

Skye

Saturday, August 7, 2004

I tapped the shoulder of the boy wearing the Abercrombie & Fitch muscle shirt, the boy who'd just decked a kid half his size. He turned, the bright sunlight blinding him for a moment. His eyes widened. He swung at me. I doubled him over with a punch to the gut.

"I thought you and your friends learned your lesson last time, Bart. Do we really have to do this again?"

Bart snarled and lunged at me. His four buddies attacked like a pack of wolves. I slugged Bart in the face, snapping his head back. Using my momentum, I hooked the right leg of one of my attackers with my foot and sent him sprawling. One boy had foolishly pounced on my back. I twisted, grabbed his head, flipped him onto his back. One of the remaining two landed a punch to my face. I rewarded him with two swift jabs to the stomach. My fifth and final attacker actually pulled my hair. What was up with that? I elbowed him in the abs and then clocked him one on the face for good measure. All this happened in the space of about five seconds.

The next few seconds was a blur of flying fists. The muscular redhead was the first to go down and stay down. He rolled around on the grass, moaning and clutching his stomach. Kerr, the boy with straight black hair was out of it after a single punch to the gut. The blond boy fought like a wildcat, even going so far as to scratch at my face. Soon, he too was on the grass, moaning. That just left Bart and the other boy with brown hair. They made an effort at an organized attack. They came in from two sides at once. A punch to the face halted the advance of the brown-haired boy. I blocked Bart's punch to my jaw, grabbed his wrist, and twisted it behind his back.

"How many times must we do this?" I asked him. "Do you enjoy getting your ass kicked that much?"

"Shut up, fa...just shut up!"

"Maybe you're some kind of masochist, Bart, but I doubt your friends appreciate pain."

Bart's buddies lay on the ground, moaning. I almost hated to whip high-school boys, but at five-to-one at least they had a chance—sort of.

I shoved Bart away from me and glanced around at the others.

"If we're going to keep meeting like this, I'm going to have to learn your names," I said.

I leaned down, picked up my shirt, and put it back in the belt-loop of my cargo shorts. My encounter with the bullies had interrupted a pleasant summer stroll.

"Thanks, boys. It's been fun."

I motioned with my head for Bart's latest victim to follow me. Bart might leave him alone now, but

then again, he might not. The kid was obviously scared. He hurried to catch up with me as I left my opponents strewn upon the field of battle.

“What’s your name?”

“Kip.”

“I’m Skye.”

“I know. That was incredible! I’ve heard stories about you, but I didn’t believe they could be true.”

I laughed.

“Where do you live? I’ll walk you home.”

Kip pointed to the east. We headed in that direction.

“So, you’re what? A freshman?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“How old?”

“I just turned fifteen.”

“Do those guys often give you a hard time?”

“Not often. They’re big jerks to everyone, but they don’t usually pick on me that much. This was the first time they attacked me. I’m sooo glad you showed up. I thought they were gonna beat me senseless.”

Kip was still a bit shaky.

“Hey, you’re safe now, Kip.”

“I know, but my heart won’t stop racing.”

“Hopefully, Bart and his friends will get the message this time.”

“You’ve tangled with them before?”

“Yeah. I caught a couple of them harassing another boy. The whole lot of them jumped me in the park a few weeks ago, too. They don’t quite seem to get the message. I’ll pound it in as often as it takes. Sooner or later, they’ll learn.”

Kip grinned. He was a cute kid: slim, curly blond hair, blue eyes.

“I’ve never seen anyone take on five guys before. That was awesome! Don’t you get scared?”

“Bullies don’t frighten me.”

“I don’t see how you fight like that—damn!”

I smiled.

Kip stole glances of my bare chest as we walked, but I didn’t detect any desire on his part. The gay boys I rescued couldn’t keep their eyes off me. Kip merely admired my strength. I could read a bit of hero worship in his eyes, but hero worship wasn’t sexual. I was relieved. The last thing I needed was another under-aged boy lusting after me.

“This is it,” Kip said, pointing to a well-kept Colonial.

“It was nice meeting you, Kip.”

“You, too. Thanks for saving my butt.”

“Anytime.”

I turned and walked away as Kip headed toward his front door. At least he was safe for the time being. Ahhh, it was good to be back in Verona, Indiana.

