

Whatever It Takes
by NSyncGrrl

It's about 'N Sync, how imaginative. Justin and Lance aren't the most communicative couple in the world, let's just leave it at that.

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Part 1
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Lance sat at one end of the hotel bar, staring into the bottom of an empty shot glass and wondering why the hell he was so alone. Because Britney's in town, he mused as he signaled to the bartender for another drink. She had called the day before, told them she was going to be able to make their show after all, and Justin took her out to dinner when the concert was over. "You want to come along?" he had asked, Britney already in the limo waiting for him. "She won't mind --"

"No, that's okay," Lance told him, and it was okay, really, he loved Britney and was glad Justin had a friend like her in his life, someone outside of the group he could talk with, someone he could hang out with, someone to just get him away from all this crazy shit sometimes. Despite whatever the media wanted to say about the two of them, Lance didn't let it bother him -- he was the one Justin slept with at night, he was the one Justin loved, he told him often enough. "You go on," Lance had said, ducking beneath Justin's arm to wave at Britney. She smiled up at him, a bright grin, and waved back. "I'll wait up for you back at the hotel."

"You sure?" Justin persisted. Lance nodded, and then Justin touched his elbow, a brief gesture that meant nothing to anyone else but the two of them. I'm thinking of you, that touch said. It was their little way of saying I love you in public. "I won't be too late."

"Have fun," Lance said as Justin slid into the limo beside their friend.

Have fun, he thought now, watching light gleam off the amber liquid the bartender poured into his glass. Have a blast. I am. How long had he been at the bar now? A few hours, that's all. He glanced at the clock above the bar, a gaudy Miller's Light sign that flashed neon colors, and saw it was only a little after two in the morning. Not late at all, really. Justin should be back any time now.

He tossed back his head and swallowed the shot of whiskey, and was about to call the bartender over for another one when Chris came up behind him. "Hey man," he said, his voice soft in the dim room. He sank onto the stool beside Lance's, placed his half-empty beer mug in front of him. "Where's your boy?"

"With his girl," Lance said. That made Chris laugh, a sound that brought a smile to Lance's own lips. He ran one finger around the rim of his shot glass and didn't look up at his friend. "He'll be back soon. They just went out for a bite to eat."

"Without you?" Chris asked. He frowned when the bartender came over to them, the bottle of whiskey in his hand. Covering

Lance's glass, Chris said, "I think he's had enough --"

"Just leave it here," Lance told the bartender, who nodded and set the bottle of Jack Daniels in front of him. When he reached for the bottle, he saw Chris's frown deepen and he sighed. "Don't start with me, Chris. I can handle myself."

Chris watched as Lance filled the shot glass. "Is this because he didn't ask you along?" he wanted to know.

"He asked me," Lance said, indignant. He drank down the shot and shook his head, trying to clear it. How long had he been drinking? A few hours, no longer, surely. What was wrong with that? Joey did it all the time when he was out at the clubs. So Lance was only at the hotel bar -- so that made it wrong somehow? He couldn't understand that. Drinking's only acceptable when you're having fun, he mused, pouring himself another glass. Do it by yourself and people start to think something's wrong. When Chris didn't say anything, Lance told him, "I didn't want to go. He hasn't seen her in a while -- don't give me that look. They're just friends, Chris. Nothing more."

"Says you," Chris muttered.

"Yes," Lance said, getting angry, "says me. He's not like that, Chris. He's not cheating on me. Especially not with her." Another shot of the whiskey -- this one burned as it went down. "She's a great friend, that's it. We've been together too long --"

Chris nodded. "I know, I know," he conceded, sipping at his beer.

When Lance reached for the whiskey again, Chris beat him to it, picked up the bottle and poured more than half of what was left into his beer mug. Then he handed the bottle back to Lance, who frowned at it. "Chris --"

"Just saving you from yourself, man," his friend said. He clapped Lance on the back and took a long drink from his glass. "Gah!" He shook his head. "Jack and Bud don't mix, trust me on this one." As Lance poured what little remained of the whiskey into his shot glass, Chris said, "Come on, dude. I'll help you upstairs."

Lance shook Chris's hand off his arm. "I'm fine," he said. "I told Justin I'd wait here for him. Go on --"

"It's getting late," Chris pointed out. "He'll know where to find you."

"No, I'm fine," Lance insisted. "Really." He pried Chris's fingers off of his arm, where his friend held on as if afraid to let him go. "Chris, please, I'm fine."

For a minute he didn't think Chris would leave him alone. His fingers dug into the bony part of Lance's elbow with a strong grip and the intense way he studied Lance made him want to cover his face to hide from his friend's gaze. "He'll be here soon," Lance told

him. He looked at the clock above the bar as if to make a point. Two-thirty. "He'll be back by three, I'm sure. I'll be fine til then." Please, Chris, he prayed. Please don't push it. I'm not going back to the room by myself.

Finally, Chris sighed and let go of Lance's arm. "Fine," he said. He took another sip of his whiskey-laced beer, grimacing at the taste. "Don't try this shit, man. I'm warning you."

Lance laughed. "I won't," he promised. He'd stick with his straight up whiskey, thank you very much.

"Don't stay here too late," Chris told him as he slid off the stool. Pulling out his wallet, he tossed a few dollars onto the bar and said, "You call me if he doesn't show up, you hear? You know what room I'm in?"

"The one next to ours," Lance said. "Chris, I don't --"

Chris grinned at him. "I'm in 1221. You just have that one bottle?" He fumbled in his wallet for more money.

"I've got it," Lance told him.

"You sure?" Chris studied him for a moment, gauging him. Then he shoved the money back into his wallet, stuck that back in his pocket. "You call me if he doesn't show --"

"He will," Lance insisted.

"If you're still here at 3:30," Chris said, interrupting him, "then I'm dragging your ass upstairs."

Lance sighed. "Okay," he said, pouring himself more whiskey. Anything to get you out of here, he thought. Justin would be back before then. "Just go, Chris, okay? I'm fine."

"Says you," Chris mumbled, but he turned and walked away, leaving Lance by himself at the end of the bar.

* * *

At quarter past three, Justin's limo pulled into the hotel garage. He tipped the driver and gave Britney a kiss on the cheek. "Nice seeing you again," he told her as he climbed out of the limo.

She laughed, a bubbly sound like champagne, too bright this late in the evening. "Now it's your turn to come to one of my shows," she said.

He grinned at that. "I'll see if we can make it." The we came easily enough, without hesitation -- he meant him and Lance. After almost four years with the same guy, sharing the same bed, he didn't think in terms of himself anymore. If anyone asked if he could make an appearance, do a photo shoot, come by to hear

their sound, he always said the same thing. We'll see.

Inside the lobby, he flashed his ID at the concierge, who nodded as he passed. I hope Lance is still awake, Justin thought, even though he knew his boyfriend probably fell asleep hours ago. It was cruel to wish he had waited up when he was this late, but he wanted to see him, talk to him, tell him about his evening and just spend a few minutes alone with him before he had to call it a night. When they were on tour, everything was rush rush rush and they never got much of a chance to just sit down and spend time together, to talk or just hear each other breathe. They spent the days traveling or giving interviews or rehearsing, and the nights performing, and afterwards ... they collapsed in the bed, too tired to do anything more than snuggle beneath the covers.

How long had it been since they fooled around? Before the tour started, that was for sure. Justin remembered a warm spring night spent at Lance's apartment in Florida and in the morning they had to catch a flight to meet up with the guys. That had been the last time they made love -- in the shower amid soap and giggles and driving water pounding down around them, so soothing. They almost missed their plane, they spent so much time goofing off, and Justin wondered if that would've been a bad thing, to be a few hours late to the rehearsal. Here, now, in the wee hours of the morning in an anonymous hotel, his whole body aching and exhausted, he didn't think a couple more minutes then would've hurt the group any, and it would've been fun. They hadn't had that kind of fun in a few months now.

He stopped by the hotel bar, even though he didn't expect Lance to still be inside. But he knew his boy and his penchant for a nightcap, and who knows? Justin thought, peeking into the dimly lit room. A few people sat scattered at the tables, nursing drinks, and a few more patrons sat at the bar. Maybe he'll still be here. Maybe --

Justin saw Lance slumped over on the bar, his arms folded beneath his head. Asleep. Stepping up to the bar, Justin pulled out his wallet and motioned for the bartender. "Aren't you a little young?" he asked, eyeing Justin warily.

"I want to pay for my friend there," Justin told him, pointing down at Lance. As the bartender took his money, he asked, "Has he been here long?"

"Few hours," the bartender said with a shrug. "Just dropped off about thirty minutes ago. You need some help getting him upstairs?"

Justin shook his head. "I've got him," he said, crossing the room. He looked down at Lance's closed eyes, his slightly parted lips, his dark, disheveled hair. I hate to wake him, he thought, smoothing a hand along his lover's back. Leaning down, he placed his lips against Lance's ear and whispered, "Wake up, sleeping beauty."

Lance's eyes flew open. He blinked at Justin, confusion written plainly on his face. "Wha --" He sat up and stretched. "Damn," he muttered, his voice thick with sleep. Rubbing his hands down his face, he asked, "What time is it? Justin?"

"It's late," Justin told him. He leaned against the stool beside Lance's and let his hand trail down his lover's back until it rested above the waistband of his pants. Rubbing gently, he said, "I tried calling your cell but you didn't answer."

"I think I left it in the room," Lance said. He yawned, shook his head, yawned again. "Jesus."

"You okay?" Justin asked, concerned.

Lance nodded. "Tired," he said.

When he reached for his wallet, Justin stopped him. "I already paid your tab," he said, taking Lance's arm. Helping him stand, he added, "Come on, let's get you to bed."

Lance didn't argue. He let Justin help him to the elevators, and once the doors closed and they were alone, Justin leaned back against the mirrored wall, pulled Lance into his arms, held him close. Lance snaked his arms around Justin's waist and closed his eyes, his head resting against his boyfriend's chest. With his chin on the top of Lance's head, Justin could smell the clean scent of his hair, laced with the strong stench of alcohol. "So," Lance said, his voice low. His words rumbled through Justin. "Did you guys have fun?"

"Oh yeah," Justin told him. He rubbed one hand along Lance's back, a soothing gesture, up and down the hard nubs of his spine. "She's a blast. Asked about you, I told her you were doing fine."

"Hmm," Lance murmured. Justin thought maybe he was falling back to sleep, and he hoped they could at least make it to their floor before that happened. He wanted to talk a bit, was that too much to ask? If you hadn't stayed out so late, he told himself, then you could talk, he wouldn't have had too much to drink, he'd want to stay up with you.

"You sleepy?" Justin asked, kissing the top of Lance's head.

Lance nodded. "Just a little," he whispered, but his voice sounded distant, faraway and slipping fast. "Keep talking. I like the way it feels."

With a laugh, Justin said, "I've never heard that one before."

Lance smiled, hugged Justin closer. "I just made it up. So you had fun?"

"Yeah." Justin told him about the restaurant where they ate, an expensive place Britney liked but he hadn't really cared for all that much. "They didn't give you enough food," he said. "You get more in a Happy Meal, for a lot less."

Lance laughed, a breathy sound, short and sleepy. When the elevator finally reached their floor, Justin kept his arm around his boyfriend's waist, led him down the hall to their room. Lance shook himself awake as Justin dug the key card out of his pocket and swiped it in the lock. "Here we are," he whispered, holding the door open for Lance.

Stepping into the room, Lance stretched and tugged his shirt off over his head, not bothering to unbutton it. Justin wrapped his arms around his lover's waist and kissed the back of his neck, the skin warm beneath his cool lips. "I'm sorry I'm so late," he breathed.

"It's okay," Lance told him. For a brief moment he leaned back into Justin's touch, savoring it, and then he extracted himself from the embrace. "But you had fun, right?"

"Yeah," Justin said, but Lance disappeared in the bathroom, closing the door behind him, and didn't hear his reply. Justin clicked on the lamp by the bed, the small light casting the room into shadow. Then he shrugged out of his jacket, kicked off his shoes, pulled off his shirt, unzipped his pants and started to step out of them when the bathroom door opened again and Lance came out, his hair standing up from his forehead in short, damp spikes. His shoes were gone and his pants unbuttoned, the front of his boxers peeking through the open fly. "My turn," Justin told him, kissing his cheek as he passed. He left the bathroom door ajar and turned on the faucet in the sink. "So what did you do tonight?" he called out over the sound of the running water.

"Nothing," Lance said. Justin brushed his teeth quickly, hard strokes that left his gums bruised and sore, but he didn't want Lance to fall back asleep while he was in the bathroom. He wanted to spend at least a few minutes with him before he drifted off again.

To keep him talking, Justin peeked around the corner of the doorjamb. Lance sat on the edge of the bed, toying with the zipper on his pants. "Nothing at all?" Justin asked around the toothbrush in his mouth.

"Nothing much," Lance amended. He looked at Justin, and his gaze drifted down his naked chest, the pants at his ankles. Quietly, he said, "Make love to me."

"Hold that thought." Ducking back into the bathroom, Justin spat toothpaste into the sink and kicked off his pants as he rinsed out his mouth. He'll be asleep when I get in there, Justin thought, splashing water on his face and buzzed hair. He's so tired, he's not really going to want to make love, not tonight. But he couldn't help the way his body responded to the thought of his lover beneath him, moving with him, against him, the two of them one. By the time he turned off the water and clicked out the light, he was already half hard and looking forward to release. They'd have to be quick, he didn't want to keep Lance up all night, he'd already done that --

Lance still sat on the edge of the bed, picking at his zipper. He looked up as Justin approached, his shadow pooling in his lover's eyes. "You're sure?" Justin asked, tracing the curve of Lance's jaw with one hand. "I know you're tired --"

"And drunk," Lance pointed out, but he turned his face and pressed his lips into Justin's palm. "And horny. I spent all night waiting, wanting you."

"I'm sorry," Justin whispered. When Lance stumbled to his feet, Justin caught him in a strong embrace, held him steady while he stripped out of his pants and boxers. "I'm so sorry, Lance. I didn't mean to stay out so late --"

"I know," Lance said, cutting him off. As he stood, Justin could see his own slight erection, already starting to stand up from his crotch. "Kiss me," Lance commanded.

Justin obeyed. He eased his arms around Lance's waist, pulled him close as their lips met. Lying Lance back on the bed, Justin tugged off his own boxers and crawled on top of his lover, smoothed his hand along Lance's stomach as he held himself up over him. Lance held onto Justin's shoulders and tasted like whiskey and Aquafresh, a sour combination that Justin barely noticed in his lust. "I love you," Justin sighed, his hand moving low along Lance's abdomen, lower, until he held the soft, cool sac below his dick in his palm. "You know that."

