

The Graymoor Mansion B&B

Sean—Graymoor Mansion Bed & Breakfast—Verona, Indiana—May 2004

I pulled my loaded-down Cavalier to a stop in front of Graymoor and looked through the windshield at my home.

“Wow.”

I hadn't returned since Christmas, and I could see that even more work had been completed. At last, Graymoor looked as it must have on the day it was originally completed, at least on the outside. A professional-looking sign by the gate read:

Graymoor Mansion Bed & Breakfast
Opening Soon
Now Taking Reservations

Another sign near it read, “Beware of Ghosts.” The transformation of the dilapidated old home into a B&B had taken five long years, but at last it was about to open.

Of course, I'd been away at college during most of the restoration—studying hotel management, believe it or not. While construction crews were swarming all over Graymoor, I'd been learning the ins and outs of running a hotel. The Graymoor Mansion Bed & Breakfast was going to start out small, but my parents and their silent investor, none other than Jordan of *Phantom* fame, were hoping to turn Graymoor into a major hotel. Doing so would allow the renovations to continue. All of Graymoor might someday be restored to its former glory. From the outside it appeared that day had already come. My parents (and scores of workers) had performed a miracle.

I guess I should explain how my parents had managed to restore so much of Graymoor in such a short time. Not that all of it was restored. Most of it was as yet untouched, but all the main rooms had been redone, as well as loads of bedrooms. I couldn't wait to get a look at the Natatorium and Solarium. They were unfinished when I left, but Mom had told me over the phone they would be completed by the time I came home. Anyway, the whole project started just before I graduated from good old Verona High School...

“I have a proposition for you,” Jordan said, as he, Mom, Dad, my boyfriend Nick, my cousin Avery, Jordan's partner Ralph, and I sat around the kitchen table drinking coffee and tea after a tour of Graymoor.

“A proposition?” Dad said.

“I think Graymoor has the potential to eventually pay for its own restoration.”

“How's that?” Avery asked.

“If you were to turn it into a hotel, paying guests could not only provide the funds for day-to-day expenses, but also to renovate the house.”

“A hotel?” my mom asked. “That sounds far too ambitious.”

“You could start it out as a Bed & Breakfast by renting out only a few rooms and then go from there, expanding as the opportunity presents itself.”

“Even that would take a huge amount of capital, which we just don’t have,” Dad said.

“That’s where I come in—as an investor.”

“An investor?” I asked.

“Yes. This old house means a lot to me. You all know the connection between my dad and Graymoor. It was one of his dreams to restore it to its former grandeur. I’d like to help you realize that dream.”

“Jordan, it would take a massive amount of money even to get started,” Mom said.

“Money is not a problem. *Phantom’s* CD sales are up, and our last tour was a great success. I’ve been investing most of the money I’ve made since the very beginning. I easily have enough to cover what I have in mind and then some.”

“Whoa. You *are* rich,” Avery said.

Jordan laughed.

“There’s one huge problem with your plan,” Avery said. “You’re forgetting Graymoor has a notorious reputation. No one in Verona would *ever* want to spend the night here. The ax murders occurred over a hundred years ago, but no one around here has forgotten.”

“On the contrary, the history of the house almost guarantees it will be a success. Perhaps the residents of Verona will be reluctant to stay here, but it isn’t local residents who patronize hotels. It’s travelers. A few may pass on Graymoor because of its reputation, but even more will come because of it. Hotels rumored to be haunted do quite well.”

“Graymoor isn’t just rumored to be haunted,” I said. “Anyone staying here overnight will almost be guaranteed to see a ghost.”

“Even better,” Jordan said. “The ghosts will be a major selling point.”

To make a long story short, after much discussion over a period of weeks, Mom and Dad took Jordan up on his offer. My parents remained the owners of Graymoor. They provided the house, and Jordan provided the funds to restore it. Jordan would likely never come out ahead on his investment, and he knew it, but he didn’t care. He loved that old home as much as we did. Not everything is about money.

Now, the renovations had been underway for years. I gazed at my old home once again. I could not get over the change. I grabbed my backpack and left the car. I walked through the massive iron gates and crossed the mowed lawn, admiring the roses, daisies, and black-eyed Susans. Dozens of other flower varieties peaked out from beds as well. I stopped for a moment, remembering the yard as it had been on the day we moved into Graymoor. Then, the grounds were overgrown and creepy, looking more than anything like an Addams Family movie set; now, they were beautiful. What a difference a few years could make.

I crossed the porch and opened the massive front door. A hint of varnish was in the air, and I could hear hammering in some distant part of the house. Construction had been going on continuously throughout my college years. It nearly drove me insane the first few weeks after I graduated from high school. My rowdy college dorm was quiet in comparison. Now, I’d just graduated from college and had returned home. It felt good to be back.

“Sean, hey bro, what’s up?” Avery asked as he grabbed and hugged me.

“When did you get in?”

“Yesterday. I flew out here as soon as my last final was done. I couldn’t be late for the massive graduation party. It’s hard to imagine: you, Nick, Marshall, Skye and me all graduating at

the same time.”

“It’s not that amazing. We all graduated from high school at the same time, too. Remember?”

“Yeah, well, it’s not as if we had the same courses. College isn’t high school, Sean.”

“I guess you’re right. I took some time to actually work in hotels to gain experience, and Nick took a lighter load since he knew it would take me an extra year to finish.”

I frowned.

“What? Are you still upset Nick didn’t finish up so he could move in with you the last year?”

“That’s the past, Avery.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Marshall’s courses actually took five years to complete. Only you and Skye decided to take an *entire* year off in the middle of college.”

