tight, and Justin squeezed his eyes closed. He didn't think he could cry

anymore, his eyes burned from the tears that already fell, but when he rolled onto his back and looked at Lance, he saw his friend's watery eyes, his trembling lips, the high spots of color on his cheeks that told Justin he was struggling, he was trying to be strong for him, and Justin curled his head against Lance's shoulder as the tears came again. "God," he sobbed. Lance's hands smoothed across his back and his friend whispered softly to him, telling him everything would be alright. "Lance --"

"It's okay," Lance murmured. Justin clung to him and gave into the grief that flooded him. "It's going to be alright, Justin. It's going to be okay."

* * *

Lance had been in a meeting when his cell phone rang at quarter past nine that morning. He smiled disarmingly at his client as he reached for the phone. "Let me get this real quick," he said, turning away as he answered the phone. "Lance Bass."

"Lance, this is Lynn. Justin's mother?" How could he forget? The tone of her voice froze the smile on his lips, and when she said Britney was gone, Lance felt as if a hole had opened beneath his feet. "This morning," she said. This morning ... he hadn't stopped falling since.

How long ago had he last seen her? Lance couldn't remember. It had been Sara's christening, and he remembered the way Britney laughed when he told her motherhood agreed with her. At the airport he promised to keep in touch, didn't he? And he dared to hug Justin, something he should have never done because it brought back all the old feelings, all the things he kept hidden from everyone, including himself. And because he was so happy, I stayed away. The months turned into years and the last time I talked to him had been what, Christmas? He said she was in remission and everything was going fine, and I laughed at the things he told me about the kids, I told him I'd keep them in my prayers, and now this. Now this.

In the kitchen of Justin's house, Lance opened the refrigerator and took inventory. The milk expired yesterday, the eggs were broken in their carton, and there were enough quiches and casseroles to keep the kids fed for weeks. For something to do, Lance stirred up a pitcher of Kool-Aid and then started on the dishes, piled into the sink and forgotten with everything else that had happened. Then I'll go through the cabinets, he told himself, running hot water into the sink to soak the dirty dishes. See what he needs. Behind him a chair scraped across the floor, and he turned to find Sara staring up at him as she sat down at the kitchen table. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Lance," he replied. "I'm a friend of your daddy's from when he was singing."

"You're from 'N Sync?" she asked. Lance laughed and nodded. "Cool," she said. She watched as he soaped up the dishes, rinsing them clean. Then she asked quietly, "Is Daddy okay?"

"He will be," Lance told her. I don't know when, though. He expected Justin to be upset, but Britney had been sick for some time, and part of him hoped Justin would have steeled himself for this. But when he found his friend in bed, staring at the wall, the kids answering the door, he knew Justin wasn't coping well, not in the least. And then he cried like a baby in my arms, Lance thought, remembering the way it felt to lie in bed, their bed, and hold Justin close. God, he needs someone to be strong for him, because this just isn't going to be easy. Not for him, not for the kids, not for any of us. "I might stay here for a little while," Lance added. "Just until he gets better. Do you mind?"

Sara shook her head. "Nope. Is Mommy going to be coming home soon?"

God. Lance cut off the water and dried his hands on a dish towel. "Sara," he said, taking a seat at the table. He forced a grin as he looked into her eyes, blue like Justin's, and she had her father's smile, too, sunny and carefree. Carefully, he took her tiny hands in his and sighed. "Your mommy's been sick," he told her.

Sara nodded. "I know," she replied. "She has cancer."

At least she knows that much, Lance thought. God, he shouldn't be the one doing this. He shouldn't have to -- but Justin can't. He's too lost in himself and someone needs to take charge here. Someone needs to get this family back together again. And because he was the only one here, the only one who dropped everything and rushed halfway across the country when he heard the news of Britney's death, then he supposed that someone had to be him. Frowning, he said softly, "Sometimes people have to leave because God wants them to visit Him. Do you know where God lives?"

"In heaven," Sara explained, and then for emphasis she pointed at the ceiling. "Up there. So Mommy went to visit Him?"

Lance nodded. "When is she coming back?"

"When you visit God," Lance said gently, "He usually wants you to live with Him. In heaven. So you don't come back here." He watched Sara's face as she struggled to understand that, and he waited until she looked up at him again, her bright eyes rimmed with tears.

"When will I see Mommy again?" she asked. Her small fingers tightened around his.

Lance took a shuddery breath. "When it's your turn to go to heaven," he told her. "Not right now, though. Now your mommy's there."

A single tear slipped down Sara's cheek. "At Sunday school,"

she whispered, "they said there's no pain in heaven. You don't hurt anymore when you go there. I know Mommy's belly hurt and so do you think maybe God wanted her to come to heaven with Him so she wouldn't hurt anymore?"

Lance nodded. "I think that's the reason why she went," he told her.

Slipping off of her chair, Sara climbed into his lap and buried her face against his chest. "I want her here with me," she cried, and Lance held the little girl close. "I want my Mommy back."

"I know you do, sweetheart," he replied, smoothing down her hair. "I know you do."

* * *

Sara cried herself to sleep in his arms, and Lance carried her gingerly into the living room, kissing her forehead as he laid her down on the sofa. Back in the kitchen, he finished the dishes and started rummaging through the cabinets, making a mental list of things he needed to pick up at the store. Flour, he thought, bending to look beneath the sink. Sugar, Kool-Aid, milk, eggs, tea -- "What are you doing?"

Lance looked over his shoulder as Randy entered the house, letting the screen door slam shut behind him. "Your sister's sleeping," Lance warned the boy, who dribbled a basketball noisily on the kitchen floor. "Does your mom let you do that in the house?"

"My mom's dead," Randy said bitterly, but he caught the ball in both hands and set it on the table as he sat down. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to help your father," Lance replied, standing up. He leaned against the sink and studied the boy, Justin's son. Just like his father, too, he mused, taking in the hard eyes and the stubborn chin. Eight years old and every inch his father, despite the fact that he has Britney's hair and eyes. He's got that Timberlake arrogance already. "How are you holding up?" he asked.

Randy shrugged noncommittally. "I'm fine," he pouted, not meeting Lance's steady gaze. "I don't know what the big deal is. She was sick. People die every day. We don't need your help."

Lance knew those tough words were a facade hiding the frightened boy inside. He's strong because no one else is, he told himself. Justin's not, and Sara's too young, and so Randy thinks he's got to do this alone. But Lance couldn't leave Justin behind, not when he knew his friend needed him, and he remembered what it was like to be eight, when it seemed like no one listened or paid him any attention when all he wanted was to be in control of his world, at least just a little part of it, any part he could hold onto. Randy was the same way, he could see it in the boy's eyes -- his

mother was gone, and it was up to him to be the boss, he was in charge now, finally, and he wasn't going to let just anyone in. It was up to him to protect his dad and sister. "Do you think I should leave?" Lance asked carefully.

Glaring at the sink, Randy asked, "Did you wash the dishes?" Lance nodded. "What were you looking for under the sink?"

"I was thinking we should go to the grocery store," Lance told him. "Just to get some food."

"We've got plenty of food," Randy replied. "The fridge is full of it."

Lance nodded again. "Do you want to eat any of it?" he asked. The casseroles didn't look appetizing to him -- he had never understood the mentality of cooking after a death. It was a nice gesture, something to do, a way to alleviate the burden, true, but hadn't he seen green bean casserole in there? That stuff made with those fake fried onions? It's the thought that counts, he reminded himself. When Randy didn't answer, he prompted, "What do you feel like eating?"

"Pizza," Randy replied, and now he looked up at Lance. "We haven't had pizza in a while because Dad said Mom couldn't eat it. Cause of her sickness."

"Do you want pizza tonight?" Lance asked him. Randy nodded. Digging into his pocket, Lance pulled out his wallet and handed the boy a twenty dollar bill. "Here," he said. "You can call it in. Do they deliver?"

"Yeah," Randy said, taking the money. From the doorway he turned and frowned as he looked back at Lance. "Are you going to stay here?"

"If it's okay with you," Lance told him.

Randy shrugged. "It's fine," he said. "You can help out a bit, if you want."

Lance smiled crookedly. "Thanks," he said. Randy nodded again and hurried to the phone.

* * *

When the pizza arrived, Lance asked Randy to show him where the paper plates were kept. "Here," Randy said, pointing to a low shelf in the pantry. "And the napkins are here. We should have soda, too."

"You think so?" Lance asked. Randy nodded, and Lance let the boy fill four glasses from an unopened bottle of Pepsi they found behind the plates. In the living room Randy set the glasses down on the coffee table and opened the pizza box, grinning at the steam

that rose from the hot pie. "Should we wake up Sara?"

Randy nodded again. "Sara," he said, shaking his sister gently. "Get up, Sara. Time to eat." As she stretched awake, he added, "Maybe Dad wants some?"

"I think he might," Lance conceded, though he didn't know if Justin would feel like coming down to the living room to eat. Still, he thought, it doesn't hurt to ask. "Do you want me to go get him?"

"Yeah," Randy said, pulling out a slice of pizza for Sara. He set it on his sister's plate carefully. "You go get him. Don't eat yet, Sara. It's hot."

Upstairs Lance eased open the door to Justin's room. "Justin?" he called.

He heard the bedsheets rustle as Justin moved. "What?" he asked.

God, Lance thought, biting back tears. He sounds so old. "We ordered pizza. Do you think you might want to come downstairs and eat some of it?"

Justin sniffled and then sighed wearily. "In a little bit," he whispered. "Maybe."

Lance nodded, even though his friend couldn't see the gesture. "Okay then," he said. "When you feel like it." As he came down the steps, Randy looked up at him expectantly. "He'll be down shortly," he said.

Randy frowned. "Here you go," he told his sister, helping her with the awkward glass of soda.

"Is Daddy coming?" Sara asked, shifting her wide eyed gaze from her brother to look at Lance as he sat down on the sofa.

"Soon," Lance said. "He's still not feeling well."

Randy sighed. "None of us are," he replied, biting into his slice of pizza viciously. I know, Lance thought, watching the children eat quietly. He hoped Justin could find the strength to come down, if only for their sake. To let them see he's still here for them. He has to be.

* * *

Laughter from downstairs trickled into Justin's room through the partially open door. I should go eat, Justin thought, and his stomach rumbled in agreement, but he didn't feel like going through the trouble of eating. He remembered reading in an article years ago that hunger pains only lasted fifteen minutes. He didn't know how long it had been since the smell of hot pizza first began to waft through the house, rousing his stomach, but he thought

maybe that fifteen minutes was already up. And he was still hungry. I should write a letter to the editor, tell them the article was wrong. Only he didn't know where he read it, and did it really matter anyway? He didn't think so.

Lance is here, he thought. That was good. He's feeding the kids, at least. How did he know again? His mother told him. Justin managed just two phone calls at the hospital -- one to Britney's mom and one to his own. And his mom knew to call Lance. That's what moms are for. Only Sara will never know this now. And Randy ... he stifled a sob. Their mom is gone. My wife. Gone.

He had to call other people, he knew this. The guys, definitely. But not Lance, he added silently. He's already here. Didn't he have to make some kind of arrangements? He wasn't sure. Did the hospital do that? Hadn't Britney done this stuff already, back before the holidays? He remembered her talking about it, and he hadn't listened because she was fine, she was going into remission and she was looking better every day and she was fine, wasn't she? Fine.

And now this. Though it wasn't sudden, he hadn't been prepared for it, not in the least. How am I supposed to get through this now? he wanted to know. I can't do it alone -- those kids need something more than just me. I can't do this. I can't ... he'd never been alone. First there had been his parents, then the group, then he got married when the group broke up and ... and now this, he thought again. He didn't know if he could go on alone. He didn't think he had it in him.

There's the kids ... true, but he would have to be their strength, and what would hold him up? He would have to raise them alone. Alone ... but right now Lance is here, and he thinks you should go down and get something to eat, so as long as he's thinking, then you don't have to, Timberlake. So go have some pizza, even if you don't feel like it. Wearily he pushed himself up and sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the door. He didn't think he could walk that far right now, but he heard childish laughter from downstairs and sighed. I really should go down there.

Somehow he made it down the stairs, one step at a time, watching his feet as if someone else was moving them, not him -- he was only along for the ride. "Daddy!" he heard his daughter exclaim, and he forced a smile as he came into the living room, but from the worried expression on Lance's face, he didn't think the smile was much. Sitting down by his friend on the couch, he let Sara climb into his lap. "Here Daddy," she was saying, and it took all he had to concentrate on her words. "You can have some of my pizza." When she pressed the warm slice of pizza to his lips, he opened his mouth automatically and bit off a mouthful.

"How are you doing?" Lance wanted to know. He placed a comforting hand on Justin's knee.

Justin looked at his friend and sighed. Not well, he wanted to say, but when he opened his mouth again Sara stuck the pizza

between his lips and he bit down on it without thinking. As he chewed he said, "I should make some phone calls."

Lance squeezed his knee and Justin wanted to cover his friend's hand with his own, but his daughter was in his arms and he didn't want to let her go. "Lynne will be here tonight," he said softly, and Justin closed his eyes as he leaned back against the couch. "Your mom's flight comes in tomorrow, and I've called the guys. I didn't think you'd want them all here --"

"I don't have the room," Justin whispered. He didn't know where all these people would stay, and he didn't want to talk to them, not when all they would do was apologize and cry and he just couldn't do it. He couldn't. "Lance --"

"They're staying at the Hyatt," his friend said. "I made reservations. I called the funeral director --" Justin sobbed, and Randy crawled up on the couch beside him, leaning against his chest as Justin wrapped an arm around his son's waist. Funeral director ... he knew he couldn't handle that. With red, tear-filled eyes he turned to look at Lance, hoping his friend would still be able to read his expression after all these years. I can't, he thought. Please understand ... Lance pressed his lips together in a wry attempt to smile. "Don't worry, Justin," he said, and Justin's heart swelled at the strength he heard in his friend's deep voice. "I've taken care of everything for you."

"Thanks," Justin whispered. He hugged his son closer and kissed the top of Randy's head. Now it was just the three of them. And Lance, he added silently. "Are you staying long?" he wanted to know.

"As long as you need me," came Lance's reply. I need you forever, Justin thought, because now it's just me and I don't like that very much.

* * *

Randy carried the empty pizza box into the kitchen while Lance cleared away the paper plates and glasses. From the kitchen doorway he watched Justin, sitting on the couch with Sara in his lap and staring into space as the little girl talked quietly to him. "Lance did the dishes," she was saying, and when Justin didn't respond, she took his face in her hands and squeezed his cheeks between her palms. "Daddy, look at me." He turned towards her and she smiled brightly. "He's so nice, Daddy. I like him."

"I do, too," Justin whispered.

Behind him, Randy folded the pizza box noisily. Lance turned and frowned as the boy struggled to shove the box into the trash can. "Get in there," the boy breathed angrily. "Get in --"

Lance caught Randy's hand in his. "Randy, don't force it." The boy pulled free from his grip and pushed the box into the can as

hard as he could. "Stop, Randy. It's not going to fit."

Randy kicked the trash can hard and cried, "It does fit. It will. You just have to make it ..." For emphasis he shoved the pizza box again, and this time Lance heard something rip inside the can.

When the can wobbled dangerously beneath the boy's weight, Lance pulled him back. "Randy, no, it's okay," he said. "Really, it's fine --"

"It's not fine," Randy declared, twisting away from Lance. "Nothing's fine. Get away from me. Let me go." He punched Lance in the stomach and kicked at him, suddenly a fury of fists and feet. He's lashing out, Lance thought, holding onto the boy, the only way he knows how. Randy's face crumbled as he started to cry, and when the tears came he stopped struggling, letting Lance pull him into a tight embrace. "Nothing's fine," the boy sobbed.

Lance knelt down beside him, hugging him close. "I know," he whispered, patting Randy's back as he cried into his shoulder. Your dad should be here, not me. He should be the one holding you now, he needs to be strong -- but Justin wasn't strong, he knew that. Part of him had always known it, and that's what attracted him to his friend, wasn't it? That little boy lost quality that Lance wanted to protect from the rest of the world. "Shh," he murmured as Randy cried lustily. "It's going to be okay."

But would it? He didn't know. From the other room he heard Sara laugh girlishly. "Daddy, smile." He could picture her now, molding Justin's face into a ghost of his usual sunshine grin, and he just didn't know how he could help the three of them through this.

* * *

Lynne called a little after nine. "The plane's delayed," she said, sighing. "How's he holding up?"

"Not well," Lance admitted. He looked over his shoulder into the living room and frowned. Sara was still in Justin's lap -- he hadn't moved since he came downstairs, and that worried Lance. Randy sat on the floor in front of the TV, too close for his own good, but he had apologized for kicking Lance after he stopped crying, and he even did the dishes, so Lance didn't have the heart to tell him to scoot back. With a sigh, Lance asked, "Where are you?"

"Chicago," Lynne replied. "We'll get in after midnight, but it'll probably be too late to stop by then."

"Yeah," Lance agreed. Much as the kids would want to see their grandmother, he didn't think it would do any of them good if Britney's family stopped by in the middle of the night.

"But we'll be over first thing in the morning," Lynne was saying, and Lance nodded as if she could see him. "I promise. You take care, Lance. I'm glad he has someone like you."

Me too, Lance thought, hanging up the phone. With a glance at his watch, he clapped his hands together as he walked into the living room. "Okay, guys and dolls. Bedtime."

Sara giggled as he picked her up off of Justin's lap. His friend's hands fell away easily as Lance took his daughter from him. "Bedtime," he echoed, as if it was an excellent idea.

"I don't want to go to bed," Randy said. "You can't make me."

"Randy," Lance started, but then Justin grabbed the remote from the coffee table and clicked the TV off. "Now, young man," Justin said, his voice stern, and Randy sighed dramatically as he stood up. "Get to bed."

"So you are alive," Randy muttered as he passed Lance on his way upstairs.

Following him, Lance asked, "Are you this smart all the time? Or just when you know your dad can't fight back?"

Randy kicked his shoes off into his room. "He's not the one who died," the boy said hotly, flinging himself down on his bed. "We're still alive. Can't he see that? Doesn't he know we're still here?"

"He knows," Lance replied. He let Sara slip from his arms when she struggled to be set down. "He's just having a hard time dealing with this, Randy. We all are." The boy sighed again. "Do you want to talk about it?" Lance asked as Sara ran down the hall to her own room.

Randy picked up a small football from the floor and, laying back in his bed, tossed the ball into the air. Catching it deftly, he shook his head. "There's nothing to talk about," he said. When Lance started to walk away, he called out, "If you're his friend, go talk to him. Can you do that?"

"I can try," Lance said. Down the hall he heard Sara laugh in her room, and he nodded at Randy. "Get ready for bed, okay? We all have to be strong, Randy." As the boy pushed himself up from the bed, Lance added, "Thank you for doing the dishes. I appreciate it."

He didn't think the boy would reply, but as he started to walk away, he heard a mumbled, "You're welcome."

In Sara's room he found the girl already half dressed, her shirt replaced with a nightgown that covered her pants. "Shoes," she said, pointing at her feet.

Lance knelt down and picked at the knots in Sara's shoelaces. "They're all tied up," he said, and Sara laughed as she leaned on his shoulders. "What did you do to them?"

"I don't know," Sara admitted. "Daddy tied them this morning."

"He made a mess of them," Lance told her. The laces were

nothing but knots, and it took him several minutes to get them free.

Sara laughed again. "He made a mess," she agreed, nodding. When Lance managed to slip the first shoe off, Sara ran a small hand experimentally through his thick hair. Tugging on the top of his ear, she asked, "Is Daddy going to be okay?"

"I hope so," Lance said. The other shoe came off much easier. "There."

When Sara pulled up her nightgown to take off her pants, Lance covered his eyes with one hand, a gesture that made her giggle. "You're funny," she said. "You can look now."

"Are you decent?" he asked. smiling.

"Yep," she said. "All decent." With a growl he scooped her up in his arms and laughed as she squealed, and then he tucked her gently into the bed. She looked up at him with large eyes and frowned. "Mommy used to sing me to sleep," she whispered, suddenly somber. "I guess she won't be singing to me anymore, will she?"

Lance smiled sadly. "Maybe you'll see her in your dreams," he suggested. "She can sing to you then."

Sara nodded. "Maybe." As Lance reached for the lamp beside the table, she asked, "Can you sing to me?"

"What do you want me to sing?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Anything."

He thought for a minute. Then he smoothed the wild hair away from her face and sang softly, "Goodnight sweetheart, well, it's time to go." When she giggled, he smiled at her. "What?"

"Daddy sings that to me sometimes," she said. Settling back against the pillows, she sighed and closed her eyes. "Keep singing."

Lance tried to remember the words to the song, but when Sara's breathing evened out, he clicked off the light and quietly left her room. Down the hall he found Randy already asleep in his own bed, the light in his room still on. Lance turned it off and pulled the door partially shut. Because he didn't see a night-light, he left the hallway light on as he went back downstairs.

In the living room, Justin lay on his side, curled into himself on the sofa. "Justin?" Lance asked, sinking to his knees beside the sofa. He reached out and ran one hand down his friend's back. "Come on upstairs."

"I'm fine here," Justin replied, shifting his eyes to look at Lance. For a moment he didn't seem to see him so much as look through him, and then his eyes focused and he sighed. "Are they in bed?"

Lance nodded. "They're both asleep," he said.

"Where's Lynne?" Justin asked. "You said she was coming tonight. You did say that, right?"

"Her flight's been delayed," Lance said, resting his chin on the couch beside Justin's hand. "She'll be here in the morning."

"I don't want to do this," Justin whispered. Before Lance could ask him what he meant, he sighed again. "None of it, Lance. I don't want to. It's ... God, it's going to be hard. So hard." His eyes filled with tears again. "So damn hard."

"You have to think of the kids," Lance told him, and Justin nodded as if he knew that. "They're still here, Justin. They still need you."

"I know," his friend replied. "I just can't ..." He closed his eyes and tears spilled down his cheeks silently.

"I'm here, too," Lance said gently, and Justin trailed his hand through Lance's hair absently. The touch was soft and Lance pressed his lips together, closing his own eyes as he savored the sensation. "I'm not going anywhere, Justin. I'm here for you."

"Thank you," Justin whispered, resting his hand on the back of Lance's neck. His thumb stroked behind Lance's ear, a soothing, steady gesture that made Lance want to pull his friend into a strong embrace and never let go. "Don't leave me."

"I won't," Lance promised.

* * *

The weekend passed in a blur of family and friends and more food, which Lance just kept on the kitchen table so it would get eaten. Justin came down every now and then, a wan smile on his face as he moved through the house like a ghost, drifting from room to room as if in search of something he had misplaced and couldn't find. When he found Lance he would grab onto his friend's elbow as if to anchor himself, and Lance would cover his hand with his own, pressing Justin's fingers in a comforting gesture. "You're doing great," he whispered at one point when Justin followed him into the kitchen. For once it was just the two of them -- the living room was alive with visitors, and over the quiet talk Lance could hear Sara laugh as Joey tickled her mercilessly. Filling a glass with water, he handed it to Justin, who drank it without a word. "You know that?" Lance asked, frowning at his friend. "You're really doing well."

"I don't feel well," Justin admitted, handing the glass back to Lance, who set it in the sink. With a sigh, Justin picked halfheartedly at a plate full of quartered sandwiches. "I feel like I'm going to be sick."

Lance rubbed a hand across Justin's back. "Sit down," he said, pulling a chair out from the kitchen table, which Justin sank into gratefully. "You just need a few minutes to yourself," Lance told him. "They'll understand."

Crumbling one of the sandwiches into breadcrumbs, Justin blinked back new tears that threatened to fall. "How long has it been?" he whispered. "What's today?"

"Sunday," Lance said gently. He looked up as Joey came into the kitchen, Sara giggling in his arms. "It's been three days."

"Three," Justin echoed, and Lance nodded. "Tomorrow's the funeral?" Lance nodded again. "Three days."

"How's it going, guys?" Joey asked, setting Sara down onto one of the remaining chairs. He glanced at Lance, worry written plainly across his face, and he raised his eyebrows at Justin. Lance just shook his head. "You two want to be alone?"

"Justin's not feeling well," Lance said. His hand traced a broad pattern across Justin's shoulders and he frowned at Joey as Sara reached across the table for one of the sandwiches. "He just needs a few minutes."

"Yeah," Joey replied, nodding. Reaching out, he ran a hand over Justin's thick curls and forced a smile. "You doing okay, man?" When Justin twisted his lips into a half-smile, Joey sighed and let his hand fall away. He's not doing okay, can't you see that? Lance wanted to say, but he kept quiet.

Sara climbed down from the chair, sandwich in hand. "Here, Daddy," she said, pressing the sandwich to Justin's lips. "You need to eat."

But Justin shook his head. "Daddy's not hungry, honey," he replied. "You eat it."

"Kay." Sara bit into the sandwich and grinned up at Lance. "When he's hungry, make him eat," she said, nodding sagely.

Lance nodded back. "I will," he promised. "Right now your daddy wants to just sit here for a while. Do you think that's okay?"

Sara nodded again. "I'll tell people to leave him alone," she said. With a mock accent, she added, "He wants to be alone."

Startled, Joey laughed. "Brit must've taught her that," he said, sweeping the little girl up into his arms again. She giggled and held the sandwich out to him to take a bite. Wolfishly, Joey bit into the sandwich and growled, trying to shake it from her hand, and Sara laughed again.

At the table, Justin sighed. "Joe," Lance warned. Justin's not in the mood for your jokes, he thought.

Joey nodded as if he had heard the thought. "Come on, Sara,"

he said, spinning the girl around dramatically. "We've got a house full of people to entertain. What do you say, *que sera sera*?"

"What's that mean?" Sara asked.

"It means you're the prettiest little girl in the whole wide world," Joey replied, and Lance heard her giggle again as they left the kitchen.

Justin sighed again. "Brit did teach her that," he whispered, and Lance knelt beside him so he could look up into his friend's saddened face. "They used to throw diva parties, they called them. A girls' night where Brit would dress Sara up in her clothes and jewelry and makeup, and they'd sing into hairbrushes, all Britney's old tunes. You should've seen them, Lance, all dolled up like Madonna wannabes. They were so pretty."

Lance smiled. "What did they sing?" he wanted to know. Maybe once you talk about it, he mused, studying Justin's face, the wavering eyes, the ruddy cheeks, maybe then you'll be able to move on.

Justin's lower lip trembled at the memories. "Sara's so cute," he said. "She stood on the couch and if she didn't know the words, she'd follow Brit's lead. Hit me one time, she'd sing, so off-key but God, so earnest you just couldn't laugh at her." Softly, he sang, "Hit me one time ..." The words tapered off. Closing his eyes, Justin leaned forward until his forehead rested against Lance's, and he raised his hands between them, covering his face. "God," he sobbed. Lance reached up and wrapped his arms around Justin's neck, pulling his friend easily into his embrace. Into his shoulder, Justin breathed, "I miss her so much."

"I know you do," Lance told him. He held Justin tightly, and finally his friend's arms came up beneath his own to hug him back. Somehow we'll make it through this, Lance promised silently as Justin cried against him. I know you loved her, and I'll help you through it, Justin, because I love you. I've always loved you. And I swear I'm not leaving you to fend for yourself now that she's gone. I can't. I love you too much to do that.

* * *

After dinner, Lance walked JC and Chris to their rental car. "Thanks for coming, you guys," he said, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. This should be Justin's job, he thought, saying goodbye to the guests. But Justin had wandered back to his room sometime before his mother started to dish out the casseroles on dinner plates, and he didn't come down again. He's not feeling well, Lance said, explaining his behavior, and everyone nodded sympathetically. They understood.

Chris sighed, staring up into the night sky. Beside him JC leaned against the car and picked at the lint on his blazer. "When did you get here?" Chris wanted to know.

"Friday," Lance replied. With a shrug, he added, "He needs someone, you know? The kids need someone."

"Yeah." Chris frowned as he searched for something to say. "Tomorrow?" he asked. When Lance nodded, he nodded back. "Ten o'clock. Small's Funeral Home?"

"It's not far from the hotel," Lance told him. "You guys heading out after that?"

JC sighed. "I have to be in the studio Tuesday," he said. Meeting Lance's gaze for the first time all evening, he mumbled, "I'm sorry. I know it's hard."

"It is," Lance conceded. They fell silent again, the only sounds in the evening air the distant hum of traffic from the city and the high-pitched squeal of cicadas in the grass. When had they grown this distant? There had been a time when the three of them never wanted for words, and silence was filled with songs and laughter and when did that all dry up and disappear? Lance wondered. He still stayed in touch with Joey, and even if he didn't call Justin all the time, he kept up to date on the Timberlake family. He had to -- part of him slept easier at night knowing that Justin was well. But he hadn't seen Chris in years, and he didn't know anything about JC except that he owned an R&B record company as popular as Lance's own country label. Time's moved on, Lance thought, trying to find something to say, and we've moved along with it. We're different now, all of us. We're not who we used to be. For some reason, that made him want to cry.

"Well," Chris sighed, and JC nodded, pushing away from the car. "We better go."

"Yeah," Lance agreed. He stuck out a hand that Chris shook almost eagerly. "See you tomorrow."

"Yeah," JC said, shaking Lance's hand as well. "Take care of yourself, Scoop. And him. Take care of him."

"I'm trying," Lance replied. "Thanks again, guys. It means a lot to me that you came out here. I know it means the world to him." With a shrug, he said, "He'd tell you himself, but you know how it is."

Chris laughed. "We know how he is. You've got your hands full. Three kids now, Lance, and two of them with Timberlake tendencies." Winking, he added, "Welcome to married life."

Lance grinned at that. "I'm just here until he gets back on his feet," he explained, but Chris shook his head and something in JC's smile made him wonder what his friends were thinking. "He won't need me forever."

As he watched their taillights fade into the night, he wondered if that would be such a bad thing, if Justin needed him forever. He didn't think so.

Joey met him at the door. "Come out here with me a second," he said, stepping out onto the porch.

Lance frowned as Joey lit up a cigarette, the flame from the lighter illuminating his face briefly. He looked ancient in that light, haggard and worn. And he's only two years older than me, Lance mused. Do I look that old? He thought maybe after this weekend, he did. "I should look in on the kids," he said, reaching for the doorknob. "They need to get to bed --"

"Lynne's tucking them in," Joey replied. He walked to the edge of the porch and leaned heavily on the railing. Looking out into the night, he sighed and took another drag on his cigarette. "So you rushed here the minute you heard, didn't you? Just dropped everything and came. Somehow I expected you would."

"What do you mean by that?" Lance wanted to know. He stepped up beside his friend and frowned at the lit tip of the cigarette, bright in the darkness. "He needs someone --"

"No," Joey corrected, "he needs you. He's always needed you."

Lance sighed. "Joey," he started, but part of him wanted to hear this, and he leaned onto the railing beside Joey. "I don't think --"

"You were always there for him," Joey said, tapping his cigarette against the railing. Lance watched the tiny embers wink out as they fell to the ground. "For all of us, but him?" Joey laughed, a dry sound in the night. "Jesus, Lance. He fell and you were the one to pick him up, time and time again. He screwed up and you were there. You were always there."

Another drag on the cigarette, and Lance waited for what he knew was coming. What none of the guys had ever asked him, never talked about, but he knew they wondered. He used to see it in their eyes whenever he made another excuse for Justin's childish tantrums on the stage, and he thought they suspected more happened on those late nights the two of them spent together in the hotel rooms, something more than merely playing video games and watching movies.

They probably think we fooled around a bit, Lance thought, watching the lighted cigarette. In his mind he was twenty again, and Justin a laughing boy who still found *The Simpsons* insanely funny, and they lay side by side in another hotel bed, flicking through the only ten channels the TV seemed to get. Remember how comfortable he was with you? Lance remembered. It had always been that way between them, from the beginning -- an easy air that surrounded the two of them, a way they had that didn't demand talk or action. They could sit for hours in a room and not say a word, and Lance held onto each of those moments fiercely. He kept it all inside, all the times they spent together, all the innocent touches Justin probably didn't remember, everything ...

he still thought about it at night, when he was lonely and the dawn seemed so far away. And on the plane over here, it all came back, didn't it? They probably thought we fooled around and then Justin grew up and we went our separate ways, he married and I buried myself in the business and now ... now here we are. His wife's funeral. Of course I came -- how could I not? "Joe," he whispered, his voice quiet between them. Joey looked up at him, questioning. "We weren't ..." He sighed. "I mean, we never --"

"I know," Joey replied. With a laugh, he admitted, "We used to take bets on it, did you know that? Josh and Chris and me, we'd sit up late and try to listen through the walls. Chris always picked Chicago. He swore if you two ever got it on, it'd be in Chicago. I never could figure out why."

Lance laughed. "Bets?" he asked. He never knew that.

Joey grinned. "At the altar, I kept waiting for you to object. If anyone has a reason this couple shouldn't be joined in holy matrimony ... I was pulling for you, man. I was thinking come on, Lance, just say it already. Tell him you love him and let me get that twenty from the guys, you know?" He laughed again, a little sad. "I was California. If you spoke up then, I would've won the bet."

"Hmm." Lance folded his hands together and sighed. "You know, I didn't think of saying anything then. I wanted him happy. That's all I've ever wanted for him. To be happy." A car rumbled past the house, the engine loud in the night, and he wondered how it felt to be in that car, to drive by and not know the sadness hanging over this house, the tears cried inside. "She made him happy."

"And now she's gone," Joey pointed out. When Lance nodded, he asked, "How long are you going to stay here?"

Lance shrugged. "As long as he needs me." Standing up, he stretched and added, "As long as the kids need me."

"That Sara's a cutie," Joey said, smiling again. "A baby Britney, you know? You better watch it or she'll snatch your heart away." Dropping his cigarette, he crushed it out beneath the heel of his shoe and laughed. "You always were good with kids, weren't you?"

"Randy's going to be a terror in his teens," Lance said, laughing. He sighed. "I'll stay here until he tells me to leave."

"That's not going to happen," Joey told him. "You know Justin. Let someone else do it ... let you do it, Lance will take care of it, he takes care of everything." Shoving his hands deep into his pockets, he rocked back on his heels and for a moment Lance saw the years roll away from him and Joey was twenty-three again. It was there in the disheveled hair that Sara tried to restyle earlier, the damp eyes, the wry grin. "How do you do it?" Joey asked, and Lance blinked away sudden tears because neither of them could get those years back, could they? And did he really want them? Those ten years he spent wrapped up in the business and stayed away from

Justin because he wanted him to be happy. What good would those years be to him now? "How do you manage to take care of everything?" Joey wanted to know. "How can you be so strong all the time?"

Lance shrugged. "He needs me to be," he explained. "I don't know, Joe. He needs me to be strong, he expects it, so what else can I be?"

* * *

With long, even strokes, Lance ran the disposable safety razor up his cheek, cutting away the scrub of growth that had blossomed on his face over the weekend. He tried not to think of the starched shirt he wore, freshly pressed and stiff along his back, a tiny washcloth tucked in at the neck to keep the shaving cream off. In the mirror he stared at himself and wondered if that sad man with the haunted eyes, so pale he could almost see through them, if that man was really him. Has to be, he thought, shaking the razor into the water in the sink. Who else is there? Just me. Just me and the kids and Justin, and I'm the only one holding them all together, aren't I? If I wasn't here ...

He didn't want to think about how Justin would make it if he wasn't there.

Down the hall he heard Sara shriek, followed by boyish laughter. "Give it back!" the little girl cried. "Randy! I'm telling!"

"Who?" Randy taunted. Lance set the razor on the sink and hurried to Sara's room. In the doorway he found Randy holding a Barbie doll in the air, out of Sara's reach. The little girl jumped for the doll, but her brother pulled it away. "Who will you tell, Sara? Daddy won't listen. Daddy's not listening to anyone anymore. Daddy --"

Lance snatched the doll from Randy's hand. "That's enough," he said, trying to control the anger rising in him. How can you pick on him? he thought. He's your own father. How can you say things like this? Sara's little fingers gently pried the Barbie from Lance's hand. "Randy, stop it right now. He's your father."

"He's a zombie," Randy replied hotly, the Timberlake temper coloring his cheeks. "He doesn't care about us." Crossing his arms, he waited for Lance to contradict him.

Lance took a deep breath to steady himself. Not today, he prayed, smoothing down Sara's hair as she hugged his leg. "Come on," he said, heading for the door. From the hall he looked back at Randy and raised his eyebrows. "Well? Come on. We have to talk."

Randy sighed dramatically. "We don't have to," the boy pouted, but he followed Lance into the bathroom. As Lance closed the door, Randy picked up the razor and ran it experimentally over his own hairless cheek. "What are we talking about?" he wanted to know.

Taking the razor from the boy, Lance pointed to the closed lid of the toilet. "Sit," he said, and for once Randy didn't argue. He sat on the toilet and kicked at the roll of paper hanging from the dispenser on the wall, a steady thump thump thump that Lance told himself he could ignore. For a moment Lance let the boy simmer as he finished shaving. From the corner of his eye he saw Randy watching him, waiting. Finally Lance rinsed the razor off and, without looking at him, asked, "How old are you, Randy?"

"Eight," came the sullen reply. "Why?"

Lance shrugged. "Because eight is a pretty grown-up age, don't you think? Your dad lets you ride your bike to your friends' houses?" Randy nodded. "To the store?" Randy nodded again. "Before you know it, you'll have a car and then you can go wherever you want, have you thought about that?" When Randy nodded a third time, a little reluctantly, Lance asked, "Where do you think you'd like to go?"

"I don't know," Randy admitted. "Someplace cool."

"Someplace cool," Lance echoed. How definite was that? "Well, where do you like to go?" Randy shrugged, noncommittal. Wiping the remaining shaving cream from his face, Lance looked at the boy and sighed. Just like his father, he mused. Same face, same grin, same stubborn streak a country mile wide. "I was thinking maybe after all this is over with," he said, his voice low, "maybe you'd want to take a trip somewhere. Just the three of you. Sara, your dad --"

"You're not coming?" Randy asked, surprised.

"Why would I?" Lance countered.

Randy shrugged again. "We need you," he whispered, looking down at his hands as he picked at his pajamas. "Dad needs you. I just thought you'd stay here with us for a while."

"Do you want me to?" Lance asked. Without meeting his gaze, Randy nodded. "I want to stay here, Randy. I do. But I need your help." Randy looked up, a pout pulling his face into a sad caricature. Sitting on the edge of the tub, Lance covered Randy's hands with one of his own and smiled. "Today's going to be rough, I won't lie to you. You're old enough to know that it's not going to be easy, not for any of us." Tears pooled in the boy's eyes, and Lance squeezed his hands comfortingly. "I need your help today. You've been a great help so far, and I appreciate it, Randy, I really do. But I need you to watch out for Sara today. Make sure she's quiet during the service, make sure she doesn't run around. Can you do that for me?"

Randy took a shuddery breath. "Yeah," he said, sniffing.

"I've got your dad to look after," Lance said, and when the boy nodded, he tousled Randy's hair playfully. "We can trade if you want."

"No," Randy said, laughing suddenly. "I'll take Sara. She's easier."

"Okay." Lance watched as the boy struggled not to cry. "It's okay, Randy," he whispered. Rolling the toilet paper on the dispenser, he tore off a large handful of the tissue and handed it to Randy, who laughed as he took it. "You can cry if you want. I know sometimes it helps."

"I miss my mom," Randy sighed, rubbing at his eyes fiercely. Taking a deep breath, he blinked the tears away. "I'll look after Sara. You make Dad better, okay? That's why you're here, isn't it?"

Lance smiled. "Yeah," he replied. That's why I'm here. Standing up, he said, "Go get dressed. And make sure Sara's ready to go, will you? I'll take care of your dad."

"Okay." When Lance opened the bathroom door, Randy hurried to his room, already tugging his pajama shirt off over his head. "Sara!" he called out, and Lance heard him rummage through his closet for the suit Britney's mother bought him the day before. "Get your dress on."

"I'm trying," his sister replied, and Lance grinned at himself in the mirror. He let the water out of the sink, rinsing away the shaving cream clinging to the porcelain. Buttoning up his shirt, he tied a necktie into place and ran a hand over his short hair to straighten it out. "Lance!" he heard Sara call out, and then she began to cry. "Help me."

He found her in her room, one arm stuck at an awkward angle through the sleeve of the black dress Justin's mother picked out when she took the kids shopping Saturday. Tears filled her eyes as she looked up at Lance, pouting. "I'm stuck," she said with a sigh.

Lance smiled disarmingly. "I see that," he said, gingerly maneuvering her arm until she managed to slide it through the sleeve. Then she turned around and he zipped the dress up. "Now you're ready," he told her. "You're the prettiest girl I've ever seen."

Sara giggled. "I know," she replied loftily. "Can you brush my hair?"

Behind them Randy entered the room, and Lance turned to smile sadly at him, dressed in the suit and hating it, by the scowl on his face. "Can Randy do it?" he asked, and the boy shrugged. "I need to get your Daddy ready."

"Randy pulls too hard," Sara complained. "He won't let me hold my dolly and he hurts."

"I won't pull," Randy promised. Picking up a hairbrush, he sat down and patted the floor between his legs. "Sit down, Sara. You can take your doll. She has to wear black, though."

"Okay," Sara agreed, plopping down to the floor. Randy began

to run the brush through his sister's unruly curls. "When are we leaving?"

"Soon," Lance told her as he left the room. Just have to get Justin ready, then we can go. Please, he prayed. Please help me get him through today. We'll talk about tomorrow when it gets here -- just today for right now. That's all I ask.

* * *

Justin couldn't seem to get the buttons on his shirt to work right. Lance will help me, he thought, sitting the edge of the bed to wait for his friend. Around him the room was dark, the only light whatever managed to slant between the closed blinds to stripe across the bed. Today was the funeral. Justin didn't want to think about that.

Think about the good times. All weekend long he heard that, everyone said it. The good times. Like that would make things better. Like that would bring her back. And whenever he tried to think of the good times, the only thing that came to mind was the group. Touring, and lying in a hotel bed beside Lance watching TV while he talked to Britney on the phone, and she'd get mad because he'd laugh at something Lance said, some comment he make about something on TV, and she wasn't there to get the joke. And the time he came to visit, Justin thought, before Randy was born. Suddenly he could see the three of them, young and carefree all over again, washing the car and squirting each other with the hose. The memory was so sharp he could almost smell the acrid scent of the soap, he could see it shimmer off the pavement in the summer sun, he could hear Britney's squeal when he turned the hose on her and the cold water soaked through her t-shirt and shorts. Tears stung his eyes, and his chin trembled as he struggled not to cry.

Someone knocked on his door. "Come in," he muttered, picking at the cuffs of his shirt. He didn't want to do this. Can I just lie down again? he wondered, looking up as Lance entered the room. Just go to sleep until it's all over with? Please?

"How are you coming along?" Lance asked, easing the door shut behind him.

Justin frowned at his friend's suit and tie. "I got dressed," he replied. He had managed the socks and pants and undershirt, but after he shrugged into the dress shirt he couldn't seem to get the buttons fastened and he had given up. Looking down at his hands, useless in his lap, he sighed. "Mostly dressed, anyway."

"Mostly," Lance echoed. Justin nodded as his friend stepped closer. "Oh Justin," he sighed, and Justin looked up as Lance knelt down in front of him. With brusque fingers he straightened Justin's collar, smoothing down the starched fabric. "We'll make it through today," he said, nimbly buttoning Justin's shirt. "I'll help you

through."

"Thank you," Justin said. He held out his wrists for Lance to button the cuffs. "How long will this be?"

Lance shrugged. "Couple hours," he said. When he had the shirt buttoned, he stood up and tugged on Justin's arm, helping him stand. "The service will be about an hour," he was saying as he unzipped Justin's pants to tuck his shirt in. Justin stood there like a child, holding his hands up out of the way as Lance flattened the shirt down into his pants. "Then there's the graveside ..." His voice trailed off, and when Justin looked at him, he forced a grin. "Couple hours, that's it. When it's over with I'll bring you right back here, okay? Unless you want to visit."

"No," Justin replied. He shook his head for emphasis. "I don't feel like it."

"I know," Lance whispered. Stepping away, he said, "Zip up, Justin. Where's your tie?"

"I can't find it," Justin told him, zipping up his pants. "Brit always kept up with that stuff for me." Glancing around the room, he realized for the first time that he didn't know where a lot of things were. I'm a stranger in my own house, he thought, frowning at his reflection in the mirror above the dresser. I don't know where she keeps the extra soap, or which drawer has her hosiery in it, or where she stores the jewelry I used to wear. Suddenly he wanted to know all those things, wanted to see the huge JRT diamond-cut necklace he was never without fifteen years ago, wanted to touch the silky smoothness of her pantyhose and God, he sobbed, covering his face with both hands. I can't do this.

Lance found the neckties hanging on the back of the closet door. "Here's one," he said, picking out a black tie. When he turned he saw Justin crying into his hands, and he tossed the tie onto the bed as he took his friend into his arms. "It's okay," he whispered, wrapping his arms around Justin's waist. Justin leaned his head onto Lance's shoulder as the tears racked through his body. "It's going to be okay, Justin. I promise."

How many times had he said that already? Too many, and Justin didn't know when anything would ever be okay again. "Lance," he sighed, fisting his hands into Lance's ironed shirt. "I can't. I just can't --"

"You can," Lance told him. Pulling away, he looked into Justin's face, his expression so earnest, so trusting, because he knew Justin could do it, Justin could see it in his eyes. "You can do it, Justin. And I'm going to be with you every minute, okay? I'm not going to let you do this alone. Do you hear me? I'm going to be right beside you."

Taking a deep breath, Justin nodded. "Okay," he whispered. "If you stay with me --"

"I will," Lance promised.

"Then I'll try," Justin finished, nodding again. "I can't give you more than that, but I'll try. Is that good enough?"

Lance managed a crooked grin. "It's going to have to be."

* * *

Sara's carseat was in Britney's sedan, and much as Lance didn't want to take her car, a glance at the clock told him they were running late and he didn't have time to move the seat to Justin's car now. "Randy!" he called, hurrying down the stairs with Justin in tow. "Come on, we're leaving." When the boy appeared at the top of the steps, Lance asked, "Is Sara ready?"

"Yeah," Randy said, nodding. "Sara! Come on."

Lance found Britney's keys on the kitchen counter. She probably dropped them here one day, Lance thought, turning the keys over in his hand. On her way in from the store or from picking Randy up from school. The keychain was a heart shaped frame -- one side read World's Greatest Mom; the other displayed a photo of the kids and Justin, grinning for the camera. Carefully Lance extracted the car key from the keychain. No need to take the whole thing, he told himself, dropping the keys into one of the kitchen drawers. He smiled as he heard the kids race down the stairs, Sara giggling to catch up with her brother. Anxiously Justin snapped, "Don't run in the house. Do you hear me?"

The children's laughter vanished. With a sigh Lance opened the sample pack of Valium the hospital gave Justin -- he had found it discarded on the table when he first arrived and set it aside, knowing they might need it. Like today, he thought, filling a glass with water. "Justin?" he called out.

Justin wandered into the kitchen, Sara in his arms. His eyes were already red and he looked so damn tired, and they still had the rest of the day ahead of them. "Here," Lance said, holding out the small pill. "Take this."

"What is it?" Justin asked, but he popped it in his mouth and took the water from Lance, drinking it down quickly.

"Something to help you out," Lance replied, and Justin nodded. Already his hands shook as he handed the glass back, and Lance could just imagine how he'd be at the funeral home without anything in his system to ease his nerves. Rubbing Justin's arm, he smiled. "Come on." He tweaked Sara's nose, eliciting a bubbly laugh from her. "We're running a little behind."

In the garage Lance unlocked the doors to Britney's car. As Randy buckled Sara into her carseat, Lance frowned at Justin's petulant expression. "The carseat," Lance explained. "That's the only reason we're taking it."

"I know," Justin muttered. He sank into the passenger seat

while Lance held the door for him, and when he didn't move to buckle his seat belt, Lance leaned across his friend and snapped the belt into place. "Thanks," Justin whispered, his breath a ghost on Lance's cheek.

