

# *This Time Around*

November 1998

Jordan

Ralph and I stepped into the South Bend terminal, glad to be back on the ground and in Indiana once again. We'd packed light, but I was still weighted down with two heavy bags. It was a good thing, too. Just as we rounded a corner, a teen boy plowed into me and would have sent me flying if the bags hadn't steadied me. The boy bounced off my chest and landed flat on his butt.

"I'm so sorry!" he said. "I was..." He froze when his eyes met mine. "You're... You're... You're him!"

"I'm Jordan," I said, dropping my bags and extending my hand. The boy seemed reluctant to take it, but finally grasped my fingers with his own. I helped him to his feet.

"I'm Joel."

"It's very nice to meet you, Joel," I said, shaking his hand.

"I can't believe you're talking to me," he said.

"Why not?" I laughed.

"Because you're...you're Jordan!"

"Well, I can't argue with that," I grinned.

"I can't believe I ran right into you like that! I'm such a dork!"

Ralph laughed. "Then join the club, that's how we met."

Joel turned to Ralph, looking surprised, as if he hadn't noticed him before.

"Wow, Jordan's boyfriend."

"Most people just call me Ralph."

"Oh, yeah, I'm sorry, man."

"It's not a problem." Ralph was grinning.

"Did you guys really meet like you said, by bumping into each other?"

"Yeah," said Ralph, "we came around a corner at the same time and WHAM!"

Joel smiled. He had beautiful, perfectly straight, white teeth.

"Oh, uh...this is my mom," said Joel, nodding his head in the direction of a woman in her mid-thirties who was just behind him.

"I'm glad you remembered I was here," she said. "I'm Marcie." She shook our hands.

"I'm Jordan, and this is Ralph."

"Wow," said Joel, looking at us. He was clearly overwhelmed. It was a reaction I'd gotten used to, although I never understood why meeting me was such a big deal.

“Joel has posters of you all over his room.”

“Mom!” Joel turned red.

Marcie grinned slightly. “I think I’ll go on before I embarrass Joel any more. Nice to meet you. Don’t be long, Joel, our flight leaves in a few minutes.” Marcie walked toward a ticket counter.

“Um. I, uh...I want to tell you something,” said Joel, nervously looking around to see if anyone was listening. “I never thought I’d get the chance to tell you in person, but since you’re here... Well, anyway, when you announced you were gay at that big press conference, I just couldn’t believe how brave you were. I’ve always thought you were awesome, but when I found out you were gay, too... I mean, wow. It gave me the courage to come out to my parents. I’d never told them because I was so afraid they’d hate me or something, but you know what? They said they loved me. They said they didn’t care as long as I was happy! I have a boyfriend now and everything and my parents even love him! Although I have to keep the door to my room open when he’s over.” Joel rolled his eyes. “Everything is cool now. None of it would have happened without you.”

Joel spontaneously moved forward to hug me, then pulled back as if suddenly realizing he was doing something he shouldn’t do. I smiled and embraced him.

“Thank you so much for telling me,” I said. “That really means a lot to me. I’m so happy for you.”

When I released Joel he was beaming and slightly pink.

“Flight 1211 to Houston is now boarding.”

“Shit, that’s my flight. It was so cool to meet you, Jordan. You too, Ralph.” He shook both our hands. “I’ll remember this forever.”

Joel started to walk away, and then ran back. “I almost forgot. Can I have your autograph?”

“Um, sure,” I said, trying to think of what I could sign. Joel handed me his ticket folder and I wrote Joel, your boyfriend is a lucky guy. You’re a cutie, Jordan. Joel had Ralph sign it too, then sped off to catch his flight.

“Cutie, huh?” said Ralph. “Should I be jealous?”

“Never!” I said. “Even if I did like fifteen year olds, I’d never trade you in.”

Ralph laughed.

Before we could make it to the car rental counter, a girl of about sixteen or seventeen gave a shriek and ran towards me.

“Oh my God!” she said. “I can’t believe you’re here! You are my favorite singer!” I was impatient to get to Verona, but I tried to make time for the fans whenever possible. They were the reason I was able to spend my life living my dream of making music, after all.

“Hi, um?” I said, when I could get a word in.

“I’m Zoe. Could I have your autograph? I just love your music!” Zoe had a machine-gun approach to speaking. She fired off one string of words after the next, seemingly without taking a breath. “Your brothers are soooo cute, especially Zac, but you are way hotter than either of them. And, I just love MMMBOP.”

Ralph snickered beside me, and then bit his lower lip and looked away so he wouldn’t burst out laughing. This had happened to me before. I liked to think of it as

a lesson in humility. Zoe had obviously mistaken me for someone else.

“Um, Zoe,” I said, when I could work a word in edgewise, “I hate to tell you this, but I’m not Taylor Hanson. I’m Jordan Potter, with Phantom.”

Zoe grew instantly silent and a horrified look descended upon her face.

“I’m so sorry!” she said. “I thought... Oh, this is so embarrassing.”

“It’s okay,” I said grinning.

“I love your music, too, and I’m not just saying that. I don’t know what I was thinking. I’m so stupid!”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. It’s okay. I’m just sorry to disappoint you.”

“Oh. I’m not... I mean... Oh dear. Could I still have your autograph?”

“Sure,” I said, taking the slip of paper and pen she handed me. I wrote, “To Zoe, Jordan (not Taylor)” and drew a little smiley face. Zoe went on her way, a bit red faced.