“That trip to Europe was worth it. I had a blast! I have no idea why Skye chose to remain in California instead of coming with me.”

“I’ve got a good idea. I hear California is filled with buff boys.”

“Damn, those French babes were hot,” Avery said.

“Yeah, I hear girls with hairy legs are a real turn-on.”

“Like you know anything about girls.”

“Ignorance is bliss. Speaking of girls, where’s Nicole? Or has she dumped your sorry ass already?”

“Dump this fine bit of masculinity? Dream on! Nicole flew home to visit her parents. She’s going to meet me at Phantom World.”

“You’re starting to sound like Skye.”

“Me sound like Mr. Testosterone?”

“Yes, you.”

“So, when do Marshall and Nick get here?”

“Everyone is supposed to arrive by tomorrow. How many days do you have to stay?”

“Just four. The park doesn’t open for almost three weeks, but we have orientation. I’m helping train some of the newbies since I worked there last summer.”

“I wish you could stay longer. I haven’t seen you since Christmas.”

“In four days, you’ll be sick of me. Don’t worry,” Avery said.

“I doubt that.”

It was hard to remember the Avery who had been such a total jerk when he was a teenager. Who would have guessed that I’d come to think of him as a brother? I suppose sharing life-threatening events had something to do with that.

Avery led me into the kitchen.

“Guess who’s here?” he asked.

Mom turned away from the range and then ran toward me.

“Sean!”

She hugged me and kissed me as if I was thirteen instead of twenty-three.

“Oh my! You’ve grown.”

“You saw me at Christmas, Mom.”

“I still think you’ve grown. You boys have changed so much.”

“Yeah,” Avery said. “I keep getting more gorgeous, and Sean here isn’t the pudgy little geek he used to be.”

“I hate to be the one to give you the bad news, Avery, but you’re not gorgeous, and I’ve only lost five pounds. I’m *still* pudgy.” I sighed.

“You look fine, and I *am* gorgeous.”

“You should not have lived with Skye this year. He’s completely rubbed off on you,” I said. Avery gave me a look that indicated there was a story to tell, but not in front of Mom.

“I’m so glad to have you home,” Mom said, hugging me again. “My son, a college graduate.”

“Come on, Mr. Big Shot. I’ll help you unload your car,” Avery said, rescuing me from Mom.

I tossed my backpack on one of the kitchen chairs, and Avery and I walked out to the car to begin carrying in the many boxes that loaded down my Cavalier.

“So, you ready to put that expensive college education to work?” Avery asked.

“Definitely. I interned at an 800-room hotel. I’m sure I can handle a start-up bed & breakfast. We’re just going to rent out eight rooms in the beginning.”

“I don’t envy you. I think working in an amusement park will be a breeze compared to what’s ahead of you.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“You always were a little odd.”

“So tell me about Skye,” I said.

“Oh, man, that boy gets around. Every time I walked in our apartment there was a new guy with Skye, and he was out every night, too. I seriously think he fucked every gay guy at the university and several of the straight ones, too. And of course, you know Skye; all the guys he hooked up with were gorgeous.”

“How would you know who’s gorgeous?”

“Hey, you don’t have to be queer to know a good-looking guy when you see one—a point proven every morning as I look in the mirror.”

I rolled my eyes.

“I suppose the love affair of the century is still going on?” Avery asked.

“Of course.”

“Damn, I don’t know how you and Nick handled that long-distance-relationship shit. Zoë and I tried my freshman year. What a disaster.”

“Well, you’re still friends.”

“True, but I thought she was ‘the one’ at the time.”

“How many girls have you thought that about since Zoë?”

“Just three, counting Nicole, but Bette turned out to be such a freak.”

“Sounds like a perfect match to me.”

“Screw you, Sean,” Avery said, smiling.

“Oh, bisexual now, huh? I told you college would broaden your horizons. Did you do a little experimenting while you were in California?”

“Dream on, homo boy.”

“This is sick,” I said. “I actually missed you.”

“Hey, I grow on you.”

“Like fungus.”

It was Avery’s turn to roll his eyes. “You’ve got to get some new material, man. You are still such a geek.”

I stuck out my tongue at him.

We had made our way to the third floor by then, with each of us toting a box in our arms. Just before we reached my room, a Gothic side chair slid across my path, nearly tripping me up. The disturbance was followed by a disembodied giggle. At one time such events freaked me out, but after years in Graymoor I was no longer troubled by furniture that seemed to move by itself.

“I see some things are still the same here,” I said.

“Yeah, and I still think the ghosts will send whatever guests we get packing. Not everyone is accustomed to candles lighting themselves, disembodied moans and an organ that plays itself.”

“People are going to love this place. You’ll see.”

“I hope you’re right,” Avery said.

We continued to catch up as we carried boxes up to my room. It was going to take a good deal of time to unpack. Who knew so much crap would fit in a tiny apartment?

The fact that I was back home for good hit me after Avery and I had unloaded the car and I was sitting alone in my old room. It felt strange to be there after all those years of living away from home. Sure, there had been visits, but it wasn’t the same as living there full time. Now, I was back. Most kids went away to college to escape from home, but my college education led me right back to Graymoor. I wasn’t one bit sorry. I knew this is where I belonged.

Avery knocked on my door just before six p.m., disturbing the end of a rather pleasant nap.

“Mom says supper will be ready soon.”

Mom was technically Avery’s aunt, but she was his mother in every way that mattered. He’d taken to calling her Mom about the time we graduated from high school. That was about the same time Avery and I began to think of each other as brothers, not as cousins.

I stretched and yawned and followed Avery downstairs. Halfway across the parlor the scent of something wonderful met my nostrils. Avery looked at me. He’d noticed it, too.

