

Second Star to the Right

Toby—Blackford High School—Late August 2003

“MAKE WAY!! COMING THROUGH!!”

Eddie and I threw ourselves flat against the lockers to avoid being plowed over, as a blue blur, followed by what looked like the entire football team, whooshed by.

“What the hell was that?” I asked in a state of mild shock.

“Dude, you apparently haven’t met Cedi yet,” Eddie said, pulling himself away from the wall now that the danger had passed.

“What’s a Cedi?”

“That’s a Cedi,” said Eddie, pointing to the now-distant figure racing down the hallway.

“I can’t say that I’ve had the pleasure.”

“You’re gonna love him, Toby.”

“Why?”

“I can’t tell you. Cedi must be experienced to be appreciated.”

Mackenzie, my little brother, came hurrying down the hall.

“Have you guys seen the boys’ locker room?” he asked.

“No.”

“Go take a look.”

Mackenzie went on his way, giggling.

“Let’s see what’s up,” said Eddie, pulling me toward the gymnasium. We crossed the polished wooden floor and walked into the boys’ locker room. Eddie burst out laughing as we stepped inside. There, strung from one set of lockers to another like a banner, was a string of jockstraps tied together with a sign hung in the center that read, “Revenge of the Homo! —Cedi”

“The kid has balls,” said Eddie in admiration.

“Perhaps he’s just suicidal,” I suggested. I couldn’t imagine being out in our school, let alone publicly announcing it in such a manner. The boy was crazy.

“Come on, let’s get out of here. I’ve heard that if you hang around the jocks too much they rub off on you. You could even become one,” said Eddie.

“Ewww!”

“Yeah, I hear it’s a fate worse than death.”

“It won’t happen to me. I hope to be far too busy with play practice. We’re doing *Peter Pan* this fall.”

“Dude, you trying out for Wendy?”

“Funny! With any luck at all, I shall be Peter Pan.”

“Yeah, dude, I can see you flyin’ around now, wearin’ tights,” snickered Eddie.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you are Orlando’s *special* friend.”

I jerked my head toward Eddie so fast I nearly wrenched my neck.

“What did he tell you?” I asked, looking fearfully around to make sure we were alone.

“Relax, little dude. Your secret is safe with me. Orlando and me are best buds now, aren’t we? After all, I’m dating his mom.”

I still couldn’t believe that. When Orlando had told me that Eddie, the school burnout, was dating his mother, it blew me away. I peered at Eddie. He was the same age as I was, sixteen. He was slim, about 5’11” and had long, dark-blond hair he wore in a ponytail most of the time. He wasn’t what I’d call good looking, but he wasn’t bad looking, either. I wondered what an older woman would see in him.

“Yeah, but…”

“It’s all good, dude. Orlando has been tons happier since he got with you. That whole thing with Krista and Kerry really ripped him up. I’m happy for you guys; I swear.”

It was the first day of school and the end of a summer that had been an eventful one for all of us. I’d worked at Phantom World, a large amusement park within walking distance of Blackford, and there I’d met Krista, Orlando, and a whole bunch of others. I’d had a crush on Orlando since the moment I laid eyes on him. It was funny; he went to Blackford High School, but I’d never crossed his path before. Anyway, Orlando started dating my new friend, Krista, so I figured I had no chance with him. But then, Orlando cheated on Krista with her very own brother, believe it or not, so I found out he wasn’t quite as unobtainable as I’d thought. Of course, I wasn’t sure I wanted him after what he’d done to Krista, but there was a lot more to the situation than I’d thought at first. In the weeks since Orlando and Krista broke up, Orlando filled me in on most of the details. It was a real soap opera.

I don’t even wanna get started on what happened to me during the summer. If one of my teachers asked me to write about what I did on my summer vacation, she would be in for a shock. The coolest event of the summer, with the exception of actually meeting *Phantom* (I still can’t believe it!) was getting together with Orlando. We’ve been sort of dating, and it rocks!