"I know," Lance murmured. "Love me now."

Lathering his hand with lotion they kept on the bedside table, Justin guided himself into his lover, gasping at the tightness, the muscles drawing him in, squeezing him. "It's been too long," he sighed, kissing Lance's chin and throat.

Beneath him Lance moved in a slow, steady rhythm, his exhaustion evident in the way he let Justin set the pace -- he simply clung to him, digging his fingers into Justin's shoulders, moaning with each thrust. "Yes," he breathed, a guttural sound, over and over again, affirming their lust, their passion, their love. "Yes."

When Justin came, he pulled out of Lance and rolled off to one side, his hand straying to his lover's erection. A few hard strokes and he came, too, a rush that slicked Justin's fingers. Curling against him, Lance sighed. "Justin."

Justin kissed his forehead, wiped his hand on the sheets behind him, and then held Lance close. I'd have come back sooner, he thought, staring at the dark shadows draped across his lover's face, if I knew you wanted to do that. "I love you," he whispered, kissing Lance again.

Lance didn't respond. His breath tickled Justin's neck, and when Justin leaned past him to turn off the lamp, he saw his lover's eyes were closed again, asleep. I won't wake you this time, Justin thought, cuddling up against him. I love you, Lance, more than

you'll ever know. We need more times like this so I can tell you that. We need more time alone.

As he drifted off to sleep, Lance's heart beating against his in the dark, he swore he'd find more time for them. He'd make it if he had to.

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Part 2
by NSyncGrrl

Before he opened his eyes, Lance knew he was alone in the bed. Again, he thought, trying unsuccessfully to ignore the pain throbbing behind his closed eyelids. He rolled onto his stomach, his whole body aching like a rotten tooth, his ass and his head beating in a blinding rhythm, his heart too damn loud in his chest. When he pushed himself up on wobbly hands, a wave of nausea washed over him and he dropped back to the mattress, dizzy and weak. Not even hung over, he thought grimly. Still drunk.

Despite the empty bed, he called out, "Justin?" The word stuck in his throat, so thick in his mouth he almost thought he could chew it. He didn't even hear his own voice -- it was lost in the pillow, deeper than normal and low, a foghorn to his ears. God, he thought. That was one of the only words he seemed to be able to form in his mind. Justin. God.

Carefully, he opened one eye, stared at the rumpled blankets beside him, the pillow that still held the impression of his lover's head. Maybe he's in the shower, Lance thought, listening, but he didn't hear any water running. All he heard laughter was down the hall, a TV blaring from somewhere, Joey's loud mouth calling out to JC to wake the hell up already, it was almost eight. What about me? he wondered. Why isn't Justin here to wake me up?

"Justin?" He wasn't going to raise his voice, he couldn't, his head hurt too much to talk any louder. He's not here. Again. What time did he finally get in last night? After three, and all he said was sorry. No real explanations. Sorry doesn't cut it, boyfriend, Lance thought, turning as he heard the door open behind him.

It was Justin. He entered the room quietly, thinking Lance would still be asleep. Already dressed in jeans and a black tank top, Justin smoothed a hand over his hair, an unconscious gesture he still did from time to time, even though he had no hair left to speak of. When he saw that Lance was awake, he smiled and crossed the room. "Hey there, lover," he said softly, sitting on the edge of the bed. He touched Lance's bare back, his hand cool and firm against Lance's hot skin. "How are you feeling today?"

"Like shit," Lance muttered. He tightened his grip on the pillow and sighed. "Thanks for waking me up."

"I didn't mean --" Justin started, but Lance cut him off. "I was being facetious."

"Oh." Justin rubbed his back and Lance let his eyes drift closed again. "I thought you might need your sleep," Justin whispered. "We were up late last night --"

"Whose fault was that?" Lance asked. The question came out sharper than he intended, but his head hurt too much to apologize. He turned his face away from Justin's steady gaze, buried his nose in the pillow that smelled like sex and sweat and whiskey, and tried to ignore the tender way Justin's fingers stroked his spine.

"I said I'm sorry," Justin mumbled. Don't start with me, Lance thought. Not today. He could hear the slight pout in his lover's voice and he sighed into the pillow. "I didn't know --"

"I said it was okay," Lance told him. When Justin didn't respond, he asked, "Did you want something?"

Justin's hand froze on his back. "I guess not," he said. "You going to be like this all day?"

"Like what?" Lance shrugged, settling Justin's hand into the space between his shoulder blades.

"Pissy," Justin said. "Because if you are --"

With a dramatic sigh, Lance told him, "Don't start, Justin. Please."

Slowly, his lover's hand started to caress his back again, his fingertips working into the tight muscles bunched beneath his skin. "I'm not," Justin whispered. He climbed over Lance, stretched out on his side of the bed, his hand still working small circles into his back. Then he pressed his forehead to Lance's, his breath soft where it brushed against Lance's cheek. Gently, he kissed the tip of Lance's nose and pulled him closer. "Stop being pooppy," he sighed.

"I don't feel well," Lance whispered. Justin's hand dropped from his back to his waist, held onto his hip, and he rested his lips against Lance's shoulder. "Justin --"

"I'm not fighting with you," Justin murmured into his flesh. "I'm sorry you don't feel well but I'm not going to let you take it out on me."

"I'm not --" Lance started, and then he sighed. "Fine. Make me feel worse. You're good at that."

Justin didn't reply. He kept his damp lips against Lance's shoulder and kneaded his lover's hip with his fingers. Answer me, dammit, Lance thought, listening to Justin's breath rasp against his skin. Don't ignore me. Get mad, say something, don't just lie there and take it.

Another kiss, this one on Lance's upper arm, and then Justin laid his head where his lips had been, his short hairs scratching beneath Lance's nose. He hugged him closer and sighed. "I'm sorry," he said again.

God, Lance thought. That little boy voice you're doing? That's my fault, and I'm sorry, I don't want to fight you, either. Last night was great, what I remember of it -- I love you but don't make me

say I'm sorry. I don't feel like it right now. Please just let me sleep this off, please.

Quietly, Justin told him, "I thought about you all last night. Next time she stops by, you come with us, okay? She wants us to see one of her shows --"

"Justin." Lance kissed the bristly hairs on the top of his lover's head. "Let's not talk, okay? My head is killing me."

For a moment he thought Justin would say something else, just because that's what he usually did, pushed too far and didn't know when to stop, kept trying to talk things out between them until Lance thought his head would explode. And right now he didn't feel like talking. Right now he felt like curling up and squeezing his head between his hands to keep it from shattering. Right now he wanted to die.

"I'm sorry," Justin murmured. Lance felt the words more than heard them, and when Justin didn't say anything else, he eased an arm out from beneath the pillow and draped it over his lover's shoulders. Justin snuggled up in the space between Lance's chest and the bed, burrowed his head against Lance's neck, kissed the hollow of his throat as his hands clenched into fists in the small of his back. "Get better, okay? We'll talk later. Okay?"

Lance kept silent. He knew Justin well enough to know that if he said something, then his lover would reply, and it would never end. Stay here with me, Lance thought, tightening his grip around Justin. Don't let me wake up alone again.

But he didn't say the words out loud.

* * *

Justin listened to Lance's breath, waited until it evened out again and he fell asleep, before he extracted himself from his boyfriend's arms. I'm not fighting you, he thought, smoothing the hair back from Lance's brow. "Love you," he whispered, kissing Lance's shoulder as he sat up. Then he poked at the spot he just kissed, pressing his thumb against the dusky skin until it turned white. "Don't fight with me, Lance. Please don't."

Sometimes they got like this -- his mother said it was normal for a relationship, especially one like theirs, where they spent every waking hour together and then shared a bed at night. "Things can't be all rainbows and roses, honey," she told him when he mentioned that sometimes he and Lance argued over silly shit. "Not all the time."

He knew that. It was the tour, that was all, the hectic schedules, the shows, the crowds. It took its toll on them, he knew it did -- it made him tired and Lance irritable, it made all five of them snap at each other, and by the end of the tour they were ready for a break. And there's not much time left of this tour, he

reminded himself. He eased off the bed, careful not to wake Lance. When it's over, I'll take you somewhere nice, someplace where it's just the two of us. Even though he knew Lance couldn't hear him, he said softly, "I'll be right back, baby." He cringed when the floor creaked beneath his weight on his way to the door. Slowly, carefully, he opened the door just wide enough to slip out, and then he closed it gently behind him.

Out in the hall he could hear the loud TV from the floor lounge, where Joey and Chris were watching cartoons. As he hurried to the lounge, he heard Joey call out, "Jayce! Get up right this minute!" In a lower voice, he added, "Do we have to wait for him to eat? I'm starving."

"Keep it down," Chris told him. He looked up as Justin entered the lounge, frowned when he saw he was alone. "Where's Lance?"

"Not feeling well," Justin said. He sat on the arm of the couch Joey and Chris shared and stared at his hands when he felt his lower lip tremble. "He had a bit too much to drink last night."

Joey laughed at that. "Me too," he said, his red eyes the only sign that he had stayed out too late the night before. "And now I'm hungry." Raising his voice, he bellowed, "Josh! Come on, man! You're holding us up!"

"Why don't you go drag his ass out of bed?" Chris asked, watching Justin from the corner of his eye.

"Good idea," Joey said. He hauled himself to his feet and stretched, yawning with a leonine roar. "Is Lance coming?"

Justin shook his head. "No, I'm just going to order something in," he said. "You guys go on without us."

Joey shrugged. "Suit yourself. Be right back -- don't take my seat."

With a laugh, Justin slid onto the couch. "Too late," he said.

"I'm going to sit on you," Joey threatened, but Justin raised his leg and pushed against Joey's butt with his foot. "Hey!" Joey wiped at imaginary dirt on the seat of his pants. "You're damaging the goods, my man."

"You're blocking the TV," Chris told him. He didn't smile as Joey held his arms out at his sides, covering most of their view of the screen. "Joe --"

"I'm gone," Joey said. He tried to slap the top of Justin's head as he passed behind the sofa but Justin ducked out of the way. "You better get up when I get back."

"Yeah yeah," Justin muttered. He picked at the fringe on the pillow beneath him and wondered if Lance would feel like eating when he woke up again. Sometimes when he drank too much the night before, he was shaky and sick until he got something into his

stomach. He could order something now, have it ready when Lance woke up ... but sometimes the sight of food makes him ill, Justin mused, glancing up at the TV. Chris was watching Batman Adventures, and when they cut to a commercial, his friend hit the mute button on the remote, throwing the room into silence. Maybe I'll just wait and see what he feels like eating when he gets up again.

Beside him, Chris asked softly, "So when did you get in last night?"

Justin shrugged. "A little after three," he admitted.

"Have fun?" Chris stared at the TV as if he could still hear it and didn't look at Justin when he spoke.

"Yeah." Justin played with the pillow's fringe, shredding the longer strings. "Brit's always a good time. She said --"

Chris cut him off. "It doesn't bother you that your boyfriend drank himself stupid last night waiting for you to come back?" he asked, his voice still soft.

Justin looked at him, a slight frown on his face. "I don't think that's any of your business," he started.

With a bitter laugh, Chris replied, "Like hell. One of my friends tries to bury himself in a bottle of whiskey, alone, damn straight that's my business."

"He likes a drink now and then," Justin told him, defensive. He felt the nerves along the back of his neck prickle, suddenly alert, and a surge of adrenaline shot through him, made his hands shake. Because he was alone, he thought, angry. And he was drinking just to get drunk, and you know it was probably because of you. Admit it, Justin -- Chris has just hit on your own fears. Because Lance was upset last night, you don't know why, and he drank himself into a stupor and you weren't there to stop him. He slapped the pillow away and sat up. "I'm not talking about this with you --"

"No," Chris said, "you wouldn't. Nothing's wrong in paradise, is it, Justin? Nothing's the matter between you two."

Justin stood up. "So he drank a little last night," he told his friend. "So what? We all do it from time to time. It doesn't mean anything. There's nothing wrong with us." An icy hand gripped his heart. Is there? "I've got to get back to the room. He'll get up soon --"

"Fine." Chris thumbed the button on the remote and the TV came to life again, deafening in the quiet morning. For a moment Justin stood there, looking down at his friend, almost hoping he'd press the issue just so he could assure himself there was nothing wrong. So Lance liked to drink sometimes, so what? His father was the same way, a social drinker, there was no harm in that.

Only it's not social if you're alone, is it? his mind whispered. He

pushed the thought aside. "Have fun at breakfast," Justin mumbled.

Chris raised a hand in farewell, his attention glued to the cartoon. "Yeah," he said. "You too."

In the hall Justin could hear Joey singing outside of JC's room. "P is for party. A is for all night. R is for rowdy --" A door slammed shut, and then Joey began pounding on the wood, laughing. "Get up already, Josh! You're killing me here."

Justin hurried back to his room, where Lance was hopefully still asleep, and told himself Chris was just being overprotective. There's nothing wrong, he assured himself, opening the door. Lance still lay where he left him on the bed, snoring slightly. Maybe when he wakes up, he'll be in a better mood, Justin thought. And hungry. I'll order us something to eat. Pancakes, maybe. Or eggs. They'd sit on the bed in their boxers and eat from the room service cart, maybe watch some cartoons if he could find any on their small TV, cuddle beneath the sheets and forget the harsh words spoken earlier. It sounded like a good idea to him.

* * *

From the small sofa by the window, Justin watched Lance sleep. He had one of the curtains pulled back just an inch, just enough to cast a line of bright sun across his lover's hips, hidden beneath the covers. With just the slightest flick of his wrist, the strip of light would grow along Lance's thighs, his calves, his feet. Where his skin peeked out beneath the blankets, the faint hairs winked golden in the light. And then Justin let the curtain close, narrowing the light until it almost disappeared, nothing but a thin sliver that curved along Lance's butt. Wake up, Justin thought, flicking the curtain wide again. Wake up in a better mood, baby. Wake up.

Out in the hall, he could hear his friends getting ready to leave. Joey roamed the corridor, randomly hitting doors to get the band and crew up. Once he accidentally hit Justin's door, hollered, "Get up in there," and Justin could hear him continue on, hit Chris's door, then Lonnie's. And then he came back, tapping softly as if to make up for his earlier noise. "Sorry, you guys," he whispered loudly. "Sorry."

Lance didn't move -- he just lay on the bed in the same position, and Justin thought if he wanted to he could crawl back into place, it would be so easy, just fit back into the space between his lover and the bed like a puzzle piece. Maybe he'd do that before he woke up. Then Lance wouldn't have to know he had ever left. He hates waking up alone, Justin mused. It was a tempting thought --

On the table by the bed his cell phone started to ring. He hurried across the room, fumbled with it as it rang again. Shit. Clicking the phone on, he whispered, "Hello?"