“What is that?” I asked as we stepped into the massive kitchen.

“That is Martha’s five-cheese lasagna,” Mom said, nodding toward an older woman I’d never seen before. “Martha is going to be handling most of the cooking and baking for the B&B. She’s our head chef. Well, currently our only chef.”

“Hey, I’m Sean,” I said as I stepped toward Martha. “I would have hired you with nothing more to go on than the scent of that lasagna. I wasn’t even hungry when I walked downstairs, but now I’m starving.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Sean. Your mother has told me a lot about you.”

“If I know Mom, you’re sick of hearing about me, I bet,” I said.

“Not at all. Now sit down everyone. The garlic toast is nearly ready.”

“Just wait until you taste Martha’s blueberry muffins,” Dad said. “And her pecan pancakes and—”

“We’ve been trying out dishes for the bed & breakfast,” Mom said. “All these years I thought I knew how to cook, but Martha—”

“Oh, stop,” Martha said. “If those caramel-pecan breakfast rolls are any indication of your baking abilities, you’re an excellent cook, Kayla.”

I could tell Mom and Martha got on well. I liked Martha already. She was kind of grandmotherly, although she probably wasn’t over fifty and seemed full of energy.

Supper was superb. I had never tasted such lasagna, not even in the best Italian restaurants. It was beautifully seasoned and the cheeses. Mmmm. The garlic toast was equally delicious, as were the cooked apples and gourmet mashed potatoes which were seasoned with herbs and mixed with melted cheese. I could have made a meal out of the potatoes alone. Avery talked little during supper. He was too busy stuffing his face. Apparently, he shared my opinion of Martha’s culinary skills.

“So, when do you think we can open?” I asked as we were eating.

“We’ll need to discuss that with you,” Dad said. “We’ve begun taking reservations starting on June 14th.”

“How’s that going?”

“All eight rooms are booked for nearly all of June,” Dad said. “The only advertising we’ve done was a small one-time ad in the *Verona Citizen*.”

“Wow, that’s great. So it’s locals booking rooms?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm, I seem to remember someone saying that no locals would ever stay in Graymoor,” I said, turning to Avery.

“Hey, can’t a guy be wrong now and then?”

“You’re wrong all the time, Avery; that’s what’s so right about you.”

“And you rip off lines from M*A*S*H far too frequently, Sean.”

“Sometimes I can’t help myself.”

I turned my attention back to my parents. “Once we get going, I’ll implement my advertising scheme. Ads are really expensive in most of the travel magazines, but I thought we’d try it on a limited scale. I thought we could focus on some smaller, regional publications, web sites and so forth. If we can get a travel columnist to come, we can get a lot of advertising for the cost of a night’s stay.”

“See, Dear, I told you that the tuition money was well spent,” Mom said to Dad.

“What I’m hoping to do is make use of word of mouth. If we can impress our first guests, hopefully they’ll spread the word. I thought we might offer a discount for referrals.”

“That sounds great,” Dad said.

“I’ve been working up several ideas. I did a marketing plan for Graymoor as one of my class projects. I got an A, so at least Professor Coltrane thinks it’s sound.”

“I can’t wait for you to see the Solarium,” Mom said.

“So it’s finished?”

“And beautiful,” Mom said, “although beautiful isn’t a strong enough word to describe it. Mr. Diggory has done an incredible job.”

“Mr. Diggory? That sounds like the perfect name for a gardener,” Avery said.

“He’s a wizard with anything that grows,” Dad said. “You won’t recognize the Solarium when you enter it. You’ll swear those plants have been growing in there for years.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” I said. “Can we take a look after supper?”

“Of course,” Mom said. “You will be amazed at the transformation. You should see what he’s done with the Natatorium as well. It’s a paradise.”

“So the pool is finished?”

“It’s ready for guests.”

“Wow.”

When I’d departed, most of the repairs and restoration in the Solarium and Natatorium had been completed, but the pool and massive planters were empty. Now, all was restored to what it once had been. I never thought I’d live to see the day. I felt as though I’d been waiting for this forever.

“Tomorrow, you can meet Mrs. Hawkins, our housekeeper.”

“Why isn’t she here now?” I asked. “Isn’t the staff living in?”

“She’s still in the process of moving in.”

“Where’s Mr. Diggory?”

“Out and about on the grounds most likely,” Martha said. “We have a terrible time getting him to come in and eat. He just can’t keep himself away from the gardens. I’ll take a tray out to him later.”

“He sounds very dedicated.”

“More than you could believe,” Dad said.

“Have you filled all the positions yet?” I asked. It was a task I would have liked to have had a hand in, but it was hardly possible, since I was away at school.

“We’ve completed the first round of hiring,” Dad said. “We’ll let you handle the rest of it. Once we get going, we’ll need a larger staff. We already have a stack of applications for household staff, gardening assistants and so forth.”

“Great. I’ll want to consult with Mr. Diggory before we hire anyone to assist him. I think he should have the final say over any staff involved with his area. I’ll be consulting you about kitchen staff as well, Martha. I’m sure you know best. One thing I want to avoid is micromanaging.”

It was a bit surreal to be an adult sitting there with my parents. I was getting ready to take over the running of Graymoor—the bed & breakfast aspects of it, at least. Dad would be in charge of the restoration, of course. Who better to ensure it was restored properly than an archaeologist with a background in architecture?

I was hoping to see more of Dad now that I was back home. Mom said he’d been around more than usual during the restoration. His career often took him far from home. I guess we were just lucky he wasn’t an Egyptologist. We might never see him then. Dad worked mainly with early Colonial American sites on the order of Jamestown or Williamsburg.

