

## **Dead Man's Party**

### **By: Thru Terry's Eyes**

"I just don't understand it," Sam said, watching Dean in pretend amazement.

"What?" Dean asked, eyes rolled up to stare at Sam. He crammed the last batter-dipped fry in his mouth, chewed and swallowed, forcing it down. He was stuffed to the gills but they were so damned good he couldn't leave them uneaten.

"How can you eat so much, so often, and stay so thin?" Sam replied, shaking his head. He was kidding, of course. They were always on the move and sometimes opportunities to eat were few and far between and usually not good. Indigestion was a common and accepted fact of their life.

Sam had to admit this place they had stopped at for dinner was amazing. An all-you-can-eat family style chicken place with table clothes and everything. Sam had suggested they stop there on a whim. It had looked like a nice place and they were unusually flush for a change.

"Fast metabolism, son," Dean replied to Sam's comment, wiping his fingers on the cloth, *cloth, for God's sake*, napkin. "Fast metabolism." He sat back, very full and momentarily content. He hiccupped softly.

Sam laughed. "Can you even breathe?"

Dean's eyes widened slightly. "Just barely."

Sam went back to his own food. He was getting pretty full himself.

Dean was so wired all the time, Sam reflected, he probably burned thousands of calories just sitting still. Sam enjoyed those rare occasions when Dean was in a really good mood - well rested, well fed and not bleeding. Trying to achieve all three states at the same time for either of them was usually difficult, if not impossible. Food, at least, was somewhat controllable. Good food was a rare treat.

The waitress, a high school girl with curly blonde hair, stopped at their table with the coffee pot. Dean put his hand over the cup. "Thanks, but I've got nowhere left to put it but my pocket." He gave her a glittering smile. Sam was sure he saw the girls' knees buckle.

"I think we're ready for the check."

"No dessert?" she asked, sounding disappointed. "We've got the best blackberry cobbler around."

Sam groaned, but shook his head.

Dean laughed. "I guess not tonight. Thanks anyway."

She shrugged, thumbing through her tickets. "Your loss." She handed the check to Dean. "I'm glad you enjoyed it, come back again." She smiled longingly at Dean then went to wait on a beckoning customer.

Dean smirked at Sam. "I still got it."

"If you're into cradle robbing," Sam snorted. He swallowed the last bite he could make room for and gave up.

Dean chuckled and pulled out his billfold, tossing some money on the table by the check. "You ready?"

Sam nodded and got up. "I wanta wash my hands, I'll meet you outside." Sam saw Dean hesitate. "Swear to God, if I'm not out in five minutes you have permission to come in after me."

Dean eyed him a moment longer then held up five fingers, cocking an eyebrow. He turned and ambled toward the door, snatching a toothpick from the dispenser and putting it in his mouth, unable to resist a quick look back as Sam vanished in the direction of the men's room.

He pushed his way out into the cool evening air, liking the feel of the breeze on his face. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and walked slowly to the Impala rolling the toothpick across his lips with his tongue.

It was that golden period between dusk and nightfall and the setting sun cast a rich mixture of fading light and shadow across the ground as Dean crunched through the scattered leaves. He returned the smile of a young couple he passed as he moved through the parking lot, in no particular hurry to get to the car. They had no place they had to be right now, he had a good meal, actually a great meal, under his belt and prospects of a quiet night if he couldn't find some place for a few drinks and a quick game of pool. It didn't matter. It was nice just to be peaceful once in a while. To actually relax.

"Excuse me—"

The hand that fell on Dean's arm jerked him out of his food induced haze and he snapped around, pulling his arm free, automatically falling into a defensive posture. The toothpick spiraled to the ground.

The man behind him wore a suit and a look of surprise. He stepped back with his hands up when Dean turned, fists raised.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you—"

Dean dropped his hands slightly, only Sam would have noticed the change in his breathing.

The man in the suit, who looked to be in his mid to late forties was obviously not a physical threat. He had taken care to step well out of Dean's arm range and kept his hands up in a placating gesture. His dark hair was streaked with gray at the temples and his suit had cost more money than Dean saw in six months. His eyes were a bright, intense blue. A gold signet ring flashed on the pinky of his left hand. To say Dean came off as a little shabby next to him would have been an understatement.

Dean's gaze fastened on the mountain standing behind the man who had spoken. This guy's suit was just as expensive, but the fit was having a hard time duplicating the tailored look of the first guy, who was obviously his boss. Massive shoulders strained the fabric and the coat front barely contained the equally huge chest, tapering down to a narrow set of hips and legs of respectable size. His hair was buzz cut and his features looked as though they had been hastily whittled from balsa wood, blocky and lacking in detail. His washed out blue eyes stared coldly at Dean, his stance screaming bodyguard.

Dean's eyes shifted back to the well dressed man, dismissing the muscle with that brief glance. "Whatever you want, you got the wrong guy." Dean growled brushing past them, angry with himself for allowing someone to get that close without noticing.

The smooth voice followed him. "You are Dean Winchester, aren't you?"

Aw, hell...Dean's pause was so brief it might never have happened. He turned back with a smile and shook his head. "Sorry, wrong number," he replied, continuing on to the car.

"My name is Dale Carlyle. I just want to talk to you for a moment." His voice held the trace of an accent. He slowly lowered his hands, careful to keep them away from his body.

Dean stopped again, looking back. He cocked his head and squinted at the man. "Is that name supposed to mean something to me?" He nodded over Carlyle's shoulder at the bigger man behind him. "And if you just want to talk, why'd you bring the Hulk with you?"

The bodyguard stiffened and took a step forward. "Why you little—"

Dean never moved as Carlyle reached back without looking and stopped the other man's momentum with a slight touch. "Stand down, Monty."

Dean watched, fascinated, as the bigger man, Monty, fell back without a murmur. His body might have been at rest but judging from Monty's face, if looks could have killed, Dean would have been kicking his life out on the ground right now.

"You have a brother named Sam, parents John and Mary Winchester—" Carlyle never saw Dean move but the hands that were suddenly twisted in the lapels of his suit jacket, backed by muscles of iron shoving him backwards, were undeniable proof that he had.

"Who the hell are you?" Dean snarled, bending Carlyle back over the hood of someone's car.

Carlyle's goon, a beat behind the action, moved forward but stopped abruptly as past experience told him the sudden coldness pressing against his neck was the muzzle of a gun. A hand fisted into the collar of his jacket and a voice hissed in his ear, so close Monty could feel the heat of the newcomer's breath.

"One more step and you get a free body piercing."

Dean's eyes flicked up to Sam, standing behind Monty, and the corner of his mouth quirked slightly, "Hey, Sammy."

"Dean," Sam replied, eyes never leaving his prize. Sam wouldn't have pulled the trigger but sometimes it was just fun to say stuff like that. He and Monty were about the same height but Monty would've made two of Sam. Possibly three. "I can't leave you alone for five minutes, can I?" He said.

Dean snorted and gave Carlyle's body a shake. Carlyle made no attempt to resist him. His

hands rose again, palms out.

"Please..." he choked out around Dean's death grip. "I think there's a misunderstanding..."

"Damned right there is!" Dean growled.

"I didn't mean to make you feel threatened, I'm sorry. I just wanted to make sure I had the right people." Carlyle's aplomb was swiftly draining away under the intensity of this most scary young man leaning over him. He was used to waging verbal war in board rooms with powerful men who could control destiny with the flick of an eyebrow; where you knew the damage had been inflicted but you never personally got your hands dirty. This was a little too real for his taste. "If you'll just let me up I'll explain..."

Dean's eyes narrowed. "Are you a cop?"

Carlyle actually laughed. "Not even close. My ID is in my front coat pocket..."

Dean sneered. He knew how much an ID was worth. But he began to relax his grip and slowly straightened back up, pulling Carlyle with him.

Monty shifted in Sam's grip and Sam shoved the gun harder into his neck. "Stay!" he warned. When Monty reluctantly relaxed, Sam nodded. "Good boy."