Ralph allowed himself a small laugh when she was out of earshot. “Well, Taylor... I mean Jordan, shall we go?”

“I think Ross is beginning to rub off on you,” I told him.

“You’re just lucky Ross isn’t here. You’d never hear the end of it.”

“Isn’t that the truth?” I said. “And don’t you dare tell him!”

Ralph grinned.

We rented a sporty little red convertible and set off for Verona without further incident. Ethan had volunteered to come and pick us up at the airport, but we didn’t want him going to all that trouble. We’d be putting him and Nathan out enough by staying with them. Besides, we needed a car to get around during our visit.

“Look at those colors,” I said, admiring the late fall foliage. A good many leaves were already on the ground, but those that lingered were stunning. I took a breath of fresh country air. It was good to be back.

“Nothin’ like that back in California,” said Ralph.

“This is beautiful.”

“Just wait until Christmas. We’ll be seeing pine trees and snow, instead of palms and bikinis.”

“Yeah, I never cared much for bikinis anyway. Now Speedos—That’s another story.”

Ralph grinned.

“I’m so looking forward to this,” I said.

“Yeah, after a whole summer in L.A., it’s going to be relaxing hanging out on a farm. Mmmm, I wonder what we’ll have for supper. I hope Ethan fries some chicken.”

“Oh, yeah! With mashed potatoes and those rolls like Nathan made last time.”

“I wouldn’t mind some cobbler either.”

“You know, after a few days with the guys, we’re going to have to go on a diet,” I said.

“Yeah, right! Like you’ve ever had to diet. If I didn’t love you, I’d hate you for that.”

“I can’t help it. It’s my metabolism!”

“It’s okay. I do love you, so you’re safe.”

It felt weird being behind the wheel of a car. I almost never drove anywhere. Even when we were in a car instead of a tour bus or limousine, Ralph usually did the driving. It was a nice change. I was thinking about buying a truck, or maybe one of those SUV's, something with four-wheel drive that I could get in the mud. Of course, I'd rarely have the time to drive it, but I still wanted one.

We had the top down on the convertible and the brisk fall wind whipped through our hair. The air was slightly chill, but refreshing. I grew quiet as the miles slipped by, taking us farther and farther south.

"You okay?" asked Ralph.

"Yeah. A little nervous, but okay."

We hadn't come on this trip just to visit Ethan and Nathan. I'd been thinking a lot about my dad, ever since Nick—Ethan and Nathan's son—had sent me Dad's journal barely a week before. It was the journal that'd inspired our trip to Verona, although we'd already planned to come back to Indiana for the holidays. We merely departed earlier and altered course a little, flying to South Bend instead of Evansville.

I'd read Dad's words over and over. I'd learned so much about him from his journal entries, but there was still so much I didn't know. When we'd visited Verona before, at the beginning of the summer, we hadn't stayed long. I'd taken in some of the sights, like my dad's old high school and his grave, but I wanted to see more. I wanted to experience the little town that Dad had lived in when he was my age. Actually, I was a little older than him already. Dad died when he was only sixteen. He was just a boy really, just beginning his life. It was weird to think that I was now a year older than my dad. Well, I guess I wasn't really, but still...

Ralph reached over and put his hand on mine. He pulled it to his lips and kissed it. I took his hand and squeezed it. I knew that whatever might come, Ralph would be by my side.

It felt like much less than an hour had passed when we reached Verona. We drove straight out to the Selby farm. I found it with little trouble. The last time we visited (which was also the first time) the corn was just getting knee high. Now, nearly all of it had been harvested and the fields were open and clear. The farm was no less charming than before; it possessed a tranquil beauty that helped set me at ease. I stepped out of the car and drew in a huge breath of fresh air.

"Mmm, smells like fall," I said.

"And it doesn't smell like smog."

A rich, earthy scent rode the light breeze, speaking to me of tilled earth, fallen leaves, and horses running in the pasture. Despite the time I'd spent with the Selbys and on Ralph's farm, country life was a novelty to me. I'd been living in big cities for so long I'd almost forgotten the true beauty of nature.

"Jordan! Ralph!" Nick came running to us and clasped his hands around my middle. He gave Ralph a hug, too.

"I can't believe you guys are really here!"

"I told you we'd come back, didn't I?"

"Yeah!" Nick beamed.

Nick was a good-looking guy, probably just a little younger than Ralph or me.

He was a Phantom fan and could be a bit too exuberant, but I couldn't help but like him. He certainly wasn't any worse than most of my fans and he was as friendly as he could be.

Nick pulled us along the concrete sidewalk, past the screened in front porch, through the back door and into the kitchen. "They're here!" he announced needlessly.

Ethan stepped away from the stove for a moment. He was indeed frying chicken. He hugged us both. I felt something special when he hugged me, almost like he was my dad in a way. Nick was very lucky that Ethan and Nathan had adopted him.

Nathan gave us both a hug, too. Sean, Nick's boyfriend, who we'd met last time, was leaning up against the kitchen cabinets. He shyly shook our hands and smiled. I think I scared him a little. That sometimes happened, because I was famous. I never quite understood why my fame induced fear, but I guess some people just didn't know how to react. They didn't realize that under all the hype, I was just an ordinary guy.

"Lemme show you to your room," said Nick, full of enthusiasm. He led us up the stairs. "You're using my room, just like last time."

"I hate to put you out," I said.