My encounter with Bart and his buddies was a welcome respite from a very strange day. Recent, virtually unbelievable events kept replaying in my mind until they’d driven me from the Gymnasium of the Graymoor Mansion Bed & Breakfast; by the way, I run the Gymnasium at the B&B. Then again, it was more likely my keen sense for trouble that pulled me toward the park. I didn’t understand what I’d come to think of as my sixth sense, but I’d learned long ago not to ignore it. I was drawn to trouble like a magnet toward steel.

My thoughts went back to the evening before—to Devon—a once malicious spirit miraculously changed overnight into a mere boy. Yes, that’s right. He was an evil spirit, but after a trip through his past somewhat reminiscent of A Christmas Carol, Devon was changed. His transformation from spirit into human wasn’t even the greatest alteration that had taken place. The most significant change was inside Devon and inside those of us who’d gone along for the ride. I’d never guessed at the emotional anguish Devon had experienced in his youth, but gazing at his past I came to understand how his love turned to hate and how he trapped himself in his own hell.

Oh, how I’d dreamed of the day I’d could get my hands on Devon! Devon had been a thorn in my side for years. He’d tormented me and my friends. He’d very nearly succeeded in killing Oliver and me several years back—and Thad very recently. My frustration at not being able to lay my hands on him had been immense. How did one fight something that had no physical form? When Devon was made human at last, it wasn’t at all like I thought it would be. Even my desire for revenge drained away as my eyes were opened and I understood at last. At the very moment he was within my grasp, I no longer desired to harm him. Devon had changed before my very eyes. He was no more evil now

than he was a spirit.

I thought I was accustomed to the supernatural. Graymoor Mansion was Spook Central, after all. I've seen furniture move by itself. I've had my ass pinched by a mischievous 600-year-old boy ghost (whom I'm told likes to watch me shower, the little perv). I've talked to angels. Yes, real angels. I even had a crush on one, but that's a whole other story. Still, witnessing the evil menace whom I'd sought to destroy transformed into a real, live boy stretched even my ability to believe. There was no denying the truth, however. I'd seen it with my own eyes. I almost couldn't believe the long battle with Devon was over. I could never have guessed that it would end with him as a sixteen-year-old boy living under the same roof as I was!

I wondered how Sean had explained Devon to his parents. They were privy to many of the supernatural goings-on in Graymoor Mansion, but the human mind could only handle so much. Had I not been exposed to the truth in measured doses, I think I might've gone stark-raving mad. So much I'd seen and experienced over the years couldn't possibly be real, and yet it was real, all of it.

I'd seen no sign of Sean, his parents, or Devon all morning. Perhaps they were holed up somewhere trying to deal with this new and bizarre reality. We were all trying to cope. Recent events boggled the mind. I felt a bit disoriented, as if I couldn't count on the sun rising or gravity holding me down anymore. The sun had risen, however, and gravity showed no sign of releasing its grip. Still, it was a wonder we didn't all go insane.

I returned to Graymoor. I did have a job after all. I knew my employers, Sean and his parents, wouldn't mind my stroll. They knew my real task in life: to make wherever I was a safer place. I'd long ago accepted my destiny.

I spotted Sean and Devon walking together as I crossed the lobby. I tensed, ready to spring into action, but then I remembered... Sean gave me a quick "hey," but Devon merely looked uncomfortable. It was so odd seeing them together—so strange seeing Devon as a human, period. Devon looked like an ordinary sixteen-year-old boy. I reminded myself he was exactly what he seemed now. This wasn't one of Devon's tricks—changing himself into the form of someone else. Still, it was hard to fight old habits. It was definitely going to take time to grow accustomed to the new Devon.

I walked on through the long, twisting hallways of Graymoor until I entered the familiar world of the Natatorium. The scent of chlorine and blooming plants was reassuring. I was far more comfortable in the physical world than the spiritual. Somehow, I kept getting pulled into otherworldly events. Perhaps now my life would be a bit more normal, and I could concentrate on protecting the gay boys of Verona from non-supernatural threats. Then again, I lived and worked in Graymoor Mansion. I doubted a normal day was even possible within its ancient walls.

Craig

I gazed at the photo of Skye and then back to my easel as Brahms played softly in the background.