"Justin?" It was Britney, yawning in his ear. "I hope I didn't wake you --"

"No, you didn't," he said, keeping his voice low. "But Lance is still asleep. He waited up for me."

"Oh." In his mind he could see her, probably at her vanity, staring at herself in the mirror with owlish eyes, still waking up. "I just wanted to let you know --"

Someone knocked on the door to their room. "Fuck, hold on," Justin muttered. Can't you guys let him sleep already? he thought. He tripped over Lance's shoes, left discarded in the middle of the room, and before the knock could come again, he jerked the door open to find JC on the other side, hand raised, his wet hair slicked back from his face and already starting to curl. With a sigh, Justin gestured to the phone in his hand. "I'm on the phone --"

"Hang up," JC told him. He crossed his arms in front of his thin chest and waited.

"I can't just --" Justin started, and then he sighed again. "Lance is still asleep, Josh. Can't this wait?"

JC shook his head. "Get out here, then."

Putting the phone to his ear, Justin said, "Brit, look, I gotta go --"

"So I hear," she said. "He's still evil in the mornings, ain't he?"

"You don't know," Justin told her, but his grin died when he saw JC staring at him, patient, waiting. "I'll call you later, okay? Thanks again for last night."

"Okay," she said. "Bye, J. Tell Lance I said hi."

"Will do." Turning off the phone, Justin stepped out into the hall, careful to shut the door quietly behind him. "What is it?" he asked, keeping his voice down. "Aren't you guys going to breakfast?"

"Aren't you?" JC wanted to know. When Justin shook his head, JC nodded at the closed door behind him. "What's wrong with him this morning?"

Justin sighed. Why don't you ask Chris? he thought. He'll give you a whole dissertation on our problems. But instead of saying that, he simply shrugged. "He's not feeling well," he hedged.

"After all that whiskey last night, I imagine not." JC glanced down the hall at the lounge, but their friends weren't in sight. Still, he stepped closer and lowered his voice when he asked, "Is everything okay with you two?"

"What do you mean?" Justin asked, surprised. "Of course it is. Shit, Josh --"

JC backed away, held his hands up to show he meant no harm. "Hey, I'm just asking," he said. "Chris says he was down in the bar all night --"

"He waited up for me," Justin explained. Anger choked his words. "Jesus Christ, so he has a drink or two and he waits for me to get back, and now you guys think we're having problems? What the fuck's up with that?"

"Okay," JC conceded. "Point taken. Just thought I'd ask --"

"He's not feeling well," Justin told him. "We don't have another show until Monday -- we don't even have to rehearse until after lunch. If my boy wants to sleep in today, then let him. He's tired --"

"We all are," JC reminded him.

"He's feeling a little sick today," Justin continued, "and he just needs to sleep it off, okay? Does that meet with your approval?"

JC's eyes hardened. "You don't have to get shitty with me," he told Justin. "All I wanted to know was why you guys weren't going to eat with us. I don't need a detailed report."

I know, Justin thought. He pressed his lips together to keep from saying the words aloud. "Fine," he said, looking down the hall to avoid meeting JC's stern gaze. "We'll catch you guys later, okay? Just give him some time."

"Fine," JC replied. "Don't jump down my throat next time."

"Fine," Justin said. "I won't." He tried to think of something else to say, something to leave him with the last word, but his mind was blank right this second. Completely blank? Lance would have asked with that smirk Justin loved. Just thinking of that teasing smile made him want to go back into the room and curl up beside his lover. "Look, Josh, I appreciate your concern --"

"Good," JC said. "Just so you do."

He turned and stalked down the hall to the lounge. What the hell is that supposed to mean? Justin wondered. Then he told himself he didn't care, everyone was just on edge today, that was it. Opening the door behind him, he slipped quietly back into their room.

Whatever It Takes
Part 3
by NSyncGrrl

Alone, Lance thought, waking for a second time. "Goddammit, Justin," he muttered, rolling over in the bed.

"What?" Suddenly Justin was there, leaning over him, smoothing a cool hand along his fevered brow. "I'm right here, baby."

Stop leaving me, Lance thought, pushing himself up on his elbows. He felt horrid, his mouth rancid, his teeth furry, but at least the pain behind his eyes had subsided to a dull ache he could live with. Note to self, lay off the booze. You want to get drunk? Make sure you ain't gonna feel it in the morning. "Feeling any better?" Justin asked.

Lance didn't want to see the concern in his boyfriend's eyes so he didn't look at him, just pushed past him as he sat up. "Lance?" Justin asked, rubbing a hand along his back. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Lance said with a short, bitter laugh. "Don't I look okay?" As he stood up, the blankets fell away from him and goosebumps pimples along his naked arms and legs. For a moment he considered pulling on his boxers, but they lay on the floor and he wasn't up to bending over to get them -- that would bring the pain back, sharp shards piercing into his brain and he didn't want that, he was fine right now, if he just took small steps and shallow breaths and didn't move too fast, he'd be okay.

Justin followed him to the bathroom. "I gotta pee," Lance told him, forcing a grin he didn't feel as he closed the door between them.

From the other side of the door, Justin called out, "The others went to breakfast without us. I didn't think you'd want to get up." Lance sat down on the toilet just to steady himself -- his body was still sore, his ass hurt, and the longer he stood, the more his head started to ache. I don't think I want to BE up, he thought. I'm thinking I might just go back to bed, call in sick for the rest of the day. He could hear Justin's voice through the door. "Do you want to order something to eat?"

Lance sighed. "I'm in the bathroom," he said slowly, as if Justin might not have noticed.

"I meant when you get out," Justin replied. There's that pout again, Lance thought, covering his face with his hands. Justin, please, don't do this to me. I'm not in the mood for it today. The doorknob rattled as Justin touched it, and then he muttered, "Jesus. Bite my head off, will you?"

"I didn't mean to," Lance whispered, closing his eyes. The others went to eat -- didn't he say that? And he stayed here with me. Not like I asked him to. But at least he stayed -- that surprised him. Why? He's my boyfriend. He should be thinking of me. Of only me.

Then why wasn't he last night?

Lance didn't know, he didn't want to know. He was with Brit. He hadn't seen her in a while and he needed some time away from the group, that was all. Reaching across the sink, he turned on the faucet and let the cold water chill his fingers. Then he pressed his damp fingertips against his eyelids, wonderful and wet and cool. He didn't want to have to say he was sorry, not today.

A pair of Justin's boxers lay at his feet, black cotton that had begun to fade in the wash. He pulled them on and they fit like a second skin, tight across his butt where Justin didn't have much to fill them out, a sweet press against his crotch. But they covered his nakedness, at least, and made him feel safe. They smelled like Justin, too -- Lance caught a whiff of his boyfriend's warm cologne as he smoothed the fabric down his hips and felt his eyes sting. God, he thought, turning off the water. Can we do this all over again? Start from when we left the show last night, you ask me if I want to come out with you guys, I say yes this time. Then I don't spend the night drinking and I don't pass out at the bar, and when we make love I don't barely remember it, and I don't wake up in a piss-ass mood. Just roll it back a few hours, that's all I'm asking for here.

He eased open the bathroom door, sure Justin would be on the other side. One look into those sad eyes and he'd apologize, he'd take him into his arms and say, You know what, baby? I'm sorry. I'm glad you had fun last night and I'm sorry I'm being hateful right now, I'm so sorry.

But Justin wasn't waiting for him. Lance clicked off the light and stepped into the hotel room, saw his lover on the couch by the window. He fiddled with the string that opened the curtains, toying with the tiny plastic shell that covered the knot. A shaft of light streamed through the space where the curtain didn't quite meet the wall, throwing a bright sunny triangle across Justin's arm. As Lance approached, Justin looked up at him, frowning slightly. Then his gaze dropped down Lance's bare chest to the boxers, his boxers, and he grinned. "Come here, sexy," he growled, catching one of Lance's hands in his. Lance let himself be pulled down on the sofa beside him, and when Justin's arm wrapped around him, hugging him close, he buried his head in his lover's chest, his hands fisting in Justin's tank top. Rubbing Lance's shoulder, Justin started, "If you're not hungry --"

"We can get something to eat," Lance said. He breathed in deep Justin's clean scent and wondered how his lover could even stand to touch him -- he reeked, the sharp smell of sour whiskey rising from his pores like a miasma. "God, I stink," he muttered, sitting up. "I need a shower."

But Justin tightened his arm around him. "Stay here," he said. "Just for a few minutes, baby. We didn't get to talk much last night --"

"What do you want to talk about?" Lance asked. He stretched, his back arching like a cat's as he reached up to the ceiling. When Justin trailed a hand down his chest, he laughed and folded his arms protectively around himself. "Hey!" he cried as Justin tried to tickle his stomach. "This isn't talking."

"It's more fun," Justin told him. Enveloping him in his arms, Justin pressed Lance back against the sofa and grinned at him. "You're right," he whispered. "You do stink."

Lance pushed against him. "Thanks for pointing that out. Let me up."

"What if I say no?" Justin teased. "Maybe I've got you right where I want you. Now we can talk."

"I don't feel like talking," Lance told him. He pushed against Justin harder, tried to sit up. "Justin --"

With a sigh, Justin rolled against the back of the sofa, letting him up, but now that he was free, Lance didn't feel like getting into the shower. He didn't feel like moving, not with Justin so close. I love you, he thought, looking up at Justin, who propped himself up on one arm and laced his fingers with Lance's where his hand rested on his stomach. Why can't we always be like this? "Well?" Justin asked, his voice low, almost husky. "You wanted to get up."

"Hmm." Lance let his head loll against Justin's arm. Maybe they could talk for a little bit. He liked lying here, Justin hovering above him. "Did you and Brit have fun last night?" he asked.

Justin sighed. "I told you --"

"I don't remember," Lance said, irritated. "I was drunk off my ass, okay? I don't remember much after the concert."

"Shit." Justin shook his hand free from Lance's and ran it over his hair, as if he needed to smooth down the short bristles. "You don't remember us?"

"I remember a little bit," Lance admitted quietly. Justin sat up angrily, pushed away his hands when he tried to hold onto him. "Justin, I was drunk --"

"And that's supposed to mean what?" Justin wanted to know. He held his head in his hands and twisted away from Lance. "That last night was just a fuck --"

Lance shook his head. "No," he said. "God, no. Listen, I'm not saying I didn't ... Justin, listen to me." This time when he touched Justin's arms, his lover didn't pull away. He hugged him back against his chest, rested his chin on Justin's shoulder. "I'm not

saying that it was just sex, okay? I'm not saying I don't remember it at all. I'm just saying I don't remember most of the night."

Beneath his hands, Justin's arms were bunched muscle, and Lance began to knead at them, working them, trying to loosen him up. "I remember sitting on the bed and waiting for you to come out of the bathroom," he said softly. He kissed Justin's shoulder through his tank top, then kissed the freckles on the back of his neck. "I remember asking you to make love to me. That much I remember, baby. How can I forget that?"

Looking back at him over his shoulder, Justin said, "You just didn't pay any attention to me before then."

Lance sighed. "I didn't say that --"

"Did you want some breakfast?" Justin asked abruptly. "We should order soon --"

"Justin!" Lance cried. "Christ, just change the subject, will you? I didn't say that --"

"Okay, fine, I believe you." Justin turned and smiled, but Lance wondered why that sunny grin didn't quite make it to his eyes. At Lance's frown, Justin's anger left him in a sigh. "Lance, baby, it's okay. Really." He kissed Lance, his lips tender and soft and slightly damp. Lance kept his eyes open and stared at Justin's closed eyelids, wondered what was going on behind them right now. His lover's hands found his forearms and squeezed gently before rubbing up their length. "Really, it's okay," Justin murmured against his lips. "I love you. Go shower. I'll order us something to eat."

When Lance didn't answer immediately, Justin opened his eyes and frowned. "Lance?" he asked. "It's okay --"

Then why don't I believe that? Lance wanted to ask. "Hmm," he said, turning when Justin tried to kiss him again. His lips brushed Lance's cheek as his hands tightened, frustrated, on Lance's arms. "Love you, too," he murmured.

Justin sighed as Lance stood up, then threw himself back against the couch and Lance could feel his gaze on his back, weighing him down, watching him cross the room. He felt like a doll that had been dropped and then set back up on a shelf -- each step rattled the pieces inside and he walked carefully to keep the pain from flaring to life again. So pretty on the outside, falling apart within. He wondered how long the glue could possibly hold it all together today.

* * *

He's just in a bad mood, Justin thought as he leafed through the room service brochure. Still, it hurt to know that Lance didn't remember much of the previous night. They hadn't had sex in weeks -- made love, he corrected, dialing the number for room

service. Didn't he say it wasn't just sex? It never is. Sometimes it's the only way I know how to make him see just how much I feel for him.

He shouldn't have gotten mad. He realized that now -- Lance woke up feeling like shit and he was just making it worse. Maybe it would've been better to go with the guys, give him some time by himself. But he had that last night, right? And look where it got him. Part of him realized he was trying to make up for that and even though it was too late, he couldn't help thinking something he said now, something he did, might make things right between them again.

After he ordered breakfast, he stripped the sheets from the bed, balled them into a large lump, and left them by the door. He wondered if he could call the maid service, ask them for new sheets -- these smelled like a brewery, cloying this early in the morning. He was at the phone, dialing the hotel operator, when the bathroom door opened and Lance came out, his hair and chest damp, a thin towel draped around his waist. He passed Justin, intent on his bag at the foot of the bed, and Justin hung up the phone just as it started to ring. Catching Lance around the waist, he pulled him close. Through his thin tank top, Justin could feel the water beading on his lover's skin. "I'm sorry," he whispered, kissing Lance right behind his ear. His hair tickled Justin's nose and smelled heavenly, thick and wet and clean. Caressing Lance's stomach, he hugged him tight. "I'm so sorry, baby. I know you're having a shitty day. I'm sorry."

For a moment he thought Lance would pull away. Then he relaxed and leaned back against him and sighed. His voice was thick when he said, "It's okay, Justin." He rubbed Justin's hands at his waist. "I'm ... I guess I'm sorry, too."

Fear tightened Justin's throat as he remembered Chris's words earlier. No problems in paradise ... "Is it me?" he choked. "Because if it is, baby, tell me, please, let me know --"

Lance sighed again. "I don't know what it is," he mumbled. "I'm just -- I don't know."

"But is it me?" Justin persisted. "You'd tell me if it was."

Lance turned and smiled at him, a tight, halfhearted gesture that pressed his lips together into a thin white line. "Sure," he said. Justin let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. "I think it's just everything right now, you know?"