"Oh, you're not putting me out. There are guest rooms, but I want you guys to use mine! It makes it...kinda special." Nick pointed to a cardboard sign on his wall that read, "Jordan and Ralph Slept Here." I smiled. I suspected it was a joke, but with Nick, I wasn't so sure. I didn't want to laugh and embarrass him. I had the feeling he thought of his room as a historic site. Kind of like those colonial homes with the signs reading "George Washington Slept Here."

We dropped our bags. Nick still had his Phantom insignia poster hanging on the wall, the one I'd autographed for him last time. He had even more Phantom stuff displayed than before. There were all kinds of posters and pictures from magazines taped and tacked to the walls.

"You know, you don't have to put all this stuff up just because we were coming," I teased.

Nick smiled. "You know I didn't! I'm your biggest fan!"

"You're my friend," I said. I hoped Nick would calm down a bit and see me as just another person, instead of a rock star.

"Um, I think supper will be ready in about half an hour. The bathroom's down the hall. Well, you know that. Anyway, I'll leave you two alone for a while. I'm so glad you're here!"

Nick disappeared.

"I think that boy likes you," said Ralph. "I hope he doesn't try to steal my boyfriend."

"I don't think Sean would like that."

"The question is, would you?" Ralph grinned.

"Nah, I already have my own farm boy. One is enough for me."

I pulled Ralph to me and kissed him on the lips.

\*\*\*

"Pass me those mashed potatoes!" I said.

I was already working on fried chicken, corn, and cooked apples and I couldn't get enough. It was my second helping of mashed potatoes and there'd likely be a third.

"Another roll, Jordan?" asked Nathan.

"Oh yeah! Pass me one of those babies."

"This is so delicious. You guys cook as good as my mom," said Ralph. "Just don't tell her I said that!"

"Your secret is safe with us," said Nathan, as he reached over and squeezed Ethan's hand. The love between them was obvious and had been burning strong since they were younger than Ralph and me. They must have been something back then. They still were, even now. They were both in their early to mid-thirties, but they didn't look it. Nathan had thick blond hair and a youthful face that made him look more like a college boy than a man old enough to be my dad. Ethan—he was something else. If his dark hair and handsome features weren't enough, he was built. I wished I could be half as buff as him. What I wished most of all, however, is that Ralph and I would be together when we were their ages. I loved Ralph with all my heart, but who knew what the future might bring?

We were far too busy eating to talk much, but we did chat some as we stuffed ourselves. I felt so at home in the farmhouse. It reminded me a lot of Ralph's farm. I wondered if our own home would have the same feel. Ralph and I now owned a little log cabin in southern Indiana, in the wild woods of Pike County. At last, we had our own place; a real home where we could live when I wasn't on tour or in the recording studio. We wouldn't have much time to spend there, but it would be nice to have a place to call home—someplace that'd always be there, waiting on us, no matter where in the world we might be. It was especially important to me, since I spent so much time living in hotels, rented houses, and the tour bus. The last real home I could remember was when my mom and I lived in a little house in Georgia for a while. I was thirteen then, I think. Before that we'd moved around all over the place, living in run-down houses, trailers, and even cheap motel rooms. I felt like I'd been on tour all my life.

I could only vaguely remember living in Indiana. That was no surprise. I think we lived in Indiana from the time I was born until I was four or five. It was before I started school anyway. It was some little town near Indianapolis. I didn't even remember the name. The only thing I could really remember was that Mom had to keep the stairs blocked off because I liked climbing on the banisters. She called me her "little monkey." I sighed. I hadn't talked to Mom in months. Sometimes I wasn't sure she cared.

"Thanks so much for sending my dad's journal," I said. Nick would never know how truly special that journal was to me. It was valuable beyond price.

"Thank Sean. He's the one who found it," said Nick.

"Yeah, that's right," I said, remembering the letter Nick had sent with the journal. "Sean, if you ever need anything, you let me know."

"Well, I know a really big fan of yours. I'm sure he'd just die if you kissed him on the cheek. Wouldn't you, Nick?"

Nick turned beet red. Sean had a devilish glint in his eye. Nick was sitting next to me, so I leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“You can die happy now, Nick,” teased Sean.

“You’re gonna get it later,” threatened Nick.

“Oh, baby!” said Sean.

“That’s not what I meant!” said Nick, his cheeks reddening even more as he glanced nervously at his dads. Ethan and Nathan only grinned at their son’s embarrassment.

“Seriously, though, Sean, that journal means more to me than just about anything. If you need anything, call me. I owe you big.”

Sean just smiled.

I felt comfortable sitting there. I was with family. I wasn’t related to a single soul at that table, but family was about a lot more than genetics. Ethan was the closest thing I had to a dad. I hadn’t known him all that long, but there was something there. He just seemed fatherly. He’d known my dad, too. I almost couldn’t believe that the handsome man sitting at the table had been one of my dad’s boyhood friends.

“I don’t know if this is the time to bring it up,” I said, “but there’s something I’ve been wondering…” I paused; butterflies had just taken wing in my stomach. “Are my dad’s parents…still around? Are they still alive?” It was a big question for me, one I hadn’t dared ask on our last visit. I wasn’t even sure I was ready for the answer now.

Ethan looked into my eyes. “Yes. They’re both still living, although I guess they’re in their early to mid 60’s by now.”

“Do you know where they are?”

“Right where they’ve always been. People in Verona tend to stay put. I saw Mrs. Potter in the grocery just last week. We didn’t speak. We never do. I sometimes think that seeing me is a painful reminder of her past. I’m not exactly comfortable around her or her husband, either.” A flash of anger temporarily altered Ethan’s features, but it was gone as quickly as it had come.