Lance smiled sadly and closed the door. Leaning into the back seat, he checked Randy's belt and the strap holding Sara's seat into place. "How's it going back here?" he asked.

Randy nodded. "Fine," he replied.

Sliding into the driver's seat, Lance clicked off the radio before starting the car. The last thing they needed was to hear one of Britney's songs come on, or a news bit about the funeral, some cruel remark or witty commentary that would just reduce Justin to tears again. Bad enough the car smells like her, Lance thought, rolling down his window. Honeysuckle shampoo and gardenia perfume, faded like roses in the sun but still there, still enough to quiet the kids and make Justin's hands shake, despite the pill. As he backed out of the garage, he smiled at Randy in the rearview mirror, but the boy was looking out the window, ignoring him. Beside her brother Sara talked quietly to her Barbie. Wearing a black sweater and shorts, Lance noted. Dressed for the funeral. God.

On the road he dared to place his hand over Justin's own where it rested on his friend's knee. Justin curved his fingers around Lance's palm and squeezed gratefully. "Not much longer," Lance murmured. "We'll make it, you'll see."

"I know," Justin said with a sigh. In the back seat Sara told Barbie that they were going to say goodbye to her mommy, and Lance felt Justin's hand tighten in his.

* * *

By the time they reached the funeral home, the pill had taken effect, and Justin stared up at him with glassy eyes when Lance opened the car door for his friend. From the back seat Randy leaned over and unbuckled Justin's seat belt. "There you go, Dad," he said, and Justin roused himself enough to smile wanly at his son before the boy began to help Sara from her carseat.

"Come on, Justin," Lance murmured, taking his friend's arm.

Justin let Lance pull him from the car. When Randy climbed out, he hugged his father's waist briefly, a tight squeeze before the boy pulled away, and Justin let his hand rest on the top of his son's hair, already warm from the morning sun. And then Sara was there, hands raised, begging to be picked up, and Justin took her into his arms while Lance locked the car. "It's going to be okay," Justin whispered, an eerie echo of Lance's own sure voice. He looked up at Lance as if to confirm that, and the kids followed their father's gaze.

Lance nodded quickly. "It is," he said, tousling Randy's hair. "It's going to be fine."

One of the undertakers held the door open for them, ushering the foursome into the funeral home. In the lobby their friends and family were already gathered -- the mothers in their black gabardine dresses, Justin's brothers in their dark jeans and t-shirts, their current girlfriends trying not to look bored, the guys from the band somber in their dark suits. When Sara saw Joey she struggled in her father's arms. "Joey!" she cried, laughing, and Justin let her slip to the ground.

"Sara girl!" Joey laughed, scooping her into a bear hug that left her giggling. He squatted on the ground and set the little girl on his knee, grinning at her. "Who's this?" he asked, pointing at her Barbie.

"My dolly," Sara explained, holding the doll up for Joey to see. "She's dressed for the funeral."

Justin sighed, and Lance caught his arm, his hand strong on his friend's elbow. "Is she now?" Joey asked, glancing up at them. His gaze lingered on that touch, Lance's hand on Justin's arm, and when he met Lance's eyes, he smiled sadly. "Do you need to go with your daddy?"

Lance shook his head. "She can stay with you, if she wants," he said, and Joey nodded.

Winking at Randy, Joey asked, "What about you, sport? What say you hang out with us old farts for a little while, hmm?" Randy laughed at that. "Give your dad some time alone."

"He doesn't need time alone," Sara said brightly. "He has Lance."

Lance turned away when Joey looked at him again, a smirk on his face that seemed out of place among the long faces and sad eyes. "Come on," he whispered, leading Justin after the undertaker. When Justin glanced back at the kids, he said, "They're fine. Your mom's out there with them."

The room off the main parlor was small and dark, furnished in garnet and mahogany, the carpet and drapes and chairs lending to the oppressive air. "You can wait here," the undertaker told Lance. "So he won't be disturbed."

"Thank you," Lance replied. He closed the door and led Justin to one of the chairs, which he sank into gratefully. Kneeling in front of his friend, Lance forced a smile and said softly, "Not much longer, Justin."

"I know," Justin whispered. His hands twisted together in his lap anxiously. Standing, Lance crossed the room and peeked behind the drapes that separated the room from the parlor. "Lance?" Justin called out.

"Right here," Lance told him. Out in the parlor, the chairs were already filling up, friends and family and people he didn't even know, people from the church and school, people who knew Britney on a daily basis. He saw the discreetly dressed policemen he had hired to keep the press and paparazzi at bay, but he wondered how many reporters managed to wheedle their way in for the service anyway. Vultures, he thought bitterly. Justin doesn't need that. He can't handle this as it is, and he sure as hell doesn't need to be reading about it on the cover of the National Enquirer when he's in line at the supermarket. At least he had insisted on a closed casket. At least there was that.

Back at Justin's side, Lance sat down in one of the plush chairs and took his friend's hands in both of his. Justin sighed lustily. "The kids," he started.

Lance nodded. "They're with Joey, remember?" When Justin nodded, Lance rubbed his hands gently. "They're holding up really well, Justin. They're amazing, you know that, right?"

Justin smiled, a ghost of his former grin, but at least it was something. "Brit was the strong one," he murmured. "Not me. I've never been strong." For emphasis, he squeezed Lance's hands. "It was you and then it was her. I can't do this alone. And now she's gone ..." His voice trailed off into a sob.

"And I'm here," Lance reminded him. "You're not alone, Justin." He turned Justin's face towards his, and when his friend raised his eyes to meet his, Lance smiled sadly. "You're not."

"I know," Justin whispered. As Lance's hand fell away from his face, he sighed. "She told me you'd be here for me."

"What?" Lance asked, surprised. "Who? Your mom?"

"Britney," Justin replied. He looked away, his gaze falling to the thick carpet as he sighed again. "When I talked to you last what, Christmas?" Lance nodded, but Justin didn't notice. "I was telling her all that you said, just talking a mile a minute, she couldn't get a word in edgewise." He smiled at the memory. "You know the way I get."

"I do," Lance agreed.

Justin frowned as he remembered that night. "She laughed and told me she was glad I still had you. The others -- I don't know what happened, you know? Especially with Josh. We had been best friends. But I guess we just grew apart. I guess we couldn't help it after the group broke up." Absently he stroked his thumb along Lance's palm, a ticklish sensation. "She said if anything happened to her, she knew I'd be okay because I'd still have you."

Lance felt hot tears sting his eyes. She knew, he thought, tightening his fingers around Justin's. God, she knew, she HAD to have known. She knew the way I loved him and she knew he'd be okay. She knew I'd help him through. "She said that?" he whispered.

Justin nodded. "I told her not to talk like that. I didn't want to --" He sighed, tears trailing down his cheeks again. "I didn't want to think about it. I didn't want to admit it would happen, that she would die ..." The word was barely a whisper, and he choked it off quickly, pressing a hand to his mouth to keep from sobbing as he squeezed his eyes shut.

Lance pulled Justin into his arms. "It's okay," he breathed, rubbing Justin's back as his friend's arms slipped around his waist.

"She said you'd be here for me," Justin sighed, burying his face into Lance's neck. "She told me it would be okay ..."

"It will be," Lance promised him. "I'm not leaving, remember? She was right. I'm not leaving you."

Justin nodded, his tears tapering off, but he clung to Lance until the undertaker knocked, signaling that the service was about to begin. "Justin," Lance whispered against his friend's shoulder.

"I know," Justin replied, his voice hushed, but he didn't move. When he sighed, his breath was soft along Lance's neck. "You're staying with me, right?"

"Yes," Lance told him.

"How long?" Justin wanted to know.

Smoothing his hand across Justin's back, Lance whispered, "As long as you want me to."

"Forever," Justin said, sitting up. He looked at Lance with teary eyes and waited for his answer.

Lance nodded, pressing his trembling lips together. "Forever, then," he replied.

The undertaker knocked again, and Lance helped Justin to his feet.

The End

Maybe
by NSyncGrrl

When the phone rang, Justin thought it would be his mother. She hadn't called since he got back into town and he was expecting to hear from her sometime soon, even if he wasn't looking forward to fielding her carefully worded questions. She'd want to know what had happened between him and Lance, why he didn't want to talk about it over the phone last week when he called from his hotel room before leaving for their final stop on the tour, why he hadn't called her since. She'd want to know the answers to all those questions and more, and this early in the morning Justin didn't want to go through it when he didn't even know what had happened himself. Lance is happier without me, he'd tell her, and then she'd say Bullshit and he wasn't up for another argument with anyone right now, he just wasn't.

Or maybe it was Britney. She'd know he was back and maybe she was calling him up, just to say she heard about what happened and she was so sorry, did he want to talk about it? And if he couldn't talk to his mom then why would he want to talk to her? There's nothing to talk about, he thought, listening to the phone ring. He sat on the front porch and could hear the shrill cry through the screen door. It was already hot outside, heating up to be another humid summer day, and he didn't have the strength to go in and pick up the damn phone. Let the machine get it. There's nothing I want to say to anyone right now.

On the fourth ring, he heard his own voice as the answering machine picked up. "What's up, yo?" How long ago had he recorded that message? He didn't know, but he hadn't heard his own laughter in a while now and it startled him to hear it ghostlike in the empty house. He'd have to change the tape.

A thin beep, and then he heard the deep laugh that haunted his dreams, Lance's laugh. There had been a time while on tour that Lance never laughed, and Justin feared he'd never elicit more than a wan smile or a fake chuckle from his lover ... my EX lover, he reminded himself, and he hated the way that sounded. He hated everything about those two letters, E and X. But he was miserable with me, I know he was, because we started to argue all the time and one morning I'd just had enough, I left, I told him he was better off without me and I heard him laughing with Chris later that day and so I was right. I was just dragging him down and once I set him free ... well, he's happy again. Carefree and laughing and so damn happy, and I still love him so much, he's the way he was when I first fell in love with him and I'm still falling, every day I fall harder and harder and what's the use? He's happier without me. Listening to Lance laugh on his answering machine, Justin frowned at the suburban street around him, still asleep this early on a Saturday morning, and sighed. I want him happy. Even if it's without me.

"Justin," Lance growled into the phone, and then laughed again. "That message is so damn old, boyfriend." I'm not your boyfriend, Justin though glumly, pushing himself up from his chair. Remember? How could you forget? "I know you're there," Lance continued as Justin came into the house. The screen door slammed shut behind him. "Pick up the phone."

"I'm not here," Justin said. He stopped in front of the phone table and stared at the answering machine, watching the tape roll beneath Lance's words.

"Justin," Lance warned, and was he calling from a pay phone? Justin thought maybe he was, because he could hear the sounds of traffic in the background, rushing cars and a horn or two, people talking and shouting and someone over a loudspeaker, announcing an incoming flight -- he's at an airport, Justin thought. God, why call me from there? What are you trying to do, Lance? Twist the knife in my heart while you're waiting for your flight? "Pick up the phone," Lance said, lowering his voice until it was that deep basement tone that the fans recognized on their albums. "Pick up, pick up, pick up --"

Justin snatched the receiver, cutting off Lance's words and stopping the tape. "What?"

"There you are, sunshine," Lance said, a smile in his voice. "What are you doing?"

Justin sighed. "Listening to you sing into my answering machine," he replied. "What do you want, Lance? I'm trying ..." He sighed again. I'm trying to learn how to live without you, he wanted to say. I'm trying to get over you, Lance, because you're so obviously over me already. "It's early," he said instead, and it sounded like a feeble excuse and it was, he knew it was, but he wasn't going to dump his problems onto Lance, not when his friend was handling their breakup so well.

"I know it's early," Lance replied. "I'm here at the airport, waiting for you to pick me up."

"What?" Justin asked again, confused. "I don't remember --"

"I'm waiting," Lance sang, and then he laughed. "Come on, Justin. I was bored at home so I thought I'd come visit, what the hell, right?" When Justin didn't respond, he cleared his throat and asked, "We're still friends, aren't we? You said we'd still be friends."

"We are," Justin whispered. But God Lance, he thought, the last thing I need is to see you right now. I know I said we'd still be friends and I don't know why I even bothered because just thinking about you makes my arms ache, and seeing you again will bring it all back, all the nights spent in your bed, all the kisses, all the touches ... but they had been friends first, and if Lance wanted to be friends again, then at least he'd be in Justin's life, if only just a little, and Justin couldn't imagine him not being there at all. They broke up what, three weeks ago? Something like that, and with the

tour they hadn't had a chance to talk about it yet, so maybe Lance just wanted to talk. Even though he knew he shouldn't, he said, "I'll be right there."

"Thanks, baby," Lance said, and Justin sighed. Baby -- don't you know what that does to me? Justin wondered, listening as his friend told him where he'd be waiting. It makes me think you still love me, Lance, and maybe you do but we can't be together because it's just better this way, you know? So please don't call me baby, or boyfriend, or sunshine, because it makes me think maybe there's hope and there's not.

* * *

It started with a careless kiss at a New Year's Eve party, just something for laughs because they were standing next to each other and when the ball dropped at midnight, Justin turned to Lance and, with a wink, said, "I wish I had someone to kiss." And before he knew it, Lance leaned down and pressed his lips to Justin's, just the briefest of touches, but it was a kiss, it was real, and it burned on Justin's lips for the rest of the evening. The next day he cornered Lance at the hotel buffet and asked, "Did you mean it?"

"Mean what?" Lance wanted to know. It was still early and he blinked at Justin owlishly, unsure of what he was talking about.

"That kiss," Justin replied. Lance shrugged, noncommittal, and Justin asked, "Lance? Did you mean it?"

"Maybe," Lance said, shrugging again. "I don't know, Justin. I was drunk and it was New Year's, okay? You said you wanted a kiss so I kissed you."

Justin thought maybe there was more to it than that, and when Lance started to walk away from the buffet table, he caught his friend's arm. "What are you doing tonight?"

Lance frowned at his touch. "Are you asking me out?"

Now it was Justin's turn to shrug. "Maybe," he replied, and that night Lance kissed him again. Somewhere between that second kiss and the release of their next album, Justin fell in love with his friend's soft lips and easy hands, and Lance told him he loved him, too.

When their tour went overseas, Lance grew homesick and crawled between the covers of Justin's bed, and he clung to him while Justin sang softly, every one of their songs, until Lance fell asleep. In the morning he said he didn't want to sleep alone again. Justin promised he wouldn't have to.

We were wonderful together, Justin thought as he drove to the airport, lost in the memories. Even when things started to get rough, we were there for each other. He still wasn't quite sure what

had happened, when the arguments began, the petty fights and mean words that they smoothed over with greedy kisses. Lance didn't want to go out after a show, Justin wanted to know why, and before long they'd be shouting back and forth and Justin would leave, just slam the door and walk out because he'd had enough. It was the tour getting to Lance -- Justin could see the strain in his friend's face, the thin lines around his eyes, the weariness that made him snap whenever Justin tried to talk about it. "Nothing's wrong," he'd say, rolling onto his side in the bed they shared, his back to Justin. "I'm just tired, okay? That's all."

"Then why --" Justin would start, and Lance would sigh dramatically.

"Justin," he'd warn. When Justin reached out to touch his back, he'd shrug away, and nothing Justin said or did would get him in his arms for the rest of the night.

And I just had enough, Justin thought. He eased the car to a crawl in front of the airport, scanning the crowd for his friend. I couldn't take it anymore, because he wasn't happy and he said it wasn't me but I can't help but wonder, you know? He saw Lance talking with a uniformed guard, just shooting the shit and laughing and God, Justin thought, sliding into a parking spot close by. Why can't he be like that with me? He stopped laughing, stopped smiling, and I thought it was the tour and the record and the business, everything just pulling him in a million directions at once, and I tried to help him. I tried to make everything okay. But he wouldn't let me in and he wouldn't let me help, and what the hell is he doing here now? Justin couldn't imagine.

"Hey there," Lance said, tossing his bag into the back seat of Justin's convertible. With a wave at the guard, he sank into the passenger seat and turned a bright grin onto Justin. Would a kiss be awkward? Justin wondered. He thought maybe it would. "What's up?"

"Nothing," Justin muttered, easing back into the flow of traffic. They drove in an uncomfortable silence that stretched between them like a web, trapping them both. The moments hung pregnant, full of anticipation, but the longer Lance remained quiet, the harder it was for Justin to break the silence. He didn't know what to say because his friend seemed happy and he didn't want to ruin that, but he wanted to know what he was doing here and he couldn't deny that just sitting in the same car with him made Justin as anxious as that first kiss had, all those months ago.

When they pulled into Justin's garage, Lance sighed. "You're mad I came," he said, climbing out of the car.

"No," Justin said. He wasn't mad, not at Lance. Never at Lance -- he was mad at himself, because he was the one who couldn't be enough for his lover, he was the one who couldn't take it anymore. He was the one who had left. And now he's back and I'm mad because he's happy and I couldn't make him that way. He's happy without me. Leading the way into the house, he asked, "How long

are you staying?"

Lance laughed. "Trying to get rid of me already?" he asked, winking at Justin. When he closed the front door behind him, he added, "Can I get a hug, at least?"

Justin dropped his car keys onto the steps. "Do you think that's a good idea?" he countered.

With a grin, Lance wrapped his arms around Justin's waist and hugged him tight. "I like your hugs," he said, resting his head against Justin's back.

"Lance," Justin warned, but he let his hands rub along Lance's arms as he closed his eyes, savoring the feel of his lover's body against his. EX lover, his mind whispered. Don't forget that ex.

"I've missed you," Lance whispered. "Do you think maybe we can try again?"

"Is that why you're here?" Justin asked. Please don't get my hopes up like this, Lance. Please don't --

He felt Lance shrug against him. "Maybe," he replied, letting Justin slip out of his embrace.

Justin sighed. Can't you be more definite than that?

* * *

He made a pitcher of tea while Lance unpacked. Justin could hear him moving around in the extra bedroom upstairs, and he wondered again if this was such a good idea. But he wanted to see me, Justin told himself as he poured the tea into two tall glasses filled with ice. And maybe we just need to talk. Without the other guys around, without the tour or the fans or anything else. Just the two of us.

He carried the glasses up the stairs. In the doorway of the guest room he stopped and watched as Lance folded his clothes from his bag onto the bed, his t-shirt tucked into his jeans and pulling across his shoulders with every move he made. I love him, Justin thought with a sigh. No matter what's been said, I still love him. I always will. "Lance?" He stepped into the room, the glass in his hand like a peace offering. "I made you some tea."

"Thanks." When Lance took the glass his fingers brushed against Justin's. "You didn't have to."

Justin shrugged. "I know you like tea," he said. He sat down on the edge of the bed and traced his initials onto his glass, the condensation cool beneath his skin. He didn't know what else to say.

"Thanks for letting me visit," Lance told him, drinking down the

tea. The corner of Justin's mouth curved into a halfhearted attempt at a smile. I had no choice, he mused, watching Lance's throat as he swallowed the drink. You call me and say pick you up at the airport, what am I supposed to say? No? God, you know me too well, Lance. You know I can't say no to you. "So," Lance said as he set the empty glass aside, "what've you been up to?"

"Nothing much," Justin replied. "Just unwinding, I guess." He frowned as he looked away from Lance's unwavering gaze. "What about you? You seem ... I don't know. You seem like you're doing well."

"I am," Lance agreed. "Not perfect, mind you, but who is?" When Justin shrugged again, he leaned over and trailed a hand down Justin's arm. The innocent touch sent flames of desire licking through Justin's body. "I could be perfect ..." He let the sentence trail off, leaving the thought unfinished.

Justin gulped down his drink. "I never made you perfect," he whispered. "I couldn't -- God, Lance, don't you remember the fights we had? The constant bickering, the arguments? That wasn't perfect."

"That wasn't us," Lance replied. "That was just the last few months of the tour. I was down and it had nothing to do with you, nothing --"

"Didn't it?" Justin looked up at him and felt the helplessness rise in him again. "I was supposed to be the one you could turn to, Lance. I was your lover, and I was there for you, but you didn't need me. You'd push me away as if you liked being depressed all the time, you liked being down, and nothing I said or did could ever change that." Lance moved the clothes aside, sitting beside Justin on the bed, one hand resting on Justin's thigh. Justin wanted to take that hand in his but he wouldn't. In a quiet voice, he whispered, "I'm sorry I left, Lance. God, I miss you so much. But I couldn't stand you being so miserable all the time. I thought it was me --"

"Justin," Lance sighed, and his hand slid a little further up Justin's leg as his other arm eased around his waist. "It wasn't you, not at all. You were the only thing keeping me together."

Justin wiped a stray tear from the corner of his eye and took a shuddery breath. "Really?"

"Really," Lance said. "When you left I was pissed, I won't lie to you. I sat there in bed thinking well fuck, now what? But the more I thought about it, the more I saw that you were right, we just needed some space, some time to think about what we want and where we're going -- in the group and together." He reached up and brushed Justin's curls back, smiling. "I want to try again, Justin. Can we do that?"

"Maybe," Justin whispered, but he leaned into Lance's touch and wondered if it could really be that simple.

There was a part of him that wanted to forget the past few weeks, just pretend they never happened, take Lance in his arms and smooth over the lost time with eager kisses and familiar touches, but he couldn't do that because it was his fault they broke up, wasn't it? He had been the one who wasn't strong enough for Lance, the one who couldn't possibly be everything his lover needed him to be. So why should I expect him back? Justin thought. They sat on the porch in the afternoon heat and stared at each other like wary alley cats, unsure of what to say or what to do that wouldn't provoke a fight. A small rattan table separated their wicker chairs, and Lance reached across the span to take Justin's hand in his own. "I still love you," he said quietly, and Justin closed his eyes against sudden tears. "I do."

"I love you, too," Justin whispered. "I'll love you forever, I know it. I just don't know if I can make you happy."

Lance laughed. "You always make me happy," he said, squeezing Justin's hand. "I told you, baby, it was the tour and everything else. It was just too much for me." He raised Justin's hand to his lips and kissed the knuckles, his lips gentle.

"Lance, don't." Justin pulled his hand free and asked, "Do you know how hard it was for me to walk away? I told myself it was for the best. I told myself you didn't need me --"

"But I do," Lance replied.

Justin shook his head. "If you needed me, you would've told me what was wrong. You would've let me help you --"

Lance sighed. "I don't know what was wrong," he said. "I was depressed, Justin, that's all."

Depressed, Justin thought, frowning as he remembered the harsh words they threw at each other the last morning they woke up in the same bed. Depressed made you tell me to mind my own damn business when I asked you why you couldn't talk to me. Depressed made you tell me to leave you the fuck alone -- those were your words, weren't they? Depressed ... "And now you're not," he said.

"I'm not," Lance agreed. "I'm doing a lot better, Justin. Trust me."

"I can see that," Justin replied. "And that's what worries me." When Lance looked at him, questioning, he said, "You're doing great now, Lance, and it's without me. You can say it was the tour and the schedule and whatnot, but look at you. The tour ended three weeks ago. We ended three weeks ago. And you're doing great. You don't need me to complicate things. You don't."

With a slight pout, Lance reminded him, "You said you love

me."

"I do," Justin told him. "God, Lance, I do." Turning to his friend, he took in the pale skin, pale eyes, the lips he knew tasted so sweet and so warm. How could he not love this man? "I just want what's best for you. And if it's not me, then I'll deal with it. Somehow, I'll learn to deal with it."

"What if it is you?" Lance asked. Justin shrugged. "What if it's always been you?" When Justin didn't reply, he added, "What if I want it to be you?"

"I don't know," Justin admitted. But I want it to be me, too, he thought.

* * *

They had been friends first, and by the time they finished dinner the awkwardness surrounding them had all but disappeared. Justin felt as if he were holding his breath in anticipation, waiting for something to go wrong. But Lance laughed in all the right places, and he winked when Justin grinned at him, and his hands had a habit of trailing along Justin's arm or leg or back, anywhere they could touch when Justin walked by. At the top of the stairs, Lance caught Justin's hand as he headed for his room. "This is like a trial period, isn't it?" he asked with a grin.

Justin laughed. If Lance kept touching him the way he'd been doing all evening long, Justin didn't think they would be apart much longer. I don't WANT to be, he told himself, but he wanted to be sure before he just jumped into the relationship again. He wanted to be certain Lance was right and it wasn't him depressing the hell out of his lover. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't glad you're here," he admitted.

"But I guess I'm sleeping alone tonight, eh?" Lance's smile didn't reach his eyes.

"I think it's best for right now," Justin whispered.

Lance pressed his lips together and nodded. "But you're thinking about this, right? Give me that hope, at least."

Justin laughed. "I'm thinking," he said.

Lance leaned over and kissed Justin's cheek, his lips just as soft as he remembered. "I'm thinking of you, too," he breathed, and then he turned away, heading for the guest room.

* * *

Justin dreamed of roller coasters. They were at an amusement park somewhere, the whole group, and Lance sat in the first seat of

the coaster with Joey, like he always did. Justin didn't like roller coasters too much, especially the ones with the loops, so he sat behind Lance, like he always did. That way he felt a little protection, at least -- he wasn't the one in the front anymore, and it was a wonderful feeling. In the dream he couldn't see who sat beside him, but he thought it had to be Chris because JC never wanted to sit next to him on a coaster. He once said Justin's viselike grip and girlish screams freaked him out. "I don't scream like a girl," Justin had pouted, and Lance laughed at that. He should know -- he sat right in front of his lover for every ride.

As the roller coaster started up the first steep incline, Justin felt the familiar feeling of dread curl into his stomach, nausea that made him frown as he slept. He hated that feeling. The clink clink clink of the chain that pulled the coaster up was loud in his ears, and the ground dropped away below him with a deliberate slowness that terrified him. "I want to get off this thing," he told no one in particular.

From the front of the coaster, Lance turned around and smiled at him. "Relax," he told him, before turning back to laugh at something Joey said.

Relax -- Justin toyed with the bar that locked him into place, pouting because he wanted off, just stop the ride already and let him get down, let JC sit next to Chris because he wasn't up for this, not right now, not anymore ...

The bar in his hands popped up, startling him. Oh shit. Somehow he knew that wasn't supposed to happen, even in the dream. "Lance?" he asked, fear in his voice. "Um --"

"Relax," Lance said again, as they neared the summit of the incline. He reached back and took Justin's hand in his, the touch reassuring despite the fact that he wasn't locked in. When the coaster went over the top, the only thing keeping him from falling would be that hand, Lance's hand, gripped tight in his own. "I'm going to hold on," Lance was saying as the coaster crested the tracks. "Don't worry, Justin. I won't let go."

"I won't let go." Justin felt his stomach fall away as the coaster whooshed down the slope, felt his balls in the back of his throat and the screams locked inside, but Lance's hand was strong in his and he didn't fall out of his seat as he feared. "I won't let go ..."

Justin woke slowly, trying to shake the fear from his mind that clung to him like gossamer strands of webbing, ensnaring him in the dream. "I won't let go ..." Lance's words echoed through him, over and over again, and when Justin opened his eyes he found himself staring into the face of his friend. "Lance?" he asked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He distinctly remembered that his lover -- ex-lover, his mind whispered, but he ignored it -- had spent the night in the guest room. Not my bed. "What are you doing here?"

Lance grinned at him. He was stretched out along the bed

beside Justin, his head in his hand as he sipped at a hot mug of coffee. "I'm watching you sleep," he said, his voice gentle. "Bad dreams?"

Sighing, Justin pulled the thin sheet up over his shoulders and hunched down into it, closing his eyes again. He didn't remember his dream -- just a disconcerting sense of falling and Lance's promise to not let him go. "I don't remember," he mumbled.

Lance reached over him and set his mug on the bedside table. Then his hand, warm through the bedsheet, began to rub Justin's shoulder, a slow, lazy rhythm that eased away the dream. Why did I walk out? Justin wondered. Lance had been right -- the fighting wasn't always them, it never was until the end of the tour, and how could he just give up? All the mornings they cuddled together, all the evenings they fell asleep in each other's arms, all the touches and kisses and everything ... how could he just walk away from it all? He didn't know.

Resting his forehead against Justin's, Lance whispered, "You're so beautiful when you sleep. Have I ever told you that before?" When Justin shook his head, he felt Lance's lips press against his skin, right between his eyebrows. "I'm sorry I pushed you away." Justin sighed. "I'm sorry I didn't let you in. I guess, I don't know. I guess I was trying to prove I could handle it myself. I didn't need anyone else." Opening his eyes, Justin looked at the curve of Lance's neck and wondered how long it would be before they were arguing again. When the next tour starts, he mused, or the next album comes out. "But I was wrong," Lance said, kissing the tip of his nose. "I need you."

"Do you?" Justin pulled back until he could see his lover's clear green eyes, and he choked back a sob because he could see the love in that gaze and he had to believe him, how could he not? "Lance --"

Lance's lips closed over his in a tender, sweet kiss. "Yes," he whispered. "God, Justin, don't walk out on me again, please. Don't leave me alone."

"I won't," Justin promised. If Lance needed him, he could work through the fights, when they came.

With a grin, Lance asked, "Does this mean you're my guy again?"

Justin laughed. Stretching awake, he draped his arms around Lance's shoulders. "I never said I wasn't," he pointed out, thinking back to that morning weeks ago when he left Lance lying in the hotel bed, glaring at him. "I said I'd give you some time. I never said we were through."

"So we aren't?" Lance asked, hopeful. At Justin's slow smile, he laughed. "Is that a yes?"

"It's a maybe," Justin replied, but when Lance kissed him again, he didn't think it would take long to turn that into a more definite

answer.

The End

Sea Change
by NSyncGrrl

The storm blew up suddenly, as late summer storms are wont to do. Lance knew it was coming, could feel the surge of the tide in the flow of his veins, and he spent the day gathering in the nets strung out along the beach, where he had left them to dry. By dusk the sky was bruised and swollen with angry clouds muttering above the water, and the sea threw white foam-capped waves at the shore. It was going to be a bad storm, by the looks of it. Even the gulls that usually cried along the tideline were hiding among the rocky cliffs that edged the beach like a cupped hand.

The nets were woven of coarse and heavy rope, knotted and reknotted until they looked like gnarled hands, arthritic with use. As he rolled them up, careful not to tangle their lengths, Lance noticed a few frayed cables here and there, places the kraken had eaten through during the last haul, and he'd have to mend those before he went out on the sea again. Tonight, he thought, lifting the bundled nets onto his shoulders before turning home. When the storm breaks.

Home was a small, one-room hovel that sat at the far end of a boardwalk whose wooden planks were beginning to rot beneath the constant briny air. Each step he took on the boards sounded flat and listless, the echo hanging beneath stifling clouds that pressed down on him as heavily as the weight of the nets on his back. The air itself was a thick blanket, cloying and tight around him in an uneasy calm before the storm. It rains too much anymore, he thought as he entered his hovel, but that wasn't the truth. The truth was it hadn't rained in months, and this storm was long overdue. The last time it rained they had been on the water --

He shook the memory away and threw the nets down to the sand-covered floor. That was long ago, a different life, a different person, not him. He was just a halfling anymore, eking out a living at the edges of the world. The last time it rained, he had been torn in two, part of him drowning in the sea while the rest of him, the part that he was now, washed ashore. Here, he thought, lighting a smoky lamp to push back the shadows filling the hovel. Like driftwood, cast aside. Some days he wished both halves had drowned. At least then he'd still be whole.

The oily light illuminated the small room. Two chairs lined one side of a low, wooden table -- only one chair was ever used now. The other one waited patiently, but it would wait forever before anyone sat in it again. Along the far wall a narrow bed stretched out like an empty hand, too damn large for the half of him that was left. A cast iron stove, cold and unlit, a bucket sink, a trunk full of clothes and photographs and memories he never looked through anymore ... in the center of these things, the nets looked like beached leviathans, huge and awkward and noisome out of the

water. With a sigh, Lance closed the door to the hovel and pulled out the only chair he ever sat in and, pulling a corner of the nets into his lap, began to stitch the damaged ropes as he waited for the storm.

* * *

It was summer when he smiled. He used to run along the edge of the water like the pipers, laughing as he tried to keep ahead of the tide. "Lance!" he'd cry, and Lance would look up from his nets and grin as he watched the boy splash through the waves. Justin. His name had been Justin. Those six letters were still carved on Lance's heart, etched deep so the tide and time wouldn't wash them away.

Justin, the other half of his soul. When he smiled, the sun rose in the sky. When he cried, the heavens filled with stars. When he laughed, everything in Lance swelled like the sea rising to the moon and he had to throw the nets aside to catch Justin in his arms, kissing his salty skin until they both lay in the sand, exhausted and tangled together like kelp.

But then the storms came, and there was no laughter, not anymore.

* * *

When night fell, it brought with it large, icy raindrops and a quick wind that howled around the hovel as if it wanted in. But the door was latched and the windows shuttered, and Lance sat in the damp glow of his lamp, mending the nets in his lap. He watched his tanned fingers shuttle the needle through the rope, weaving the frayed lengths back together again, and he tried to ignore the way the wind screeched his name as it flung the rain against his home.

In his hands the needle moved back and forth between the ropes, and he watched it as if those weren't his fingers guiding it along. Outside the world drowned in a torrential crash of rain that deafened him. When the wind blasted the hovel, the lamp flickered uneasily, afraid. In its unsteady light his needle wove through the nets with the flash and shimmer of a dartfish dancing in a shallow tidepool. It was only a thick scrap of bone, carved from a kraken tusk long ago. Back when he had been whole.

Suddenly he heard laughter through the storms, distant and carefree. His laughter, and Lance's eyes welled with tears he thought gone because it was the breakers and the crash of the surf and the thunder, nothing more. The rains, he thought, waiting to hear if the laughter would come again. It's the storm, so late in the season. It's the wind, it hates me, always tangling my nets and threatening my home. It's not --

It came again, a light, boyish sound that tore him from the

chair, the nets falling forgotten to his feet. He stumbled over the thick ropes as he tripped towards the door, the laughter drawing him like a beacon in the storm. "Justin!" Lance cried, flinging the door wide.

Rain struck his face, cold, fat drops that stung his skin. A gray mist rose from the sea like a curtain draping the beach. The rain fell so hard that it pelted the sand into flat, dark land before ricocheting back towards the sky.

But the beach was empty, the laughter gone. Justin. He was still halved like an mollusk whose shell has been broken, still alone, and he wished he hadn't cried out. Justin. He closed the door and kicked through the nets, but the word skipped around the room like a pebble across water, and he wished he had never set it free.

* * *

Justin. The sun shines down on his curls, turning each lock into a ringlet of gold. The seaspray mists across his tanned chest, so smooth and thinly muscled, strength hidden beneath calm waters. His eyes dance as he looks out over the ocean, twin pools in his face that rival the deepest sea. "Lance," he says, pointing out to their nets. They need to gather the haul in before the storm.

The rains are gentle at first, and Lance doesn't see the hurry in retrieving the nets. The kraken can wait. He's hungry for his boy, and he eases Justin down to the smooth wooden deck of their boat, his fingers slipping easily beneath the shorts he wears, stroking hard flesh and soft skin until Justin arches into him, gasping his name. He loves the sound of his name in that voice, and when he enters Justin, his name becomes a litany of lust and love that echoes the sigh of the sea. His lips are like coral, that pink and that perfect, and Lance sees the fine spray of sweat above his upper lip, caught in tiny hairs bleached blonde by the sun.

Salty kisses and sandy hands, the warm press of bodies in the cold rain, the rocking rhythm of the boat beneath them that matches their own rhythm, faster and harder with the coming storm, the waves crashing around them, blood pounding through their veins until the moment crests into an explosive orgasm that leaves them both spent and drenched and clinging to each other like anemones to a reef.

And the storm comes in from the sea, fierce and angry. And they struggle to get the nets in, kraken slipping through frayed lines that would have to be mended. And a low roar rumbles through the boat like thunder, the bitter cry of a leviathan caught in the tangled nets, trying to shake itself free.

And the waves toss the boat as if it is nothing but a piece of flotsam, and lightning splits the sky, the world, the lovers, in two.

* * *

Lance heard the laughter again as he struggled awake. Memories like dreams threatened to drown him, and it would be welcome, after all this time, to just give in to them. It would be welcome to become one again, to become whole, to see Justin's sunshine grin and chase his laughter, to love him and never let him go.

But it was morning. Justin was gone, and without opening his eyes Lance knew it would still be raining, a steady drizzle that drenched the world beyond the hovel, tamping the beach into a color like sodden ashes. He was gone, and Lance's arms ached to hold him again, his fingers burned where he could still feel the brief press of skin before he slipped away on the wind and the waves and the storm. In his empty bed Lance clenched his fists as he hugged himself tight, but the storm had left him cold and damp and alone.

"Lance." The word was a whisper in his ear, but it was his voice, the hint of laughter running beneath it like a stream, and Lance rolled over, half-expecting to find Justin beside him once again.

The bed was still empty.

"Lance." Another whisper, and this time a small laugh as well, so childlike and innocent that Lance's heart twisted to hear it after all this time. Lance turned back over, but he was still alone.

A fit of giggles erupted somewhere behind him, and even though he knew there was nothing but wall he still craned his neck back, arching away from the bed to see ... "Stop it," he muttered to himself. There was nothing, just as he knew there would be, but he couldn't calm the quickening of his blood, couldn't stop the hope from blooming inside of him, and it was his own body he tried to command, not Justin. Never Justin. He hadn't heard that voice in so long, he didn't want to lose it now. "Justin?" he dared to whisper.

Laughter again, and this time it was outside. Tumbling from the bed, Lance ran for the door, but halfway there he tripped over the nets lying in the middle of the room. He skidded to the floor, scraping his palms and knees, and then the laughter surrounded him and he pushed himself up again. "Justin!" Don't, he thought, pulling the door open. Be there. Don't do this to me. Don't --

The rain was gone. The sky was deep and endless, an ocean that stretched above him. Beneath it the sea glistened with the strength of a million diamonds, cast down from the blazing sun. The sand was bleached and white and pure as snow, and along the tideline ran a wild wisp of a boy with unruly curls and flashing eyes. "Lance," he called, glancing back over his shoulder, and there was summer in that smile, those eyes. "Follow me, Lance. Catch me ..."

"Justin." Lance took a step out onto the boardwalk, squinting into the sun. It's not him, his mind whispered, but how could it not

be? It looked like him, it sounded like him ... it was him. But Lance lingered by the hovel, unsure. Beneath his bare feet the boards were hot but he couldn't feel the heat. Justin laughed again, taunting him. Raising his voice, he called out, "Justin!"

"Catch me," Justin said again. Lance raced after him. He fell, that voice inside his mind reminded him, but he ignored it. He fell, you saw him fall, he slipped through your fingers and into the sea, knocked from the boat by the leviathan during the storm and you SAW it happen -- but had that happened? Had that really happened? Justin ran ahead of him now and maybe it had all been a dream, one of those nightmarish visions in that gray time between awake and asleep, when the world was only half-real. Because he was only half-real, without Justin, and there he was, racing the tide and he was real, he had to be.

Breaking into a run, Lance followed his boy as swiftly as he could. As he closed the distance between them, Justin glanced back once more, still laughing. "Lance --"

And then Lance had him in his arms, and he was warm and alive, his lips softer than Lance remembered, his hands strong and his skin salty. Lance couldn't get enough of his scent and his taste and the small moans he made as they kissed. "Justin," Lance whispered, fisting his hands in the cottony velvet of his lover's curls. "Justin." It was the only word he knew.

Justin twisted out of Lance's fevered embrace like a fish darting through the thick ropes of their kraken nets. "Follow me," he said, taking Lance's hand in his as he pulled him towards the sea. The sun winked in his curls, damp with spray. "Lance? I've missed you. Come with me."

Lance let himself be led into the waves, and the cold water swirled around his ankles. Farther, and the water pressed against his chest with a chilly weight. Each breath was short and forced, but Justin still smiled at him, his hand in Lance's own. "Justin," Lance said, wavering.

"I love you," Justin whispered. That was all Lance needed to hear. Another step and his foot slid out from under him, icy water numbed his leg, a dangerous undertow that threatened to drag him out to sea. No! his mind screamed as he slipped beneath the waves. His chest ached and his feet scrambled for purchase, but there Justin's hand was still in his. Justin --

Strong arms encircled his waist. Warm lips covered his, and hot breath filled his mouth, pushing back the cold and the fear that gripped his heart. "Lance." His name was the souging sigh of the surf, but it was Justin's voice, and it was Justin's hands on his body, Justin's lips on his skin. Too long, Lance thought, letting his lover lay him down on the soft sand of the ocean floor. Justin pressed against him with the weight of the sea on his back, his hands caressing Lance's chest and legs and arms, heating his skin despite the cold water surrounding them. "I've missed you," Justin said again, and his voice was the crash of waves on the shore.

"Justin," Lance sobbed as he drowned in his lover's eyes, safe in his arms and finally, finally whole once more.

The End

Toy Soldiers
by NSyncGrrl

"Justin," Lance sighs, and suddenly he's gone, rolling away from me in the darkness. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" I want to know. What the hell just happened? is what I want to say, but I don't. It's been forever since we've shared a bed, the last week spent on the tour bus with the others and finally I get him to myself, finally I get him alone, and we were kissing so hard my lips are sore now, my tongue tingles with the taste of his, my body still feels his hands rubbing over my chest and legs and arms as if not comprehending the fact that he's pulled away. Tentatively I reach over and run a finger down his arm. His muscles are tight and bunched beneath my touch. "Lance, what's wrong?"

"I can't," he says, and I hear the frustration in his voice that echoes my own.

I don't get it. "What do you mean? Can't what?" I don't know about him, but my whole body aches right now, my crotch throbs with the memory of his knee pressing sweetly against my cock, and I'm hard and I've waited long enough for this moment, I don't want it to slip away. "Lance --"

He sighs, exasperated, and I can tell I'm not going to get any more loving tonight from the bitter way he says, "Can't, Justin. Do I have to spell it out for you? C - A - N - apostrophe --"

"Stop it," I tell him. He shrugs away from my hand and I pull back, angry. "I'm not a child. I know how to fucking spell." We both lie there for a moment on our backs, staring into the night and I don't know about him, but despite my anger I'm beginning to wonder if there's anything I can say or do to get him back on my side of the bed. "Why not? We've done it before. All of a sudden you can't --"

"It's not that," he says, and now there's something more beneath his words, something a little more telling than just I can't. He sounds like a teenager who's mad, trying to tell his mom that he's washing his bedsheets because he had a wet dream without just coming out and saying it and she's not picking up his hints. "Justin. I'm sorry," he sighs, and I want to hold him more than ever. "It's just ... it's not that I don't want to, I do, but I can't." In a tiny voice he adds, "Please don't make me say it out loud."

"Say what?" I blurt out, because that's just how I am, mouth moving faster than my brain can think. Just tell me, Lance, I think, frowning at the thin strip of light across the far wall, right above the mirror on the dresser, light from where our curtains don't quite meet. Just say you can't get it up and I'll kiss away the embarrassment and hug you tight and tell you it's okay, because it

is, even if I've been waiting DAYS for this, it's okay, I can wait longer.

But Lance pushes up from the bed and I hear him stumble over our bags in the dark, cursing under his breath. "Lance," I tell him, sitting up even though I know he can't see me. "It's okay, baby. Really, I understand. It's fine --"

"It's not fine," Lance cries, angry, and he slams the bathroom door before I can say anything else.

Fuck. I throw myself back against the pillows, pissed to all hell. Here I am, trying to be nice about it, trying to ignore the blood surging through my body, the lust and the desire and the passion, and he just up and leaves. Like it's nothing. Like I'm not so damn hard for him I won't be able to sleep on my stomach tonight, not without poking a hole through the bed. Like he's the only one that's disappointed. Guess I ain't getting any tonight. I should use my hand and get over it already.

But I don't. I try to forget the way he feels in my arms, the way he pressed me to the bed and sighed my name when we first came back to the hotel, his sardonic eyes and that secretive smile of his -- who am I kidding? I love him and I want him so badly, my body hums for him. It's going to be a long, sleepless night.

Just when I think he's not going to come out of the bathroom, he's just going to lock himself in there for the rest of the night because he's too damn stubborn to talk about it, I hear the light click off and the door open. Thank you, I pray, even though the mood's shot to hell now and my balls throb with a dull ache like someone reached between my legs and twisted them til they threatened to fall off. As Lance slides between the sheets again, he mutters, "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I tell him, and it is, because at least he's here again. At least he's laying next to me, and when I roll over he's in my arms and of course it's okay now, of course it's fine. I hug him close, his arms wrapping around my waist and his head resting against my chest, and I pull him against me. If I can't have more tonight, I'll take whatever I can get.

He's trembling in my arms, and when I kiss him, his lips taste like toothpaste. I feel his hands fist in the small of my back and he whispers, "I want to, Justin, don't think I don't. I just, I don't know, I just can't."

"It happens," I say, like I'm not disappointed, but it's never happened to us before and I'm mad, though not at him. It's not his fault. "Maybe it's just stress. The tour and the album and your movie ..." I let my voice trail off because I don't know if it's stress or not, I don't know what it is, he was fiery and fierce earlier, kissing and stroking and all over me, and then poof! Nothing. Nothing at all.

"I don't know," he whispers, his breath tickling across my nipple

and dammit the fuck, I'm getting hard again. Just by holding him. He does that to me.

When he tries to pull away I hold him tighter. "At least let me hold you," I tell him. He sighs because he knows I'm mad. "Jesus, Lance, at least give me that."

"I'm sorry," he says again, burrowing his head against my neck. His skin is so soft beneath my hands and if I hug him any closer, he'll be behind me.

"It's okay," I say, kissing his forehead, but they're just little kisses, I don't want to get myself worked up for nothing. "Maybe in the morning?" I ask, hopeful. Lie to me if you have to, I want to add. Give me something to look forward to at least.

We've been together long enough that he can practically read my mind, or maybe he feels my budding erection pressing against his thigh and he feels bad. I hope he feels bad, because I sure as hell do, I feel fucking horrid, and it's not his fault, I shouldn't think shit like that, I'm just frustrated and horny and I hate feeling like this. It's not his fault. "We can try again in a little while, if you want," he offers.

I love him, I do. I kiss him again and this time he leans back, pressing his lips to mine as if he wants me to ache all night long. "When you're ready," I say. He draws intricate patterns along my back, moves his leg against my cock until it's like a steel rod between us, and then he kisses down my chest, nipping at my nipples and swirling his tongue around my belly button. "Lance," I gasp when he rolls me over onto my back and takes me into his mouth. He's warm and wet and I'm so close that all I need is a few hard thrusts into him before I come, fisting my hands in his hair and relieved, oh God relieved, because at least I got it out of my system, at least I got a little something from him tonight.

"I love you," I breathe as he crawls back into my arms. His mouth is sour from my own juices but I smother him with kisses and tell him he's my boy, because he is, and I love him, because I do.

* * *

In the morning we're running late -- we don't even get a chance to cuddle before Chris is there, banging on our door and shouting at us to get our lazy asses out of bed, the bus is leaving in twenty minutes whether we're on it or not. "Get up," Lance tells me, pushing me out of bed. I laugh and kiss the tip of his nose, and he blinks at me owlishly, his eyes wide and sleepy, his hair all mussied til it's sticking up every which way. He pouts. "Don't laugh at me."

"You're cute," I tell him, and that makes him smile. Neither of us mention last night.

I brush my teeth, staring at myself in the dingy bathroom

mirror that starts to fog over when he gets in the shower. "Can you turn that water off?" he asks, raising his voice over the rushing sound of the shower. "I don't have any pressure here."

Spitting a mouthful of toothpaste into the sink, I rinse my mouth and turn off the faucet. Then I lean over the counter, dangerously close to the mirror, and study the dark smudge of my hair. It's cut as short as it can possibly be and still be hair, but I see the ends are beginning to curl already and I just want to shave the whole mess off. I did that the first time, to get rid of the damn curls. "I need a haircut," I say, not because Lance cares but just to talk. I like this time in the morning, when it's just the two of us and we don't talk about anything but haircuts and stupid shit like that. I can pretend we've been married for years, we're that comfortable with each other, which makes me hope that one day we really are married and we're still like this. I want that more than anything else out of life.

