

Altered Realities

Sean—Graymoor Mansion—February 1998

“It would take a lifetime to look through all these books,” said Marshall, pulling another one from the shelf and holding it under the hanging lamp for a better view.

Marshall and I were in the library, exploring the dusty, leather-bound tomes—thousands of them.

“That’s typical of Graymoor,” I said. “I’ve lived here nearly a year and I haven’t even been in all the rooms yet. There’s always something new to explore.”

“Something old, don’t you mean?” said Marshall, grinning.

Rain mixed with sleet pelted the window panes. I stared out the window, but nothing met my gaze except for my own distorted reflection in the glass. It didn’t matter. My eyes were all but unseeing.

“What’s wrong?” asked Marshall, looking up from his book.

I turned to him. “I was just thinking about Marty. It was on a night like this that he disappeared.”

Marshall closed the book and returned it to the shelf. “I know you miss him. I can’t pretend to understand. I don’t know how I’d feel if my best friend was murdered. Upset, yeah, but...it’s one of those things you have to experience to understand.”

“Pray to God you never understand, then. It’s been months, but I still keep expecting to run into him in the halls at school or to pick up the phone and hear his voice, then...I remember...and it all comes right back at me.”

“I’m sorry,” said Marshall.

I looked into Marshall’s dark eyes and smiled grimly.

“Time heals all wounds, right?”

“That’s what they say.”

I turned back to my reflection in the window. “He died too young.”

“He’s in a better place,” said Marshall.

“Do we know that for sure?” I asked.

“There is a way to check. Perhaps enough time has passed now...perhaps...”

“No, Marshall. It’s not worth the risk.”

“Then ask Taylor the next time he appears...or Mark.”

“I don’t know. Sometimes all this is just too much,” I said.

“Is living in Spook Central getting on your nerves?”

“I love Graymoor, but...so much has happened. Sometimes I can’t even believe it myself.”

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

“Don’t I know it?” I shivered, wrapping my arms around myself. “It’s cold in here. I just wish... I just wish I could have saved him. If only I could go back and do things over, do things right...”

“Hindsight is a wonderful thing,” said Marshall.

“But fairly useless, all things considered.”

“Oh, I don’t know. There is much to be learned from the past. Sean?”

“Sorry,” I said, wiping my eyes. Tears were running down my cheeks. I just couldn’t help myself.”

“Are you still thinking of Marty?”

“Yes, of Marty, the friend I lost and will never see again—of the others, of Taylor and Mark. You’ve read their journals; you know what it was like for them.”

“Yes.”

“God, I wish I could just turn back time and save them. I’d save them all.”

“If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride,” said Marshall. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to be a jerk.”

“It’s okay.”

I stood looking at my own reflection in the window until I became aware of the absolute silence in the room. How long had I been standing there? Seconds? Minutes? Hours? I turned.

“Marshall? Marshall?”

A distant look had come over Marshall’s face. He just stood there, gazing off into space. It frightened me.

“Yes,” he said quietly, but I had the distinct impression he was not speaking to me.

I watched Marshall as he rolled the ladder down the shelves on the west side of the room. He climbed nearly to the top and pulled down a thick, heavy tome. I noticed a glint of gold and a flash of red as the light hit it. The cover had a large, flat, rectangular, jewel that looked like a ruby set into gold. Marshall climbed down, blew away the dust of a century, and placed the book on the large marble-top table in the center of the room, right under the old-fashioned gas chandelier that had recently been converted to electricity.

A gust of wind shot through the room, though the windows and door were fast shut. The book blew open and Marshall put his finger to a page.

“Yes!”

“Marshall? I don’t like this...”

Marshall began speaking, chanting in a language unfamiliar to me, yet familiar in a way. It wasn’t quite English, yet I could almost understand part of it. I caught bits and pieces... perce... swich... strange strondes... tyme and space. Tyme and space? Time and space?

“Marshall, what are you doing? Stop. Marshall, stop!”

A vortex formed around Marshall, a whirling cyclone of wind and debris, yet he and the table were untouched by it. I was not so lucky. I leaned hard into the wind, fighting to remain standing, fighting to make my way to Marshall. I could hear his voice above the wind, chanting. The howling wind became deafening, then...silence...blackness. I could see nothing. It was as if I’d gone blind. I could hear nothing, save for my own ragged breath.

“Marshall? Marshall?”