I nodded. I could well understand. When my grandfather threw my dad out of the house, it started a chain of events that led to disaster. In only a few hours, my dad had taken his own life. That caused Mark, my dad’s boyfriend, to kill himself too. Ethan was close to both of them, especially Mark. I didn’t doubt that he still blamed my grandparents for the death of his friends. A part of me was angry with them, too. If it weren’t for what they’d done, maybe I wouldn’t have grown up without a father. Part of me wanted to meet them. They were my grandparents after all. Part of me never wanted to see them. I wasn’t sure I could forgive them for what they’d done all those years ago. Whether or not I saw them was a decision I intended to make while staying on the farm. It was one of the main reasons I’d come—to quiet the ghosts of my past.

Ralph took my hand and squeezed it. He understood. Throughout my entire life, I’d wondered about my father. Mom never told me much about him. I think the memories were too painful for her. I guess I could understand that. In recent months, I’d discovered more about Dad than I ever thought I would: first through the pages of his boyfriend’s journal, then by reading his own. I still had questions. There was so much I didn’t know about him. That’s why I’d returned to Verona—to walk where he walked and to talk with those he actually knew.

I put aside my thoughts for a while and lost myself in the moment. The kitchen

was warm and filled with the scent of home cooking and freshly baked bread. We talked of the farm and the simple things that life was all about. I found myself wishing I could just stay there forever.

We polished off all the mashed potatoes and nearly demolished the chicken. Even so, when Nathan pulled out a blackberry cobbler, we greedily set out to devour it. The vanilla ice cream on top made it especially tasty. The whole meal was delicious. I'd eaten in the very best restaurants in New York City and in L.A., and they didn't have anything on Ethan and Nathan. If I stayed with them too long I'd have to hire a personal trainer. I doubted that even my metabolism could burn up that many calories.

We had hot blackberry tea with our cobbler. It made me feel all comfy and cozy. The whole farm made me feel that way. It was unlike the rest of my life. There were no paparazzi trying to get my picture, no screaming fans, no one pushing photos at me to sign. I could just relax and talk with friends. Nick had a crazed-fan feel to him, but only to a certain degree. He was mellowing out nicely. On our last trip, I'd given him my address, e-mail address, and a phone number where he could reach me. Now, I was back in his home. I think knowing that he could reach me pretty much anytime he wanted helped him to calm down. He'd been so thrilled when we first met that he followed me around like a puppy. It was a little annoying. Now, he was merely excited and I was more comfortable around him. He was a great kid. I chuckled to myself. I thought of Nick as a kid, and yet he was probably only a few months younger than me.

I was a little concerned by the glint in Nick's eye. I could feel something when he looked at me. I had the distinct impression that he was physically attracted to me. I hoped it didn't become a problem. He surely knew that nothing would happen. I was totally devoted to Ralph. Nick had a boyfriend, too. Sean was kind of quiet, but there was something inherently likeable about him. I could tell he was excited to meet me, and yet he treated me like he would anyone else. I liked that. I wanted to get to know him better, if there was time.

After supper, we made our way to the living room and chatted for a couple of hours. Ethan and Nathan talked more about life on the farm, which I found fascinating. I talked a little about the new CD that Ross, Kieran, and I were putting together, but mostly we talked of ordinary, everyday stuff. It was wonderful.

That night, I lay in an antique bed beside Ralph, breathing in the scent of polished wood and clean sheets. I slept with Ralph almost every night, but I never failed to appreciate how truly lucky I was to have him in my life. Some people searched their entire lives for love without finding it, but I was still young and had already found it.

I was lucky in a lot of ways. I was able to follow my dreams and spend my days making music. I was famous. I was rich. All of that paled when compared to having Ralph. If I had to give up all but one thing I loved in my life, it was Ralph I'd keep. There was no doubt about it. He was more important to me than even my music, and that was saying something.

Ralph was drifting off, but I was strangely wakeful. I should've been tired after the flight, the drive, and my evening with the guys, but I was as wide-awake as if I'd just arisen from a good night's sleep.

“I’m going to check some email,” I said, as I kissed Ralph on the forehead and slipped out of bed. Ralph mumbled something, but was already sleeping. His chest gently rose and fell and his regular breathing hinted at sweet dreams.

I pulled out my laptop and plugged it into the phone jack. Luckily, I had an 800-access number so I didn’t have to worry about running up Ethan and Nathan’s phone bill. I signed into my email account and quickly browsed through the new messages. There weren’t many. Only a handful of friends had my private email address. I didn’t even use it for business.

The farmhouse was dark and quiet. I was reminded of a line from *A Visit From Saint Nicholas*, “Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.” Well, I was stirring. I was just too keyed up to sleep. That sometimes happened, but usually before a concert. Normally, I was so tired I slept like the dead.

I decided to check out some chat rooms. Ralph had told me about talking to people on the internet, but I’d never done so myself. I was generally far too busy for such things. It was kind of an interesting concept, however, talking to someone by typing to them.

I couldn’t believe the number of chat rooms. There were dozens of them, maybe even hundreds. I worked my way into the music section. There, near the top of the list, were five different Phantom chat rooms. I was surprised, but then again, I’d never stopped to think that people might be chatting about our group on the internet.

Hmm—should I? I thought. Why not? What could it hurt?