"Leave your hair alone," Lance says, splashing in the shower behind me. "There's nothing to cut."

"But it's starting to curl," I tell him. He doesn't reply because he likes my curls, he always has, and I know he secretly wants me to forget about cutting it and let them grow back. Secretly, I've thought about doing that just for him.

Frowning at myself in the mirror, I pick at the tuft of hair along my chin and think I should shave it off. Just for something different. But I stopped shaving when I wanted to give up that boyish look a few months back, when the curls went, and I don't have a razor with me anymore. Lance does, I think, and I know he does because even though he's sporting that grizzly morning-after look himself these days, he still carries the electric razor his mom bought him for Christmas last year. Every now and then he gets it out and shaves off whatever's managed to grow on his chin, even though I tell him I like the rough and tumble look on him. I think he's afraid it'll turn into something like what JC's trying to pull off, and that's why he shaves it off every couple weeks, whether he needs to or not. Heaven forbid he does that shit JC does, with that stupid little patch of hair beneath his lower lip that looks like a shaved bikini line. He can't think he looks good like that, can he?

"Can I use your razor?" I ask, already reaching for his little black bag sitting on the edge of the sink. What's he going to say, no?

Surprisingly, he says just that. "You're not shaving your head," he starts, and I laugh because that would be cute, me trying to chop off what little I have. I can picture it now, my hands behind my head, that damn razor buzzing in my ears, and who knows what the hell I'd look like then.

"I'm not," I tell him. His black bag is overflowing with all sorts of stuff -- toothpaste, his toothbrush, a pair of my earrings (so that's where they went), three little black combs like the ones you get at a barber shop, chapstick (also mine), cologne, one of those

tiny hotel soaps he swiped from the last Hilton we stayed at, a trial size bottle of shampoo that reads EconoLodge (even though we haven't been in one of those for a while now). Beneath it all is the razor, and while I'm pulling it out, I hear the unmistakable rattle of pills. Aspirin, I think, because I have aspirin in with my shit, too, a huge bottle of K-Mart brand Excedrin that has all sorts of pills in it, Advil and Tylenol and Aleve, even some Motrin from when Britney hung out with us in New York last summer. But these pills aren't in one of those over-the-counter bottles, they're prescription, and I frown at the label because I don't know what Effexor is. Ask him, I think, but I didn't know he was taking anything regularly and part of me knows he'll get pissy that I found them, there's a reason he didn't tell me about them in the first place, and I'm sure it'll start a fight so he won't have to tell me now.

The date on the label is just a few weeks back, right around when the tour started, and maybe these are just stress pills. Take one tablet three times a day... damn, I'm with him round the clock and I've never seen him take these things. Last night I was there every step of the way, from the bus to dinner to the show, and then in the limo and up here to the room -- I was with him all the time. Unless he's not taking them.

I open the bottle and shake out a handful of the shield-shaped pills into my palm. The bottle's more than half-empty; if he's not taking them, he's throwing them out three at a time, because I can see just by looking at them that they're disappearing right on schedule. He came in here last night, remember? After he couldn't get it up, he came in here and brushed his teeth and he probably took one then.

Behind me the shower cuts off. I dump the pills back into the bottle and twist the cap on quickly -- I don't want him to think I'm snooping, not after last night. I hate arguing with him about anything, anything at all, and I just know these pills are asking for it. I shove the bottle back into his bag and rummage around in it some more, just to cover them up with the rest of his things. Then I put the razor back in, because I'm not interested in shaving anymore. Effexor. What the hell could that be for?

When he steps out of the shower, his body already toweled dry and his hands shaking the water from his hair, I lean back against the sink and smile at him. I let my gaze drift down his naked body -- he's so damn fine, and he knows it, I know he knows it, he's standing there grinning at me because he knows he's turning me on. "Come here, sexy," I growl, forgetting about the pills.

He slips into my embrace and kisses me until I feel his cock stir against my thigh, and wasn't I right, didn't I say maybe in the morning? He was just tired last night, that's all. We both were. But now we're running late and we can't do anything about this now. I sigh and pull him close, cupping his ass in my hands. Resting my forehead against his, I look into his apple green eyes and tell him, "Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if the bus did leave without us."

He laughs, a rich sound that makes me smile. "There's always

tonight," he tells me. Then he grows serious and picks at the collar of my shirt, not meeting my eyes. "Justin, last night --"

"Hey, it happens," I tell him. "Stop apologizing already, Lance. It's okay." To prove my point I kiss him again, my lips lingering against his until he's good and hard now, just like I was last night, and he sighs my name and I know he's aching for me. "I wish we could take care of this," I whisper, moving my knee until it's between his legs and squeezing his ass in both hands.

"Do we have a few more minutes?" he asks, and I start to say maybe when Chris bangs on our door again. With an exasperated sigh, Lance pulls away from me. I let him go. "Guess not."

"Tonight," I remind him. Then I slap his ass once, the smack of my hand on his flesh a loud crack in the bathroom, and he laughs as he dances away from me. Tonight.

* * *

Effexor. I'm on the bus with Joey, listening to my discman while he leafs through a magazine, something JC picked up at the last gas station we stopped at, and I can't get that bottle with its small peach-colored pills out of my mind. If Lance is sick, why doesn't he tell me? I mean, shit, he's only my fucking boyfriend. We've been together two years now and I thought he told me everything. Maybe he's going to tell you, I think, closing my eyes as I listen to the music that fills my ears. He just hasn't had a chance yet. But the date on those pills was almost a month ago, so what the hell is he waiting for?

I should just ask him, but I'm scared because then he'll think I was going through his stuff, which I wasn't, not really. He'll think I'm just being possessive or nosy and he'll get mad, and I don't want that. Before the tour started up he spent too much time on the set of that new movie of his, and I tried to be understanding, I tried to tell myself he was chasing a dream and living it up and let the boy enjoy himself already, Justin, but those thoughts didn't comfort me when I was a million miles away, lying in an empty bed and aching to hold him close. The one time I mentioned something to him about it, he snapped, and the whole conversation melted into an argument that left me crying into my pillow once I hung up the phone. He apologized, of course -- called me first thing in the morning crying himself, saying he was sorry, it was the movie and the stress and he just had an awful day, and then he couldn't even sleep because we argued and he was so damn sorry, how could I not love him for that? But I can still hear his bitter words, and the movie may be over but he's still stressed, I can see it in the lines along his mouth and brow, he's always frowning anymore, so I'm not going to mention the pills at all. Not unless I have to.

Beside me Joey starts to giggle, and because I'm not really listening to the music and I want something to distract me, I glance over his shoulder to see what's struck him funny. He's looking at an

ad, one of those you see in Time or Life, with an idyllic scene of people too damn happy to be real surrounded by a sea of fine print. Turning off the discman, I grin at Joey's smile. It's infectious. "What's so funny?"

"These ads," he tells me, and then he clears his throat like he does before he starts to read something. He does that around his baby, when we see her, and he looks so much like a father then, it's scary. "Side effects include," he starts, raising his eyebrows at me, "dry mouth, nervousness, dizziness, sweating, nausea, impotence, and death. Do not take if you have suicidal tendencies --"

I laugh. "Jesus," I whisper.

"Wasn't that a group back in the day?" Joey asks. I shrug -- I've never heard of them. He continues to read. "If any of these side effects occur, contact your doctor at once." Then he starts to laugh and points at the magazine, showing me the ad. "If you die, you're supposed to contact your doctor? What's up with that? I don't think he can help you much then."

My heart stops when I see the drug name written at the top of the ad in thick pink italics. Effexor. Holy shit. "What's this?" I ask, taking the magazine from him. I try to read everything at once. Depression, the ad reads. It's an anti-depressant. Like Prozac?

"Hey!" Joey cries, trying to wrest the magazine from me, but I'm holding it tight and he doesn't want to rip it because then JC will have a shit fit so he just settles for pouting at me while I read the ad. "I was reading that."

"This is for depression?" I ask, as if he knows.

He shrugs. "I don't know," he says. "Give me back the magazine." When I don't hand it over right away, he sighs dramatically. "Justin? I had it first."

Laughter from the front of the bus reaches back to us, Lance and Chris playing a stupid video game, and I frown at the ad. Depression? Is Lance depressed? Why doesn't he tell me this shit? I want to know. I should show him the ad and make him tell me what he's taking the damn drug for. Depression, Justin. It's written right here in black and white. What do you THINK he's taking it for? It's not a fucking vitamin. Beside me Joey asks, "Justin?" When I look up at him, he holds out his hand. "The magazine?"

The laughter erupts again, and JC hollers at them to keep it down, he's trying to write. I can see Lance's leg stretched across the aisle up front, and when he leans over for his soda on the table, he glances back at me, smiling. Is he depressed? I didn't think so, but his smile fades as I stare at him, thoughtful. With a quick pucker he blows me a kiss and whispers, "Love you." I can read his lips. Depressed ... I force a small smile, enough to make him laugh as he sits back. Joey tries for the magazine again and this time he manages to pluck it from my fingers but I don't care.

"I'm going to lay down," I hear myself say, my voice far away to my own ears. Joey nods as he turns back to the magazine, and I push myself up from the seat and make my way to the bunks along the back of the bus. I've got to lie down. Right now I don't even want to think too much -- just sleep and maybe when I wake up everything will be the way it's supposed to be, and my boyfriend will be who I think he is and not some stranger taking pills because he's depressed. When did that start? The bottle's only a month old but how many bottles were there before this one?

From up front Lance laughs again, and the sound follows me to the back of the bus.

* * *

I lie down on one of the lower bunks and push myself as far as I can against the wall of the bus, which vibrates against my butt and shoulders in a way that soothes me for some strange reason. Depressed. I still can't get that out of my head.

A little while later I've almost managed to drift off when I hear Lance's laugh, closer this time, and then a thin screech as he pulls aside the curtain that separates the bunks from the rest of the bus. He closes the curtain again and I feel the mattress shift beneath his weight when he lays down beside me. It's a tight squeeze in the bunk, which is nothing more than a box cut out of the wall with a small curtain that can be drawn when we sleep, but it's just the same as a narrow bed and we've fit the two of us in these things before. I'm on my side, my arms crossed in front of my chest, and he rolls onto his side, as well, moving as close to me as he can. The tip of his nose touches mine and his breath tickles my upper lip. I know he's watching me.

When I don't open my eyes, he scoots closer still and drapes a leg over my hip, an arm over my shoulder, and without moving he kisses me, a quick press of lips that he uses to wake me up sometimes. Tiny kisses, each one lingering, each one longer than the last. I love waking to that.

But I'm not quite asleep yet, so I open my eyes and look at him, his closed eyelids almost translucent and pinkish in the low light that reaches around him into the bunk. His eyelashes are long and curved, each one beautiful, and I could count them, each and every one, I've done that before. I've watched him sleep by the early light and counted his eyelashes, and then brushed my fingertip over them to feel how they flutter against my skin. I've smoothed down his eyebrows, too, which aren't as unruly as mine. They feel like fuzzy caterpillars, and the one time I rubbed them the wrong way they all stood up and he giggled beneath my touch.

He senses me looking because he opens his eyes, too, and for a moment we stare at each other, lips pressed together, eyes locked, and then he laughs. "You're awake," he says, moving away slightly. He nuzzles his nose along the side of my own. "I thought I'd have

to work to get you up." His hand rubs down the front of my jeans and I laugh. All he has to do is look at me and I'm up, if you know what I mean. Beneath his hand my cock stirs, suddenly interested.

"I'm not sleeping," I tell him. He grins at that. Before I can stop myself, I ask, "Are you depressed?"

His smile disappears. God, Justin ... I didn't mean to say it like that. Between us the words sound like something my mom might have said back when I was thirteen and upset because Britney wouldn't give me the time of day. "Lance," I stammer, sure he's going to pull away. I don't want him to leave. "I mean --"

"You found the pills," he says, his voice even, and it's not a question but I nod anyway. I can't meet his gaze anymore, and his hand still rests against my crotch but I expect him to stop touching me at any minute now. I'm sure I've pissed him off.

But his hand eases around my waist, slipping beneath my shirt to caress my stomach and that surprises me. "They're for stress, Justin," he tells me, and I pout because that's not what the ad said, the ad said depression loud and clear. "I was a little on edge when the movie ended, that's all. You know that."

I do. He wasn't himself the last few weeks of filming, and we'd argue on the phone every night. Of course he said he was sorry, he's always saying that anymore, I hate to hear the words because he shouldn't have to say it, I'll always forgive him, no matter what. When we got together to rehearse the tour the first thing he did was hug me tight and whisper he was sorry, so sorry, and I only wanted to hold him close, I missed him something fierce, so I just said it was okay because it was, it's always okay. But he's taking pills now? That bothers me. "How long have you taken them?" I ask. God, I hate how nosy I sound but I can't help it. I love him.

"It's just this one bottle," he says, and that's not an answer but I nod like it's enough. "The doctor said to try it for a month, see if it helps any."

"Does it?" I want to know.

He shrugs. "I think so," he tells me. "I'm not so down all the time, you know? I don't get stressed about every little thing I can't control." For a moment he watches me, and I'm still pouting, staring at the faint traces of hair along his cheek, and then he raises my chin so he can look me in the eye and he asks, "Are you okay with this?"

Like I can tell him no. "I guess," I whisper. What I want to say is that he shouldn't need the pills. He has me. He should come to me -- he should ask me to take the weight of the world off his shoulders when it gets too heavy for him, he should ask me to let the world turn without him when he barely manages to hang on. He does that for me. Why can't he let me do it for him, too?

But I don't say that, and he starts kissing the pout away, his hands rubbing me in all the right places, his lips eager and hungry

on my own, and even though the bunk is cramped we manage to make up for last night. It's a tight fit, the bottom of the bunk above me hits my hips with every thrust, and I can hear Joey in the main part of the bus, mimicking my moans, but I lose myself in Lance and his hands and mouth make the rest of the world disappear.

Why can't I do that for him?

* * *

He laughs more, or maybe it's just that I know he's taking the pills and I'm looking for proof that they're working for him. I want him to be happy, more than I want anything else in the world. I'd give anything for his smile, which he hid too often before, I realize that looking back on the summer. He was always tired it seemed, always telling me everything was okay -- "How are you?" I'd ask. Okay. "What are you doing?" Nothing. "What are you doing later?" Nothing. As if it was too much trouble to tell me anything. As if it took too much effort.

But I can see the change in him -- his eyes sparkle like he's just a little kid and this is all new to him, he makes it new again, every rehearsal, every show, it's like he's flying high through it all. Nothing bothers him anymore, it seems, and when my damn harness twists around JC's one day at rehearsal, Lance thinks it's the funniest thing he's ever seen. "I'm glad you're laughing about this," I growl, pushing JC away as he tries to untangle the cords. "Josh, this isn't helping --"

"Stop moving, Justin," JC tells me, yanking on my harness. The thick cord is snaked around my thighs and the bitch bites into my skin, right by my balls, leaving a burn that I know is going to sting for days.

I punch JC just to get him to step back, and from center stage Lance is sitting with Joey and Chris, the three of them laughing at us. "Shut up," I tell them.

"It is kind of funny," Joey concedes, watching as we struggle with the harnesses. "You'd think you guys knew how to use these things by now."

"Fuck you." JC pulls at the cord again, and I punch him harder this time. I just want to get out of this damn thing already. "That's it," I say, balancing precariously on one leg as I try to extract the other from the harness, "I quit. Get me out of here."

"Justin," Lance starts, but I manage to get one leg free and I twist around, trying to dislodge the other one.

JC tells me to stop it. "You're just getting us more fucked up," he says, but I'm halfway out and there's no way I'm stopping now. "Justin --"

"Fuck you all," I say, because I've had it. When I try to pull my

other leg free, I fall backwards and land hard on my ass, but the cord moves down my thigh and I manage to kick it off. Lance laughs again, and I glare at him from the floor. "You too," I tell him. "I'm glad you find this so goddamn funny."

He sighs between giggles. "Justin, don't be that way --" But I'm already on my feet and walking away. Let JC figure out how he's going to get out of those damn contraptions. Let the others laugh at him -- let Lance laugh. I need time out.

Backstage I get a Coke from the cooler and throw myself down on the floor against the wall, my knees pulled up, my arms on my knees, a look on my face that dares anyone to talk to me. No one does. Maybe I should take a few of Lance's happy pills. God knows I need them today.

Lance comes backstage looking for me, just like I knew he would. He eases down beside me and takes the Coke from my hand. I let him have it. He takes a long drink and from the corner of my eye I watch his Adam's apple as he swallows. He's got an amazing neck. I think it's so sexy, and despite the way he laughed at me, I just want to kiss him, right here, right now. But I can't -- too many stagehands around us, and we can't be overly friendly in public. Not when you don't know who's watching. Look at Britney -- the poor girl gets a little frustrated one night before a show and now anyone can download a file of her cussing out the sound tech, recorded for all posterity. Sometimes I hate being like this. It's like living on MTV's *The Real World* only it's not real, is it? Not when I can't hug him or kiss him when I want to. It's a dream, but it's not mine. Not anymore and sure as hell not today.

When he hands back the soda, I drink from it only so I can feel the warmth of his mouth lingering on the thin aluminum, and I lick the taste of him from the pop-top. "You're pissy today," he says, as if I didn't know this. When I don't answer, he adds, "I'm sorry I laughed."

"Stop saying that!" It comes out harsher than I intended, and he frowns at me as I glare at the floor, unable to meet his gaze. I didn't mean to yell at him.

"Saying what?" he asks, his quiet voice more reprimand than my angry shout.

I sigh. "Stop saying you're sorry all the time. You don't have to apologize for everything, Lance. It's not all your fault."

"I'm --"

"Stop it!" This time I scrunch my face up at him and he laughs. That's what I wanted -- I don't want him mad at me. Hell, I don't want to be mad at him myself. I don't like it when we fight. "You say it again, I'm going to have to hurt you."

He leans close to me and his breath tickles my neck as he whispers, "Is that a promise?"

Now I'm smiling, too, and the rest of the afternoon is washed away when he eases a hand around behind me, where it presses against the small of my back. "I didn't mean to be pissy," I tell him. Not to you.

"Sokay," he says, taking the soda back. Another sip and he tells me, "You just need to get away for a little bit, I know. Trust me, I know."

What's he mean by that? The pills, I think. They help him get away. I don't like that.

* * *

It's been a few days since I found the pills and sometimes I think he's not quite the same boy I'm used to. Sometimes he's too talkative, like he's got so much to say and he has to get it all out because he's afraid of losing it, and tonight he's so wound up that I almost ask him where the off switch is. But I don't -- I just lie on the bed and flip through the channels on the hotel television, all ten local stations and HBO, while he talks to Britney on the phone. He's talking so damn fast I can't follow the conversation anymore, and I'm pretty sure he stopped breathing five minutes ago. I don't know why Brit doesn't just say goodnight and hang up on him. He's like the Energizer Bunny, keeps going and going ...

And that thought makes me smile, because I have a few good ideas on how we can use that energy, so I click off the TV and scoot down a little on the bed until I'm stretched out and comfortable. He's sitting beside me, still talking on the phone, but he glances back at me and flashes me a quick grin like he's going to hang up soon. But the rate he's talking, I'm going to have to take matters into my own hands. I start by rubbing my crotch through the thick denim of my jeans. I'm already hard -- that Energizer Bunny thought got me started -- and when I ease down the zipper, I moan softly, just loud enough to get his attention.

It works. Lance's words cut off in mid-sentence as he watches my hand slip into my open fly, stroking my cock through my underwear. One by one I undo the snaps of my boxers, until the soldier down there is standing up and saluting through the fabric, and I take my erection in one hand, wrapping my fingers around the thick shaft and moaning again when I thrust into my palm. I can see the red tip standing out of my fist, and I hear Lance gulp into the phone. "Gotta go," he mutters. "Nice talking to you, Brit. Justin says bye." I hear the phone click off.

And then he's pressing me to the bed, his hand pushing mine away so he can hold me, and I thrust into his hand as I silence him with a kiss. "Justin," he sighs, his other hand already working at getting his own pants off, and I catch his face in both hands and hold him to me as we kiss.

"Shit," he mutters, pulling away. When he climbs off of me, I

feel naked and empty and so alone ... he picks the phone up from the bed and throws it to the floor, and then he starts zipping up his pants. Wait a minute --

"Lance," I say, confused. Hello? Correct me if I'm wrong but aren't we in the middle of something here? He flops back to the bed and stares at the ceiling, anger bunching his jaw, his arms crossed against his chest as if a shield to keep me out. I manage to squeeze my erection back into my pants and zip up my jeans, as well. "What's the matter?" I want to know. I hope I don't sound as frustrated as I feel.

"I can't," he tells me, and when I cuddle up beside him, he pulls away. "Justin, I'm sorry --"

"I told you not to say that," I remind him, my voice playful.

But he glares at me. "Well," he cries, "I'm sorry about that, too. Okay? I'm sorry about everything, Justin."

I don't like the sudden despair I see in his eyes. "Lance --"

"I'm not perfect," he says, as if I asked. "Sometimes I can't deal with it all and I wish I could. I wish I could be like you and just take everything in stride but I can't. It's not that easy for me."

"I don't do that," I say, sitting up. Does he really think I'm as invincible as the media has made me out to be? "Lance, it's hard for me, too. Christ, the tour and the album and all that shit." He stands up and kicks the phone as he walks to the bathroom. "Baby, don't you walk away from this," I warn him. "You can't do this to me."

He laughs, and there's nothing warm or caring in the sound. "Use your hand," he tells me. "You might as well anyway, you know? I can't get it up anymore."

For one heart-wrenching moment, I think maybe it's me. Maybe I'm the reason he can't get it up, maybe I'm the one who's been making this hard on him. Maybe he can't deal with me. I watch him disappear into the bathroom and before he can close the door I ask him in a tiny voice, "Lance, is it me?"

The door stops before it shuts completely, and I hear him breathing. Please, I pray. "Tell me," I plead. I need to know. I feel hot tears sting my eyes but I tell myself I'm not going to cry. "If it's me, Lance, tell me and I'll do better, I promise. I'll do whatever I need to do to make you happy. Please."

Dammit, I am crying, and when he comes back out of the bathroom, he's crying, too, his face mottled and red and I reach for him as he hugs me, holding me so tight I almost can't breathe. "It's not you, hon," he whispers, and his hands are strong along my back, I can't imagine him being weak and unable to cope with anything, he feels so strong to me. "It's not you, Justin. God, please don't think that. Some days you're all that keeps me going."

"I want to be that every day," I tell him, and he's still crying but I kiss him and pull him into the bed with me, and this time it goes right. I hold him close and this time he doesn't turn away.

* * *

After a while I think he's stopped taking the pills. Or they aren't working anymore, because he can't wake up in the mornings and he stops laughing so much. He's back to looking tired all the time, even though I know he's getting enough sleep -- every night he lies beside me, his breathing deep and even, while I hold him in my arms, and I feel his gaze on me long after I've fallen asleep. But by morning we've drifted apart like ships in the night, and he's anchored to the other side of the bed, held down by blankets that have twisted around his legs and bunch between us in the middle of the bed. I get up first and let him sleep -- he looks so worn out, like he's been fighting all night long and just finally dropped off a few hours before I wake, and I don't want to bother him. When he sleeps is the only time his face is smooth anymore, and I'd let him sleep for weeks if I thought it would help him any.

I shower and brush my teeth, listening through the half-open bathroom door to see if the running water has woken him up, but it never does. And somewhere between Seattle and Detroit, I find the rest of his pills.

I'm not snooping. I don't snoop. I'm just out of toothpaste and it's not even six yet, too early to wake one of the security guards and send them out to the local CVS for a tube of AquaFresh. I'll have to stop and get some before tomorrow, but Lance's travel bag is right there beside me on the sink, he's asleep in the other room still and all I have to do is open the bag and borrow his toothpaste, I've done it a million times before. But I look at the bag with a wary expression, like it's a snake and it's rearing to strike, and I hold my toothbrush in front of me to ward off the attack. Well? a voice inside asks. What are you waiting for? Brush your damn teeth and then wake him up. What's he gonna do, yell at you?

He won't, not for using his toothpaste, I know that. But I'm scared to open the bag and find another bottle of the pills, because I know he's still taking them. Since I found the first bottle, he hasn't hidden them anymore, and he swallows them in front of me at odd times during the day. Once in a while it's so frequent I ask to see the pills, just to make sure they're the same ones -- surely he can't be taking that many of them. He always smiles as if he's indulging me, and there's always one shield-shaped pill in his palm, even though they seem to be losing their effect.

From the hotel room I hear him sigh, a lusty sound in sleep, and I close the bathroom door quietly. When it latches shut I set the toothbrush down and unzip his bag, my heart thudding so loud in my chest that it's the only thing I hear in the tiny bathroom. Any minute I expect him to knock on the door. Any minute I expect him to find me --

The toothpaste is right on top. I snatch it up and start to zip the bag (I'm not going to look, I'm not, I tell myself I won't, it's none of my damn business) when I see that bottle again. It's shoved down into the bag at an angle and I can read half of the label, only instead of three times a day I read once at night and I'm like what the fuck? Maybe he did switch pills. I pull the bottle out and this isn't Effexor, it's Sonata, and I don't even know what that shit's for. So he's not taking the other stuff? Now I'm curious, and even though I know he's going to bust in here any minute and find me rifling through his bag, I can't help but look.

There's the bottle of Effexor, down in the bottom of the bag, and it's full again so this must be a refill. Then there's this Sonata, which are green and white capsules that look so pretty in the bright light above the sink. And some tiny black triangles that just look plain evil, dark blue capsules, small pink pills, even blue diamonds that read Pfizer and I tell myself it's not Viagra, it can't be, but that's what's typed on the bottle. I don't know what the others are for. I can't imagine ... ask him, my mind whispers, and I answer, Yeah, right. I'm not asking him. How would that sound? "Baby, I needed to borrow your toothpaste and just happened to stumble upon a fucking pharmacy in your toiletries -- what the hell's up with that?" I'm sure that'll go over about as big as Britney's see-through outfit at last year's VMAs.

So I cram the bottles back into his bag and brush my teeth as quickly as I can, missing the back molars completely because I'm wondering what the fuck is he doing with Viagra? I mean, sure, he's been a little limp lately but I thought it was the stress and maybe those pills -- didn't Joey say one of the side effects was impotence? But we always manage to get a groove on, and I can live with a case of blue balls every now and then. Fuck, he makes me hard just thinking about him, I can't have him 24/7, I know this. But Viagra? I frown at my reflection in the mirror and think he couldn't even tell me what was wrong, how the hell did he tell a doctor? "Sometimes I'm in the mood and things are going hot and heavy with me and my boy and I think we're doing great but nothing's stirring down below, you catch my drift?" He probably called that one in -- I can't imagine him telling someone face to face he can't get it up.

But what about the other pills? What are they for?

* * *

He's still asleep when I unlock the bathroom door, but I stand there in the doorway for a long moment and watch him, curled into the blankets like he's trying to hide from the rest of the world. I think of waking him but I should let him sleep -- we've got about a half hour before we really need to get our asses in gear, and he's been so damn grumpy in the mornings anymore, like he stayed up too late and wants nothing more than to sleep in. I don't have the heart to wake him.

As quietly as I can, I tiptoe across the room and rummage through my duffel bag. After a few heart-stopping moments I find my cell phone and go back into the bathroom. With the door locked once more, I pull out one of his bottles and dial the pharmacy number on it. It's still early and I know they won't answer, but I try anyway. The area code is in Mississippi, and we're on the west coast so I'm hoping ...

A girl answers, sounding like she'd rather be anywhere other than behind the pill counter at Target. Thinking fast, I tell her, "I'm cleaning out my medicine cabinet and you wouldn't believe the shit I've got in here. Oops ..." She laughs and says that's okay, she's heard worse. With a grin, I ask, "Well, maybe you can tell me what these things are for? I don't really remember. If I tell you the names? So I know what to keep and what to throw out."

"Sure," she says. So I grab the first bottle, the tiny black triangles labeled Atarax, and she says, "Anxiety. Panic attacks, you know? Stage fright." You're joking me. Next it's the Sonata -- "Sleeping pills," she tells me. Which is why he's so hard to get up in the morning, I think. I put aside the Effexor and Viagra -- I know what they're for -- and then it's the pink pills. "Paxil. Anti-depressant," she says, and I know she's thinking I'm a basket case to have all this shit lying around. Not me, I want to tell her, my boyfriend. "That one's good for social anxiety, too. Like dealing with lots of people? Some businessmen take it before presentations and stuff." I nod, even though she can't see me. So he needs two anti-depressants? Two anti-anxiety pills? My God. The last pills, the dark blue capsules, are Xenical. "For weight loss."

Numb, I thank her and hang up. Weight loss? Sleeping pills and anxiety pills and fucking depression pills ... and that damn impotence pill to top it all off. Does he take these all at once? A snippet of song plays through my head on an endless loop -- "Doctor, please, some more of these. Outside the door, she took four more ..." I shake my head to clear it and put all the bottles back in his bag. I'm not going to say anything. I can't, if I don't want him to get mad at me. But I'm going to watch him. He's not himself anymore, all these pills aren't helping, and I'm going to watch him to make sure he doesn't get worse.

I'll say something then. Before it does get worse.

* * *

It's the Xenical that sticks with me. Those dark blue capsules, like sapphires in the bottle. For weight loss ... who the hell told him he needed to lose weight? I like him the way he is, with that ass that won't quit and those arms that make me feel safe and if Joey made any crack about his weight I'll fucking kill him. Or JC, or Chris, or hell, even Wade -- I'll find out and hurt the bastard. At rehearsals I keep an ear out, turning to watch every time someone talks to him, listening to every single thing that's said, each corrected step, each "Jeez, Lance, you're dead on your feet today,"

each "Can't you dance?" That comes from JC, and before he even manages to push away from Lance I'm in his face, shoving him back and telling him to lay the fuck off him. "He's half asleep," JC retorts, anger botching his face. "He can't stand up much less dance, and you're yelling at me? Whatever."

Behind me Lance is staring at the floor, his hands twisting nervously in the front of his shirt, and when I pull him aside he looks up at me with wide eyes. "I'm sor --" he starts, but grins when I glare at him. "I'm just a little tired, Justin. That's it."

Is it? I want to ask. Or is it the pills? How many are you taking again? "Lance," I sigh, because I told myself I'd watch and I'd step in when it got too bad, didn't I? And is it too bad now? Maybe. With a frown I suggest, "Maybe you're not getting enough sleep?" Mention the sleeping pills, I pray. Then I can say maybe you're taking too many and you won't have to know I found them.

But he doesn't. Instead he shrugs and says softly, "Maybe."

I sigh again. "Maybe it's the pills?" I ask, meaning the Effexor, but the sharp look he gives me says he's thinking about the Sonata and the Paxil and whatever else it is he's got in his system right now. "Do they make you drowsy?"

"No," he whispers. "I'm fine, Justin."

If you're fine, you wouldn't be taking the pills, I think, but I don't say that out loud because some things you can't take back. Biting my lower lip, I ask him, "Would you tell me if you weren't?"

For a moment something wavers in his gaze, and he wants to tell me, I see it in his eyes, but then he blinks and it's gone. "Yeah," he says, and he nods as if he believes it. "I'd tell you."

You're lying. But I don't say that, either, so maybe he's not the only one.

* * *

It's gone too far when he yells at Joey. Joey, who's his best friend out of the group. Joey, who he's so damn close to, I'd be jealous if I didn't know that Joey was painfully straight or that Lance loves me like he does. Joey, who you can't be mad at because he's like a little kid, so eager to please, always joking and laughing and making you feel like you're the only one in the world when he's talking to you. Joey. He yells at Joey and I know. It's got to stop.

It's one of those mornings where we don't want to get up -- the tour is starting to drag us down, and I lay in bed beside Lance until someone bangs on our door, telling us to get moving. Finally I get going, but he's still asleep even after I get out of the shower, and it takes all I have to wake him up. The pills do that to him, make him too tired to get out of bed, and I hear him in the shower just

standing there, letting the water slap him awake. God, baby, I think, staring at myself in the mirror as it fogs up, brushing my teeth so I'll have some excuse to stay in the bathroom with him. You need to stop this. I need to find the balls to make you stop it. We can't live like this.

He has eye drops to take away the red but he still looks like shit, his eyes bloodshot and slipping closed because he's not sleeping well, his damp hair in spikes that look like they fought with a comb and lost, his skin so pale ... when did he get so pale? And so thin -- his cheeks are starting to look gaunt and ghastly like JC's and he needs to eat, I'm going to make him eat, I'm going to take those weight loss pills and throw them away and get my boy back.

From the corner of my eye I watch him, waiting to see him take that handful of pills I know he swallows, but he's cautious and he doesn't take them while I'm in the bathroom. "Justin," he says with a sigh, and it breaks my heart to hear it, he sounds so desolate. "Can I have some privacy?" When I start to speak, he kisses my cheek and whispers, "Please?"

How can I say no to him? He closes the bathroom door behind me and I should bang the door down, I should bust up in there and rip those pills from his hand and throw them out the fucking window, but I don't because I tell myself he's old enough to know when enough's enough, isn't he?

When we leave the hotel he's wearing a pair of sunglasses that hide his eyes, and I can tell by the sour twist of his mouth that he'd rather still be in bed. As we board the bus he's in front of me, stumbling up the steps, and I keep a hand on his back to steady him. On the bus Joey's sitting near the front, and he looks up as we start down the aisle. With a wink at me he asks, "What do you boys do all night long that makes it so hard to get up in the morning?" Before I can answer, he laughs and adds, "Or maybe you do get it up in the morning, eh? That's why you guys are always so late. One more for the road, is that it?"

We ain't getting much up anymore, I want to say, but it's none of his business and I just force a smile at him because he's always like this, joking about the fact that Lance and me are together. Hell, we've outlasted all of his girlfriends, so I don't know what he's laughing about. But this morning Lance isn't in the mood -- I'm thinking he doesn't like to be reminded that things aren't quite the way they were -- and he glares at Joey over the tops of his shades as he passes by him. "Shut up," he growls.

From the hurt look in Joey's eyes you'd think someone kicked him. "I was just playing --" he starts, but Lance isn't playing today and he whirls around, pushing Joey back against the seat before I can stop him. "Hey!" Joey cries, indignant.

"I don't ask who you fucked last night, do I?" Lance snarls. I grab his arm and he shrugs me off. "I don't ask you how that piece of ass was, I don't want to know, so you keep your damn mouth shut about us, you hear me?"

"Jesus," Joey says, rising to his feet. He looks at me with a wounded expression and I grab Lance's arm again, pulling him back. "I'm only joking, Lance. I didn't mean --"

Lance turns away. "Well it's not funny, Fatone. I'm not laughing, am I? I'm sick and tired of your jokes. Mind your own fucking business."

JC and Chris stand in the aisle now, watching us, and Lance pushes by them. They see the anger in his face and let him go. But Joey steps out into the aisle in front of me and follows Lance, like he wants to set this shit straight before we move on. "Okay, you know what?" he asks, and Lance doesn't stop, just keeps heading for the back of the bus, because it's obvious he doesn't care what Joey has to say. But Joey keeps talking anyway and I trail behind him, helpless, hoping I can somehow squeeze between them again before things get too far out of hand. "What's your problem anymore? What happened to the Lance who knew how to take a stupid joke?"

"I don't have a problem," Lance says, and I glance up at Chris as I pass him, thinking, Yeah, right. No problem, my ass. The look in Chris's eyes suggests he's thinking the same thing, and I wonder if anyone else knows about the pills. I don't think so, but they've all noticed the way he's changed, how could they not? I have to do something about that, and soon. I'm the only one who can do anything.

Joey reaches out to Lance and he pushes him away. When Joey tries again, Lance pushes him back, hard, and he staggers into me. I manage to catch him but he shrugs off my hands and looks like he's going to cry. "Don't you see it?" he asks me, and Lance is watching me, daring me to nod, daring me to say something because I know he knows I found the other pills, he has to know by now. "Justin," Joey pleads, "don't you fucking see it? You can't tell me you don't notice, you of all people ..."

"I'm sorry," I whisper, and it's not because I don't see it, it's because I do, and I'm sorry I've been ignoring it, I'm sorry I thought it would go away on its own. Oh God Lance, I think, easing around Joey to catch Lance in my arms. For a moment he fights my embrace, but I hold him tight and don't let go, and eventually Joey turns away, Chris and JC lose interest in us, and I rest my head on Lance's shoulder because I don't know what else to do. Oh God, I'm so sorry. So damn sorry. I have to stop this, now. I have to make it better, because it's spiraling out of control, and I'm not going to lose him to some damn pills that aren't even making him feel good anymore. He's stronger than that, he's got to be -- he will be, with me beside him.

We're both going to have to be stronger than this.

* * *

Lance feels bad about what he said to Joey, and when Chris suggests they both go to a movie to patch things up he jumps at the chance, if only to show he didn't mean to be mean. I haven't heard him say he's sorry yet but that's my fault, he doesn't say that in front of me anymore. At the elevator I kiss him and tell him to apologize. He looks at the floor with a sheepish expression and whispers that he will. "I love you," he tells me. Joey's standing in the lift behind us, holding the doors open and rolling his eyes like he wants to get going already.

"I love you, too," I say, kissing him again. I hope he remembers that when he gets back because I have a feeling he's not going to like me very much then. I know what I have to do now -- it's the only thing I can do, short of tell someone and I don't want to do that, I know he'd never forgive me for that -- and I'm counting on the fact that he loves me just as much as I love him to get us through this. We can get through it, I know we can.

I watch from the window and when the limo pulls out from the hotel garage, I wait another ten minutes just to be sure they aren't coming back. Then I lock the door to our room, even though I know I won't be bothered. I just feel better with it locked, and I'm the only one in the room but I lock the bathroom door, too, like I'm a criminal and I don't want to get caught. Lance's bag sits on the edge of the sink. When I pick it up, my hands begin to tremble.

Unzipping the bag, I dump its contents into the sink. Toothpaste, toothbrush, combs, my earrings, one of which skitters away down the drain before I can stop it, and I don't even want to think about how much that damn diamond will cost to replace. Shampoo, some soap, a small tube of K-Y Jelly that's crinkled and half empty from use. And the pills, all those bottles of pills. I hate those brown bottles. I hate the pills, and the way they make him feel, and the way they're not helping him, and the fact that he's taking so many. I hate everything about those things, and I hate the doctor for prescribing them, I hate the pharmacy for filling them, I hate that I'm hiding here in our bathroom and that I waited so long to do what I need to do. I hate that most of all.

Before I can lose my nerve I open all of the bottles and pour the pills out onto the counter. There are so many of them, and I even throw in aspirin and the over-the-counter herbal pills he's bought, St. John's Wort and Ginseng and a men's multivitamin of some sort. The pills form a small pyramid, as colorful as Joseph's coat in the Bible, and I scoop them up in both hands like a mound of dirt to be tossed into an open grave. Then I dump the whole sordid bunch into the toilet with a splash. They slide between my fingers like sand through an hourglass, pouring into the toilet with a sound that reminds me of rain, and I stare at them for long minutes through the blue-tinted water. A few of the capsules float but most of the pills rest at the bottom of the toilet like sunken treasure, pretty but deadly. They're killing Lance -- hell, they're killing us both, they're killing us, and I won't let them. I won't let anything ruin what I have with him. I love him too much to lose him.

I flush the toilet, watching as the water froths from the few pills

that have started to dissolve, and it takes two more flushes to wash them all away, but then they're gone, just like that. I should've done it sooner but at least it's over with now. I gather up the empty bottles and take them down the hall to the trash room. There I throw them down the trash shoot and I can almost imagine them melting in the incinerator far below, in the hotel's basement, writhing into misshapen lumps that can't be refilled and can't hurt him any more.

Then I go back to our room and sit down on the sofa by the window, and I wait for him to return.

* * *

I've been staring out the window for so long now that I don't realize it's grown dark -- the city outside came alive with lights and sounds without me. I'm thinking maybe I shouldn't have done something so drastic. Maybe I shouldn't have dumped the pills out like I did. But he didn't need them before, did he? So he doesn't need them now. And it's a little too late for regrets anyway, isn't it?

He comes in a little before eight, laughing at something Joey says from the hallway, but when the door closes it clips off his laugh like a pair of scissors through a string, snip!, and he's not even smiling when I look up at him. I'm still on the sofa, on the opposite side of the room, and I didn't turn on any lights so he doesn't see me at first. But there are shadows beneath his eyes that make him look impossibly old and tired, and I know I did the right thing, throwing the pills out. I just hope he knows it eventually, too.

From the bathroom I hear the sound of running water as he splashes his face, and then he fills a cup from the faucet. To take his medicine, I think, holding my breath. In my mind I see him sipping from the cup before setting it aside. I picture him reaching for his bag, unzipping it, thinking he just needs a little something to get through the rest of the evening -- maybe a Sonata if he's tired and wants to sleep, maybe a Viagra if he thinks we might get it on later, maybe one of those Paxil to calm him down. Pick a pill, any pill, I think. Pick your poison. Which one will it be tonight? I hear him rummage through his bag, searching because they're there, he knows they're there, they're supposed to be there, and I don't want to picture the wild look in his eyes, the frown on his lips, the flush that will color his cheeks when he can't find the bottles. "Justin?" he calls out, his voice unsteady, and I close my eyes against sudden tears.

"Out here," I tell him, though I know he must have seen me -- why else would he call my name? I watch as he comes to the door of the bathroom, his bag forgotten in one hand, his eyes twin wards of crystal that freeze me in place like an enchantment in a fairy tale.

Holding up the bag, he asks, "Where are they?"

Where are what? I want to ask, just to get him to say the words out loud. "My pills," and then I could ask him just what he means by that, and he'll have to tell me about the others, even though it's obvious I already know about them. I just think he should hear himself say it -- I'm thinking I should hear him say it, and maybe once the words are free we'll be able to ball them up and toss them out like used newspaper. We'll be able to get past them then.

But there's a haunted look in his eyes that keeps me from making him admit to them. I can see he knows, he knows I know, and despite the anger I hear underlying his voice, every ounce of his body is begging me to help him. Somehow he knows what I've done, or he suspects, and he's mad but there's some part of him that's almost relieved, and that's the part I have to appeal to now. That's the part that's going to help us both get through this.

So I clear my throat and meet his wavering gaze, and in a soft voice I tell him, "I flushed them down the toilet."

His face crumbles. It's like I'm seeing him through a window in the rain and everything just runs together until all he is beneath the glass is a blur of flesh tones in a vaguely human shape. I'm not sure if it's just him or if I'm crying as well, but he sinks to the floor like a toy soldier knocked over by an angry child. The bag falls from his fingers and he whispers, "What?" As if he didn't hear me. As if he doesn't believe I could do such a thing. "You --"

"They're killing you," I say. It takes every ounce of strength I have not to get up from the sofa and go to him now -- I want to hold him in my arms and never let him go, I just want to make everything better, even though I know I can't, not right yet, it's going to take time -- but I don't move. My chin trembles as I watch him struggle to comprehend what I'm saying. "You don't need them, Lance. You don't, don't nod like that, you know you don't. You never needed them before."

"Justin," he sighs, his voice full of tears.

But I don't let that stop me. "I hate what they've done to you, baby," I tell him. "And I know you hate it, too, and that just feeds into the cycle, doesn't it? You're a little down so you take depression pills. They make you nervous, so you take anxiety pills. Those make you sleepless, so you have sleeping pills which make you tired, so you take another pill, an upper and now you can't get it up at all --"

He presses a hand against his mouth to stifle a sob and looks up at me with pleading eyes. "Justin!"

I ignore him. Rising to my feet, I hear my voice grow louder and I can't help it, I'm almost shouting at him now, and I don't know how to stop. "So you take Viagra and that's for old men, Lance, not someone your age! Fuck, you don't need that shit, none of it. You don't need --"

He picks up the bag and throws it at me, his toiletries escaping

through the open zipper like released inmates. The bag hits my chest and falls to the floor, deflated. "Shut the fuck up," he snaps, anger strengthening his voice. "You don't know what the hell I need, Justin. What gives you the right to go through my shit and throw out what you don't like? Who the fuck do you think you are?"

"Your boyfriend," I remind him, crossing the room that separates us. "It's called concern, Lance. It's called love. You don't like that? Fine. You want me to leave? Fine." Each word wounds me but I'm holding out on the fact that he said earlier that he loves me. I'm hoping that will be enough to keep us together, that love, those feelings I have for him that I hope he still has for me, too.

When I reach him he looks up at me with such pain in his eyes that I almost wish I hadn't hurt him like this. If only I didn't flush them away, I think, but I shake the thought away because I did it, I dumped them into the toilet and they're dissolving in the sewer where they can't hurt him anymore, and now I have to hold him up until he can stand on his own again. I have to be here for him -- finally he has to rely on me, which is all I ask from him, that he lets me shoulder whatever it is weighing him down. Lowering my voice, I frown at him and say, "I love you, Lance. I hate to see you like this, and I know you hate it, too. I did it because I love you. That gives me the right, doesn't it? That love?"

He glares at the floor and sighs, a deep, shuddery sound that brings me to my knees. Taking his chin in my hand, I raise his face until he looks at me again, and as gently as I can, I ask him, "Do you want me to leave? I don't want to -- God, Lance, I don't want to leave you ever, but if you really feel that it's none of my business and I have no right to help you and want what's best for you, then fine. Just tell me and I'll walk out that door, and you'll never have to see me again, I promise. If you want it that way ..." I let my voice trail off but inside my mind is screaming at him, No, you DON'T want it that way, you KNOW you don't, please Lance, please don't let it end like this. Please -- I don't know if I have it in me to walk away from him, not now, but if that's what he wants ...

His eyes search mine for a long time, and just when I'm about to ask him again, he turns his face away, closing his eyes and pressing his cheek into the palm of my hand. His skin is damp with tears, and when I rub my thumb over his lips, he kisses it. "Don't," he sighs. "God, Justin, don't leave me. I can't do this, not alone. Not without you."

That's what I hoped he'd say. I pull him into my arms and he hugs me tight, his hands fisting in my shirt as he cries against my chest. When the tears taper off he breathes my name and says he loves me, he's sorry and he loves me and I was right about the pills, he's sorry ...

I kiss the apologies away and promise him we're both going to make it. As long as we have each other, it's going to be okay.

The End

I'll Take the Rain
by NSyncGrrl

"I can do miracles, bay-bee!" Justin cried into the microphone, his voice amplified throughout the studio. A dozen girls giggled, extras in their new video, a captive audience because they were on a short break and none of them wanted to step outside for a moment and possibly miss the call for the next shot. They were aspiring actresses and they were getting paid by the hour, and besides, they were in an 'N Sync video ... what more could they ask for? "I can do anything," Justin told the pretty blonde closest to him, who laughed at the sudden attention. "Justin Timberlake -- hold your applause, ladies. Hold your applause."

Laughter again, and a few of the girls dared to clap, a halfhearted response. It had been a long day, and it was far from over -- another three hours of filming, at least, and already Justin's legs quivered with exhaustion. But he had found the microphone and thought he'd fool around a bit, just to flirt with the girls because Lance was busy with Wayne, the director, setting up the next shot.

From the corner of his eye, Justin could see his boyfriend, a few feet away on the other side of the cameramen and watching, but Justin felt as if he were right beside him, staring and silent. A little self-consciously, Justin started in on a beatbox routine, something impromptu with a killer back beat that washed over him, drowning out the girls, the studio, everything, everything but Lance's steady gaze and disapproving mouth, not quite a frown but just enough to tell him that he was going to hear it later on.

* * *

When they left the studio a little before two that morning, Lance sat on the far side of the Jeep Cherokee they shared, staring out at the passing city as the driver took them back to the hotel. Justin had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in one hand, and after every bite he glanced over at Lance, just to see if he was looking at him yet, but he wasn't. And he wasn't talking, either, and he seemed so far away against that window, so distant and lost in his own thoughts. Talk to me, Justin pleaded silently, but Lance didn't respond. Anything for your words, your touch. Lance? Please?