The bell rang, ending our lunch period before I could ask Eddie any more about Cedi. I’d gotten too lost in my own thoughts. I did that sometimes. Not to worry, I was sure I’d find out more about him soon enough. If what little I’d seen so far was any indication, Cedi was definitely going to add some excitement to B.H.S.—if he didn’t get himself killed, that is. It was only the first day of school, and he’d already been marked for death by the jocks. I was glad I wasn’t him.

I made my way to my locker, picked up my English Lit book, and searched out my classroom. B.H.S. wasn’t all that big, but I still got lost a bit on the first day in the general hustle and bustle. The halls echoed loudly with the voices of kids greeting each other after the long summer vacation. Every slammed locker door, dropped pencil, and squeak of a sneaker on the polished wooden floor was magnified. The school was nearly a hundred years old and not designed with acoustics in mind.

Blackford High School was a relic of the past. My parents and even grandparents had gone to school there! I’d often thought the school would’ve made a good set for a movie, like that old film *Back To The Future* where that kid went back to the 1950s. Our school looked a whole lot like that one. There was a big addition to the school on the north side, but even that had been added in the 1960s, according to Mom.

I stopped thinking about the antiquated building when I found my Lit class at last. I stopped dead in my tracks for just a moment as I entered the room. Cedi was sitting about halfway back. The blue blur I’d glimpsed in the hallway at last made sense, for Cedi’s hair was dyed a bright neon blue. His hair partly concealed his face, hanging down the sides and in front of his eyes. The other kids were gawking at him. Blackford was kind of tame in the alternative-style arena. One kid last

year had a Mohawk. Ian Babcock, the school Goth, wore black makeup around his eyes and a studded collar. But Cedi was probably the first person ever to appear in school with blue hair.

Cedi was a pretty-good-looking guy, not that it mattered. I had Orlando after all. I couldn't figure out the color of Cedi's eyes. They were kind of a greenish-blue, or bluish-green, but then they looked sort of violet, too. Yeah, more violet than anything, which was weird. His eyes flashed with mischief when he caught me checking him out. I courageously and somewhat fearfully took the seat next to him. Most of the other kids seemed apprehensive about getting so close to such a creature. Cedi looked like the kind of kid who would do *anything*. I'd already witnessed his handiwork in the boys' locker room. Just remembering it brought a smile to my lips. Cedi gave me a quick grin, but then Mrs. Corlett entered the room. She was soooo old. She was actually one of my mom's teachers, if you can believe it!

The class quieted down quickly. Everyone was kind of afraid of Mrs. Corlett. She had a reputation as someone you didn't want to cross. I think a lot of the students were afraid she'd crack them across the knuckles with a ruler if they got out of line, just like they did in the old days.

Mrs. Corlett's eyes lit on Cedi's hair, but she didn't say anything—maybe because her hair was kind of blue, too. Her hair was an old-lady blue, however, gray-tinted blue, not bright and neon like Cedi's. I had to stifle a giggle as I thought about what she'd look like with Cedi's hair color.

I looked around the room hoping to spot Krista. She was new to B.H.S., and I wanted to do all I could to make her feel at home. I wondered how Orlando and Krista would handle seeing each other on a daily basis. As far as I knew, they hadn't spoken since their breakup. I guess it wasn't my concern, and I wasn't going to waste time thinking about it. I was just excited that I could see my best girlfriend all the time now! Unfortunately, Krista's twin brother, Kerry, had moved to Blackford with the rest of the family. Kerry was trouble.

Cedi fidgeted continually as if his body couldn't contain the energy within. I kept expecting him to jump up on his desk and scream or something. He seemed constantly on the verge of exploding into activity. Yeah, that was Cedi: a lightning bolt just waiting to sizzle through the air and strike an unsuspecting target. I wondered what was up with him and the jocks and about the sign he'd left in the locker room. We were only hours into the school year, and the drama had begun. It promised to be an interesting semester.

The moment the bell sounded, ending class, Cedi catapulted out of his seat, slung his backpack over one shoulder, and zipped away as if the football team was still chasing him. It was as if he couldn't sit still for a second longer. He kind of reminded me of a hummingbird, zipping around faster than the eye could see.

