

The Perfect Boy

December 2003

Toby

“Martin Wolfe! Stay away from me!” a voice wailed—hysterical and terror-ridden.

Play practice was just letting out. Krista and half the cast of *A Christmas Carol*, including me, of course, were coming out of the auditorium when we heard the distant, frightened voice. Only moments later, there was a scream, followed soon by the doors to the gym bursting open and slamming against the walls. Josh Lucas tore through the doors as if the hounds of hell were pursuing him. His eyes were wide and crazed. He didn’t even seem to notice the throng coming out of the auditorium.

Ian rounded the corner from the other direction. Josh spotted him and screeched to a halt.

“No!” Josh screamed. “I’m sorry! I won’t tell anyone! Call him off! Call your ghost off! For God’s sake! Please!”

Ian grinned.

Josh gasped, toppled over backward, and hit his head hard on the floor. He lay motionless. His eyes were closed. The crowd gaped at his still form. Krista ran to him. She raised his wrist and checked his pulse.

“He’s dead.” She looked directly into my eyes. “Oh, my God. He’s dead!”

Ian’s grin faded, and the color drained from his face. He stared down at the dead football player in horror.

Two Months Earlier — October 2003

“Down!” I said, shoving Cedi back into the chair.

“Grrrrr.”

“She’s just gonna color and trim your hair, Cedi, not shave you bald.”

“But I love my pink hair!”

“You promised Jordan you would dye it black. You can change it back to pink later—or blue, or purple. I think purple was my favorite.”

“Yeah! That looked cool! Didn’t it, mate?”

“Sit!”

Cedi had stood up again. The boy could not sit still. I swear I was going to have to smack him on the nose with a rolled-up newspaper. We’d been in Clips & Curls for ten minutes, and the poor beautician had yet to get to Cedi.

“Come on, Cedi. Clara came in late just for you. Hold still!”

“Sorry,” said Cedi, looking over at Clara.

“No problem, cutie,” Clara said as she smacked her gum.

Clara was barely out of high school, and I think she kind of had a thing for Cedi. He is quite a little hottie—in an unconventional way. Cedi’s about 5’9” and 125 pounds, slim and sinewy. His eyes are greenish blue and appear violet at times. His hair is medium length and sort of curly, but I have no idea what color it was supposed to be. I don’t know the last time anyone saw Cedi’s natural hair color.

“I’m definitely not getting paid enough for this,” I said more to myself than anyone else.

“What? You’re getting paid to spend time with me? Noooooo!” Cedi wailed.

“Calm down, hyper-boy. Jordan hired me to get you ready for your first appearance on stage with *Phantom*. Why he thinks I can handle you, I’ll never know.”

Cedi started to get up out of the chair again, but I pointed my finger at him.

“Stay!”

Cedi held still long enough for Clara to get to work. As she washed his hair, I wondered how I’d gotten myself in this situation. Well, I knew how: Jordan gazed into my eyes and asked me, and that was all it took. Besides, overseeing Cedi’s transformation into a more or less normal boy wasn’t that big a task—or rather wouldn’t be if Cedi could sit still more than five seconds without being sedated. He was trying to cooperate and yet still squirmed in the chair as Clara washed his hair.

Cedi behaved fairly well—at least by Cedi standards—but I was glad to see him back to his old, overactive self. I knew his breakup with Thad was hard on him, even if Thad had dumped him for his own good. Cedi and I had shared our sorrows over our recent breakups. It helped. I was going to miss Cedi when he was gone, and his departure was coming up all too soon. After the upcoming concert at Phantom World, Cedi would leave on tour with *Phantom*. There were little more than forty-eight hours before we had to say goodbye.

An hour or so later, Cedi was finished. Clara twirled him around so that he was facing the mirror.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“I’m gorgeous!” Cedi said.

He jumped up out of the chair, hugged Clara, and led her around the room in an impromptu dance. Clara obviously didn’t mind at all.

I’d never seen Cedi with a normal hair color before, but he looked hot. Clara had not only dyed his hair black, but trimmed it in such a way that it looked wild and yet not messy. I wondered if I should have her cut my hair some time.

Cedi paid Clara, gave her a big tip, and then we stepped out onto the sidewalk.

“So, what do you want to do on your last night of freedom?” I asked.