My eyes slowly adjusted to the absence of light. I felt my way toward the light switch. I searched, but could not find it. I remembered then the flashlight I’d set on the marble top table when we’d entered. I never walked about Graymoor without a light. Large portions of it were unlit, and you never knew where you would end up when walking the twisted halls of Graymoor.

I made it only halfway to the table when my right foot shot through the floor, or rather where the floor was supposed to be. My thigh hit hard against jagged wood, causing me to cry out in

momentary pain. Luckily, the hole was not large or I might've fallen to my death. I pulled myself up and limped toward the table, no longer sure of anything.

I found the flashlight easily enough and switched it on. Marshall was nowhere to be seen. I looked at my hand. It was blackened as if I'd stuck it into a chimney and pulled it out covered with soot. I shined the flashlight around the room.

"What the..."

The walls were darkened and burned in places; the ceiling was blackened as if by smoke. I shined the light onto the windows. The reflection I'd seen only minutes before was gone. The glass was gone! All the windows had been broken. I next shined the light onto the hole in the floor. It looked as if a fire had burned through from the floor below. None of what I was seeing made sense!

I turned the light onto the table. The book was still open to the page Marshall had read out loud. I looked at the strangely spelled words upon the page.

"Middle English," I said to myself. I recognized it from my literature class. We'd read part of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in the original Middle English.

"Where are you?" I said, turning my attention to the shelves. "I know you're here. I saw you just a few minutes ago!"

I pulled yet another tome from the shelves—a Middle English dictionary. I'd been thumbing through it earlier in our explorations. I began to clumsily translate the text Marshall had recited and, as I did so, my fear grew. No, it couldn't be true, it just couldn't!

"Marshall," I said out loud to the darkness. "Oh my God, Marshall, what have you done?"

Taylor—November 3, 1980

I stumbled past the high school, the rain plastering my hair to the sides of my face. Icy water swirled around my toes as I ran. I slowed to a walk, holding my side, gasping for breath. I trembled with cold and fear. My shirt, shorts, and boxers were soaked with the freezing rain that continued to fall. I was so cold...so cold. I fought to blink my tears away as another sob rose up from my chest. This was it; this was the end.

Shivering, I staggered on across the empty parking lot and onto the soccer fields. I thought of Mark, and fresh sobs assaulted me. "It'll be better this way," I said to the cold, unforgiving darkness.

I made it to the soccer goal, my limbs numb with the cold. I couldn't feel my fingers anymore. The icy rain hit my face, stinging and freezing. No more pain soon, no more. I'd make it all go away.

I sank down against the soccer goal and looked into my hand. The bottle of pills was still there, clutched in my frozen fingers. I fought to release them, my grip set as if rigor mortis had already taken possession of me. I fumbled with the lid, but it would not come off.

"Taylor! Taylor!"

A voice in the darkness called out to me. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

"Taylor! Don't! For God's sake, don't!"

I heard sloshing footsteps—someone running toward me. I struggled with the lid.

"No, Taylor! You can't! No!"

The bottle of pills flew from my hand, knocked away. I looked up as the frigid rain ran into my eyes, mingling with my hot tears. I blinked my eyes into focus.

“Who are you?” I asked. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter. Leave me alone!”

“No, Taylor. I won’t let you do this. If you only knew...”

I reached for the bottle, crawling toward it on hands and knees. The boy who’d appeared in the darkness grabbed me around the waist and pulled me away. He snatched the bottle, opened it, dumped the contents onto the mud, and ground the pills into nothingness with his foot.

I lay in the mud, fighting for breath, fighting for warmth, sobbing.

“It’s okay, Taylor. It’s okay. You’re going to be okay now.”

The boy pulled me to my feet. My head swam.

“I’m so cold,” I said shivering.

“And I’ve no coat to give you.”

I looked at the boy who’d placed my arm over his shoulder. He was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt only. His eyes and hair were dark.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I’m Marshall,” he said as he gazed at me, his eyes full of wonder.

Headlights blinded us for a moment from the distant parking lot. Doors slammed, and three figures ran toward us as if the hounds of hell were chasing them.

“Taylor! Taylor! Thank God!”

I turned my eyes toward the sound of the voice. My thoughts were cloudy, my body racked with pain.

“Brandon?”

“Yes, it’s me, Taylor. I’m here. Oh my God! I thought we’d lost you. I thought you’d...”

Brandon was crying. Yes, it was Brandon.

“God, you’re freezing, both of you,” said Brandon. “Jon, Ethan, help me get them to the car.”

Brandon and Jon took me from...from...I’d forgotten his name already. Everything was so foggy. They pulled my arms over their shoulders and carried me. My strength was failing. I couldn’t have walked on my own.