Carlyle glanced at his bodyguard, whose obvious fury was barely being restrained, then at the tall young man behind him who, although somewhat baby faced, had a look in his eyes much older than his features. This was no kid still wet behind the ears.

"If you'll release Monty, I promise he won't try to do anything," Carlyle said motioning at the bigger man who made a noise of frustrated protest but kept his mouth shut.

Sam shot a look at Dean, who had slipped a hand into his jacket. Dean nodded. Sam dropped his hand and stepped back, knowing Carlyle wouldn't draw another breath if Monty so much as cocked an eyebrow at him. Dean wasn't a murderer but Sam knew what he was capable of when pushed.

"Monty, go back to the car." Carlyle ordered, without looking at him.

"Mr. Carlyle—" Monty protested, looking from Sam to Dean and back at Carlyle.

"The car, Monty, now. I'll be fine."

With a snort of anger, Monty turned, hands fisted, stomping toward a black Mercedes sedan and got inside. The heavily tinted window rolled down and he sat glaring at them.

Carlyle smiled at the two brothers who had moved next to each other. Sam had relaxed somewhat but Dean was still tensed and wary.

"Let's start again." Carlyle offered, holding out his hand. "I'm Dale Carlyle and assuming you are Sam and Dean Winchester, I want to offer you a job."

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Carlyle had offered them a ride in his Mercedes to someplace they could talk

comfortably, but Dean had insisted he and Sam would ride in the Impala to a public place of their choosing.

Carlyle had agreed readily and Monty had pulled in behind the Impala to follow.

Dean had barely started the ignition when Sam had the laptop out and was keying rapidly.

Dean glanced at him. "So?"

Sam's eyebrows disappeared under his bangs as a page of websites flashed on screen in response to the name Dale Carlyle. There were 16 more pages listed at the bottom and a next.

"Wow," Sam murmured, opening one of the sites. He scanned as quickly as he could. "Entrepreneur, wealthy investor, likes unusual projects." Sam blinked in surprise. "He owns a bunch of big houses that people rent out for special occasions, family reunions, corporate getaways and junk like that. Mystery weekends. High rollers apparently," he remarked. There were no fees listed for the service, just a number to call for assistance in planning.

Dean frowned. "What?"

Sam shrugged, shutting the laptop off as Dean spotted what he was looking for turned the car into the parking lot. "It's like a game. People pretend they're different characters in a murder mystery or something, you get clues and try to solve the mystery. There're other kinds of scenarios, too."

"People pay money to do that?" Dean exclaimed coming to a stop.

"You have enough money you can pay a lot to have fun," Sam replied, sliding out of the car.

Dean shook his head and got out as the Mercedes slid into a parking space.

Almost sadistically, Dean had pulled into a somewhat sordid-looking all night truck stop/restaurant/bar, enjoying the sight of the gleaming black Mercedes alongside the battered collection of vehicles, semis and motorcycles parked out front. This was the kind of place Sam and Dean inhabited on a regular basis and Sam knew Dean had chosen this spot to level the playing field.

Carlyle's distaste at his surroundings was thinly disguised, but he gamely followed Sam and Dean through the smoke and bad country music, sliding into a booth without hesitation. He seemed oblivious to the looks and snickers his expensive suit drew. Monty, lumbering along behind like a tame grizzly, stifled most of the looks and gestures as the patrons quickly avoided eye contact with him. He slid in after his employer, eyes shooting daggers at Sam and Dean.

A frowsy waitress undulated up to the table and disinterestedly scribbled their orders for coffee then slithered away.

Sam bit back a grin when Dean suddenly let out a hiccupping belch, looking surprised.

"Sorry," he said, straightening. He took a deep breath. He rested his elbows on the table, cracking his knuckles. "First, there's something I want to know. How the hell did you find us?"

Carlyle couldn't quite stop the smile. He cleared his throat and absently moved his place setting around. "I'm sure you don't give away your trade secrets, I hope you'll understand if I prefer not to reveal mine." He looked Dean straight in the eye. "Let's just say I have friends and I called in some favors and leave it at that. Although I will say, it wasn't easy." He clasped his fingers together and rested them on the table in front of him, waiting.

Dean eyed Sam and shrugged. "Fair enough." He leaned back and flipped his hand. "So talk, we're listening."

Carlyle suddenly looked a little uncomfortable, as if realizing what he had to say wasn't going to be as easy as he had thought. He raked a hand across his perfectly cut hair and made a face. "Well, I'm sure you had time to do a little research on me as we made our way to this fine establishment so I will assume you have some idea of who I am..."

"A little," Sam replied, tapping his fork softly on the table. "Although, I'm having a little trouble seeing how what you do has anything to do with us."

Dean glanced pointedly at his watch.

"Okay," Carlyle began. "I have this...problem...I was hoping I could interest you both in. I spent a lot of time and a not inconsiderable amount of money to track you two down. I researched you both, what you do—" he stopped as Dean stiffened and the fire began to blaze in his eyes again. "Don't get the wrong idea," Carlyle added hastily. "I need someone who understands this...stuff." His hands rose and fell. "Someone who isn't just another crackpot scam artist." He laughed softly. "Trust me, I learned a lot more about some things I'd have been happier not knowing about than I ever wanted to."

"Cut to the chase," Dean said, glancing at Sam and leaning forward again.

"I own a haunted house," Carlyle finally said, as if revealing a dark and long kept secret. Whatever reaction he had expected to get at this revelation did not include the look of blank "so what?" he was getting from both brothers.

Dean looked at Sam then back at Carlyle, raising his eyebrows and moving his hands in an obvious "yeah, and...?" gesture.

"I'm serious," Carlyle insisted.

"What do you want us to say?" Sam asked finally when the silence had stretched out to awkward.

Carlyle blew out a laugh. "I guess I expected you to laugh," he replied.

"Why?"

"Cause it's crazy. There's no such thing as a haunted house!"

Dean got up. "C'mon, Sam. This is wasting our time, I'm tired." Sam obligingly slid over.

"Wait-" Carlyle reached out.

Sam paused.

Dean put his hands on the table and leaned his weight on them. "Look, Mr. Carlyle. You either want some help or you don't, but don't tell me you spent a great deal of time and money hunting down a pair of "ghostbusters" to just tell them you don't believe in something. So what's it gonna be? Cause, I gotta tell you, if you don't want to tell us because you're afraid of what we, of all people, might think about you, you got a bigger problem than a haunted house. C'mon Sam." Dean said again, turning away.

Sam smiled. "Nice meeting you, Mr. Carlyle." Waiting for it to play out.

Carlyle caught Sam's arm as he got out of the booth. "Okay, you're right. Please, sit back down. I really do need your help with this." He sighed and the look on his face this time was not that of a slick professional businessman but just a man with a problem he didn't know how to deal with.

Sam glanced up at Dean and shrugged. Dean rolled his eyes but sat back down with obvious reluctance.

"Okay," Dean said. "Let's start again. I'm Dean Winchester and this is my brother Sam." He nodded at Sam. "What's the deal with the house and whadaya think we can do to help?"

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The coffee became beer and except for Monty's cold glare, the atmosphere had definitely become less stiff a short time later as Carlyle explained the situation.

Sam sipped his beer. "So let me get this straight. You buy the houses and set them up for these special parties?"

Carlyle nodded. "They're fantasy parties. You create the scenario, my company sets it up at the appropriate location and you and your guests play it out. It's sort of like playing video games but it's for real. You can bring your friend and they can play or we'll supply the other players, whatever the client wants and is willing to pay for. With the exception that, other than the unavoidable accident now and then, no one gets hurt. We have a dozen properties all over the world running right now with settings for a multitude of scenarios. I have a rather large staff that coordinates the games."

"Sounds expensive," Dean commented, watching Carlyle over the rim of his glass.