I entered “Phantom Fans Rule” under the username of JT-1998, which stands for Jordan Taylor, my first and middle names. I just threw in the rest because JT was too short and already taken. There were about fifty people in the room and messages appeared on the screen pretty quickly. It was a little hard to keep up because there seemed to be more than one conversation going on at once and I wasn’t sure who was talking to whom. I laughed softly at the main conversation. Didn’t people have better things to talk about?

Phantomgurl\_873: Don’t you just LOVE Jordan’s hair?

Jordans\_boy\_785: Oh yeah! I dream about running my fingers through it.

Phantomgurl\_873: You’re soooo lucky JB cause Jordan is gay.

Jordans\_boy\_785: Yeah right! Like he’d ever look twice at me.

Phantomgurl\_873: At least you’ve got a shot at him, although I secretly hope he’s bi.

Jordans\_boy\_785: You never know.

Phantomgurl\_873: Someone said he was cutting his hair, like REAL short.

Jordans\_boy\_785: Noooooooo! He can’t do that!

Abercrombiejock46: That’s just a stupid rumor.

Phantomgurl\_873: I HOPE SO!

Susie\_cat: Don’t yell, Phantomgurl.

Phantomgurl\_873: Sorry, it just upsets me.

Susie\_cat: It’s only hair.

Jordans\_boy\_785: But it’s Jordan’s hair! He can’t cut it, it’s soooo sexy!

Phantomgurl\_873: You got that right, JB.

Devilboy\_209: Jordan’s a fag and Phantom SUCKS!

Jordans\_boy\_785: Shut up, Devilboy!

Devilboy\_209: They can't even sing. Why don't you people listen to real music?  
Phantomgurl\_873: Phantom is the best!  
Jordans\_boy\_785: You go gurl!  
Devilboy\_209: I hate Phantom! They sing like girls! Fuckin' queers.  
Phantomgurl\_873: Then why are you here, Devilboy? This is a Phantom Room.  
Devilboy\_209: I wanted to see what losers chat about. Jordan's hair! LOL  
Jordans\_boy\_785: Fuck off, Devilboy.  
Devilboy\_209: I'm so scared, you fag.  
Phantomgurl\_873: Just put him on ignore.  
Jordans\_boy\_785: K  
Devilboy\_209: Don't bother, losers. I have a life. BYE  
Phantomgurl\_873: Creep.  
Jordans\_boy\_785: Hey, when you think the new CD is coming out?  
Phantomgurl\_873: I heard real soon, like Christmas.  
Jordans\_boy\_785: I wish they'd do a Christmas CD. Hanson did one and it rocked!  
Phantomgurl\_873: Yeah, I loved "Snowed In", but it would be awesome if Phantom did one.  
Jordans\_boy\_785: Don't you think Jordan looks a lot like Gil Ofarim?  
Phantomgurl\_873: Who's that?  
Jordans\_boy\_785: You don't know Gil Ofarim? He's this heavenly singer from Germany. He has long, blond hair like Jordan, but his is darker. You gotta get his CD. The Moffatts did a song with him. You do know them, don't you?  
Phantomgurl\_873: Of course I do. I have a weakness for cute boys with long hair. Dave has short hair, but he's still a cutie. Scott, Bob, and Clint are sooo sexy.  
Jordans\_boy\_785: You got that right! Hey, don't you think Jordan looks a lot like Taylor Hanson, too?  
Phantomgurl\_873: Yeah, he does. I've never been able to decide which is cuter.  
Jordans\_boy\_785: Jordan is cuter!  
Phantomgurl\_873: I knew you'd say that.  
Jordans\_boy\_785: Jordan's hotter than any of 'em! I'm not knocking the others, but wow!  
Phantomgurl\_873: LOL  
Jordans\_boy\_785: I have dreams about Jordan.  
Phantomgurl\_873: I bet you do, LOL.  
Jordans\_boy\_785: I'll tell you about them, but not in the room.  
Phantomgurl\_873: K, let's go private.

I kind of felt like I was eavesdropping as I read the screen. They were talking about me and had no idea I was listening in, or whatever you call it. What was up with everyone talking about my hair? Whenever we did a press conference or interview there was always the inevitable hair question. It just astounded me that anyone would care about something so meaningless. It didn't make me angry, but I just didn't understand it.

"Devilboy" sure had the right name. His comments didn't bother me, though; I'd heard plenty like that before. You couldn't be in the public eye without someone going off on you.

Suddenly, a little box popped up on my screen and I heard a chime. Inside the box was a message from someone called "Number\_1\_Phantom\_fan." It said, "Hey,

what's up?"

I just sat there for a few moments, not sure what to do. I didn't know it was even possible to send a message like that. Finally, I typed, "Not much, just looking around."

Almost immediately, another message appeared, "Cool, you into Phantom?"

"Yeah, I guess you could say that," I typed.

"They rule," typed Number\_1\_Phantom\_fan. "Who's your favorite?"

"I don't really have a favorite."

"Jordan is mine! Ross and Kieran are totally cool, but Jordan's a babe and oh can he sing!"

I felt a little weird talking to someone about myself, especially when they didn't know it was me.

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen," said Number\_1\_Phantom\_fan. "You?"

"Same. You a guy or girl?"

"Guy. You?"

"I'm a guy."

I hope you don't mind me asking, but are you gay or straight?"

"I'm gay," I typed.

"Me, too. I know a lot of straight guys who are into Phantom, but most of 'em are gay."

"Yeah, I guess," I said.

"Do you have a pic to trade?"

"Huh?"

"A picture of you?"