“Here, let me help you,” said...Ethan? Yes, Ethan. He was helping the other boy.

“Thanks.”

“Who are you?” asked Ethan.

“I’m Marshall.”

We were both dumped in the back seat of Brandon’s car. They covered us with blankets. My teeth chattered. Everyone climbed in. Brandon started the car and turned on the heater full blast before driving through the dark rain. My fingers began to ache as feeling returned to them.

“Is Mark home yet?” asked Jon.

“I don’t know. I’ll call him from the hospital,” said Brandon.

My vision blurred. I was disoriented and confused. Worried voices sounded in my ears, but I could not tell what they said. I slipped into darkness. Was this death? Images began to swirl in my mind: my father screaming at me, hitting me in the face. “Get out, you fucking little queer, and don’t ever come back!” my father shouted at me. My own father! The images faded into darkness as my mind went blank.

When my eyes opened, I was staring at a stark white ceiling. The light was bright, too bright. I closed my eyes, then reopened them.

“Hey, Babe,” said a voice.

Mark; it was Mark. I felt him squeeze my hand.

“Hi,” I said, my voice wavering. “God, what happened?”

“You don’t remember?”

I concentrated for a moment. As the memories began to return to me, my eyes filled with tears.

“My parents...my dad...”

“I know, Taylor, I know. Brandon told me all about it. It’s going to be okay, Babe. We’ll get through this together.”

I turned my head. In the bed beside me lay the boy from last night; at least I thought it was last night. He was sleeping, dead to the world. I turned my attention back to Mark.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and started crying.

I knew what I’d tried to do, and I knew how much it would have hurt Mark. What had I been thinking?

“It’s okay, Babe. It’s okay. Everything is going to be fine. I’m here with you now.”

Mark pulled me to him and held me close. I cried like a baby for a few moments, then lay back in bed once more. Mark held my hand.

“I was so scared. I felt so...hopeless. The pain. Nothing mattered but getting rid of the pain. Oh, God, I almost...”

Mark gazed at me, more concerned than I’d ever seen him.

“Brandon told me you said you’d be better off dead.”

“Yes, I’m sorry, Mark. I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking straight. I couldn’t think. It just hurt so bad...my dad...everything that’s happened. I just...snapped, I guess. I was going to...I almost...but then *he* stopped me,” I said, looking at the sleeping form in the bed next to me.

Mark looked at the boy. “Ethan said his name is Marshall. No one seems to know where he came from.”

“Yes, that’s it: Marshall. He saved me. He knocked the pills out of my hand. He crushed them into the mud. If he hadn’t been there...”

Mark raised my hand to his lips and kissed it.

“Promise me you’ll never do anything like that again, Taylor. Never again. I couldn’t live without you. I’d have killed myself if you’d succeeded. I couldn’t have stood it.”

“I promise,” I said.

I drifted off to sleep again, for how long I don’t know, but when I awakened, Mark was still holding my hand. Marshall had awakened, too. He’d arisen and dressed.

“Welcome back, Babe,” said Mark, running his fingers through my hair. He kissed me on the cheek, then the lips. I smiled.

Marshall had come to the edge of my bed. I turned to him.

“Thank you,” I said. “Thank you for saving my life. I was out of my head last night. It was last night, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, and you’re welcome,” he said awkwardly.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I’m Marshall.”

“I know that, but who are you? I’ve never seen you before.”

Marshall hesitated. “I...I don’t think I can...”

“It’s alright,” said Mark. He paused for a moment. “Are you a runaway?”

“Yes. I’m a runaway,” said Marshall. “I don’t belong here.”

Mark grasped Marshall’s hand, and the dark-haired boy looked down at it in wonder. Marshall had a peculiar look on his face, as if he was afraid of us or in awe of us, although neither explanation made sense.

“We’ll help you,” said Mark. “We’ll help you anyway we can. I...I owe you everything.”

“Thank you,” said Marshall. He looked as if he might cry. I wondered what he had run away from. In any case, he was homeless, just like me...

“What am I going to do now?” I asked Mark. “I can’t go home again.”

“Maybe we can talk to your mom.”

“No!” I said firmly. “No, I’ll never go back there! I’m not welcome. They don’t love me. My father told me he no longer has a son.”

Mark had tears in his eyes. He felt my pain as keenly as I did myself.

“Maybe you can live with Aunt Anne. You liked it there, didn’t you?”

“No. I mean yes, I liked it there. It was wonderful, but I won’t be separated from you.”