The cold mask of the businessman slipped into place briefly. "We cater to a select clientele, yes. Obviously, it's not for everyone. But if you want to go to an island and play war with your buddies, play the killer in a murder mystery or hire a mansion, pretend your Hugh Hefner and surround yourself with bunnies, my people can set you up."

Dean's eyes widened, Sam kicked him.

"A couple of years ago one of my location scouts found a house for me that had a reputation as being haunted. A place called Blackmoor House. I was intrigued, I'll admit it. It was in pretty bad shape but worth the renovation and as a draw for the client looking for unusual entertainment I thought it might be worth the investment." Carlyle caught the waitress's attention and signaled for refills.

"The renovation took a while but when it was done it was a showplace. We did a lot of research into the history of the house, filled it with furniture, art and architectural elements from locations all over the world that also had reputations for being haunted."

"Are you friggin' nuts? Why would you do a thing like that?" Dean asked in disbelief. "Do you have any idea how dangerous that could be?"

Carlyle looked disgusted. "Please remember that when all this started it was just a way of creating a draw to a new enterprise. The house is practically a museum of purportedly haunted items. Up until now that kind of thing was total crap as far as I was concerned. Who believes in that kind of thing?"

Now it was Sam and Dean's turn to look disgusted

"We were right about the appeal," Carlyle continued. "The house has been booked up solid since it opened, in fact it's booked up for the next eighteen months. The recent...accident...just seems to have made it more popular." He hesitated, looking at his hands, deciding what to say next. "A couple of months ago, we received a new group of items for the house, a special request from a special customer." Carlyle knotted his hands together. "You have to remember the house is pitched as haunted, it's rigged for that. There were always little things going on at the house no one could explain, harmless stuff that the engineers didn't design. It just kind of added to the atmosphere..."

"What was in this new shipment?" Sam asked, sitting forward.

"I'm not sure, I can provide you with a list; it was quite sizeable." Carlyle rubbed his upper lip. "The thing is, after that shipment was installed, during the party scheduled for that weekend some really strange stuff started happening. People started saying they were seeing things, feeling things, there started to be accidents, clients really frightened. Then a few weeks ago, during a scheduled party, two clients were killed in...I want to call it an unfortunate accident, and another has been admitted to a psychiatric hospital totally traumatized. The remaining members of the party had conflicting stories about what happened. No one could seem to agree on the exact series of events that led up to the accident."

"What supposedly happened?" Dean asked, pushing his glass around in its small puddle of condensation.

Carlyle sighed. "The police wrote it up as a murder/suicide, but frankly, based on what I heard and what we've been able to find out, I don't think that's what happened at all."

"What do you think happened?" Sam questioned softly. Carlyle was obviously upset and he felt like it wasn't totally over the accident he had related to them.

"I wish I knew," Carlyle replied, shaking his head. "We tried to keep the lid on the whole thing, bad publicity and all that, but word gets around." He laughed mirthlessly. "Can you believe it? Our bookings at that location tripled."

"You want us to check the place out, see what's causing the problem," Dean supplied for the man.

"I want to keep the property open. If something we brought in caused this I want to get rid of it." Carlyle paused. "Here's the real problem as far as I'm concerned."

Sam cocked his head and shot a look at Dean.

"I have a client whose daughter's twenty first birthday is this coming weekend. This party has been booked for almost a year at Blackmoor, right after the property was completed. His daughter's friends are the children of some pretty high rollers. I can't cancel the event this late in the game. This client is looking to invest pretty heavily in this if he likes what he gets, but I can't take any chances that something might happen to anyone."

Carlyle knotted his hands together. "I won't lie to you guys, I need this investment, this is a unique venture and there's a much bigger market for it than anyone realizes but I can't expand any further without additional capital. I need this to go off without a hitch and I need you guys to help me sort this out and make sure no one gets hurt."

At this point, Monty, who had sat like a statue throughout the entire exchange, suddenly barked, "We don't need these guys, Mr. Carlyle! I told you I—"

"Monty, we had this discussion. Everything can't be solved by hitting it." Carlyle spoke sharply and Monty, like a trained dog, sat back and fell silent. His mouth might have been closed but his eyes said volumes.

Dean stared straight at Monty and made a kiss face. Red flooded Monty's angry features but he remained still. *Damn*, Dean thought, *he's better than trained dog...*

He felt Sam poke him. He turned and Sam's look clearly conveyed, *don't tease the bears, you idiot!*

"Think of it kind of like working security. You'll be paid and rooms and food are included. You don't have to participate in the entertainment, just keep an eye on everyone and see if you can figure out what's causing this." Carlyle spread his hands. "With any luck it'll be like a vacation. Good food, soft beds, a chance to mingle with the scion of the high and mighty. You never know when a new contact might come in handy." Carlyle searched his mind to try and make the offer as appealing as possible.

He looked over at Monty, who made a face but reluctantly reached into his jacket withdrawing a hefty envelope which he laid on the table between them, sliding it toward Sam.

"What is this?" Sam asked reaching for it when Dean made to do so. He opened the clasp on the envelope and pulled out a thick sheaf of folded papers and another smaller envelope.

"That's is the history on the house and an up to date inventory list. I figured you could use that. It includes every item purchased for the house and, to the best that our research can tell us, the history of each item." Carlyle tapped the smaller envelope. "That's an advance. If you take this job, you need to get some better clothes. At Sam and Dean's twin looks of slightly offended surprise, Carlyle added. "No offense but this isn't a torn jeans and old t-shirt kind of get together. There's also driving directions and money for gasoline and food, it's a fifteen hour drive from here. I know you prefer not to fly-" Dean's eyes flicked up at that and his mouth opened slightly. "-so it also includes money for motel rooms if you don't want to drive straight through."

Dean was still floundering at "prefer not to fly" and was at a momentary loss for words.

Sam frowned at Carlyle and slowly opened the white envelope, thumbing through the bills inside, trying not to look stunned. "What happens if we don't find anything? Or if something happens that we can't stop?"

Carlyle sat back, looking a little smug. "I have faith in you. No one is going to know anything about you other than you are part of our house security there to ensure everyone's safety. This weekend goes by without incident, you get paid a set fee. If you can figure out what happened and make sure it doesn't happen again I could be very generous over that amount. If something especially untoward does happen, I think you'll agree that the advance is very generous and depending on the circumstances we can negotiate any additional pay. Think of the advance as a gesture of good faith." He smiled.

The businessman was back in control. He was well aware of the financial gray area that the Winchester brothers operated in, the people on staff who did his research were nothing if not thorough, but frankly didn't give a damn, it was none of his business and he preferred not play that card, sensing correctly, that Monty's presence notwithstanding, Dean Winchester would punch him in the nose. Then he and Sam would vanish into the night and his chances of ever finding them again would vanish right along with them. Another thing he had learned was that the two hunters were not without their own backup of protective resources if threatened, some of which they apparently were not even aware of, but enough red lights had gone off as a result of his inquiries that he knew to tread carefully.

"I will be on hand, personally, for this occasion as host and you will be provided with any other information that you may need when you get there. Which, by the way, is 4 pm on Friday the 24th, two days from now. The weekend ends the following Monday morning. We will settle additional compensation at that time." He held out his hand over the table. "So, do we have a deal?"

Sam handed the envelope to Dean, who glanced at the contents, then back at Sam. "We need to talk about it, Mr. Carlyle. You got a card?"

This was obviously not the response that Carlyle expected judging from the look on his face. The smile was quickly back in place though, and his hand shifted smoothly to his pocket where he palmed a card which he pushed toward Dean.

Dean took the card without looking at it. He shoved out of the booth, tucking the envelope Monty had provided into his inside jacket pocket. Sam slid out behind him.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Carlyle said, rising also. He held out his hand palm up. "The advance?"

Dean glanced at Monty, whose face had turned black. Only Carlyle's touch on his arm prevented Monty from crossing the short distance between Dean and himself and doing some serious damage. Sam could feel himself tensing up as they stood there.