"Oh, no, sorry."

"Want to see me?"

"Um, sure."

For a few seconds nothing happened, but then a message appeared on the screen asking if I wanted to accept a file. I clicked "okay." Several seconds later it finished downloading and I clicked "open." The picture was of an ordinary, but kind looking guy with brown hair and eyes. He was wearing a Phantom shirt.

"What do you think?" typed Number\_1\_Phantom\_fan.

"You're handsome," I said.

"No, I'm not, but thanks for saying it."

"You are," I typed. It was true. Sure, he'd never be a model, but the world had too many of those already. He looked just fine.

"I'm Hunter," said Number\_1\_Phantom\_fan.

I paused for a moment. Should I give him my real name? I didn't want to reveal who I really was. Then again, there were plenty of Jordan's in the world.

"I'm Jordan," I said.

"Awesome name! What do you look like?"

Uh oh, I thought. Now what do I do? I didn't want to lie, but I didn't want him guessing who I was—not that he'd be likely to believe me if I told him.

"I look a lot like Jordan from Phantom."

“Are you shitting me?”

“No.”

“You must be gorgeous then!”

I giggled.

“I look okay.”

“If you look like Jordan, you look more than okay. He’s the hottest boy alive.”

I started feeling guilty again—like I was reading Hunter’s diary.

“I think he’d rather be liked for his music,” I typed.

“Oh, I do! I heard Phantom on the radio and ran right out and bought the CD. I loved the music even before I knew what the guys looked like.”

“That’s cool.”

“Yeah. They are all totally hot, but I’d love their music if they were butt-ugly.”

I was starting to like Hunter even more. What I really liked is that I could talk to him as just a regular guy. I hadn’t been able to talk to anyone like that in as long as I could remember. I felt like I’d made a new friend.

“You go to high school?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m a junior. You?”

“I don’t go to high school. I guess you could say I’m home-schooled.”

“I’ve heard of that, is it cool?”

We talked about what it’s like having tutors instead of attending school, and I asked some questions about what life in high school was like. I was so engrossed in talking to Hunter that I forgot all about the Phantom chat room.

“You have a boyfriend?” asked Hunter.

“Yeah, you?”

“No way. I wish. I want one so bad, but I’ll never find one.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I’m a fat-ass.”

“You aren’t fat.”

“Yeah, I am. No one wants a fat boy.”

“I’ve seen your picture. You aren’t fat. You’re not skinny, but you’re not fat.”

“You’re just being nice.”

“No, really.” I was being a little nice. Hunter was on the chubby side, but I wanted to pump him up a bit. His opinion of himself was too low. “Well, I think you look just fine. You should be able to find a boyfriend.”

“Yeah, right! I’m fat and will probably die alone. I bet you’re nice and slim and have a boyfriend that’s some kind of jock or something.”

“My boyfriend is kind of chubby.”

“Really?”

“Yes, and I love him SO much.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“No, I’m not. I promise. He’s a little chubby and it doesn’t matter to me. I love the way he looks. I’d love him no matter what he looked like. It’s what’s inside that matters.”

“You’re really nice, Jordan.”

“You are too, Hunter. Don’t be so down on yourself. I bet you’ve got plenty to

offer.”

“It’s hard not to be down on myself. I always have been.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be. I don’t really know you, but you seem pretty cool to me,”

I typed.

“If you didn’t have a boyfriend, would you date me?”

“I might, but that would depend on your personality, not your looks.”

“You’re saying looks don’t matter at all? I wish it was like that, but it’s just not true,” typed Hunter.

“I’m not saying they don’t matter at all. They do matter, but personality matters a whole lot more. I’d rather have a kind, sweet, ordinary looking guy than a totally gorgeous guy who was a dick.”

“Yeah, I guess I get what you mean. So, you look kind of like Jordan? Do you have long hair like him?”

“Yep, real long.”

“Wow. That’s so cool.”

“It can be a pain. It takes a long time to wash, dry, and brush. I like my hair long, but I often wonder if it’s worth it.”

“Oh man, I LOVE dudes with long hair.”

“Where do you live?” I asked, hoping to distract him from the topic of hair. We’d already discussed it more than enough as far as I was concerned.

“Indiana.”

“Really? Cool. I’m in Indiana.” Right after I’d typed it, I wondered if I’d made a mistake. I was forgetting that I shouldn’t be totally honest.

“Sweet! Where at?”

“A little town called Verona. I’m sure you’ve never heard of it.”

“Nope.”

“It’s in northwest Indiana.”

“I’m in the northeast. The nearest big town is Fort Wayne.”

“Cool.”

We talked for an hour more, mostly about Hunter’s inability to find a boyfriend. He had some real issues with his appearance. I felt sorry for him, not so much because he was having trouble finding someone, but because of his self-image. I thought it must be horrible for him to go through life thinking he was ugly. When I told him he wasn’t, he simply couldn’t or wouldn’t believe it.

Before we signed off, Hunter typed, “Thanks for talking to me, you’re cool, you make me feel better about myself.” That made me feel really good. Hunter seemed like such a sweet guy. I wished he could see it.

I shut off the computer and undressed for bed. I looked at myself in the mirror. I didn’t like seeing myself naked. Where Hunter thought he was fat, I thought I was too skinny. Well, not really skinny, but I could’ve used more muscle. I didn’t need to be all buff like Ethan, but I wouldn’t have minded to have a little more muscle here and there. I guess everyone had something they didn’t like about their body. Still, I had a pretty good self-image. I guess having so many people say I was gorgeous helped with that, not that I believed them. I wished Hunter could hear someone say he was hot—and believe it.