“Maybe my parents will let me move there with you.”

“We both know that’s not going to happen, Mark. Your parents hate me. They hate the very thought of us together.”

I looked at Marshall. Perhaps we were saying too much in front of him, but I owed him my life, and he’d seen Mark kiss me.

“You’ve probably guessed that we’re gay. Mark is my boyfriend, so if that bothers you, I’m sorry, but...”

“It doesn’t bother me,” said Marshall.

“Are you...”

“No,” said Marshall. “I’m not gay, but I understand. I have...had some gay friends, back where I used to live.”

Marshall looked about uncertainly, as if he expected the walls to close in on him—or simply disappear.

“I wish you could stay with me,” said Mark, gazing into my eyes.

“Like that’s going to happen. Your parents would kick us both out on the street.”

“I’ll leave home. We’ll run away together, the three of us,” said Mark, looking at Marshall.

“No. I won’t let you give up your home and your parents for me, Mark.”

“My dad hates me anyway.”

“He doesn’t hate you. Maybe he’ll understand in time. And your mom, she’ll come around someday, Mark. I know she will. Don’t throw away what you’ve got with them. I know how much that’s worth. I’ve lost my parents. I don’t want you to lose yours.”

“Maybe you could live with Brandon,” said Mark.

“Yeah, like his dad would go for that. He already thinks Brandon might be queer. If Brandon asked if I could move in, well, I can just imagine...”

“His dad is an idiot. Brandon is as hetero as they come.”

“There’s no place for me here,” I said.

“There’s got to be.”

I sat there and thought long and hard, considering and discarding one possibility after the next.

“Graymoor,” I said finally.

“Taylor, you can’t be serious. You can’t live in Graymoor. It’s abandoned! It’s haunted!”

“If there are ghosts there, they’ve never bothered us,” I said. “Yeah, Graymoor. I could live there, at least for a while. I could still go to school. I’ll need to get a job or something, but...yeah, I could do it.” I was beginning to see the faintest ray of hope for the future.

“I can’t bear to think of you living alone in that horrible place.”

“It’s been good to us so far, hasn’t it?” I asked. “And maybe,” I said, looking at Marshall, “maybe I wouldn’t have to live there alone.”

“Me?” said Marshall, “Live in...in this Graymoor place you’re talking about?”

Was it fright or excitement I heard in his voice?

“Yes. You’re a runaway, right? It’s abandoned, a bit scary, and huge, but it’s dry inside. It’s not so bad really. No one ever goes there, so no one would bother us.”

Marshall smiled. “I like this idea. I sure have no place else to go.”

“You’d better take a look at it before you decide,” said Mark. “Graymoor can be rather...intimidating.”

“Oh, I’m sure I can handle this Graymoor place,” said Marshall. “It sounds like it’s right up my alley.”

Our conversation was interrupted when a doctor walked into the room. I’d never seen him before, but then I’d been unconscious during most of my stay. He gave me a nod and walked over to Marshall.

“We’ve been unable to reach your parents,” he said. “In fact, the number you gave us is disconnected.”

Marshall looked uncomfortable. “Well, uh, that’s not surprising. Things have been kind of tight recently, bills piling up, that sort of thing, you know? My parents probably couldn’t afford the bill.”

“And you say you’re here visiting friends?”

“Yes,” said Marshall, pointing to Mark and me.

“I see.” The doctor looked back and forth between us. “Is there anything any of you boys want to tell me?”

We shook our heads.

“Like what?” asked Mark.

“Such as Marshall being a runaway.”

“He’s not a runaway, sir. None of us are. I was in this very hospital not all that long ago. You can check the records if you like and you’ll find my parents’ signatures. I’m Mark Bailey. I know you’ve talked to Taylor’s mom.”

I looked at Mark. That was news to me.

“Yes, but the hospital can’t give treatment to a minor without the permission of a parent or guardian.”

“I don’t need any treatment,” said Marshall. “I was just out in the freezing rain too long.”

“Yes,” said the doctor. “You had a mild case of hypothermia and were in a slight state of shock.”

“So, what’s the problem? I feel fit and ready to leave right now.”

“We still need the signature of a parent or guardian before you can be released.”

“Well, my parents are far away, I told you that, and since you can’t reach them, what are we going to do? You can’t hold me prisoner here.”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to call the authorities.”

Marshall swallowed.

“Marshall is staying with me,” said Mark. “Perhaps you can call my parents, and they can give you these signatures that are so damned important.”