"At 4 pm on Friday, Sam and I will be there, or this will." Dean patted his pocket.

As Carlyle opened his mouth to protest, Dean smiled. "Think of it as a gesture of good faith, Mr. Carlyle."

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Dean shifted uncomfortably in the stiff-feeling shirt and pants he was wearing, annoyed at the tightness of the new boots that were squeezing toes used to the well broken in feel of his usual footwear. The only thing he liked about them was the fact that despite their rather stylish look, they had steel toes. Sam's too. They couldn't totally forego practicality over style. They had stopped and purchased the new, dressier clothing that morning with part of the advance money they had been given.

Dean hated them because the clothing was virtually useless for work and there weren't that many occasions when they required anything better than jeans and t-shirts. Sam had argued that the clothing was part of the deal, but secretly he was enjoying the feel and smell of new clothing that hadn't been blood soaked, mud soaked, slashed, ripped, repaired repeatedly, belonged to someone else originally, actually fit and hadn't just generally been worn to death and beyond. Dammit.

"Stop twitching," Sam finally snapped.

"It's itchy!" Dean snapped back.

"You look good. You'll get used to it. Can we please talk about these files Carlyle gave us? We'll be there in like three hours and you haven't done any more than just glance at this stuff." Sam rattled the papers in his hand. "I checked out a lot of this information on the laptop, including as much of the history of the house as I could find. I got some stuff his people didn't but most of it matched up. They were very thorough, I'll give 'em that." Sam shuffled papers again.

The constant sound of papers crunching was getting on Dean's nerves almost as much as the clothing and he resolved if Sam did it again, advance money or not, he would pull over and kill him. *Unidentified body of young male found by the side of the road with a ream of papers stuffed-*

"Are you even listening to me?" Sam cried in exasperation.

Dean jerked. "Yes!! Yes, I'm listening! Anyway, I will, if you say something worth listening to!" He yelled. "And I did more than glance at those papers! Just 'cause I haven't memorized them into my geek brain like you, doesn't mean I don't have a grip on the information! Okay?" Dean hit the steering wheel with his hand, swearing.

"You really hate those clothes don't you?" Sam said quietly, glancing at Dean.

Dean shot him a dirty look and tore at his thumbnail, rolling his shoulders.

"I guess we should have washed 'em first." Sam commented, lapsing into a hurt silence that was worse than the paper rattling.

Dean writhed internally, giving up with a heavy sigh. It wasn't Sam's fault the damned clothes were pissing him off, or that Dean actually preferred it if Sam ran through this kind of background stuff out loud so he could think about what he was hearing, mentally sorting the dross from the information that mattered.

He had tried to read the mass of paperwork about the house but his eyes had tended to wander the pages and despite his claim, he had absorbed only the barest of information, concentrating mainly on the staggering list of items in the house that were supposedly from genuinely haunted buildings. Some of them had made Dean laugh out loud and others had him slavering to see for himself.

"So, okay," he finally said. "Why don't you go through that stuff again, refresh my memory, in case I missed something, I mean."

"You sure?" Slightly petulant.

"Sam."

Again the paper shuffle. And throat clearing this time.

Dean rolled his eyes and ground his teeth.

"Okay," Sam began. "The house was built by a Daniel Blackmoor as a wedding present for his wife, Lucia. It's built on a small island, the only way to get there is by ferry."

"What?" Dean exclaimed, having totally missed that part. "Ferry? By ferry?"

Sam shrugged. "You could always swim, or use your superhero powers to fly—oh, no I guess that wouldn't--"

Dean snorted. "So not funny, Sam," he warned.

"Anyway..." Sam went on pointedly. "Apparently, this Blackmoor was in shipping and he was away from home a lot. Mrs. Blackmoor stayed there with the servants and was perfectly happy. She was an accomplished pianist. Blackmoor even had a special grand piano built for her and sent over from Europe on their first anniversary. When the wind was right, people on the mainland said they could hear her playing.

"Despite the location of the house, when Blackmoor was home, the couple were famous for the extravagant parties they threw. It was considered quite an honor to be included on their guest list."

Dean made a popping noise with his mouth to indicate boredom. "Sounds pretty damn scary to me."

Sam grinned despite himself. "It get's better. Creepier anyway. The Blackmoors had a child five years after they were married. A daughter named Iris. Lucia died two days after Iris was born." Sam cocked an eyebrow at Dean's sideways look. "Blackmoor lost it, Lucia had been everything to him. He sold his business, stayed on the island constantly, everything was done through servants. If they needed something, Blackmoor paid to have it brought from the mainland. From everything I read, mostly based on what servants reported, Iris looked exactly like her mother, beautiful, talented, she started playing piano at four. Blackmoor hired private

tutors for her, nannies, the only stipulation being they had to agree to live on the island. He doted on her, anything she wanted.”

Sam paused and rubbed his eyes.

“And?” Dean prompted, moving his hand in a circle.

“Sorry.” Sam cleared his throat. “Like I said, he gave her everything that she ever wanted, except for one thing.” Sam rested the papers in his lap and looked over at Dean. “She was never allowed to leave the island. Ever. In her entire life, she never once stepped on the mainland.”

Dean frowned. “Are you kiddin’? How is that possible?”

“You gotta remember this was a long time ago, the father’s word was iron. Women had very little say about their lives, especially in wealthy families, and this was a child. She probably didn’t even realize what her life was like compared to other kids. She had the servants’ children as playmates, a couple anyway. She didn’t know any different. It was normal to her.”

Sam paused again, caught in a small epiphany, “normal” meant so many different things to so many different people. He wondered if there really was such a thing as “normal...”

“So what happened?” Dean snapped into the growing silence. He glanced at Sam and frowned at the look on his face. “What?”

Sam shook his head; he and Dean were not on the same plane where “normal” was concerned. “Nothing.” He took a deep breath. “As time went by, things started to...change. Iris was growing up and Blackmoor apparently started believing that some of his servants were planning on taking her away. Servants would quit and not be replaced, the house started to run down. Blackmoor’s behavior became,” Sam’s mouth tightened slightly, “-erratic. He started drinking and calling Iris “Lucia”. Insisted she spend all of her time playing her mother’s piano. There are photos of some of the portraits; I mean, they looked exactly alike.”

Dean grimaced, suddenly not liking the direction this felt like it was going. It made his stomach feel strange.

“The few remaining servants started fearing for Iris’s welfare and theirs. Blackmoor would beat the servants, whipping them for things they did or didn’t do, or nothing at all. These were people who had remained with the family for years. Some of them decided to leave one night when the boat from town brought supplies to the house.”

“Did the servants take her?” Dean asked softly.

“They tried. Iris was seventeen years old. She might not have gone, she loved him, he was her father. She admitted she thought he was going insane. She’d fallen in love with the son of one of the servants, a kid she’d grown up with named Kenneth Amstead. She’d never been off the island, but he had, he must have told her what she was missing. His family was leaving and he wanted Iris to come with them. She insisted on telling her father what she was doing and why. Kenneth went with her.”

Sam shifted into a more comfortable position. “Blackmoor was drunk, crying over a painting of his wife when they found him. When Iris told him what she was going to do, he went crazy. He killed Kenneth and locked Iris up in her room. When Kenneth’s family came to see what was keeping him, Blackmoor claimed he had stopped the kid from raping Iris. He ordered them to take his body and leave.”

“What about the cops? Didn’t anyone call ‘em?” Dean exclaimed, outraged.

“Different times, Dean. No phones. A wealthy man’s word against a servant? No witnesses? Iris was definitely traumatized. Nothing came of it.”

“So what finally happened? And how does anyone know all this crap anyway if Iris never left the island?”

“She didn’t leave,” Sam replied solemnly. “Not alive, anyway. A year went by before some people from town finally got up the nerve to go out to the house. They found Daniel Blackmoor dead from a gunshot wound to the head, the only two servants who had stayed were locked in the cellar, dead from starvation and Iris was found hanging from a noose in the main

stairwell. They'd all been dead for at least a month." Sam slowly folded the papers up and replaced them in the envelope.