It seemed like just yesterday I was an insecure and uncertain teenager. Where had the time gone? I still felt very much like that teenaged boy in some ways, but I knew I was up to the task at hand.

After supper, Avery and I offered to help Martha clean up, but she shooed us out of “her” kitchen. Mom and Dad took us on a little tour.

“We’ll show you the Natatorium first,” Mom said.

We walked through the winding hallways of Graymoor. I wondered how many of our guests would get lost while exploring. I’d already taken the original house plans and made maps that guests would be advised to carry with them. Maps couldn’t possibly show everything, however, since even the plans didn’t. They would be of assistance, though, I’m sure.

As we neared the Natatorium, an unfamiliar scent wafted to my nostrils. I couldn’t identify it at first, but then realization dawned on me: it was chlorine. Another scent mixed with it: floral. It was quite a pleasant combination. As we drew even closer, the scents became stronger and the air more humid.

“Holy shit!” Avery said as we entered the Natatorium.

I gasped as I stood beside him. I was not prepared for the sight that met my eyes.

“It looks like something that belongs in a Roman Emperor’s palace,” Avery said.

I couldn’t have agreed more. The Olympic-sized pool was filled with sparkling blue water for the first time since I’d lived in Graymoor. Large tropical trees grew from huge planters, and ferns and ivy trailed down columns and arches toward the pool. Purple and lavender water lilies grew in wide, shallow containers. With the life-sized statues of nude, athletic young men, it really did look like a scene from ancient Rome. The light was failing outside, but concealed lighting and lights in the pool itself beautifully illuminated the Natatorium.

“We have a surprise for you,” Mom said, and she led us to the side of the Natatorium that connected with the house. A large doorway led from the Natatorium into what had been a huge

room, empty except for abandoned planters and antique pool furniture. When I stepped inside, I gasped again.

“Skye will love this,” Avery said. “When he comes for the party...I mean.”

“A gym? You put in a gym?” I asked.

I couldn’t believe it. All kinds of weight machines filled the room. It looked better- equipped than the university’s weight room.

“We told Jordan it was unnecessary, but it’s something he really wanted to do,” Dad explained.

“With the pool and all this equipment, it’s like a spa,” I said. “All that’s missing is a hot tub.”

Dad pointed to one corner; sitting there was a sunken hot tub.

“I don’t even want to think about what all this cost,” I said.

“We’re well into the millions,” Dad said.

“There is no way Jordan will come out ahead on this,” I said, “even if we open up a hundred rooms.”

“As if he cares,” Avery said. “He said himself that profit isn’t the point.”

“Yeah, but still. You know, we’re going to need to hire someone to oversee the pool and gym.”

“We’re already ahead of you. He arrives tomorrow,” Dad said.

“Let’s take a look at the Solarium now,” Mom said.

She took us the long way around, through the house instead of cutting through the yard. Every room we passed had been restored, looking as it must have on the night of the Graymoor murders. I wondered how our guests would react to the frequent ghostly re-enactment of *that* terrible event.

The Natatorium had made me gasp, but the Solarium absolutely took my breath away. Since the first day I’d wandered into the Solarium, I’d dreamed of seeing the vast space filled with life. Everywhere I turned there were trees, shrubs, flowers and vines of all descriptions. The Solarium no longer seemed like one huge open area, but like a series of beautiful living rooms decorated with statuary, columns and arches. I had the feeling fifty visitors could wander through the space at once and yet feel a sense of solitude.

The sun had gone down, but the Solarium was lit with subdued, hidden lighting. The stars blazed above as we wandered through a tropical paradise below. I knew then that I’d never want to leave home again. I breathed in the warm, moist air. The scent of Calla Lilies, Angel’s Trumpet, roses and other blooming plants wafted around us. Some of the plants were potted, but most grew in the numerous beds throughout the Solarium. I could almost swear I was in a jungle instead of northern Indiana.

We tarried long in the Solarium. It was just too enchanting a place to leave. I found myself wishing I could just sleep there. I couldn’t believe my family actually owned such a thing. I couldn’t believe any gardener could create it. As with the Natatorium, the plants in the Solarium looked as if they’d always been there. How Mr. Diggory was able to create such beauty in only a few months I’d never understand.

I returned to my room later simply astounded by what I’d seen. It isn’t often that one’s hopes and dreams are exceeded. Everything seemed so wonderful that it nearly made me fearful. I’d known so much tragedy and terror in my life that the present seemed unreal, like a dream.

Skye

I walked into the terminal and immediately spotted Sean and Nick. They smiled and waved. I gave Greg, a cute and built college boy I met during the flight, a wink and went to join my friends.

“Skye!” Sean said, hugging me.

Greg walked by and grinned. Nick didn’t fail to notice.

“Who was that?” he asked.

“Just a friend I made on the flight. He’s got the hottest ass.”

“You guys didn’t...on the plane?” Sean stammered.

“It’s called the Mile High Club, Sean.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“Hey, I had some time to kill, and he was hot, so—”

“Spare us the details,” Nick said. “Why didn’t you fly in with Avery? Sean said he got in two days ago.”

“I didn’t want to rush off like he did. I had a few goodbyes to make.”

“Don’t you mean a few guys to make?” Sean asked.

“Hey, I was leaving forever. I had to say goodbye properly. Besides, I’ve spent more than enough time with Avery over the last year. So, when did your flight get in, Nick?”

“About an hour ago.”

“Good. You guys didn’t have to wait too long for me, then. South Bend doesn’t have the most exciting airport.”

“I guess that’s why Marshall is flying into Indy,” Nick said.