I was amazed that Mark was such a cool liar.

“Okay, that will be our next step then. If Marshall is currently living with your parents, they can be considered *in loco parentis*.”

“Loco what? Doesn’t that mean crazy?” asked Mark.

“In Spanish, yes; in Latin, no. It means that they are acting as his parents.”

“Oh, well then, that should solve things.”

“We’ll see. Now, as for you, young man,” said the doctor, turning his attention to me. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better!”

“You’re a lucky boy. When you were carried in, you were suffering from severe hypothermia and shock.”

“Well, I feel fine now.”

“You’re going to be fine, but you need rest. You also need to stay out of the freezing rain. Just what were you boys doing outside on a night like that anyway?”

“Playing soccer,” I lied.

“Well, next time, save the soccer for a clear day.”

“Yes, sir.”

The doctor grinned. “Your mother has already signed your papers, so you’re free to go. In fact, I can have an orderly come with a wheelchair to escort you out right now.”

“I don’t need a wheelchair.”

“Sorry, hospital policy. Just enjoy the ride.”

The doctor left the room.

“Just how much trouble are you going to be in when the hospital calls your parents and asks about Marshall?” I asked Mark.

“Plenty, I’m sure, but that’s not our biggest problem. We’ve got to get Marshall out of here.”

“I’ve got an idea,” I said. “Marshall, switch beds with me.”

“Huh?”

“When the orderly comes to get me, you go instead.”

“You think that will work?” asked Marshall. “You think they’ll just wheel me right out the front doors?”

“Why not? As long as the orderly thinks you’re me, it should work. Mark can walk out with you. I’ll wait a minute, then slip out myself.”

“This sounds a little too easy,” said Marshall.

“A simple plan is usually the best. Besides, this is a hospital, not a maximum-security prison. If our doctor doesn’t spot you, you should be fine.”

“And if he does?”

“Then run like hell.”

Marshall laughed. We switched beds.

“Wait a minute,” said Marshall. “What if someone catches you leaving?”

“I’m supposed to be leaving. I just won’t be in a wheel chair. I doubt they’ll lock me up for that.”

“I guess that’s true,” said Marshall.

“What are you doing?” I asked Mark. He’d picked up the phone.

“Calling Brandon. We’re going to need a ride back to Verona, and my driving privileges are still suspended.”

“Good idea.”

Five minutes later we were all set. The plan was in place, and Brandon was on his way. We’d all rendezvous as soon as possible at Southard’s Diner, just down the street.

“Where’s that wheelchair?” asked Marshall. He was getting antsy. If the doctor called Mark’s parents before Marshall could get out, things would get complicated.

Blessedly, the orderly arrived just then and wheeled a chair over to Marshall’s bed.

“Okay, Taylor, your chariot awaits.”

Marshall laughed and climbed in.

“See you later, Taylor,” I called as Marshall and Mark departed.

As soon as they were out of sight, I whipped the covers back, ripped off the flimsy hospital gown, and dressed. I slipped out of the room and down the hall. Thankfully, I knew the hospital well, having visited Mark there after he’d been beaten in the locker room at school. I made for the back entrance.

All went well, at least for my part. I made it out without so much as being challenged. It was a piece of cake.

Mark and Marshall were at Southard’s when I arrived.

“I thought I’d get here first,” I said.

“We just beat you.”

“Any problems?”

“None.”

Mark looked at his watch. “It’ll take a few minutes for Brandon to get here. Why don’t we sit down and have something to eat. We’ll look less suspicious that way, and I’m starving.”

“Good plan, except I don’t have any money,” I said.

“Me, either,” said Marshall.

“I do,” said Mark. “I’ve got plenty to spend on my boyfriend and his savior.”

Marshall blushed.

We took a booth away from the window and picked up the menus already sitting there waiting on us. The waitress, an older lady with mauve hair and laugh lines around her eyes, arrived at our table a couple of minutes later.

“What can I get for you boys, and will this be separate checks?”

“Just one check, and I’ll have chicken strips, fries, and a large Coke,” said Mark.

“I’ll have the breakfast pancake special,” I said, “and iced tea.”

“Um, how about a double cheeseburger and fries and a medium Coke?” said Marshall.

“I’ll get these right in.”

Our waitress departed, and Mark leaned over the table. “Okay. Planning session,” he said.

“Before that,” I said. “The doctor said my mom came and signed some papers. Did she visit me while I was asleep?”