"Most of what I told you came from the servants themselves who were there. The rest came from a set of diaries that Iris's mother had started. Iris found the books and continued with them. All that's in that part at first are simple drawings and gibberish, but as time went by they became actual entries.

"The entries stopped in the middle of the last book in the set. All the pages after Iris says she and Kevin are going to speak to her father had been torn from the book. The books were discovered in a wall space when the house was being cleared out after the bodies were found."

Sam glanced at Dean, "The last book in the diary is part of the collection in the house. The rest of the books were destroyed in a fire."

Dean returned Sam's look, wincing slightly. "So no one really knows what happened that last year?"

Sam shrugged. "Rumors, nothing to substantiate them. The usual stuff that gets started in small towns if something like this happens.

The house became the property of some relatives of the Blackmoor family. Different members tried to live in it a few times but it never worked out for one reason or another." Sam stretched. "Usual stories again. Finally, the house was abandoned and eventually it wound up being bought by Mr. Carlyle."

"So this murder suicide thing..."

"A female guest and a male guest were found dead, both shot, the woman had a gun in her hand. According to the other guests present, and the reports are really conflicting here, there was some kind of animosity between the two of them from the get go. Considering the fact that up until that night they'd never met, that seems a little odd to me. In fact almost everyone had some really strange things to say about what happened that weekend. It was like after they'd been there a while everyone started acting weird, at least according to everyone else. None of the guests thought they themselves were acting strangely, just everyone else. There was one lady in her sixties who practically raped some young guy who was there with his fiancée."

Dean made a yuck face. "Dude, that's just wrong."

Sam laughed and cocked an eyebrow, "Well, it's weird all right. Everyone's behavior was totally off the wall but no one can explain what happened." He shook his head. "I don't know what could cause something like that. Mass possession? Hypnosis?"

"Beats me," Dean replied, reading the approaching exits. "Where were we supposed to get off at?"

Sam grabbed the directions and scanned them quickly. "Exit 118. Then take the Shoreline Road until you reach Maidenville. Turn left at the second light then right on-"

"Stop, stop, stop...too much information, keep it 'til we get there." Dean swung the big car onto the exit down the heavily wooded side road that led to the shoreline.

\* \* \* \*

The drive along the shoreline had been interesting if for no other reason than the sight of ocean waves crashing against the rocks. The ocean had seemed a trifle wild even for the time of year and Dean was a little uneasy at taking a ferry over it.

Maidenville was a typical, small ocean side town during off season. Deserted. The regular inhabitants hurried along the street, bundled against the cold wind. It had been late fall two days ago, here it was early winter, cold, damp and windy.

"Left at the crab place," Sam said suddenly, pointing at the small, barn like building with a faded wooden sign sporting a big red crab at the end of the street.

Dean grunted and slowed for the turn.

"There should be a warehouse two blocks down on the right, almost right on the water. Pull in there." Sam sat forward, watching.

"You got it," Dean replied, spotting the drive and turning in. Sure enough, there was Carlyle's big Mercedes and as the Impala growled into the parking area, Carlyle himself and Dean's new best friend, Monty, stepped out of the car.

Carlyle smiled and gave a friendly wave, Monty scowled and gave them the finger behind his boss's back.

"You know," Dean remarked, putting the car in park and killing the engine, "I can't quite put my finger on it, but I don't think that Monty guy likes us." He opened his door and stepped out.

Sam grabbed his folder of papers and slid out on his side with a laugh. "Speak for yourself. You're the one who kept poking him with a stick, not me."

Dean sneered. "Always nice to know you have my back."

Sam laughed again. "When it comes to *him*," Sam murmured as they drew closer. "I will definitely be standing behind you."

Carlyle came toward them with his hand out. "Four o'clock on the dot. Glad you could make it!" He wore a mid calf, cashmere topcoat and kidskin leather gloves.

In their new clothes, even with the old jackets, Sam and Dean now looked trendy rather than shabby. Dean wouldn't have admitted it, but Sam looked really good and happy in his new clothes. Itchy as the damned things were, it was still kinda nice. Even if just for Sam's sake.

"So what now?" Dean asked, watching Monty over Carlyle's shoulder.

Carlyle's mouth tightened slightly. "We've got a little problem. We had some last minute cancellations: one couple, became ill and now they won't make it. They were flying here with another couple who won't be able to make it either. There were supposed to be six couples, but now there will only be four, plus you two, Monty and I and a very small staff of three that will see to the needs of the guests including the catering, and housekeeping service.

"Miriam Desmond, the guest of honor, and her escort are already here, along with four of her friends. The weather delayed the last couple and they will be here within an hour. Since the staff and house are ready I want go along with you on the ferry and then Monty and the last couple will follow along as soon as soon as they arrive.

"If you'll get your bags and follow me I'll take you to the ferry and introduce you to the guests."

Carlyle smiled again but his manner was noticeably tense. Sam and Dean glanced at each other.

"Is this gonna ruin the weekend for your client?" Sam asked bluntly, to Dean's surprise. Sam worked at being tactful like some people worked at creating art.

The smile vanished and reappeared like a magician's trick. Carlyle shook his head. "Weather and client health issues are out of my control. As long as Ms. Desmond gets what her father paid for, she and her guests have a good time, and nothing untoward happens, which is where you boys come in-" Carlyle's voice hardened slightly on the last words, and then the smile blossomed again, full force. "-I know we'll all have an enjoyable weekend and you'll take care of my little problem for me."

"What exactly did Ms. Desmond's father pay for?" Dean asked sharply, eyeing Carlyle.

Carlyle shrugged. "She wanted to spend the weekend in a real haunted house. Not even a game. The timing on this was the most important part."

"Whada you mean?" Dean said sharply. He glanced behind him as Monty growled.

Carlyle frowned. "Didn't you look at the dates on that research I gave you?" He rolled his eyes. "Tomorrow is the anniversary of Lucia Blackmoor's death. It also coincides with the date that Iris and Daniel Blackmoor's bodies were found seventeen years later."

\* \* \* \*

"Didn't you read the dates on that research?" Dean mimicked in a snarl, yanking open the Impala's trunk. "Hellfire, Sam!" he jerked out the weapons bag and threw it at Sam.

"Don't yell at me!" Sam exclaimed. "You said you read it! You'd think if both of us read it, if one of us didn't catch it the other would!"

Dean scowled but refrained from commenting further. He made a sound of disgust. "Why do I feel like this is not only gonna come around and bite us in the ass, it's gonna rip 'em off. I don't think that advance money was enough." He slammed the trunk lid down and jerked open the back door to retrieve their bags.

Sam shouldered his own bag and followed along as Dean stomped back toward the Mercedes, muttering to himself. "It may not mean anything, Dean. People die every day and nothing happens on the anniversary of it. We don't even know if this house is actually haunted. Maybe Carlyle's right, we'll all just have a nice weekend, check the place out. Remember, nice beds, good food." He paused as Dean glanced over at him. Sam smiled encouragingly. "What could happen that we can't handle even if there is something going on? I'm sure everything will be fine." He knew his logic was a little faulty. Every hunt was different and if there was one thing that guaranteed trouble, it was taking stuff for granted. Somehow though, that didn't seem to support his point.

Dean rolled his shoulders. "Yeah, I guess. This is just too easy, man." He fell silent as they got back to Carlyle.

Carlyle was smiling that professional smile again. "Ready? Come along then. We can't keep Ms. Desmond waiting. She's anxious to get to the house." He turned to his burly bodyguard. "Stay here until the rest of the guests arrive, Monty. The ferry will be back before then."

Monty looked as though he tasted something sour. "Yes, Mr. Carlyle."