“You mean before I’m surrounded by bodyguards, screaming girls, and paparazzi?”

“Exactly.”

“Um...eat my weight in pancakes!”

“Café Blackford then?”

“Yes! I’m buying, since I’m gonna be rich now!”

I laughed.

“Good, then I’m ordering something really expensive.”

“There is nothing really expensive in Café Blackford, Toby.”

“Drat!”

“Drat? You Americans definitely talk funny.”

“Well, you British drive on the wrong side of the road.”

“Do not!”

“Do, too!”

Spending time with Cedi was like babysitting a ten-year-old at times, but he made me laugh.

Autumn had come to Blackford, but it was still warm enough outside. I drank in the scent of the fallen leaves as Cedi and I walked side by side. Part of me, a big part, wished he was staying, but I knew he had to follow his dream. Touring with *Phantom*! How cool was that?

We reached Café Blackford without incident and were soon seated away from the windows, near the fire.

“I feel as if I never really got the chance to explore Blackford,” Cedi said as we perused the menus. “I feel like I just got here. Now I’m leaving.”

“You’ll come back. Your aunt lives here, after all, and then there’s Thad.”

“Yeah,” said Cedi, a bit sadly. He was still smarting over his breakup with Thad T. Thomas, Blackford’s resident celebrity and the author of a series of very popular vampire novels.

“Cheer up. You’re going on tour with *Phantom*. You’re not allowed to be sad.”

Cedi grinned. “You know I always dreamed of being in a group like *Phantom*, but I never thought I’d get to be a part of *Phantom*. It’s unreal.”

“You’re unreal, punk.”

Cedi and I looked up. It was Chase Simmons, football jock, former nemesis, but now friend of Cedi. It was too bad Chase didn’t go for guys. He was a hottie: dark hair, dark eyes, and nice muscles.

“Sorry, I have no time for losers,” Cedi said.

“Then what are you doing hanging with Riester?”

“Funny!” I said.

“Sit down, steroid-boy,” said Cedi. “We were just about to order.”

Chase joined us. Not that many weeks ago I thought of Chase as a badass who might enjoy rearranging my face, but things had changed—thanks to Cedi. The jocks had done their best to give Cedi a hard time, but he had a unique way of handling abuse: he refused delivery.

Our waitress arrived soon to take our orders.

“I’ll have the pecan pancakes and the strawberry pancakes. And bacon!” Cedi said.

“There is no way you can eat all that,” Chase said.

“Just watch me!”

Chase ordered a triple cheeseburger and fries. I opted for a banana-nut waffle and bacon.

“So, you ready to be a big hotshot rock star?” Chase asked.

“I was born a rock star!”

“Sure you were,” Chase said. “I remember you back in the old days when you were nothing more than a little punk.”

“The old days?” Cedi said. “You’ve only known me for three months!”

“Yeah, like I said.”

“I’m excited!” Cedi said.

“You’re always excited,” Chase said.

“I don’t think I could sing in front of all those people,” I said.

“Come on, Toby, you’ve performed in front of an auditorium full of people!”

“That was acting. It’s not the same.”

“I can’t wait!” Cedi said.

“Well, the concert at Phantom World is the day after tomorrow,” I said.

“Yeah. It’s gonna be a blast!”

Cedi, Chase, and I talked and laughed while we waited on our orders. The few girls who were in the café came up to our table and asked for Cedi’s autograph. Chase watched enviously.

“What a waste: all those girls interested in *you*,” Chase said.

“Hey. I like girls! I’m only half gay, you know.”

“Jealous, Chase?” I asked.

“Yes!”

Cedi laughed so loud everyone in the café stared at us for a moment.

“Don’t worry, Chase. Cedi will be gone soon, and then the girls will turn their attention back to you.”

“Yeah! They’ll be willing to settle for second best when I’m gone!” Cedi said.

Chase crossed his arms and shot Cedi a menacing look. Had he meant it, it would’ve been scary. Chase had a load of muscles and could’ve snapped Cedi like a twig.

Our food arrived, and we got down to the serious business of eating. The portions were rather large at Café Blackford, and I couldn’t begin to finish mine. I watched in amazement as more and more of Cedi’s pancakes disappeared.