“That, and there are no direct flights from London to South Bend,” Sean said.

“Can you even get to Indiana from London?” I asked.

“I thought you said Marshall had a layover in Atlanta?” Nick said.

“Okay, his flight was almost direct. Damn, you know we haven’t seen Marshall in five years?” Sean said.

“I wonder how much stranger he’s become,” I said. “After five years in England at that school for psychos.”

“Not psychos, psychics,” Sean said. “He was studying psychology and parapsychology, Skye.”

“Hey, I’m just practicing. I have to give him a hard time. He’ll think I don’t like him if I’m too nice to him.”

“Now there is some screwed-up logic,” Nick said.

“Did someone say screw?” I asked.

“So, I hear you got your degree,” Sean said.

“Yep, sports fitness.”

“You think you’ll ever put that to use? I mean, what’s a B.S. in dumb jock really worth?” Nick asked.

“I’ve already got a job waiting on me, smart ass.”

“Really?” Sean asked. “Already? You just graduated. You didn’t mention this in any of your e-mails.”

“Yep. As for the e-mails, my life is far too full to mention everything.”

“Is it near Verona? I hope you won’t be moving off to New York or somewhere. I’d like to see you occasionally.”

“Oh, you’ll be seeing a lot of me.”

“So your job is close then? Is it here in South Bend?”

“Notre Dame?” Nick asked.

“Nope.”

“Who are you working for then?” Sean asked.

“You.”

“Huh?”

I laughed. “I’m the new personal trainer and spa manager for the Graymoor Mansion Bed & Breakfast.”

“What?” Sean asked, almost shouting. “My parents didn’t tell me!”

“I asked them not to. I wanted to be the one to give you the news.”

“Avery didn’t say anything, either.”

“He doesn’t know. Do you think I’d be stupid enough to entrust Avery with a secret? Shut up, Nick.”

Nick closed his mouth before he even had a chance to utter a comment on my intelligence.

“This is so awesome!”

“Just remember, if you try to make me call you boss, I will kick your ass. You’re going to start working on those abs, too,” I said, looking down at Sean’s midsection.

“Yes, sir,” Sean said, grinning.

Sean and Nick helped me find my luggage and load it onto a cart. I didn’t see how it would all fit in Sean’s Cavalier, which was already loaded with Nick’s stuff, but my bags went in without a hitch. Soon, we were on our way to Verona.

“Whoa! You’re really going to live in Graymoor?” Sean asked.

“Are you sure you’re brave enough?” Nick asked.

“Don’t make me pound you, Nick. Of course, I’m going to live in Graymoor. It’s not that scary. Besides, Marshall assured us years ago that the evil presence there is gone.”

“Unless Devon comes back for a visit, which is a distinct possibility,” Sean said.

“At least he’s the devil I know, but anyway, moving to Graymoor is perfect. I wouldn’t feel right about moving back in with my sister and Matt, especially now that Colin has a little brother. It would be too crowded, and I don’t do diapers.”

“Ah, I thought you weren’t afraid of anything, Skye,” Sean said as he drove.

“Have you ever smelled a dirty diaper? Be afraid; be very afraid.”

“So I guess you don’t want to move in with your mom and step dad, either?” Nick asked.

I leaned up from the backseat and punched Nick hard in the shoulder.

“Owww!”

“That’s what you get for calling Josh my step dad.”

“Well, it is true, you know.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Are you two still not getting along?” Sean asked.

“We do okay. He’s no longer in danger of getting his face rearranged. He’s been a good deal nicer to me since I saved his ass. I even kind of like him; just don’t tell him that.”

“How are things with your mom?” Nick asked.

“A little strained, but we get along. She’s more or less comfortable with my sexual orientation now. I’ve forgiven her for abandoning me when I was kid. She did come back, after all, and what good does it do to hold onto a grudge? Things aren’t entirely as they should be between us. Like I said, I’ve forgiven her, but forgetting is a whole other matter.”

“Mom showed me the Natatorium and the new weight room,” Sean said. “I guess you haven’t seen them?”

“No, but I did work with your parents, advising them on what machines to order. I told them the basic machines that are a must and gave them a wish list of other equipment that isn’t a necessity but would be great to have in the gym.”

“From the looks of the gym, I think they ordered everything,” Sean said.

“Sweet.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” Nick said.

“You guys will not believe the change in the Natatorium and the Solarium,” Sean said. “It will knock your socks off.”

“How about my boxers?”

“You haven’t changed, Skye,” Nick said.

“I can’t wait to get started,” I said. “I’m hoping that some guests will eventually come mainly to use the spa. I’m going to tailor fitness programs for them to use at Graymoor and when they get back home. I’m expecting things to be slow at first, but hopefully word will get out. I want to talk to you, Sean, about advertising in some fitness publications. I really think the spa can draw in a lot of business.”

“I have no idea what our advertising budget will be,” Sean said. “I’ll have to talk to Jordan about that. He’s the one writing the checks.”

“I was thinking we could offer some weekend fitness packages or something like that,” I said. “We could include specially prepared meals for the fitness-minded, something a bit different from the usual menu.”

“Whoa, Skye! You sound like a businessman,” Nick said.

“Nah, not me. I just have a few ideas. Making them work is Sean’s job.”

“No pressure there,” Sean said. “So when did Mom and Dad hire you?”

“About six months ago. I’d been talking to Gold’s Gym and a couple of other fitness chains. I’d really planned to move to Chicago or maybe New York after graduation. I was considering staying in California even more. Your parents convinced me to return to Verona. I could make more in a big city, but at Graymoor I can manage the gym. The cost of living is far lower as well. I also get room and board, so I’ll actually be making more working for your parents than I would elsewhere. Do you know what it costs for an apartment in Chicago? It’s unbelievable. And L.A.? Forget it! Plus, I will be near my family this way.”