Carlyle led Sam and Dean into a rundown-looking building with a sign on it that said "Blackmoor Ferry" that was nothing like rundown on the inside. It was beautifully restored and well appointed for comfortable waiting. Several people and a large amount of baggage were sitting at one end of the smallish room. When Carlyle, Sam and Dean entered, the waiting clients rose with a soft sound of money. The obvious big money stood in the center, artfully surrounded by her entourage of young up and comers.

They weren't that much younger than Dean, or Sam for that matter, but something about them made Dean feel world weary and old. He sighed and dropped his duffel on the ground, stopping next to Sam as Carlyle halted, arms opening to welcome his guests.

"Ms. Desmond, so sorry to keep you waiting. The young men I was telling you about are here and we can leave anytime you like."

A young woman with long blonde hair stepped forward and swept the two brothers with an appraising once over. Whatever she had been about to say was forgotten, her look changing from irritated boredom to languid interest and a smile played at the corner of her lips.

"I'd ask how you are, but I think I can tell by looking," she commented, running her eyes up Sam lanky form, displayed quite nicely in the new, well fitting clothes before shifting to Dean's slightly smaller but equally well kitted out body. "I'm Miriam Desmond, you must be the..." her mouth quirked, "security... Mr. Carlyle has been telling us about." She held out her hand to Sam. "And you are?"

Sam took her small soft hand in his large rough one. "Sam Winters," he replied, using the names on the ID Carlyle had provided for them in the packet they'd been given. He gestured at Dean's slouching form. "This is my brother, Dean."

Dean offered Miriam one of his better smiles and shook her hand. "Nice to meet you."

Miriam eyed him speculatively and nibbled on one long painted nail. "Trust me," she murmured. "The pleasure is mine." She swayed slowly from one foot to the other.

They all jerked back as another hand was thrust into their midst. It was wielded by a tall, sturdily built young man about Sam's age with short dark hair. He looked like a football player. He moved close to Miriam and slipped a possessive arm around her waist.

"Brent Michaels," he said, leaving his hand out.

Miriam giggled softly and pecked his cheek. "Meet our bodyguards, Brent. Sam and Dean Winters. They're brothers," she whispered loudly in his ear.

Sam and Dean shook hands with Brent mumbling first time greetings.

The rest of the waiting group came forward and introductions were made. The other two couples- Frank, Jennifer, Lakita and Rome- seemed nice enough, if a little aloof. The fact that the other two girls left their eyes resting on Sam and Dean a little longer than might have been necessary obviously didn't sit well with the two younger males.

"Well," Carlyle said bringing his hands together. "If we're ready let's go down to the ferry and be on our way." He extended a hand toward another door and allowed the guests to precede him. Two young men in simple uniforms grabbed the bags piled on the floor and followed behind. Sam and Dean took their own bags and brought up the rear.

The door led to an enclosed walkway that allowed the ocean to be seen on one side. The wind had come up and rain was now splattering the glass.

To Dean, the waves outside looked pretty rough and he tightened his grip on the weapons bag. He was so not going to enjoy this. He had never been on a boat in his life, let alone a ferry.

They all climbed aboard the rocking ferry and the luggage was stowed to one side. The compartment they were in was warm and dry and commanded an expansive view of the ocean on front of them.

Lakita, a pert, bouncy girl whose skin and wind blown mane of hair were the same rich copper color, rushed to one of the padded benches and kneeled on it, pointing ahead to a dark blob on the horizon.

"Is that where we're headed?" she asked, turning back to look at Carlyle. The others moved forward to look.

Carlyle joined them nodding. "Yes indeed, that's Blackmoor Island. It'll take about twenty minutes to get there with since the water is a little rough. We have refreshments if anyone is interested." He indicated a small area to the side where there were coffee pots, iced drinks and, from the looks of it, a fairly well stocked bar. There were also some covered platters of small finger foods.

"Ooh, I'm starving!" Jennifer, the dark haired girl who was a little on the heavy side, although unattractively so, clapped her hands and went to the bar to see what was there. Her, companion, Frank, thin and bespectacled, grinned at Sam and shrugged.

"More to love," he murmured, following her.

Rome and Brent joined them, seeming more interested in the liquor than anything else. Both young men were similarly built and their concentration reminded Dean of two football players in a huddle.

Miriam left her position at the window and drifted toward her friends, brushing against Sam in a move so deliberate even he couldn't ignore it.

Dean grinned and gave Sam a nudge, mouthing, "Get her!"

Sam slapped Dean's hand away, giving him a dirty look. "I'm gonna get some coffee."

"Hey, get some for me, too, huh?" Dean grinned again.

"Jerk," Sam muttered as he walked away.

"Bitch," Dean replied, mouthing again. He turned and walked toward Carlyle. He stumbled as the ferry suddenly surged forward into the swell, leaving the dock behind them. He caught himself on a thin pole that ran from deck to ceiling. There were some startled cries behind him and then nervous laughter.

"Little rough, huh?" Dean offered when Carlyle turned at the sounds behind him.

Carlyle gave him a lopsided smile but did not reply. He looked back out through the rain splattered windows at the dark island in the distance.

"Have you ever wanted something so badly that you'd do almost anything to get it?"

Dean blinked at Carlyle's quiet words. "Excuse me?"

Carlyle faced him this time, lowering himself to sit on the cushioned bench. "Have a seat," he said patting the bench.

Dean was feeling the sway of the ferry a little more than he was happy with and sitting sounded like it would be a less than stellar idea. He swallowed. "If you don't mind, I think I'll stand."

Carlyle laughed softly. "Don't like boats?"

"Never been on one." Dean admitted after a brief hesitation. "Spend most of my time in my car." He rubbed his nose. "What did you mean? About wanting something."

Carlyle shrugged, shaking his head. "This...endeavor. It's original, it's succeeding and I think it's a marketable investment." He looked at Dean who shrugged in return.

"Don't look at me, man," he replied, "I don't know sh—anything about business. I guess if I could afford it and was looking for some fun..." Dean cocked his eyebrow and thought about it. He could think of a few good scenarios he'd have like to live out. "Yeah, I could see me checking this out." He looked up as Sam laughed. He appeared to be getting on like a house afire with the guests, which in one way, surprised Dean but in another shouldn't have.

Carlyle sighed and rubbed his forehead "My father was - is - a very successful entrepreneur. It seems like all I've ever done in my life is disappoint him with what I tried to do. I want this to work. I need it to work." He snorted softly. "I can't believe I'm fifty-two years old, and I'm still trying to do something to make that'll make my father tell me he's proud of me." He looked up at Dean, who was staring at him. "How pathetic is that?" When Dean didn't answer, Carlyle smiled. "I guess that's hard for you to imagine." He watched Dean for a moment and then turned back to the water. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm telling you this."

Dean's eyes flickered wildly for a moment and the muscles in his jaw flexed as he struggled to come up with an acceptable answer. "We'll do our best help you with this, Mr. Carlyle," he finally forced out.

"Here," Sam held out a cup of coffee to him. He gave Dean an odd look. "You okay?"

Dean glanced at Sam and away, taking the coffee. "Yeah, I'm fine. Be glad to get back on solid ground, though." He raised the cup to his lips.

Hot coffee sloshed over his hand, making him swear at the burn as the ferry suddenly shuddered sideways, sending them all staggering to one side, sprawling on the deck.

Sam and Dean collided with each other and fell across the benches.

"What the hell!" Dean yelled, as the ferry slewed around in a sickening dip and roll. A loud clanking sound filled the air and Sam's mouth fell open as black smoke billowed from the prow of the boat.

The guys were swearing as the girls shrieked and tried to struggle to their feet.

"Stay down!" Sam called out over the noise. "Someone's gonna get hurt falling!"

"What is that?" Dean barked at Carlyle, who looked like a man living his worst nightmare.

"I don't know!" Carlyle pulled himself to his feet and staggered drunkenly to a wall panel and flipped it open. Reaching in, he grabbed a mike and keyed it on.

"Carl! What the hell is going on?"

"We blew...starboard engine!" the voice on the other end crackled. "...got a fire but we're getting...control!"