Chase finally pushed his plate away, leaving part of his burger and a good many fries. I ate about two-thirds of my waffle and half my bacon. It was as much as I could manage. Cedi’s pecan pancakes were gone, and Chase and I watched as he devoured his strawberry pancakes and bacon.

“I can’t believe it,” Chase said when Cedi pushed his platters away. “I would have bet a hundred bucks you couldn’t eat all that.”

“And you would have lost!” Cedi said.

Cedi paid for all of us. Chase and I escorted Cedi back to his aunt’s house. We were his unofficial bodyguards, protecting him from wild, teenaged girls. Luckily, none spotted us on our walk.

“Remember, Cedi, you’re supposed to be at Phantom World by 11 a.m. tomorrow,” I said.

“Aww, and poor Toby will be stuck in school.”

“True, but I’ll see you at the concert in a couple of nights.”

“Good night, guys!”

“Night, loser,” Chase said.

“Night, Cedi.”

Chase and I went our separate ways. I was truly going to miss Cedi. Blackford would never be the same without him.

Daniel

I zoomed down the sidewalk toward the school, my backpack dangling from one shoulder, my dark hair flying. Major distraction. I jerked my head to the side, my skateboard hit a rock, and I went tumbling into a small knot of skaters and Goths who were seated on a concrete retaining wall.

“Smooth move, Peralta,” Ian said, frowning as he helped the others push me up onto my feet.

“Hey, that rock ran right out in front of me! It could have happened to anyone.”

“Yeah, sure,” said Auddie Mason, my best girl friend but not my girlfriend, if you know what I mean.

I hoped no one noticed what caused me to wipe out: the cute boy chatting it up with Becky

Wayne and Cindy Erickson. I was soon to learn his name was Cole Fitch, but at that moment his name didn't matter. My heart beat faster as I looked at him. I had to tear my gaze away from his curly black hair and green eyes before my friends got wise. Only Auddie seemed to notice me checking out the new boy in school, but then only Auddie knew I liked boys.

I stole another look at Cole as he walked away. The first day at a new school was an unsettling experience for most, but Cole was so completely at ease it was as if he'd been there all along. This had to be his first day. A boy like that could not have escaped my notice since the beginning of the school year. No way!

I hate to admit this, but I stalked Cole as he moved through the hallways of Blackford High School. I just had to get a closer look at him. Cole was a vision of masculine beauty. He was hot enough for the cover of any teen magazine. He wasn't muscular like the football jocks but rather was slim and sexy. Likewise, he wasn't tall. He was about my height, 5'10", but it suited him perfectly. Cole looked like a boy-band escapee, and I suspected he'd been created for the sole purpose of driving me out of my mind with longing. I wanted a poster of him to tack up on my wall.

I just stood and stared at Cole while he worked the combination on his locker. I couldn't help it. When I came to my senses, I jerked my head this way and that, checking to see if anyone noticed me gawking. I wasn't out, and being tagged as queer at B.H.S. could be dangerous to my health. Everyone was going about their own business, so I had no need to worry. I had to watch myself, though, because a slipup like that could cost me dearly. That was the trouble with beautiful boys like Cole Fitch: their looks made them dangerous. They could cause boys like me to reveal more than we wished. I tore myself away from Cole and headed for my own locker.

"Hey, Daniel, what's up?" Toby asked.

"Um, nothin' much." I sure couldn't tell him I'd been stalking Cole.

"Hey, Happy Birthday."

"You remembered?"

"Sure."

"Hey, I'm having a party tomorrow tonight—just a few friends. Everyone is dressing up. It is Halloween, after all," I said, grinning. "You can come if you want."

"I would love to, but I can't. My parents have saddled me with handing out Halloween candy to juvenile delinquents."

"Aww, that sucks."

"I would like to get together with you some other time, though."

"Cool."

"Awesome," Toby said, smiling. He stood there for a few moments as if he wanted to say something more, then he bid me goodbye.

I felt guilty for not inviting Toby to my party sooner. The truth was I simply forgot. We hadn't been hanging out together all that long, so I was still getting used to the idea. Toby was cool. He always greeted me in the halls and smiled at me. He was a nice guy, and there were precious few of those around. Toby had seemed kind of detached and sad recently. That's what got me to start hanging out with him more. I didn't like to see anyone in pain. I was glad I'd made the effort. We were fast becoming friends.