“It’s going to be great having you around,” Sean said.

“I’m looking forward to it. The only thing I don’t like about returning to Verona is the lack of gay guys. There’s no way Verona can compete with Chicago or L.A. in that department. If the B&B really gets going, maybe some hotties will stay as guests.”

“I knew you had an ulterior motive,” Nick said.

“Hey, I’ve grown accustomed to having a whole university at my disposal. I can’t go cold turkey.”

“Cold turkey? Yeah, right!” Sean said. “If I know you, you’ll get laid before dark.”

“Nah, I may not even look for anyone until...tomorrow.”

“You know, if you had a boyfriend, you wouldn’t have to look for hook-ups,” Nick said.

“Where’s the fun in that? No offense, but be with the same guy all that time? Doesn’t that get boring?”

Sean and Nick looked at each other. I couldn’t be sure from the back seat, but I think they exchanged a grin.

“Not at all,” Nick said. “Besides, Sean and I haven’t seen each other since Christmas.”

“Yeah, I know what you two will be doing as soon as we get to Verona.”

“Don’t you know it!” Sean said.

“Hmm, maybe I should look for someone tonight. I may have to set up my laptop and check out gay.com.”

“Don’t you mean slut.com?” Nick said.

“I’m gonna have to hurt you, boy.”

I was amazed at the transformation of Graymoor when we arrived about an hour later. I had been back to Verona for Christmas, but I hadn’t actually been inside Graymoor Mansion for some two years. Sean and Nick were far too eager to dash off and get naked together to show me around, but what I did see as Sean’s mom led me to my room was impressive. The term mansion truly fit now. While Graymoor had always had a dilapidated edge before, now it was as good as new—at least the parts I glimpsed. I don’t mean that it looked like a new home. Far from it. The whole place was undeniably old and filled with antiques. A sense of history permeated the air, yet all was fresh, sound and clean.

I was impressed with my room. It was rather large and seemed almost palatial compared to my apartment. The furniture was all antique, of course. I wasn’t big on antiques, but they fit at Graymoor. The room was comfortable and had a decidedly masculine feel to it. Sean’s mom had obviously picked it out just for me. The color scheme was hunter green and yellow. The yellow was pale, but not quite so pale as to be a pastel. The soft carpet, heavy drapes, bedspread and the tiny shamrock designs in the wall paper were all hunter green. The wallpaper was predominantly yellow and the ceiling was gilded tin.

My bed was awesome! It was an antique, of course: a double with a high, carved headboard that reminded me of the bed in the Lincoln bedroom in the White House. I loved the large oval in the headboard and footboard. I plopped myself down on it, and it was so comfortable I could have lain right there and taken a nap. I moved around on it a bit, and there was not a squeak to be heard. That was a good thing because I intended to use the bed for far more than just sleeping.

My room also included a marble-top dresser that matched the bed and a huge wardrobe with a full-length mirror. There was an old roll-top desk and chair, a large table and a couple of comfortable chairs. There was a big, heavy-looking bookcase that would be perfect for my CDs, books and magazines.

I think the bathroom might have been my favorite part, however. The bathroom was a new addition. Even I knew indoor plumbing was virtually non-existent in rural areas in the Victorian age. The bathroom fit—so well I bet most people wouldn’t have realized it wasn’t an original part of the house. It was rather large, with gleaming brass hardware everywhere I looked. There was an old-fashioned, claw-foot tub, big enough for two (which definitely gave me ideas), as well as a separate shower. The floor and the walls up to about ten feet were tiled, the floor in hunter green and the walls in pale yellow, except for a single row of tiles that matched the floor. Above the tile, the walls were painted yellow and the ceiling was gilded tin with fancy designs in it, just like in the main room. No expense had been spared. I knew right then and there that someday Graymoor would be a first-class hotel.

I walked back into my room and looked out one of the three large windows. I was located on the third floor and had a magnificent view out over the Natatorium and Solarium.

I was itching to see the gym, but wasn’t quite sure how to get there. I found a pamphlet on my desk that folded out to become a map, however. I left my room behind and descended to the first floor. After that, I used the map to find my way to the Natatorium. I took a couple of wrong turns, but at last I managed to get there.

“Whoa!” I said out loud, even though I was quite alone.

I simply couldn't believe the sight before my eyes. I'd seen the Natatorium in its dilapidated state, but I wasn't prepared for the sight before me. The Natatorium was gorgeous. The crystal clear blue water looked so inviting I wanted to jump in right then. I couldn't wait another moment to get a look at the gym, however, so I quickly walked to the gymnasium.

"Wow!"

Sean was right. It looked like Jordan and Sean's parents had purchased every piece of equipment on my wish list. I felt as if I'd died and gone to heaven. Everything was gleaming and new. Most universities didn't even have a setup like this. Just getting to use the equipment would be a thrill. I almost couldn't believe I was going to be paid for managing the spa. There was even a hot tub!

I wanted to work out right then and there, but I was too fatigued by my flight. The last thing I needed was an injury because I was too tired to do my exercises properly. I yawned. I seriously needed a nap. There was so much I wanted to do, from working out to swimming to unpacking to checking out the local gay scene, but I opted to return to my room. Once there, I stripped naked and flopped down on the bed. I closed my eyes and was asleep in minutes.

The light was getting dim when I awakened from my nap. I needed a breath of fresh air, so I dressed and walked downstairs and out the front door. I found Sean and Nick roaming among the flower beds in the moonlight. No doubt they'd been making out. I could use some lip and tongue action myself.