I climbed into bed beside Ralph. I knew I was lucky to have him, but talking to Hunter made that even more obvious. I snuggled up against my boyfriend and was soon fast asleep.

## Ralph

By the time Jordan and I awakened, showered, dressed, and walked downstairs, most everyone was gone. Sean had gone home the night before. Nick was at school. And Ethan was already out and about doing farm work.

“What can I fix you two for breakfast?” asked Nathan.

“We can get something in town. You don’t have to feed us all the time,” said Jordan. “We don’t want to put you out.”

“Nonsense,” said Nathan. “It’s no trouble at all. How about some scrambled eggs, toast, and bacon?”

“That does sound good,” said Jordan.

“How can we help?” I asked.

“Are you any good with toast?” asked Nathan.

“Jordan’s not, but I am.”

“Hey!”

“I love you, Jordan, but we both know you can’t cook.”

Jordan laughed. “That’s only because no one ever taught me.”

“Okay, then today’s lesson is toast,” I said. “Maybe tomorrow we can move on to eggs.”

“And then pancakes?”

“Let’s not get crazy.”

“Funny!”

While Nathan scrambled eggs and fried bacon, I cut thick slices of bread from a homemade loaf. It smelled delicious and we hadn’t even toasted it yet. Jordan smeared on butter and slid the slices into a little toaster oven.

Nathan fixed eggs like I’d never seen them prepared before. When they were mostly done, he added hunks of cheese. While that was melting, he cut fresh chives from a pot on the windowsill and chopped them up fine. He stirred the chives into the eggs and cheese and added salt and pepper. It smelled heavenly.

The timer dinged and Jordan pulled out the first slices of toast from the oven. They were golden brown.

“Who says I can’t cook!”

“You’re a true chef, Babe.”

In a few minutes’ time we all sat down to a nice, big breakfast. It was so much better than our usual fare. In many ways, Ethan, Nathan, and Nick were the ones who lived in the lap of luxury.

We helped clean up after breakfast, despite Nathan’s protests. I almost felt like I was back home on Mom and Dad’s farm. That reminded me that I needed to give them a call soon. I never went more than a week without calling my mom. I was out of high school, but she still thought I was her baby. I had the feeling she’d still think

that when I was fifty.

We returned to Nick's room and Jordan pulled out a blue flannel shirt from one of his bags and slipped it on.

"How do I look?"

"Beautiful."

"I mean, will I blend in? Do I look like a farm boy?"

"Babe, you'll never look like a farm boy, but you might blend in."

Jordan looked so very handsome. He was wearing a pair of faded and worn jeans, well-worn sneakers, and a royal blue T-shirt, with the blue-plaid flannel shirt over it. Still, he didn't look quite like an ordinary boy. There wasn't anything ordinary about Jordan.

"How about now?" he asked, after donning a "John Deere" baseball cap.

"Now, you fit in," I said.

I hoped we could walk around without being recognized. That was the trouble with having a famous boyfriend. We could almost never do anything normal. It was difficult to simply eat out. Shopping in a mall could easily turn into a mob scene. Verona was a very small town, however, and even if everyone descended on us at once, surely the crowd couldn't be too big.

I looked at Jordan's hair. No matter how good his disguise, it never failed to give him away. Not many seventeen-year-old guys had blond hair that reached the middle of their back. It caught the attention of most people—then they looked at Jordan's face and knew exactly who he was. I was a little nervous about Jordan going out in public without a bodyguard. He gave little thought to his own safety, but I was always a little worried that something would happen. I wondered how Mike, Jordan's bodyguard, was enjoying his vacation. He was probably spending it worrying about Jordan. Mike didn't want to go on vacation at all. Jordan had to force him. He sent him off to Barbados for several days of fun in the sun. No one deserved it more than Mike. He guarded Jordan 24/7 for months on end.

We hopped in our rental car and Jordan drove toward town. He passed his dad's old high school very slowly, but didn't go in. That would have created chaos. I could just imagine how all those kids would react if the most famous rock star in the entire world just walked into the cafeteria. Ethan said he could get Jordan into the school after hours so he could have a look around. The Phys Ed teacher/football coach was an old friend of his.

We parked the car, got out, and walked around downtown. It wasn't very big at all. It reminded me of the small towns around my old home in southern Indiana. On Main Street there was a barber shop, a couple of beauty parlors, a corner bar called *The Green Dragon* with a faded sign hanging out front with a large fire-breathing dragon painted on it, and two small restaurants called *Café Moffatt* and *The Iron Kettle*.

There were a few quaint shops along Main Street. We stopped at a little antique store and went inside. Jordan kind of liked old things. I think his world was so filled with high-tech instruments, recording equipment, limousines, and spotless hotels that he found more primitive stuff comfortable and homey.

His eyes fell on a big, old cupboard as we were browsing. It had to be at least seven feet tall and nearly as wide. I knew from the look on Jordan's face that he wouldn't leave the shop without owning it. Being able to buy anything you wanted was

one of the perks of being a rock star.

“You like it?” asked Jordan, as he ran his hand along one of the smooth doors.

“Yeah.”

“I love it,” he said.

A lady, who looked old enough to be an antique herself, came out of the back and walked toward us.

“Now that’s a very nice piece,” she said.