Mark shook his head. I was disappointed, but not surprised. Mom hadn’t disowned me as Dad did, but she sure hadn’t done anything to keep him from kicking me out of the house.

“I’m sorry, Tay. Maybe she’ll come around yet.”

“Maybe,” I said without much enthusiasm. “So, planning session...”

“Okay, if you guys are going to live in Graymoor for a while, you’ll need supplies—flashlights, toothpaste, food, like that. When Brandon gets here...”

“When Brandon gets here what?”

We looked up.

“The cavalry has arrived,” said Mark. “Take a seat and grab a menu.”

“How are you, Taylor?” asked Brandon, scooting in beside Marshall.

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“You had us worried last night.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I...I’m really sorry.” I didn’t quite know what to say.

“It’s okay,” said Brandon, smiling. “I’m just glad you’re all right, but if you *ever* pull a stunt like that again, I’ll kick your ass.”

“I won’t,” I said, feeling supremely embarrassed. I didn’t know if I could live with my friends knowing I’d almost killed myself, but I guess it was better than not being alive.

Our waitress walked over, and Brandon quickly ordered the same thing I had.

“Now, like I was saying,” said Mark. “If you guys are going to hide out in Graymoor...”

“Graymoor?” asked Brandon.

“Yeah, try to keep up.” Mark grinned.

Brandon flipped him off.

“You’re going to need some supplies. So, if Brandon will be so kind, we’ll make some stops and get you what you need.”

“That’s going to cost an awful lot of money,” I said.

“I’ve got some.”

“I’ll pay you back for it later,” I said.

“Don’t worry about that! It’s just money,” said Mark.

“I’ve got money, too,” said Brandon. “And, hey, I’ll swipe some stuff from the house: toilet paper and blankets, and crap like that. My dad deserves it for not believing me when I tell him I’m straight.”

“Can’t you just explain to him that you aren’t gay, just incredibly unsuccessful with girls?” asked Mark.

“I hate you,” said Brandon, but then laughed.

“Don’t worry, your luck is bound to improve. You’re just in a dry spell,” said Mark.

“Yeah, you’re due for a downpour,” I said.

Brandon smiled dreamily. “Mmm, it’s raining girls.”

“I think we’re about to lose him,” said Marshall.

Mark snapped his fingers in front of Brandon’s face. “Ground control to Brandon. Come in, Brandon.”

Brandon turned his gaze to me. “So, are you guys really going to stay in Graymoor? You’re out of your freaking minds if you are. That place is cursed.”

“Yes, they’re staying in Graymoor. Get with the program, Brandon,” said Mark.

Brandon flipped Mark off again.

“Brandon, you know I’m taken. Quit offering. Damn, you are desperate.”

“Shut up.”

Marshall giggled, and our food arrived. The pancake breakfast special, ordered by both Brandon and myself, included three pancakes, bacon, eggs, and hash browns. It was quite a lot of food, but I was especially hungry. I smeared butter all over my pancakes, then drowned them in maple syrup.

“Man, I love pancakes,” I said.

Marshall smiled at me. I noticed he looked at me a lot, especially when he thought I didn't notice. He did the same with Mark, but not so much with Brandon. I wondered about Marshall. I don't mean I distrusted him, because he saved my life after all, but he just seemed...odd. He had this edgy, frightened look to him. Of course, a lot of that probably came from being a runaway. I was feeling pretty edgy myself, but I had Mark and our friends to help me get over what had happened. Maybe all Marshall needed was to be reminded that he wasn't alone anymore. We'd take care of him. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to be truly alone.

Half an hour later we were all stuffed. I felt guilty when Mark paid the check. I'd have to find some kind of job soon because my parents would no longer be footing the bills. I'd need money for food, clothes, and lots of other stuff. I had a little money in a checking account, but not much. I guess money was the least of my worries, though. Not only did most of my classmates hate me because I was gay, but now I was homeless, too. The future was not looking bright.

Brandon drove us to K-Mart, and Mark took control of the situation, filling the shopping cart with toothpaste, toothbrushes, deodorant, candles, lighters, a lantern, and more. Sometimes Brandon stopped him by saying, "Don't buy that, I'll get one from home."

Mostly Mark bought food, Pop Tarts and anything else he could find that didn't have to be cooked or refrigerated. Graymoor had no electricity, after all.

Mark clicked his fingers. "Coleman stove," he said.

"Huh?" asked Marshall.

"For cooking. We've got one in the garage. I'll snag it, and you guys can use it in your new place."