I hadn't been there for two minutes when a large, black limo pulled up. I was more surprised by who climbed out of the back of the limo than by the car itself.

"Marshall!" Sean and Nick said, running toward him.

"Hello, mates!" Marshall said.

I walked over to join them. Marshall nodded at me.

"Hey, Skye."

"You're taller," Sean said.

"You're a bit taller, too," Marshall said.

"A limo?" Nick said. "Did you become rich and famous while you were gone?"

"I'm afraid not," Marshall said, "although I'm better off than I was. London is full of opportunities. The limo was actually cheaper than a taxi."

"Marshall, you have a British accent," I said, laughing.

"It will fade in time, unfortunately, now that I'll once again be under the influence of you bloody Yanks and your barbarian dialect."

We helped Marshall lug his bags upstairs to one of the rooms that had been renovated for guests.

"If the rest of the house looks anything like this, it must be incredible," Marshall said as we dumped his bags on the antique bed.

"Just wait until you see the Solarium and Natatorium," Sean said. "You won't believe it. The Dining Room has been restored, as well as several bedrooms, sitting rooms, studies and hallways. Of course, I'm sure you noticed the main stairway has been redone. Construction crews have been swarming all over the place for five years, and they're still going at it."

"I'm sure the construction has stirred up a lot of ghosts," Marshall said. "Changes always do that."

"I told you he wouldn't be here five minutes before he mentioned ghosts," I said.

"He is correct, however," Sean said. "Mom and Dad have experienced sightings far more frequently since the restoration began. I've only been home for a few days now and then over the

last five years, but even I've noticed an increase in supernatural activity."

"And here we thought you had rid Graymoor of ghosts," Nick said.

"Only of the evil presence and the trapped souls," Marshall said. "Believe me, there are plenty of ghosts left."

"You say that with such certainty," Nick said. "You just got here minutes ago!"

"Which is long enough for me to have already seen a few specters."

"So, you're still seeing dead people, huh?" I asked.

"Did you see *Sixth Sense*?" Nick asked. "I think it came out about a year or two after you left for England."

"Of course, I saw it. I was living in London, not the Amazon. I found it quite accurate for a bloody Hollywood film."

"Come on, Nick," Sean said. "You know he watched it. It was probably required for his Ghost 101 course."

"Funny!" Marshall said.

"So did you learn anything useful at that school?" I asked.

"Loads," Marshall said. "It was a dream come true!"

"Can you use any of it to make a living?" I asked, "or will you be waiting tables at Café Moffatt?"

"There's a name I haven't heard in a while, but yes, I can use all of it to make a living. I've already been doing so. I'm planning on opening my own business, in fact, right here in Verona."

"What kind of business?" Nick asked.

"Paranormal investigations for those troubled by ghosts, or what they believe are ghosts. Also, counseling for ghosts themselves. I'll likely be traveling a great deal, but I'm going to use Verona as my base of operation."

"What are you going to call it—Freaks 'R' Us?" I asked.

"You're still trying to be funny, aren't you, Skye?"

"Screw you!"

"And still a slut, I see."

I grinned. I'd missed trading barbs with Marshall.

"Counseling for ghosts?" Sean asked, ignoring our exchange. "How can you make any money on that? It's not like the dead can pay."

"I'll be hired by the living who have contact with a troubled ghost."

"So, like a horse whisperer, only with ghosts?" Nick asked.

"More or less."

"So you, like, talk to ghosts through a séance?" Sean asked.

"A séance is no longer necessary for me," Marshall said. "I've sharpened my skills, although at the academy they determined that my psychic abilities were quickly increasing without training."

"You can't make our heads explode just by looking at us can you?" Nick asked, teasing.

"Let me see," Marshall said, staring hard at him for a few moments. "No, I guess not. What a pity."

"You are so not funny," Nick said.

"Well, at least he tries," I said.

"Let's let Marshall get some rest," Sean said. "We can pester him about his psychic abilities later. Besides, this is Marshall we're talking about. We'll never get him to shut up once he gets started."

"I am tired. It's about four a.m. London time, and it was a long flight."

“Have a good night, then,” Sean and Nick said.

“Yeah, good night, Marshall. It’s good to have you back,” I added.

“Good night, guys. It’s good to be home.”

I awakened just after seven the next morning. I showered in the impressive bathroom connected to my room and then dressed. I could remember when Graymoor didn’t even have electricity. Now, my room was comparable to that in any luxury hotel in the U.S.

I stepped out of my room and walked down the hallway. I met Marshall as I reached the second-floor landing. Apparently he had just awakened as well. Together, we made our way to the kitchen. Sean’s mom and Martha greeted us as we entered.

“Our first guinea pigs of the morning,” Martha said.

“Good morning, boys,” said Sean’s mom, Kayla.

“Did you have a nice flight, Marshall?”

“It was long, but yes,” he said.

“This is Martha Merlot, our head chef.”

“Martha, this is Marshall, one of Sean’s friends.”

“Head chef. It makes me sound impressive, but it’s really just a grand way of saying I’m the cook,” Martha said, smiling. “We’ve just been concocting a Greek omelet. Would you boys like to try it?”

“I would love to,” I said.

“Me, too,” Marshall said. “Martha Merlot? You wouldn’t happen to be the Martha Merlot who wrote *Descent Into Darkness* would you?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.”

“I read your book while I was at school. One of my professors raved about it in class, and everyone started reading it. It was brilliant!”

“You never told me you’re a writer.” Kayla looked at Martha in confusion.

“Oh, it’s really only a hobby—something I do to keep myself occupied. I’ve only written one book.”