Slowly, my pencil sketch was beginning to form itself into the incredible lines of Skye's body. I much preferred to draw Skye as a live model, but he'd been more than generous with his time. The real, live Skye was far more distracting than his photos, too, which were quite distracting enough. Never—not in a magazine, not on TV, not in a film—had I ever seen such a perfect body. Skye looked as if a master Renaissance artist had spent his entire life sculpting him, focusing all his energy and talent into making Skye perfect. Skye was without flaw. It was impossible to improve his form. He was no less than a god.

Experiencing a little hero-worship are we? I thought to myself.

I grinned. Considering Skye a god was certainly over the top and yet in his case, perhaps not. If there was such a thing as physical perfection, Skye embodied it. His face alone possessed such intense masculine beauty it was difficult to gaze upon him at times. His body—there was no describing it. It was no wonder men fell at his feet. Frightened and uncertain virgin though I was, I was barely able to keep from coming onto him. Had I not been so timid and terrified of the consequences, I might have done so. Perhaps fear did serve a purpose at times. At least, it kept me from making a complete fool of myself in front of Skye.

I was beside myself with joy when Skye agreed to pose for me. True, some small part of that joy came from the opportunity to view Skye in all his naked glory. The true source of my joy was finding such a perfect model. Great art requires inspiration, and there was no one as inspiring as Skye. With Skye as my model, my chances of getting into a good art school increased by a factor of ten.

I frowned. Acceptance would mean nothing if I lacked the funds to pay for school. My parents—well, make that my father—had issued an ultimatum: I would attend a small conservative college or receive no financial assistance. I chafed at the parental blackmail. My dad was hell-bent on me following in his footsteps: wholesale hardware. Can you believe it? Such a life was a fate worse than death, I was sure. How could any father want to inflict such mediocrity on his son? If I was talentless, I could understand my father's determination better. I was not without talent, however. I wasn't a great artist yet, but I was a good artist, and someday I would be great. Perhaps my name would never be well known in the art world, but I knew I could be a success if given a chance. Why couldn't my father believe in me?

Homophobia. There was the answer. Dad feared pursuing art would turn me into a homosexual. There was no danger of that. I already was one. I had been all my life. I'd known it since I was eight.

My mother encouraged me—secretly. I often wished she would stand up to dad, but I understood she didn't have it in her. Like mother, like son. Soon, I'd have to stand up to my father. My senior year was about to begin. The clock was ticking. I'd already applied to the best art schools. Taking Skye's advice, I'd applied for every scholarship I might have even a remote chance of winning, including a PFLAG scholarship. I was thinking hard about applying for a part-time job at the B&B. Skye said they'd be hiring as they expanded. He said he'd put in a good word for me.

What if even the scholarships and job weren't enough? How long would I have to toil away after

high school before I could start my college life? The possibilities depressed me.

There are months before you graduate. The school year hasn't even started yet, I reminded myself. There was no need to give up hope yet.

I smiled as I looked at my sketch of Skye. It was coming along better than I'd hoped. I'd actually captured the aura of self-confidence and ease that flowed from him. It was the nonphysical qualities of a model that were the hardest to capture. Without capturing those qualities, an artist might as well be sketching a still life.

I'd need at least one more session with Skye to put the finishing touches on my sketch. Really! I was eager for any chance to see him naked, but sometimes photos just would not do. I'd already completed my photographic study of Skye. Next, I'd move onto sculpture. I yearned to sculpt him full-size, but it was out of the question for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that I had to transport the sculpture to show to prospective art schools.

I allowed myself a little fantasy as I worked. The art school of my choice would select me for a full scholarship. My father would stop pressuring me to step into his world. I'd pass my senior year in eager anticipation of what was to come. I'd find the courage to come out. I'd find a boyfriend! Skye! Yeah! Hey, it's my fantasy, right? If you're going to dream, dream big. I wondered where I'd heard that. It certainly wasn't from my father. He didn't believe in dreams. I did. Where would I be without my dreams?

My fantasies were unlikely to come true. As hopeless as getting into an art school seemed, coming out and finding a boyfriend was even more unlikely. As for Skye becoming my boyfriend, well, that was just this side of impossible. There was no way a guy like him would be interested in me. There was the age difference, too. I'm seventeen and Skye twenty-four. Seven years isn't a big deal, but I have high school to finish, then college. Who knows where I'll end up? I seriously doubt Skye would want to go off with me while I attend school. Part of me wished it was five years from now. I'd be out of school (hopefully) and twenty-three. Skye would be thirty. I'd know what I was doing with my life. Even the age difference would seem smaller later. For some reason, twenty-three and thirty seemed much closer than seventeen and twenty-four. Crazy.