Justin nodded. When Lance stepped away, he let him go, watched as he bent to retrieve his bag from the floor. He lifted it onto the bed and started digging through it, pulling out clothes to wear. "The tour?" Justin asked. "Is that it?"

With a sigh, Lance shrugged. "I don't know, honey."

Justin knew that tone of voice all too well -- he was pressing the issue and Lance didn't want to go there, not right now. In an effort

to change the subject, he said, "Brit called this morning. She said to tell you hi."

"Hi Brit," Lance said, pulling a t-shirt on over his head. "That's all she wanted? To say hi to me?"

Justin laughed. "No, just to talk, I guess, I don't know. Josh knocked and I didn't want him waking you." Lowering his voice, he added, "You needed your sleep."

"I know." Without shame, Lance dropped the towel around his waist and stepped into a pair of white briefs. Justin watched the way his muscles moved, just beneath his skin -- he wanted to reach out and touch that smooth flesh, he knew how soft it was beneath his fingers, how pliant. The way Lance moved as he dressed stirred Justin's blood -- not too fast, not too slow, unconcerned that he was being watched. I love you, Justin thought. His chest ached with the emotion. His hands in just the right place and he could get Lance to turn around, take off those jeans he just pulled on, wrap his arms and his legs around Justin and love him again -- this time he'd remember it, Justin would make sure of that. To prove his point, he eased a hand into the back pocket of Lance's jeans, cupping his ass. "Justin," Lance warned.

Justin squeezed the handful of flesh in his hand and moved closer. Kissing Lance's neck, he murmured, "What, baby?"

Lance sighed. "Not right now," he said as he shoved clothes back into his bag. When Justin kissed him again, he pulled away. "Justin, please --"

"Why not?" Justin wanted to know.

"I'm not in the mood," Lance told him. He set the bag on the floor and brushed past Justin, heading back to the bathroom.

Justin's hand slipped free from his pocket. "I can get you in the mood," he said, following Lance.

In the bathroom, Lance dug through his toiletries, looking for his deodorant. "Later, okay?" Justin leaned against the door frame and pouted -- he knew Lance was a sucker for his little boy act.

But it wasn't working today. Lance rolled his eyes, and in the mirror his reflection gave Justin that look he had that simply said don't. "Baby --" he started.

Lance shook his head. "Breakfast is on its way," he said. He found his deodorant and set it aside, started digging through his things again, looking for a comb this time. "I'm just not up for it right now -- don't grin at me like that, you know what I mean. I'm still sore from last night --"

"Which you don't remember," Justin pointed out.

He shouldn't have. Lance narrowed his eyes and his lips tightened again, and Justin knew he wasn't getting anything now,

no matter how hard he might beg. When Lance didn't answer, Justin sighed. I've already said I'm sorry, he thought, turning back to the hotel room. Too many times today. I'm not saying it anymore.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he picked at the tag that hung off the mattress, the one that read DO NOT REMOVE. Angrily, he tugged at it, short jerks that made tiny tearing sounds, ripriprip, and when it came off in his hand, he tossed it aside. The words stared up at him from the floor, DO NOT REMOVE, and he wondered if the maid would even notice the tag was gone. Would they make him pay for the mattress? He could almost see the headline now -- 'N Sync's Timberlake Wrecks Hotel Room. "He tore the mattress tag off," the article would read. He grinned at the thought of his mom reading that in the National Enquirer. Bending down, he picked the tag up and began to shred it, tearing off tiny fibers from the sides and letting them fall to the floor. In the bathroom Lance fumbled with his toiletries, studiously ignoring him. Let him, Justin thought. He'll get over it. He's just being pissy today and I've already put up with too much of his crap this morning.

But he didn't like the silence poisoning the air between them. When Lance finally came out of the bathroom, he stopped to pick up his shoes from the middle of the floor and didn't look at Justin. Tearing at the tag in his hands, Justin said, "Last night Brit said we're so cute together. Her words. She said I'm so lucky I found someone like you."

"Really?" Lance asked, but he didn't sound particularly interested. He threw his shoes over by the bed and began picking up the dirty clothes littering the floor.

"She said you really need to come with us next time," Justin continued. He watched Lance move around the room, tidying up their mess. Well, mostly Justin's mess, since he tended to just leave his clothes where they fell. "You don't have to pick those up," he said as Lance gathered up a few of Justin's things. "I'll get them --"

"I already have them," Lance told him. He fisted the dirty clothing into a tight ball, shoved it into their laundry bag.

"We had fun last night," Justin said, picking up where he left off. "There's this new dancer they've hired, Brit really likes him. Says he reminds her of Joey, he's fun like that. She says --"

Lance sighed. "Can we talk about something else?" he asked, meeting Justin's gaze in the mirror above the dresser.

Justin let the tag fall, and he brushed it off of his jeans to the floor. "I thought you wanted to know --"

"I'm just tired of hearing about her," Lance muttered.

"I'm sorry," Justin started, but he stopped himself. I wasn't going to apologize again, remember? "Lance --"

Someone knocked on the door. "Room service!"

"There's breakfast," Lance said, relieved. "God, I'm hungry."

You're just saying that, Justin thought as Lance hurried to the door, almost eager to put some distance between them. Why'd you ask if you didn't want to hear what I had to say?

Whatever It Takes
Part 4
by NSyncGrrl

Justin kept silent during breakfast -- he didn't talk of Britney or the night before, just sat next to Lance on the bed and watched the television, CMT because the hotel didn't get MTV and Lance told him he wanted to hear some music. His leg rested against Lance's, and the touch was enough to remind him that he was there, even if he didn't speak. I like us like this, Lance thought, eating pancakes covered in strawberry syrup, sickening sweet and so damn cloying he almost choked, but he ate them anyway, because that's what Justin ordered for him. Just sitting here, eating and watching TV and being normal guys. He knew Justin was thinking of him -- he could see it in the way his lover kept touching his knee as if to reassure himself that Lance was still there beside him, and once when Justin reached behind him for the orange juice on the bedside table, he kissed Lance's shoulder, a quick peck that left a damp imprint of his lips on Lance's shirt. I'd give anything for more moments like this, Lance thought.

It didn't last. The others returned, Chris banging on their door, shouting at them to wake the hell up already and get out of that bed, he knew what they were doing in there, they should be ashamed of themselves. Lance looked at Justin and the two of them broke into giggles that left them breathless. "Lay off the door!" Justin called out, climbing over Lance's legs as he got out of bed. "Damn, Chris, break it down already, will you?"

He opened the door and Chris pushed his way into the room, Joey and JC right behind him. "You guys are pigs," Joey declared, surveying the cart full of food they had ordered in. "Damn, we didn't have half this shit at the Denny's we went to." Without waiting to be asked if he wanted to join them, Joey picked at the remaining bacon, still warm, and stuck a few strips into his mouth.

"Help yourself," Lance muttered.

Justin sat back down beside him and laughed as Chris crawled into the bed with them. "What do you guys want?" he asked, digging into the rest of his eggs.

Chris shrugged. "You feeling better, man?" he asked Lance.

Lance nodded. "Just hung over," he replied. "You know how it is."

"I know I do," Joey said, sitting on the edge of the bed. JC began flipping through the channels on the TV, looking for something other than Garth Brooks to watch. Pointing at Lance's plate, Joey asked, "You gonna finish those strawberries?"

Lance handed the plate to Joey, who picked the strawberries up

with his fingers and laughed when the juices ran down his hand. "Maybe you shouldn't drink so much," JC suggested softly.

Beside Lance, Justin stabbed at the food on his plate, suddenly angry. "Maybe you should mind your own fucking business," he growled.

"Justin," Lance warned. His heart began to thud in his chest. Don't start, you guys, he prayed. He wasn't up for it.

Sinking onto the sofa by the window, JC looked at him carefully. Lance avoided meeting that steady gaze. "I'm just saying --"

"Well, don't," Justin told him.

Lance sighed. "Look," he started, and all four friends looked at him, waiting. God, he thought. He wished he still had his plate, just so he had something to hold on to, something to occupy himself with so he wouldn't have to look at everyone, at Justin, sitting there with that frown on his face that said it wasn't their business what he did, he didn't have to explain shit to them. "I'm not talking about this," he said. "I don't feel well --"

"You don't have to --" Justin started.

Lance glared at him. "Am I talking here?" he asked, bitter. "Do you always have to interrupt me?"

Justin opened his mouth, shocked, but nothing came out. Chris picked at the mattress and refused to meet Lance's gaze. Joey tapped his fork against the plate in his hand, trying to spear the last piece of pancake hidden beneath the strawberry syrup. And from his perch on the sofa, JC smirked at them, his eyes flickering between Justin and Lance and back again. Hurt flooded Justin's face, filled his eyes. I'm sorry, Lance thought. Oh Justin, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean it, please ...

Before he could apologize, Joey cleared his throat, embarrassed. "So what time is rehearsal again?" he asked in a small voice. "One? After lunch, right?" He looked at JC, who shrugged and pulled back one edge of the curtain, looked out the window as if disinterested. "Chris? One, right?"

"Right," Chris said.

Joey glanced at his watch and Lance looked at the clock by the bed just to avoid Justin's eyes. A little after eleven, that was it. Can't this day be over with already? he wondered. He was so ready to go back to sleep, wake up tomorrow, start all over again. Maybe things between the two of them would be better then. "Only a few hours," Joey said. "Where do you guys want to go to lunch?" He smiled at Lance. "Will you even be hungry by noon?"

"I don't know," Lance whispered. Just leave, he wanted to say, but he couldn't seem to form the words. "Justin --"

Justin turned away. Lance felt his eyes begin to sting with hot

tears that he refused to cry. "I'm sorry," he murmured, reaching out to touch his lover's knee. "Baby, I didn't mean --"

Justin brushed his hand away and stood up. "So what are we going over today?" he asked, ignoring Lance as he began cleaning up their breakfast plates.

"I was thinking we can just run through the show," JC said. He glanced over at Lance and then turned back to the window. "Keep it fresh in our minds, you know?" He looked at Lance again. "I don't want it to go stale."

Maybe it's already too late, Lance mused, watching Justin pile the plates onto the room service cart.

* * *

Justin still wasn't talking to him by noon. When lunch came and went and his lover didn't even look his way, Lance wondered how he could ever hope to make it through the day like this -- it was as if he didn't exist. Joey leaned across the buffet table at the restaurant where they ate and told him, "He'll get over it, Lance."

Lance didn't reply. What was there to say? He knew Justin well enough to know he would probably stay mad until late into the evening, until they were alone again, and then he'd let Lance work to make it up to him, kisses and massages and soft words, none of which Lance felt like doling out right now. So let him be pissy. Joey was right -- he'd get over it.

After lunch, they took two limos to the studio where they were scheduled to rehearse -- Lance thought they could all fit into one car but before he could suggest it, their three friends hopped into one and sped off, Joey yelling out the window for them to see if they could keep up with their set of wheels. So he's alone, Lance thought, settling back against the seat as Justin slid in after him. He started to sit opposite his boyfriend and Lance didn't know if he could handle that, Justin staring at him from across the back seat of the car, but then Justin sank down beside him, surprised him by taking his hand. "I love you, Lance," he said, so softly Lance wondered if he imagined it.

"I love you, too," Lance told him, and he squeezed Justin's hand in his. Then he raised it to his lips and kissed Justin's knuckles. "I'm sorry --"

"Don't worry about it," Justin whispered. Thank you, Lance thought. He held Justin's hand in both of his, held it in his lap. "I hate it when we fight."

"Are we fighting?" Lance wanted to know.

Justin shrugged. "What would you call it?" he asked.

Lance didn't know. Me being pissy, he thought. Me drinking too

much last night and taking it out on you. So you had a good time, so I'm jealous of that, okay? You should've been with me. You're MY good time, Justin. So why can't I be that for you, too? "I wouldn't call it fighting," Lance murmured.

"Hmm." Justin stared out the window, watching the city pass them by. Lance smoothed a finger over Justin's skin, studied the fine hairs curled along his lover's wrist, and wondered what he could say to make everything all right between them again. Was there a magic word somewhere that would bring back the way they used to be, back when they first started dating and everything was fresh and new and amazing? One word, he thought, and I'd say it a million times. One picture and I'd paint it across the sky. One song and it'd be the only thing I'd ever sing to you, Justin, if it'd just bring you back to me, bring us back to the way we were -- do you know what I wouldn't give for that? What I wouldn't do?

When they arrived at the studio, the others were already there, sprawled out along a large couch that lined one wall. Lance squeezed in beside Chris and Justin took a seat on the arm of the couch, leaning back against his boyfriend's shoulder. Wade went over the routine, throwing in a few new steps here and there he wanted them to learn, but before they could rehearse it, Chris raised his hand as if he were in school. "Yeah?" Wade asked. Chris didn't answer, didn't put his hand down. Wade sighed. "Chris --"

"I'm tired of the strip thing," Chris announced. "I think we should let someone else do it for the rest of the tour."

From the other end of the couch, JC laughed. "Like who?" he asked. "It was your idea to start with."

"Like Lance," Chris said. He stood up and pulled Lance to his feet. "Come on, kid. It's not that hard. Just move your hips like this --" He began his bump and grind dance, and when JC laughed again, Chris danced over to him, his eyes smoldering. "You know you want it, Josh," he purred. "See Lance? It's not that hard. You try it."

"I'm not dancing up on JC," Lance said, but the way Chris moved, trying hard to look seductive and sexy and failing miserably ... well, he had to admit it was funny, and he grinned as Chris turned, backed up to JC, and sat down for a lap dance. Justin hooted and Joey clapped, laughing as Chris ground his ass into JC's crotch. "I'm so not doing that."

JC pushed Chris up. "Get off me, pervert," he muttered, but he was laughing, too, and when Chris winked at him over his shoulder, JC stuck his tongue out at his friend, pretended to lick the back of his neck. "I hate to tell you this," he said, "but you're not doing anything for me here."

Chris wiggled his butt, pushing JC back against the couch. "Then what's this you've got crammed down the front of your pants?" he asked.

Joey fell against them, laughing so hard his eyes were just crescents, his face red. "Jesus," he sighed, breathless. "Josh, you should see your face --"

"You should see yours," JC said, pushing Chris up. "Get off me, will you? I said --"

"I hear you," Chris replied. Standing, he said, "You try it, Lance. Come on."

"I don't think so," Lance said, shaking his head.

Strong hands eased around his waist, and then Justin pulled him back against him. "Come on, baby," he said. "Show them what you've got."

Lance pried Justin's hands off his waist, where his lover's fingers were already fumbling for his zipper. "I said no." He twisted out of Justin's arms, shook free from his hands. He didn't have the nerve Chris had, the flair, the rhythm. He knew he couldn't pull off a stunt like that, not in front of his friends. "Chris is good at it," he said. "Let him do it."