It was totally weird being back in school. It was kind of a letdown after working the entire summer at an amusement park. Phantom World was still open on weekends through most of October, and I was going to be working Saturdays, but I would much rather have kept working there full time instead of attending school. I was going to make the best of the situation, however. I had nothing to complain about. I had a lot of money saved up from working all summer, and, best of all, I had Orlando!

My first day of school went smoothly. I had a couple of classes with Krista, which was totally awesome. I was pleased to show her around the school and introduce her to people. I knew she'd have no trouble making friends on her own. She had a sparkling personality that just drew people to her. She already knew a few people, too—kids who had worked with us at Phantom World.

The only drawback to her transfer to B.H.S. was that she'd see me with Orlando. So far, I'd

kept our relationship a secret from her. I didn't know how she'd take it after what he'd done to her. I was going to have to talk to her about it, and soon, because it would not take her long to discover that Orlando and I were more than friends. I didn't like being caught in the middle, but life is seldom easy.

My only class with Orlando was eighth-period drama, my next-to-last class. I was excited we had drama together. I was the one who'd talked him into signing up for it in the first place. We sat right next to each other, but we both knew we'd have to keep our relationship low key. Blackford wasn't the most homophobic town around, but it wasn't exactly San Francisco, either.

Orlando and I were more than friends, but we weren't boyfriends. The whole thing with Krista and Kerry during the summer kind of messed up Orlando. I was a little cautious, too, because I didn't exactly have a good track record with dating. During the summer I'd fallen for a boy who turned out to be straight and another who didn't exist at all. The latter is a long story, but suffice it to say that you should be careful if you meet someone on the Internet. Orlando was quite real, but he was bisexual, not gay, so I had some reservations. Still, I really enjoyed our time together, and part of me so powerfully yearned to kiss him I couldn't stand it.

In drama class I listened intently as Mrs. Jelen (pronounced yellin) spoke about the fall production *Peter Pan*. I was a major theatre freak and had landed the lead in *Tom Sawyer* in the previous fall and in *Oliver* in the spring. I wanted the lead in *Peter Pan* so bad I could taste it, but I didn't know if my luck would hold out. I also feared that Mrs. Jelen might decide it was time for someone else to play the lead. I wasn't going to complain if I was cast as one of the lost boys or pirates or whatever. As long as I was in the play, I'd be content. I wondered if I should give some thought to reading for Captain Hook or Smee. Both would be good parts and preferable to the lost boys.

The script felt cool and crisp in my hands as I held it. I was filled with excitement. This was the beginning, that moment in time when the whole adventure was before me. I could already picture the rehearsals, the sets going up, and the costumes. I could feel the heat of the lights and smell the greasepaint.

I read the title page, *Peter Pan: a play based on the original by J.M. Barrie*. I was vaguely familiar with the story, but I planned to read the entire script before the night was through. It was critically important to select just the right scene for my audition. I needed something to show Mrs. Jelen that I was the only choice for Peter Pan.

At the end of the day I walked toward my locker. There was no use lugging books home I wouldn't be opening. Unfortunately, my backpack was going to be stuffed. Nearly every teacher had given opening-day homework. Couldn't they get together and plan things a bit better? I'd be lucky if I had enough time to read my script, and there was no way I'd be able to work in any practice.

As I neared my destination I spotted Cedi standing before his locker with a magic marker. I slowed, then stopped beside him.

"Dude, why are you writing 'HOMO' on your own locker?"

Cedi laughed. "HIIIIII. I'M CEDI!"

Cedi was loud, energetic, and boisterous. His voice cut right through the din around us. What a presence he'd have upon the stage. If he went out for the play, I was going to have some major competition.

"I'm Toby."

“Nice to meet you, Toby!” I was surprised by Cedi’s British accent, but I thought it was really cool. “This,” said Cedi, indicating the large block letters spelling out HOMO, “is no doubt courtesy of the Neanderthals who pass for jocks around here. I’m just making a few alterations.”