Our new place. He made it sound as if Marshall and I were getting an apartment together and not moving into a haunted house. I knew we wouldn't be disturbed in Graymoor, but there was a reason for that. Virtually everyone was too terrified to enter. Mark and I had been there several times, however. It was our sanctuary from the cruel world. I had fond memories of Graymoor. Mark and I made love there every chance we got. It was the one place we could be alone together without fear of being attacked.

"Mark, as soon as I can get a job, I'll pay you back," said Marshall.

"Don't worry about it, dude. I owe you."

Marshall looked embarrassed. "Well, I still want to pay you back."

I guess Marshall was like me. I didn't like someone else paying my way. Well, I'd never minded my parents paying for my food and clothes and stuff like that, but that was kind of their job, until now.

We drove straight to Graymoor from K-Mart. It wasn't dark yet, but the light was beginning to fail, creating shadows by the score.

"It's so huge," said Brandon quietly.

"It's not like you haven't seen it before," said Mark. "Remember the night Jon talked us into going inside?"

"What do you mean *us*? I seem to remember that you refused to get out of the car."

"Well, I remember the rest of you running back to the car, screaming like girls."

"We heard screams *inside* the house, before we even got there!" Brandon swallowed, never taking his eyes off the four-story mansion before us.

"Come on," said Mark, shoving a bag in Brandon's arms. "Help us carry this stuff in, then we'll make a run to your house and mine and grab a few things."

Brandon took a deep breath and reluctantly followed Mark as he walked toward the house.

I wasn't sure, but I think he was actually shaking. Marshall seemed oddly unafraid. Perhaps he had no fear of ghosts, or maybe his unfamiliarity with the legends of Graymoor Mansion was the explanation. Perhaps ignorance is bliss.

Mark opened the heavy oak door, flicked on his flashlight, and stepped inside.

"Oh, God," said Brandon quietly.

"It's okay, Brandon. Mark and I have been here lots of times."

Brandon nodded, but didn't look particularly reassured.

"I can hold your hand if it will make you feel better," said Mark with a snicker.

"Shut up."

"Let's put the food in the kitchen," I said. "Then, I think I remember a bedroom on the second floor that looked cozy."

"Cozy?" asked Brandon, incredulously, his voice shaking.

We made our way across the vast parlor into the kitchen. There we dug through the bags and placed all the foodstuffs on the huge table in the center of the room.

"Well, you sure won't have to worry about dishes," said Brandon, running his own flashlight over the walls. There were large built-in cupboards, filled with entire sets of fine china and lots of old, old glassware. I was willing to bet the drawers were filled with linens. Mark gave the old pitcher pump attached to the sink a try. He pumped it several times and water began to flow. It was rusty at first, but then ran clear.

"Hey, look at this!" he said. "Running water, sort of."

"It'll sure beat having to carry it in," I said.

"Yeah, this place has everything," said Brandon. "Just like the Hilton." He gave a small, uncomfortable laugh.

"It's awesome," said Marshall.

Brandon stared at Marshall as if he thought he was out of his mind.

"Let's go upstairs," I said.

We walked back through the parlor to the main stairway, our flashlights cutting through the darkness, catching the ever-falling dust in their beams. Like the rest of Graymoor, the stairway was huge: wide enough for at least six people to walk abreast. It was made of dark wood, walnut probably, and ornately carved. Graymoor was a treasure. If only someone had enough money and time to restore its faded grandeur. Of course, there was the little matter of the ghosts. Mark and I had never been too disturbed by them, but I'd heard things that made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. I was thankful Marshall was staying with me. I didn't want to sleep in that humongous old house alone.

I walked down the second-floor hallway, searching, trying to remember.

"Here it is!" I said at last, opening the door to a large bedroom.

There was a canopy bed on either side of the room, each hung with velvety dark-green curtains, as well as matching marble-topped washstands and dressers. There was a large wardrobe as well and a couple of comfy armchairs near the empty fireplace. Three huge windows faced out into the yard, overlooking a room made entirely of glass, like some kind of greenhouse.

The furniture was dark, but the walls were covered with old wallpaper, mostly white, with little roses all over it. There was even a dark red carpet on the floor which was in amazingly good shape for being a hundred years old.

"The beds are even made," said Brandon. "It's as if someone still lives here and will be coming back to climb into bed tonight."

“I sure hope not,” said Marshall. “I prefer to sleep alone.”

“This place gives me the creeps,” said Brandon.

“It’s time to shut up, Brandon,” said Mark.

“Sorry.”