Fantasies were just that: fantasies. Still, it was good to dream. I was sure my fantasy wouldn't come true, at least not exactly as I'd dreamed it. Even if I had to work a few years to raise money for art school, I could still make it happen. I seriously doubted Skye would date me, but maybe I could manage to find a boyfriend. As for coming out, well, maybe I'd do that in college.

My arm began to ache. I looked at the clock. I hadn't realized I'd been working so long. With a subject like Skye, work was pure pleasure. I closed my pad and secreted it away in my top desk drawer, which for security, I locked. I had nightmares about my father discovering a drawing of a nude male. He'd freak! My father never came to my room, but there was no reason to tempt fate.

My stomach growled. No wonder. I hadn't stopped for lunch, and it was now past six p.m. I often became so absorbed in my artwork that I lost all track of time. I headed for the kitchen to rummage through the refrigerator, but halfway down the stairs I could hear Dad yelling at the TV. He did that

sometimes when something upset him, and a lot of things upset him. When he was in one of his moods, it was best to avoid him.

I changed my mind about raiding the fridge and quietly crept down the stairs. Dad was so absorbed in the news that he took no note of me. I headed quickly down the hallway and made my escape out the back door. I heaved a sigh of relief as I stepped out into the August evening. It was quite warm, but nothing compared to the heat of the day.

I walked down the sidewalk, taking in the scenic beauty of Verona. A lot of guys my age couldn't wait to get out of "this hick town," but I liked my hometown. Of course, I was a bit of an oddity. I'm not just talking about being gay. I'd be an oddball even if I lusted over girls. For one thing, I enjoyed school, especially art and literature classes. For another, I didn't smoke, drink, or do drugs. I'd tried a cigarette when I was a kid. I nearly coughed to death. That was enough smoking for me. I'd tried beer, wine, and whiskey, too. I found each to be vile. As for drugs, I wasn't about to try those. That's just plain stupid. Most of the guys at school drank, at least some. Smokers were far fewer in number. Drug users were a minority, but there were a few around. It seemed like everyone either smoked, drank, or did drugs—at least occasionally—except for me.

My biggest oddity was my music. Brace yourself. This is a big one: I like classical. That's not to say I won't listen to some of the more popular stuff, but classical helps me chill out. I love Brahms, Chopin, Mahler, Vivaldi, Bach, and well...I can't list them all. I love Scott Joplin, too. He's one of my favorites, in fact. Joplin wasn't a classical composer. He wrote these incredible ragtime pieces for the piano. You've probably heard *The Entertainer*. It was in that old Robert Redford film, *The Sting*. Actually, a lot of music from the film was written by Joplin. Joplin wrote most of his stuff at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Okay, I'll shut up. When I get going on my music, I talk way too much. The same happens when I talk about art. OMG! I went to the Indiana University Art Museum at the beginning of the summer...but I'd better not get started or you'll want to kill me just to shut me up.

I ran my fingers through my shaggy, black locks. My parents were always nagging me to cut my hair, but it wasn't going to happen. I liked my hair, and who knew how long I'd have it? Dad still has nearly all his hair, but one of my mother's brothers is nearly bald, and he's like forty-something. You just never know. My long hair does increase my morning prep time a good deal, but hey, I'm gay! I have no objection to mirror time. I don't see how guys (or girls) with really long hair take care of it. My hair doesn't quite reach my shoulders, but taking care of it is time-consuming enough.

The bell on the door rang as I entered Ofarim's. The cool air wafted around me, as did the scent of burgers and fries. My hunger swelled.

"Hey, Craig."

I turned. There he was: Verona's resident hunk and champion of the oppressed—our own superhero.

"Skye. What's up?"

"I'm just escaping from the insanity for a while."

“Insanity?”

“Long story,” Skye said. “Want to join me? I just ordered.”

“Sure.”

I slid into the booth, facing Skye.

“How’s the sketch coming?”

“Almost finished. I want to do one more session with you to put on the final touches. Then, we can start the sculpture sessions.”

“Just let me know when. I can come up with some time most evenings.”

“Good. School starts back up in a few days, so evenings are perfect.”