I slammed my locker and headed to class. Okay, you're going to think I'm a total freak, but there's something I should tell you before we go any further. You'll probably want to quit reading about me and chuck this book in the trash, but I can't live a lie. Yeah, I live in perpetual fear of being tagged as queer, but I'm not talking about that. I like school. I mean I *really* like it. I like

English. I like algebra. I love world history. I love literature! So yeah, I'm a freak. This is your chance to jump ship if you can't handle that.

Okay, now that the losers are gone, he-he, we can continue. You know how I just said I love literature? Well, I had another reason to love it when I arrived for my third-period class later that morning. The desk between Toby and me had sat empty since it had been vacated by Cedi. Unfortunately, Cedi attended B.H.S. for only a few months. He was leaving to go on tour with *Phantom* in a couple of days. Yeah, sounds unbelievable, right? It's true, though. If you don't believe me, just check out MTV or any music magazine. It's big news. Well, Cedi touring with *Phantom* is big news, not the fact that he used to sit beside me. Anyway, I'm getting way off topic, so it's time to tell you what was so great about literature, other than reading *Emma* by Jane Austen. Sitting right there in the desk recently vacated by Cedi was none other than my personal heart throb: Cole Fitch!

I learned Cole's name when Mrs. Corlett announced it to the class, along with the fact he was a new student. As if we didn't know! Toby eagerly eyed Cole from where he sat on the other side of him. Most of the class was eyeing Cole. The girls were practically drooling. Some of the guys frowned, suffering no doubt from a clear-cut case of jealousy. Personally, I just enjoyed the scenery.

Cole looked in my direction and, gasp, smiled at me! I swear my heart pounded as though I'd been running in gym. I grinned back. Thankfully, Cole looked away again before I had time to go all goofy. He had such dreamy green eyes. Swoon!

The next delightful surprise of the day came at lunch when I discovered that Cole had the same lunch period as I did. I didn't dare sit with him. I was permanently assigned to the skater table. I don't mean officially assigned, but seating wasn't random in the cafeteria like it appeared. Each little group had its own territory. The jocks had their tables, the artsy crowd had theirs, we skaters had ours, and so on.

Even if I had the nerve to sit by Cole, it was impossible. Girls swarmed around him like bees—bees who had just discovered the most beautiful flower in existence. A few guys were sitting near him, too. These were sitting by their girlfriends and were eyeing Cole suspiciously. Yeah, they knew competition when they saw it. They knew their girls would run to Cole if he snapped his fingers.

"You're drooling," Auddie whispered in my ear.

"I am not!" I said, quickly wiping my mouth, just in case.

Auddie giggled. I looked around to make sure no one had overheard, but Auddie was discreet. She would never place me in danger. My friends were cool. Some of them, like Ian, were way out there. All of us were outsiders. I feared I'd become even more an outsider if my buddies knew I drooled over boys instead of girls. I'd have to join the burnout table—if they'd have me.

The skater table was occupied by Jake Patrick, Andy Straus, Ian Babcock, Auddie Mason, and, of course, me. We were a small group, but we stuck together. Auddie always sat right next to me. A lot of people thought we had something going, something physical. We didn't. I wasn't interested in Auddie like that, and, besides, we'd been friends so long it would've just been weird. Jake sat across from me. He was kind of funny, but he was often quiet. It made for a weird combination. Sometimes, he wouldn't say anything at all for the longest time, and then he'd crack us all up. Andy, another of our crowd, usually had his nose poked in a skating magazine. He was forever making us look at pictures or reading us facts about skaters. We didn't mind. Rounding out our little group was Ian Babcock. Ian was not only a skater but also a Goth.

The Goth table was adjacent to the skater table—well, it was the other end of the same table,

really. There weren't that many skaters or Goths at B.H.S. Ian sat right in between, forming a sort of bridge between the two groups. Ian was a double dose of bizarre. He wore only black. His hair was black, too, and long, reaching to his shoulders. Ian wore a leather collar with spikes and studded leather bracelets on his wrists. He wore lots of chains and necklaces, too. He had an earring dangling from his left ear and black makeup lining his eyes. Ian didn't smile, at least not much. He has this ultra-serious, angry look to him most of the time. Some kids are afraid of him, but he's actually rather cool. You just have to get past the spikes to get close to him.