Mark put his hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes. “We need to go and pick up stuff at Brandon’s house, then mine. Will you be okay while we’re gone, Babe?”

“I’m a big boy.”

“I know you are,” said Mark grinning. “You’re a *very* big boy.” I could feel myself go red. Mark kissed me, and the whole world disappeared. It was just the two of us for a few moments.

“You go on. Marshall and I will be just fine.”

“We’ll be back soon,” said Mark.

He kissed me again and departed. Sadness enveloped me for a moment as I watched him go. I could never bear to be parted from my boyfriend for long.

“You really love him, don’t you?” asked Marshall.

“You have no idea!” I said, feeling all warm inside.

“Maybe I do.”

“Listen, Marshall, I don’t know if you have any fears about this, but you don’t have to worry about me...you know...coming onto you or anything. I’m completely devoted to Mark, and even if I was single I wouldn’t put the moves on a straight boy.”

“I’m not worried,” said Marshall. “I know a lot of guys get all bent out of shape over gay stuff, but not me. I’m completely comfortable with gay boys.”

“Wow, you’re amazing. Only our best friends have stood by Mark and me. Most of them turned on us when they found out about us.”

“It’s their loss.”

“Yeah, well, it still hurts, you know? Sometimes, I don’t think I can take it anymore.”

“Things will get better, Taylor. I know they will.”

“I sure hope so.”

I looked around my new home for a few moments. This particular room was in amazingly good shape. You could almost forget you were in a dilapidated mansion when the door was closed. Just then a loud moan came from down the hallway, causing my heart to race.

“Welcome to Graymoor,” said Marshall. He looked more excited than frightened.

“How about we get this place cleaned up before we lose the light?” I asked.

“Sure thing. I’ll take care of the beds.”

Marshall stripped off quilts and sheets and took them out into the hall to shake out the dust. I pulled a can of Pledge and some paper towels out of a *K-Mart* bag and began to wipe away the dust of a century. There was surprisingly little of it. The lemony scent of Pledge and old wood soon permeated the room.

After several trips out into the hall to shake out the blankets, Marshall came back into the room with an antique sweeper he’d discovered somewhere.

“How’s that thing work?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” said Marshall, grinning. “It’s got some kind of brush that turns when you push it.”

He pushed the sweeper back and forth over the floor and the dust and dirt began to disappear. I’d never even heard of a non-electric sweeper before, but it was working.

By the time Mark and Brandon returned, we had our little room cleaned up nicely. It was

actually rather pleasant, if a bit spooky. We'd lit a few candles and turned on the lantern Mark had purchased. There was no electricity in Graymoor. There never had been.

"Wow, this place cleaned up nicely," said Mark, setting a box on my bed.

"Yeah, I'm surprised no one else has ever taken up residence in Graymoor."

"I'm not," said Brandon. "This place freaks me out. I wouldn't set foot inside for anyone else."

"I appreciate it," I said.

"If you guys don't mind, I'd like to get out of here. You coming, Mark?"

"Nah, I'll walk home. I want to spend some time with Taylor."

"I bet you do," said Brandon, grinning. "Catch you guys later."

"Thanks, Brandon," I said again.

"No problem. You need anything, you just tell me."

With that he was gone. Mark pulled me to him and kissed me. Marshall seemed completely undisturbed by it. We sat on my bed and joined hands. Marshall took a seat on his own bed just across the room.

"So what's your story?" asked Mark.

Marshall looked uncomfortable.

"I've been on the run for a few weeks, just moving from place to place."

"It must be tough for you."

"Well, I must admit I feel kind of lost and alone. I don't think I can describe it, really."

"Where'd you get those shoes?" I asked. I'd never seen anything like them.

"Oh, um, Mom bought them for me before...you know. They're some kind of new design."

Marshall swallowed. He seemed uncomfortable.

"So why did you run away?" asked Mark.

"I'd, um, rather not talk about it."

"Okay, that's cool. I was just curious. We won't pry into your private life."

"Thanks," said Marshall.

Mark looked at me. I could tell he wanted some alone time with me. He had that look in the eye, the one that made me want to jump on him. He leaned over and kissed me.

"I think I'll run downstairs and get the kitchen into shape," said Marshall.

"Want some help?" I asked.

"No. I can handle it. Besides, you guys look like you need to be alone."

"Thanks," I said.

Marshall smiled, grabbed a flashlight, and departed, closing the door behind him.

"I like your new roommate," said Mark.

"Me, too."

I stared into Mark's eyes, pulled him to me, and kissed him with hunger and passion. It was good to be alive.