Jennifer cried out and huddled against Frank, who didn't look any too calm himself.

"Can we make it to Blackmoor on one engine?" Carlyle barked over the noise. The rain was pouring now and lightning was dancing across the sky.

"...can't turn back....have to compensate...not too far..."

Carlyle swore. "Do the best you can, let us know when your ready to land." He tossed the mike back into the wall box. The ferry lurched again and he stumbled back to the bench.

Miriam Desmond sat where she had fallen, looking excited and breathless rather than frightened. "Mr. Carlyle? Is this part of the show by any chance?"

Carlyle shot her a short look of disbelief, matched by everyone else in the compartment.

"Are you nuts?" Rome snapped, holding Lakita tightly to keep her steady on the rocking deck.

"I'd like to tell you yes, Ms. Desmond but unfortunately, this is for real. You heard Carl, we just blew an engine. They've got the fire under control and we'll still make our landing. The storm and only one functioning engine are just going to make it a little more difficult. Once we get to Blackmoor everything will be fine. Just a little added excitement." Carlyle smiled, attempting to lighten the atmosphere a little.

"That's fine with me, " Miriam replied, looking satisfied. "I like a little excitement." Her eyes were fixed on Sam, even though her arm was curled through Brent's.

Sam turned to Dean, who had shifted to a cross legged position on the floor with his hands gripped around deck pole. Dean, a little wild eyed, shrugged helplessly at him.

\* \* \* \*

It took thirty minutes of painstaking maneuvering with the stormy ocean waters but Carl, the ferry captain, was nothing, if not good at his job. One more burst from the single engine and the ferry finally wallowed as close to the pier as it was going to get. The water was so rough near shore the rocks were banging against the bottom of the shallow drafted vessel as it rocked back and forth.

Sam, Dean and Carlyle had conferred with the captain and were prepared when the ferry landed. The rain hampered their efforts but the spotlights on the ferry coupled with lights on the pier helped. Lightning flashed wildly and the cold wet wind tore at them as Sam braced himself and jumped to the pier with a rope as the ferry dipped close.

Dean's heart was in his mouth as Sam did it and he relaxed visibly when Sam hit the pier and began to wrap the rope around the nearest mooring cleat. In a calm, Sam could have pulled the boat in, but fighting the waves and rain, it was impossible.

Dean wiped the rain from his eyes and tossed Sam the other rope. Rome and Brent had come on deck to assist and stood ready with the gangplank to push it to the pier.

"Got it!" Sam yelled. "Swing it over!" It took all three of them to push the gangplank over. Dean couldn't hear it hit but he could feel it. Sam grabbed the rope and hurriedly wound it around the end of the railing and the post closest to it to try to anchor it more solidly in place. The rocking of the ferry pulled it back and forth with great force.

Once it was in place, Rome raced across and ran to the black van that was parked by the boat house. Carlyle had given him the keys and he jumped in, started the engine and brought the vehicle as close as he could.

The bags had been brought on deck and were quickly thrown over and stowed in the van.

Dean grabbed Lakita's hand and Brent Jennifer's and they hurried the squealing girls through the cold rain to the gangplank. Brent walked each girl carefully to the pier, making sure they kept their footing. Once on the dock, Rome helped them get into the van. Sam kept watch on the sliding gangplank to make sure it stayed relatively in place.

Dean grabbed Miriam's hand. "You ready?"

She grinned at him. "Always!" She hunched over against the rain, actually laughed and raced down the gangplank to the van, Frank ran along behind her. Dean, soaked through, stared after her in disbelief. He shook his head and went back to get Carlyle.

Carlyle met him at the door. "Can you believe this?" he shouted.

Dean grinned. "What about the captain?"

"He wants to try to get the ferry back. He seems to think he can make it. It's just not safe enough for the passengers! C'mon, let's get out of this monsoon!" Carlyle jogged to the gangplank, paused a moment as it shifted, then half jumped across and headed for the van.

"C'mon Dean! I'm gonna drown if I stay out here much longer!" Sam yelled.

Dean ran to the gangplank and was halfway down when the ferry suddenly rolled forward, forcing the gangplank down and then up as it racked back under an especially high wave that half drowned Sam where he stood in a spray of icy salt water.

Dean, caught halfway across, was catapulted from the gangplank. Sam watched in horror as Dean flailed wildly, yelling, before disappearing into the foaming water that crashed against the rocks.

Sam could hear screams from the van behind him, even through the driving rain and thunder.

He threw himself on the edge of the pier, searching desperately for some sign of his brother in the waves below.

"DEAN!"

\* \* \* \*

"Oh, *HELL* no!!" was Dean's first thought as he felt himself pitched off the gangplank, flailing madly as though that would somehow help, before he hit the freezing water and it closed over his head. One near-drowning a scant month ago had been more than enough water play for him.

He gasped at the shock of the water and choked on the salty spray, coughing out what little air he had in his lungs.

Luckily, the water here was fairly shallow and he felt the slimy rocks beneath his boots, kicking off as he hit them, although, the water was so turbulent he had to fight to reach the surface.

*I swear to God, if there's a cowboy waiting for me when I get outta this water, that's it!*

Sam rolled off the pier and dropped onto the rocks below, sliding down to the water's edge. He gave out a barking laugh of relief as Dean's head surfaced near the rocky shoreline and the first word out of his mouth was, "SHIT!" followed by hoarse coughing.

"You okay?" Sam yelled, scrambling closer and reaching out to grab Dean's hand. There was a smear of red on Dean's forehead but he seemed basically unharmed.

It went downhill from there as Sam helped Dean pull himself onto the rocks below the pier. Sam was well aware of Dean's penchant for colorful invective but the language currently pouring out of his mouth beat anything Sam had ever heard. Dean must have been saving it for a special occasion because Sam wasn't sure some of the words could even be used together in the same sentence.

"—king ice water!" Dean gasped, coughing. His hands were shaking so badly Sam almost couldn't hold on. Their fingers finally locked together and Sam tugged, pulling Dean up onto solid ground.

"I got you!" Sam grunted as Dean practically crawled up him.

Suddenly a pair of dark hands grabbed Dean's arm and added their strength to Sam's. Rome's teeth glittered in the spots from the ferry lights.

"Dude, it's a little cold to go swimmin'!" he exclaimed.

Dean grasped him and gratefully accepted the assistance. He was totally waterlogged and freezing from the icy water. "Thanks!" he said, hacking water.

Between Rome and Sam they managed to get Dean and themselves back up the rocks, and as they reached for the boards of the pier Brent's form leaned over to give them a hand up.

The men were pulled into the dry interior of the van and the doors slammed shut, cutting off the cold rain and muffling the noise from outside.

Dean, squashed between Jennifer and Lakita, doubled over coughing, teeth chattering.

"Is everyone all right?" Carlyle demanded.

"Yeah, yeah, I think so..." Sam replied, swiping water out of his eyes. He reached out toward the scrape on Dean's forehead. It didn't look deep. "You sure you're all right?"

Dean swore again, rocking with his arms crossed, shivering uncontrollably. "That's it, Sam! No more water! Put it on the freakin' list! No rats! No planes! *NO WATER!*" He blasted Sam with a look that would have killed someone not used to being on the receiving end.

Sam, relieved that Dean was okay, saved his own life by swallowing the laugh that Dean's remark almost caused. The others in the van looked at each other in confusion but said nothing.

"Thanks for your help," Sam said, looking at Brent and Rome.

"No prob," Rome replied as Carlyle started the van and pulled away. Rome unscrewed the cap to a small silver flask and held it out to Dean. "You want a hit?"

"God, yes," Dean wheezed, taking the flask and downing a healthy swallow. He choked, expecting whisky and getting brandy instead. Coughing he handed it back to Rome who passed it over to Sam who shook his head. Brent took it instead, passing it back to Dean who downed another draft.

"So when does it get exciting?" Miriam drawled.