Clearing his throat, Justin asked softly, "Do you want a bite?" He held out the sandwich like a peace offering, watching Lance carefully. Please turn around.

Lance shook his head without looking at him. No words, Justin mused, staring at the sandwich. What had he said today to bring on this silent treatment? What had he done?

He didn't know. Hell, it didn't take much anymore, did it? And Lance wouldn't tell him, not until he was ready. If Justin was lucky, it would be before they went to bed, and maybe he wouldn't have to sleep alone on the extra bed in the double room they shared back at the hotel. Maybe he could apologize and sleep with Lance tonight. If he gives me the chance.

At the hotel he waited until they were in their room with the door closed on the rest of the world, and he caught Lance's hand before he could make it to the bed. "Lance, wait," Justin said.

Lance shrugged out of his grip. "Was it worth it?" he asked, his deep voice quiet. He always spoke quietly when it was just the two of them.

"What?" Justin asked, not quite sure what he meant. He reached for Lance again but his lover pulled away a second time. "Lance --"

"The girls," Lance said, and Justin sighed. He watched Lance pull his shirt off, balling it into a fist before tossing it aside, and he wanted to touch the bare expanse of his lover's back, but he knew better than that. He didn't want Lance to move away -- he didn't need that rejection, so blatant, so stinging. "You had to use a microphone, didn't you?" Lance continued, unzipping his pants. "Had to have the whole studio listen to you."

It wasn't the girls, Justin knew that. It was the fact that he had performed for them -- that had been egotistical of him, he realized that. Like the girls wanted to hear him perform. Who the hell was he? Justin Timberlake, of 'N Sync. What the hell did that mean to them? Nothing. Nothing at all.

Lance kicked off his shoes and shucked off his pants, his back still to Justin. Justin felt a tiny pout begin to tug at the corners of his mouth as he watched Lance undress as if he weren't in the same room. As if he didn't exist.

Pulling down the covers on his side of the bed, Lance asked, "You can do miracles?"

Justin closed his eyes, his chin trembling. "I didn't mean that," he said. So Lance had heard. That was what this was all about. That remark. "Lance, I was just kidding. I didn't know what I was saying, you know that. I didn't mean --"

"Only one person I know of who can do miracles," Lance said, twisting the word until it hung sharp and dangerous between them. Please don't, Justin begged, but Lance didn't hear the plea. "Who's that, Justin? Do you know?"

"God," Justin whispered. When he swallowed, he thought he would choke.

Lance crawled beneath the sheets of the bed. "So you think you're God, is that it?" he asked. Same quiet voice. Same soft words.

"No," Justin sobbed, hot tears stinging his eyes. "I'm not, Lance. I'm --"

"Remember that," Lance said, clicking the light off. Justin opened his eyes in the sudden darkness and took a tentative step forward, hands out. When his knee bumped the mattress, Lance said, "The other bed."

Justin bit his lower lip to keep the tears from falling and navigated to the second bed. I want to sleep with you, he thought, undressing in the dark. You didn't even give me a chance to apologize, Lance. He slipped into the cold sheets and even though it was too late, even though he was already sleeping alone, he whispered, "I'm sorry."

He didn't know if Lance heard him or not. He didn't think it mattered.

* * *

Justin woke to warm hands caressing his stomach and damp kisses on the back of his neck. "Wake up, baby boy," Lance purred into his ear. Justin rolled over to find Lance leaning down over him, his eyes as light as the morning sun that lit the room. With a smile, Lance kissed the tip of his nose and whispered, "What are you doing over here all by your lonesome?"

It was a rhetorical question -- Justin knew better than to answer it. Instead he let Lance's lips cover his, the tender kisses and gentle hands erasing the previous night. Don't make me sleep alone again, Justin thought, easing his arms around Lance's neck to hug him closer, but he couldn't say the words out loud.

Lance pressed him into the bed and straddled him. Running his hands over the scruff of Justin's hair, he ground his hips into his lover's and whispered, "We have a few minutes. Does the great Justin Timberlake want to show his boyfriend how much he loves him this morning?"

"I'm not all that great," Justin murmured, trailing his hands down Lance's chest. He picked at the ruddy nipples because he knew that drove Lance crazy, and he sighed when Lance sat back and frowned at him. "Can I say I'm sorry now?" he asked.

"For what?" Lance wanted to know, even though he knew. Justin knew he knew. He just wanted to hear Justin say it.

But Justin didn't want to say it. He pouted and toyed with the waistband of Lance's boxers, opening and closing the top snap, and waited for Lance to say something else, anything to change the subject.

When he didn't speak, Lance climbed off of him and Justin held onto his boxers. "No," he said, letting Lance drag him into a sitting

position as he got out of bed. "Lance, no, I'm sorry. Please don't --" Lance slapped his hand away from his crotch. "Lance, please. We have a few minutes --"

But Lance was already in the bathroom, and when the door shut behind him, Justin fell back to the bed and buried his face in the cool pillow. He always messed things up between them, didn't he? Why did he do that? How did he always manage to drive them both apart?

* * *

"This video is all about me," Justin said, laughing as he watched Chris fuss over his hair. "You're behind JC -- no one will see you."

"I know," Chris said with a shrug. They stood in front of the large dressing room mirrors, primping before the shot. "But I'm gonna steal the show, you wait and see. All the girls want me."

Justin laughed at that. "They want me," he replied before he could stop himself. He wished he could just keep his damn mouth shut. Instead it went on talking without him, not heeding his silent plea to shut the hell up. "This video starts and ends with me. We should change our name to Justin Timberlake's 'N Sync. What do you think?"

His smile slipped and faded when he saw Lance's reflection in the mirror, watching him closely from the wardrobe rack. Why did he always say stupid shit like that? Now he'd sleep alone again tonight, he just knew it. And it was all his fault. Him and his damn ego.

With a sour twist of his lips, Justin left the mirror, brushing past Joey's chair as he headed for Lance. Joey looked up at him and grinned -- earlier in the week he had injured his leg and it still hadn't healed completely. He had staples in it and couldn't shoot yesterday but he was determined to be in the video today, at any cost, and the strain was beginning to show on his face. Justin's gaze slid over the lines worn into Joey's brow and he forced a smile of his own for his friend's sake. "Justin," Joey started, glancing back at Lance, still watching.

But Justin kept moving past Joey waiting for the next shot, past JC interviewing with the MTV reporter, across the dressing room to where Lance stood, waiting. Watching. Silent. Lowering his voice, Justin muttered, "God, Lance. I didn't mean it."

For a long moment he was afraid Lance wouldn't reply. He was afraid his boyfriend would simply ignore him as if he weren't there. He didn't want to cry, not here, not in front of everyone, but he hated the judgmental way Lance stared through him. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I didn't mean --"

"I know," Lance replied, and Justin sighed, relieved. He felt tears flood his eyes and he blinked them away and smiled, but

Lance wasn't looking at him anymore. His gaze was fixed on the mirror and the reflections of their friends. Justin glanced over his shoulder at the others -- only Joey was paying them any attention, his dark eyes distrustful in the mirror. "It's okay, Justin," Lance said, his voice soft. "I know you don't think when you talk."

That stung, but he guessed he deserved it for what he said to Chris. Even if the video was about him ... he wrote the song, didn't he? But that didn't matter to Lance. What did he always tell him? "We're a group, Justin. It's not just you." He knew that, honest he did, but why did he always say something to make him sound egotistical and childish and dumb? "I'm sorry," he said again, and then he took Lance's hand quickly, before he could move away, and he sighed, "I love you."

Lance frowned at the mirror, where Joey was staring at them. "Please," Justin hissed. "Please, Lance. I said I was sorry." Please tell me you love me, too.

With a sigh, Lance murmured, "I know." But he squeezed Justin's hand in his, and it was enough that he was talking to him, wasn't it? It was enough that he didn't pull away. There was that, at least.

* * *

Dinner was on a catered buffet table set to one side of the studio, and after the day's last shot everyone crowded around the food while the group filmed their final sequence on the closed set. By the time Wayne let them rest, the extras were gone and the studio emptied of everyone but bodyguards and a few construction workers making changes to the set. Justin dared to touch Lance's arm in what he hoped would be a casual, friendly gesture. He wanted to go back to the hotel now and if Lance was still not angry with him, maybe they could do tonight what he had hoped for this morning. "You hungry?" he asked, praying Lance would answer.

He did. "A little," he replied, turning when JC caught his other arm.

JC's face was flushed from dancing. "Hey guys," he said, a little breathless. "Wayne says we can watch the sequence. Come on."

"Right now?" Lance asked.

Bring him dinner, Justin thought, his fingers kneading Lance's arm gently. Tell him to go watch the take and bring him something to eat, and then he won't be mad tonight and he'll let you sleep in his bed, you'll see. "Go on," Justin said, smiling as Lance frowned at him. "I'll bring you something to eat." When Lance didn't move, Justin gave him a slight push. "I'll be right there."

Lance turned away in reply and followed JC to the camera Wayne had set up to view their footage. Chris was already there, laughing at something on the screen, and the only person at the

buffet was Joey, snacking on a plate of cold shrimp. Of course, Justin thought, picking up two empty plates. "I knew I'd find you here," he said, laughing.

Joey grinned. "Food is my life, man." Justin laughed, and Joey added, "Well, that and sex."

"Amen," Justin said with a wink. He hoped Lance would give him some loving tonight. He needed it.

As he moved around the table, filling both plates, he became aware of Joey's gaze following him. Looking up at his friend, Justin frowned. "What?" he asked.

Joey glanced over at the others, still by the camera. "Can I ask you something, Justin?" he wanted to know.

Dread curled into the pit of Justin's stomach. No, he wanted to say. He steadied the plates in his hands and thought maybe they had enough food between the two of them already -- he should walk away. He should find Lance and give him his dinner. He didn't need to talk to Joey. He didn't want to.

When he hesitated, Joey hurried on. "You can tell me no."

Even though that was exactly what he wanted to do, Justin popped a strawberry into his mouth and chewed the fruit thoughtfully. "What do you want to know?" he asked. He wasn't sure he wanted an answer to that.

Joey studied him for a minute, his gaze dropping to the twin plates in his hands before rising to meet Justin's eyes. "You can tell me to fuck off, if you want to," he said, his voice so low that Justin took a step closer so he could hear him. "You can tell me it's none of my damn business, and maybe it isn't, but you're my friend, Justin. Hell, you both are." He didn't have to ask who Joey meant by that. Lance. "I know you two are sleeping together --"

"It's more than that," Justin replied, looking past Joey to where Lance stood with JC and Chris. Sleeping together didn't even begin to define their relationship -- hell, most nights they didn't share a bed, not if Justin had done something stupid to piss Lance off, or if they were on the bus with the others. Whatever it was between them was much more than that.

"Dating, then," Joey corrected with a laugh. "I know you guys get it on, how's that?"

Justin grinned. "That's what you wanted to ask me?"

"No." Joey's laughter stopped, and under the intensity of his gaze, Justin looked away. Favoring his bad leg, Joey moved closer, closing the space between them, and when he spoke it was in a conspiratorial whisper. "Does he hit you, Justin?"

Justin jerked his head back as if slapped. "What?" he asked. "No. God, no. This is Lance --"

"I know," Joey conceded, raising his hands to show he meant no harm. "I just ... I don't know. Things seem strained between you sometimes. I just thought --"

"You thought wrong," Justin said, anger clouding his face. "It's not like that, Joe. He's not like that."

Joey pursed his lips in thought. "Is he mean to you?" he asked.

Mean how? Justin shook his head defiantly. "No," he said again. "Jesus, what --"

"What is it then?" Joey wanted to know. He glanced over his shoulder, and Justin followed his gaze.

Lance was watching them, an unreadable expression on his face, and Justin knew he should've walked away when he had the chance. Should've told him no, he thought, backing away from Joey. Now I'll have to sleep alone again and it's not even my fault this time. It's Joe's fault. All his fault. "I gotta go," Justin mumbled, taking another step back.

Joey caught his wrist. "What does he do to you?" he asked. "What does he say when you two are alone? I know --"

"You don't know shit," Justin replied, twisting free of his friend's grip. Food slid precariously on the plates he held, but he balanced his hands before he could lose anything. "Lance keeps me real." Wasn't that what Lance always told him? "He loves me, Joe. I know that's a hard concept for you to grasp, but he loves me, and he'd never hurt me. Never."

Quietly, Joey asked, "Would you tell me if he did?"

Walk away, he thought, glaring at Joey. Just walk away, don't say a word, isn't that what Lance does? And look at how effective that is -- he brings you down quick with that one, so just walk away. You don't need to reply -- he doesn't DESERVE a reply.

For once, Justin listened and kept his mouth shut as he pushed past Joey, heading for the others. For Lance.

* * *

Lance didn't ask about it until they were in the car again, heading back to the hotel, and by that time Justin had almost convinced himself that he didn't remember what Joey had said to make him mad. He sat as far away from Lance as he could, sure his boyfriend was upset at him, again, and so damn sure he'd sleep alone tonight. His body ached to be touched, any part of it, even a brush of fingers against his own. Was that too much to ask?

Maybe. So he kept his mouth shut and stared out the window, and prayed that by the time they reached the hotel Lance would let him apologize. He just hoped Lance didn't ask for what because he

wasn't quite sure what he was sorry for this time, but if it kept them apart like this, on opposite sides of the car, then he was more than sorry for whatever it was he had done.

"What are you doing over there, baby?" Lance asked in that quiet way he had that made Justin pout.

Justin turned towards him but didn't answer. Anything he said would be wrong, anyway. Draping one arm along the back of the seat in an inviting gesture, Lance said, "Come here."

Justin didn't need any more prompting. He slid across the seat and wrapped his arms around Lance's waist, snuggling against his chest. Closing his eyes, he breathed in the mingle of cologne and sweat -- the scent warmed him, stirred his groin. Lance rubbed Justin's shoulders in an absent manner. "What did Joey say to you earlier?" he wanted to know.

In his arms Justin stiffened. Nothing, his mind whispered, but that was a lie and Lance would know it. That answer would surely get him an empty bed tonight. He asked if you hit me, he thought, but he didn't want to say that, either, because then Lance would get mad and he'd never hit Justin, never, and even though he was mean sometimes, it was for his own good, wasn't it? It was to keep him grounded, to keep his head on his shoulders and out of the stratosphere where his ego tended to soar.

Maybe Lance wouldn't want an answer. Maybe this was one of those test questions he asked from time to time, where any answer Justin gave would be wrong and Lance wanted him to just think about it and not say a thing.

"Well?" Lance prompted. So he was waiting for a reply. Dammit.

"I don't want to talk about it," Justin muttered.

Lance's hand continued to trace soft patterns into his shoulder. "He asked about me," he said, and this time it wasn't a question. It was his way of demanding an answer.

Justin sighed. "Lance, please. I don't want to talk about it right now, okay?" Lance's arm left his shoulders to stretch across the back of the seat again, and without the touch Justin felt lonely and cold. "Lance, please ..." He trailed off and looked up at his lover's closed face, harsh in the passing street lights. "Don't be like this," he whispered.

Lance turned away and stared out the window, dismissing him as if he suddenly ceased to exist. Justin hugged him tighter and buried his head in Lance's shirt, the material coarse against his damp cheeks.

* * *

In their hotel room, Justin sat on the edge of the second bed

and undressed as slowly as he could. He didn't want the night to end with them in separate beds again, but he couldn't think of anything to say that would make Lance speak to him before he turned out the lights. On the far side of the other bed, the bed he wanted to sleep in, Lance ignored him as he pulled off his shirt. Did he not exist? Sometimes he wondered that, especially in the darkness, alone. Without Lance's hands on his body, without his lover's gaze or touch or words, he couldn't prove to himself that he was there. His stomach would churn at the thought that he was fading, growing dimmer and dimmer when Lance didn't acknowledge him, and one day he would just vanish altogether, extinguished like a flame in the rain.

Tonight would be bad if he didn't sleep in Lance's arms. Tonight might be the night he disappeared completely.

Justin watched Lance shuck off his pants, his gaze on the floor, the bed, anywhere but him. Tears stung Justin's eyes, and he tried to blink them away but it was too much, this silence. He pressed his fingers to his eyes, trying to stop the tears from falling. It didn't work, and hot trails burned down his cheeks, no matter how hard he pressed. When red patterns blossomed on the insides of his eyelids, he took a ragged breath and whispered, "He asked if you hurt me."

"What did you say?" Lance wanted to know. His voice, so quiet, belied the anger Justin knew boiled just below the surface of his words. But at least he was talking to him.

"No." Justin choked on the word and sighed. "Lance --"

"I love you, Justin," Lance said, and Justin sobbed, covering his mouth with his hand to stifle the soft noise. He had waited to hear those words all day. "More than anyone else, you know that."

"I know," Justin whispered.

Lance continued as if he hadn't spoken. "Do you want someone to worship you?" he asked. Justin, his eyes still closed, knew Lance was watching him now, so he shook his head. "Someone to put you on a pedestal? There are a million fans who'd do that for you. You want someone like that, date one of them. Is that what you want?"

Justin shook his head again. "I want you," he breathed.

"That's not real love," Lance told him. "That's infatuation. That's obsession, idolatry. That's not real."

"I know," Justin admitted. He did know. What they had together, what was between them, that was real. Everything else was only a child's game anymore, a fantasy world that shimmered sometimes and he knew that when the curtain was pulled back finally, all the fans would disappear, all the albums wouldn't mean shit, and there would be nothing left for him but Lance. Some days he wanted that moment to happen now, he wanted to give it all up and just have his boy. Things would be better between them then, like they were when he was in Lance's arms and Justin Timberlake

of 'N Sync didn't exist. When he was simply Justin, or Lance's baby boy, or his lover, and Lance's lips and hands and breath made him real.

"No one will ever love you for who you are," Lance told him, "who you truly are. Any fan who claims to love you like I do is lying."

"I know," Justin whispered.

"Is that what you want?" Lance persisted. "Someone to love the image and not the man?"

Justin squeezed his eyes shut tighter because he knew Lance was watching him, waiting for an answer. Shaking his head, he said softly, "No, Lance. Jesus, no. I love you. I don't want anyone else. I want you. I'm sorry."

He waited, expecting Lance to prompt him, and he was ready to just break down and tell him he was sorry for every little thing, everything he might have done, anything at all. Just let me stay with you tonight, he pleaded silently. Please.

"He thinks I hurt you," Lance said, his voice quiet. When Justin nodded, he asked, "Why does he think that?"

"I don't know," Justin whispered.

"Do I hurt you?" Lance wanted to know. The edge in his voice dared Justin to reply.

Justin shook his head again, but a voice inside him whispered, If he doesn't hurt you, then why are you crying? He didn't know, and he didn't want to answer that. Right now he didn't want anything more than for Lance to hold him. With a sigh, Justin admitted, "I don't like sleeping without you. That hurts."

"That hurts me, too," Lance told him, and Justin sobbed again, tears hot beneath his fingers as he held his eyes shut. "You don't know when to stop, Justin. You don't know when to shut up --"

"I know," Justin said, nodding.

"Sometimes you lie to me," Lance continued, and even though that wasn't exactly the truth, Justin nodded anyway. "Sometimes you forget that you're always in the spotlight. And sometimes you let that mean more than anything else in the world. Even more than me."

"No!" Justin cried, and his body shook beneath the tears he tried to keep inside. "You mean the most to me, Lance. I promise you, please I swear it ..." His words dissolved into sobs that racked his chest.

For a long moment Lance watched him cry into his hand, his other arm hugging himself tightly. His shirt was unbuttoned and hung open, his pants unzipped and his shoes untied. He hadn't

even finished undressing.

Finally Lance sighed. "Come here, baby," he whispered, and Justin stumbled blindly onto the other bed, crawling across the covers to his lover's open arms. He fell to the mattress, burying his head into Lance's boxers, and Lance rubbed his back in long, soothing strokes as he cried. "It's okay, Justin," he sighed, pulling Justin into a strong embrace.

"Let me stay with you tonight," Justin breathed, wrapping his arms around Lance's neck. "Please."

Laying him back on the bed, Lance kissed away Justin's tears as he helped him finish undressing. Before he turned out the light he let Justin make love to him, finally, and when Justin came, tears coursed silently down his cheeks. Lance brushed them away, his hands soft and warm. "I love you," he whispered.

Justin sighed as he cuddled into his embrace and closed his eyes. Lance's arms kept the darkness at bay.

* * *

When the alarm clock rang a few hours later, Justin sniffled against the pillow and sighed. Even with his eyes closed, his head throbbed like a broken tooth and he couldn't breathe through his stuffy nose. Cried myself to sleep, he thought, fisting the sheets against his chin. Now I look horrid. Thank God we're not filming today.

Beside him Lance rolled over and cut off the shrill alarm. "Wake up, baby boy," he mumbled, leaning over Justin to kiss his cheek. Touching the puffing skin beneath Justin's eyelashes, he cooed, "Aww, look at you. Poor baby."

Justin nodded, turning into Lance's arms. He studied the concern in his lover's face and sighed. How could Joey ask if Lance hurt him? He didn't see the love Justin saw in Lance's eyes -- he couldn't see it. "I feel like shit," he muttered.

Lance crawled out of bed and disappeared into the bathroom. Justin tugged the sheets up over his nose and closed his eyes again, determined to get another few minutes' worth of sleep before he had to get up. He heard Lance come back into the main room, heard the ice chink in the bucket on the dresser, and then he felt a cold, wet cloth press gently beneath his eyes. "Lance," he sighed, reaching out with one tentative hand. The cool washcloth grew warm against his skin.

Lance's hand caught his. "You shouldn't cry at night," he said, holding the washcloth over Justin's face.

"I know," Justin whispered. I shouldn't cry ever, he thought, but he kept the words to himself. Right now, with Lance's hand in his and the cold cloth on his eyes, he couldn't remember why he had

been crying at all. Something Joey had said, he suspected. It was all Joey's fault.

Their hands rested on Justin's stomach and Lance rubbed his thumb across the ticklish part of his waist, just above where dark hair hinted beneath the sheets. "I love you," Justin said. He heard Lance's breathy laugh and he grinned. "Kiss me," he dared. When Lance didn't reply, he added, "Please?"

Warm lips closed over his. "You don't have to beg," Lance murmured. His teeth nipped at Justin's lower lip, teasing.

A knock on their door interrupted the kiss, and Justin frowned as Lance pulled away. Sitting up, he let the washcloth fall to his lap. Lance was already across the room, his hand on the doorknob, and Justin resisted the urge to tell him to ignore it. Don't answer, he thought, and to the person outside, he pleaded, Go away. Things are great right now, don't bother us. Go the fuck away and leave us alone, please just leave us alone ...

When Lance opened the door, Joey stood on the other side, leaning heavily on a cane the doctor gave him. He glanced past Lance and frowned at Justin. "Hey, you guys," he said, hobbling into the room. Something in his eyes told Justin he wanted the three of them to talk. Justin could only imagine what it was about.

"Hey, Joe," he replied, climbing out of bed. He threw the washcloth into the ice bucket and pushed past his friend, not meeting his gaze. "I'm going to take a shower."

"What happened to you?" Joey wanted to know. He caught Justin's arm, forcing him to stop, and tugged on it until Justin looked up at him. "You look awful."

"I don't feel well," Justin whispered. With a furtive look at Lance's expressionless face, he shrugged out of his friend's grip and backed into the bathroom. "I'll be out in a few minutes."

Closing the door behind him, he leaned against it and closed his eyes so he wouldn't have to look at himself in the mirror. Through the thin wood he heard Lance ask Joey what he wanted. "Just to talk," came the reply, but Justin didn't think it was all that simple.

* * *

Justin stood under the shower and let the hot water pound away the tension that bunched his muscles. He hadn't turned the cold water on at all and his skin was red, his face sweaty from the heat, but he barely noticed. He was listening over the roar of the shower, straining to hear anything at all from the other room.

A short while later, the bathroom door opened and a whiff of cool air swirled around his legs. Suddenly aware of the scalding water, he turned on the cold water faucet. The shower rushed over him, tepid and bearable now. On the other side of the shower

curtain he heard Lance undress.

Then the curtain was swept aside as Lance stepped into the shower behind him. Strong hands crossed over Justin's stomach, pulling him back against a tight body. His lover's fingers twirled through thick hair matted with soap and water, rubbing gently until Justin's whole body responded to the touch. When Lance kissed his shoulder, Justin whispered, "Is he gone?"

Lance nodded. Justin felt the movement against his neck, and he leaned back into his boyfriend's embrace. Did this moment ever have to end? He was almost afraid to ask what Joey had said, sure that Lance was mad and if he asked, then Lance would be mad at him, and then they would lose this intimacy between them. So he stood there, savoring the feel of Lance's hands on his body and the shower cascading over them. Finally Lance pressed his cheek against Justin's shoulder and said, "He thinks we should spend some time apart."

The words, so soft, cut into Justin like razors, and he bit back a sob. He thought maybe it wasn't only water streaking his face now, and his reddened eyes burned with fresh tears. "What do you think?" he whispered. Please don't leave me, he added silently.

"I think he should mind his own goddamn business," Lance replied, a little harsh. Then, as if the thought just occurred to him, he asked, "Did you tell him to talk to me? Is that why you didn't want to tell me what he said?"

Justin turned in Lance's arms and slipped his arms around his lover's waist. Lance's face was unreadable, and Justin stared into his lover's crystal eyes, trying to see into them, through them, into his mind. "You can't think that," he said. "No, Lance. No. Why would I do that? Did he tell you I said that?"

Lance studied him a moment longer, not quite frowning, and then he shook his head as if to dispel the notion. "You know I love you --"

"I know," Justin said, nodding. He knew that. He did.

Lance continued. "I'm trying to help you, Justin. I'm trying to keep you from becoming the egotistical superstar everyone's determined to make you into."

"I know," Justin said again. "I know, Lance. You keep me real."

"But if you think you don't need me anymore," he said with a shrug, "if you think we should to spend some time apart --"

"God, no." Justin leaned closer until their foreheads touched, and he closed his eyes at the thought. "Don't leave me." I don't exist without you, he thought. Couldn't Joey understand that? He was going to ruin things between them, hound at Lance until he didn't want to put up with it anymore and he'd leave, and then Justin really would disappear, he'd wink out of existence, and no one would ever love him like this again, he'd never love anyone,

not the way he loved Lance. Couldn't Joey see what Lance meant to him, what they meant to each other? "He doesn't know what he's talking about, Lance. He doesn't see us like this. He has no fucking clue."

Lance's hands fisted in the small of his back, and then he kissed Justin, his lips tender and damp. "I know," he murmured. "I know."

* * *

As they waited for the elevator, Justin rested his head against the mirrored doors and studied his reflection. The puffiness around his eyes had faded, leaving him looking more tired than he had been when he woke up, and each time he blinked, he felt as if he could easily keep his eyes closed for the rest of the day. They were bloodshot and grainy, and he hid them behind dark sunglasses because the light in the hall was too bright this morning. Beside him Lance carried both of their duffel bags -- their flight left in two hours, heading back to Orlando, where they would finish rehearsing for the tour slated to start in another week. It seemed as if the last tour just ended, and part of him didn't want to go back on the road again so soon, but he didn't have any say in the matter.

There's very little I have any say in anymore, he mused, frowning at himself. His reflection frowned back.

Chris and Joey laughed over a magazine they leafed through -- they were across the hall so Joey could sit down in one of the chairs that faced the elevator. In the mirror Justin saw Joey glance up at him every now and then, the smile on his face fading whenever their eyes met. On the other side of the mirrored doors, JC leaned against the wall, his elbow holding the elevator call button in as if that would make the lift arrive any faster. His eyes were closed and he snored lightly, already dozing.

When the elevator finally came, Justin pushed JC to life as the door slid open. He stumbled, blinking awake, and followed them into the lift. Chris held the doors for Joey, who watched Justin carefully, trying to get him to look his way. Instead Justin focused on Lance and the way the straps from their bags cut into his fingers, leaving red marks behind like lashes. He wasn't going to look at Joey. He promised himself he wouldn't.

In the lobby, security guards formed a path out of the hotel to their limo. Both sides were lined with fans who shouted when the elevator doors opened. "Smile, boys," JC said, plastering a grin onto his face as he stepped into the lobby. The roar of the crowd was like the ocean's surf, deafening. It threatened to drown them completely.

Justin flashed the grin he had perfected long ago and he heard his name screamed in the voices of a hundred different girls. At the limo he paused and waved back at everyone, posing once more for the cameras that blinded him, freezing his smile into photographs,

but it was just a shape his mouth made, that smile. It was like the sunglasses that hid his eyes -- it served the same purpose.

In the limo he pressed his thigh against Lance's and listened to the crowd outside. When he heard his name, he laughed. With a wink at Joey, sitting across from him, he said, "Listen to that. They love us." Before he could stop himself, he added, "They love me. There's nothing quite like the sound of undying adoration first thing in the morning. Too bad they can't market that stuff."

"What would you do with it if they did?" Chris asked. He held up a half empty can of soda and pretended he was an announcer on television. "From the people who bought you edible groupies, instant Fan in a Can. Pop the top and hear the refreshing sounds of a million teenies wash over you. Now in two exciting new flavors, original and cherry."

Joey laughed and even JC grinned, but Lance was staring out the window, ignoring them. Ignoring him, Justin knew it -- "They love ME," he had said, and the instant the words were free Lance had pulled away from him, a small gesture that none of the others noticed, but suddenly Justin felt sad and alone despite the fans because Lance's leg was no longer pressed so comfortably against his. He forced a smile at Chris's lame jokes and tried to take Lance's hand in his.

Lance clenched his hands into fists around the straps of his bag and Justin's fingers slid helplessly across the taut skin. He noticed the straps of his own bag had slipped from Lance's grasp and now drooped to the floor. When they reached the airport, Chris and JC climbed out of the limo and Lance left Justin's bag where it lay as he followed them. He didn't look at Justin.

Serves me right, Justin thought, suppressing a sigh as he scooped up his bag and slung it over his shoulder. Things were wonderful this morning. We're great when it's just the two of us. But add others into the equation and he found himself becoming the cocky boy the press made him out to be, and that wasn't someone Lance liked very much. Hell, he didn't like that boy very much, either, and if he could only learn to keep a tighter rein on his mouth then maybe he wouldn't have to carry his own bag so often. He already dreaded this evening, after the flight, when Lance would make him sleep alone again. Didn't they just talk about this? I can never please him, Justin thought, following Lance into the airport terminal. He hurried to catch up with his boyfriend, but Lance was too far ahead and walking fast. Why can't I do anything right?

"Justin!"

He turned and frowned at Joey, leaning heavily on his cane as he hobbled behind him. "Wait up," his friend called. Pain glistened in his eyes and sweat beaded his face.

Justin glanced over his shoulder at Lance, who had stopped and was already starting back towards him. Maybe he's changed his mind, Justin hoped. Maybe he's not going to be mad at me today.

But it wasn't that -- he knew his lover well enough to know that it was Joey that made him turn around. Whatever Joey had said to him earlier still stung enough to make him forget his anger at Justin's ego. He wanted to make sure nothing more was said. "Justin," Joey sighed. Wincing, he leaned a heavy hand on Justin's shoulder to take the weight off his bad leg.

Justin looked from that hand to Joey's flushed face. "You shouldn't push yourself, Joey --"

"You don't have to take his shit," Joey said, bitterness tingeing his voice. He nodded at Lance, rapidly closing the distance between them, and his hand tightened on Justin's shoulder. "Jeez, just tell him off already. You don't need to put up with him."

Justin shrugged out of Joey's grip. "I know that," he whispered. A glance behind him showed that Lance was closer, probably within earshot now, and anger flashed in his eyes like lightning before a thunderstorm. "I love him, Joe. I can't just give that up."

"You can't live like this," Joey persisted. Justin wanted to tell him to keep it down but he couldn't find the words, and as Lance neared, he swore Joey spoke louder, wanting Lance to overhear. "He treats you like a child, Justin. He treats you like a fucking pet --"

"Shut up," Justin said. He didn't want to hear this.

"He tells you when you're wrong, is that it?" Joey continued, ignoring him. "Are you always wrong, Justin? Does he ever let you be right once in a while? Is he ever wrong?"

Justin took a step back from his friend. "Shut up, Joe," he said again, but his voice held no conviction. Was he ever right? Last night, his mind whispered, when we had sex and he cried my name when he came. When he kissed me and told me he loved me. This morning, when we did it again in the shower. When we're alone and I don't fuck anything up with my mouth, THEN he lets me be right. He calls me his baby boy and you just wouldn't understand what that does to me, Joe. You just don't know ... "I appreciate your concern," he said, taking another step back, "but this isn't any of your business."

"Do you think he loves you?" Joey asked, grasping at anything he thought might make Justin see what he saw.

Another step back, and Justin bumped into Lance. He felt strong hands on his hips, a familiar touch that told him everything Lance couldn't say. It spoke of love and possession, and Justin thought, He came back for me. He's not so mad that he left me to fend you off by myself. See, Joe? He loves me. I know he does.

Joey's gaze flicked behind Justin and he frowned at Lance. "You're an ass," he hissed. He leaned on the cane with both hands like an old man resting during a walk. "You can't see how much you're hurting him, can you? You don't see what you're doing to

him." To Justin, he pleaded, "You don't have to take this bullshit."

"I know," Justin whispered again. Lance's arm tightened around his waist, and he raised his chin to meet Joey's tortured stare. "You're right, Joe." Relief flooded his friend's face. "I don't have to take any of this."

Without another word, he turned away. Catching Lance's hand in his, he headed for the terminal. "Justin!" Joey called out. "Justin, wait a minute! That's not what I meant --"

Justin whirled around, angry. "It's easy for you to stand there and tell me what I should do, isn't it?" he asked. Lance squeezed his hand but kept quiet, watching them, waiting. "But it's not so easy when you love someone, Joe. When the only thing you want is to be with that person, forever, no matter what. That's how I feel, okay? I don't expect you to understand it, and I sure as hell don't expect you to accept it, but it's my life, alright? It's my fucking right to do whatever I want to do."

Joey looked at him, wide-eyed, as if on the verge of tears. Justin struggled not to cry himself. Couldn't his friend see what he was doing to them? He only saw Lance's bad points -- he didn't know about the tender kisses and the soft touches and the gentle whispers in the night. He didn't know about the way they laughed when they were together, as if they were invincible. He didn't see what Lance meant to him, or what he meant to Lance, or how they were all that existed for each other, and he didn't know the safety of Lance's arms, the comfort of his presence. So they had a few problems -- didn't everyone? Didn't all couples have their issues? At least they had each other. That was all they needed.

"You don't understand," Justin whispered, his lower lip trembling, and he shrugged helplessly. "I know you think you're helping, Joe, but you're not. You're not."

"Justin --" Joey started, trying one last time.

But Justin shook his head. "You act like I'm too stupid to know what's going on," he sighed. "Like this isn't a choice for me."

He let the words sink in, and when Joey took a step closer, he turned away. Lance followed him into the terminal, his hand tight in Justin's. The others were inside, waiting, but he looked back at Joey, standing outside as if struggling to understand why Justin would stay with Lance if he knew what was happening. Justin had thought of leaving, calling it quits, once. Only once. But who would I be then, Joey?

Without Lance he would be no one. He would cease to exist without those hands, those lips, those eyes defining him. And if being with Lance meant he would have to endure the silent treatment and the biting remarks and the empty nights spent in separate beds, then that just meant he had to try that much harder to please his lover.

Lance took his bag and slipped a hand into the back pocket of

Justin's jeans. Leaning closer, he whispered, "I love you, baby boy."

Justin's smile lit up his eyes. See? he thought. He wanted to point this out to Joey, to the whole world, even. This is why I love him. This is why I'm with him. For moments like this.

No matter how rare they were.

The End

My Words
by NSyncGrrl

Lance sits on the edge of the stage, his back to the empty coliseum that yawns behind him. He holds his knees to his chest and watches the others dance. Correction: watches Justin dance. Chris is singing a capella into one of the microphones that's mercifully turned off, and Joey's too busy winking this way to pay much attention to his dancing. JC is running through the steps for their song "I Want You Back," which Lance already hates. It's on the charts now and he's sick of it. Justin's the only one following the steps. Lance loves to watch him move. Here, during rehearsal, he can stare without anyone thinking anything of it.

Beside him, Britney giggles. "Joey, stop it," she calls out. Lance smiles when she leans against him, laughing. "He's so bad."

"He's a flirt," Lance tells her. He watches Joey trip himself up and stumble into Justin, which sets the two of them laughing. The look JC throws them is one of pure hatred. Lance wishes he was over there learning those steps. He wishes it was his hand on Justin's back, his antics that put the grin on his friend's face.

Britney sighs. It's such a girlish sound that Lance laughs at her. She's what, sixteen? Seventeen tops, he's not sure. She knows JC and Justin from their stint on the Micky Mouse Club, which seems to Lance like the setup of a perfect joke but he's not the funny one -- that's Chris. Lance is the shy one. Lou Pearlman has them all pegged. Justin's the baby. He's also the cute one. Lance can see why. "He's grown up a lot," she says.

"Joey?" Lance asks. He's only been with the group for what, a year? If that. It seems like so much longer now, like he can't imagine anything else before he met these four other boys and fell in love with one of them. With Justin.

Who has no idea how I feel, Lance muses. That makes him sad. He watches as Justin deviates from JC's choreographed moves and starts in on a hip-hop breakdance routine that makes Joey laugh. He glances over to make sure everyone else is looking. When he sees Lance, he smiles. Yes, Justin's definitely the cute one.

"No, silly," Britney says. She slaps Lance's arm playfully. Lance has decided he likes this goofy girl who's going to be their opening act for this leg of the tour. She's got a funny sense of humor and she likes to talk to him. Now she stretches her long legs out in front of her, crosses her ankles, and leans back. Lance glances at her. She's staring at the guys and he's not surprised when she tells him, "I mean Justin. We go way back."

Lance frowns just slightly at the faraway look in her eyes. There's a name for that look -- smitten. He knows it well. It stares back at him from the mirror every day. He lets his gaze linger over

the swell of her breasts, her tapered waist, her curved hips. Of course she'd have the hots for Justin. Of course.

He hears Justin's laugh, bubbly and infectious. He tries to hate her but can't. He knows all too well just how easy it is to fall for that boy.

* * *

Justin wishes Joey would stop trying to screw up their routine and just go over to talk to Britney already. It's so obvious the boy likes her. Every little thing he does is punctuated with a look her way to make sure she saw it. And if Joey was over there with her, maybe that would mean Lance could come over here with him. Justin doesn't like the easy way that girl touches his friend, or the way she always manages to make him laugh.

He tries to take his mind off of that, though. Off of Lance, and his bleached hair that's cut too short, his light eyes that are too big, his lips that are too red. Hair he wants to run his fingers through. Eyes he wants to stare into forever. Lips he wants to taste again and again.

Stop it, his mind warns. Justin frowns at JC's feet as if he can't possibly do that combination of steps his friend just performed, but the frown is really for himself because he needs to stop thinking about Lance like that. They're friends, that's it. And they finally have a good thing going here, a hit album and a tour to promote it. If it wasn't for that ...

And for Mr. Pearlman. Justin can't bring himself to call the man Lou yet. He lets his feet move to the music on their own accord. He hopes Lance is watching -- he knows he's graceful. What was it their manager said? They were overnight sensations, though in Justin's opinion that was sure one long night before they hit it big. Before the tour, Mr. Pearlman took them all into his office and closed the door, sat on the edge of his desk like an overbearing father, pinned them each with a stern stare and told them they had to toughen up. "People will be critics," he told them -- Justin's found that it's true. "There's always someone somewhere who's going to talk shit about you. But you don't have to fuel their fire, you boys hear me? If you're into drugs or sex or sucking dick, give it up for this tour. Give it up until you've had your fifteen minutes in the spotlight. I put you guys together, you know that. I can take you apart just as easily."

Justin doesn't know about drugs -- that's never been his scene. But he's pretty sure Joey's sexual appetite hasn't been curbed in the least since that little talk, and he still has it bad for Lance. Once or twice he almost told him, almost, when he thought maybe the light shining in his friend's eyes was more than just a reflection of the sun, but he always catches himself in time. Mr. Pearlman's words haunt him. He wishes he never heard them. They make him feel dirty for just thinking how Lance would taste or feel or move in

his arms.

"Justin!" JC cries. Justin twirls out of step with a flourish, grins at him. JC doesn't smile back. "You think maybe we could practice for the tour? Or would you rather write your own damn steps? You're not paying attention."

No, he thinks. I'm not. Instead of saying that, however, he shoves his hands in the pockets of his jeans, rocks back on his heels, stares at the floor. "I'm sorry," he mumbles.

Behind him comes quick laughter. A corner of his mouth pulls into a slow smile and he glances over his shoulder. Britney's giggling at him, her head resting on Lance's shoulder. Lance is laughing, too, his head ducked as if he's trying to hide his mirth. Justin feels a flash of jealousy stab through him. Why can't he lean against Lance like that? With his hand on his friend's arm, their hips pressed together? His smile fades and he glares at Britney. "Oh Justin," she sighs amid her giggles. "You're too cute."

Her words sober Lance up. He clears his throat, catches Justin's gaze before he looks away. There it is again, that glint of something deep in his eyes that Justin tells himself mirrors his own feelings. "I put you guys together," Mr. Pearlman whispers in his mind. He's growing to hate that man's voice.

He turns away from them, back to the stage. He flashes JC another quick grin to show him that he means business. "I can take you apart just as easily."

At least Lance is watching him dance. At least there's that, right?

* * *

Lance sits by himself on the tour bus, trying to work out figures for their sales that don't seem to be adding up as they should. It's just a distraction, and not a very good one at that. Every now and then his gaze still wanders to the front of the bus where Justin sits, his legs propped up on a small table, a comic book open in his lap. The last time Lance looked up, Justin was looking back. Since then Lance has been fighting with the numbers in his budget book, like they're to blame for the way his heart aches.

"Hey boy." Lance looks up as Britney sinks into the seat beside him. She looks exhausted -- he thinks they all do. The past three days were back to back concerts and they only have one day's rest before the next show. But she manages to flash him a winning smile. "What 'cha doing?"

"Not much," he tells her. When she leans over his arm to see what he's writing, he grins. "Going over the books."

She laughs, rolls her eyes. "Fun," she says. She slides a little lower into her seat and looks around. Lance tells himself she's not

looking at Justin but she is. She has the hint of a smile on her face and when she speaks again, her voice is lower, conspiratorial. "Hey," she whispers. He glances over at her. She touches his arm, leans closer. Her light brown eyes shine bright. "We're friends, right?"

Lance nods slowly. "As far as I know," he tells her with a grin. "Why?"

Britney chews on her lower lip, a nervous habit he's noticed she has. "If I tell you something, it's just between us. Okay?"

"Sure." He nods again. "What's up?"

Leaning back in her seat, she sighs. Her voice is still low. "What do you think of Justin?" she asks.

You don't want to know, Lance almost says. He's sure she doesn't want to know how he thinks that Justin's smile outshines the sun, or that his eyes are as endless as the night sky, or that he's sexier than anyone Lance has ever seen. He doesn't need to tell her this, not when it's apparent she's thinking the same thing. Carefully, he asks, "What do you mean?"

She laughs. "Can I tell you something?" He glances at Justin, lost in his comic. He's not sure he wants to hear whatever it is she's going to say. "He's the first boy who ever kissed me." Lance looks at her, surprised. She laughs again. "It's true! God, it was years ago but it was my first kiss. I'd been upset about something, I don't know what, and he found me crying in the dressing room. He put his arm around me and one thing led to another and ..." She shrugs as if it's no big deal, but it obviously is. "He kissed me."

He kissed her. Lance feels his heart sink in his chest. His fingers go numb around the pencil he's holding. The numbers in his notebook swim in front of his eyes. He kissed her.

Well, that clears things up, doesn't it? Lance has been keeping his feelings to himself because he doesn't want to screw up the group dynamic. He doesn't want Lou Pearlman to blame him when the band falls apart. He wants Justin as a friend first, and he just assumes that sooner or later he'll admit to Justin how he feels because he's so sure Justin might be that type of guy. The type who likes other guys.

But maybe that was just hope, he thinks now, looking at Britney's smile. It must have been one hell of a kiss because her eyes are dreamy, distant, and she rests the tips of her fingers against her lips remembering it. Maybe I'm just fooling myself, seeing things that aren't there, things that can never be. He should be glad that at least they're friends. If she's what Justin wants, what will make him happy, then what can Lance do about it? Nothing.

Now she touches his arm, laughs again. "I doubt he remembers it," she says, suddenly self-conscious. "It was so long ago."

Lance doesn't like the way her smile slips. She's looking at Justin again. When Lance follows her gaze he sees Justin glance up from his comic, a frown creasing his brow. He looks at Lance, at Britney, at Lance again. It's as if he knows they're talking about him. "Maybe he never forgot it either," he suggests. When she shrugs, unconvinced, he adds, "You should ask him."

"What?" she asks, laughing. A thin blush creeps into her cheeks. "I can't do that."

"Why not?" Lance wants to know. He nudges her with his elbow playfully. "You like him, don't you?"

Her blush turns a deeper red and she sinks down until the seat in front of her hides Justin from her view. "Shh," she hisses amid giggles. "Lance --"

"What?" he asks. He grins at her girly antics, glances at Justin who's studiously ignoring them. "He can't hear us."

"God," she gushes. She covers her face with her hands but her giggles still escape. Lance can't help but laugh at them. "What would I say?"

With a shrug, Lance offers, "Tell him he rocks your world." That sets her off anew, fresh laughter bubbling between her fingers. While you're at it, he thinks, his smile slipping a notch, tell him he rocks MY world, too.

Finally the giggles taper off. "Oh Lance," she sighs, "I can't do that." She wipes tears from her eyes, careful not to smudge her makeup.

"Why not?" Lance asks. Part of him is glad she balks, though.

It tells him whatever she feels for Justin is nothing more than a schoolgirl crush. She's not with him all the time like Lance is. She can't feel the same way he does about their friend. "Britney --"

"Oh I don't know," she says with another sigh, this one over-exaggerated. "I'll get all embarrassed and silly if I try to talk to him and then he'll think I'm just fooling around. I'm such a goober when it comes to boys."

Me too, Lance wants to say. He can count the number of boys he's liked on one hand, and he's never actually been with one before. He's not sure he'll know what to do if he ever manages to get Justin alone. All he knows is that just thinking about his friend makes his palms sweat, his heart thump, his head hurt and his groin ache. If this is love, he can see why they say it makes you sick.

For a few minutes Britney doesn't say anything. Lance thinks maybe that's all she's going to say about it. He sees she's staring at Justin again, and Justin's raised his comic so she can't see his face. Only his blonde curls peek over the top of the book. Lance wonders if he suspects Britney likes him. Hell, he's often wondered

if Justin suspects that he likes him, and that's what makes this all the more painful because there were a few times when he thought Justin liked him back. Little things he said or did that made Lance start thinking maybe it wasn't just him. He wouldn't call it flirting per se, but it was damn close. Damn close indeed.

Finally Britney sighs. "I can't tell him," she whispers. She picks at the armrest between them, her nails plucking at the worn material. "I'll die, Lance. I can't -- I can't do it."

Lance thinks it's funny that someone who pours her heart into her songs can't just walk up to the guy she likes and tell him how she feels. But who's he kidding? He hasn't said anything to Justin, either, so he's not one to talk. He bends back over his notebook but he's lost interest in the numbers. "Why don't you write him a note then?" he asks.

Britney giggles, a little breathless. "You mean like the ones we used to write back in grade school? Do you like me? Circle yes or no."

Lance laughs. He never got any notes like that when he was in school. "See?" he asks. "It's not that hard."

"Yeah, right," she snorts. "I can't do that."

Lance doesn't see why not. "Come on, Brit," he says, nudging her again. "Just think about how you feel and write it down. You don't have to stand there while he reads it."

The look on Britney's face suggests Lance is crazy to think it's not hard to do. "What would you say?" she counters.