The waiter, a cute boy from school who I think was a year behind me, came and took my order. I wondered what he looked like without a shirt. My gaze lingered on him as he walked away.

Skye smiled when our waiter departed.

“What?”

“You were checking him out.”

I could feel my face turn pink.

“I...um... You don’t think he noticed, do you?”

“No. You were subtle. I’m just tuned into these things. You have good taste. He’s cute and has a nice butt. He’s too young for me, but for you...”

“Yeah. If he’s gay; if he’s into me. Those are two big ifs.”

“It might take a while to figure him out, but it could be worth it.”

“Or, I could out myself in the process.”

“That’s why you have to be careful, at least until you’re ready to come out.”

“That will not be soon.”

“Have you had any trouble?”

“Not since you rescued me a few weeks ago. Why?”

“I ran into your buddy Kerr.”

“What was he up to?”

“He and four others were picking on a freshman.”

“Oh,” I said, none too happy.

“I taught them a lesson—again. I hope it takes this time, but keep your eye out for trouble just in case.”

“I always do. So...what’s the insanity you’re escaping from?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you, and I can’t tell you,” Skye said. “Things are crazy right now. It’s a wonder I don’t lose my mind.”

“You’re being very mysterious. How’s everything else, other than the insanity?”

“Couldn’t be better,” Skye said. “I actually get paid to run a gym. We’re going to start selling memberships in the near future. Since Verona doesn’t have a gym or a community pool, Sean and I thought it would be a good way to bring in some money. Sean wants to get the B&B in the black as soon as possible.”

“That’s not very likely, though, is it?”

“No. It might be if we charged ridiculous room rates, but the Hiltons don’t want to cater to the rich. They’re very down to earth. The rates aren’t cheap, but they’re reasonable, especially considering what guests get for their money.”

I drank in Skye’s beauty as we talked. My earlier fantasies embarrassed me. My chances with Skye were zero. He was a man, and I was still a boy.

Our cute waiter was soon back with our food, so we ceased talking for a moment.

“That’s all you’re eating?” I asked Skye. Only a small cheeseburger and a Diet Coke sat in front of him.

“This is all I want, believe me. I usually have a big breakfast at the B&B. I often just have a piece of fruit or something for lunch because I’m just not hungry.”

“Wow. You make me look like a pig.”

A double-cheeseburger and a mound of fries sat before me, as well as a Coke and a chocolate milkshake.

“Hardly. What did you have for breakfast and lunch?”

“I had a bagel with cream cheese for breakfast. I forgot lunch.”

“Then I ate more than you today, except I didn’t have anything as fattening as that shake. You’re thin. You can get away with eating like that. I can’t.”

“Don’t tell me you have to watch your weight?” I said.

“Yes, I do. I put on muscle easily but also fat. If I didn’t watch what I eat, I’d pack on the pounds.”

“Hey. Let me know when the B&B is going to start hiring, okay? I definitely need an after-school and maybe weekend job.”

“I will. Your dad isn’t budging on his demands?”

“No way. If I want to go to art school, I’m going to have to pay for it myself. That’s exactly what I’m going to do, but I’m not telling him that until I’m ready to move out.”

“You’re trying for scholarships?”

“I’m applying for everything. I will leave no stone unturned.”

Skye smiled.

“Good for you. I’ll put in a good word for you with Sean when he starts hiring.”

“Thanks.”

I sighed without realizing it.

“What?” Skye asked.

“Nothing.”

It was a lie. If I told him the truth, I would have said “I want to kiss you” or “Let’s have sex” or “Will you be my boyfriend?” I didn’t think such thoughts around other guys, even very attractive ones. Skye was one in a million, however. Still, I had already decided to save myself for Mr. Right. I’d been a virgin this long. I figured I might as well give it up to someone I truly loved. Would I ever meet such a guy? At the moment, I doubted it.

Devon

I gazed in the mirror. A sixteen-year-old boy looked back at me. I touched my face—and it was my face. I was me once again. I was the me I had been—how many years ago? I was sixteen in 1980. Now, it was 2004, and I was sixteen—again. It was as if all the years in between had never happened. Bizarre.