I eyed Cole as I ate my fish sandwich. I had to fight to keep from sighing out loud. If I was allowed to design my very own boyfriend, I couldn't have done better. Cole was perfect. Okay, I know no one is perfect, but, wow! I didn't even see how anyone could stand to be *that* handsome.

I looked around the table, checking out the looks of my friends. Jake and Andy were far from good looking. They were both on the scrawny side and just not that hot. Ian was rather handsome in a scary sort of way. The black makeup he wore around his eyes kind of hid his features, but his good looks still came through. I had a secret crush on him. I was afraid he'd punch me if he knew I thought he was hot. Auddie was good looking, but she was a girl, so she was no good for comparison with Cole.

I looked at Cole again. My heart sank in my chest. I didn't have a snowball's chance in hell with a boy like him. Still, I could dream. I could hope. I could fantasize. I planned to do a little fantasizing later that night. I was going to need to in order to release the tension in my groin. Okay, I realized that might be T.M.I. (Too Much Information), but I'm a teenaged boy, so...

I caught only a few glimpses of Cole the rest of the day, which was just as well. I was in serious danger of outing myself by drooling over him. I had to get myself under control.

Cedi

I yawned and looked into the mirror over the bathroom sink. I was momentarily startled by the stranger who stared back, but it was just me. I turned my head from side to side while still keeping my eyes on my reflection. Black was a rather tame hair color, but I guessed I'd get used to it. It was the only real concession I'd made to join *Phantom*.

I think the guys were right, *Phantom*'s fans probably weren't ready for a boy with pink hair. Besides, it was only hair. No one was asking me to change my personality. I could still be me.

"This is it, Cedi. Today is the day," I said to my reflection.

All the papers had been signed, and for the next several months I was officially a member of *Phantom*. Somehow, that made all the difference. I had practiced with Jordan, Ross, and Kieran already, preparing for the upcoming tour. Today would be my first practice as an official member of the band.

I looked forward to the concert. I would be performing on the very stage where it all started not so long ago. A freak accident injured Kieran, and I found myself on stage with my idols. Now, I was returning to that stage not as an outsider but as a member of the band.

It was Jordan's idea to give an unscheduled concert before we began the tour. He didn't say so, but I know the concert was for me. It was a chance to play for my hometown crowd and to perform for friends. True, I'd lived in Blackford not quite three months, but this was my home as much as, or more so, than England was. There wasn't much that frightened me, but I was glad there would be some friendly faces in the crowd my first time out.

This was really my second time, but I was in such a daze during my first performance that

it seemed unreal. Everything had happened so fast. This time would be different. We would even be playing a special version of *Do You Know That I Love You* with me on the violin. I couldn't wait!

My life had sure changed. Such a short time ago, I'd been going to school with Toby, Chase, and the gang. Now, I'd soon be heading out on a cross-country tour, living my dream. That was right. I was insane to think of passing up the opportunity of a lifetime. As much as it hurt, I knew That did the right thing when he dumped me. Despite his comments to the contrary, I knew it was a great sacrifice on his part, too. I'd never forget what he'd done for me.

I stripped off my top and boxers and climbed into the shower. This was going to be some day.

I arrived at Phantom World about 10:30. The park was closed for the season, and the rides were eerily silent. A small workforce moved about, shutting up the rides and booths until the park reopened in the spring. Only the large amphitheatre was alive. I quickly made my way there to join Jordan, Ross, and Kieran.

I heard the sound of an electric guitar as I neared. It was probably Chad getting the instruments ready for our practice session. Chad was a blast—a real California surfer dude, or so I'd thought until I found out he'd never been to California except with the band. He sure sounded like the surfers in movies. Every other word he spoke seemed to be "dude."

I spotted Kieran on the stage as I came within sight of it. I was still getting used to being so close to my idol. Kieran was a god; no one could play the guitar like he could. Of course, he couldn't play now because of the accident. That's why I was here. Until his arm mended, he wasn't allowed to touch a guitar.