He should say this isn't about him. But her giggles put him in a good mood and he likes talking to her, so he nods his head towards the front of the bus and asks, "To Justin?" He hopes it sounds incredulous and funny. He hopes it covers the way he really feels.

It works. Britney laughs again. "No, silly. Just in general. Like if you wrote a love letter -- what would you say?"

Lance feels the smile fade from his face. He looks at the notebook in his lap, the lines of numbers written down the page in his own neat handwriting. He looks at the pencil between his fingers, the wood slightly gnawed at the tip. What would he say in a love letter?

Jesus, he thinks. He's written a hundred love letters in his mind. He looks up at Justin, still buried in his comic, and tries to think what he'd put down in words to capture the way he feels. In a soft voice, he says, "I'd start by saying how beautiful he --" He glances up at Britney but she's not looking at him, she's back to staring at Justin. He swallows thickly, hopes she doesn't catch his slip. "The person is. Then maybe tell them how much I feel for them. Then maybe say --"

Britney sighs. "But what would you say exactly? I'm so horrible

at this, Lance. I can't even write my own songs yet. You want me to write a love letter?"

I only suggested it, Lance thinks, I didn't tell you to WRITE it. "I don't know," he says. "Maybe I'm not good at this sort of thing, either."

Britney leans over him again, whispers when she speaks. "What should I say to him?" she asks. When Lance starts to protest, she shakes her head. "Come on, Lance. Just give me an example, okay? Just look at him and come up with something that sounds halfway decent, and I'll go from there. Please?" He looks at her, frowns at the way she bats her eyelashes and folds her hands beneath her chin. "Pretty please? For me?"

He sighs. I shouldn't, he tells himself. I don't need to do this to myself. Do you hear me, Lance? You hurt too much already. You don't need to make it worse.

But his gaze turns to Justin again, and because he's kept it all inside for so long, kept it all to himself, the words are right on the tip of his tongue, escaping before he can think to keep them in check. "I'd tell him he's like a god," he whispers, "that careless and aloof, that painfully beautiful. He has eyes like the ocean, sparkling with starlight on a clear night. His smile is a wildfire, igniting the world, the universe, my heart." He laughs at how cheesy that sounds, shakes his head. "God, where did that come from?"

Britney's staring at him, wide-eyed. "It's wonderful," she breathes. Then she turns to a blank page in his notebook, points to the paper. "Write it down."

"What?" Lance feels his cheeks heat up and he smooths the pages back down, pushes her hand away. "No. I don't even know --" He shakes his head again. "No. Britney, I don't remember what I said."

But she turns the pages again, takes his pencil, starts to write. "Like a god," she says. "Careless and what was that word you used? Come on, Lance! That was so good. Please write it out. Please."

With a sigh, he takes the pencil from her. While he writes he thinks of a million other things to say about Justin, about the way he makes his heart beat and ache, the way he can't get the boy out of his mind. Before he knows it, he's got the beginnings of a letter on the page. "I don't know where to begin," he reads, surprised at what he wrote, "what to say. We've changed a lot over the past few years ..."

"Here," he tells her. He tears the sheet of paper from his notebook, hands it to her. "Don't say I never gave you anything."

She laughs, folds the paper into a tiny square before she sticks it in her back pocket. "Thanks, babe," she says. She blows him a kiss and giggles again. "Do you mind if I use this? I mean --"

Lance hunches over his notebook before she can see his blush. "Just don't tell him it's from me," he says. "If anyone finds out --"

"They won't," she assures him quickly. "It's our secret. I promise." She gives him a quick hug before she stands and walks away. The tangy scent of her perfume lingers in her wake. It tickles his nose, makes him want to sneeze. He wishes he never let her talk him into writing all that down. What if Justin sees it? It's in Lance's handwriting. He'll know it immediately.

He won't know I wrote it about him. He glances over at Justin, still reading his comic. As if he feels Lance's gaze, he looks up. Lance turns away guiltily. No, he really doesn't want Justin to see that piece of paper in Britney's back pocket. Had he really said that he was like a god? Had he really admitted that?

God.

* * *

Justin isn't reading his comic. He hasn't even turned past the second page. He's too busy watching Lance watch him.

He wonders if Lance knows he's doing it. A furtive glance every few minutes, as if to make sure Justin's still there. He thinks it's unbearably cute. If they were alone on the bus he'd drop the pretense of reading the comic and say something witty. He's not quite sure what that would be, but in his mind he imagines it's enough to get Lance to come sit by him at the table.

But they aren't alone, are they? Britney's on this bus too, and JC's sleeping on one of the bunks in the back. Joey and Chris are on the other bus because that's where the TV and video games are. Justin was going to get on that one until he saw Lance climb aboard this one. He had hoped they'd be by themselves. They don't spend enough time together.

Correction, he thinks, lowering the comic just enough so he can look at Lance without raising his head. We spent plenty of time together. Time enough for me to know I like him. But we're never alone and how am I supposed to flirt with him with the others around? I can't, end of story. I just can't. God, if Mr. Pearlman even suspected how Justin fantasized about Lance, he'd cancel the tour and shred their contract, Justin knows it.

And then there's Britney. The girl hangs around Lance constantly. Justin thinks she must like him or something. Maybe Lance likes her back? Maybe Lance isn't like Justin thought he is, maybe he and Brit will hook up and where will that leave him? He should just forget the group, forget the tour, forget everything and tell Lance how he feels. It's so tempting.

His gaze flicks to where Britney sits near the middle of the bus. She was sitting with Lance earlier, and the two of them laughed until Justin was sure they were talking about him. From the corner

of his eye he watched as Lance wrote something on that notebook in his lap, the one he keeps their budget in. Then he tore the sheet of paper out, handed it to Britney. She folded it up tiny and shoved it in her pocket and walked away. Justin wants to know what Lance wrote down. He's wondering if he can maybe charm that piece of paper away from her ... maybe if he asks nicely, she'll giggle and let him read it.

He doubts it. She's sitting by herself now, her bag open on the seat beside her, a thick book on her lap that she's using as a desk to write something of her own. A letter home, he thinks. When she pulls Lance's paper out, reads over it, and puts it back in her pocket again, Justin suspects maybe it has an address written on it, someone they used to know. They were friends before this tour started, weren't they? Justin thinks he heard that somewhere. Their parents knew each other, or something. He's not sure of the details.

Then again, he and Britney knew each other before, too, at the MMC. She was the first girl he ever kissed, the only girl, and he's still not sure why he did that. Just to see what it was like, maybe. Soft and a little greasy from her lipstick, but other than that, nothing much. It wasn't like kissing a boy, which he finds exhilarating and heady and amazing. Boys taste different, he's decided. And he wants to know how Lance tastes. He'd give anything to find that out.

* * *

When the bus pulls off at the next rest stop on the interstate, Justin drops the comic on the table and stretches his arms above his head. Through narrowed eyes he sees Lance look at him, his gaze fixed on Justin's midriff that's exposed where his shirt pulls free from his pants. With a yawn he rubs at his stomach, showing more skin, and he has to stop himself from pulling the shirt off completely. Lance isn't even pretending not to look now -- he's staring openly. Justin grins, smooths down his shirt again. Like what you see? he wants to ask but doesn't. Britney's still there.

Lance stands as the bus slows to a stop. When he steps into the aisle, the driver hits the brakes a little too hard and sends him stumbling into Justin. "Hey there," Justin says, grinning. Where his hands rest on Lance's arms, he feels warm skin beneath his palms. They've never touched like this before.

"Hey." Lance doesn't look at him, backs away. When he glances down the aisle at Britney, Justin wonders if she said something to Lance about him. Then he nods at the comic on the table. "That any good?"

Justin shrugs. As he steps out into the aisle he lets his hands touch Lance again, an absent gesture that he hopes looks nonchalant. His heart beats wildly in his chest when his hands brush along Lance's shoulder, his back. He thinks Lance can

probably hear it, it's so loud to his own ears. "'S okay," he says. "What were you and Britney talking about?"

Is that a blush that pinks Lance's cheeks? Justin thinks it is. He was right -- they were talking about him. "Nothing," Lance mutters. He stares at the floor of the bus, moves towards the door that's already starting to open. He hasn't looked at Justin once since the bus stopped.

Justin starts to say something when Lance turns back, smiling. "Hey Brit?" he calls over his shoulder. Justin turns as well, frowns at her. Why's he want to talk to her? "Pit stop, girlfriend. Come on."

"In a minute," she says. She's still writing and doesn't look up at them.

"Get Josh up too," Justin tells her. "He'll be pissed if he misses the snack machine."

Lance laughs. Justin likes the fact that it's at something he said.

* * *

Britney doesn't get back on their bus. At the soda machines Joey buys her a Coke and asks if she wants to play XenoGears with him and Chris. "I don't know," she wavers, but when he buys her a pack of Twinkies, she relents. "I've never played that game before," she tells him.

Joey places his hand on the small of her back in such an easy way that Justin's sure Britney doesn't even realize it's there. He thinks he should try that with Lance. "I'll teach you how," he says, smiling down at her. When the buses board again, she waves at Justin and follows Joey onto the other bus.

Finally, Justin thinks, but they're still not alone because now JC's awake and he's sitting next to Lance, talking about how they need to tighten up their moves during their "Tearin' Up My Heart" number. Justin wants to ask him who the hell cares. He wants to tell JC to go back to the bunks and take a nap and leave the two of them alone.

But he doesn't. Instead he picks up his comic, flips it open to the page he wasn't reading before. When he raises the book in front of his face, a small blue envelope falls into his lap.

He frowns, sets the comic back down. His name is written on the front of the envelope in a neat, feminine script. It's Britney's handwriting, he's sure of it.

JC says something that makes Lance laugh. The rich, deep sound startles him, and Justin looks up at his friends, sure they've seen the envelope. But they're not paying any attention to him. He slips a finger under the flap of the envelope, slits it open, pulls out

the thin sheet of stationery that's inside.

"Justin," the letter begins. Before going any further he checks the signature -- "Forever yours, Britney." God, he thinks. Suddenly it's too hot in here, he's sweating and his stomach cramps and he can't even breathe. Please, he prays. No.

"I don't know where to begin, what to say," the letter reads. Justin scans the lines quickly because he wants to know what it says and he doesn't want to take the time to read it line for line. The words rush into his mind like a flood. He doesn't know what they can possibly mean. "We've changed a lot over the past few years, haven't we? We've both grown up so much. But I want you to know that I value what we have together --"

He shakes his head. What's that? he wants to know. He can't imagine what she's talking about. "I think about you all the time. I can't possibly tell you this face to face -- God, I'd be so embarrassed. What if you blew me off? What if you don't feel the same way?"

"No," he whispers. He doesn't feel the same way. He hasn't even gotten to the end of the letter and he already knows where it's going. He doesn't want to read anymore but he can't seem to make his fingers fold the paper back over. He can't seem to put the letter down.

"If I had words to tell you what I'm feeling inside, I'd tell you that I think you're like a god. That carefree and aloof. That painfully beautiful." It goes on. And on. Justin's never had anyone say such wondrous things about him. His eyes like the sea filled with stars? Jesus.

When he reads her name again, his fingers shake. He can barely get the letter back into the envelope. All he can think is that he wishes it was Lance's name written on the bottom and not hers.

* * *

Lance sees Justin read the letter. He didn't think Britney would give it to him so soon, but when she didn't get back on their bus, he figured she had her reasons. Yeah, he thinks. She didn't want to be there when he read it. Lance saw how badly Justin's fingers trembled when he finished reading. He wishes he hadn't been there, either.

They spend the night in a small hotel -- Lou's famous for picking out horrible places for them to stay. Lance hasn't quite figured that one out yet. If they have songs on the Billboard charts and packed stadiums night after night of their tour, why can't they stay at the Ritz once in a while? He doesn't think that's asking for much. But no, this hotel doesn't even have a one star rating, and they're sharing rooms. He and Justin in one. JC and Joey in another. Chris gets his own because he has those damn dogs with him, though he offers to bunk up with Britney. She giggles about

that and tells him to stop it, but Lance knows she likes the attention.

He's not sure who's idea it was to put him with Justin -- he wishes he knew, though, so he could thank them. When they turn out the lights he lies on his bed, the one closest to the window, and listens to Justin breathe. He imagines that breath ruffling his hair, his friend's hands strong against his stomach. He lies on his side, strokes himself in long, slow movements that feel so good, and stares at the outline of Justin's body on the other bed. He's glad it's dark so Justin can't see him watching.

After a little while, Justin rolls over amid the soft rustle of bedsheets and sighs. "Lance?" he whispers, like he thinks Lance might be asleep. Lance doesn't respond. "I know you're awake."

"I'm trying to sleep," Lance whispers, as if they're spending the night at his parents' house and he wants to keep it down so his mom won't overhear them. He waits a minute, then adds, "We have to get up early tomorrow."

"I know." For a long moment Justin doesn't speak and Lance thinks he's fallen asleep. But finally he whispers, "Can I ask you something?"

Lance clears his throat and whispers, "About?"

"About Britney."

No, Lance thinks. Sudden dread makes his blood race. Don't ask me, Justin. Then I won't have to tell you anything. Then I won't have to lie to you.

But he doesn't say that. He can't -- this is Justin. So instead he asks, "What about her?"

Justin sighs. "Do you, I don't know. Do you like her?"

"Yeah." Lance laughs softly. "She's great, Justin. Really nice." And she likes you. I know you two would be perfect together, like Barbie and Ken. You don't need me to tell you this.

"Do you like her a lot?" Justin wants to know.

Lance shrugs. When he realizes that Justin can't see him, he says, "I guess." And because he has to ask, he has to know, he adds, "Do you like her?"

Justin doesn't answer. Lance rolls onto his back, stares at the ceiling. A glance at the clock tells him it's after midnight and they have a show to do tomorrow night -- he needs to get some sleep. But how's he supposed to now when that question hangs in the air between them? He's about to ask again when Justin murmurs, "I guess."

You guess. Lance squeezes his eyes shut. Well you have your answer, don't you? He likes her. Not you, her. Get it, Lance? Not

you.

"She gave me a note," Justin continues. "It's kind of like ..."

"A love letter?" Lance asks. He hopes his voice doesn't sound as mean and hurtful as it does to his own ears. I wrote that, Justin. Those are my words. That's how I feel about you.

"Kinda." Justin's sheets rustle as he moves to a more comfortable position. "I didn't know -- I thought she liked you. She's always talking to you."

Lance laughs. It's a bitter sound, he knows, but he can't help it. Britney liking him? That's classic. "We're friends, Justin," he tells him. And because it hurts and because he can't stop himself, he adds, "Like you and me are friends. Just friends. That's it."

"Just friends," Justin echoes.

"She likes you," Lance says with a sigh. "Remember on the bus, when you asked me what we were talking about?"

"Yeah?"

Lance rolls over again, his back to Justin, and buries his face into the cold pillow. He feels hot tears sting his eyes. He promises himself he won't cry, he won't, not over something like this, because Justin doesn't like him back. He likes Britney, right? And she likes him. He'll be happy with her. "Lance?" Justin asks.

"She told me she likes you," Lance whispers. His voice is muffled in the sheets he's pulled up to his chin, the pillow he's pressed against his cheek. "She's too chicken to tell you herself so I told her to write that letter. I even ..." He trails off. He won't say it.

But Justin wants to hear it. "Even what? Lance, even what?"

"I even told her what to write," Lance admits. I'm sorry, Britney, he thinks, but those were my words, my feelings. I have to tell him that. He has to know. Doesn't he?

Justin doesn't say anything for a long time. Lance burrows deeper into his blankets, tells himself it's just as well. The next place they stay, he'll ask JC if he can switch rooms. He's sure Justin's thinking that if he wrote the letter then ... "Is that the way you feel?" Justin asks. "About me?"

Tell him no, something inside of Lance whispers. Laugh it off and tell him you were just helping her out, you meant nothing by it. Or hell, don't say anything at all. He doesn't feel the same way. He doesn't have to know how bad you have it for him.

For once, Lance listens and stays silent. When Justin calls out his name, he bites his lower lip and doesn't speak. When he hears the insidious sough of sheets, hears Justin step onto the floor between their beds, he says nothing.

But when he feels Justin's hands on his shoulder, feels the bed move beneath his friend's sudden weight, he pulls away. "Justin?" He rolls over, sees Justin loom above him in the darkness. "Justin --"

"Tell me," Justin whispers. He lies down beside Lance, who moves over so they don't have to touch. He's in my bed, Lance tells himself, as if he can't quite comprehend it. He's in my bed lying next to me and sweet Jesus in Heaven above, how am I supposed to get to sleep now? "Tell me, Lance. You wrote those things. My eyes are like the ocean, right? Sparkling with starlight. Is that what you think?"

"Your smile is a wildfire," Lance murmurs. He remembers the letter word for word. "Igniting the world, the universe, my heart."

Justin's fingers entwine with his. "You wrote that for me."

"Yes." Lance sighs. His eyes burn with unshed tears. Now he's going to lose a friend, won't he? Maybe the group, as well. What if Lou finds out? What if Justin tells the other guys? God. "Yes, Justin, okay? Yes."

And then Justin's lips press against the smooth flesh of his cheek. Justin's breath is hot against his skin. His lips are as soft as Lance dreamed they would be, and his fingers tighten around Lance's own. His other hand brushes through Lance's hair tentatively. "When I read it," Justin admits, "I wanted it to be from you."

Lance turns, surprised. "You mean --"

In the dark Justin's mouth finds his, cutting off anything else he might say. Lance gives in to the kiss, the sweet lips on his, the gentle tongue slipping over his teeth. Sorry, Brit, he thinks as he pulls Justin to him. But they WERE my words.

And he's not really sorry, not in the least.

The End

The Last Thing on My Mind
by NSyncGrrl

Yesterday he told me he loved me. Today we're dead.

I'm too young to be dead. That's the only thought keeping me going right now. I'd say keeping me alive but that's a joke, isn't it? I'd laugh if I thought it would help, but I'm afraid it'll sound a little hysterical and once I start I won't be able to stop, and if I really am dead then I don't want to spend the rest of my afterlife cackling away. I shouldn't be laughing, anyway, because I have to remind myself I'm mad. I'm pissed to be honest, fucking livid, and it's all Justin's fault but I'm having a problem staying angry with him because I keep hearing him say the words over and over again, an endless litany in my mind. "I love you."

And it shouldn't, but somehow it makes everything all right.

* * *

You can't say we're dating because we're not, not really. Dating implies going out to dinner and holding hands in the mall and going to the movies. Dating means driving him home and kissing him in the driveway with his mom watching from the window pretending she's not looking at us. We can't do that sort of stuff. The business we're in, we can't even go out in public without being mobbed, tens of thousands of screaming little girls crying our names, in tears because they see us and they want us and what the hell would they do if they ever got their grubby little teenaged hands on us anyway? I've never figured that one out. I used to have nightmares when we first started this gig, horrid dreams where girls would chase me down the street and into limos like I was Ringo Starr, and they'd get closer and closer and I'd feel them touching me, I'd feel their hands grabbing at my clothes, and just when I tripped and fell and they all crushed against me, I'd wake up in a cold sweat.

But I'm dead now, right? So that means no more dreams.

In the darkness of the hotel room I'd feel his body against mine and he'd clutch me tight. "It's okay," he'd whisper, and it would be because he'd be there. Once I asked him if he ever had dreams like that. He told me no. "I only dream of you."

And then he killed me.

Well, killed us both. I can't really blame him, though. It was an accident. We had a few days off from the tour and he wanted to take me out on a real date, someplace we could go where the fans wouldn't see us and no one knew who Justin Timberlake was. The way the girls scream for him, you'd think he was the Messiah. But

he's not, he's my boy, and even though we have to keep the whole thing under wraps I'd love to just grab him in public one day, kiss him full on the lips, and tell the world he's mine. Mine. Britney, eat your heart out.

So we're driving along, right? Air conditioner up full blast because it's hot as hell outside, middle of the summer, and Justin hates the heat. He hates to sweat, even though I tell him it makes him look sexy and smell intoxicating. He sweats up a storm when we have sex, no matter how high the a/c's kicking.

In the car we have the windows rolled up and the air on, and the radio up as loud as it'll go so we can hear it over the air. And Justin drives fast, real fast, always tearing down the road like he's on his bike and everyone else is going too damn slow. So he has his foot all the way to the floor and the trees are just flying by us, we're singing along to one of our first tapes -- the one with that "Riddle" song on it, which is so cheesy I don't even want to think about it, but I can't stop because it's the last song I heard and it's stuck in my mind forever now that I'm dead. He's holding my hand and he turns to smile that Justin Timberlake smile, the one that melts the hardest of hearts, the one that I fall for every single time, and he tells me he loves me again. I can't hear the words for all the noise but I see the way his lips move and I know what he's saying. "I love you."

Then that deer jumps out into the middle of the road.

Then he slams on the brakes. The car fishtails and the seatbelt eats into my chest. He tries to let go of my hand, he needs both hands to steer, but I'm holding on so tight now, I've forgotten how to let go. So maybe it's partly my fault, too, because he can't keep the car on the road and the trees leap out at us, rushing just as fast as they were before only now they're rushing at us and not passing us by. I squeeze my eyes shut as tight as I can and all I hear is squealing tires, scraping metal, crunching wood.

Then we hit the tree. Head-on. We're going so fast it doesn't stop us at first so we hit another one, but I didn't know that at the time. At the time the only thing on my mind is Justin beside me, his hand still in mine. I can't even think about pain because it's all happened so quick and nothing hurts yet.

He's the last thing on my mind and then we're dead.

* * *

"Lance."

The way he says my name still makes me want to lie down on the ground and let him walk all over me. But I'm mad at him, remember? He killed us. I'm thinking I should be pissed. So I don't answer him. Instead I look at my hands folded between my knees and try not to think about the short length of chain that's shackled my left wrist to his right one. We were holding hands when we

died. We're handcuffed together now forever. I just hope this thing's long enough that we can still have sex.

Yes, I know I'm dead. But I still get hard just thinking about him. Who wouldn't?

"Lance," he says again. I can tell that he's pouting without even looking at him. "Are you mad at me?"

"Yes," I tell him, but there's no conviction in my voice. I'm not really mad, much as I'd like to be.

He knows that. He's sitting beside me on this bench that didn't seem hard at first but the more we sit on it, the more uncomfortable it gets. There's a table in front of the bench, just slightly out of reach, so we'd have to get up if we actually wanted to leaf through one of the magazines that are strewn out across it. I've already glanced at them -- dog-eared, yellowed copies of Newsweek and People and Time that are months old. Nothing I want to read.

On the other side of the table is a wall. It's a muted shade of dingy pink that I suppose someone thinks of as soothing but it's not. It looks like dried bubblegum that's been stuck on the bottom of your shoe. That pale, that washed out. There's another wall behind us, the same color. And two more hem us in, making this a tiny room in the middle of eternity. There are no doors, no windows. The carpet beneath our feet is thin and threadbare. The ceiling is off-white, and a ceiling fan turns lazily around and around, stirs nothing. It's not too hot and not too cold. I guess this is what they call room temperature.

"Are you really?" Justin asks, like I'm kidding. "Like really mad at me?"

I sigh. "No," I tell him. I take his hand in mine and kiss his knuckles. The chain that binds us together clanks with a hollow sound. "I'm not mad. It's not your fault."

"Damn straight it ain't," he says. I laugh at his indignant frown and kiss his cheek. With wide eyes he looks at me, looks past me at the wall. "We're dead," he says. Like I might not know this.

"Yeah," I whisper.

His hand tightens in mine. "Do you think this is heaven?"

"Do you?" I ask him. Personally, me? No, I don't think that at all.

"No," he says.

"Me either."

He picks at the light hairs on the back of my wrist. His fingertips are ticklish and I think about how I can never stay mad at him for long. "This reminds me of a joke," he tells me, and then he laughs

just thinking about it. "You want to hear it?"

"Do I have a choice?" I ask.

That makes him pout again. "Nevermind."

I sigh, kiss the back of his hand. "Justin --"

"Nevermind."

Be that way, I think. No, this definitely can't be heaven.

* * *

I don't know what time it is because my watch stopped on impact. Running smack dab into a tree tends to do things like that. But what does it matter, how many hours go by? We have the rest of forever to sit here. We have all the time in the world. Right?

We're dead. As if I could forget that little fact.

I stand up and stretch -- my back is starting to hurt sitting on that damn bench. Justin looks up at me and he's still being poopy, hasn't said a word since I brushed off his stupid joke. That's fine. He'll get over it. "I love you," I tell him. I tug at the chain between us until he stands. "Kiss me."

He does. "Tell me your joke," I say.

"No," he replies. He's so stubborn sometimes.

Fine, I think. I didn't want to hear it anyway.

Pushing at the table, I ask, "Do you think we can move this thing over a bit? I want to lie down."

"We're dead," he tells me. No shit. "I'm thinking we probably don't need sleep --"

I sigh. "I didn't say sleep, I said lie down." I push at the table and it moves away easily. The carpet isn't something I'd particularly like to curl up on but right now I want to feel my baby's body against mine and I know we can't cuddle on that damn bench.

Justin watches me like he's never seen anyone move furniture before. "Why?" he asks.

I sit on the floor and pull him down beside me. "I want you to hold me," I tell him. "Is that okay?" When he doesn't respond I add, "I'm not mad."

It's awkward at first. We keep sitting back up to get into a more comfortable position and I think maybe this is hell because we can't seem to find a way to lie that lets us touch each other the way we want to. It's the handcuffs. Finally he gets his arm between my waist and the floor and we lie like spoons, my back to his belly, and

my arm that's connected to his rests in front of me. His other arm holds me tight. "I'm sorry about all this," he whispers. I love the feel of his breath against my neck.

"Me too," I say. I wonder how the guys are taking it. The nation's hottest boyband is now a trio. Poor JC. How's he ever gonna make it with two backup singers? Chris is getting too old for the group anyway, and Joe's had an awful time this last tour. I hope things work out for them.

After a while my neck starts to hurt. It's from lying on this hard carpet, no pillow to support my head. "This sucks," I say.

He sits up, starts to pull off his shirt. "You can use this," he says, but when he gets down to the last sleeve he frowns at the chain connecting us. "Oh fuck."

The shirt won't come off over that.

"It's okay," I tell him. I'm lying on my back looking up at him, his naked chest, his dark nipples, the scruff of hair on his chin. He's so beautiful. Maybe this is heaven because he looks like an angel and at least we're together. It could've been worse. I could've died with Chris in the car. He'd drive me insane after an eternity or two.

Justin stretches the shirt, tries to pull it through the chain, and I catch his hand before he can rip the fabric to pieces. "Honey," I tell him, "it's okay. Really. Put your shirt back on."

"I want you to lie on it," he says. I hear a slight tearing sound as he tugs at the shirt. "Lance --"

"It's okay," I tell him again. He gets frustrated so easily, it's cute. "Lie back down, baby." As he pulls the shirt back on, a horrible thought occurs to me. We can never take these shirts off, not handcuffed together like this. So we'll never be completely naked again. I'll never see him with everything off, everything, and God, I love his body. He's always going to have that shirt on. And what if that's not all? I think. What if NOTHING comes off? I don't like that one bit. "Justin," I say. I hope my voice sounds calm.

"What?" He struggles to get the shirt back on over his head. Each time he moves he pulls my arm along for the ride.

"What if we can't get undressed?" I ask him. He pulls the shirt down over his face and stares at me, his eyes wide, as the implications of that set in. "What if we can't take our pants off?" I press. "What if --"

"No," he says. "God no, that'd be hell." He smooths his shirt down quickly and unzips his jeans with trembling fingers. "Oh Jesus please," he mutters as he lays back, shucks off his pants.

I hurry to tear my own jeans off. Then my briefs, pulling them down as fast as I can, and I'm not even completely undressed but I'm already hard and throbbing and he's rolling onto me now, pressing me back into the hard carpet, his hand wet between us.

He grabs my dick and kneads it until I moan, and then he guides me into him, into the hot darkness I know so well, and he places his hands on either side of my head as we find a steady rhythm, one as furious as our sudden energy. I thrust into him -- this'll be quick, one of those ones we used to steal in the dressing rooms backstage, when the other guys were just outside in the hall and we wanted each other so badly we couldn't wait until after the show. And just as I think maybe this is hell because I've never been so hard and so close without getting off already, I come in him and he sighs into my neck, a little whimper that makes me want to hold onto him forever. Now I can, I think as my hand, the one without the chain, snakes between us. I squeeze and play and stroke and then he comes, too, and he kisses my chin, my cheek, my lips while we lie together, sweaty and spent.

Well, at least we still have each other. At least there's that.

* * *

Back on the bench. I'd pace but I'd be dragging Justin around with me and he's sitting slumped beside me and I don't want to disturb him. We have our whole afterlives to pace. We can do that later. "Sit up," I tell him.

"Why?" he asks. He's like a kid when he does that, always asking why.

I shrug. "It's bad for your back."

He laughs at that. "We're dead, Lance. Dead. No one cares about my back anymore."

"I do," I say. "I don't want to be chained to a hunchback for the rest of eternity."

He laughs again but at least he sits up. "You want to hear that joke now?" he asks.

"Which joke?" I stand up, snag one of the magazines on the table, sit back down. People, the Oscars' fashion issue from 1990. Joy.

Justin sighs. "Come on," he wheedles. He's good at that. "Remember? I told you this reminds me of a joke --"

"Oh yeah," I say. I remember. I really don't want to hear it, though, but he did put out for me, didn't he? And he said he loved me again. I'll never tire of those words. The least I can do is listen. Leafing through the magazine, I say, "Tell me the joke."

"Okay." He takes a deep breath and thinks for a minute. Let me just say that he sucks at telling jokes. I hope this is the only one he knows. He's that bad. Me, I suck at jokes, too, and that's why I never tell them. Justin isn't like that. He'll get halfway into the joke, forget the punchline, make something else up entirely, and

then laugh like it's the funniest thing he's ever heard. Most of the time I laugh just because he's laughing. He gets all giggly when he's laughing, all touchy and wants to snuggle and how can I say no to that? So let me hear this joke already. Maybe it'll end up with us on the floor again. I already ache to hold him.

"Okay," he says again. "There's these two guys, right? And they die --"

"Like us," I say.

He nods. "Like us. And they go to heaven and at the pearly gates St. Peter comes out and says there's only one rule here and that's you can't step on a duck." He thinks for a minute and then leans against me. I drape an arm over his shoulders, which pulls his own arm across his chest, and he takes my hand in his. "Do you remember seeing any pearly gates?"

"No," I tell him. I lay the magazine on my lap and brush my free hand over his stubbly hair.

With a small sigh he whispers, "Me either." He places his hand beneath his cheek, rests against my chest. "So anyway, these guys are in heaven and they're walking around and they're really careful not to step on ducks."

"How many ducks are there in heaven?" I ask. I smile at the consternation that crosses his face. He hates being interrupted when he's telling something.

"I don't know," he says. "There must be a lot because they don't want anyone stepping on them, right?"

"Like how many?" I want to know.

"Lance!" He frowns at me and I laugh. "Let me tell the joke already."

I kiss the tip of his nose. "Okay," I whisper. "Then can we do it again?"

He grins at that. "Anyway," he says, and the way he says it tells me he doesn't want me to ask any more stupid questions. It's just a joke. "So they're in heaven, right? And the first guy goes and steps on a duck."

"Oh shit," I say. This is a stupid joke. Then again, those seem to be the only kind of jokes Justin knows.

"Listen!" Justin cries, like I'm not being serious enough for him. Like he wants to hurry up and get this joke over with because he's got something else to do. Hello? We're dead, I want to tell him. Everything else suddenly became a lot less important.

But instead I say, "I'm listening," because I am and because I love him. Another kiss on the nose and I prompt, "The first guy steps on a duck."

Justin nods. "And out of nowhere St. Peter comes with this ugly bush woman and chains her to the guy. Like we're chained together. And the guy's like what the hell? And St. Peter goes, this is your punishment for stepping on a duck. You have to be chained to this ugly woman for all eternity."

I narrow my eyes. "St. Peter called her ugly?" I ask, just to be contrary.

"It's just a joke," Justin says. He picks at one of my nipples where it strains against my shirt. I love it when he does that. "Let me finish it."

"Okay." But now he's licking at the tender bud through my shirt and I'm getting hard again, and I don't think we have much longer to go before we get back on the floor. "Justin?"

He laughs. His breath is cool against the damp cloth that covers my nipple. "So then the second guy, he's walking along and walking along and all of a sudden St. Peter is there with this drop dead gorgeous woman. The guy's like aww yeah. St. Peter handcuffs him to this woman and the guy's like what did I do to deserve this?"

"What if he was gay?" I ask. Did I mention this was a stupid joke? And the fact that we're shackled together and dead makes me hate it all the more.

"He's not," Justin tells me.

"But what if he is?" I want to know.

"Lance!" Justin cries. He sits up and frowns at me with that little boy look of his that I want to just smother with kisses. "You're ruining the punchline!"

"I'm sorry," I tell him. And I am. I'm just messing with him because he's so much fun to tease. "What's the punchline?"

Justin sits back, tries to cross his arms in front of his chest and can't because I've got my arm around his shoulders and he's chained to it. But he does his best and slouches down on the bench and pouts. "Nevermind."

I sigh. Lord, I pray, give me the strength. I hope you can still pray when you're dead because much as I love him, some days prayer's the only thing that gets me through one of Justin's moods. "Baby," I breathe, and I stroke his cheek and cup his chin, and then my hand winds its way down his chest and over his stomach until my fingers pick at the zipper of his jeans. I lean close and kiss right behind his ear, where I know he's weak. "Tell me the rest of the joke, Justin. Don't leave me hanging."

"You don't want to hear it," he mutters, but he's already melting beneath my touch. It never takes much. Before I can answer, he sighs and says, "So he goes what did I do to deserve this, right? And the woman says, I don't know what you did but I

stepped on a duck."

I don't get it. I never do -- didn't I tell you I suck at jokes? But he's grinning at me and so I laugh, and then he starts to laugh, and then he's pulling me into his lap and we fall to the floor in a tangle of limbs and we're really laughing now and this time it's his turn and he rolls over on me, pins me to the floor, loves me until I scream his name in a breathless rush.

Maybe being dead isn't so bad after all.

* * *

Later. That's the only way to describe the time here, now and later, like the candy. This time we don't even get up off the floor, just lie in each other's arms and stare into each other's eyes. It's not like there's much more to do. Justin lays over me, brushes the hair back from my face. I trail my fingers along his back, between his smooth flesh and his shirt. I wish he could take it off. We have our pants around our ankles and our stomachs exposed but it's not enough. I want every inch of him touching me. I want these damn chains to disappear.

"What do you remember?" he asks me. His voice is low, even though we're the only ones here.

"From the accident?" I ask. He nods. I stare up at the ceiling and try to think. "I remember you said you loved me, right before we ran off the road."

"Aww." He kisses my chin. "What else?"

"I don't know, Justin," I tell him. "It all happened so fast. What do you remember?"

Without hesitating he says, "Your hand in mine."

That melts me. I hug him close and sigh against his neck. God, I love this boy. I say a silent thanks that we died together because I can't imagine living the rest of my life without him. What if only one of us was killed? No, I won't let myself think about that. I won't. "What else?"

He shrugs. "I remember thinking you'd be mad at me," he says. I kiss the shadowed hair along his jaw and he adds, "I remember thinking that we're gonna die and at least I'd have you with me. I mean, if you have to go, you might as well take someone else along, right?"

I laugh at that. His logic never ceases to amuse me. "I guess so," I whisper. "Bad as it sounds? I'm glad it was me."

"I'm glad it was you, too," Justin tells me. Between us he's getting hard again and I'm thinking this whole being dead thing gets a bad rap because all we're doing is having sex and that's

quite alright by me. "This must be heaven," he decides. His finger trails along my cheek and then over my lips. I open my mouth and nip at his fingertip playfully. He sticks the finger in my mouth and laughs when I curl my tongue around it. "Because I'm with you."

He eases his finger from between my lips and his mouth closes over mine. "You want to know the last thing I remember before we died?" I whisper.

Justin nods. "You," I tell him. "You were the last thing on my mind."

And then we do it again, because we've already looked through all the magazines and there's nothing else to do. When he holds me tight and says he loves me, I can't think of any place I'd rather be.

The End

In Control
by NSyncGrrl

Another show in a string of concerts. I've lost count of the cities we've been in this tour. Each stadium starts to look the same after a while, every crowd the same mass of people like a sea in front of us, their screams and cheers a wave that washes over us with a dull roar. I look out and all I see are bright lights staring back. When the lights fade and the encores are over, I still see those bulbs burning behind my eyes. Everywhere I look, large circles of yellow shine back at me like I'm still in the spotlight, and my ears ache with the memory of the crowd.

And after every show it's the same. Get in the limo, all five of us piled together and already sleepy. The adrenaline wears off so quickly. Chris with his feet propped up on the seat across from him, chin tucked down into his chest as he starts to doze. He's getting too old for this. JC beside him, his head leaning against the window, already half asleep. Joey with that tired grin of his, trying to talk someone into hitting the clubs with him. None of us want to. We're too exhausted. How long have we been doing this gig? We did the same thing yesterday, in another city, and there's another show tomorrow night, somewhere else.

Justin next to me, his arm around my shoulders. I lean against him with my eyes closed and pretend I'm sleeping but I'm not. I'm listening to his heart beat beneath my ear. I want to love him tonight but he'll be too tired. He's always too tired.

I think we're all getting too old for this.

* * *

Justin's the type who likes to think he's in control. That's why he's the front man for the group. It gives him a sense of being in charge. He and JC argue over that some times because JC says there's not one of us who makes the group. "There's no I in 'N Sync," he likes to say, and I think that's cheesy as hell and a boldfaced lie because everyone knows Justin's name, even people who don't like our music. Justin is Mr. 'N Sync. He likes it that way.

He tells the guys that our hooking up was his idea. I let him think it was. A few smiles here, a touch there, and truth be told I orchestrated the whole thing. I saw him and wanted him the first time I laid eyes on him, and I knew I'd make him mine. But you can't just chase after someone like Justin, hell no. He'd see you coming and run the other way. He's got to be the one who makes the first move. He's got to be the one who says what happens next.

So when I wanted him to think about me in that way, I flirted with him. Nothing overt, nothing he could pin down and throw back

at me and say, "Jesus, Lance, I didn't know you were gay," and then run away and hide in Britney's skirts and tell me he wasn't into guys. Oh no -- I couldn't have that. It started with a smile every time he looked at me, and a laugh after everything he said that he thought was funny, and that way of staring I have that makes you think you're the only thing that matters to me. He loves that one. He'd be standing across the room at a party and look up and there I was, staring at him from against the wall. And I'd hold his gaze two seconds -- no more -- and then look away. When I looked back again, he was still watching me. Me. Me.

He kissed me first. He was the first one of us who wanted to touch there. Sharing rooms was his idea. He suggested taking showers together. He suggested making love.

At least, that's what he thinks. That's what I want him to think.

* * *

He's always too tired to fool around when we're finished with another show. You'd think at his age he'd be tearing off his pants at the mere hint of sex, but we're wearing thin. Night after night after night of concerts, all day traveling across the country, it starts to get old. Most times we just come back to the hotel and shuck off our clothes, hop in the shower, lather each other up with soap and barely rinse clean before we can make it to the bed to sleep. Cuddling's as far as we go when on tour. All of our energy is spent on stage.

But I want him. More to the point, I want him to want me, and sometimes it seems like we're just falling into this comfortable pattern of eat, sleep, perform, and snuggle that I don't want to get into. I want spice. I want passion. I want his body and I want him in me and I want him at my feet, begging to love me. And he might think he's the one in control but I always get what I want where he's concerned.

So it starts with me setting the alarm clock ahead a half hour. That's step one. When I hear the alarm ring, I don't move. I pretend I'm not awake. And when he leans over me to turn it off, he sighs and in his thick bedroom voice says my name. "Lance, get up."

And I roll over onto my back beneath him. I stretch languidly, like a cat -- first one arm, then the next. A hand behind his back, touching his skin as lightly as possible. My cheek pressed into his chest. My leg moving along his until my knee brushes his crotch, and I yawn when he leans into my touch. Then I smile that slow, just woken up smile that I know he loves. When I finally open my eyes he's staring at me like he wants to eat me for breakfast, and that's exactly where I want him. "Justin," I breathe. My voice is deeper than it usually is because I know what that does to him. "What time is it?"

"Time to get up," he says, and he's just barely whispering and his hands are already smoothing along my chest, down my stomach.

When his fingers brush through the hair at my crotch, I roll away. His hand trails around my hip and over my butt as I glance at the clock. It's thirty minutes later than the time we usually get up and I stumble from the bed before he can keep me beside him. "Oh shit," I say, like it wasn't me who changed the time on the alarm. Running late's part of the plan. Make him want me and then don't let him have me, not just yet. "Jesus, we're late."

"Lance," he says again, but I'm already pulling on my boxers and I have my back to him so he won't see me grin when he sighs, frustrated. "We have a few minutes ..."

Not long enough, I think. I don't want right now -- I want forever. I want him begging for me. I want him hard and aching. "Maybe tonight," I tell him as I zip up my jeans. Over my shoulder I wink at him. "Come on, baby. We can't right now."

He pouts at me and for a moment I almost give in. Almost. But then I turn away and pull on one of his shirts and he's already wanting me, isn't he?

And that's a good thing.

* * *

Step two -- don't let him touch me. Well, little touches are okay, a hand on my back when he guides me into the car first, his arm pressed against mine in the limo, his leg alongside my leg beneath the table at lunch. But that's it, nothing more. No hands on my knees, squeezing to get my attention. No holding hands. No hugs or kisses or anything like that. When he makes a move that looks like it'll end up with me in his embrace, I move away. Not on purpose, mind you. It can't look like that. No, I just shift a little and he plays it off like his arm wasn't trying to wrap around my shoulders, and he smiles at whoever's with us, that just hurry up and leave smile of his that he uses when we aren't alone and he wants us to be. Then he shoves his hands in his pockets and looks at me so hard I can feel his gaze like the weight of the world pressing in on me, and I have to bite the inside of my lower lip to keep from grinning. He doesn't know what I can do to him.

It's a rush from the hotel to the airport and then to another hotel, then to the stadium, a quick run through our routine before tonight's show, and he's watching me the whole time. I can almost feel his need radiating from him like musk from a deer in heat. Just before the opening act goes on and we're in the dressing room getting ready, I manage to get the two of us alone for three minutes, no more. Chris is in the john and JC's at wardrobe because he can't find his lucky t-shirt, which I hid earlier just so he'd have to hunt for it, and Joey's flirting with the girl with the

Security shirt on because I told him she looked his way, and it's just me sitting in front of the mirror and Justin standing behind me, and I let him place his hands on my shoulders, massage my neck. "God," he sighs, his reflection staring at mine. "I thought we'd never get a moment to ourselves."

I smile at that. A moment alone wasn't in my plans until right now. I lean back into his touch and close my eyes, purse my lips and moan as his hands work into the tension bunched along my back. I wait. One, two, three ... and then he kisses me, just as I knew he would, because he can't look at my lips puckered slightly and not want to kiss them. The scant hair along his chin tickles my upper lip, and his little press of lips turns into something more, his tongue slips into my mouth and over my teeth and he spins me around in the chair, leans me back and pushes into me, hungry. He wants me so bad, I can taste it. His hands grip the sides of the chair and one knee rises alongside my thigh as he tries to climb onto me. I feel his hard dick rub against me when I run my hand down the front of his pants, and he sighs my name, pushes me into the chair and the chair back into the vanity table, and for a moment I'm ready to give in when the door to the restroom opens and Chris comes out. "Guys!" he calls, disgusted. "We go on in less than ten minutes."

Justin rests his head on my shoulder and sighs another frustrated sigh. I ease my arms around his waist and laugh, a breathless little sound I've perfected that tells him I'm just as horny as he is. "After the show," I whisper.

"I want you now," he says.

And yes, that's part of the plan, too.

* * *

Onto step three. After the show, in the limo, his arm around me and my head against his shoulder, my eyes closed like I'm falling asleep. I'm not. But I make him shake me gently and pretend to be roused. "Wha --?" You have to say it just right, like you were almost out and he's just gotten you up, or he won't buy it.

"We're at the hotel," he tells me. He says it low, pressing his lips against my ear and breathing those quick little breaths that tell me he might ravage me right here and not even wait until we get to the room. As he helps me from the limo, his hands brush along my stomach and lower, rub beneath my ass as if by accident, and I lean heavily on him because he likes that. It makes him feel strong when he helps me to the elevator.

Now we're up to the final step of the plan. I love this part. We get in the room and he starts to undress and I just sink to the bed like I'm too tired to take my clothes off. "Lance," he whines. Yes, whines. He's twenty and can still sound all of twelve when he wants something badly enough. "Baby --"

"I'm tired," I tell him, and for emphasis I fall to the pillow, pull my legs up beneath me, yawn so wide he'd fall in if he comes any closer. Then I sigh, that deep sigh people have right before they fall asleep. He's naked now and leaning over me, and I have to keep my eyes closed or I'll give in because I know he's ready to rumble, I feel his dick poke at me when he climbs into the bed beside me. "Justin --"

"Come on," he wheedles. He starts to take off my shirt and I let him because I need to get undressed anyway. Then he unzips my pants, pulls them down, starts kneading me through my briefs like he's going to get me interested whether I like it or not. And that's the only thing I can't control, because no matter how much I think about my mother or his mother or Britney or even JC, I can't not get hard. I can't keep from being turned on by him and his hands which are pulling off my underwear, his lips kissing along my lower belly. "Come on, Lance, please? I've waited all day for this."

I know he has. But I'm still not giving in.

So I roll away. "Justin," I sigh, letting my voice trail off like I'm too tired to keep talking. And his lips are now on my hips, my ass, that sensitive skin where my legs meet my butt and between my thighs, he's kissing and his tongue licks at me like I'm the sweetest thing he's ever tasted. He likes my ass, I know he does, so I let him roll me onto my stomach and I bury my face into the pillows to keep from moaning when his fingers slip into me. "Justin," I say again. It takes a hell of a lot of effort to keep my voice steady, and I can't help but arch back into his hand. "Baby, I'm so tired ..."

"Please," he says again. "I'll be quick, I promise. Please."

He spreads my legs and kneels between them. Then he raises my hips and eases into me, filling me, moaning that I'm tight and hot and he loves me, he loves me, he loves me. He always says that when we have sex. It's a mantra for him, it keeps him going. I fist my hands into the bedsheets, keeping them beneath the pillows so he can't see them. Then he lies down on top of me, snakes his arms under mine, pulls himself down onto me and holds me close, his chest flat along my back. With each thrust he moans again, a breathy sound right in my ear, and he starts to kiss my neck but ends up just grunting my name and the words love and God and yes over and over again. I hold back, don't let myself come when he comes, filling me with a liquid fire that makes me warm and sleepier than I already am. When he's done he kisses my cheek and tells me he loves me again, and I frown, my eyes still closed, like I'm still not in the mood. "Lance," he sighs. Here it comes. The apology.

"I'm sorry," he says, like I knew he would. His hand eases between my body and the mattress, reaching for my erection. When he finds it he says he's sorry again. "I know you're tired, baby, I'm sorry." He rolls me over, his fingers kneading me, working at me until I can't hold back any longer. Then he crawls down between my legs and with his lips and tongue brings me to the edge, until I arch into him and I bite my lip so I won't cry his

name when I come.

Then he's kissing me again. He tastes sour now, my own juices on his lips, in his mouth. He's kissing me and holding me tight and saying he's sorry, he's so sorry, he didn't mean to do it when I didn't want to but he was so damn horny and I was so good, I'm always so fucking unbelievable and he loves me. I snuggle against him and murmur it's okay because it is. This is exactly what I've been building up to all day long, this moment. Tomorrow he'll be unbearably sweet because he'll think he took advantage of me. He'll bring me breakfast in bed and he'll pack all the clothes and carry all the bags and he'll bring me drinks from the soda machines, he'll bring me lunch. And tomorrow night he'll let me love him nice and slow, the way I like it, no matter how tired he is because he'll feel bad for using me tonight. He tells me he loves me again before I really do fall asleep.