I felt as if I'd awakened from a nightmare. Was that terrible creature who tried to destroy those around him really me? I could remember the horrible, overwhelming hatred. I could remember countless treacherous acts. It was as if I was watching a movie, a horror film. None of it seemed quite real, yet it was all real. I knew I had been the one who had done such things, but now I couldn't imagine myself being that creature. I couldn't imagine myself, or anyone, filled with so much hate. Love turned to hate. How was it even possible?

Someone knocked. I left the bathroom, walked across the room, and opened the door.

"Devon, come with me. It's time for breakfast."

It was Sean. I'd once possessed his friend Marshall and tried to kill Sean. I'd led murderers to him so they would kill him, more than once. I'd done so many horrible, horrible things to Sean and his friends, but here he was—helping me.

Sean and the others had forgiven me, but they hadn't forgotten. I could see it in Sean's eyes even now. He was trying to forget, but how could he? How could any of them? How could they even look at me?

"Come on. You've got to be hungry."

"I am. I haven't eaten in seven years."

"Huh?"

"I died seven years ago. Remember? I killed myself."

Sean nodded. He remembered.

"Well, now you're back. You've been given a unique chance, Devon. I don't know if anyone has ever been given the chance to truly start over."

"But why me? I don't deserve it."

"You must deserve it or it wouldn't be happening."

"Do you believe I deserve a second chance?" I asked.

Sean hesitated. He wanted to tell me I deserved it, but he didn't believe it, and so he couldn't say it.

"That's what I thought," I said.

"Come on."

I followed Sean downstairs to the first floor. He led me not to the dining room, nor to the

kitchen, but to a little parlor. Perhaps no one thought it safe to let me eat with others. Perhaps they feared I'd revert to the evil creature I once had been. Maybe they thought I was inherently evil and would do in human form what I'd done as a spirit. Perhaps they were right. I felt nothing of that evil being inside me, but he had been me. Perhaps, he was within me still, just waiting his chance to come out.

I was wrong about my isolation. A table was set for four. Sean's parents sat waiting. How odd it was that I knew this house and everyone in it so well; yet it wasn't odd. I was a sixteen-year-old boy again, but I remembered everything. I wished I didn't.

"It's very nice to meet you, Devon," Sean's mom said as I entered. She fearfully took my hand and shook it. I knew it took a supreme effort on her part to touch me.

"It's, um... very nice to meet you."

"I'll go tell Martha we're ready. Is French toast, scrambled eggs, and bacon okay?"

"That sounds wonderful!" I said. How strange it felt to smile. How odd it felt to breathe.

"Hello, Devon," Sean's dad said as he shook my hand. He was less fearful than his wife but still cautious. I wondered if he was there to greet me or to act as a bodyguard in case I lost control. "Please have a seat."

I was nervous and frightened. I wanted more than anything to return to my room, where no one could see me. Maybe I could stay in there forever. They could just leave my meals outside the door, or maybe it would be better if they just let me starve to death.

I looked at Sean; uncertainty and confusion engulfed me.

"I filled my parents in on what's happened," he said by way of explanation.

How could they accept such bizarre events so easily? How did Sean explain the events of last night to them? Oh, by the way, remember that sadistic evil spirit who existed solely to torment us? The one who keeps trying to kill me? Well, he's seen the error of his ways—at least we think so. Oh, yeah, and he's human now, too.

Perhaps years of living in Graymoor had prepared the Hiltons to believe the unbelievable. My story was definitely unbelievable. I wasn't even quite sure I believed it. Perhaps I'd merely gone insane long ago and never realized it. That seemed more likely than anything else. What if I really had gone mad? Perhaps I was trapped in some new hell, and all those I'd preyed upon would turn on me and torment me.

"We have a lot to discuss," Sean's dad said.

Here it comes, I thought. Here is where they tell me I have to get out. I have to go far, far away because no one wants to have anything to do with me. They can't have me around because I might

be dangerous.

“We don’t want you to worry about anything. We’re going to take care of you.”

I looked at Sean and his dad suspiciously. This had to be some kind of trick—or trap. Take care of me? After I’d tried to kill their son? No one was that forgiving—or stupid. Still, what could I do but play along? What if it wasn’t some kind of trick or trap? I had nothing to lose by seeing how things played out. After all, I had nowhere to go and no one to go to.

“Um...thank you. I...um...I don’t know what to say.”

“I expect not. This is new territory for all of us.”

Sean’s mom and Martha returned soon with a cart filled with covered dishes.

“Martha, I’d like you to meet Devon. He’ll be living with us for a while.”