At first I could barely speak to Kieran because I was overwhelmed by his presence. That said Kieran was the only person in the world who could make me speechless. That was right—again. I was loosening up around Kieran. At least he seemed real now. Before, it was as though my mind couldn't quite comprehend he was really speaking to me. It was as if I was in a dream. The dream had become reality, and Kieran and I were even becoming friends. It was a bummer he wouldn't be with us for the tour. Since he couldn't play, he was taking some time off to be with his fiancé, Natalie.

As I drew close to the stage, I could see Jordan drinking a mug of something, talking to Chad and a pretty strawberry blonde. I struggled to remember her name.... Samantha; that was it, although everyone called her Sam. She helped Chad with sound. Ralph was nearby. Now, *there* was a lucky guy. I couldn't even imagine what it would be like to have a partner like Jordan. Of course, if I could've had my pick of the guys, I would've chosen Kieran. That was an impossibility, however, because Kieran was hetero.

"Cedi!" Ross yelled when he spotted me. He ran toward me, hurtled himself off the stage, and jumped into my arms. I tried to catch him, but Ross was considerably larger than I was. We both went crashing to the ground.

"Ross! You idiot!" Kieran yelled. "If you hurt our new guitarist, I'm gonna kick your ass."

"He has no sense of humor," Ross whispered loudly enough that Kieran was sure to hear.

I smiled and shook my head. Ross was a ton of fun. He was wicked cute, too, especially when he smiled.

"How are you this morning, Cedi?" Jordan asked.

"Excited!"

"The same as always, then," Ralph said.

"Ohhhhh, donuts!" I said, spotting the big box on the table at the side of the stage. I grabbed

up a crème-filled maple long-john and took a bite.

“There’s hot English Breakfast tea, as well,” Ralph said.

“Hot tea? Now you’re talking!”

I made myself a mug of tea, nice and sweet with plenty of sugar and cream.

“You British and your tea,” Ross said, taking a swig of his Coke. “Are we going to have to break for teatime every day?”

I giggled. “Only if you want.”

“Hey, I like hot tea, and I’m not British,” Jordan said.

“Well, you’re just plain weird,” Ross said.

Ross leaned in close and pretended to whisper, although he spoke loud enough for all to hear. “He even likes guys instead of girls.”

“Like that’s a secret!” I said.

“What gave me away?” Jordan asked. “Was it the press conference or my boyfriend?”

“Both,” I said.

Jordan was most definitely gay. Kieran was obviously not. I wondered about Ross. Even back in Britain, the tabloids were filled with stories about his sexual exploits with members of both sexes. There were lots of photos of Ross coming out of clubs, eating in restaurants, attending plays, and so forth. Sometimes he was with a girl, sometimes with a guy. The tabloids always played it up if he was spotted with a male. These were the same papers that claimed a B-52 had been found on Mars and that Noah’s Ark had been spotted floating off the coast of Japan, so I didn’t know what to make of the stories. Ross was definitely a hottie. He could probably have any girl or guy he wanted.

I pushed the matter from my mind. What did it matter? Why was I even thinking about it? I took a sip of tea and then bit into my long-john. Ross grinned at me mischievously.

“Okay, guys,” Jordan said. “I think we need to run through *DYK* with Cedi’s violin sections. We don’t have that one down quite right yet, and I know Chad and Sam are still working out the sound levels.”

“And I’m having trouble switching back and forth between the guitar and violin,” I said.

“Our bass guitarist can handle the guitar sections once we’re on the road. You won’t have to worry about that after this first concert.”

I was glad to hear that. While I kind of liked rushing back and forth between instruments, I was a bit concerned I’d screw up. There was precious little time between the sections. It would be cool when the backup musicians joined us, too. I knew the sound would be a lot richer. I was glad they weren’t present on the day I filled in for Kieran; otherwise, it would’ve been the bass guitarist replacing Kieran and not me. I would never have gotten the chance to play with *Phantom*.

Kieran couldn’t play, but he could still sing. We’d been practicing a song that featured Kieran in the lead. I’d never heard it before, but it was eerily beautiful. It was called *Nemesis* and was all about this guy and his greatest enemy, who turned out to really be his friend. The song brought to mind images of knights in shining armor, dragons, and mythical creatures. It was almost magical.

“Ready, guys?” Jordan asked when we’d all finished pigging out on donuts.