And he thinks he's the one in control. But that's okay. Because that's what I want him to think.

The End

We're Not Fighting
by NSyncGrrl

To Justin, she was just another girl in wardrobe, that was it. So she might have a crush on him, so what? He was with Lance. To him, that meant more than anyone else seemed to realize. He knew he was a flirt -- he was sexy and he liked the way the girls giggled when he winked or smiled at them. He knew they swooned when he sang. He was voted Teen Male Hottie for two years running -- he knew he was hot. But he was with Lance, he was madly in love with the boy, had been for years, and there was nothing that could come between them, nothing. You can look but you can't touch, girls, that's all there was to it.

Her name was Leslie. She was Wade's cousin, a pretty redhead who could do some wicked things with makeup, and part of the crew on their new tour. When Wade introduced her, he added, "You guys be good to her. She's family."

Justin sank to one knee and took her hand as the rest of the group laughed, and even Leslie started to giggle when Justin pressed his lips to her palm. "Fair maiden," he said, and that was as far as he got before Joey placed a foot against his ass and knocked him over. Letting go of her hand, Justin pulled at his friend's knees until he fell on top of him. "You die for that, Fatone!" he cried as they wrestled together on the floor. Chris jumped in the fray and Lance laughed as he and Joey managed to pin Justin down. "Let me up! Lance!"

"You guys stop it," Lance admonished, but not too lightly. He saw the way Leslie's eyes sparkled as she watched their mock fight, and he had decided he didn't like that girl one bit.

He was right to be so suspicious. In the dressing rooms backstage she hovered around Justin, always ready to jump for anything he needed. "Do you want more water?" she'd ask. Justin would nod because he liked to be waited on and if she was willing why not take advantage of that? "Your eyeliner's running. Hold still, I'll touch it up."

"His eyeliner is fine," Lance would say. And it would be -- she was only making excuses to touch him.

But Justin would simply look up at the ceiling and let her fix him up, make him pretty as he called it, and he didn't see why Lance didn't like her. "She's a nice girl."

"She's all over you," Lance told him. "Can't you see that?"

"She is not," Justin would reply. "Jesus, Lance. You're jealous of her? Please. What do I need her for when I have someone like you?"

And he would pull Lance into the safety of his embrace and kiss away his objections, and he was right, wasn't he? What did he need her for when he had Lance? They shared a bed, slept in each other's arms, had for years ... how could she even hope to come in between them?

Still, Lance didn't like her, and he never let her out of his sight. Whenever she tried to talk with Justin, Lance was there with some off-the-wall question to interrupt. She'd ask Justin what he had planned for after the show and it would be Lance who answered. She'd try to get Justin alone and Lance was always there, always. She'd rush to smooth out a smudge on Justin's cheek only to find that Lance was already wiping it away. "I don't like her," Lance told Justin when the lights were out and they lay together in the hotel bed they shared.

Justin kissed the back of his lover's neck and sighed. "She's not that bad."

"She's after you," Lance replied. He felt Justin's arms tighten around his waist, the slight erection at his crotch press against his buttocks, and he knew he had nothing to worry about but why take that chance? "You need to tell her off."

"I can't," Justin whispered. "She's Wade's cousin. I can't just --"

"You can," Lance insisted. He closed his eyes and ignored Justin's hands as they tried to smooth along his stomach. He wasn't giving into them tonight. "Either you tell her to leave you alone or I will."

Justin sighed again. "Lance, we've talked about this. No one's supposed to know but the guys --"

"If I tell her," Lance said, interrupting him, "it's not going to be a pretty sight."

Justin kissed Lance's shoulders and didn't say anything. Sometimes it was easier not to argue. Instead he slipped a hand between Lance's legs, rubbed at soft skin and along the inside of his lover's thighs, trying to get him interested. "Babe --"

"Not tonight," Lance mumbled. He caught Justin's hand in his and held it tightly against his stomach. "I'm not in the mood."

"I can get you in the mood," Justin murmured. He kissed his lover's earlobe, his jaw, his chin.

But Lance sighed, that you're not getting a piece of me sound that Justin knew all too well, and he turned away. "I said not tonight."

* * *

Three nights of lying together and not doing anything. The first

day Justin swore he was the one who was right -- they had decided not to tell anyone of their relationship, no one outside of the guys, and there was no need to tell Leslie because she didn't need to know. The next day he wondered if maybe he should just mention to her that he wasn't interested, but he couldn't really because she never came out and said she liked him. He didn't want to make a fool of himself.

But after the third night of holding Lance in his arms and not getting any kind of reaction from his lover at all, Justin was ready to tell the world he loved his boy, he wanted no one else but him, anything for just a kiss, a smile, a hug. "We've got a few days off," Justin whispered to him in the darkness of the apartment they shared. "Come on, baby. Let's just forget this, okay? Please? I miss you."

"I'm right here," Lance replied.

"You know what I mean." For emphasis, Justin thrust his hips against Lance's, gasping when his hard cock ground into his lover's ass. "Please."

"Not right now," Lance said. "Maybe later."

"Like when?" Justin wanted to know. He was pleading here.

Lance simply shrugged and said, "Later."

* * *

When Chris invited the four of them to his place for dinner, Justin planned to ask the others what they thought about the whole thing. She was only being nice, Lance had nothing to worry about, he was getting all worked up over nothing at all. Justin thought maybe Joey could talk some sense into him. Or maybe Chris would see the humor in the whole thing and laugh it off. Hell, even JC would point out that they've been dating since the group began, there's no way Justin was about to leave for some girl he just met. One he's not even interested in. Maybe their friends could make Lance see he was wrong.

Lance stood in the foyer, waiting while Justin pulled on his coat. "Come here," Justin told him, and before Lance could reply, he kissed him briefly. "Don't be mad at me," he whispered.

"I'm not mad," Lance told him in that pissy tone of voice Justin recognized all too well.

"You are, too." Justin kissed him again. When Lance tried to turn away he wrapped his arms around his lover and nuzzled against his neck. "I love you."

"Justin," Lance sighed. "I love you, too. We're going to be late." His hands were strong against Justin's chest, keeping him back.

Justin took one of his hands and pulled it out from between them. "I'll say something to her," he promised as he sucked below Lance's ear. "Just don't keep doing me like this. Please."

He felt Lance begin to soften beneath his touch, and he thought maybe they could be a few minutes late if it meant he got a piece of his boy before they left, when his cell phone rang and interrupted them. "Dammit," he muttered. He snagged the phone from his belt and flicked it open with his thumb. "Yeah?"

"Justin?" It was a woman's voice, one he thought he should know.

"Who is this?" he asked. Lance rested his head on Justin's shoulder and watched him closely.

"Leslie."

Shit. "Who gave you my number?" Justin frowned at Lance as his lover slipped out of his arms. "Leslie --"

Lance's eyes hardened. "No, wait," Justin told him, but it was too late.

"I'll be in the car," Lance muttered. He slammed the front door shut as he left the apartment.

"Wade did," Leslie was saying. "Is this not a good time?"

"No," Justin snapped.

"Well, I can call you back," Leslie said, hopeful.

With a sigh, Justin said, "Look, don't, please. I'm seeing someone and I really don't need this hassle, okay?" When she didn't answer immediately, he pressed, "Okay?"

"Hey, I didn't know," she told him. "I didn't --"

"Well now you do." Justin hung up the phone before she could say anything else and hurried outside after Lance. He found him behind the wheel of their car, the engine already idling. He didn't look up as Justin slid into the seat beside him. "Baby --"

"She has your cell number?" Lance asked. He popped the car into reverse and tore out of the driveway. Yes, he was furious. Justin could see it in the tight set of his lips and he wondered if they should even go to Chris's dinner. It wasn't going to be a fun evening.

"Wade gave it to her," Justin told him. "Look, I didn't know she had it. I never expected her to call me. Jesus, Lance, you know I love you." Lance didn't say anything. This was how he usually was when he got angry. Justin hated it because he felt as if he could open him up with just the right word and he would spend hours talking just to fill the silence between them. He hadn't done anything wrong -- why couldn't Lance see that? He reached out and

touched his lover's knee, hoping to break through to him. "Honey --"

"I don't want to talk about it," Lance said.

That made Justin mad. "So what, you're just going to sit there and make me feel like shit until you want to forgive me? I didn't give her my number!"

"Well, something you said or did must have given her the idea that it would be okay to call you," Lance pointed out. He stared at the road ahead and took the turns a little too sharply. "Something to make her ask Wade for your number. I'm sure he didn't just give it to her for no reason whatsoever."

"I've never been alone with her," Justin reminded him. He had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach that whatever he said, Lance would ignore. He wondered why he even bothered trying. "You're always there, Lance. You know I don't encourage her at all."

"You don't exactly discourage her, either," Lance said.

Justin laughed, a shaky sound. "I don't believe we're talking about this. How long have we been together? Can you seriously sit there and think I want to leave you for someone else? I mean, really?"

"Then why did she call you?" Lance wanted to know.

"I don't know!" Justin cried. "Jesus Christ I don't fucking know, okay?"

Lance glared at him. "Don't," he said simply.

"Don't what?" Justin asked.

But Lance didn't reply. They drove the rest of the way to Chris's place in a stony silence.

* * *

"Warning," Justin told Chris as they entered their friend's apartment. "We're having a fight."

As Chris took Justin's coat, Lance came in from the cold evening. He pushed past Justin as he shrugged out of his own coat and glared at his lover. "We are not fighting," he said.

Justin sighed. "We're not fighting," he told Chris, rolling his eyes. "But Lance is in a pissy mood --"

"I am not," Lance said, but the angry set of his jaw and the way he didn't look at Justin suggested otherwise. He dumped his coat into Chris's arms and said again, "We're not fighting. Where's the bar? I need a drink."

"You don't," Justin muttered, but Lance ignored him. As he walked down the few steps that led into the living room, where Chris kept a fully stocked wet bar, Justin watched the way his pants pulled across his thighs and sighed. "We're fighting," he muttered.

"I couldn't tell," Chris said. He hung his friends' coats in the hall closet and asked, "So what's it about this time?"

"You don't even want to know." Justin waited until Chris closed the closet, then followed his friend into the living room.

At the bar, Lance stood by Joey and JC with a glass of scotch in one hand and a fist full of pretzels in the other. When he saw Justin, he turned towards their friends, still ignoring him. "Hey guys," Justin said, easing an arm around Lance's waist. His lover stiffened but didn't pull away. "What's up?"

JC looked at Lance closely before answering. "You tell us. Are you two fighting again?"

"Yeah," Justin said, as Lance told them, "No." He glared at Justin. "What do you mean again?"

"He just asked --" Justin started. It was going to be a long night.

"Hey, it's cool," Joey said, a little too quickly. He placed a hand on Justin's arm and forced one of his famous Fatone grins, the kind that could charm the hardest of hearts. "No need to get into it now. We're just here to have fun."

Lance laughed at that. "Fun," he muttered, taking a long sip of scotch. Justin tightened his grip on his lover's waist and thought Joey had fucked up ideas of fun.

* * *

Justin sat beside Lance at the table, but his lover didn't speak to him during dinner. He was still getting the silent treatment and he hated it. Lance's mood soured the whole evening, despite the two drinks he had before they started eating. At the table JC and Chris kept exchanging worried glances, and the only one with any kind of an appetite was Joey, who ate as if he were famished. Justin, on the other hand, couldn't even taste his food.

"So," JC said, pushing his plate away. In an effort to make conversation, he asked, "Looking forward to the next leg of the tour?"

Chris shrugged. "I want one of those bulls when this gig's over." He looked around the table, his eyes sparkling with mirth. "What do you guys think? You think I can get them to give me one?"

"It'd look good in the living room," Justin said with a laugh. "You want one, too, Lance?"

Lance didn't look up from his plate. "No."

"I'll see what I can do," Justin told him. "If you want one."

"I said --"

Joey threw down his fork. It clattered on his plate, cutting Lance off. Leveling his gaze at them, he asked, "Just what the hell is up with you two?" Justin looked at his friend across the table and then looked away. "You're acting like children."

"It's nothing --" Lance started, but Joey shook his head.

"Bullshit," he said.

JC sighed. "Joe --"

Joey held up a hand to silence him. "You've been shitty all night," he said, ignoring JC. "What's your problem? Are you guys breaking up?"

"What?" Justin asked, incredulous.

Beside him Lance shook his head. "Joey, no! God, no."

"Then what is it?" Joey waited.

"It's nothing," Lance said again.

Chris laughed. "A lover's quarrel?"

"Shut up," Justin muttered. He felt Joey staring at him as he tried to finish eating, but suddenly he had no appetite left. "Okay, you want to know what's going on?" he asked. Hadn't he wanted to tell them anyway? Get their opinion?

Lance kicked him beneath the table. "I'm sure they don't," he warned.

But Justin wasn't listening. "You know Wade's cousin? Leslie?" Joey nodded, and JC shrugged. Chris leaned forward, interested. "Lance says she likes me. So what, right? I've got a boy. Only he's so damn jealous --"

"I am not," Lance said. "I just think you need to tell her --"

"I don't need to tell her shit," Justin replied. "She's part of the fucking crew."

"Why don't you have her transferred?" JC suggested.

Justin shook his head. "She's Wade's cousin," he said, as if that were reason enough. "This whole thing is ridiculous. I'm not interested in her. I'm not!"

Chris watched Lance's closed face intently. "Do you want her transferred?" he asked softly.

Lance sighed. "I want you to tell her," he said. He looked at Justin for the first time all evening, and Justin bit his lower lip to keep quiet. I love you, he wanted to say as he stared into those crystalline eyes. I'll do whatever you want, Lance, just know that I love you, okay? I love you. "Tell her we're together. That's all I want."

"I told her I was seeing someone," Justin admitted. "When she called --"

"Tell her it's me," Lance said. He looked at Justin and asked, "Or can't you do that?"

"I already told her --" Justin tried.

Lance's chair scraped along the floor as he pushed it back. He threw his napkin on the table and said, "You know what? Fine. You can't tell her you love me? You can't say the damn words except when we're alone? Fine. So maybe you're right, Joe. Maybe we're breaking up after all."

He turned and left. Justin stared after him, shocked. He heard the closet door open. He heard Lance pull on his coat. He heard the front door open and then slam shut like an exclamation. Was that it? Was it over that easily? No, he thought, shaking his head. That can't be it. I won't LET it be the end. "Well?" Joey asked. Justin turned and looked at him, at all his friends, watching him, waiting. "You going after him or what?"

Justin pushed away from the table and hurried after his lover.

* * *

He found Lance outside, struggling to get the key into the car door. The temperature had dropped since the sun went down, and Justin zipped up his coat as he raced across the yard. The grass was already stiff with frost that snapped beneath his feet as he walked. "Lance!" he called out. "Lance, wait."

Lance kicked out at the front tire, angry. "I'm going home," he told Justin. His fingers fumbled with the key. "Come on," he muttered beneath his breath.

Justin took Lance's hand in his own. "Give me the key," he said. In his palm Lance's fingers were freezing. "You shouldn't drive, baby. You had a few drinks, remember? I'll take you home."

Lance pushed him away. "Can't you just tell her you love me?" he asked. When he looked up, cold tears stained his face. "Is it that hard, Justin? You love me. Can't you say that?"

"I say it all the time," Justin reminded him. He tried to hug Lance but his lover stepped away. "Lance, if that's all you want, I'll say it until I'm hoarse. I love you, okay? I love you."

Lance glared at him through his tears. "We're alone, Justin. No one else can hear you now. Can't you say it when it's not just the two of us? You never even say it in front of the guys. Or our parents. No one else hears it but me. No one else knows."

"No one else matters," Justin said. "Lance, you're the only one I care about. You're the only one who needs to know it."

"It matters to me," Lance whispered. When Justin reached for him again, he turned away. "I want to go," he said, skirting the car. "Take me home."

Justin sighed. "Get in the car." He unlocked the door and climbed in behind the wheel. Then he unlocked the passenger side and waited while Lance got in beside him. He stuck the key in the ignition and turned it just enough to kick the heater on. "We have to talk," he said, turning the heat up full blast to take the chill out of the air.

"We can talk at home," Lance told him. He sat hunched into himself, his arms crossed in front of his chest, and he stared out of the window as if Justin wasn't even in the car with him. "Justin --"

"We can talk now," Justin replied. When Lance sighed, Justin said, "Listen to me, baby. Listen!" He turned Lance's face towards his and held his lover's chin as he spoke. "I'll tell her, okay? I'll tell everyone. I don't care who knows it. I love you, only you. Listen!" He frowned as Lance tried to twist away from him. Lance's tears dampened his fingers, and he felt his own eyes start to burn, as well. "Listen to me, Lance, please. I love you. Tell me what you want me to do to prove it to you, and I'll do it. Tell me what to say and I'll say it. Anything, Lance, just don't push me away." Lance's lower lip trembled, and Justin pulled him closer, rested his forehead against his lover's, stared into those large green eyes and whispered, "Please don't push me away. Please don't. Please."

Lance sighed again. "Justin --"

"Shh." Justin kissed him, tasting salty tears on his lover's lips. This time Lance didn't pull away, and another kiss made his arms unfold from his chest to ease around Justin's neck. "I love you," he whispered into Lance's mouth as he pushed him back against the seat. "Don't leave me."

"I won't," Lance murmured. He slid a hand beneath his seat and hit the release. The seat swung back beneath their combined weight. Justin shifted onto Lance, pressing him down as they kissed. Lance's hand cupped Justin's crotch, squeezing his erection through his jeans. "I'm sorry, Justin. I've been an ass."

Justin unzipped his jeans and gasped when Lance's hand slipped inside his underwear. As he stroked his lover's swollen cock, Lance told him, "You're supposed to say no you haven't."

Justin laughed and thrust into Lance's hand. "Baby, don't," he sighed. He kissed Lance's chin, his cheeks, his jaw. With his hands on either side of Lance's head, he pushed the seat back as far as it

would go and climbed into his lover's lap. Rubbing against him, he moaned. "Don't talk, please. Not now."

With nimble fingers Lance unzipped his own pants. "Sit up," he commanded. When Justin didn't move, he pushed against him and turned his head so the kisses fell on his neck. "Justin, you gotta sit up a little. Come on."

Justin straddled him and sat back against the dashboard. When he realized that Lance was trying to shimmy out of his pants, he grabbed the waistband and pulled it down, exposing white briefs that strained with his lover's erection. Justin hooked his thumbs into the briefs and pulled them down, as well. Lance licked his palm and encircled Justin's hard cock with his wet hand, stroking him, working him, squeezing until Justin's eyes slipped closed and he gripped the seat, arched into him. "Lance," he sighed. How long had it been? More than a few days, surely. It seemed like forever. His hands smoothed along Lance's thick length where it lay against his groin, red and swollen. "Oh please, oh please."

Lance guided him between his legs and Justin stretched out above him again, pressing him down as he eased inside. So tight, he thought, thrusting into his lover. So hot, so tight, Jesus I love him, I love this boy, I love him so much. Beneath him Lance's hips rose to meet his and his moaned into his lover's mouth, thrust harder, deeper, whimpering because this was it, this was what he had missed, all those days, this was his boy, his lover, his.

The car rocked beneath them, a steady rhythm that steamed the windows. Their moans filled the car, drowned out the hiss of the heater, and Lance held Justin close as they made love. When he came, Justin kissed Lance breathless, tiny kisses that fluttered around his face and lips and neck and threatened to drown them both. "Lance," he sighed. He pulled out of him and slid to his knees on the floor between his lover's feet. "Lance," he whispered again, taking his lover's erection into his mouth, licking and sucking and tonguing it until he came, too, his juices filling Justin with a hot rush. "I love you," he murmured, kissing his lover's wilting dick, his thighs, the impossibly soft skin of his balls.

"Justin," Lance sighed. He tugged on his ears playfully. "Get up here, baby." When Justin climbed back on top of him, he wrapped his arms around him and said, "We're not fighting."

"No," Justin agreed. Around them the windows had steamed over, obscuring the night outside. "I'll tell anyone you want me to tell. We're not fighting anymore."

The End

One More Try
by NSyncGrrl

From the kitchen Lance could hear girlish laughter over the noise of the television in the living room. "Daddy, look!" his daughter cried, and laughed again.

"Daddy's in here, sweetheart," Lance called out. He looked up from the pot of spaghetti he was stirring on the stove to see her run into the kitchen, a large piece of the morning newspaper in her hands. Her thick blonde hair was pulled into twin ponytails on either side of her face, and her eyes sparkled like champagne when she laughed. Lance smiled down at her -- five years old and she had already stolen his heart. He couldn't remember much of his life before she came along. "What do you have there, Kaylie?"

"I drew you a picture." The newspaper was twice her size, it seemed, and it wrapped around her small body as Kayla tried to hold it out for him to see. "Daddy," she whined, and then she sighed dramatically. "This paper."

Lance grinned and set down the spoon he was using to stir the spaghetti sauce. "Let me help you," he said, taking the ends of the newspaper where they scraped along the ground. He held out the paper and smiled at the colored circles doodled onto it. "Oooh, pretty. A priceless work of art like this should be hanging in the Louvre. How much do you think we can get for it on eBay?"

Kayla giggled. "Daddy, stop it," she said playfully. "That's the wrong side. Turn it over."

"This is just practice, eh?" he asked, winking at her. That set her giggling again. She had the prettiest little laugh he'd ever heard. Squatting on the floor, he helped his daughter turn the newspaper over. On the other side was a full-page ad for handbags. Kayla had drawn little stick figures in the white spaces around the pictures, childish people with big balloon heads and spindly arms and legs, little triangle skirts for the women and shaky cowboy hats for the men that looked like McDonald's golden arches on their heads. There were four people -- a woman had a little girl by the hand and together they stood between two men. "Who's this?" Lance asked, pointing at the little girl. "Is this you?"

"Yep," Kayla agreed. She pointed at the woman. "And this is Mommy, and this is you --" she indicated the man standing on the other side of the little girl, and Lance could see she had used a pale green crayon to color in his eyes, the same one she used on her own picture. Even though she looked like her mother, she had his eyes.

"And this?" Lance asked, pointing at the other man.

Kayla laughed. "That's Paulie."

Paulie. Paul Martin, her mother's new boyfriend. Not seven months after their divorce was final and Meredith already had someone else in her life. Lance wondered how serious it could be in that short of a time. Serious enough if Kaylie knows him by name, he thought. Nice to see she got over me quick.

But had there been anything to really get over? They were married for five years, four of which they spent in separate houses. Kayla didn't remember a time when her parents lived together. Lance was glad she was so young, so resilient. She thought nothing of the fact that her mommy had a boyfriend and her daddy lived alone in a small townhouse that she visited every weekend. She didn't know this wasn't how it was supposed to be.

"Do you like Paulie?" Lance asked his daughter.

The little girl shrugged. "He's okay," she said. "Mommy likes him, though. She says it's nice to have someone like her back."

I'll bet it is, Lance mused. He had tried to make the marriage work, Lord knows he tried. But some days it felt as if he barely held his life in check, and there was no way he could hold onto a wife, as well. And when Kayla came along, it was almost too much for him. He knew it was only a matter of time before it all fell down and he was still picking up the pieces that had shattered when he dropped the charade. At least Meredith was strong enough to move on, he'd give her that.

"He's coming to my party," Kayla said. "You're coming too, right?"

Lance forced the memories aside and laughed. "Wouldn't miss it for the world," he told her. Rising to his feet, he swept her up in his arms amid a squeal of giggles and covered her cheeks and forehead with big, sloppy kisses. "My little girl's turning six! You'll be in school before you know it."

"Yay!" Kayla shouted. She kicked her legs and he let her slide to the floor. "Can't wait, Daddy. I'm all grown up."

He tousled her hair and, with a sad smile, agreed. "You're getting there, sweet pea." Handing her the napkins and forks he had placed on the counter earlier, he asked, "Why don't you set the table? Dinner's almost ready."

She took the offered tableware solemnly. "I can do that," she told him.

He watched her trot into the dining room and sighed. She was growing up so fast and he barely saw her enough as it was. Weekends were the only real time they spent together, except for the few times Meredith invited him over. But that wasn't often -- she was bitter towards him, and could he really blame her? Five years of their lives, gone, thrown away as quickly as it had taken him to sign the divorce papers. The only good thing to show for that time was their daughter. Everything else hurt too much to

mention.

* * *

Kayla stood on one of the dining room chairs, directing Lance as he filled their plates with spaghetti. "That's too much, Daddy!" she laughed. "You can't eat that many. Put some back."

Lance grinned at her and scooped up a large spoonful of the pasta. "How's that?" he asked.

She frowned at the plate, picked up one long noodle, and stuck it in her mouth. It dangled down her chin. "Help." Lance held the noodle out as she slurped it up between her lips, and when he touched her nose with the tip of it, she giggled. "That's good enough," she told him, pointing at his plate. "It's time to eat now. Did you turn off the TV?"

Lance setting the pot of noodles aside and started to say, "Yeah, I did --" when the doorbell rang, echoing through the townhouse and startling them both. He wasn't expecting company. Don't let it be Mere, he prayed, though he knew it wouldn't be. She was at the beach with Paul this weekend, enjoying her time off from motherhood. Raising his eyebrows at Kayla, he asked, "I wonder who that can be."

The little girl jumped down from the chair. "I'll go see!" Before Lance could stop her, she raced through the living room towards the door.

"Kaylie!" he called out. "Don't run in the house!" As he set the pot of spaghetti onto the table, he heard her fumble with the latch. He hoped it wasn't Meredith. She never interfered with his time with their daughter before.

From the living room he heard Kayla open the door. "Hello?" she asked, her voice so tiny, so chipper. Maybe it was one of his neighbors. Maybe it was UPS.

He was wiping his hands on a dish towel when he heard a voice he hadn't heard in years. "Hey there, baby girl. Your daddy home?"

Justin.

As in Timberlake, the golden boy of 'N Sync, king of the pop world six years ago when they had been at the top of the charts with platinum records and sold-out concerts. Six years ago, before Kayla, before Meredith, when he had his life in control and he knew what he wanted. When what I wanted was him, he thought with a sigh. And I thought I was over that, I thought I was finally getting over HIM, and now he's back again. Damn.

"Daddy!" Kayla called. He wondered how rude it would be to ask her to just shut the door and come to the table, dinner was getting cold. But she's only five, he reminded himself, crossing the living

room. How old are you? Time to play the adult here. His stomach churned like the towel he twisted in his hands.

His daughter looked up as he approached and he forced a smile for her sake. "Who is it, honey?" he asked, even though he knew damn well who it was. His heart stopped in his chest when he saw the baggy camouflage pants, the short denim jacket over a black muscle shirt. The scant chin hair, the full chapped lips, the confident grin that always made his friend look so impossibly young, those dark eyes, that buzzed hair. How many times had Lance thought he would die if those eyes weren't on him? How many times would he have killed to lose himself in their depths? Nothing had changed. Six years and not one damn thing about the boy had changed. "Hey Justin."

The grin faltered. "Hey Lance." Justin nodded at Kayla and said, "You have a beautiful daughter. She has your eyes."

Lance placed a hand on Kayla's head, mussing her hair. "Thank you," he said. And then, because he didn't know what else to say, he added, "She looks like her mother."

"Very pretty," Justin said softly. Bending down, he gave her a sunny smile and asked, "What's your name, baby girl?"

"Kayla," she replied, suddenly shy. She wrapped a tiny arm around Lance's knee and hid behind his leg.

Justin reached out and tweaked her nose, eliciting a giggle from her. "Well, baby Kay-Kay, you're going to break hearts one day with eyes like that, aren't you?"

She laughed as she rubbed at her nose but didn't reply. Lance noted the duffel bag Justin had slung over one shoulder. He didn't want to think about what that might mean. "What are you doing here?" he asked quietly.

Justin glanced up at him. Folding his arms around his knees, he squatted in front of the door and sighed. "Just thought I'd stop in and say hey. See how you were doing, say I'm sorry, shit like that." At Kayla's giggle, he grinned and tugged one of her ponytails. "Crap like that. My bad."

"Sorry for what?" Lance asked with a frown.

Standing, Justin shrugged. He glanced around the empty parking lot of the townhouse complex. "You don't think maybe I could come in? Just for a few minutes." Lance tried to ignore the things he saw in his friend's eyes, the questions, the pleas, all the things he wanted to say and couldn't, not out here, but he had never been good at ignoring anything about Justin. In a quiet voice, he added, "I won't stay long if you don't want me to."

Could I ever tell you no? Lance thought. But he pressed his lips together to bite back the comment and stepped aside. "Come on," he muttered, angry at Justin for still making him feel the way he did, angrier at himself for the feeling. Inadequate and lovestruck

and invincible all at the same time, with just one look from his friend. It left him reeling and scared. Even now, Justin still seemed larger than life to him.

Kayla pointed at the dining room as Justin closed the door behind him. "We're eating spaghetti," she said, though she pronounced it pissgetti, the way little kids do. "You can have some."

At Justin's smile, Lance closed his eyes to steady himself. Thank you, Kaylie, he thought, following his daughter into the dining room, for inviting him to stay. He was surprised at how easy it was for her at five, when he couldn't even form the words at thirty. "If your daddy doesn't mind ..." Justin trailed off, uncertain.

Lance felt his friend's stare and forced another smile. It was something he never quite forgot how to do, mask his inner feelings with a grin. It came in handy all those years he spent in the group -- all those times reporters asked Justin about Britney, all those comments about Lance being single, all those fans screaming his name. He hid everything behind a grin that came back to him just as easily as riding a bike or driving a car. He hoped Justin couldn't see past it. He had never been able to before. "I don't mind," Lance said, meeting his friend's frank gaze for the first time since he appeared on his doorstep. He felt himself falling into those eyes and his smile widened in defense. "There's plenty of noodles."

"Thanks," Justin whispered. Lance let his gaze linger on those eyes, those lips, that smile, and then he led the way into the dining room. Help me, he prayed. At least Kayla was here with him. If he had been alone, he didn't know how he would ever be able to make it through the rest of the evening.

* * *

Kayla sat across from Justin and watched, fascinated, as he twirled spaghetti onto his fork. "Do mine!" she cried, pushing her plate across the table. "Daddy, watch."

"I'm watching," Lance told her. Try as he might, he couldn't seem to look anywhere else but at Justin, and his strong hands, his bare arms, his slender throat. Justin's coat lay discarded on one of the living room sofas, his bag beside it as if it belonged there, and Lance didn't have the nerve to ask him what was in it. It was an overnight bag, obviously. He wasn't sure he wanted to know just where Justin was hoping to spend the night.

He watched as Justin twirled spaghetti onto Kayla's fork. "Open up, baby doll," he said, leaning across the table.

Kayla opened her mouth and let him stick the fork in, and she giggled when a few of the noodles dripped onto her chin. "More, please," she said, opening her mouth again.

"That's enough," Lance said.

Justin glanced up at him, an unreadable expression on his face. "But Daddy --" Kayla started.

"You're a big girl," Lance told her. He turned to his plate and ignored her childish pout. "You can feed yourself."

"Justin makes it more fun," Kayla replied. With a bright smile, she whispered, "Do it again."

But Justin shook his head and pushed her plate back. "Your daddy said no."

"I don't care," Kayla said, crossing her arms. She pouted at the plate in front of her and sighed dramatically. "I want you to do that thing for me or I won't eat no more."

Lance stood up, his chair scraping across the floor. He picked up his plate and hers. "Then you're done," he told her. As he headed into the kitchen he called out over his shoulder, "Don't you dare feed her off your plate, Justin."

He heard Justin say again, "Your daddy said no." Then he heard another chair being pushed back and his daughter's footsteps as she ran around the table. He didn't have to look back out into the dining room to know she was crawling into Justin's lap.

At the sink he scraped the plates clean and tried not to think of his friend out there in his dining room, turning on the Timberlake charm and winning his daughter's heart as easily as he had won Lance's years ago. He tried to tell himself that things had changed between them, they weren't the same as they were before, he wasn't the same -- he had been married and he had a child, he wasn't some starstruck teenaged boy who stuttered whenever Justin looked his way, he wasn't in love with him anymore, he wasn't. It's been years, he told himself as he flicked on the garbage disposal. I'm not falling for him again. I won't let myself.

He heard laughter from the dining room, Kayla's sweet giggle mixed with Justin's voice, so melodic and still boyish at twenty-eight, and he knew it was probably already too late.

* * *

When Lance tucked Kayla into her bed, she hugged him tight and asked, "Is Justin staying over, too?"

Lance shook his head. "No honey, he's just here to visit." He wasn't sure how much of a visit it would be now that she wouldn't be with them, keeping the talk light and easy. He didn't really want to go back downstairs. He wondered how rude it would seem if he just crawled into the bed beside his daughter and held her until they both fell asleep.

But Kayla was smitten with Justin -- he had forgotten how good

his friend was with kids -- and she scooted over a little in her small child's bed and patted the empty space beside her. "He can sleep in here," she said. "I've got plenty of room."

Lance grinned and ruffled her hair. "I'm sure he has other plans for the night," he told her, though he didn't believe that. Justin seemed intent on picking up their friendship right where he had dropped it six years ago, and Lance was sure he planned on staying the night. Why else would he bring the duffel bag in? And when Lance announced Kayla's bedtime, Justin didn't kiss her goodbye and leave, oh no, not him. He swept her into a bear hug and said he'd see her in the morning. "Sleep tight, angel cakes," he told her with a wink, and then to Lance he had said, "I'll be on the porch."

"He promised he'd cook me pancakes tomorrow," Kayla pouted.

Lance smoothed the hair back from her brow and kissed her forehead. The thought of Justin in his kitchen making breakfast terrified him -- this was a boy whose idea of a good start to the morning was half a box of cold cereal in front of the morning cartoons. But he just said, "We'll see. Get some sleep, sweetheart."

With a huge yawn, Kayla nodded. "Okay. Night, Daddy."

He clicked off the lamp by her bed and whispered, "Night, Kaylie." At the door to her room, he looked down the length of the hall to his own bedroom, considered just hiding out in there until the morning came -- he didn't have to go back downstairs, he didn't have to talk to Justin, he didn't. But you're stronger than that, a voice in his mind whispered. You've always been the stronger one, Lance. Don't wimp out now.

Had he really been stronger than Justin once? Before his marriage fell apart, before the group disbanded. He couldn't remember. If I'm the stronger one, he mused, taking his time as he went down the stairs, then why is it he's the one who found me after all these years and not the other way around? If I'm the stronger one, why wasn't it me who went in search of HIM?

The voice in his mind didn't have an answer for that.

He found Justin where he said he would be, on the porch. For a moment Lance stood inside the sliding door, looked out at the night punctuated with lights from the surrounding townhouses, watched Justin on the porch swing where he sipped from a bottle of beer as he pushed at the ground with one foot. His other foot was on the swing, his leg folded as he hugged his knee to his chest. He looked so patient, so unlike the Justin Lance used to know, that his hand hovered above the latch and he considered turning it, locking his friend outside, out of his life forever. It would be so easy, just a turn of the wrist and he could go on as if Justin had never showed up again.

But he couldn't do that. From the minute Kayla opened the door and he heard Justin's voice, Lance felt an abyss open within him and he stood on the edge, staring down into a darkness that he

had thought he managed to tame, a hollow space within him that threatened to engulf him completely. An emptiness that opened the day Justin climbed onto his motorcycle without a backward glance and roared out of his life.

And now he's back. Lance couldn't begin to imagine why -- or rather, he wouldn't let himself hope, not now, not after six long years he had spent waiting for a phone call or a letter or something, anything to let him know Justin still thought of him. Some days? Some days he would have given the world to know that his friend still cared.

He's here now, he thought. Doesn't that say something? Lance wasn't sure. He didn't want to let himself believe it meant anything, not yet. Ask him. Go out there and ask him why he's come back.

Before he could lose his nerve, he pushed open the sliding door and stepped out onto the porch. The heat of late summer pressed against him and the cicadas hummed in time with the slight creak of the porch swing. Justin looked up as he sank into one of the wicker chairs by the door. "She's in bed," Lance said instead of hello.

"She's a lovely girl," Justin told him. He took a long swallow of beer, his steady gaze on Lance down the length of the bottle.

"Thank you," Lance replied. He picked at the armrest of his chair to avoid looking at his friend.

Justin patted the empty seat beside him on the swing. "Come sit with me."

"I'd rather not," Lance told him. The lie came easily enough but it took all the strength he had to remain in the chair. He didn't need to sit next to Justin out here in the dark, just the two of them alone. He didn't need that temptation.

Justin took another swig from the bottle. "I hope you don't mind," he said, "I helped myself to some beer."

Lance sighed. "What are you doing here?" he asked, glancing at his friend and then glancing quickly away. He hadn't intended to sound so ... so demanding. In a lower voice, he added, "I mean --"

"I know what you mean," Justin laughed. It was a bitter sound, one Lance didn't like. "You mean why the hell did I come back to fuck up your life now, that's what you mean."

Because that was exactly what he meant to say, that was just the thing he wanted to know, Lance stayed silent.

Around them the cicadas rose to a deafening pitch and then stopped. The swing's chain sighed as Justin pushed it gently, back and forth. Finally he asked, "How's Meredith doing?"

"Fine," Lance said, and he nodded to emphasize that. "Saw her yesterday. She's doing good, real good."

Justin watched him closely. Lance could feel his gaze in the night so he frowned at the armrest as he picked at the wicker strips. "I heard about the divorce," Justin whispered. Lance laughed -- who hadn't? It was in all the celebrity mags, People and US and the tabloids. "I'm sorry things didn't work out."

"It's not your fault," Lance told him, but that was another lie, wasn't it? It was all his fault -- the marriage, the divorce, everything. I wanted you, Lance thought, not daring to look at his friend, even under cover of darkness. I wanted ONLY you, Justin, and you had Britney so I started dating Meredith just to take the sting out of seeing you two together. You were so happy, I told myself I wanted you to be happy, I told myself Britney was good for you ... and then you came to me, do you remember that? You came to me and said you didn't love her, you thought you were in love with me, you made me believe it might be possible that it was ME who would make you happy, that it was ME you wanted. Damn you for giving me that false hope. And now you're back. Damn you to hell.

For long moments they listened to the creak of the swing. Justin finished off his beer and set the bottle on the porch railing. He stared out at the woods that hemmed in the back of the townhouse complex, said softly, "Brit's getting married."

"I heard." Lance forgot where -- he thought maybe Joey mentioned it, last time they talked. When had that been? He didn't know. He didn't really keep up with the guys anymore. He had seen Chris before the divorce was final, opening a new line of his FuManSkeeto clothing at Nordstrom's, and they talked of old times over lunch, but it hurt to think that they had called them that, "old times." At thirty, he had "old times." How sad was that?

"I'm happy for her, though," Justin said, and he nodded to himself. "I'm glad she found someone who can do good for her ..." He shrugged. "Lord knows I couldn't."

"You would've made her happy," Lance told him. Just like you would've made me happy, he added silently, if you had only stayed to talk to me, to give me a chance. One night, Justin. That's all I got from you, one lousy night, and my life's been hell ever since. Trying to find you in everything around me. It's not a way to live, looking for something I can never have. Looking for you in all the places where you aren't anymore. "She loved you."

"Hmm." Justin patted the seat beside him again, an absent gesture. "Please sit with me," he said.

"I shouldn't," Lance murmured. He met his friend's gaze and shook his head. "Really, Justin, I can't --"

"I'm sorry," Justin said softly. On the swing his hand curled into a fist and his lips twisted into a frown, his eyes glistened with unshed tears. "Oh Jesus, Lance, I'm so sorry. I was scared, you know? Terrified. I'd never had anyone like you before. I'd never --"

"Justin," Lance warned, holding up on hand. He didn't want to hear this.

But Justin wasn't listening. "You gave me everything, Lance, everything you had, everything you felt for me -- God, I was stupid. I was so damn stupid and it scared me, that much, that soon. One night, I thought I'd be able to handle it. Just a little taste, that's all I wanted. Just something to tell me it was okay to feel the way I did for you. Something to tell me it was right."

"Justin," Lance said again, "please --"

"I couldn't face it," Justin told him. "I couldn't accept it. I had to get out of there, I had to leave, don't you see? I couldn't stay. I just couldn't."

With a shuddery breath, Lance sighed, "You told me you loved me."

"I did," Justin whispered. He reached across the space between them and touched Lance's hand. When Lance didn't move away, he curled his fingers into his palm and pulled the swing closer to him. "I do, Lance. I love you. I do."

Lance closed his eyes and squeezed his friend's hand. "Six years," he breathed. "It's taken you six damn years to admit that? Justin, six years? I wanted to hear it then, not now. I needed to hear it then."

"Don't tell me it's too late," Justin said. Lance bit back a sob that threatened to choke him and tried to extract his hand from Justin's, but his friend held on too tightly. "Please, Lance. Give me one more try, that's all I'm asking. Please."

Lance wanted to say no. He wanted to shake Justin's hand loose and stand up and tell him to leave, it was nice but it was over, that was it, he didn't get another try. He wanted to be strong enough to tell him to get his damn coat and bag off his sofa and get the hell out of his townhouse and back out of his life. He wanted to tell him to go, leave, don't look back, just get out of here already, but he didn't. He couldn't. He managed to get to his feet and then Justin stood, too, his hand still in Lance's, his body so close that Lance could feel the heat radiating from his bare arms, and Lance felt his resolve die as abruptly as the cicadas' music. "You're staying here tonight then," he said. It wasn't quite a question.

Justin nodded. "Only if there's a chance for us. Only if you think we can try again ..." He let his voice trail off, the hope in it painful to hear.

With a sigh, Lance let go of Justin's hand. His friend took the hint and dropped his hand, waited. Lance blinked back hot tears, headed inside, the scrape of the sliding door loud in the quiet night. He opened his mouth to speak, not sure what he would say, and when the words came out they were thick, strangling him. "You can sleep on the couch."

"Thank you," Justin sighed, relieved. His hand touched Lance's waist briefly, then disappeared.

* * *

In the morning Lance told himself it had been a dream. Justin wasn't really on his sofa, he hadn't shown up after all this time, he didn't ask Lance for another chance. And he sure as hell didn't say he loved him. That had been a dream, surely. How long had he waited to hear those words again? Six years. His mind was a sick and twisted thing, to dream up something like Justin after six long years of trying to forget about him.

But just in case it wasn't a dream, just in case Justin was on his sofa downstairs, Lance stayed in bed. The last thing he needed to see was his friend sleeping. That would make it real and he didn't think he could see him asleep and not touch his skin, not kiss his lips, not want to take him up on his offer of just one more try.

Through his closed door he could hear the faint sounds of the TV and Kayla's laughter, so normal, so innocent, a sharp contrast to the confusion swirling in his mind. I should get her something to eat, he thought. She wants pancakes, didn't she say that last night? Justin promised her pancakes.

Justin. Already he was a part of Lance's thoughts again. It terrified him at how seamlessly his friend managed to do that, to integrate himself into his life as if no time had passed at all.

Lance crawled out of bed. If Kayla was up, then maybe Justin was already awake, too. As long as they had the little girl with them, she was a buffer, keeping them apart. He could cope with the fact that Justin was here as long as he had Kayla by his side. But what happens when Meredith picks her up this afternoon? his mind whispered.

He didn't know. He didn't want to know.

Halfway down the stairs, the smell of frying bacon filled his senses and his stomach growled noisily. Dressed in his boxers and a t-shirt, Lance padded barefoot into the kitchen. I can do this, he thought. I'm thirty years old. Too old to fall for his sexy smile and pretty eyes. Too old, do you hear me? Almost on cue, Justin turned around from the stove, let his hungry gaze linger on Lance's body, grinned as if he liked what he saw. "Hey."

Even in rumpled jeans and the same muscle shirt he wore the night before, Justin was achingly beautiful. So it wasn't a dream, Lance thought, staring at his friend. Which meant the rest of the evening -- the hand in his, the apology, the plea for another chance -- all that really happened. He said he loved me, didn't he? I told him that he said it before and he said he did, he DOES, he loves me. Sweet Jesus Christ, what the hell am I supposed to do about that now?

He didn't know. And he didn't want to think about it right this second -- his daughter was here, he had to think of her first. He'd deal with Justin only after Kayla left and he had to face him, no sooner. Smiling at his little girl, already seated on one of the stools that framed the breakfast bar and coloring on another spread of newspaper, he kissed her cheek and murmured, "Morning, darling."

She giggled and pulled away. "You're grizzly," she said, and Lance rubbed his unshaved cheek along her smooth skin, eliciting another laugh. "Daddy, stop!"

With a loud kiss on her cheek, he eased onto the stool beside hers, his hand rubbing along her back softly. "What're you drawing now?" he asked.

"Same picture," she told him. Pointing at the figure she was working on, she said, "I'm putting Justin in next to you. That way you and Mommy both have someone and I'm in the middle. See?"

Lance glanced up at his friend, but Justin was busy flipping pancakes and he didn't meet his gaze. Was that a hint of a smile Lance saw? Did you tell her to draw you into the picture? he wanted to ask. That was something he would have expected from the boy he used to know, the boy who walked out after he poured his heart and soul onto him. But his daughter was stubborn, hated to be told what to do, and he suspected she drew him in on her own, without any prompting from his friend. She was falling for Justin as hard as he once had.

It's hard NOT to fall for someone like him, Lance mused, watching Justin's biceps as he turned the pancakes over in the skillet. Look at me. Got burned once and I'm all but begging to be hurt again. Heaven help me, please.

Turning from the stove, Justin carried the skillet to the bar. "Pick up, girlfriend," he said, smiling at Kayla. She swept the newspaper onto the floor, sending crayons and markers scattering after it, exposing a plate that had been set before her. As Justin dished pancakes out for her, he said, "Say when."

Kayla watched with huge eyes as Justin piled pancakes onto her plate. After three, Lance said, "I think that's enough."

"I'm hungry," Kayla told him. "Keep going, Justin. I'll say when." A fourth pancake, a fifth, and when Justin started to put a sixth onto her plate, she shook her head. "When."

"This one's yours then, Daddy-O." Justin plopped the pancake onto an empty plate and set it in front of Lance.

Lance pushed the plate aside. "I'm not really hungry," he said as he helped Kayla open the bottle of syrup. "You eat it."

"No, you, Daddy." Kayla squirted syrup on his plate. "Justin made it for you."

Justin stepped around the breakfast bar until he stood beside

Lance. His stomach brushed against Lance's elbow, and it was all he could do not to fall into the touch. He could feel his friend's muscles, sheathed beneath his shirt, flutter at the brief contact. Then Justin leaned against him, dumped another pancake onto his plate. "Eat up," he said, his voice soft now that they were so close together. "I've learned to cook over the years."

"I'm really not that hungry," Lance protested, but when Kayla frowned at him, he picked up a fork and began to cut the pancakes into tiny triangles.

"That's a good boy," she said, diving into her own food.

Lance laughed, surprised. "You hear that?" Justin asked, nudging him playfully. "You're such a good boy."

Before Lance could reply, Justin planted a quick kiss on his forehead. Then he scraped the rest of the pancakes onto his own dish and sat down across from Kayla. Lance stared at him, the imprint of his lips drying on his skin, but Justin only winked and looked away.

* * *

When two o'clock rolled around, Kayla didn't want to pack up to go. "Your mother will be here any minute," Lance told her, gathering up her coloring books and crayons and shoving them into her Sesame Street bookbag. "Come on, Kaylie. Don't make me beg."

"Beg, Daddy!" she shrieked, running through the living room as Justin chased after her. "Justin! No, I don't want to get ready to go. I don't want to!"

Justin swept her up into his arms, spun her around upside down, laughing at her giggles. "Justin, stop it," Lance admonished. "You're getting her all worked up."

As he set her on her feet again, Kayla shook her head stubbornly. "He's not, Daddy. I'm not worked up. Do it again, Justin."

Justin shook his head. "Your daddy said no."