As I watched he drew a bold circle around the word HOMO, dots within the Os and a smile underneath, turning the entire thing into a large smiley face. Cedi didn’t even seem in the least upset that someone had written an obvious slur on his locker. He actually seemed enthusiastic about turning it into a work of art. I wondered about the boy. He had a weird way of dealing with abuse; he simply refused delivery. I just hoped whoever wrote HOMO on his locker wouldn’t beat him senseless later on.

Cedi

Blackford High School definitely had potential. Sure it was a total backwater, but there were definitely some hot birds at school and some wicked-cute boys as well. I’d already been pegged as a poof my first day, but that was no biggie. It was amazing how the Cro-Magnon jocks were so sure I was queer when I wasn’t even sure myself. Some guys were hot. Some girls were hot. It was as simple as that. I didn’t go in for labels. If the jocks wanted to call me a fag, that was okay, but they were gonna get Cedi’d for it. I’d already paid a little visit to their lair in response to three of their kind shoving me around and comparing me to a Smurf. No doubt about it, if they were gonna mess with me, there’d be a price to pay.

I ran home from school. Don’t think I did so because I was scared of those football guys, though. I run more often than not. I mean, why spend all that time just getting there? I had things to do, and, besides, the world often looked a whole lot better when it was whizzing by.

I tossed my backpack on my bed when I got home and picked up my electric guitar. I cranked up the amp and let my newest creation fly. One thing I HAD to do is play my guitar. I’d go totally starkers if I couldn’t play my music!

I gazed about my room as I played. Mostly, my eyes fell on unpacked boxes and disorganized stacks of papers. There were boxers, briefs, and socks strewn on the floor along with the odd shirt and some of my music magazines. I was still moving in, but I’d given some thought to decoration. My *Beatles* poster and my Union Jack were the first to go up, and only the day before I’d bought two new *Phantom* posters, one with the *Phantom* insignia and the other with Jordan, Ross, and Kieran all looking so sexy. Kieran was my all-time favorite, mainly because he was a guitarist like me; well, he was heaps better than me. He was the greatest guitarist in the entire world!

“Bloody hell!”

I tossed my guitar to the side. My newest creation needed some serious work. I was foremost a lyricist, but I wrote music, too, mostly for my guitar—and for the keyboard. I was kind of into techno, but I got into other stuff as well. I could play the violin wicked, and I was working on putting some violin into my songs. Pretty much no one did that, unless they played country. That was the one thing I wanted to avoid—country music: such a vile American creation. I was willing to bet it was big in Blackford. The town had some serious problems, but I figured I could fix that.

I considered doing my homework, but turned to my lyrics instead. You’ve gotta have priorities, right? I’d get my homework done, probably, but if I didn’t, so what? I was going to be a musician, and I was going to be a big rock star in fact, so high school wasn’t exactly of the utmost importance in my life. Thank God my aunt understood. She was totally supportive of whatever I wanted to do and was so busy with her causes she probably wouldn’t notice if I dropped out of high

school. She was big into save-the-trees- and save-the-children-of-Ethiopia-type stuff. If I told her I was queer, there'd be a rainbow flag hanging outside within twenty-four hours. I wondered momentarily what a bisexual flag would look like, perhaps a Union Jack with pink instead of red.

I worked on my lyrics until I nodded off. Sometimes I get totally awesome ideas in my dreams, sometimes not. I woke up at about 10 p.m., thinking it was later. I gave my backpack a glance, but otherwise ignored it. Screw homework. I had more important things to do. I could die tomorrow for all I knew. I followed Auntie Liz's motto: live like your bum is on fire.

I slipped on my sneakers and walked out into the night. That was another cool thing about my aunt; I could come and go as I pleased at any hour. I didn't even have to tell her or leave a note. She didn't believe in rules. I was probably the only kid anywhere who never had to sneak out. What an agreeable change it was from boarding school!

I wandered around, reading my lyrics by the streetlights. I thought they were pretty rockin'. I'd made some kick-ass improvements before I nodded off. I had a first-rate love song for sure. Okay, the lyrics still needed a tweak, but they were by far the best thing I'd ever written.