“Jordan is a slave driver, Cedi. Get used to it,” Ross said as he headed for his drums.

I picked up my electric guitar, and Jordan stood behind his keyboard. Ross started the beat on his drums, and we began to play.

Something came upon me when the music started. It was as if I wasn’t the same Cedi any

more. It was a bit like the feeling I'd had when I looked into the mirror earlier that morning. I was me and yet not me. I felt transformed, as if I'd changed from Clark Kent to Superman. I became lost in the music. I became the music. During our practice, there were only Chad, Sam, and a handful of other workers around, but it didn't matter. The music was magic whether anyone was there to hear it or not.

The magic intensified when we reached the first violin section. I couldn't count the times I'd listened to *Do You Know That I Love You*, and there I was putting my own mark on it. My addition melded in smoothly, as if it had been there all along. I almost couldn't believe I was standing there on the stage with Jordan, Ross, and Kieran. It was a dream come true.

"We may have to cut a single of that," Jordan said when we'd finished the song. "Or, put it on the next album. That's extraordinary, Cedi."

"Thanks!" I said, grinning like an idiot, no doubt.

We practiced the rest of the morning and broke for lunch a little before one. Lunch was served in the flat on top of the Graymoor Mansion. I loved the view from up there. One could stand and look out over the entire park.

"Pizza!" Ross yelled as we entered.

Steaming hot pizzas were just being set out on a long table as we entered. Yes! I could really get into this whole rock-star thing!

Kieran, Ross, Jordan, and I were joined by Chad, Ralph, Sam, and the crew. Everyone seemed like one big family. The crew treated the guys as if they were just like anyone else. The guys were as friendly to the crew as they were to each other—perhaps more so. Jordan clearly ran the show. When he talked, people listened, but he was mostly just one of the guys. Everyone made me feel right at home.

After three Cokes and several slices of pizza, I was revved up and ready to go. Ross challenged me to a duel with bread sticks, and we fought each other while Chad laughed and Jordan and Kieran rolled their eyes.

"I should seriously be getting paid for babysitting," Jordan told Kieran, but I saw him grin.

"Well, at least now Ross has someone to play with."

Ross glanced over at Kieran and arched his eyebrow. I darted and jabbed him in the chest, a bit too hard because my bread stick broke. Ross grabbed his chest as if wounded.

"Now, I have you," he said and unleashed a vicious attack. Soon, I was on my back giggling as Ross finished me off, using his breadstick like a dagger.

"You guys are just too weird," Ralph said.

"But you know you love us, Ralphie!" Ross said, jumping up. He ran to Ralph and planted a big kiss right on his lips. Ralph wiped his mouth with pretend disgust.

"Okay, children, we need to get back to work," Jordan said.

"So what's up next for practice?" I asked.

"Nothing. We're giving interviews the rest of the day."

"Interviews?"

"Yeah, to publicize the upcoming tour," Jordan said. "Cedric, why don't you stay back with me for a bit while the others go on. I'll give you some pointers."

"Watch out, Cedi," Ross said. "Jordan is a predator. More than one boy has lost his virginity when he 'stayed back' with Jordan."

"What makes you think I'm a virgin?" I asked.

Ross arched his eyebrow again—at me this time.

“Ross, go away,” Jordan ordered.

Ross growled, but left. Everyone else departed, as well.

“I’m guessing you’ve never been interviewed before,” Jordan said.

“No.”

“Just remember, you don’t have to answer all the questions—or any of them if you don’t want. Most of the questions will be fairly standard. In fact, you’ll get sick of hearing them over and over. You’re new, so a lot of attention will focus on you. You’ll probably be asked about how you feel about joining the band, what it’s like to work with us, what musical experiences you had before, etc. Some of the questions can get very personal, so don’t be afraid to say, “no comment,” or just tell the reporter you won’t talk about that. Sometimes it’s necessary to be very firm. Most reporters are fairly cool, but some get overly aggressive and ask questions about things that are no one’s business. How much you want to share about your private life is your business. Just remember that some things can be taken out of context, so watch what you say.”

I felt a bit intimidated.