"I'll do it for you," Chris told him. "Sit down. Come on, if JC could do it --"

"I didn't want to," JC pointed out.

Joey patted his lap. "Do me, Chris," he said. When the others laughed, he looked around, confused. "What?" he asked. "What'd I say?"

Leaning down over him, Chris whispered loudly, "You want me to do you, Joe?"

Thin color crept into Joey's cheeks. "I didn't mean -- you guys! I didn't mean it that way. I didn't!"

Chris laughed and plopped down in Joey's lap, leaned back against him. "He ever dance for you, Justin?" he asked, nudging Lance with his foot.

"Not yet," Justin said with a leer that made their friends laugh again.

Lance frowned at his lover. And not ever, he thought, angry, not now.

Justin leaned over to Chris and in a loud whisper, told him, "He's in a mood today."

"Like you aren't?" Lance snapped. He turned away before he could see that wounded look in Justin's eyes again, the one it seemed he couldn't help but put there anymore.

"Is this part of that fighting thing again?" JC asked cautiously. "Because this isn't the time or the place --"

"No," Justin agreed, "it's not." Rising to his feet, he caught Lance's elbow, their secret I love you gesture, only his fingers pinched now, hurting him. "We can talk about this later," he muttered. When Lance didn't look at him, he tightened his grip.

"Fine," Lance muttered. "Whatever." Only they wouldn't talk, would they? You say we can but we won't, he thought as he crossed his arms and Justin's hand fell away from his arm. We'll get alone and you'll kiss me and I'll apologize, we'll make love and I'll still feel like this, like we're a million miles apart and drifting further with every word.

Carefully, Wade said, "If you guys don't want to rehearse --"

"We do," JC told him. He stood up and hauled Chris off of Joey's lap. "Come on, guys. Let's get this over with, shall we?" He stared at Justin, waiting for him to back down. "Shall we?"

Lance watched the angry set of his lover's shoulders as he turned and walked away.

* * *

A little after four, Wade called for a break. Lance sat on the edge of the couch, toweling off sweat that beaded along the back of his neck, and watched Justin and JC run through the sequence for "Pop" again. He loved the way Justin moved, the way his body fell into the rhythm easily, almost accidentally, and it looked so simple when he did it, so right. JC added a complicated shoulder roll which Justin copied flawlessly, and Joey stumbled to keep up. It was competition, pure and simple -- on the stage they worked together as a group but here, in the studio, on break? Justin was trying to outdo his friends, he was trying to be the center of attention, he thrived off that shit. He's forgotten all about me, Lance thought, wiping his face with the damp towel. I could disappear, he'd never know it, for all he's looked at me this afternoon. I should be the center of HIS attention and he only notices me when it's just us, or when the guys are talking about sex, or when he's reminded he has a boyfriend. Was that why he felt so shitty lately? Because Justin wasn't paying enough attention to him? God, that's selfish. Who am I to think --

Someone plopped down next to him on the couch. "Here you go," Chris said, shoving one of those cone-shaped cups from the water cooler beneath Lance's nose. "I got you something to drink."

Lance looked at the cup warily. "Why?" he asked.

Chris shrugged. "Cause I'm nice?" He winked at Lance, gave him an impish grin. "Drink up, man. Just looking out for you, that's all."

At least someone is, Lance thought, glancing up at Justin again, still dancing with JC and Joey. His hand wavered uncertainly when he raised it to take the cup. "Chris --"

"I didn't poison it," his friend said, indignant. "Look, I'll show you." Then he drank down the water, throwing his head back as he emptied the cup. "Ahh," he sighed. Lance laughed as he squinted into the cup. "Oh shit man, I didn't mean to drink it all. That was for you."

"That's okay," Lance told him, but Chris leaned on his knee and pushed himself up. "I'll get you more," he said, heading for the water cooler in the corner.

"Chris," Lance called out after him, "It's okay --"

Chris ignored him. As he passed their friends, he jumped in behind Justin, mimicked his dance moves, and made funny faces behind his back until Joey laughed. Then Justin noticed him and turned around, pissed. "Get out of here," he said, pushing Chris away. He saw Lance's grin and growled, "That's not funny."

Lance covered his mouth with one hand and looked away. "Here we go," Chris said as he came back, the cup refilled. This time when he handed it over, Lance took it gratefully, drank it down in one swallow. He could feel Chris watching him, and when he sat down on the couch, his hip pressed against Lance's, his leg almost hot through their sweat pants where it rested along Lance's. "How do you put up with him?" Chris wanted to know.

"I love him, I guess," Lance replied. He didn't meet his friend's frank gaze.

Chris laughed. "Why?" he asked. Because I just do, Lance thought, crumbling the cup in his fist. I don't know why, I don't even want to know. When Lance didn't answer, Chris traced the striped pattern that ran down Lance's thigh, black lines along the grey fabric of his pants. "If you want my advice --"

"Did I ask for it?" Lance asked, and instantly regretted it. God, he thought. I'm evil today. I'm sorry, Chris, really, I didn't mean it.

"Doesn't matter," Chris replied, smirking at him. "I'm older than you are, been there, done that, bought the t-shirt. I've got shit to say and you're gonna listen whether you want to or not."

Lance laughed. "Advice about what?" he asked. "Justin?"

With a shrug, Chris said, "Just advice in general. I don't know what's going on between you two --"

"Nothing," Lance told him. Nothing was going on with them -- he was just out of sorts today, that was it. And yesterday, and the day before, and last week ...

As if he hadn't spoken, Chris continued, "But you don't seem happy to me, Lance, neither of you do."

Lance turned to Chris, concerned. "You don't think Justin's happy?" he asked. He looked happy to him, didn't he? Isn't he

happy with me?

"Not jumping for joy," Chris said, and he arched his eyebrows, gave Lance one of his you know what I'm talking about here looks. "I mean, he's happy enough, but things could be better, right? For both of you, right?"

Lance looked over at Justin, working on a new series of steps with JC. "I'm not saying you guys shouldn't be together," Chris said, his voice low beside him. "I'm not saying you're not right together. Jesus, remember the last tour? The way you two made so much noise no one wanted to room next to you?" Lance blushed at the memory. "I'm not saying you don't love him, or that he doesn't love you. I'm just saying maybe, I don't know, maybe you're getting used to each other, you know? Maybe the passion's starting to cool."

Tears stung Lance's eyes. "God," he sighed, blinking them away. "Chris --"

"It's not a bad thing," Chris continued. He placed a hand on Lance's shoulder, a comforting gesture. "But maybe you need some time apart -- you two are always together, always. Maybe you need to pull back some, reassess what it is you're doing here, remember why you're in love with him. Is this making any sense?"

Wiping a rough hand across his cheek to brush away tears that threatened to fall, Lance nodded. "Yeah," he said. "You're saying we should break up for a while."

"It doesn't have to be that extreme," Chris told him. His hand slipped down until it rested in the crook of Lance's arm. "Not unless that's what you want. If you think that'll help ..."

"I'm afraid," Lance admitted. He took a deep breath to steady the waver in his voice. "If I tell him? If I say I want some time out, what if he says to forget the whole thing? To forget about us? I don't want that to happen."

Chris sighed. "If he does, then maybe it's for the best."

Lance squeezed his eyes shut, pressed his lips together to keep them from trembling. No, he thought. It's not for the best, Chris, believe me, it's NOT. "I'll think about it," he whispered. "I'm not promising anything --"

"I'm not asking you to," Chris said. "Listen, why don't you go out tonight? Get out of the hotel for a few hours, hmm? We'll take in a movie, just you and me, what do you say?"

I had hoped to spend some time with Justin, was what Lance wanted to say, but maybe Chris was right -- maybe things would work themselves out if he just gave Justin some room. "I'll have to see if he's got anything planned," he started. At Chris's sigh, he hurried to add, "But sure, I think it'll be okay. A movie would be good."

With a forced laugh, Chris told him, "Good. Then it's a date."

"Hello?" Wade called out. Lance rubbed the towel across his face, rubbed away the heat in his cheeks and the tears in his eyes. "This group ain't a trio. You two get back over here -- break's up."

Lance didn't think Justin would want him to go out tonight, but he'd remind him that he had a night out with Britney, didn't he? So didn't Lance get some time alone, too? That should keep him quiet, Lance thought, letting Chris help him up. And we won't stay out nearly as late, I can still spend some time with him before we fall asleep, and maybe we'll be able to work the kinks out, maybe I'll be in a mood to work them out. He hoped so.

Whatever It Takes
Part 5
by NSyncGrrl

In the mirror that made up one wall of the studio, Justin watched Lance struggle with the new steps Wade wanted them to learn. It's not that hard, honey, he thought as Lance stumbled into Joey. Maybe this isn't a good time to go over this. He doesn't feel well ...

"Come on, Lance," Chris said. "Like this." He ran through the steps flawlessly, his feet a blur across the hardwood floor.

Suddenly he tripped up, pitched headlong into JC, and knocked them both to the ground in a fit of giggles. Lance started to laugh, and Justin could see the tension fall away from him like a weight lifted from his shoulders. "Well," Chris said, grinning up at him, "not quite like that, but you get the drift, right?"

"Yeah, I get it," Lance told him. He laughed again as Joey grabbed the waistband of Chris's pants and pulled him up.

"Can we get on with this?" Justin asked, angry. I should be making him smile like that, he thought as jealousy spiked through him. He loved his friends, all of them, but right now? Right now he hated the way Lance looked at Chris, his tired eyes sparkling with mirth. He hated the way Wade touched Lance's hips, showing him how to move through the steps. He hated that Joey could joke with Lance and he couldn't even talk to him without getting bit, he couldn't even talk to his own boyfriend, not today. "Guys --"

"Oh lighten the hell up," JC said. He pushed himself up on his hands and knees, using his backside to help Joey lift Chris. "Get off me, dammit."

Justin sighed. "Are we going to practice here?" he asked, hoping he didn't sound as peevish as he thought he did.

Lance's laughter died. "Isn't that what we're doing?" he asked.

There's that pissy tone again, Justin thought, meeting his lover's stare. Only with me. Why, baby? "I have to pee," he announced. "If none of you mind --"

"So go piss already," Chris told him. He shook free from Joey and took up a position beside Lance. "Like this, try it with me this time."

As he started through the number, Lance dropped his gaze from Justin's. "Can we do it without the falling bit?" he asked, following Chris's lead.

I shouldn't let this shit upset me, Justin thought, storming from

the room. But he couldn't help it. Maybe the guys were right, maybe there was something wrong between them, something he just couldn't see -- but he said it wasn't me, he reminded himself as he pushed through the door into the men's bathroom. This morning when I asked him, he said he'd tell me if it was and he hasn't said anything yet.

He kicked open one of the stalls and slammed the door shut behind him. Then he locked it and leaned back against it, crossed his arms over his chest and glared at the toilet in the tiny stall with him. It's just the tour, he gets this way sometimes. Tonight I'll take him out -- when's the last time we spent a night out together? I'll take him to dinner, see if there are any shows playing around here, maybe drive out to the edge of town and open the sunroof on the limo, stare up at the stars and drink some Mike's and just cuddle. Get him to tell me what's wrong. Get him to TALK to me.

The yawn of hinges told him someone had entered the bathroom. Maybe it's him, he hoped. He'll kiss me and laugh when I tell him I'm jealous of all the attention he's giving Chris today, he'll think that's cute. But it wasn't his lover's voice that said, "Well? You going to sit in there all day and sulk or can we get on with the rehearsal already?"

JC. Justin unlocked the stall door and yanked it open. "Go away," he muttered, pushing past his friend to the sink.

"News flash, Timberlake," JC told him. "This is a public restroom. You want privacy? Go hang out in the girl's. You can do your pouting stint there."

"I'm not pouting," Justin said. He turned the faucet on full blast just so he wouldn't have to hear whatever else JC wanted to say.

"You look like this." JC crossed his arms and stuck out his lower lip, ducked his head slightly, and in the mirror his reflection looked up at Justin with huge, puppy dog eyes. "Stop flirting with my boyfriend."

"He's not flirting," Justin growled. He splashed a handful of water at JC. "Leave me the hell alone."

JC smirked. "Did that touch a nerve?"

"No," Justin told him, twisting off the faucet. "He's not --"

The door opened and Lance walked in. "Hey," he said, his voice soft as he shoved his hands into his pockets. "Wade wants to know if you two are ready to get back to work."

"Yeah," JC said. He looked as if he wanted to say something else, glancing from Justin to Lance and back again -- don't, Justin thought. God, don't say a word, JC. How many times do I have to tell you it's none of your damn business?

Perhaps he saw that thought in Justin's eyes. Or perhaps he knew it wasn't his place to say anything, because he didn't. "I'll tell

him you'll be right there," he muttered, turning towards the door.

Lance moved aside as he left. Suddenly he found the floor much more interesting than Justin and he studied it intently, scuffed his shoe along the dingy tiles. "Can we just pretend this morning never happened?" he asked quietly. "I know you don't want to fight --"

"I don't," Justin told him.

"And I know you say we're not fighting," Lance continued.

Justin shook his head. "We're not."

"But I just feel like ..." Lance sighed. "Like we're off, you know? I know it's my fault --"

"It's not," Justin said. "Baby, it's not your fault --"

Leaning back against the tiled wall, Lance bit his lower lip and said, "It is, Justin. Don't argue with me, please." With two steps Justin crossed the room and had his lover in his arms, hugging Lance close. Against his neck, Lance breathed, "Can't we just start over again?"

"Sure." Justin rubbed his hands along Lance's back, felt the nubs of his spines beneath his fingers. "Anything, baby, I'm sorry --"

Lance's hands came up around Justin's waist. "It's all gone," he whispered. "Starting over means there's nothing to apologize for, okay?"

Justin grinned. "Okay." For a moment longer he held Lance, savoring the way he felt in his arms, and then he remembered the others and Wade and rehearsal and shit, he thought. He didn't want to lose this moment. "They're going to wonder where we are," he murmured. When he started to pull away, Lance held onto him. "We can pick this up again tonight --"

"Not tonight," Lance said.

This time when Justin stepped back, Lance let him go. He didn't quite meet his gaze -- he looked somewhere behind him instead, at their reflection, maybe, or the sinks, or the other wall. Anywhere but at Justin's eyes. With a slight smile, Justin raised Lance's chin to get him to look his way and asked, "What, you got a hot date tonight or something?"

"Or something," Lance said. He twisted away from Justin. "Chris wants to go to the movies --"

Chris. Of course. Justin didn't let his smile falter. "That's cool. What time?" Lance raised his hands and pressed against Justin's chest, widening the gap between them. "Lance? When's he want to go?"