Lance sighed as Kayla tried to cajole him into picking her up again. "Just a little one," she said, trying to wrap his arms around her tiny waist. "Just a little one, Justin. Please?"

"Your daddy said --"

Lance yelled, "I said that's enough!" Justin froze, Kayla half in his arms, and they both stared at him as if he were suddenly someone they didn't quite know. "Make me the villain, why don't you? Get over here, young lady, right now. Your mother will be here any minute and you don't even have your shoes on."

For a moment Kayla stared at him, her lower lip trembling as if she were on the verge of tears, but when she saw that he wasn't going to fall for it, she plopped down on the floor and kicked her legs out in front of her. "Put on my shoes," she told Justin. She glared at Lance as she leaned back on her small hands, daring him to tell her to put them on herself. She could -- she was old enough -- but Lance didn't feel like arguing and he went back to picking up her toys, scattered around the room. "Daddy's mean," Kayla whispered loudly as Justin tugged on her sneakers.

"He's just a little upset right now," Justin said. Lance could feel his friend's gaze follow him as he bent to retrieve Kayla's toys, and when he passed by the two of them, he didn't look up from the floor.

"Why?" Kayla wanted to know.

Because he's here, Lance thought, shoving a stuffed puppy into his daughter's bookbag. From the corner of his eye he could see Justin kneeling on the floor, Kayla's foot in his lap as he tied her shoestrings. "Because you're leaving," Justin told her, tightening the knots. "He doesn't like to see you go."

"Why?" Kayla asked.

"Because he loves you, baby girl," Justin replied. He saw Lance watching them and winked. Lance turned quickly away. When Kayla opened her mouth again, Justin covered it with one hand. "I know what you're going to say."

Kayla giggled. "What?"

Justin grinned at her. "Why?" He tickled her stomach until she kicked at him and rolled away. "Why why why why," he said, crawling after her as she squealed his name.

"Stop it," Lance said, zipping up her bag. "Kaylie --"

His daughter crossed her arms and pouted. "You're no fun," she declared. "You're being poopy, Daddy."

"Watch your mouth," Lance told her. He caught her elbow and hauled her to her feet. "Stand up, Kayla. If your mother sees you on the floor --"

The doorbell rang, interrupting him. "Mommy!" Kayla screeched, jumping onto the couch so she could look out the window, even though she couldn't see the front step from there. But she saw her mother's car, and she clapped as Lance climbed over Justin's legs to get to the door. "Mommy's here!"

"Joy," Lance muttered beneath his breath. When the doorbell rang again, he unlocked the door and pulled it open, forced a smile at Meredith Edwards, his ex-wife. Good thing she never changed her name, he thought as she breezed by him and entered the house. She smelled like coconuts, her arms and face slightly red from the sun, her blonde hair pulled back in a damp ponytail.

"Mommy's here," Lance announced as Kayla launched herself off the arm of the couch and wrapped her arms around her mother's waist. "Hey, Mere."

"Hey yourself," Meredith replied. She saw Justin and pressed her lips together until they formed twin white lines in the tanned skin of her face.

"Hey Meredith," Justin said, rising to his feet. He held out a hand to her which she didn't take. Before he could drop it awkwardly, though, Kayla took it in her own tiny hand and shook it. He winked at her before he said, "You're looking great."

Meredith turned away from him. "So you're back," she said, her voice cold. She sounded like she needed a drink, something as stiff as her voice and twice as dry. "And you just let him in?" she asked Lance, gathering up Kayla's bookbag and pillow. "I don't even let Paul stay overnight when she's in the house."

"It's not like that," Lance started, and Justin said, "I slept on the couch." Meredith ignored them both.

"I drew you a picture, Mommy," Kayla said, tugging on her mother's hand. "Want to see? Huh, Mommy? Want to see what I drew you?"

"Sure, baby," Meredith said. She let Kayla go as she balanced the child's belongings in her arms, and the little girl raced for the kitchen. When she came back, she held the newspaper in her hands, high above her head so she wouldn't step on it. "Pretty," Meredith told her. "Lance, help me here, will you?"

Justin moved first. He scooped up Kayla's overnight bag and a handful of stuffed animals. "I got it," he said, flashing Meredith a quick grin that she didn't return.

"Look, Mommy!" Kayla rattled the newspaper to get her mother's attention. "Look, I drew you and me and Daddy and Paulie and Justin and --"

Meredith glanced at Lance with a look of veiled attempt. "You should've drawn Justin in between Mommy and Daddy," she said, the anger sharp in her voice. "That's where he was when we were married. Between us the whole damn time."

"Meredith, don't," Lance warned. She glared at him and snatched Kayla's things from Justin. "It's not like that --"

"I don't care what it's like," she told him. "I gave up caring a long time ago. Come on, baby. Time to go."

Kayla handed the newspaper to Justin. "Roll it up for me," she said. When he did, he tapped her on the top of her head with it playfully before handing it back. She giggled and rubbed at her hair. "Come to my party. When is it, Mommy?"

"Wednesday," Meredith said. The look she threw Lance

suggested he better not invite Justin along. Family only, her eyes said, loud and clear. He wanted to ask her why that included Paul.

Justin caught the look and frowned. "I'll see what I can do, girlfriend," he told Kayla. Bending down beside her, he whispered loudly, "You work on your mom for me, and I'll see if I can convince your daddy to let me come, how's that?"

"Okay." Kayla threw her arms around his neck, hitting him accidentally with the tube of newsprint, and he kissed her cheek. "You be a good boy, Justin," she said.

He laughed. "I will, sweet pea."

"Keep Daddy good, too," she told him.

Meredith rolled her eyes. "Come on, honey," she said again, tugging on Kayla's arm. "Kiss your father goodbye."

Lance squatted down and hugged Kayla tight. He didn't want her to leave -- he never did, he wanted to stay with her forever, and every time they had to part it got harder and harder to let her go. But now it would just be him and Justin when she left. And we'll have to talk, Lance thought, kissing his daughter's forehead. I'm not ready for that. I'm so damn weak, I'll give in after the first kind word, the first soft touch. I'm not strong if you're not here. "Bye, baby girl," he whispered.

She giggled and poked at his cheek until he smiled. "Don't forget," she told him. "Wednesday, my party, don't forget."

"I won't," he promised. Standing, he told her, "Be good for Mommy."

Kayla flipped her head, her ponytails slapping her shoulders as she sighed. "I always am," she told him.

He laughed. "I know."

Meredith took Kayla's hand in hers and waited while Lance opened the door for them. "He's not invited to the party," she hissed as she stepped outside.

Lance glanced at Justin, still sitting on the living room floor where he had kissed Kayla goodbye. "Kaylie seems to like him," he told her. "She invited him. It's her party."

"I had to live with his ghost for the last six years," Meredith said angrily. "He was in our house, in our bed, in everything we said and did and I thought I got rid of him when we split. I thought I'd finally get to live without him hovering around." She tugged at Kayla's hand as the girl bent down to pick at the grass. "I can't believe you let him in. After all the shit he's put you through --"

"Mere --" Lance sighed.

"You can't stand up to him, can you?" she asked. "Just admit it,

Lance. He could drag you down to hell with him and you'd enjoy the ride. I don't want Kayla staying here if you're going to be fucking --"

"Shut up," he told her, angry that she had managed to get to him. She knew just what to push, didn't she? After all these years, she knew just where to hit him to make him hurt the most. "We're not like that, okay? He's just visiting, nothing more, nothing --"

"Bullshit," she spat. "Give him time. You think he's just here to say hey? By Wednesday you two will be sleeping together, I know it, don't shake your head at me. You're not as strong as you like to think you are, Lance Bass. You can't stand up to him. You never could."

Before he could reply, she turned away and headed for her car. "Come on, Kayla. Time to go home."

"Bye, Daddy!" Kayla waved as Meredith hurried her across the yard. "Don't forget my party! Tell Justin, too. I want lots of presents."

Lance laughed and watched his wife strap their daughter into the car seat. Ex-wife, his mind whispered. She was never really my wife, was she? She's right about that -- Justin was between us the whole time. I never forgot about him, how could I?

And now he was back. And they were alone. Lance wanted to close the door behind him, lock himself out of his townhouse, out of his life, and just disappear. He couldn't stand up to his friend. He just wasn't strong enough.

Damn her, he thought as he went back into the house. She's right about that, too.

From the living room floor, Justin looked up at him, concern etched on his face. "You okay?" he asked.

"Fine," Lance mumbled. When Justin started to stand, Lance told him, "I'm going to lie down for a bit. Alone. Please."

Justin nodded. "Sure." With a warm smile, he added, "I'll be here when you get up."

Lucky me, Lance thought, and staggered up the stairs.

* * *

When the group disbanded, there was nothing in Lance's life that held much interest for him anymore. His marriage was a sham, at best, and try as he might to preserve it, he never quite managed to give his all to Meredith. He had given that to Justin, only to have it thrown back at him, discarded, and there was nothing left to give. He couldn't even get mad at Meredith for hating him, if she did. He didn't really blame her much -- he hated

that part of himself, too, the part that was unable to let Justin go.

The studio ran well enough without him. The marriage fell apart without his help. The sun rose without his prompting, set without his permission, rose again the next morning and nothing he said or did could stop it so why bother? What was the use? Life goes on, wasn't that the way the song went? Long after the thrill of living is gone. Lance knew that all too well. He had been a member of 'N Sync for so many years that when it was over, he didn't know what else to do. Without the group -- without Justin -- he felt as if he were nothing.

Enter Kayla.

It had been Meredith's last attempt to salvage what they had together. The oldest trick in the book, Lance didn't begrudge her for it. And for a while it seemed to work -- they were a family when the little girl came along, proud parents who fawned over her, husband and wife who managed to put aside their personal problems because they had someone else to care for now, someone else who mattered. For a brief time Lance even moved back into the house with Meredith, just to be close to his daughter. Now there was someone the world revolved around, there was a person the sun rose and set on, there was someone who made his life worthwhile.

But the bickering started again, fights behind closed doors because they didn't want to get into anything in front of the baby. He started drinking again, like he had when the group first broke up, and Meredith always had something to say about that. He spent hours staring into a bottle as if the answers were written deep down on the bottom, and if he could just drink enough, if he could just get far enough inside, then maybe he could make things work. If he just tried harder, worked harder, loved more ...

That he couldn't do. He loved Kayla, yes. She was his flesh and blood, his child, he couldn't not love her. But he had never loved Meredith -- she had only been a convenience, something to bury himself in when Justin was gone. "You don't love me anymore," she accused him once, her voice shrill, during their last fight as a married couple. They had been in their bedroom, the door shut so they wouldn't wake the baby in the other room. She stared at him, arms crossed defiantly, and waited for him to contradict her like he always had before. Whenever she resorted to those words, the you don't love me argument, he knew she had nothing else left and that was her heaviest artillery, that was the bomb she always saved until the end, that was the thing that ate at her the most. And he would take her in his arms and smooth his hands across her back and tell her she was wrong, he did love her, he did, while in his mind he'd remember the way it felt the one night Justin held him, the sweet pain as his friend pressed into him, the kisses and the lust and the strong arms around him, Justin in him, his voice whispering that he loved him, he did, he did.

But that last fight, he couldn't bring himself to do that. He was tired of lying. The thought of smoothing things over yet again

exhausted him. He simply couldn't do it anymore.

"You're right," he told her. "I don't think I ever did."

She struck him, then, angry blows that fell on his chest and arms, her face crumbling like a used tissue as tears streaked her cheeks. When he tried to catch her flailing fists, she pulled away. "Fuck you, Lance Bass," she told him through her tears. "I've wasted too much time with you, loving you, and you can't even get over that asshole friend of yours. He left you! So many years ago, he left and you act like it was just yesterday. When will you grow up and see? When will you realize he ain't coming back?"

He had no answer for that. "I'm calling my lawyer," Meredith said as she yanked open one of the dresser drawers. She scooped out handfuls of underwear and hosiery, then moved to the next drawer, pulled out folded shirts. "You want to spend the rest of your life waiting for that jackass to come back? Fine. More power to you. But I've had it. I ain't a martyr, and you sure as hell ain't worth the rest of my life -- the rest of my love. I don't think he's worth it much, either, if you ask me."

"I didn't," Lance told her. As she tugged open the bottom drawer, the clothes in her arms tumbled to the floor and she sank to her knees, buried her head in her hands, wept bitter, jagged tears. "Put your stuff back. I'll leave. You can have this house."

"What about our daughter?" Meredith cried. "What the fuck do I tell her?"

Lance felt his eyes sting with tears of his own that he struggled against. "I'll care for her," he said, gathering together a change of clothes. "You don't have to worry about that."

"Get out," she hissed. "Get out and take his fucking memory with you."

He left her on the floor of their bedroom. That had been what, three years ago?

And now he's back in my life, Lance mused. He lay on his back in his bed, the room dark around him, and stared up at the ceiling. That must have been quite a shock to her this morning, like seeing a phantom or a ghost. I've thought about nothing but him for so long, I finally dreamed him into being. Only it's not that simple, is it? He's grown, he's different, he's OLDER and he seems so much more responsible, so much more capable of taking all I have to give him and not dropping it like he did before. If I'll just give him the chance ...

Did he want to take that chance himself, though? Was Justin really worth it? Or had Meredith been right about that, as well?

I hope not, a quiet voice inside his mind whispered.

The thought surprised him -- the hope in the words terrified him. He had been ready to push Justin away, he told himself that's

what he intended to do, and now ... what? Now some part of him wanted to take his friend up on his offer? Some part of him wanted to try again?

I hope she's dead wrong about him, Lance thought grimly, and I hope he's right, I hope he's matured enough and I hope he doesn't walk out on me again. I don't think I can stand that if he does.

But there was only one way to find out.

* * *

With Kayla gone, Lance usually spent the day in a monotonous routine of eating and napping and staring at the TV, napping some more until it was time to go to bed for the night. By himself, the days stretched out in front of him with a frightening clarity, an emptiness that he fought to stave off with sleep. It was an escape, true, and a poor one at that, because he'd dream of Justin and in those dreams he'd be loved, he'd be safe, he'd be held and when he woke up, it was usually with a raging hard-on and a desperation that clung to him as the dreams faded. A few quick jerks with his hand, the extent of his sex life now, and that was an escape, as well, a way to make the pain disappear, a way to pass the time. He'd sigh his friend's name in his pillow as he came in his hand, then wipe the mess away on a towel, embarrassed.

Only he's here now, Lance thought when he first woke up. His body ached with the memory of his friend's touch; his dick pressed against his thigh, throbbed with each move he made. Call him, he'd come running. Didn't he say he wanted another chance? Take him up on his offer. Jesus, Lance, you know you want to.

I can't. He rolled over, sat on the edge of the bed, held his head in his hands and tried to will away the thick erection filling his jeans. After a few minutes his heart stopped pounding in his ears, his pulse slowed, and he felt as if he could stand and not fall with the first step. He didn't really want to go downstairs. He didn't want to see Justin again. He didn't want to cope with this right now, he couldn't.

But he's downstairs, he reminded himself, and he's not going away. He's waiting for you. So get off your scaredy-cat ass and get downstairs and listen to what he has to say. So he fucked up -- we're talking about JUSTIN here, of COURSE he fucked up. But give the boy another chance, why don't you? He's already broken your heart once, and you never let it mend, you pick at the wound every single day, there's no WAY it can hurt any worse if he fucks you over again, right?

He didn't know.

Lance made his way from his room down the hall, and he teetered at the top of the stairs, considered turning around, going back to bed, just going away. But he couldn't. He could hear

someone in his kitchen -- Justin, his mind whispered, that's Justin down there -- the sounds drifting up to where he stood. Pots clattering together, running water, the ping! of a dropped fork ... he hurried down. "Justin?" he called out on his way into the kitchen. "You better not be tearing my place up."

The hot sizzle of a frying pan, the scrape of a spoon over Teflon. When he entered the kitchen Justin turned from the stove, one hand on his hip as he stirred what looked like stir-fry in Lance's large skillet. "There you are," he said with a grin. "Have a nice nap?"

Lance approached him warily, not sure if he liked the idea of Justin in front of a gas range. "You're not scraping up my pots, are you?" he asked. "You can't use metal on these things."

"I know." Justin held up the wooden spoon in his hand to prove he wasn't destroying the pan. "Meredith called to say she got in okay."

Lance nodded. She always did that, just to let him know Kayla was home safe. "She apologize for being such a bitch this afternoon?" he asked.

Justin shrugged and busied himself with stirring the food in the pan. Peppers and onions and long strips of grilled chicken, it looked like, and it smelled heavenly, a spicy blend of Southwest herbs that made Lance hungry as it cooked. "She got the machine," Justin explained. Lance noted tortillas set out by the stove and when he placed a hand on them, he was surprised to find them already warm. Who taught you how to cook? he wanted to know. "Started to leave a message when I answered. I said hey and she hung up on me, but at least she's home, you know?"

"I'm sorry," Lance muttered. He picked at the edge of one of the tortillas and Justin slapped his hand away. "You're not exactly having the warmest of welcomes, are you?"

With a laugh, Justin clicked off the burner and began to dish out the mix onto the tortillas. "That's okay," he said, holding the pan out of the way as Lance rolled the first fajita up. "I didn't think you'd be jumping all over me the minute I walked in."

Why aren't YOU all over ME? Lance wondered as he helped Justin prepare their dinner. The boy he used to know would've waited three seconds after the door closed on Meredith and Kayla before he attacked Lance, talking as fast as he could, his hands roaming over Lance's body on their own accord, pressing him against the nearest wall, his words a tumble from his lips. Lance could defend against that -- he was ready for it, he expected it, and he could get his arms up between them, push his friend away, tell him he didn't want to rush into things, he couldn't, not yet ...

But Justin hadn't touched him. Not once. He stared, let his gaze travel down Lance's body as if he remembered the feel of hidden flesh, but he didn't touch -- didn't brush against him accidentally,

didn't touch his arm, his hand, his back, didn't lean against him as they worked together at the stove. Like old times, Lance thought. Before we hooked up. Before I told him I loved him and ruined what he had with Britney, before he came to me and said he thought he loved me, too, and ruined what little he had with ME. We used to be like this, just friends, nothing more, back when I wouldn't LET it be anything more. He could guard against a pushy friend, overeager hands, he could keep them at bay. But how the hell could he keep away someone who didn't touch him? Didn't breathe on his skin, didn't come too close? Justin watched him almost warily, as if he expected Lance to make a break for it at any minute and he wouldn't stand in his way.

Touch me, Lance thought when Justin leaned past him, reaching for a plate. Touch me so I can tell you not to. Don't leave me waiting for it, Justin. Don't make me WANT it.

Justin grinned at him. "Fajitas à la Timberlake," he said, picking up a plate in either hand. "Right this way, mon ami."

"You're mixing your French and Spanish," Lance pointed out, but he couldn't help smiling as he followed Justin into the dining room. When Justin set the plates on the table, one on either side, Lance pulled out a chair and sat down. "Where'd you learn to cook?" he asked, taking a bite of his fajita. It tasted wonderful.

Justin sat in the chair across from him. "Mama Fatone," he said.

Joey never told me you visited his parents, Lance thought, but he kept silent. Joey probably didn't think Lance wanted to know that -- he hadn't wanted to know before now, would've told Joey to shut up, he didn't care what Justin did and who he did it with and what was he doing at the Fatone's place anyway? "This is good," Lance muttered around a mouthful of food.

"Thanks." Justin winked at him. "I've got plenty of good things for you, Lance. You just let me know when you want them."

Jesus. Lance swallowed thickly, suddenly hard again and hungrier than he had been before, hungry for the good things Justin promised. So much for keeping him away.

* * *

After dinner, Justin grabbed two beers from the fridge and sat out on the porch swing, waiting. For me, Lance thought as he cleared the table. He rinsed the dishes and considered sticking them in the dishwasher, turning it on and sitting outside with his friend, but instead he filled the sink with warm, soapy water and washed the dishes by hand as he stared out the kitchen window at the backyard. Stalling for time -- he realized that. He was glad he couldn't see the porch, but he could hear the faint creak of the swing through the open window and every now and then he heard Justin clear his throat, as if about to call out, ask if Lance wanted to join him ... but he didn't. And Lance couldn't say no if he was never

asked.

When the dishes were drying and the pots sank below the sudsy water to soak, he walked towards the sliding door in the dining room, drying his hands on a towel. He looked out at Justin, watched his friend stare off into the growing dusk, watched the way his leg barely moved as he pushed the swing gently. Tell me to come out there, Lance pleaded silently. Tell me to join you so I can think up something else to do. Don't do this to me, Justin. Don't let me make all the moves, please don't. How could he resist if his friend wasn't even going to chase after him?

He saw Justin watching him from the corner of his eye, and there was no way he could step back now, disappear into the rest of the house as if he'd never been there at all -- what would Justin think then? That he was avoiding him, which was true. That he was scared, which he was. That he was weak ... he was that, too, so damn weak where Justin was concerned, but he didn't have to broadcast it, did he? He didn't have to make it easy for him. So he stepped out onto the porch, sank into the same wicker chair he sat in the night before, and toyed with the towel in his hands. Maybe we have nothing to say to each other now, he thought, after all this time. Maybe the intensity of what we used to feel, what we felt that one night, maybe that's dimmed now and I'll find it's not so bright anymore. Maybe whatever's between us will simply fade away.

But somehow he doubted that. Just sitting this close to his friend made him dizzy, light-headed and tongue-tied, like he did the first time Justin ever looked his way. How old had he been then? Jesus, just a baby, really, and the guy could still do that to him? It's not a candle flame, Lance mused, staring at Justin's bare feet so he wouldn't have to meet his gaze. It's nothing small like that, easily extinguished. If it was, I wouldn't have hurt for him these past six years. This is a fucking wildfire, burning through me, and it's going to consume us both if we let it. The question is do I WANT to let it?

His friend spoke up. "What's on your mind?" Justin asked, his voice quiet.

"Nothing," Lance muttered. He twisted the towel in his hands and stared at Justin's toes, remembered the way they felt curled with his, remembered the feel of those feet on his legs, remembered the weight of those ankles in his hands. Stop it, his mind warned. Fight fire with fire. You're not going to give in. You're NOT.

If Justin were hitting on him, pushing him, wanting to hook up again so badly that Lance could taste his need, then it would be easy to fight that fiery passion -- it'd be easy to say no, to push him away. He could tell himself he didn't want to give in and if Justin forced the issue, he would take the opposite side, he'd hold out. But I can't do that, you won't let me, you're keeping your distance and it's making me want you even more when I didn't think I could possibly feel this way ever again. Damn you, Justin.

"Come sit next to me," Justin said, and he patted the seat beside him on the swing.

Lance almost sighed in relief -- this he could handle. "No," he said. It felt good to say it -- it made him think he was the one in control here, he was the one who had the final say ... wasn't he? Wasn't this what he wanted, to keep the distance between them? He wasn't going to give in, was he?

Then why do I hate myself for saying no? he wondered. Ask me again, Justin -- I might say yes this time. I want to sit there, your hand on my knee, your arm around my shoulders, my head against your chest. I want it more than anything else in the whole world. Just please, ask me again.

But Justin stayed silent and they didn't speak as the sky darkened and the cicadas started their nightly wail. When they finally headed inside for the night, Justin laid down on the couch without being asked. "Night, Lance," he said softly.

Lance froze on the bottom step. Invite him upstairs, his mind whispered, and his groin ached at the thought. You want him, you do. Stop being so damn stubborn and take the boy up on his offer already. Trust him. Let him prove to you that he HAS changed.

But he still didn't think he could take that chance. Let him stay, if that was what he wanted. Let him sleep on the couch and cook dinner and sit on the porch swing, drinking beer. More than anything else, Lance thought, let him want me as badly as I've wanted him all this time. Let him ache for me, let him long to touch me, bring him to the point of madness and push him over the edge, the way he did me. Then we'll see where we stand. In a voice so low he could barely hear it himself, he whispered, "Good night." And then he went upstairs, hating the part of himself that prayed Justin would follow.

He didn't.

Lance crawled into bed alone and pretended his eyes didn't sting with tears of disappointment.

* * *

Meredith called the next day. Lance answered before the machine could get it -- anything to distract him from Justin, stretched out on the couch and laughing as they watched TV. Lance wasn't quite sure what they were watching -- some Ben Stiller flick -- but his mind was on his friend and the innocence in his laugh, the way it made everything come rushing back bright and clear, all the days they shared together on the road with the band, all the late nights onstage or in clubs or anonymous hotel rooms, all the moments he had believed he lost somewhere along the way. And now they were back, they were here, flooding his mind and filling his soul and when the phone rang, he almost tripped in his haste to answer it. "Hello?" he asked, glancing at the TV as Justin laughed

again.

A long pause, and Lance was about to say hello again when his ex-wife's Southern drawl filled his ear. "He's still there," she said. It wasn't a question.

"Meredith," Lance sighed, taking the phone into the kitchen. "Yeah, he's still here. Is everything okay? Where's Kayla?"

"She's fine," Meredith told him, but her voice held a bitter note that Lance didn't care for much. "Can't stop talking about her Uncle Justin."

Uncle Justin. Lance had to smile at that, it was cute. "You know how he is," he said softly.

"Infectious," Meredith spat. "Like a disease."

Lance sighed. He didn't need to hear this. "Mere --"

"Let's get something straight here, Lance," she said, her angry tone one he recognized all too well. "He's an ass. He screwed you up and you never quite recovered from that. Fine, I can understand that. I can appreciate it. You were friends forever and you loved him and then he fucks with you like that, you never get over it. But now he's back and he's going to do the same shit all over again --"

"He's not," Lance told her, lowering his voice so Justin wouldn't overhear. "He's changed, Meredith, you just don't see that --"

"No," she replied, "you don't see, he's going to do it again, guys like him can't change. And if you're too damn noble or too damn forgiving or hell, if you're just too plain stupid to see that, then ..." She took a deep breath, struggled not to cry. "Then fine, don't say I didn't warn you. You want to fall for him all over again? You want to just rip your heart out of your chest and let him stomp all over it? Fine. Be my guest. I'm not your wife anymore. I don't have to care." Then the tears came, filling her voice, and he could see her in his mind, hunched over the phone at the kitchen counter perhaps, crying into the receiver with her hand over her face so Kayla wouldn't see her. "I can say it all I want, Lance, I just don't care, but damn you, it's just words. They don't change how I really feel. Damn him for doing this to you."

He sighed again. Why had he answered the phone? "Mere," he said as she cried into his ear. "Mere, don't, please. He's not --" He sighed. How could he possibly explain it to her? "He's changed, believe me. He says he doesn't want to hurt me again --"

"And you believe him?" she asked, incredulous. "Anything he says, you just eat up like it's candy. Is it that good, honey? Is he really worth all you give him credit for?"

"You just don't know," he whispered. He stood in the doorway, stared into the living room at his friend. Justin felt his gaze and turned, already smiling. Lance smiled back. "It's Meredith," he said, covering the mouthpiece with one hand. "She says Kayla can't stop

talking about you."

"I love that baby girl," Justin declared. "She's adorable, Lance. In a few more years, you're going to have your hands full keeping the boys away from her. What about the party?"

The party. Kayla's party, in another two days. And she wanted Justin to come. "Meredith," he said carefully.

"I heard," she muttered. Another sigh, this one heart-wrenching and deep. He hadn't thought it possible she had enough left in her to sigh like that. "Well fuck," she said, her voice breaking. "This isn't easy for me. You have no idea how hard it is to live with someone who loves someone else. You can't even begin to imagine how sick it makes me, just thinking about him. I lost six years to that man, Lance."

He nodded, then realized she couldn't see the gesture and added, "I did, too."

"You wanted to," Meredith told him. Her anger returned, taking away the desperate edge from her words. "You could've gone to therapy -- I suggested it a hundred times. You could've moved on if you really wanted to. But me?" She laughed. "I had no choice. I was married to two men -- your body and his soul."

Stepping back into the kitchen, Lance started, "If you don't want him there --"

"Kayla wants him to come," she reminded him. "This is her party. She wants him there so he better show up. If he breaks her heart, too --"

"I told you," Lance sighed. "He's changed --"

"I'll kill him myself," Meredith promised. "You tell him that. I'll kill him if he takes my daughter from me like he took my husband. Goodbye, Lance."

She hung up the phone before he could reply, and the hum of the dial tone filled his ear. He's changed, he thought, returning the receiver to its cradle. He glanced over at Justin when his friend giggled at the TV. He's changed. Why is it I'm the only one who sees that?

And why am I still too damn scared to do anything about it?

In the living room, he stood at the end of the couch and looked down at Justin. The smile slipped from his friend's face. "Well?" he asked, clicking off the TV with the remote. "What did she say?"

"Kaylie wants you there," Lance told him. He motioned for Justin to get up, sitting on the last cushion as Justin moved his feet. "So basically what she wants, she gets. You can come."

Justin crossed his long legs and watched Lance warily. "Do you want me there?" he asked.

Lance shrugged. "It's not my party," he said. He looked at the TV, surprised to find a blank screen reflecting the room back at him. Had Justin done that, turned it off? He wished it was still on, give him an excuse not to look at his friend. "If Kaylie says you can come, Meredith won't be able to say no."

"But what about you?" Justin persisted. He reached out across the cushion that separated them and touched Lance's wrist with the tips of his fingers, a barely there sensation that was gone before Lance could tell him to stop it. "Do you want me to come?"

God, yes, Lance thought. Could he even get the words out? He didn't think so. He met Justin's steady gaze, stared into the depths of those eyes, but when he finally spoke, it was with a question of his own. "Why haven't you kissed me yet?"

The corner of Justin's mouth twitched as he tried not to smile. "I don't know," he whispered. He slipped his hand into Lance's, trailed his fingers along his palm, ducked his head in a shy gesture that made Lance's throat swell. "Do you want me to kiss you?"

"Justin," Lance sighed. His fingers closed over Justin's. "I thought I was doing fine, you know?"

"And then I showed up," Justin said softly. Lance nodded. "I'm sorry, Lance. I didn't know --" He frowned and picked at the hairs along Lance's wrist. "Right after I left, JC used to call me up all the time, did you know that?" He waited until Lance shook his head, then he grinned. "All the time. Where are you and don't you know you're breaking his heart and grow the hell up, Timberlake, get your ass back here and apologize to him already, you're killing the boy. That's what he'd say, every time he called. It got to where I wouldn't answer the phone just because I was afraid it'd be him. I knew I fucked you over. I knew I fucked up. I didn't need someone constantly reminding me that I probably threw away the one good thing I would ever have."

"He said that?" Lance asked, surprised. JC never mentioned any of that to him. When he spoke to Lance, he never mentioned Justin at all, none of the guys really did. Joey even went so far as to change the subject if Lance tried to bring their friend up, ask about him, ask if he had heard from him at all. Chris was the only one who'd say anything. "You're better off without him," he'd say, and that wasn't what Lance wanted to hear, not at all. It didn't help.

Justin nodded. "He hounded me about you," he said with an embarrassed smile. "Like I wasn't already tearing myself apart over what I did. I just needed some space, you know? I needed to think things through, to make sure I knew what I wanted before I rushed into things."

"Rushed into things?" Lance forced a thin laugh. "Oh Jesus, you expect me to buy that? How long did we know each other before that night? I was in love with you from the start, Justin. There was nothing sudden about it to me, nothing at all."

"I know," Justin whispered, moving closer. "I'm sorry, Lance. I know that doesn't make things right between us, I know it doesn't take away all the damage I've done, but maybe it's a start, right? Please tell me that it's a start, at least."

Lance looked up and he was right there, right beside him, just inches away, and he didn't have the strength to pull back when Justin stroked his cheek, ran one finger down the scruffy unshaved skin and along his chin, his thumb smoothing across Lance's lips so softly, so gently that Lance had to close his eyes. "Justin," he sighed. "What if I say I ... if I can't do this again? What if I can't take this chance?"

He held his breath as he let Justin think about that. Opening his eyes, he stared into his friend's unreadable gaze and waited. I'm not saying I won't, he told him silently. Please don't think that. I just want to know what you'd do if I said no.

Finally Justin forced a sad smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "What could I do?" he murmured. "I'm not going to force you, Lance. I love you -- it's taken me forever to admit it but that's one thing I'm sure of now. I love you. We can be amazing together, you know that." When Lance didn't reply, Justin rested his forehead against Lance's temple, rubbed at a tender spot beneath his chin with his thumb. "I don't want to lose you again," he whispered.

"Justin," Lance whispered. Where did you learn this? he wondered, his lower lip trembling. Who told you all the right things to say? Who taught you how to win me over?

"If you don't want to give me another chance," Justin said, "then I'll understand. I'll have to understand. But I won't walk out on you again, Lance, I swear it."

"Justin," Lance tried again.

But he wasn't listening. "If you don't want to be more than friends," Justin was saying, "then I'll learn to deal with that. Just don't shut me out, please. Just don't --"

"Justin." Lance covered his friend's mouth with his hand to quiet him.

Sheepishly, Justin lowered his eyes and Lance felt his lips press into his palm, a tiny kiss. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"I didn't say I wasn't ..." Lance sighed. This was much harder than it should have been, wasn't it? "I mean, I didn't -- oh fuck, just kiss me already, will you? Shit."

Justin laughed. Taking Lance's hand from his lips, he leaned into him, pushed him back against the couch, his body a warm weight Lance never thought he'd feel again. "Held out long enough, eh?" Justin whispered, his breath hot on Lance's cheek. He kissed the corner of his mouth, his lips tender and velvety and still so damn sweet after all this time. Lance felt his body stir at the soft kiss, and his arms found their way around his friend's neck, pulled

him closer, into a strong kiss that deepened as their lips met, their tongues clashed, their hands remembered the contours of their bodies. "Lance, please," Justin sighed with another kiss. "Talk to me, please, tell me --"

Lance laughed. Cradling Justin's face in his hands, he marveled at the feel of tiny bristles beneath his skin, warm and wonderful and God, he thought, kissing Justin again. You're just as I remember, better even, so damn good, so RIGHT -- "Do you need me to say it?" he murmured. When Justin nodded, Lance squeezed his cheeks until his lips puckered out, his face smushed up into a caricature. "I'm trusting you," Lance told him. "You fuck me up again --"

"I won't," Justin promised. "Please believe me."

"I do," Lance said with a laugh. "That's my problem -- I'll believe any shit you tell me."

Justin grinned. "I love you."

"I believe that, too," Lance whispered, kissing his friend. "I'll give you a chance, how's that? Isn't that what you want to hear? Jesus, Justin, did you ever think I would say no?"

Justin's reply was another kiss, and another, until they lay together on the sofa and it was just as wonderful as it had been before, just as amazing as Lance knew it would be.

The End

Gone
by NSyncGrrl

From a side street a motorcycle zips out in front of him, cuts him off. Jesus. He slams on the brakes too hard, his Jeep Cherokee bucks beneath him, his tires squeal in the bright autumn afternoon. His seat belt bites into his chest as he jerks to a stop and stares in disbelief at the unsuspecting motorcyclist who revs his bike and zooms down the road and is gone.

Gone. He hates that word.

A faint breeze scurries fallen leaves across the street. Behind him, someone hits their car horn, tells him to get a move on, get out of the way. With trembling hands he rolls up the window so he won't feel the chill and he won't hear the leaves or the horn or the motorcycle as it fades into the distance. He kicks the heat up another notch and the rush of air drowns out the music from the radio, faint like a half-remembered dream. His fingers fumble for the switch to turn on his hazard lights. Gone.

One by one the other cars edge around him. Some of the drivers glare at him as they pass, one yells out his window but he can't hear the angry words. His windows are closed. He grips the steering wheel until his breathing evens out and he doesn't see the motorcycle careening out of control when he closes his eyes. His body isn't any warmer for the heat, but that's to be expected. He hasn't been warm for a long time and he thinks he's used to it by now, except for when he thinks of you.

He's always thinking of you.

* * *

Somehow he makes it home. The house he shared with you -- the one place where your memory lives on, so palatable that he can almost touch you here. Sometimes, in his sleep, he does reach out but his fingers brush only empty air and he chokes back a sob. Then, in the morning, he wakes up with his face buried in a damp pillow and those days he calls in sick, says he can't make it to the studio, not today, he hopes they understand. They always do. Even now, almost a year later, they still understand.

When he comes into the house, he drops his keys on the table by the front door and kicks off his shoes. Your image smiles at him from a dozen photographs -- you're in every room, on every wall. Here in the foyer, you're posing for the camera, a sunny smile on your face and a baseball cap crammed down over the curls you used to have. He remembers taking that picture minutes after you kissed him for the first time. It's his favorite photo of you because he swears he can still see that kiss in your eyes.

Into the living room, where you stare up from the entertainment center, the bookcase, the coffee table. Scrapbooks and photo albums hide more images, more pictures, more you. By the TV, you're holding him around the waist, the two of you laughing. He remembers Joey took that one, right after the photo shoot for Rolling Stone magazine -- he loves your freckled shoulders, the way your white tank top pulls up out of the waistband of your jeans, exposing the smooth flesh of your back. He used to love to kiss you there. By the couch, you're pouting in this picture, a wonderfully glorious pout that can still make him ache to see it. On the wall leading into the kitchen, you have your hands folded together and you're pointing at the camera with one finger, like a gun, bang you're dead. Bang. Gone.

The kitchen -- you're on the wall by the clock. The bathroom -- a tiny snapshot is tucked into the corner of the mirror, curling now from too many steamy showers, too many hot baths that don't warm him up completely anymore. The hall -- a line of framed pictures, collages, magazine covers carefully fixed behind glass. And the bedroom -- the only white on the walls is in your eyes or your smile or your shirt, the pale peach of your flesh, the bleached blonde of your hair when you used to wear it that way. Every inch here is covered, taped over and you stare at him from every angle every day and every night, when he dresses, when he sleeps, when he lies on the bed and throbs for your touch and sobs your name into his pillows.

He doesn't let anyone into this room. None of the guys know about it, this shrine. Here it's only you.

* * *

He's taking a nap when the phone rings. He sleeps a lot now -- even JC comments on it, but only to the other guys. Comes home from work and lies down, doesn't even eat some nights because when he sleeps, he dreams, and in his dreams you're there, waiting for him. He hates waking up and leaving you behind.

The phone rings again. He blinks awake, stares at the long shadows that crisscross the ceiling, remembers the night you were out biking with Chris and the phone rang. It woke him up then, too -- he had fallen asleep waiting for you to come home, and when he answered the phone, he knew it had to be you calling, just to tell him not to worry. You always did that, just to say hey baby, I'm on my way home, just wanted to say I love you.

But that time wasn't you, it was Chris, his voice thick and strangled and he said come down here, you have to come down here, God Lance I don't know what happened I didn't see the truck it came out of nowhere and you need to get down here now, please, just come. Please.

And after that night, it will never be you.

So he doesn't want to answer the phone now. He knows it'll probably be Chris, apologizing all over again -- he hasn't stopped apologizing, as if it's his fault. His fault you wanted to take the motorcycle out for a spin. His fault the road was slick. His fault the truck came around the corner too fast. His fault you couldn't swerve away in time. His fault.

Gone.

But when he answers the phone just to stop the noise, it's not Chris, it's Joey, asking how he's holding up. He laughs at that. Holding up, as if he's in danger of falling apart. Joey asks if he wants to go out tonight, just him and the guys, a night on the town. They can swing by in a few hours, pick him up.

He says no. Joey tells him he needs to get out more, it's what you'd want. He laughs at that, too. What's Joey know about what you want? You're not here to tell them. I hate to see you like this, Lance.

Me too, Joe. Me too.

* * *

He hoped he would be brave enough to stop by this evening, after work, but the incident with the motorcycle still makes him shake. So close. Almost, so close, God. If he hadn't stopped in time, that kid on the bike, like you --

He won't let himself think about it.

The sun dips down, paints the sky a vivid red yellow orange like the leaves that cling stubbornly to the dying trees. He lies on his bed, watches the shadows lengthen, surrounded by you. He tells himself one day this won't hurt so bad anymore, and that bothers him. He likes the pain, poignant and deep. He only listens to sad songs now, or the few albums you guys put out, or the answering machine tapes he's saved that still have your voice recorded onto them. He forces himself to watch home videos -- you by the pool, laughing at him to join you in the water, the two of you on vacation in the mountains, the one time you did a strip tease for him while the camera was rolling. Each moment is a sliver of glass stabbing into his heart, and he twists them over and over again because he never wants to forget you. Never.

Finally he gathers what little courage he has left and walks through the house, trailing his hand along the cold edges of the wooden frames that have you captured and pinned to the walls. Outside, he glances back to see you smiling at him through the tiny window in the front door, your picture ghosted through the lacy white curtain. I'll be back, he whispers. As if you can hear him now.

On the way there's a little sidewalk stand where he always stops. The vendor knows him, knows what he wants, and she has a dozen long-stemmed roses wrapped and ready when he arrives. As

he pays, he tells her thank you with a wan, distracted smile. She watches him climb back into his Jeep Cherokee and wonders who the flowers are for -- he never says. A lucky lady, she thinks. Flowers every week, very lucky indeed. Red roses for true love.

By the time he stops again, the sky has deepened to a blue as dark as your eyes, the same shade they used to get when he'd tease you and you knew he was only playing but it frustrated you all the same. The wind picks up when he gets out of the car, and he cradles the roses against his chest to protect the tender buds. Without thinking, he counts his steps, watches his feet move over raked gravel and tended grass and doesn't look at the stones he passes. He doesn't need to look to see where he's going. His feet know the path on their own, each step chiseled into his heart.

Here. Tears blur his vision and he reaches out, your green-gray stone very cold, very smooth beneath his hand. Lovingly he plants the new roses in this garden of graves and removes the old flowers, dried stems, petals like the autumn leaves crumpling beneath his knees. He'll take these home and tonight, on the bed you used to share, he'll pluck the petals one by one. He loves me, he'll tell himself. He loves me not. The petals will gather in the space between his crossed legs, to be gathered up and saved in the box where he keeps your jewelry, your diamond earring studs and your thick gold chains. The box is almost overflowing now with a year's worth of weekly roses.

It always ends on he loves me because you do. And you always will.

The End

You Think We Don't
by NSyncGrrl

He's asleep when you knock on his door. Quietly, so the rest of us don't hear. You wait one minute, two, almost three before you knock again. A little louder this time. Let me in.

The door opens and he blinks at you from the darkness of his hotel room. "Justin?" As if he isn't sure and has to ask. He squints up at you, the light falling around your shoulders. He can't see your face.

You push past him into the room. This isn't the first time. Despite the girl sleeping back in your own bed, you know it won't be the last. You need this. You tell yourself that you both need it, you need each other, and that's why he never turns you away.

When he closes the door behind you, trapping you, your hands find his body in the dark. They know every inch of his skin. You don't need light, or words, or anything but the breathy kisses and the rasp of your flesh along his. Your fingers ease beneath his shirt, push it up and tug it off and throw it aside. Your palms savor the feel of his chest against them. Your lips remember the taste of his.

Warm tongues lick secret flesh, greedy lips and hungry hands, quickening breaths. He sighs your name when he comes in your mouth and you ease two fingers into him, testing how far it'll go this time. He lets you in, his hands fisting into the sheets, his body arching into your hands. He's yours in this instant. You love that.

A few lingering kisses, his hand on you in places it aches to think about during the day. You lean above him and he takes you in, his mouth hot and damp and soft around your hardness. He lets you thrust into him, over and over again, your legs splayed on either side of his chest, your hands curled into his thick hair. This time when you come, you almost say his name. Almost.

As the sweat cools and your hearts stop racing, you lie together on the bed. His leg is pressed against yours, his fingers curled around your wrist, that's it. You don't touch him. If you did, you know you would crawl into his arms and burrow deep into him and never come out again. You're scared of that. You think you both are.

Before you get up, he kisses your stubbled cheek, a tender, friendly peck. "Justin," he sighs. That's the only word either of you have said since you came in, your name. When you start to sit up, his fingers close over your wrist and for a frightening moment you think he's going to hold on, he's not going to let you go. You imagine that it might be a wonderful, heady rush if he kept you here. Then you could tell him all the words you can't bring yourself to say and then we all would know what it is you two do in his room, at night, together.

You think we don't know.

But he lets you go, like he always does. You dress in the dark, like you always do. You don't say a word as you bend down and kiss his forehead, still damp. He runs a hand down your arm and kisses your chin and doesn't speak as you leave.

Quietly, so no one else will wake up, you close his door behind you. Blink in the sudden light. Hurry back to your room and your girl and your empty side of the bed.

You can still smell him on you in the morning, when she wakes you with a light kiss. She lets you believe she doesn't recognize his cologne on your skin, but she does. She knows. We all do.

* * *

During rehearsal he sits on the drum stool and watches you. He never mentions what happens at night. Neither of you do. But we can see it when his eyes meet yours -- it's in his slow smile when he sees you laugh, it's in your slight frown when someone touches his arm, his back, anywhere you want to touch and won't. Not when it's daylight. Not where everyone can see.

When I cross the stage to talk to him, I feel your gaze on my back but I ignore it. The weight of everything you can't tell him bears down on me. You worry about what people will say if they found out you love him, so much so that you won't admit it, not even to yourself, because what happens then? Once the words are spoken, what then?

He knows I know. He sees it in the set of my jaw and sighs before I even sit down beside him. "Don't," he says.

"Lance --"

He shakes his head. "Joey, don't start. I don't want to hear it."

I think he very much wants to hear it, but not from me. I think he lies awake long after you leave and aches to hear the words in your voice, any words at all. Even his name -- some nights that would be enough for him. Why can't you say his name when it's just the two of you where none of us can overhear?

"You don't have to let him --"

He laughs. "I don't let him. I want it, too."

Like I don't know that. I'm not as dumb as I play. "You want more," I tell him, both of us watching you try not to look our way. I know you're dying to know what we're whispering over here. I know you'll come to his room tonight and you'll love him like you always do and you won't have the courage to even ask him about me and what I might have said. You'll just let it fester inside of you

because you're scared. You're terrified that if you ask him that, then you won't be able to shut up again and you'll drown him in the sea of all you feel for him. Without words, you don't have to admit that you love him. Without words, he doesn't have to tell you he feels the same. Can't you see he does?

Hell, we all see it. Who do you think you're kidding here?

He doesn't ask how I know this. He doesn't say yes, he wants more. He doesn't tell me he loves you, which he does, or that it's already more, which it is, or even that it's none of my damn business, which it isn't. Instead he watches you and I can see the way you move in his eyes, the way your hands touch his body, the way your kisses fill him up and make him whole for the few minutes you allow yourselves to be together every night.

"You don't need this," I whisper. "You can tell him --"

"If I wanted to," he tells me with another laugh. "Maybe I like it like this, Joey, ever thought of that? Maybe this is what I want."

"Maybe," I say. "But what about him? What does he want?"

He doesn't have an answer for that. I can't believe he doesn't know.

* * *

When you knock on his door again tonight, he's already awake. Staring at the wall. Waiting. My words ring in his ears, cloud his mind, and he doesn't like that. He's never had to think about this before. He's always just accepted it because he loves you and any part of you that you're willing to give him. He's never wondered if you love him back. He's never imagined you might be the one who wants more.

You knock a second time before he gets up to answer. He opens the door and doesn't say your name, just looks at you with those crystal eyes of his, looks right through you, and for the briefest of moments, you falter. Sorry, wrong room. It'd be that easy, just turn and walk away. He's not following the script. He's supposed to be half asleep and he's supposed to yawn now, cover his mouth with one hand and shake his head and mumble your name, right?

But he doesn't. Blame me.

He sees the confusion in your eyes and before you can bolt he takes your arm, pulls you into the room, closes the door behind you. Inside the room there's a single lamp on -- there's never been light before. You've never had to look at him while you loved him, and he's never seen the lust and desire and raw need shining in your eyes when he holds you and kisses you and whispers your name. With that lamp on, you don't know what to do. You don't reach for him, you can't. Suspicious, you frown around the room and ask, tentative, "Lance?" You don't like this one bit.