“Hi,” I said, standing up and offering my hand.

“Hello, Devon. If you get hungry, the kitchen is always open.”

“Thank you.”

Martha seemed nice enough and didn’t seem suspicious or afraid. Maybe it was because I hadn’t tried to kill her kids. More likely it was because she didn’t know the truth about me.

We all sat down. I uncovered my plate and forgot about my fears and misgivings for the moment. The aroma of breakfast nearly made me moan. I didn’t realize until that moment that I was ravenously hungry. I poured syrup on my French toast then spooned on some powdered sugar. I took a bite. It was delicious! I took bite after bite until I realized I was wolfing down food like a starved beast.

“Sorry,” I said.

The Hiltons just nervously smiled at me. I was thankful there was little talk while we ate. I had no idea what to say to these people. I was thankful we were eating, too, not only because I was so hungry, but because I could concentrate on the food and not have to think.

I had two big helpings of everything. All the food was delicious.

There was an uncomfortable silence for a few moments when we’d finished eating.

“That was wonderful. Thanks,” I said.

“You’re welcome,” Sean’s mom said.

She was still cautious, still afraid of me. Who could blame her? “So...um... what happens now?” I asked.

“You’re going to be living here in Graymoor,” Sean’s dad said. “For a little while, until you adjust.”

“And after that? I don’t...It’s all so...”

I felt completely disoriented. Perhaps this second chance was a punishment after all. I would have been better off if Mark and Taylor had destroyed me instead. No one would have cared. No one deserved to be punished more than I did.

Perhaps I should stop and explain something here. Mark and Taylor are angels. Yeah, that’s right, angels—real angels—the kind that lived in Heaven and flew down to Earth to help mortals. I know that might be hard to believe, but if you can believe I was once an evil spirit, angels shouldn’t be too far a stretch now, should it?

“Don’t worry, Devon, everything has been arranged,” Sean said.

Sean pulled out a large envelope and handed it to me.

“What’s this?”

“Your new identity. In there you’ll find your birth certificate, your Social Security card, school records, medical history, your driver’s license, and everything else you’ll need.”

I looked at Sean, confused. I pushed away my plates and dumped out the contents of the envelope. I picked up the driver’s license. It had been issued only a few days before. The picture sure looked like me. I read the birth date: July 6, 1988. I looked up at Sean.

“It wouldn’t do to have your original birthday on it, would it?” he said. “You’d be what, forty, now?”

That did make sense. I looked at the name. I didn’t recognize the surname.

“Your last name had to be changed, too. It won’t do for anyone to get suspicious, although the chances of that are slim.”

I looked through the papers. They all looked so official.

“These look real.”

“They are real, as are all the records in all the right places,” Sean said. “Anyone can dig as deeply as they wish and they’ll find nothing amiss.”

“Did...you do this?” I asked, looking at Sean and his parents.

“I’m afraid that’s quite beyond us,” Sean said. “Besides, I told you, they’re real.”

“But how? Who?”

“You have one guess,” Sean said.

“Mark?”

“Exactly.”

A feeling of such powerful sadness and loss overwhelmed me at the mention of the name that I began to shudder and cry. Mark... So many memories of the past years rushed in as did memories of my early high school years when Mark was the boy I loved. I still loved him—or rather, I loved him again now. How could he forgive me for all I’d done? Forgiveness. It kept coming back to that. How could anyone forgive me?

Sean walked over to me. He put his hand on my shoulder. I didn’t look up. I didn’t want to see the doubt and fear in his eyes. At least he touched me. I cried harder. I just hurt so badly inside.

“After all I did...” I whispered hoarsely.

“Devon, Mark forgave you. We all did.”

“But how? How is that possible? You know what I was, Sean! You know the things I did! People suffered because of me! People died because of me! People have been put to death for less! I was evil.”

Sean didn’t argue with me. He knew it was true. No matter my reasons, the things I’d done...

“We know all this is difficult to accept,” Sean’s dad said. “But, you must bow to logic. You’ve been given a new life. It is quite literally a miracle, Devon. Miracles don’t happen to those who don’t deserve them. They very rarely happen to those who do.”

“But, I don’t deserve...”

Sean’s dad held up his hand to stop me. “Logic, Devon. You do deserve it or it wouldn’t have happened. You must accept the reality of the situation.”