"It's sort of just him and me," Lance replied. "He didn't ... just the two of us. I'm sorry."

Just the two of us. Justin didn't like the way that sounded. They're friends, he assured himself. JC's voice spoke up in his head. "Stop flirting with my boyfriend" -- hell, it's CHRIS, for God's sake. We're talking about Chris here, not fucking Heath Ledger. Still, he'd feel better if maybe it was Joey taking Lance out, or JC even ... Wade, Lonnie, anyone but Chris. "Justin?" Lance asked, hesitant. "If you don't want me to go --"

"No," Justin said, and then he shook his head for emphasis, said it again. "God, no." He laughed, just to show it was nothing, really, he didn't mind at all. "I went out last night, I understand. You go out tonight, have fun."

"I won't be long," Lance promised. As Justin turned towards the door, Lance caught his elbow. I love you, too, Justin thought automatically. "I don't want to stay out all night, hon. Maybe if you're still up when I get in --"

Slipping his arm around Lance's waist, Justin kissed the corner of his mouth. "I'll wait up," he said, pulling his lover close enough that their hips bumped when they walked. "We can start up where we left off then."

Lance laughed -- finally, he laughed at something Justin said, he smiled for him, it seemed like the first time all damn day. "I'm hoping we won't be too late," he said.

Me too, Justin thought.

* * *

Back at the hotel, Justin lay on their bed strumming an out of tune guitar and watched Lance riffle through his bag of clothes. "Why do you have to change?" he wanted to know. "It's just Chris --"

"Because I'm sweaty?" Lance replied. He pulled a pair of jeans out of his bag, frowned at a few wrinkles in them, and set them aside. "Jesus, Justin. Just because it's Chris doesn't mean I can dress like a slob."

Why not? Justin wondered. He plucked at the guitar strings and shook his head when Lance held up a pair of black jeans. "Those are too tight," he said.

Lance glared at him. "So?" he countered. "Justin --"

"Wear them, I don't care." Setting the guitar aside, he climbed off the bed and headed for the door. "Fuck, wear nothing, what the hell does it matter? It's only Chris --"

"Where are you going?" Lance asked.

"The lounge," Justin replied. Sure it was just Chris, and the guy was almost eight years older than Lance was, and they were all friends, he knew Lance was with him, but that didn't mean he had to like it, did he? He didn't have to like the fact that he was going to be alone tonight, or that his boyfriend was going to be sitting in a dark theater next to someone else when he should be here, he should be with him. Opening the door to their room, he said, "I'm going to watch TV. Let me know when you guys leave."

"We have a TV here," Lance started, but Justin slammed the door and cut him off in midsentence. There's one in the lounge, too, he thought. He didn't want to sit there and watch Lance get ready to go out if it wasn't going to be with him.

But JC was already in the lounge, sprawled out along the sofa and flicking through the channels on the big screen TV. Justin started to back out -- he'd find something else to do, something to keep him occupied until Lance was back from the movies, there had to be something else going on in this place -- but his friend saw his reflection in the TV screen and asked, "You wanna sit down?"

"Not really," Justin muttered as JC sat up. "I just wanted to see if there was anything on --"

JC patted the empty cushion beside him. "Lance getting ready for his date?"

"It's not a date," Justin replied, angry. "They're just friends --"

Stretching an arm along the back of the sofa, JC looked up at him and rolled his eyes. "Hello?" he asked. "He's going out with Chris. The guy who gave me a lap dance this morning, remember? Who offered to give Lance one. Who's been girlfriendless for the past few months and is probably more than ready to hit the singles scene again --"

"Lance isn't single," Justin pointed out. Why am I getting into this with you? he wondered. It's not a date. It's a fucking movie, Josh, that's it. A movie.

JC laughed. "Who stayed with him last night at the bar because someone wasn't around to keep his boyfriend from getting too damn drunk --"

That was going too far. Justin leaned down over the sofa and glared at his friend. "You know, Josh," he said through clenched teeth, "I'm really sick of your shit."

"Because you know I'm right." JC held the remote out to him. "You wanted to watch something?"

"Nevermind," Justin growled. And you're not right, not about Lance, not about me, and sure as hell not about us.

Lance decided against the black jeans. Not because Justin doesn't want me to wear them, he reasoned, but because he's right, they ARE tight, and my legs will be numb after sitting in the theater for an hour or so. He opted for a faded pair of khakis and one of Justin's t-shirts, olive green with long sleeves and a golden Oriental dragon emblazoned across the front. I've got nothing else that matches these pants, Lance told himself, straightening the shirt as he studied his reflection in the mirror. Justin won't mind that I have it on. Even clean, the shirt smelled like his lover, a heady musky scent that made Lance hug himself just so it would rise up from him in a faint cloud. I really should stay here tonight.

But it was too late. He told Chris he was going so they'd go. He'd have a good time -- how long had it been since he took in a movie? Since he had gone out without Justin? Hell, since I've been out WITH Justin, he thought as he brushed his teeth. It's not like we ever actually date. If they went anywhere anymore, it was with the guys. Our time is in the bedroom, that's it. Lance wondered if it was so bad to want a little bit of his boy throughout the day and not just at night. He wondered if he should even have a right to be upset that they didn't get a chance to do much together, because at least they still slept in the same bed. At least they had that much of each other, right?

Turning off the water, he smoothed a hand over his hair in the hopes of getting the unruly spikes to settle down. He heard the door to their room open -- Justin, he thought, and then the door shut quietly, as if his lover were making up for slamming it earlier. Lance took one last look at himself in the mirror, hating the sudden nervousness clenching his stomach, and came out of the bathroom.

Justin sat on the end of the bed, the TV already on, the remote in his hands. He looked up at Lance, took in the khakis, the shirt, his shirt, the slightly damp hair. "You leaving now?" he asked.

Tell me I look good, Lance thought, but he didn't want to say it -- he shouldn't have to say it. So he nodded and picked at the hem of the shirt, seized with an awkwardness that made him want to cry. "Yeah," he whispered. "I'm not going to stay out too late --"

"Have fun," Justin told him, turning back to the TV.

Lance sighed. "Baby?" he asked, and his voice cracked slightly. He cleared his throat, tried again. "God. Justin, are you sure you're okay with this?"

Justin shrugged. "Why wouldn't I be?" He frowned up at Lance, saw the hands twisting in the bottom of the shirt, and set the remote aside. Then he took Lance's hands in his and pulled him down beside him on the bed. "Lance, if you don't want to go --"

"I do," Lance told him. "I just don't want you to think ..." He sighed again. He wasn't sure what Justin thought, only that it was making him mad and he didn't want that. "I don't know. If I'm

running late I'll give you a call, okay? Are you still going to wait up for me?"

Easing an arm around Lance's waist, Justin kissed him, a tender press of lips that grew insistent, demanding. I love you, that kiss said. You're mine. When Justin tried to lay Lance back against the mattress, though, he broke away. "Justin," he sighed. "Honey, I'm just about to leave."

"I know," Justin sighed. "You tell him keep his hands off you in the dark."

Lance laughed. "Justin!" he cried. "Jesus, he didn't ask me to out just to feel me up."

Justin narrowed his eyes. "I thought it wasn't a date."

"It's not," Lance told him.

"You just said he asked you out." Justin's frown deepened. "That sounds like a date to me."

Lance stood up, his hands beginning to shake again. Something strong, he thought randomly. That's what I need sometimes, Justin, when I have to deal with you like this. Something strong enough to make that strident whine in your voice go away. "I meant to the movies," he replied. "Aren't you going to tell me I look okay?"

"You look fine," Justin said, his gaze trailing down his lover's body. "Nice shirt."

"If you don't want me wearing it --" Lance started.

Justin shook his head. "I don't care. Looks good on you." With a wink, he added, "It'd look even better on the floor. Can't you just tell him you've changed your mind? Stay here with me?"

Anger flared within Lance. "I didn't tell you to change your mind last night," he pointed out.

"Hey!" Justin cried. "I invited you --"

Lance laughed bitterly. "Yeah, that would've gone over big. She didn't want me there, Justin. It was just the two of you."

"You're my goddamn boyfriend," Justin reminded him. He watched as Lance pulled on his shoes without unlacing them first, just slipped them on over his socks and knocked the side of his foot against the wall to settle into the shoe. "If I want you there, what the fuck can she say about it?"

With a sigh, Lance started picking up his stuff from the top of the dresser -- change and his wallet and his cell phone, shoving the items into his pockets. "Well?" Justin asked. "I'm waiting."

"I'm not arguing with you about this," Lance told him. "Not right

now. I've got a date."

In the mirror above the dresser he saw Justin's face drain of color, and then his mouth twisted into a harsh grimace. "It's not a fucking date!"

And then he picked up the TV remote and threw it.

Lance had two seconds to think that there was no way they could just forget about this one, not if that damn piece of plastic hit him, and then it smacked against the wall, nowhere near him, but he still jumped. For a moment neither of them said a word -- just stared at each other in the mirror, both of them surprised. Finally Justin whispered, "I didn't mean it, Lance. I didn't --"

"I'm leaving," Lance announced. He stepped over the remote on his way to the door. "I hope that isn't broken. If it had hit me --"

Justin rose to his feet, hurried after him. "I didn't mean to throw it," he pleaded. "God, Lance, believe me. I'd never hit you, I promise --"

"Is this what it's come down to?" Lance asked. He held onto the door knob but didn't open the door. As Justin approached, he wondered if he should just slip out into the hall. Then he won't take his anger out on me, he thought, but that was ludicrous, wasn't it? Justin didn't hurt him. Justin wouldn't. So he had a temper, so what? Lance knew he did, too, if pushed far enough. But I don't like that he threw that. Another foot and it would've hit me. "Should I stay somewhere else tonight?" Lance wanted to know. "I mean, if you're going to be like this --"

"No! I'm not." Justin took his hand and kissed his palm. "Please come back to me," he whispered, his breath tickling Lance's skin. "I'm sorry, baby, I didn't mean to throw it, it wasn't aimed at you, please." His eyes glistened with tears and when he sighed, one drop trickled down his cheek, silent, alone. He squeezed his eyes shut as tight as he could and closed Lance's hand into a fist, trapping his kiss in his palm. "Promise me you'll come back tonight. I'll wait up. Please."

Lance brushed the tear away. "Don't go throwing shit," he admonished, trying to lighten the mood, but when Justin nodded, his lips trembling, Lance's heart almost broke. I'm doing this to him. Me. And can't you see, Justin? Can't you see what you're doing to me? "I'll call you if I'm going to be too late."

Justin nodded again. "Have fun," he whispered. Lance kissed him, his mouth salty with his tears. "Come back to me, Lance. Please."

"I will," Lance promised him. Then he opened the door and left. Out in the hall he felt like a balloon, the hand that held him back in his room finally letting go, freeing him. He almost thought he'd start to drift up to the ceiling, up farther, out of sight, until he just floated away. He wondered if that would be such a bad thing.

Whatever It Takes
Part 6
by NSyncGrrl

On the way to the movie theater, Chris asked, "What's on your mind?"

Lance stared out the window of the limo and shrugged. "Nothing much," he muttered. Justin, he thought, but he didn't want to say that. He couldn't think of anything but his lover, and those sad eyes, the press of lips in his hand, that damn remote control and the sound it made when it hit the wall. He said he didn't mean it. You know how he gets sometimes, like a little kid, so eager and so angry and so ALIVE, everything he does has to be done big, has to take center stage. So he gets mad and he wanted you to look at him and you didn't, you had your back turned, and he did the only thing he could think of to get your attention. But he didn't hit you. He would never do that.

He knew that -- he trusted Justin completely, the same way he trusted the sun to rise in the morning, the way he trusted his lungs to continue to draw in breath without his having to think about it. But if he had managed to frustrate him until he didn't know what else to do, how else to get Lance to listen to him, then maybe Chris was right. Maybe they did need some time apart. Maybe that would be for the best.

At the theater, Chris bought the largest bucket of popcorn they had, loaded with salt and butter and so greasy Lance had to wipe his fingers after every handful. He also bought two drinks, sodas so large that Lance had to use the bathroom just looking at them, and then four or five different candies, SnoCaps and JuJu Mints and Sour Patch Kids and ... "Who's going to eat all this stuff?" Lance wanted to know as he tried to find some place to stash the food. The theater had stadium seating with huge bucket seats that rocked back slightly when he sat down, cup holders on the ends of the arm rests, and he ended up just holding the popcorn on his lap and let Chris keep the candy. His friend tore into the SnoCaps and put the box to his lips, dumped the tiny chocolate candies right into his mouth. Then he handed the box to Lance, who shook his head. "No thanks."

Reaching a hand into the popcorn, Chris said, "You're awful quiet. Moreso than usual, anyway."

"I'm sorry," Lance replied. What else could he say?

Chris shoved the popcorn into his mouth, dropping kernels down the front of his shirt when he couldn't fit it all inside. "Don't be," he said. Butter slicked his goatee, and a few bits of popcorn clung to his chin.

"You've got ..." Lance brushed at his own chin, hoping Chris

would get the point.

Laughing, Chris asked, "I got shit all over me, eh?" He wiped at his chin with both hands and only managed to knock a few kernels loose. "That better?"

Lance grinned and shook his head. "Not really," he said. Tentatively, he reached over and took Chris's chin, held it with his thumb and forefinger as he brushed away the popcorn. "There," he sighed, settling back into his seat. "All clean."

"Thanks." Chris rubbed his thumb across his chin thoughtfully and looked over at Lance, who suddenly found something extremely interesting to stare at in the bucket of popcorn on his lap. Quietly, his friend asked, "Was Justin cool with you going out tonight?"

"Sure," Lance said, nodding for emphasis. "I think maybe the others are picking on him a bit, though."

With a frown, Chris asked, "What do you mean?"

Lance shrugged. "I don't know, he just ..." He sighed and sipped at his soda and wished the movie would start already so they wouldn't have to talk. "He was okay with it when I told him we were going out, but just before I left he got ... well, he got a little adamant about the whole thing."

"Adamant?" Chris asked. "Did he hit you?"

Lance jumped, almost knocking the bucket of popcorn out of his lap and into the seats below his. "No!" he cried. "Don't even -- he wouldn't ever -- don't even say shit like that."

Chris held up his hand and backed off. "Hey man, I didn't mean --"

"He's not like that at all," Lance told him. His hands shook with anger as he set his cup down so he wouldn't drop it. "Jesus, Chris, do you think I'd stay with him if he was? Do you think I'm that stupid? That blind?"

"I'm sorry," Chris said. "Forget I even mentioned it, please."

"He gets mad but he doesn't hit me," Lance muttered. "He wouldn't."