He eases his arms around your waist, surprising you. His lips brush along the back of your neck, his hands fold over the slight erection hidden in your jeans. "Justin," he breathes, and now this is starting to look familiar, you remember this part. You can deal with the light and the fact that he's wide awake and making the first move as long as he says your name like that. In that tone, in his voice, it means I love you.

So tonight you don't mind that he leaves the lamp on, its light a golden hue that makes your skin dusky against the white sheets and your sweat tiny translucent beads along the furry hair on your arms and legs. Tonight when he comes, he doesn't just whisper your name but cries out, your fingers deep inside of him, further than either of you have ever dared to go before. I hear him through the wall, his voice silenced when you kiss him quiet. I imagine you murmur to him, shh, not so loud, the others will hear.

Like we don't already know.

Later, when he's beneath you and you're thrusting into him, deeper and harder and further, almost crying because he's taking you in so far and he's taking everything you have to give and he's not spent yet, he's watching you with those eyes that you swear can see into your very soul, when you finally come you gasp his name and it's almost a sob but he hears it, filled with everything you've always been too scared to say. I love you, that one word says. I want you. I need you. Please don't let me go. Please.

And tonight, when you start to leave, tonight he holds onto your wrist and asks you to stay.

In the morning you wake with his body curled around yours. His eyes are so damn pale in the scant sunlight, so different from what you imagined, staring at you and waiting for you to say something, anything -- his name again, maybe. He liked the way it sounded in your voice.

So you give in. You whisper his name, and you tell him you think you love him, and you hold your breath until he says he thinks he loves you, too.

You tell yourself that it's about time you two talked about it, and you were right -- once you start, you don't think you'll ever stop. But that's okay, because he's been wanting to hear it for so long now, he laps it up like a man dying of thirst, your words water to his parched heart.

We wait for you to tell us about him, which you do over breakfast. And we all act so surprised, even though we aren't. When you're not looking, I wink at him. You go, Lance, I want to say, but I don't, because you don't know I've known about the two of you all along.

He grins and looks away, looks at you, can't stop looking at you now that he doesn't have to hide it anymore. Beneath the table he takes your hand in his and tonight you won't even pretend to go to

your own room first. You'll crawl into his bed and tell him to leave the light on when you love him again.

The End

Surrendered
by NSyncGrrl

He calls me his superstar. I like the way that sounds in his soft Southern drawl -- his superstar. His.

He swears he loves me. My smile, my curls, my hands. He loves my hands. The way I touch his arms and his chest when we lie together on one of the narrow bunks at the back of the bus. The way I kiss his neck, his chin, his fingers -- tiny Smurf kisses, he calls them. Just a quick press of my lips to his skin and that's it. The way I kiss him when the other guys are around.

He tells me I'm amazing. My body, my lips, my arms. He loves my arms. The way I hold him tight -- I'm so much stronger than he is, he says. The strongest guy he's ever been with, and when we finally have sex, he wants me to hold him the whole time. I laugh and tell him of course, silly, what else would I do? I've never actually done it before, but I want him to be my first and I want it to be amazing. I want it to be everything I've always dreamed it would be, and I don't want it to be sex, I want it to be love. When I tell him this, he grins in that shy way he has that makes him so unbearably cute and tells me of course it's love. He loves me.

I know that.

* * *

Joey asks me why we don't just shack up already. They all know we're together. It's not that hard to do, just tell Johnny to book one room, a double bed, he's sure we can work out the details. He nudges me with his elbow and wiggles his eyebrows at me, like I'm supposed to get his drift. Like I'd never think up sharing a room on my own. But I don't know. What would my mom say? She's disappointed enough as it is, even though she doesn't tell me in so many words. She doesn't have to -- I can hear it in her silence before she asks how Lance is doing, in her pregnant pause when I ask if she wants to talk to him, before she says no. "What's wrong with Britney?" she asks.

"Nothing, Mom," I tell her. It's just that I love him.

I'm seventeen, she'll remind me. What do I know of love?

I know no one else looks at me the way he does, like I'm the only one who exists. I know no one else can touch me the way he can, his hands toying with the zipper on my jeans before I catch them and lace my fingers through his. I know no one else has ever kissed the way he kisses me, hungry and demanding like he wants to devour me, he can't get enough of me. I know he tells me he loves me, he wants me, he wants to love only me, and that's really

all there is to know, right?

As long as I'm not sleeping with him, my mom says. She tells me she raised me better than that. He gives me a ring, promises me forever, then maybe she can compromise her beliefs and wish me the best but not before then, no matter what he tells me, do I understand?

How old am I again?

He tells me we can share a room whenever I want. I think Joey's been talking to him about it, telling him why not? He's nineteen, not a minor anymore, if he loves me and wants to sleep with me, if we both want it, then what's stopping us? He asks me if I want to, all the time. "You do, right?" he says, uncertainty flickering across his face. He's perfected that needy, unsure look. It gets me every time.

Of course I do. Of course I want him, I love him, but I just can't -- my mom, I tell him, like it's a good excuse. I'm not ready, the timing isn't right, I don't want to do it right this second, jeez.

And then he gets mad, rolls away, sighs and says, "You know, correct me if I'm wrong, but we're not just playing around here, are we? Because I love you --"

"And I love you," I assure him. I do.

"Then what's the problem?" he asks. There is no problem. I just don't want to yet, okay? Is that okay?

Fine, he tells me as he gets out of the bed. When I reach for him, he moves away. "It's just what two people do," he says, as if he has to explain it to me, as if I'm too young to comprehend the way this thing called love works, "when they feel for each other the way I feel for you, the way you say you feel for me --"

"I do," I promise. God, I so do, but I'm scared. Maybe I am too young. What will my mother say? What about the guys? Doesn't it mean anything to him that I'm willing to wait until the right moment?

Only he doesn't want to wait, he wants me now. And it gets harder each night to stop his hand from straying below my belt, harder to turn away from his insistent kisses, harder to tell him no. "Lance," I warn, his lips brushing along my jaw and then he sighs, rests his head on my shoulder, his voice thick with lust that he tries so hard to curb. "I should go. It's getting late."

"One night," he pleads. He holds my hands to keep me beside him. If I'm the strong one, why do I feel so weak when I'm with him? "Justin, you can stay just one night --"

And then how could I ever hope to resist him? It's hard enough fully dressed but together beneath the sheets, wearing only thin boxers and loose t-shirts? There's no way -- I'd give it up in a heartbeat.

He's mad. I can feel it in his hand against my back as he walks me to the door to his room, in the soft press of his lips when he kisses me goodnight. Suddenly I want to take it back, tell him yes this time, let him touch me where he wants to touch me and just go with it because I want it too, I want him, and I don't like the sad smile he forces as he holds the door open for me. I wonder if there's something I can say to make that smile reach his eyes, to make him happy again. He wants me, I can feel it, and God, I want him so bad. My voice is a whisper between us. "I'm sorry."

He sighs, rubs his face with one hand, tired. "It's okay," he tells me. He kisses my cheek, a Smurf kiss. "I love you, Justin. I just wish you'd let me show you how much --"

"I'm just not ready." I wish he'd understand. Hell, I wish I could understand. I'm scared, okay? Because once it's gone, that's it, and I know he's the one but I want to make sure, I want to know without a doubt, I want it to be right.

He forces a laugh. "I know," he says. His hand is warm on my arm and when he squeezes lightly, I almost say okay, let's do it, who am I kidding? I was born for this man, I'm as ready as I'll ever be. But he tells me goodnight and the moment passes. I go back to my own room, alone. Lie down in my cold bed, alone. Touch myself and think that if I wasn't such a baby then it could be his hand on my body, loving me. It could've been tonight.

* * *

Josh won't listen to me. He doesn't want to hear it, he says, but he's only like that because he can't remember the last time he kissed anyone who wasn't related to him. Maybe it was a bad idea to ask him anyway. He's never gotten any either. "Get out," he says, pointing at the door to his room. Jeez, touchy subject?

"I can't believe he's pressuring you into having sex," he tells me. "This is Lance we're talking about here, Justin." He's not pressuring me. I didn't say that. I only said he wants to and I don't know if I should or not and no one said anything about anyone pressuring anyone else to do anything. Josh gives me that look of his that I swear he saves just for me, the one that goes, What the fuck are you babbling on about now? and makes me feel all of five years old. Why did I come in here again? Surely not for advice?

"You're saying he wants to do it," Josh says, speaking slowly like I might miss something if he goes too fast. "And you don't? Or --"

"I do," I tell him. God, I do.

"Then why don't you?" he asks. Because I don't think I'm ready. I'm a little queasy about the whole concept and I think it might hurt, just a little, and once I do it then what? I don't know.

Josh tells me I don't get it. "If you keep him begging," he tells me as if he knows what he's talking about, "then he's likely to go looking for it someplace else."

"Like where?" I ask. Lance loves me. He tells me this all the time, not just when we're lying together and making out and touching each other to see how far we'll go this time, but when the others are around, on the bus, in the limo. He says it before each show, and after every performance, and when we're not on tour he calls me up just to listen to me smile. He wouldn't leave me just because I'm not ready for sex, I know he wouldn't.

But Josh isn't so sure. He shrugs and reminds me there are a ton of good-looking guys on our crew. Look at Joey, he says, just as an example. We all know that boy never sleeps alone, he's sex on wheels, and don't I think he might be spending too much time with Lance, hmm?

They're just friends, Josh. It doesn't mean --

"I'm not saying it does," he tells me. "I'm just saying, is all. Give it up, Justin. What are you saving it for, anyway?" Him. "Then what's the problem again?"

I don't know so I tell him to shut the hell up and I storm out of his room because I just don't know.

* * *

So what am I supposed to think when he tells me he's going to ride with Joey in the other bus until we hit Chicago? Damn Josh. "Justin, what's wrong?" he asks with a sigh. "It'll only be a few hours --"

Fine, I tell him. A few hours, fine. "If he's what you want --"

"What the hell's gotten into you?" he wants to know. I cross my arms and pout because it's what I do best, play the wounded diva. I'm good in that role, lower my head and look out the corner of my eyes so he can't see them and tell myself it's unfair, everything's unfair, I hate it. Childish, true. But it makes him touch my arm and pull me into his embrace and kiss my forehead. "Baby, what's that supposed to mean? You know I love you." Yeah, I know. "Don't you trust me?"

Him? Yes, with my life. Joey? Heh, not as far as I can throw him. And he's bigger than me, so I'm thinking that even with my killer arm, he's not going very far.

I can't find the words to tell him that I'm scared I'm going to lose him. I can't seem to say that I don't want him to leave me just because I'm not quite as comfortable about the whole idea of our having sex as he seems to be. I don't know how to let him know that I love him so much and I'll do anything for him, anything to keep him, and if he really wants to and he thinks that's what we

need to do, then I'll do it. I'll do it for him. I won't think about it and once it's over with, it won't be so hard to do again, right?

Only I'm stupid and I can't say anything because I'm afraid I'll start to cry. Finally he kisses me again and says it's not like that with Joey, they're friends but he loves me. Me. I'm his superstar, the only one he wants. Okay?

I nod, rub at my eyes so he doesn't see the tears that threaten to fall, sniffle loudly and nod again. Okay.

On the other bus I sit by myself and stare out the window so I won't have to see Josh's smug expression, the one that goes, What did I tell you? And I think to myself maybe tonight, after we stop at the next hotel. Maybe it'll be tonight.

* * *

But it isn't. I chicken out, like I always do. His hands feel so right on my chest, my arms, my stomach, but the minute they slip past my waist, I start to pull away. Tonight he ignores me, leans down over me, presses me to the bed and for a brief moment I think he's going to do it anyway, and at least then it'd be over with, just do it and don't let me stop him. His hand fists at my crotch and he rubs against me, I can feel how bad he needs it, I can feel his whole body tremble with want for me, and just as I'm about to give in, he sighs and sits back. "Fuck," he mutters. "Justin --"

"I'm sorry," I whisper. I am, I'm so sorry. "Lance, please, it's just --"

"You get me so damn horny," he tells me. He runs an unsteady hand through his disheveled hair. "And then you go no, we can't. No, I'm not ready. I want to but I can't." He laughs, a harsh sound I'm not quite sure I like. "You flaunt it for the camera but you won't let me love you, baby. You're such a goddamn tease."

I am not. There's the pout again, tugging at the corners of my mouth, and I can see his eyes harden because he thinks I'm going to blubber my way out of this, make him feel like shit, I don't mean to do it but that tease remark, that hurt. How many times do I have to say I'm sorry? Maybe I should just leave.

He's so angry, he doesn't even stop me, doesn't walk me out. In the hall I lean against his door, eyes closed, arms wrapped around my waist like I'm going to be sick. I don't understand this. I should want to, right? I do want to, so bad I can taste it, I can picture every move we make together, every breath we take. I love him so much but I just don't know if we're ready for more yet. We've got the rest of our lives ahead of us so why does it have to be tonight?

* * *

Chris tells me it's nothing to get all worked up over. "Either you do or you don't, Justin," he says, and he doesn't even look up from his video game to give me a reassuring glance. "It's just sex."

Just sex. Like the Titanic was just a boat. Star Wars is just a movie. 'N Sync is just a band but it means so much more than that to me. Then again, look who I'm asking here. He's the only one of us who's legal so of course it's just sex to him. He doesn't have to hear it from his mom when he starts dating someone new. He's already grown up, mostly. As much as he's going to, anyway.

I tell him that Josh thinks I'm going to lose him if I don't do it but he laughs at me. "I seriously doubt that," he says, and now he looks at me, looks over the top of his big ass aviator goggles that he insists on wearing all the time now, like he's got to be ready for take off at a moment's notice. "Just tell him you don't want to yet." I do. He gets mad. "Tell him to use his hand."

Yeah, that'll go over big. I want to keep him, not chase him away.

"What are you waiting for, rose petals in the sheets?" he sighs, turning back to his game. "The right time's never going to come, trust me on this. You'll keep putting it off and putting it off and then one day he'll be gone and the moment will be lost and you'll think back and go you know, I wish I had fucked him then. So do it. Or don't. Just stop talking about it already."

And I call these guys my friends?

* * *

He's lying on one of the lower bunks at the back of the bus, leafing through a comic book, and he doesn't look up when I sit down beside him. He sighs when I touch his leg, one of those what do you want now? sounds that I don't like him to use with me. I know he's still pissed. I guess I don't really blame him. I tell him I'm sorry again.

"I know," he says. "You keep saying it, Justin." I tell him I love him. I don't think I say that enough, and he says he loves me, too. I tell him I want to love him, I want him to love me, and I don't want to lose him just because I'm too scared to put out.

Now the comic comes down, and he frowns at me and says I'm not going to lose him, not ever. "Who's been telling you this shit?" he wants to know. Josh, Joey, Chris. They all say I should give in --

He takes me in his arms and pulls me down onto him. "Don't listen to them, baby," he says, smoothing a hand along my back. I hug him tight and squeeze my eyes shut and listen to the steady beat of his heart. "It's none of their business. If you don't want to --"

But I do. "Then if you're not ready --"

Maybe I am. Maybe tonight. Maybe, if he doesn't listen to me when I tell him no, maybe then we'll get further than before. Maybe that's what we need to do, just ignore the words and let our bodies do the talking for us. I just don't like him mad at me.

"It's not you," he tells me but I know he's lying.

* * *

The next time it's just the two of us in his room and he's lost in our kisses, his hand on my zipper, I bite my lower lip to keep myself quiet and fist my hands into the sheets so I don't push him away. I won't say anything this time, just do it and get it over with, it's what he wants, what we both want. He senses my surrender and moans my name, climbs onto me, suddenly all hands and he's touching me everywhere, he's undressing me and kissing me and whispering how much he loves me, how much he wants me. I close my eyes and let him make me give in. I tell myself there are worse things to lose.

Afterwards he holds me close and tells me I'm amazing. He swears he loves me. He calls me his superstar, and I like the way that sounds. His.

The End

You've Got Mail
by NSyncGrrl

"Justin Timberlake and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day."

That's the subject of the email I get and the first thing I think is, How did you know? Yesterday wasn't the greatest day in the history of the band, let me tell you that much right off the bat, because Justin was in an asshole mood from the moment he rolled out of bed. Chris didn't help matters any, picking on him until I was ready to kill them both -- can't Justin see he does that shit to bug him? But no, he has to get riled up about it, and then he gets pissy, takes it out on the rest of the group, yells at us like we're idiots out on the stage and storms off in one of his diva fits, mutters beneath his breath and we just stay away from him, it's the safest thing to do when he's like that, just get out of his way and he'll get over it eventually. He always has before.

Only I can hear him through the door that connects my hotel room to his, throwing shit at the wall and hollering because he can't find his shoes, and I'm thinking that terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day he had yesterday has continued on into today, and heaven help us all if it has. It's not even seven yet and he's already bitching. I love the boy, more than I should -- admit it, Lance, you've had a crush on him since this whole gig started, you think he's the hottest thing going right now and you spend too many nights wanting him, you should just tell him already but you can't, you choke up every time you look at him and you just can't tell him he makes you hard, you're not that bold -- and despite all that, some days he even tries my patience. Yesterday I just let it slide but I really don't think I have the energy to deal with him if he's like that again today. I just want to grab him and kiss him and make everything better and I can't. I swear I'm going to tell him some day and I just can't.

I glance at the email again -- it's a story, which doesn't surprise me. This isn't my "real" email address, just a free web-based service I signed up for when I found out that fans out there just don't write stories about us, they write sex, and some of it's damn good. I'm not talking about the stories where a girl and her four friends meet up with us after a show and we all fall desperately in love -- I'm not into that kind of fan-fic. Here I was dreaming up long, complicated stories in my head, scenes where one day at rehearsal Justin turns and just happens to look at me and it hits him, he's never realized how much he loves me before, and those daydreams usually end up with the two of us in my bed or his, writhing together naked beneath the sheets, and they make me ache because I want him so bad. And I thought I was the only one thinking like that, but here's this whole community online and I just devour their words, their stories, their visions of me and him together forever. Do you know how many times I've thought of

forwarding him one of the stories on my lists? Just to give him a hint, just to make him wake up and see how much I'm hurting for him here, and maybe then he'd drop the charade with Britney and we could get together and I wouldn't even have to say anything, just hint at it and let him make all the moves.

Like this story -- I could forward him this one. I don't recognize the sender's email address but it has to be from one of my lists, it just has to be. I'm on half a dozen of them, slash lists dedicated to lamb love, they call it, just me and Justin and a million different positions, each one raunchier than the last. I swear if we ever do hook up -- and I promise myself one day I'll tell him, one day we'll get together, I just have to find the right way to tell him -- when we do, I'll surprise him in bed, all that I read. Brit's not the only one who's not that innocent.

I scroll down the page a little ways, scanning the story. I could really use a hurt/comfort tale right about now, because I can hear Justin tearing up his room looking for something or other and all I want to do is rush over there and tell him everything's going to be okay, but I can't. He doesn't know how I feel for him, none of the guys do -- well, Joey mentioned it once, asked me straight up if I was into him like that, and I didn't answer so I know he knows but he's cool with it, said I should do something about it and I still didn't say anything so he just dropped the subject, he's never asked again -- but I don't want them to know. They can't know. Not until I'm ready to tell him myself.

"Justin had a shitty day," the story starts, and it's not the most original opening, but at least it's something. "He couldn't find his shirt, his shoes, his earrings. His toothpaste was empty, his deodorant fell out when he tried to put it on, and he had to use shampoo instead of soap in the shower because he ran out the day before and forgot to buy more."

Now you know I'm smiling at this, right? Because Justin's a cutie and I can so see that pout of his when he's holding the deodorant in one hand and staring at the white clump on the floor at his feet. So this is why your day was so bad, I think, as if yesterday had anything to do with this story. Still, at least it gives some excuse to his actions. I can pretend, right? We should be together, baby. Then I'll take care of you and you won't run out of that shit, you'll have wonderful mornings, we'll wake up together and make slow, delicious love and you'll never have a bad day again. I like that idea.

The story goes on -- Justin trips getting into the elevator, bumps his head getting out of the limo, stumbles on the stairs leading up to the studio ... and that really happened. I frown at the computer screen. That really did happen, yesterday, he stumbled going into the studio and JC made some remark about it, asked if he walked much, and Justin growled at him to shut the fuck up. It's all here in the story, every word of the conversation, like the author overheard it and copied it down verbatim. And while recording, Justin's voice cracked on a solo -- that's here, too -- and Chris laughed at him, like his voice has never broken the sound

barrier before, and then he lost the only two quarters he had to the soda machine -- that's in the story, too, in black and white on the computer screen, who wrote this stuff? How do you KNOW? I want to ask.

And then the story-Justin kicks the soda machine -- which Justin did yesterday, I know, I was there -- and surprise! Here I am, coming up behind him, offering him fifty cents, which I did. This isn't fiction, I think, scrolling back to the top of the page. I study the email address as if hoping I'll figure out who it is but it's a Hotmail address, could be anyone in the world. Anyone at all ... I don't even think it's come from a list, because there's no Yahoo! tags at the bottom, nothing saying this is part of a mailing list, someone just sent this to me. Why? I wonder. Who?

Then in the story I wrap my arms around Justin's waist there in the hallway of the studio and kiss the back of his neck and that part didn't happen, I'd remember it if it did. And he turns, catches me in a quick kiss, tells me he loves me and he wants me to make this terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day go away, and we find a supply closet where I do just that.

And I'm sweating when I finish reading, these stories turn me on something fierce and I'm gonna have to take care of this in the shower, this bulge at my crotch, and I'll be thinking of what might have been the whole time, how the story makes it sound so easy, we could've gotten together just like that. How did they know? I think again. I can still hear Justin carrying on next door, and I wonder if maybe this isn't someone's sick idea of a joke, writing a story like this, one steeped in half-truths -- it's obviously almost word for word what happened yesterday at the studio, up to the point where we get it on, that's fiction but nothing else in the damn thing is -- and I wonder who the hell would do something like this, who knows I like Justin?

Joey.

* * *

I'm halfway down the hall to Joey's room when I wonder how he could've even gotten that email address and I stop. If it's not him and I ask him about it, then what? Then he'll want to know what kind of story it was and why I'm all flushed and nervous just thinking about it and he's not stupid, he'll figure it out, he'll know it's slash and he'll think I'm sick, reading sex stories about me and Justin when I'm too damn chicken to just tell the boy how I feel about him. The more I think about it, the more it seems like just a coincidence because there's no way Joey has that email address, and he wouldn't do anything like this, not to me, would he? I mean, he likes his jokes as well as the next guy but this is too sophisticated for him. He'd just send me dirty pictures of porn star 'N Sync lookalikes, not write me a story.

So it's just one of those eerie quirks of fate, one of those things

that makes you go hmm, that's it.

Behind me Justin's door opens and I turn around as he comes out into the hall, already glaring because he's had a horrid morning -- I heard it all -- and it's not even seven yet. Poor boy. He doesn't look around, doesn't see me standing there, so I watch him as he closes the door and it locks on the sleeve of his jacket, the one he carries in his hands. He curses beneath his breath and fumbles with the keycard to unlock the door again, tugging on the jacket like that's going to help. "Goddammit the fuck," he mutters, giving the jacket a good yank to get it free, and I hear it tear before he gets the door open. "Shit."

"Hey," I call out. I like the tank top he's wearing, it shows off his tattoo, and he's letting his curls grow back, they're a mess right now, damp and sticking up all over his head. I think about him in the shower, washing those curls, the shampoo leaving long soapy trails down his body, his head back and his eyes closed and damn, stop thinking that shit, I tell myself. But this is Justin and I can't.

He looks up, frowning, but when he sees me I like to think his eyes soften and his mouth almost curves into a smile -- almost. "Hey," he says, slamming the door shut again. "Don't tell me they left without me again today?"

I grin at that -- yesterday the others headed down to the breakfast buffet and didn't even wait for him. Me, I was running late, sitting in front of my laptop, reading, and I had heard him cuss as he slammed out of his room and down the hall. "I don't know where they are," I admit with a shrug. Shoving my hands into my pockets, I watch him fiddle with the ripped jacket sleeve and ask gently, "You having a bad day again?"

With a short, humorless laugh, he mumbles, "Something like that."

Can I hold you now? I think, watching him. He avoids my gaze and pouts like he's all of twelve, I love the way he can still manage to do that. Can I kiss you and make it all go away? I don't know if it would but I'd sure as hell love to give it a try.

Only I'm scared, I can't think of the words to say, and what if he says no? What if he's not interested? I don't want to take that chance -- I'd rather be his friend then nothing at all, and if it means I have to stand here and yearn to touch him, if it means I have to ache every time I look at him, then I'll live with it. I'd rather have this, this sudden intimacy, the two of us alone in a strange city and comfortable together because we've been friends for so long, than to have no part of him at all.

Finally he sighs. "Well," he says, and now he looks up at me and I don't want him to see what I'm thinking so I look away -- at his tight jeans, the jacket in his hands, the floor, anywhere but his eyes. He's got amazing eyes, and I've looked into them before and lost my train of thought, the words just dried up in my throat, and he must think I'm an idiot when I do shit like that but I can't help

it, he takes my breath away. "Lance? You hungry?"

Oh God yes. But he's not talking about that and I don't want him to think I'm thinking it, so I just shrug and say, "Sure," like it's no big deal, we're just friends. I follow him to the elevator but he stops and waits for me, walks beside me, still poking at that hole in his sleeve like it's going to get better by itself. Every now and then his elbow bumps my arm -- the first time it happens I move away but I swear he steps closer and I'm sure he's not even aware of it, and when it happens again, I just close my eyes and savor the touch because at least it's something. Joey's right, I should tell him how I feel, and I will, one day. I promise myself, one day I will.

* * *

Down in the lobby, the guys are waiting for us. Chris leans his head on JC's shoulder like he can't hold it up and JC keeps shrugging, trying to knock him loose, but he doesn't take the hint. Joey's flirting with the girl behind the reception desk, and when he looks up and sees Justin with me, he winks and I wonder again if he wrote that story. "Morning, guys," he says, and is he looking at me like that because he's wondering if I've read it yet or not?

I'm getting paranoid. He didn't write it, he couldn't have. He's not that subtle.

In the limo I try to stay next to Justin but I end up across from him, squeezed between JC and Chris, who's decided he's going to camp out on my shoulder now. "Didn't you get enough sleep last night?" I complain, trying to shrug him off, but he's tenacious and wraps an arm around my waist and snuggles up against me. Can you switch seats with Justin? I wonder, because I'd much rather him snuggling into me. "Chris --"

"Fine," he pouts, standing, and it's at that moment the limo eases into traffic and he falls against the other seat, stumbling over our legs. "I'll just sleep here," he says, stretching out half in Justin's lap, half in Joey's.

Justin pushes him off and hops over next to me. Well, that turned out for the best, I think as Justin's leg presses against mine. He's warm through his jeans and I wonder how much warmer he'd be out of them, his skin on mine, and I need to stop thinking this shit, I really do, someone's going to clue in and I'd die if they knew he makes my blood rush like he does.

And there's Joey's smile again, like he knows what's going on in my mind. Now that he has the seat mostly to himself, Chris stretches his legs out, plops his head down into Joey's lap, and closes his eyes, folding his hands over his chest like he's really going back to sleep. Beside me Justin pulls on his jacket, and for a few awkward moments he can't find the sleeve behind him so I reach over, hold it out for him. "Thanks," he mumbles, sliding his arm into it. His thumb catches in the hole where he closed it in the

door and I hear it tear again. "Fuck."

On my other side, JC sighs dramatically, one of his here we go again sighs, and I don't even have to look over at him to know he's rolling his eyes because Joey starts to laugh. From his lap, Chris opens one eye and looks at Justin, then at me. "You still having a terrible day, Juju?"

"Yeah," Justin mutters.

"Horrible?" Chris persists, and is it just me or does everyone here know about that damn story? Maybe I'm reading too much into it, I don't know. I mean, sure, terrible is a common word, granted. So is horrible, but they just both happen to be in the title of a story someone sent me, a story about me and Justin fucking in a closet and I thought it might be Joey only now Chris is watching me closely, almost like he's waiting for me to say something, to ask him, to tell him I read it and God, did he write it? How does he know I have the hots for this boy beside me? Am I that transparent? "Lance?" Chris asks, and I shake my head just to clear it -- he didn't write it, did he? "You okay, man?"

"Just tired," I tell him. I drop my gaze to my hands, twisting in my lap, and wonder how he could've gotten that email address. Does he know, too?

Joey shifts his feet, nudging my shoe. "Maybe he's having a very bad day, too," he suggests, and I don't look up because now my face is hot, burning up pink, I know they know, they have to.

Don't they?

* * *

Somehow I make it through the day but I'm about crazy when I crawl into bed, my mind a whirl of emotions and bullshit and I don't know what the hell to think anymore. Justin didn't say two words to me all day, he's in that mood of his still, and I'd give anything to see his smile again, to hear him say my name, to have him look at me and really see me and only me. If he wasn't so untouchable and I wasn't such a wuss I'd knock on the door between our rooms and ask if I could come in, just for a few minutes, and that daydream ends up with us both on his bed, our clothes on the floor, me between his legs showing him what I've picked up from those stories I read. On that note I finally fall asleep, and my dreams are a melange of faces -- the band, my friends, the bodyguards, hell, Wade, everyone I saw today who made some remark or gave me that look that suggested they knew. I swear they all knew.

The next morning I turn on the laptop first thing and I'm going to reread the story again, maybe I'll see it's not exactly what happened the other day, I was just wrong and it spooked me and that was it, it's just fiction, people, that's all. Not true, not even steeped in truth. But when I open my inbox there's another email from the same address, and the subject of this one is "Justin

Timberlake and the Day from Hell." I don't want to read it.

But I do, and it starts with Justin in the morning, looking for his shoes. Like yesterday, I remind myself. When he catches his jacket in the door to his room, a wave of déjà vu washes over me. The jacket tears, of course. He runs into me in the hallway, of course, and I swear this author can read my mind because then I'm kissing him, I'm holding him close and whispering that it'll be okay, baby, just cheer up and it'll be fine. And right there in the hallway I drop his pants and suck him off and my God, that's this hallway, right outside my door here. My hands tremble as I scroll down -- past us meeting the guys in the lobby, past Chris sleeping on Joey's lap in the limo, all of it happened yesterday, I don't like this. No, a voice inside me whispers, you LOVE it, you do, only you wish you were the Lance in THIS story, you wish you could just come up to Justin and tell him you love him and touch him like this, kiss him and hold him like THIS, and you hate that someone is writing your days down the way they SHOULD have gone and you hate that it didn't really happen this way.

There's a knock on my door and I jump, minimize the browser, close the laptop screen like I've been caught doing something bad. I start for the door to my room when the knock comes again and it's Justin, knocking on the door between our rooms. "Lance, you awake?" he calls out. I wonder if he's having a better day today, though part of me hopes not, part of me hopes he has another shift day because maybe I'll get another story tomorrow.

"I'm up," I tell him, pulling a pair of jeans over my boxers, and I have to jam myself into them because I am up, I'm hard after that blowjob scene and the thought of taking him into my mouth makes my hands shake so bad, I can't get the zipper to work right. When Justin knocks a third time, I call out, "I'm coming," even though I'm not, not really, not yet.

I open the door and he stands there staring at me with bedroom eyes I want to wake up next to every morning. His hair is disheveled, uncombed, not even washed yet, and he's got the beginnings of a pout already pulling at his lips. I want to reach out and trace the stubbly growth that lines his jaw, it's got to be amazingly soft -- I want to smooth it down and kiss it straight and why can't I just say something already? "Justin," I sigh, and I sound so lovelorn to my own ears that I should just slam the door shut and hide beneath my covers. He does that to me.

He holds up an empty bottle of shampoo. "I'm out," he says. "Can I borrow yours?" And without waiting for a reply, he pushes into my room, dressed in just a t-shirt and boxers, his bare feet scruffing along my carpet as he heads for my bathroom. "Just a handful," he's saying, and I'm nodding because I don't trust myself to speak, I'm still thinking about his ass in those thin boxers and how I swear I saw a shadow of dark hair curled in the front of them. From the bathroom, he hollers, "Lance? Is that okay?"

"Sure," I tell him. Anything you want, Justin, anything at all.

When he comes back out he has one hand bunched into a fist full of shampoo. "I need to get some more," he says, and I nod because that's what he expects me to do but I don't care if he knocks on my door every morning, he can borrow my shampoo anytime. He sees my laptop, the power light lit because it's still on, and he asks, "Are you online?"

"Yeah." I move in front of the laptop and press the cover shut, clicking it off. I hope that didn't look too obvious but God, if he saw the emails I get ... "Just checking my email."

"Get anything good?" he wants to know, and then he laughs. "All I get is Viagra ads and click here for hot Asian chicks. Sometimes I wonder how these people get my address, you know?" I know, trust me on that one, but before I can say anything, he's padding through the door again. "One day maybe I'll get something worthwhile. You get any thing like that, forward it on to me, okay?" Yeah right, I think, like I'm going to send him the stories I get, the ones where he's in me and above me and under me, loving me. Back in his own room, he calls out, "Thanks for the shampoo. I'll pay you back, I promise." And then he closes the door and leaves me staring after him.

Then a devastating thought hits me. Why would he ask me about email? No. Oh God, please no. Tell me whoever's sending these stories to me isn't sending them to him, too.

* * *

It's got to be Joey, has to be, I just know it. He asked Justin how his jacket ripped yesterday when we were getting out of the limo, how could I have forgotten that? So I wait until we're all on the tour bus, we've got a two hour ride to the airport and I had hoped to get Joey alone, ask him where the hell he gets off pulling a stunt like this, but no, Chris wants to play a video game and the system's set up on our bus, and he convinces JC he wants to play, too, and Justin grumbles about us all ditching him and fuck that shit, he's gonna get on this bus just to piss us off. Only that's where I want him, with me. He sits in the back and glares out the window, and when Chris asks if he wants to get his ass kicked, too, because he's slaughtering JC over here, Justin doesn't answer. Instead he storms back to the bunks and pulls the curtain between us and him. "He wants to be alone," Chris intones, loud enough for Justin to overhear.

"Leave him be," I say, climbing over Joey's legs to sit by the window. Chris laughs but turns back to his game, it's much more interesting than picking on me. I flash Joey a tight smile and wonder if there's any way I can sound nonchalant when I ask him if he's sending me those stories. Hey, Joe, you writing smut about me and Justin or what? Call me silly, but I'm thinking that's not exactly the approach I'd like to take.

Because what if it's not him? What if it's Chris? I watch our

friend struggle with the game controller as if his life depends on it, and JC's not even really playing anymore, he's just sitting back watching the screen, he sucks that bad -- would Chris really do something like that? I would think he'd be more the practical joke sort, not one to write about things but set them into motion. Like that first story, with the scene in the closet -- Chris strikes me as the type who'd just shove us both in there and lock the door, hold it shut until we finally got it on, and then he'd open it, drag us out of there half-dressed, just to shake us up. I don't think he has the patience to put all that out into words.

Beside him, JC toys with his controller and asks no one in particular, "What the hell's up with that kid lately?"

He's talking about Justin, I know he is. Chris shrugs. "Unspent sexual energy," he says, not breaking his concentration. "He just needs to get laid, that's it. Ain't it, Joe?"

Joey laughs. "It always worked for me," he admits, and he elbows me like I'm supposed to think this is funny, too. "What about you?" he asks, lowering his voice. Chris glances up at us, and even JC looks over, waiting. "You think Justin needs to get laid?"

Okay, here comes that blush again, and Chris busts out laughing, JC starts to giggle, Joey's smiling like his face'll break and they think this is a riot, I'm glad they find this so damn hilarious. "Joe," I start, but I don't really want to get into this right now, anything I say will just make it worse, I know them all too well.

So I stand up and push my way to the aisle, knocking Joey's legs aside. "What?" Joey asks, like he doesn't know. I glare at him, jaw clenched, and head for the bunks. "What'd I say?"

"Looks like someone else needs to get laid," Chris mutters, and that sets them off again. I'm glad they're enjoying this.

"Shut up," I mutter, and now I sound like Justin but I don't care, that was uncalled for. I wonder if tomorrow's story will have me getting it up the ass. If that's the case, fuck decorum, I'm not even going to ask nicely, I'll just ream all of them for this stupid joke because it's not funny anymore, it's not.

I push through the curtain leading into the back of the bus and pull it closed behind me. It doesn't cut out their laughter but it muffles it, at least. It's dark back here, the only light one tiny bulb above the bunk Justin's lying on, and he looks up as I approach. I tell myself his frown smooths out because it's me. "They picking on you, too?" he wants to know as he moves over to make room for me to join him.

I sit down by his feet and lean back against the side of the bunk, facing him. Then I draw my knees up to my chest and wrap my arms around them and pretend I don't feel his long legs stretched out beside me, pressing into my hip. I pretend my feet aren't resting against his waist and he's not this close to me, I don't think about that. "I was trying to get them to leave you

alone," I tell him, and he laughs at that. He has a contagious laugh -- it makes me grin to hear it.

"So they started in on you," he says, and I nod. He knows how it goes. I love these guys to death but some days they're just too much, I can't stand them.

For long minutes we don't say anything else. Justin watches me and I stare at his belt because I can't quite meet his eyes. He picks at my shoelaces and I don't know when he starts to touch me but suddenly I'm aware of his hand on my shoe, then my ankle, then my calf. His fingers ease between my sock and the leg of my pants, brush along my flesh with a touch like fire, and I hold my breath because I don't want to say or do anything to scare him away. Did they send you the stories, too? I want to ask, but I don't. If I were bolder, maybe I would. If I were courageous. Then I could look him in the eye and with a sexy grin ask if he liked that blowjob scene and if maybe, just maybe, he wanted to give it a try.

But I don't.

"Lance," he says, and his voice is so soft, I almost don't hear it. Now I dare to look at him because he's frowning at his hand on my ankle and it's easier when he's not staring at me, when I can just watch him and he doesn't know, he doesn't see.

"What?" I ask, just as softly.

Before he can reply, I hear stifled giggles and I know someone's on the other side of the curtain, listening. It has to be JC, from the sound of that laugh -- does he think he's being sneaky? Justin's eyes light up and he grins at me, points back at the curtain. "JC," he mouths, and I nod, hiding my face in my arms to keep from laughing myself.

Through the curtain we hear a quick shuffle, and then Chris hisses, "Josh, shut up." Like we didn't hear that. What can they possibly hope to be listening for? What do they honestly think they'll overhear?

Justin smirks and murmurs, "Watch this." His hand wraps around my ankle as he closes his eyes, arches back against the bunk, opens his mouth and lets out a long, low, "Yessss" that makes me hard just to hear it. I stare at him as he does it again, one hand gripping my leg and the other drifting to his crotch and God, if he touches himself, I'm going to come just seeing it. "Oh, Lance," he moans, loud enough that our friends can hear it out in the main part of the bus. I like the way that sounds, I've heard it often enough in my dreams. "Yes, baby. Ride me baby, you know I like it like that. Yes, oh yes, oh Jesus yes."

I want to tell him to knock it off but I can't remember how to speak at this exact moment. His hand cups his crotch and I swear I feel my eyes fall out of my head, I'm dying here, his fingers tickle up my leg and I just want to melt into him, I want him that bad. "Justin," I manage, and that's as far as I get before the curtain is

torn aside and JC tumbles to the floor, Chris on top of him, Joey behind them with a goofy grin on his face. Can I die now? I wonder, seeing the looks on their faces. Justin starts to laugh and I smile just for something to do.

Then Chris slaps the back of JC's head. "I told you they weren't really doing it," he grumbles, like he wishes we had been in the middle of something hot and steamy before they busted in.

"I heard --" JC starts, and over them Joey winks at me. "Get up, Chris," he mutters, trying to stand. "I said get off --"

"I'm off," Chris says, backing away. He glares at Justin, lying on his side and coughing into the pillow, he's laughing so hard. "Cute joke, boys. Har har."

That makes Justin laugh even harder, and it's the first time I've seen him smile in days so it's not too bad, is it? And he's still touching my leg, his hand around my ankle, his knees pressed into my hip and no, it's not bad at all.

* * *

And you know the story's in my email the next day, right? There we are on the bus and Chris makes that crack about getting laid, Joey asks my opinion, I get up in a huff when they all laugh. Word for word, I've lived this already. Then we're in the bunks, Justin and me, and he touches my ankle and God, were they watching even then? Whichever one of those guys wrote this, they had to be peeking around the curtain because they have it down pat, me sitting on the bunk hugging my knees and Justin lying down beside me, facing me, watching his hand as it traces intricate patterns on my skin. And when he says my name in the story I just about die because they heard that, too? Jesus Christ, a regular bunch of peeping Toms.

Only instead of the three of them busting in on us, I start kissing him, soft, hungry kisses that make my throat close up to read them because that's what I wanted to do, I wanted to kiss him then, I wanted to touch his cheek and his neck and trail my hand down his chest, fumble at his belt, unzip his jeans and listen to him moan into my mouth as I rubbed his hard cock through his boxers and it's all in the story, it's all there. I ease his pants down and he unzips mine, strokes me hard and guides me into him, we mesh together in that tiny bunk, him below me, his moans of "Yes" and "Oh God Lance yes" real because I'm loving him and holding him and he's breathless when he comes. We don't hear our friends giggling outside until after it's all said and done, after I'm holding him in my arms and telling him I love him, we need to do that again, I love to make love to him. Then JC laughs, and then Chris tells him to shut up, and then Justin fakes the orgasm again, this time really going all out, and the guys tumble in on us only to find us already finished the deed.

And why the fuck couldn't it have gone down like that?

I read it a second time, a third, and on the fourth pass I'm pretty sure I know who wrote it -- JC. Has to be. Joey and Chris might get their kicks off this shit, Joey knows I like Justin and Chris has probably figured it out by now, or maybe Joey told him, I don't know, Joey says anything when he's drunk -- but JC? Why didn't I think of it before? This is so him, he's always scribbling into a notebook or typing away on his laptop, always writing. He says they're songs but who knows? Maybe it's a sick way of playing matchmaker. Maybe he thinks he's doing me a favor, showing me the way things might have been, showing me how it could be if I'd only get the balls to tell Justin how I feel. I don't know, maybe he gets off on this, thinking of us getting it on, I don't know.

But I'm going to find out. I should've known it from the start -- of course it'd be JC, of course. I was stupid enough to borrow his laptop a few weeks ago when we were on the road, I just wanted to check my email and the damn browser probably retained my user name, it was filled in the blank when JC logged back online and knowing him, he probably checked the history folder just to see what I had been looking at. Of course.

So I'll confront him. Say you think this is funny, you pervert? Say you get off on this sort of sick shit? I'm wondering how he knows I like Justin but damn, maybe I am transparent, maybe everyone knows, maybe Joey told him, Chris, someone, I don't know. But I sure as hell am gonna find out.

As I'm getting dressed, Justin knocks on the door between our rooms. Not now, I think, because I'm pissed and knowing him, he'll take one look at me and ask what's wrong. He's nosy like that. But he knocks again and this is Justin, I can't ignore him, I just can't. Opening the door, I sigh and run a hand through my unruly hair. "Yeah?" I ask.

He frowns at me. I'm never this short with him, I know that, and before he even opens his mouth, I'm apologizing. "Jeez, I'm sorry. I didn't mean -- I'm just a little -- did you need something?"

"More shampoo," he says, eyeing me as he comes into my room. "What's your problem this morning?"

I sigh again. "Nothing," I tell him. He's wearing those boxers again, the ones you can read through, they're so thin, and I have to turn away because he doesn't need to see how much I want him right now, he doesn't need to know that. What if the guys aren't the only ones who suspect I like him, though? What if he thinks that, too?

God. This is getting out of hand. I tuck my undershirt into my jeans and dig through my bag for a sweater to wear, I still need to talk with JC, he's got to cut this shit out, I'm sick of it, he's making me wish for things I shouldn't be wishing for, making me regret and I don't need him to make me do that, and I hear Justin in the bathroom, rooting through my stuff for the shampoo. "Just take the

whole bottle," I tell him. "You can bring it back when you're done."

"You don't need it?" he asks. I'm in the middle of pulling on a sweater -- do you think I'm going to wash my hair now?

But I can't say that, it'd be mean. "I'm fine," I call out, stepping into one of my sneakers. JC's room is down the hall. I wonder if he's sending these stories to Justin, too. As he comes out of the bathroom, the bottle of shampoo in one hand, I wonder how I can possibly ask him. Have you been getting ... I don't know, PORN stories in your inbox lately? Just curious.

I'm so not going to ask him that.

My other sneaker peeks out from under the bed so I sit down on the edge and reach for it. "You sure I can borrow it?" Justin asks.

I nod as I struggle with a knot that's worked itself into my shoelace. "I'm sure," I tell him. I expect him to leave now -- he never stays long. Not as long as I'd like him to, anyway.

That's why it surprises me when he pulls out the chair by my desk. I look up from the shoe in my lap and Jesus, Mary, and Joseph tell me I'm not seeing this, tell me he's not sitting at my laptop reading the fucking story -- "God," I manage, and then I'm stumbling across the room, trying to close the browser before he reads too much. "You didn't see that."

For a minute his face is expressionless. Then he glances up at me and says, his voice unbelievably soft, "I thought you weren't getting them."

"You got them, too?" I ask. Suddenly I'm all too aware that I'm leaning over him, one hand on the mouse, the other on the keyboard and he's between them, he's in my arms practically, all he has to do is lean back and he'll press against my chest and we don't need to be talking about this when we're standing so close. "Justin, I ..." I trail off. I don't know what to say. "Oh fuck."

Justin stares at me, my neck, my chin, my lips. I feel his gaze like the sun on me, burning me, searing into my skin and deeper, into my soul. "When you didn't say anything --" he starts.

I cut him off with a harsh laugh. "What's there to say?" I ask. He frowns and I can move away now, I back up against the bed, sink to the mattress. I'm too scared to say anything and maybe I can just blow this off, maybe he won't have to know how much the stories turned me on, how they're what I want my life to be like. Justin's still staring at me and I pick up the sneaker where it lies discarded on the floor, busy myself with untangling the knot. "I mean, really." You say something, I beg silently. Anything.

His voice is still so damn soft when he murmurs, "I thought you might like them." I look up at him sharply and he forces a small smile that makes my chest hurt. "I wrote them for you."

"You --" and that's all I can get out, I can't say it, can't even comprehend it, can't believe it.

He rises from the chair and sits down beside me, takes the sneaker from my hand, lets it fall to the floor. Then he takes my hand in his and his fingers are so warm when they wrap around mine. "I couldn't think of any other way to tell you," he whispers, and I'm not hearing this, it can't be real, it's not. How long have I waited to hear these words? "I know you like me, Lance," he's saying, his eyes pleading with me, "you have to, and I thought if I wrote down what I was thinking then maybe I could show you I like you without having to actually say it, and maybe you'd finally tell me you feel the same way. Please," he sighs. "Please tell me you do. Please tell me I'm not the only one here."

It sounds like someone else's voice that answers him. "You're not," I breathe. "Oh sweet Jesus you're not, Justin." He smiles and relief floods through me, I'm nervous and tingly and he just said he likes me, right? I think that's what he said, I'm almost sure of it. Besides, he sent those emails so that means something, right? That means he wants me to love him like I do in his stories, like I've always wanted to. With a shaky laugh, I tell him, "I thought one of the guys was doing this. I never thought --"

"Are you mad?" he asks.

I laugh again. "At what?" I want to know. I'm light-headed and giddy and so far from mad, it's not even funny. "Justin, you don't know how long I've ... I mean, God -- how did you get that address? You wrote those things for me? You -- you like me like that?" He grins at me and nods. "I thought -- how'd you even know I read that stuff?"

And it's his turn to laugh as he tells me, "You're on my mailing list. I saw the user profile and email address and sort of figured it was you. At least, I hoped it was."

I stare at him, dumbfounded, and he laughs again before he leans close, closer. His lips touch mine and he's so sweet, so soft, so amazingly perfect and everything I ever thought he'd be, and it's like we're in one of his stories because this is exactly what I've wanted all along.

Only this time I won't have to read about it in the morning because we're living it out right now.

The End