“Don’t worry, Cedric. You’ll do fine. It’s a bit scary the first couple of times, but you’ll get used to it. It’s the price of fame. There will only be a few reporters here today. We’ll do the really big press conferences when we start the tour. Most of the reporters here today are from local radio and TV stations. There’s even one from your old high school.”

I nodded.

“You ready?”

“Yeah!”

I followed Jordan down the stairs and across the park. We chatted about the upcoming tour, the tour bus, the hotels we’d be staying in, and more. When we neared the stage I was no longer quite so certain I was ready. There were only about a dozen reporters, but there were four big cameras, and one was from MTV!

As soon as Jordan and I stepped onto the stage, most of the reporters descended upon us. I felt a sense of panic. Jordan held up his hands.

“I’m sure you’re all eager to talk to our newest band member, but take it easy on him. You’ll all get your chance for a one-on-one interview with Cedric. How about you first?” Jordan said, pointing to a girl I recognized from school. She always hung out at the skater table.

Jordan had a commanding presence, and the reporters listened to him. I think his promise that everyone would get one-on-one time with me, and presumably the rest of the guys, set the reporters at ease. I was thankful my first interview was with the Blackford High School newspaper. I had no doubt Jordan picked out the B.H.S. reporter so I could ease into my life in the spotlight.

“Hi, Cedi. I’m Auddie,” the girl said.

“Yeah, I remember you.”

Auddie looked over toward Jordan, where he was speaking in front of a camera.

“It’s kind of overwhelming to be around them, isn’t it?” I said.

“Yeah.”

“Why don’t we sit over here?”

I led Auddie to one of the tables that had been set up on the stage. We both took a seat. Auddie was visibly nervous.

“So, what would you like to ask me?” I prompted.

“Oh. Um...what does it feel like to be joining *Phantom* for the tour? Were you a fan before you met them?”

I began speaking, and my lack of ease completely disappeared. Auddie didn't ask any personal questions. She stuck with questions about the tour, the music, and how I felt about it all. By the end, we were talking and laughing as though we'd known each other for a long time.

The next reporter was from a local radio station. The station broke into its programming to do a live interview with me. It was a little freaky to know lots and lots of people were listening as I spoke, but I soon forgot about that and just talked.

Talking in front of a camera took a bit more nerve, but I liked it! At the end of my first TV interview, I ran up to the camera, stared right into the lens and shouted, "Come and watch me on stage!"

Everything went more or less smoothly until the MTV reporter asked me a totally unexpected question.

"You've been seen with novelist, Thad T. Thomas. Is it true the two of you are dating?"

How the hell did MTV know about that?

"No. I am not dating Thad T. Thomas. I'm not dating anyone."

"But you have been seen with him."

"Yes. As you probably know, Thad lives here in Blackford. I've lived here a few months now. I've met a lot of great people. I haven't had the chance to hang out with as many of them as I would like, but I have been able to spend time with a few like Thad and some of the guys from my high school."

Thankfully, the reporter didn't press me on the Thad issue. Instead, he asked what it felt like to leave high school and join *Phantom*. I thought I'd handled the Thad question quite well. He'd dumped me, so I could truthfully answer that we weren't a couple.

The questions continued. Jordan had accurately predicted most of them. Even with so few reporters I found myself answering the same questions over and over again. Luckily, the Thad question came up only once. It was a reminder that my private life was no longer quite so private as before.

The funniest questions involved my hair. I was asked why I'd dyed it black, did I plan to grow it long like Jordan and Ross, and what was my natural color? Jordan rolled his eyes at me when the reporter wasn't looking. I was sure he'd had more than his share of hair questions.

It was time for supper by the time all the interviews were wrapped up. I was starving.

"I had no idea doing interviews would take so long," I said to Ross as we walked back toward the flat.

"That was nothing. Sometimes, it takes all day. Just wait until you do your first photo shoot. You'll be bouncing off the walls."

Kieran, Jordan, and Ross were beginning to feel kind of like my big brothers, at least so far as in taking me under their wings. I wasn't that much younger than they were. I was eighteen, and they were all about twenty-two. Ross actually seemed more like he was fourteen, except for the fact he was sexy as hell. He often acted like a little boy, but he had a man's body. And what a nice bum. Mmm.

I had supper with the guys—steak this time—and then we practiced a bit more. I was worn out by the time Ralph drove me home. It had been an incredible day.