"Okay, fine." Chris grabbed another handful of popcorn and tossed it into his mouth. "I said forget it. I'm sorry."

Lance frowned at his hand gripping the arm rest and wondered how he could simply forget something like that. It pissed the fuck out of him to think that someone somewhere could think of Justin as violent or brutal or capable of hurting him. "So," Chris said, trying to fill the sudden silence between them. "You think the guys gave him flack about what, you going out with me tonight?"

"I don't know," Lance mumbled. "JC must've said something, you know how he can be."

"Something like what?" Chris wanted to know. Lance shrugged. With a laugh, Chris added, "Joe laid in on me about it, too. Said I was trying to steal you away, robbing the cradle, all that."

Lance didn't think it was very funny. Is that what Justin thinks? he wondered. That this really IS a date and that I'm fooling around on him? Because Christ Jesus that's not what this is at ALL. This is a time out, not goodbye. Unconsciously his fingers traced the outline of his cell phone in his pocket. He wanted to call Justin and tell him he was wrong, the guys were wrong, JC and Joey and if Chris thought he could move in just because things were strained right now then he was wrong, too. "Okay," he said, taking a deep breath, "you know what?"

Around them the lights began to dim. "Shh," Chris admonished as the screen blared to life in front of them. "After the show."

After the show. Lance sighed as the first preview started to play. I need to tell you NOW, Chris, so it's all out on the table and neither of us is misleading the other. There is no chance, you hear me? No chance in hell. I'm with Justin. I love him. I'm not going to hook up with you just because we fight now and again. We'll work through this, we always have before.

When Chris's hand snaked across the seat for the popcorn, Lance handed the whole bucket to him. He didn't want that hand fumbling around his lap in the dark.

* * *

Justin didn't want to pick up the remote. It scared him, the fact that he threw it, the fact that he hadn't even thought about it, just launched it and he could still see Lance's wide eyes reflected in the mirror, staring back at him in disbelief. Oh no, you didn't, that look said, Justin could almost hear the words out loud, and then those eyes he loved so much, they hardened and Lance turned away and Jesus Christ, I didn't throw it, he thought, alone in the room. The only sounds came from the TV, still on, images from its screen flickering across the bed. I didn't throw it at him, I didn't MEAN to, I didn't. I didn't.

He edged around the remote on his way to the bed, circling it warily as if it were a snake and he didn't want it to strike at him, he didn't want to get bit. For a few uncertain moments he fiddled with the buttons along the bottom of the TV, the hold and contrast and brightness, the channels, the volume. Finally he found the one to cut the damn thing off, and the room fell silent. He wondered if he should call Lance's cell, just to apologize again. I didn't mean it, baby.

But the movie was probably already underway, and Lance always turned his phone off for something like that, he'd just get

the voice mail, he didn't want to leave a message saying he was sorry. He wondered what movie they had decided to see -- Lance didn't know earlier, said Chris wasn't sure either. He wondered if hoping they sat with an empty seat between them would fit into the jealous boyfriend category. He wondered what theater they were at, and if maybe he could talk someone into going there with him, just to take in a show, and maybe they wouldn't even see him but he'd feel better knowing he was there. Throwing himself down across the bed, Justin reached for his cell phone on the bedside table and turned it on before he realized he wasn't going to call. He didn't call me last night, Justin reminded himself. Even though sometimes? With Brit's too cheerful laugh and dumbass jokes, sometimes I wished he WOULD call, just so I could get a quick break from her. A Lance break -- he liked that. He'd have to mention it when his lover got back to the room.

He could hear footsteps out in the hall, and then someone stopped in front of his door, rattled the knob as if it would be open. Justin rolled over on his back and watched the knob turn. "Go away," he hollered. It was probably JC, come to rub in the fact that he was by himself. "I don't want any."

"Open up," Joey called out, and he twisted the door knob again. "Come on, Justin. I got Coronas here with your name on them."

Pushing himself off the bed, Justin muttered, "I ain't getting drunk, Joe." He didn't like drinking much -- he got stupid when he got drunk, and silly and cute and had a tendency to lose articles of clothing throughout the night, and if Lance wasn't around to see it, then he wasn't going to go through all the trouble of a few beers for nothing. As he crossed the room, Joey turned the knob again. "Damn, Joe. It's locked, you know."

He opened the door and frowned at his friend, who was swiping his key card in Justin's lock. "That's not going to work," Justin told him.

With a wink, Joey said, "Just making sure." He pushed past Justin into the room, a white plastic grocery bag in one hand. "So it's just you and me tonight, eh? Everyone else has something better to do."

Justin laughed. "I thought you were just kidding about the beer," he said, closing the door behind Joey. "Where's JC?"

"Already asleep," Joey replied. He flopped down on the bed, stretched out along its length, and looked around. "Where's the remote?" He spotted it on the floor. "Hand it up, man."

"No," Justin said. He wasn't touching that thing again. What if next time it was something else he threw, something heavier, something with the potential to hurt? And what if he didn't aim it at the wall but at Lance instead? He didn't want to even think about that.

With a deliberate sigh, Joey heaved himself up and reached for

the remote. Snagging it easily, he laid back down on the bed and clicked on the TV. "Alien Resurrection is on tonight. Started about five minutes ago. Which channel's HBO?"

Justin sat on the edge of the bed and watched the TV screen as Joey flicked through the channels. "I'm not sure," he mumbled.

Thumbing the mute button on the remote, Joey asked, "You okay?" When Justin shrugged, his friend said, "Don't worry, man. It's only Chris. JC's just talking shit, you know how he likes to get under your skin."

"I know," Justin admitted. Rubbing his temples, he frowned and asked, "Do you ... I don't know, do you think maybe I'm just ..." He sighed. "Fuck. I know he's mad at me --"

"Chris?" Joey asked. "Or JC?"

"Lance." Justin slapped Joey's arm. "Move over."

"This bed's not that big," Joey started, but he scooted over a little, gave Justin enough room to lie down beside him. "How do you two fit in it?"

"Very carefully," Justin told him. Joey laughed at that. "It's not too complicated," Justin explained. "Usually he backs up against me and I hold onto his waist. Or sometimes he curls into me here --"

Joey raised a hand to shield his eyes. "TMI, man. I didn't ask for details."

Justin laughed and laid down on his stomach next to Joey. "Sorry," he muttered. Just talking about Lance made him sad, like there was an aching hole in him that had been torn open when the door closed on his lover earlier that evening. Lance's words still stung in his mind. "Should I stay somewhere else tonight?" God, baby, I'm so sorry to even make you THINK about that. I need you here with me. Nowhere else -- with me.

"So you know he's mad," Joey prompted. He dug into the plastic bag and handed Justin a bottle of Corona.

"What, no lime?" Justin asked. He twisted the cap off and held the bottle up to his nose to feel the fizz tickle his skin. Joey rooted around in the bag until he found a small baggie filled with slices of lime. Justin laughed. "I was just kidding --"

"The only way to drink this shit," Joey declared. He pulled out one slice. "Pop it in."

Justin squeezed the lime into the narrow mouth of the bottle and grinned when it hit the alcohol, sending a tiny spray up against his finger. Then he took a swig of the beer, grimacing at the taste. "You don't like it?" Joey asked.

"It's okay," Justin replied. He took another sip, and this one

wasn't as bad. "You get used to it."

Joey nodded as he opened his own bottle. "You can get used to anything, if you put up with it long enough."

Narrowing his eyes, Justin asked, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Joey shrugged, drank a healthy swallow of his beer. "Nothing," he said. With a grin, he added, "I'm not JC, man. I don't work double meanings into everything I say." Justin watched him down more beer and wondered about that. "So he's mad," Joey said again. When Justin didn't reply, he added, "Lance?"

Picking at the label on the bottle in his hand, Justin frowned at the lime that floated in the amber liquid. "I'm afraid I'm losing him," he whispered, his voice barely audible.

"I told you not to worry," Joey said. "Chris isn't --"

"It's not just Chris." Justin sighed and took another swig of his beer, squeezing his eyes shut as the cold alcohol swirled down his throat. "It's me, Joe -- he says it's not but I know it is. When we're not on tour, it's great. You wouldn't believe how amazing we are together."

With a slight smile, Joey said softly, "Must be if you've made it this long. Three years, is it?"

"Four at the end of August," Justin replied. "The twenty-third. If we make it that far." It seemed so far away.

"You will," Joey assured him. "You can't just throw shit like that away, you know? So you guys have hit a rough spot right now. You'll get through it. Just talk it out --" He looked over at Justin. "You guys do talk, right?"

Justin shrugged. "Sometimes," he whispered. "We don't really have much time now --"

"Well fuck." Joey drank down the rest of his beer and reached for a second one. "Make time. It's not that hard."

Justin laid his head on his arm. He held the bottle of Corona in one hand and turned it between his fingers, watched the lime bob in the alcohol as he spun it slowly around. "He doesn't like to talk about it," he said, his voice quiet. "That's my fault, too. I get mad, I can't help it. He says something and it's not what I want to hear so I get all bent out of shape and ..." He trailed off, unsure of what more to say. "Today?" He waited until Joey nodded, and he whispered, "Just before he left, he mentioned the date and I just, I don't know, I got mad, you know? It's not a date, it's not, you don't even joke about that shit. And I ..." He felt tears prick his eyes and he tried to blink them away. "I threw the remote, I shouldn't have, I know that. God --"

"You threw it at him?" Joey asked, his voice soft.

Justin shook his head. "The wall," he said. "I aimed for the wall. I didn't want to hit him, but Joe, what if I had? What then?"

"You need to talk to him," Joey said. "Unless you're ready to call it quits?"

"No!" Justin cried, and now the tears spilled down his cheeks and he wiped them away with the back of his hand. "That's the last thing I want. I need him, Joe. I love him so damn much --"

"Do you tell him this?" Joey asked. Justin nodded. "Do you show him?"

Justin pressed the cold beer against his hot cheeks, the condensation on the bottle mingling with the tears on his skin. "I try but it's so hard right now, you know? We don't get much time --"

Joey laughed. "Jesus, Justin," he said, shaking his head. "I don't mean like that. I know you think I'm the last person to say this, but it's not just about sex. I mean, don't get me wrong, that's fine, but what if something happened?"

"What do you mean?" Justin asked. Fear closed his throat, made his stomach churn. Don't say shit like this, he thought, not when he's not here with me. Don't let anything happen to him, please God I'm begging you here. Don't listen to Joey. "Something like what?"

But Joey simply shrugged again. "I don't know, I'm just saying."

"Saying what?" Justin wanted to know. "Tell me, Joe. You can't start something like this and just leave me hanging. What are you trying to tell me?" Then it hit him. "Oh no. You're saying --" He sat up and glared at his friend, suddenly angry. "You told me I had nothing to worry about from him, Joe. You said it's only Chris. And now you're saying what, something's going on I should know about?"

Shaking his head, Joey sat up, as well. "I'm not saying anything like that." He crossed his legs, stuck his bottle of beer in the empty space between his thighs, and ran his hands down his cheeks, drawing long furrows in his skin with his fingers. "God, I don't know, okay? All I know is Chris told me he asked Lance out. That's how he said it, I asked him out. Not we're going to the movies, or I think maybe he needs time away from Justin, but I asked him out. Like in his mind it was a date, you know? Like it means more to him than it should." Justin curled his hands into fists. Quickly, Joey added, "I'm not saying it does, okay? I'm not saying you need to go kick his ass for trying to take your boy. I'm not saying that at all, so don't go swinging when he walks in, okay?" Covering one of Justin's fists with his hand, he stared into his friend's face, the hard eyes, the angry lips, and asked, "Okay?"

"If he thinks he can just waltz in between us," Justin muttered through clenched teeth, "then he's wrong. Dead wrong, Joe. I won't

stand for it -- "

"Why don't you talk to Lance about it then?" Joey suggested. "Work things out between you two and you won't have to worry about Chris, or JC, or anyone else moving in on you guys."

"JC?" Justin asked, frowning. "Don't tell me he's -- "

"I'm just saying," Joey said again. "That's all. If you and Lance can get past this ..." He waved his hand absently, searching for the right word to use. "Whatever it is, if you get over it and start talking, stop getting so pissed and just listen to him, then no one will be able to come between you." He pinned Justin with a steady stare. "Do you hear me?"

"I hear you," Justin muttered. He didn't want to admit it out loud, but the thought of actually sitting down and talking with Lance terrified the hell out of him. Because it's just little things building up, he thought. Building up over time and now is there any way to sit down and just have it all out? Part of him knew he didn't want to hear what Lance would have to say, because Joey was right, wasn't he? Sometimes I think the only way to tell him how much I feel for him is through sex. And I love that, I love how we are together, I love every inch of his body and his mind and God, how can I put all that into actions that AREN'T sex? I can't just say I love you. That's not good enough anymore.

"Are you listening to me?" Joey pressed.

Justin nodded. "Yeah," he said. He took a sip of his beer and sighed. "I am, Joe. I'm listening." Lance, he prayed, hoping someone could hear him, hoping someone would listen, come back to me, okay? Soon, please. Before I lose my nerve. Joe's right, we need to talk. Soon.

Whatever It Takes
Part 7
by NSyncGrrl

After the movie, Chris held the limo door open for Lance. "Your chariot awaits," he joked as Lance climbed into the back seat. He slid across the seat to give Chris enough room.

Clambering in, Chris pulled the door closed behind him and scooted over until his hip touched Lance's, and it was all Lance could do not to pull away. Can't you move over a bit? he wanted to say, but he couldn't think of a way to say it that didn't sound bad. The whole damn limo and you've got to sit right up on me. "So," Chris said, his voice suddenly breathy. His fingers toyed with the sleeve of Lance's shirt. Justin's shirt, Lance corrected, watching his friend's hand hover just inches above his own. "Where to now, Papa Smurf?"

"Aren't we going back to the hotel?" Lance asked. That was on his agenda -- get back to the room and hope that Justin had cooled off enough to let him apologize for being such a dickhead earlier. "You said a movie ..."

He glanced up at Chris and when did he get so close? he wanted to know. His friend had one arm along the back of the seat, draped behind Lance, when had that happened? And his hand had slipped from Lance's arm -- now it rested on his knee, his fingers massaging with a gentle rhythm into his leg, and he wasn't smiling anymore, even his eyes weren't filled with their usual impish glee. He just stared at Lance as if he was the only thing that mattered right now, the only thing that existed, the only thing left. "Chris," Lance started, but his voice was barely a whisper and the name was lost between them. Chris's tongue darted out of his mouth, licked his thin lips, a seductive, mesmerizing gesture, spellbinding, and when he moved closer, his hand easing up Lance's thigh, Lance couldn't find the strength to move away. "Chris," he tried again, and then he felt a hand on his neck, fingers twining in his hair. "Really --"

"It's okay," Chris murmured, shifting into a more comfortable position that settled his body along Lance's. "Shh, it's okay. Just please. Don't say anything."