I liked the old lady immediately. She probably thought neither Jordan nor I could begin to afford anything. We were dressed in worn clothes and probably looked like a couple of teenagers who just had nothing to do, but she treated us as if we were the most important people in the world. I liked people who had respect for everyone else, no matter how they were dressed or how much money they had in their bank account.

“It’s beautiful,” said Jordan, “can you tell us about it?”

“It’s Cherry, constructed with pegs and square nails. You see the width of this board?” she said, indicating the side of the cupboard, which was about three feet wide. “It’s all one piece. You can’t even find a cherry tree that big nowadays. Most step-back cupboards were made to come apart, but this one doesn’t. It was made in the 1860’s or 70’s and came out of an old farmhouse.”

We looked it over. It was beautiful.

“You have a way of delivering it?” asked Jordan. “I’d need to get it to southern Indiana.”

“Yes, we have a shipment going to Evansville and then on to Nashville. Delivery on this piece would be \$100.”

That didn’t sound bad at all for delivering something so big and heavy so very far away. The price tag was \$2,200. I didn’t know much about antiques, so I didn’t know if that was high or not.

“We’ll take it,” said Jordan.

The old lady looked surprised. I don’t think she had any idea that we’d actually buy it.

We looked around some more. Jordan picked up what looked like a small china cookie jar decorated with little flowers. It was really pretty. The tag said it was a cracker jar, circa 1870. It was only \$45.

“Let’s get this too,” said Jordan.

We looked around at a lot of interesting things. It was a cool place—kind of like a museum, but things were for sale. The shop was decorated for Christmas. There were lights and sprayed on snow around the windows and a big Christmas tree standing in one corner. The tree was decorated with old-fashioned ornaments and bubble-lights. Christmas music was quietly playing in the background and there were even free Christmas cookies sitting on a large antique cake stand. I felt like it was December instead of November.

Jordan handed the shop owner his credit card and arranged for delivery of the cupboard and cracker jar. I think we made the shopkeeper’s day.

“I’ll throw in the cracker jar for free,” she said.

“Thanks,” said Jordan, “that’s very nice of you.”

We stopped in a few more shops on Main Street, mainly just looking around. It was a beautiful little town. After a couple of blocks, one side of the street opened up into a big park. Across the park was an old theater, The Paramount, another restaurant called The Park's Edge and a little ice cream shop & burger place called Ofarim's.

"Oh, we've got to go into Ofarim's," said Jordan. "Dad mentioned getting ice cream there in his journal."

We stepped into the shop and each ordered a vanilla cone. I nudged Jordan and pointed to a large framed poster with the Phantom insignia hanging on the wall. He rolled his eyes and I smiled.

We sat at a booth and took it all in. Ofarim's was decorated like a 1950's diner, with red checked tablecloths and art deco trim. About the only thing modern in there were some of the rock posters, like the big one of Phantom.

"My dad could've sat right in this booth," said Jordan. He was clearly experiencing a mixture of excitement, sadness, and awe. "It seems so...I don't know...weird being here. I mean, think about it—my dad actually ate ice cream here. Maybe he sat right where I'm sitting. Maybe his boyfriend even sat right where you are now. Just think, he was here and now I am. I feel sort of...connected, you know?"

"Yeah. You are connected. You're his son, after all. There's a lot of him in you."

"Yeah. It's kind of like a part of him is still living, right inside me," he said, running his fingertips over his heart.

I nodded and licked my ice cream cone. I was happy that Jordan could take this time to seek out his past. Being with him made me realize how lucky I was that I'd always had a mom and dad. Jordan had never met his father. His dad died before Jordan was born, not even knowing he'd have a son. It was too bad his dad hadn't known. Maybe he could've held on if he did. Maybe he wouldn't have killed himself. I guess it just went to show how suicide was such a tragic mistake. It was too final and there were too many unknowns. When Taylor killed himself, he triggered his boyfriend's suicide as well, and forever left his son without a father. He didn't know all that was going to happen, of course, and that was the danger of suicide. One never knew what unknown pain it would cause.

"God, I wish he was still alive," said Jordan.

"I know," I said, taking his hand. He squeezed my hand tightly, and then released it.

"I used to get mad at him for leaving me," said Jordan. "It really pissed me off that he was dead, especially since he killed himself. I kinda felt like he just left me. I know he didn't do it to hurt me, though, or anyone. I don't think anyone is thinking straight when they take their own life. I hate thinking of him going through that. He must have been in such terrible emotional pain."

"Hey, Jordan," I said, taking his chin in my hand and making him look at me. "All that's over. It's in the past. Your dad's in Heaven now, or wherever you go when you die. He's with Mark and they're happy. He wouldn't want you worrying over him."

"You really think he's in Heaven?" asked Jordan. "People say that suicides go to Hell." I could tell the thought disturbed and tormented him.

"I really think he's in Heaven. Why would anyone go to Hell for killing

themselves? If someone ends their own life, it's because they're in pain. They can't handle it. They're driven to it. I'd go so far as to say it's not even a conscious choice. People who kill themselves don't really do it themselves, you know? Something makes them. It's like they are murdered by their own lives. Anyway, I'm sure your dad is doing just fine. He's probably watching over you right now—him and Mark."

"Thanks, Ralph." Jordan's eyes were misty, but a slight smile turned up the corners of his mouth. Being there for him when he needed me made me feel warm inside.

We finished our ice cream and walked around town. Jordan soaked it all in, taking in every detail. He was walking in his father's footsteps, following him, in a way. I think it made him feel closer to him than ever.