I found my way to a park and wandered around the paths there. I was trying to think of how I could find people to form a band. I played guitar and did vocals, but I needed a keyboardist and a drummer. I missed Nibs and Sam like crazy. Nibs was wicked on the drums, and Sam, well, he wasn't the best, but he played the keyboard tolerably well. They were the only cool thing about the stuffy prep school my parents had stuck me in the year before. Was I glad to be out of there! Danforth Academy, kiss my bum!

The summer wind stirred the dust and rattled the leaves. I looked into the sky. Dark clouds were edging in, and there was a hint of lightning. Thunder began to rumble in the distance. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end, but it had nothing to do with the approaching storm. I sensed movement near at hand.

Chase Simmons darted out from behind me and snatched the sheet of lyrics from my hand. "What have we got here?" he asked.

Chase wasn't alone. A boy named Adam Henshaw was with him. How could bulky football players sneak up on me so silently?

"Aww, he's written a poem," said Adam.

"It's not a poem. Those are lyrics to a song," I said, crossly.

I reached for my lyrics, but Adam jerked them away from me. I didn't truly need the lyrics, as I had them in my head, but what if I forgot something and couldn't recreate it? That would be a disaster for sure—a catastrophe worse than the Black Death.

"Give it to me," I said.

"And if we don't? What are *you* going to do about it, squirt?"

The pair read my lyrics by the light of a street lamp and laughed. My eyes grew wide, and I swallowed hard. No doubt Chase and Adam believed they'd intimidated me. I was no longer concerned about them, however; my attention was focused on the dark figure directly behind them.

"I'll take that," said a strong, masculine voice.

Chase and Adam turned toward the tall stranger. He held out his hand, and Adam meekly handed him my lyrics.

"Now, leave!" said the stranger. He didn't speak loudly, but it was obviously not a request.

Chase and Adam backed off and walked quickly away. I wasn't sure if I was glad to see them go or not. I was suddenly keenly aware that I was a slim kid, alone in the dark with a stranger who could be a Jack the Ripper wannabe for all I knew. He was dressed all in black, or at least it looked

like it. He was backlit by a street lamp, so I couldn't really tell.

"Hey!" I yelled, as the stranger began reading my lyrics. The nerve! Did everyone think they had a right to read my work?

"Did you write this?" he asked, ignoring my outburst. His tone was authoritative and dismissive, kind of superior and angry, too.

"Um, yeah."

"You know absolutely nothing about love. This is complete idiocy. You have no talent."

He wadded my lyrics into a ball and threw them at me. They bounced off my chest as I gaped with an open mouth. I stood in stunned silence as the stranger walked away. It took a few moments for my anger to surge forth. I turned and stared at his back.

"Just who the hell do you think you are anyway? What do you know about lyrics? Huh? I'm Cedi Forbes-Hamilton and I'm going to be a rock star!"

The stranger totally ignored me. He just kept walking. I glared at his receding figure, then retrieved my lyrics, uncrumpled them, and read them again.

"Just who in the hell do you think you are?" I repeated more quietly, but he was much too far away to hear by then. I turned and headed for home.

I started hanging out with Eddie the next day. I'd met him on my first day at B.H.S., and he was totally cool. He said he used to be a stoner, but he'd given it up because he was dating some girl who didn't like him doing it. I couldn't believe how many guys were led around by the balls. That was never gonna happen to me. Even if I found a girlfriend, I wasn't going to be controlled by her. I was never going to be whipped.

We ate lunch with Eddie's friends, Orlando and Toby. I thought Orlando was a pretty cool name, not at all like the usual drab and dreary names most kids got stuck with. Toby was a pretty cool name, too. I remembered him from the day before. He was the one who thought I was writing HOMO on my own locker.

"You're floating away," said Eddie, nudging me.

"This from the master at floating away," said Orlando. "Eddie has logged more time in the clouds than most birds."

"Sorry! I was just thinking!" I said. "I met this guy last night—in the park. He read my lyrics. He was so mean!"

"Lyrics?" asked Toby.

"Mean? Like he pushed you around?" asked Orlando.