Lance stopped Chris's hand before it could reach his crotch. "No, really," he said, trying to twist out of his friend's grip, but his hand was strong on Lance's neck and held him tight. "Chris --"

Sensing the moment was slipping quickly away, Chris pressed his mouth to Lance's in a hard, breathless kiss. His tongue parted Lance's lips, rough, probing, demanding as it licked into his mouth. Lance tasted butter and cola and candy -- I'm kissing Willy Wonka, he thought, and then, Oh my God, Justin. Getting his hands up between them, Lance tried to push Chris back, surprised at his

friend's strength. "Shh," Chris sighed into his mouth. "Lance, please, just let me, please."

His hand cupped Lance's crotch and squeezed, sending a jolt of adrenaline through him. "Don't you fucking dare," Lance said, shoving Chris away. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, wiping away the kiss, the memory of the kiss, and God, I need a drink, he thought, staring balefully at his friend, who sat against the door and watched him with hooded eyes. Lance's groin throbbed and his head hurt and he couldn't believe the kiss but damn, he sure as hell didn't buy that whole grabbing his dick thing. Justin will kill you, he thought, and right now? Amid the emotions swirling through him, the betrayed trust, the wounded pride, the indignation ... right now he'd pay good money to see Justin take Chris on in his defense. "Jesus," he whispered.

"Lance," Chris said, and then he laughed shakily, ran a hand through his unruly hair. "I didn't mean --"

Moving to the far side of the limo just to put some distance between them, Lance told him, "Don't talk to me."

Chris tried again. "I thought that's --"

"You thought wrong." Lance folded his arms across his chest, hugged himself close, and stared out the window at the movie theater parking lot. "You know we're having problems right now. You said I needed some time away from him --"

"You do," Chris told him. He reached out across the seat, reaching for him, but Lance pulled away.

"That wasn't an open invitation," Lance said bitterly. "This isn't a date, Chris. I'm still with Justin -- I love him, and even though things aren't the greatest right now, that doesn't mean I'm going to leave him for someone else. For you."

In a quiet voice, Chris said, "He doesn't deserve you."

Lance laughed. "And you do?" he asked. It sounded harsher than he intended and the way Chris dropped his gaze made him almost apologize. Almost. "Look, I didn't ..." He sighed. "I thought you wanted to -- was it something I said? Something I did? Something that made you think I'd give you a chance?" Chris didn't answer, just looked at his hands twisting in his lap. "Because I didn't mean it," Lance told him, "whatever it was. I didn't mean to do or say anything to lead you on. I'm with Justin. I'm not leaving him. I'm just not."

"It wasn't you," Chris said softly. His mouth twisted into a half-smile that didn't light up the rest of his face. "I guess it was just me. He treats you like shit, Lance. He's never there for you, and you two are always bickering over little things, and I guess I just thought ..." He shrugged and finally looked at Lance, his eyes dark, unreadable in the shadows of the car. "I guess I just hoped you were ready for a change, that's all."

"I'm not like that," Lance told him. "I'm not one to give up that easily."

Chris smirked. "I know. You're as stubborn as he is." That made Lance laugh. That's part of our problem, Chris, he thought. He's too damn proud to admit things aren't the best and I'm too damn stubborn to tell him. "Can we just forget about this?" Chris asked, hopeful. "I mean, he doesn't have to know --"

"If it's not going to happen again," Lance said. Chris shook his head. "It won't happen, Chris, okay? I like you, you're a great friend, but I don't love you the way I love him. You understand?"

"Yeah." Chris nodded, but he didn't sound too convincing when he said, "I understand."

"Okay." Lance sighed, tightened his arms around himself as if to ward off a sudden chill. I just want to go home, he thought, and he didn't mean home to his house or home to his family, but back to the hotel where Justin waited for him. He's my home. I want to be with him now. "Can we get going?" he asked. "Back to the hotel? Please?"

"Sure." Chris opened the door, letting in a rush of cool air that swirled around Lance's warm cheeks, stirred the sweaty hair on the back of his neck. He hadn't realized how hot he was until then.

As Chris went to talk to the limo driver, Lance wondered if he should call Justin, tell him he was on his way now. A glance at his watch showed it was only a little after eleven -- they'd be back early after all. I'll just surprise him, he thought, settling back in the seat. He rested his head against the smooth glass of the window and sighed. He could still feel Chris on his lips, his neck, his crotch. He could still taste his friend in his mouth, and it made him ache for Justin and his sweet taste, his musky scent, his gentle hands and strong arms and God, I've never wanted him so bad.

* * *

Lance didn't wait for the elevator to come to a complete stop -- when the doors started to open on their floor, he pushed his way through and tripped on the carpet. "Easy," Chris said, his hands touching Lance's waist. Lance shrugged him off. "You don't have to --"

"Thanks," Lance said brusquely. He started down the hall with long strides designed to put as much distance between himself and his friend as possible. "The movie was fun. We'll have to do that again sometime." With a slight laugh, he added, "Just the movie part."

Behind him Chris muttered, "I know." Don't follow me, Lance prayed, hurrying down the hall. Just go somewhere else, don't walk behind me, don't watch me walk away. He could almost feel his friend's gaze on his back, his butt, his thighs, and at least he hadn't

worn those tight jeans, at least he listened to Justin on that one. Good call. He glanced over his shoulder, sure Chris was right behind him, breathing down his neck ...

But his friend was gone. Lance could hear the TV turned down low in the hall lounge, and then he heard Chris's laugh in there and something heavy hit the floor with a solid thud. "Hey!" JC cried out, his voice thick with sleep. Lance grinned as Chris laughed again. Must have dumped him onto the floor, he thought. "I was sitting there," JC muttered. "You're back already?"

Lance stopped in midstride to listen. "You were taking up the whole damn couch," Chris replied. "What 'cha watching?"

"How'd it go?" JC asked. Lance held his breath, waiting for Chris's answer.

"It was just a movie," Chris replied.

JC yawned, a leonine sound that made Lance grin. "Did you guys --"

"Give me the damn remote," Chris growled. There was another thud that sounded like the coffee table being turned over, and then JC shrieked with laughter. From the noise they made, Lance thought they were probably both on the floor now, wrestling for the remote. Just keep your mouth shut, Chris, he thought. We'll forget this ever happened. Lord knows that's all I want to do.

At the door to his room, he fumbled his key card out of the pocket of his khakis and ran it through the lock. Pushing the door open, he frowned at Joey, sitting on his bed and watching TV, a bag of corn chips open in his lap and a jar of salsa in front of him. "Joe?" Lance asked, closing the door behind him. "Why are you eating in my bed?"

"Movie's almost over," Joey said around a mouthful of chips. He waved the remote at the TV screen. "This is where we find out she's a robot. Oh, wait, you've seen this, right?"

Crossing the room, Lance picked up a plastic shopping bag by Joey's leg. Four Corona bottles rattled inside, empty. "Where's Justin?" Lance asked. And then, frowning at the chips, he added, "You better not be getting any salsa on my sheets."

"I ain't." Joey took a swig from another bottle of beer in his hand and pointed at the bathroom. "He's in there."

"Has he been drinking?" Lance asked as the bathroom door opened behind him.

Justin stepped out into the room and clicked off the bathroom light. "Hey," he said, forcing a tight smile at Lance. "How was the movie?"

Lance shrugged, wary. Justin still wore the tank top and jeans he had on earlier, so Lance didn't think he'd gotten too far into the

booze yet. He had a tendency to strip the more he drank, something Lance found furiously cute. But the way Joey crammed food into his mouth and laughed at the TV suggested those four empty bottles belonged to him. Leaning back against the wall, Lance shoved his hands into his pockets and said, "It was okay."

Justin nodded as if he didn't expect more. "What did you see?" he asked.

Why are we so awkward? Lance wanted to know. He glanced at Joey, who ignored them both, and wondered if they could work things out if he weren't here. Would Justin listen to him now? Could he find the words to say all that he thought needed to be said? "I don't know," Lance mumbled.

Justin narrowed his eyes distrustfully. "You don't know what you saw?" he asked, crossing his arms.

With a small smile, Lance told him, "Jackie Chan was in it. I wasn't really paying much attention." He let his gaze trail down his lover's body, lingering at his waist, where his tank top was tucked into his jeans. "I had other things on my mind."

"Like what?" Justin asked, but he saw the look and his voice took on that playful tone Lance knew oh so well.

"Come here," Lance whispered. He held out one hand and Justin moved closer, close enough for Lance to run an arm around his shoulders. "I'll show you," he breathed into Justin's ear.

Justin giggled. "We have company," he said, nodding over at Joey.

From the bed, Joey called out, "Don't mind me. I'm just watching TV."

Lance kissed Justin's cheek. "Don't you have a TV in your own room?" he asked. Justin laughed and unwrapped his arms, eased them around Lance's waist. Bringing his other arm up around his lover, Lance hugged Justin's neck and prompted, "Joe? Do I have to tell you to get the hell out of here already?"

Joey sighed dramatically. "Fine," he said, but he winked at them as he gathered up the food from the bed. "I guess I'll go take my party somewhere else." On his way to the door, he leaned up against Justin and whispered, "Love you guys." His breath reeked of alcohol, and he kissed Justin's cheek with a loud, sloppy sound.

When he leaned closer, Lance turned away, pulling Justin with him. "Leave my guy alone," he said. "And don't you go kissing on me, Joe." Joey laughed. "Damn, you're toasted."

"Four beers," Joey said. "That's not toasted. That's mildly lit."

"Five," Justin told him, pointing at the bottle still in Joey's hand. Then he pointed at another bottle on the bedside table. "Six, if you want to finish off mine."

"Ooh." Joey snagged Justin's bottle and laughed. "Don't want to let that go to waste, do we? That's the last time I offer you any of my stash."

Lance felt Justin's hands tighten in the small of his back and he pulled his lover closer, buried his nose into his neck and breathed in his heady scent. "Joe," he murmured, kissing behind Justin's ear. "You were leaving?"

"I was," Joey replied with another laugh. "I am."

Lance waited until he heard the door close before he cupped his hands behind Justin's neck and kissed him hungrily, his lover's mouth warm and spiced with the faint taste of beer. Justin's hands fisted in his shirt as they kissed, his leg pressed against Lance's crotch, his breath hot along Lance's cheek. "I missed you," Lance sighed.

Justin grinned against his lips. "It was only a few hours," he murmured.

"I miss you when you're not with me," Lance whispered.

With a sigh, Justin pulled away. "I know," he mumbled. "Me too." Kneeling on the floor, he started to unlace Lance's shoes, first one, then the other.

Lance touched his lover's head, the short hairs ticklish and soft beneath his palm. He missed the curls, their cottony scent, the way they would twine around his fingers, the way he used to tug at them gently when he massaged Justin's neck and scalp after one of their shows. Now that they were gone, sheared off in this militaristic buzz cut, it reminded him that his boy was growing up, they both were, they weren't the same kids they had been when this whole thing started. When WE started, Lance thought, watching Justin pull off his shoes. When both shoes were off, his lover rubbed his head into Lance's hand and hugged his waist, rested his head against his stomach and sighed. "I'm sorry," he whispered, nuzzling his face into Lance's shirt, his own shirt that Lance wore. "I know you said we're going to forget about it, start all over again, but God, I'm so sorry, Lance. I didn't want to stay out so late last night, I didn't want to leave you all alone, I just wasn't thinking. I wasn't listening to you, I never do, God I'm just awful --"

Lance sank down to the floor. Leaning back against the wall, he pulled Justin into the space between his knees. "Baby, shh," he whispered, kissing Justin quiet. "It's over with, okay? Let's not talk about that now."

"Yes," Justin told him. He curled up against Lance, hugged his lover close as Lance held him, arms around Justin's shoulders, ankles crossed protectively around Justin's legs. From the safety of that embrace Justin rested his head against Lance's chest and sighed. "We need to just get everything out on the table, no matter how much you don't want to say it and I don't want to hear it."

Lowering his voice, he kissed Lance's throat and whispered, "I don't want to lose you."

"You won't," Lance promised. What did Joey say to you? he mused. What happened to make you like this? This frightened, this willing to listen to me, this eager to talk about us? Smoothing his hands along Justin's shoulder and back, he murmured, "Honey, you're shivering."

"I didn't mean to throw that thing," Justin told him.

Lance didn't have to ask what he was talking about -- he knew. The remote. He had a feeling that scene had scared them both more than they were willing to let on. "I know," he said.

"And God," Justin sighed -- it seemed now that he had started, he wasn't going to stop until everything was out, everything that strangled their relationship was free. "If you didn't want me to go out last night, you should've said something. Jesus, tell me next time! Don't just sit downstairs at the bar and drink yourself sick. I'll listen, I swear I will." Another sigh. "I wanted you to come with us. I wanted you to say yes."

With a grin, Lance admitted, "I thought you wanted some time alone with her. If I had known you really wanted me to come --"

"That's my fault," Justin said. "I should've said something. Help me, maybe." Lance laughed at that. Raising his voice, Justin cried out, "Save me, Lance! She's got me in her clutches!"

"Stop that," Lance told him, but he couldn't help laughing and then Justin laughed, too, and the awkwardness between them, the tension curled in the room, it dissipated like smoke in the air, simply dissolved, evaporated away. "I could've used some saving tonight," he muttered.

Justin looked up at him, his laughter dying away. "Did that old fart put the moves on you?" he asked, a dull anger rising in his eyes.

"You said you'd listen," Lance pointed out. "What were your words? No matter how much you don't want to hear it?"

Justin rested his head on Lance's shoulder, his breath soft where it breezed over Lance's skin. "I know," he muttered. "So he hit on you? Do I have to hurt him now?"

"No," Lance laughed. "Don't say a word, Justin, please."

"Why not?" Justin asked.

Lance could hear the pout in that little boy voice and he tightened his arms around his lover, trying to tell him all he couldn't say. Because I love you, he thought. Because you're the only one I want, I'm not even considering anyone else, it's just you. Only you.

But we're saying these things out loud now, aren't we? he reminded himself. We're talking about this kind of thing, we're not keeping it inside anymore. So he kissed the top of Justin's head and told him, "Because I love you."

"Me too," Justin sighed, cuddling closer to him. "With you. I mean --"

Lance laughed. "I know what you mean," he murmured with another kiss. That was one thing they didn't need to talk about, their feelings for each other, their love, because he could feel it in every fiber of his being, in every inch of his body, with every beat of his heart.

The End