“You could do it professionally,” Marshall said.

“It would seem like work, then. Where’s the fun in that?”

I laughed. I’d met Martha only the night before when I was raiding the kitchen for a snack, but I liked her already.

“Marshall has been in England studying the paranormal,” Sean said’s mom.

“The paranormal? How fascinating,” Martha said.

“Ghosts, psychic phenomena, et cetera,” Marshall said.

“I grew up with a ghost,” Martha said.

“The one you mentioned in your book?”

“Yes, but she’s fictionalized in the book. My grandmother died when I was six. I was able to speak with her until I was about twelve or so. After that, I lost the ability, but I could still see her, and even the rest of the family could feel her presence. My mother didn’t believe my stories for quite a while, but then I began to tell her too many things that grandmother had shared with me—things only she would know.”

“That’s something I loved about your book: the way the ghost interacted with the main character. Of course, I loved the whole book. It was right up my alley.”

“Let’s hope you like my Greek omelet, as well. It’s almost ready.”

“If it tastes anything like it smells, it will be delicious,” I said.

The omelet was incredible. I especially liked the feta cheese. It had a pungent, but delicious taste. Marshall and I both devoured our omelets while we talked with Martha and Sean’s mom. There was no sign of Sean, Nick, or Avery at breakfast. Apparently, they were all still in college-boy mode—sleeping in as late as possible. I would have remained in bed myself, but I was just too excited.

Marshall went off to explore, and I headed for the gym to prepare for our guests. There was a massive amount of work to be done: from checking over the equipment to creating signs to checking the chlorine content of the pool and more.

While standing near the pool, I caught sight of an attractive guy on the other side of the glass wall. He was conferring with a couple of men who were obviously construction workers. The one who caught my eye, however, was dressed casually in tan slacks and an attractive white, button-down shirt. He was black haired, tall and quite good looking, at least from a distance. Before I had a chance to truly check him out, he’d walked away. Perhaps Verona had more to offer in the way of men than it had when I’d departed five years before.

Before I knew it, it was time for lunch. Despite the delicious omelet I’d eaten that morning, I was ravenous. I arrived in the Dining Room as Martha and Mrs. Hilton were setting great covered platters upon the immense table. Sean and Nick were bringing in yet more platters and bowls, while Sean’s dad, Avery, and Marshall were already seated at the table. There was also an older lady I didn’t recognize, but she soon introduced herself as Matilda, the head housekeeper. She reminded me a bit of Gretchen, the head housekeeper from that old show *Benson*. There was an older man, too: Basil Diggory, the head gardener. I told him what a fantastic job I thought he’d done in the Natatorium.

“Wow, I can’t get over how much everyone has changed,” Marshall said, looking around the table.

“That’s what happens when you stay away for five years,” I said,

“You know, Skye, I didn’t think you could get any more buff.”

I laughed.

“Actually, for the last couple of years I’d just been working on definition. I don’t want to get any bigger.”

“Good, I was afraid you would turn into one of those body-building freaks. Those guys don’t even look human.”

“No, that’s not for me. I don’t like cosmetic muscles. I want them to serve a purpose.”

“Still kicking ass?” Marshall asked.

“Whenever necessary.”

Our conversation was interrupted by lunch, which didn’t upset me in the least.

“We’ll be trying out items for the menu for the next several days,” Martha announced. “I hope you all like roast duck. If not, we also have herbed pork chops and baked salmon.”

“I thought this was going to be a bed & breakfast. You’ll be serving lunch and dinner, too?” I asked.

“We’re giving it serious consideration,” Kayla said. “We’re going to start with just breakfast, but we may expand later on. Martha thought now was a good time to experiment.”

“After that omelet this morning, I’ll be your guinea pig any day,” I announced.

“Me, too,” Marshall said.

Martha smiled.

In addition to the selection of meats, there were twice-baked potatoes seasoned with rosemary, baby carrots that tasted so delicious they were like no carrots I'd ever eaten, corn with red peppers, freshly baked yeast rolls and German chocolate cake for dessert.

"There is no way I can eat like this every day," I said. "I would get so fat, but it's so good."

"Yeah, I'm going to have to work hard to practice moderation with Martha around. No offense, Mom," Sean said.

"Oh, none taken. Martha studied cooking in France."

"I can't say I'm surprised," Avery said.

"If you don't all stop complimenting me, it will be bread and water for the rest of the week," Martha said.

"If the bread tastes like these rolls, I wouldn't mind," Nick said.

"There is just no winning with you boys."

"They can be quite a handful," Kayla said.

Sean looked at Nick, grasped his hand and smiled.

"So, Nick," I said, "what are you doing with yourself now?"

"I'm going to help my dads, since I studied horticulture, farm management and botany at Purdue. I'm also seriously thinking about starting a business as a florist. Later on, I'm going to be helping out Mr. Diggory take care of the Solarium and the grounds."

"So you studied more than just farming, huh?"

"Much more."

"I think botany is fascinating," Marshall said. "I'd like to know more about it, but I don't have the time. There were so many plants in the Solarium I couldn't recognize."

"We're planning to label them all and turn it into sort of a botanical garden," Nick said.

"Right, Mr. Diggory?"

"I told you it's Basil, and yes." Basil smiled. I liked him.

"Excellent," Marshall said.

"We're all going to be very busy, I'm sure," Sean said. "Only poor Avery will miss out. He has to leave for Phantom World soon."

"Hey, I won't be on vacation. I'll be working!" Avery said.

"You call that work?" Sean asked. "Don't you just stand around and tan all day or something?"

"I didn't say it was difficult."

I looked around the table. I missed all the California boys, but it was good to be back with my friends.