"I'm a musician," I said, looking at Toby. "The guy in the park. He told me my lyrics sucked!"

"Maybe it's true," said Eddie.

"Bloody wanker! Piss off!" I flipped him the bird for good measure, and he laughed.

"The way you talk is so weird," said Eddie. "I love it."

"Well, what would you have said?" I asked.

"Something like jerk-wad I suppose."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"If you've got talent, why worry about what someone says?" asked Orlando.

"Well, I think I've got talent. I thought I had talent..."

“So you’re going to let some guy shake you up?” asked Eddie. “Unless he was some kind of music producer or something, I’d say screw him.”

“I don’t know who he was.”

“Then why do you care what he thinks?”

“He was kind of cool,” I said, only realizing what I said as I said it.

I knew I was in trouble when I caught a glimpse of a football jersey out of the corner of my eye. A strong hand clamped down on my shoulder and spun me around.

“I bet you loved fingering all of our jockstraps, didn’t you, faggot?”

I was staring into dark, intense eyes of Chase Simmons. Mike Bradley, another football jerk, was standing right beside him, flexing his muscles in an attempt to look intimidating. Behind them stood two of their teammates. A small crowd was gathering to watch.

“Not really, but I noticed that yours had a *really* small pouch,” I said.

One of Chase’s buddies actually snickered, but Chase slammed me into a locker. The back of my head hit it painfully, and the dull ring of metal clanged in my ears. Chase growled at me, sounding a bit like a wild animal.

“I guess you’re the guys who wrote ‘HOMO’ on my locker,” I said.

“That was me, and it’s only the beginning, faggot. We don’t like your kind around here,” said Chase.

“There are more of us than you know. We’re everywhere,” I said, using my most ominous tone. “How many guys are on your team? Twenty? You know that means that at least two of your football buddies are poofs. Just think about it, they’re right there with you in the showers, looking at you.”

“Shut up!” yelled Mike.

“What’s up with the hair, gay boy?” said Chase, yanking it back so hard I nearly cried out in pain. “You’re a total freak. Isn’t there a show about you on cable? Queer as Fuck?”

“You’re fairly witty for a jock,” I said with a slight grin as he released his grip on my hair. My smile threw Chase off. I wasn’t supposed to be smiling. I was supposed to be trembling with fear. That wasn’t my scene, however. Actually, I was kind of enjoying myself. Jock-baiting could be fun. I’d done a bit of it back home.

“You’ve got a smart mouth for a wimpy little fag!”

“Thank you.”

Chase cocked his fist back. “I oughta pound the crap outta you, cocksucker.”

“Ohhhhh, that’ll impress the girls. You outweigh me by what, fifty pounds? A hundred? There’s four of you and one of me. Yeah, beating me up is gonna make you look like a real stud. Go ahead, do it. I’m sure you’re love life needs all the help it can get.”

Chase snarled, but he didn’t strike. One of his buddies fought back a chuckle. Chase glared at him and told him to shut up.

Chase loosened his hold on me and stepped back as if he wasn’t quite sure what to do with me. I wasn’t following the script. It was supposed to go something like: Jock pushes poof around, poof cringes, jock slugs poof in face, poof sinks to the ground crying, jock walks away feeling macho. I’d never liked playing by the rules, however. I preferred to write my own script. It was way more fun.

Chase released me not a moment too soon. A teacher I didn't recognize rounded the corner, took in the scene before her, and asked, "What's going on here?"

I wrapped my arm around Chase's shoulder as best I could. He was a good five inches taller than I was, after all, and I couldn't manage it properly.

"I was just getting to know my new buddy here," I said.

I glanced at Chase. His eyes were darting nervously around. I could tell he was totally freaked out that I'd draped my arm across his shoulders. I slowly lowered my hand, sliding it down his back, nearly touching his butt.

"Yeah, that's right," he said finally.

"I think you two need to get moving. Don't be late for class."

"Will do," I said.

I punched Chase in the shoulder. "See ya later, buddy."

Chase's mouth dropped open slightly as I walked away. As soon as I was out of sight I began to laugh.