\* \* \* \*

They huddled together for the short ride to the main house, all wet and miserable. In the darkness and the still driving rain it was difficult to see the house as they approached, but the glow of lights in the building were a welcome sight as they drew closer. Carlyle pulled a mic off the dash and spoke into it, apprising someone at the house that they would be arriving in some slight distress. He drove the van into the covered drive at the front of the house and parked. Turning, he addressed them all.

"I can't express how sorry I am about this rocky start. I think it would be a good idea if

everyone went straight to their rooms and got into some dry clothes. I'll have the bags brought up and then why don't we meet in the drawing room to relax a little while we're waiting for dinner?"

There was a general murmur of assent and the passengers slowly exited the van.

The large double front doors of the house opened, spilling warm light onto the staircase and a man and woman hurried out, looking anxious.

"Oh, my goodness!" the woman exclaimed at the sight of them. "What on earth happened?"

"It's alright Mrs. Keller, we had a slight accident with the ferry and well, here we are at any rate. Can you please show our guests to their rooms so they can freshen up?" Carlyle sounded cheerful, but there was a distinct edge in his voice as he brushed his hair back off his forehead.

As Miriam and her friends followed after Mrs. Keller, Carlyle turned to Sam and Dean. "Why don't you go with the others. Walter," he gestured at the burly man that had accompanied Mrs. Keller, "will get everyone's bags."

"We'll get our bags, thanks anyway," Dean said, voice shaking. He reached among the luggage piled in the back of the van and dragged out the weapons cache. Sam grabbed their duffels and pulled them loose.

"Mrs. Keller will show you your rooms," Carlyle stepped closer. "I'm sorry about that accident, Sam, Dean. I'm glad you weren't hurt any worse. As soon as you're ready please come to the drawing room."

They both nodded. "Sure," Sam replied.

Dean slogged up the steps followed closely by Sam. They stood, dripping in the broad entry hall under a crystal chandelier five feet wide. It had candles in holders, but had been fitted for electricity. After being outside it was almost too warm. Dean stretched out a hand to catch himself on the stair balustrade, suddenly lightheaded.

Sam dropped his bag. "Dean? What's wrong?" he grabbed Dean's arm as he sank down on the bottom step blinking.

"Nothing, I'm okay!" Dean said with a slight laugh. "Damn, I got kind of a buzz goin' on." He swiped his hands over his face. "I guess I shouldn't have had all that brandy on an empty stomach." He shook his head.

"You sure? Maybe you hit your head when you went in the water?" Sam knelt next to him.

"Nah, I just scraped my forehead on something. Doesn't even hurt. I was fine 'til I came in here." Dean put his head down.

Sam looked up at the sound of feet clattering down the richly appointed stairs. Mrs. Keller was hurrying down to them.

“Oh, young man, are you all right? The young ladies were telling me one of you got thrown into the water! You poor thing!” She went all motherly and tried to touch Dean which brought him immediately back to his feet.

“I’m fine, really!” He insisted, “I just wanta take a shower and get some dry clothes—“

“But your head is bleeding!”

Sam smirked, but took pity on Dean and interposed on his behalf. “If you could just tell us which room is ours, we can take care of his head.” He offered his most winning smile, carefully pulling Dean back to his feet.

“Oh, surely, if you’ll just follow me!” She scampered back up the stairs like a hyperactive squirrel, Dean and Sam trudging along behind her like tired bears.

\* \* \* \*

The rest of the evening passed in a quiet blur. The storm still roared outside but the thick walls of the house muffled all but the loudest sounds of nature. Not surprisingly, the lights had flickered off and on until they had finally gone out all together. The cries of the girls faded as a back up generator kicked in a few minutes later. The light wasn’t as strong and glowed from fewer fixtures but it added a golden softness to the rooms. Everyone was exhausted and by the time dinner was served Miriam and her friends were, if not exactly drunk, definitely happy.

Sam was dancing on the edge of a headache and had stuck to water and iced tea but was surprised when Dean cupped a hand over his wine glass at dinner having already refused a drink earlier in the drawing room.

Carlyle had attempted to call back to shore to find out about the other guests but the connection had been terrible, the only understandable information passed being that the other guests had not arrived, the ferry had made it back but was incapacitated and would not be able to return that night. The cell phones weren’t getting a signal either, but since the plan was to stay until Monday anyway, no one really minded.

Carlyle had remained in the background, answering questions about the house, giving his guests the Disneyland version of the scenario that had gone down so many years ago. Playing host. A detailed tour of the house and its various artifacts was promised after breakfast the next morning. The brothers had stayed on the fringes of the conversation, answering any specific questions about themselves with patented non-answers.

The party had become more intimate towards the end of the meal, which had been delicious but so rich it was almost too much for Sam and Dean, used to a steady diet of greasy fast food.

Miriam’s friends had produced birthday presents and the conversation had become one that meant nothing to anyone but them.

Sam and Dean excused themselves after a dessert that was so over-the-top it had almost knocked Dean into a sugar coma. Sam couldn’t finish his. They both wanted to do some reconnoitering on their own, without the distraction of the slightly inebriated guests.

They retrieved the flashlights and EMF detector from their room along with a few weapons, just in case.

"You feelin' better?" Sam asked as they walked back down the stairs to the main floor.

"Huh?"

"Your head." Sam supplied. "You still feel dizzy?"

"I didn't feel bad before." Dean rubbed at the side of his head. "I just can't get this...buzz...outta my head. And my skin's all tingly." He glanced at Sam's cocked eyebrow. "I know how dumb that sounds, thank you." He shifted his shoulders, "But it's making my freaking skin crawl."

"When did it start?" Sam asked. "I've had a headache ever since we got here. Maybe there's something in the air?"

Dean sniffed, looking around. "Like what? Gas leak?"

Sam shook his head, sliding open a set of heavy carved wooden doors that disappeared silently into the walls. "I dunno, maybe. Maybe it's just been a long damn day."

Reaching into the darkness he found a wall switch and flipped it. Two floor lamps wavered into weak light, thanks to the generator, melting back the shadows a little and giving the room a gentle illumination.

"Wow," he breathed as he stepped into the room. Even with the thin lights he could see the beauty of the inlaid wooden floor and the rich brocades of the draperies. Dean's flash played along the floor, their slow footsteps barely making a sound.

"Look at this," Dean said, unconsciously keeping his voice down. He had moved over by a tall marble fireplace and was shining his light at a huge portrait hanging over the mantle, mounted in a heavy gilt frame. It had to be almost life size.

A beautiful, dark haired woman, dressed in a long deep blue gown with a plunging neckline and low riding shoulders. She was seated at an ornate piano, upper body turned forward, one slender hand lying in her lap the other raised slightly above the keys. Her lips were parted and there was a slight look of pleased surprise on her face, as though she had been startled by someone she was happy to see. It was, even to Dean's untutored eyes, a magnificent piece of work. He would not have been surprised if she had stepped from the portrait, breathing and alive.

"She's beautiful," Sam murmured. He had to lift himself on tiptoe to read the golden plate fastened on the bottom of the frame. "'Forever beloved.'" He quoted. "I recognize this from the pictures. This is Lucia Blackmoor."

Dean whistled. "I gotta admit," he said, "I might go a little crazy myself if I lost that." He shone the light on another portrait, a little further down the wall, not quite as large.

Frowning, he walked closer, drawing the flash over it. "This is weird," he commented,

puzzled.

"What?" Sam joined him, looking up at the painting.

"They're exactly the same..." Dean's voice trailed away as he looked at the face of the woman in the portrait, and a cold sensation crept up his spine.

Sam saw it too. Same dress, same piano, same pose, same everything. Only they weren't the same and he felt his own chill racing over his skin. This was Iris Blackmoor, seventeen years old, made over in her mother's image, even to the look of pleased surprise. The resemblance was uncanny except for the look in her eyes. Her mother's eyes had been full of joy. The eyes staring back at Sam from this painting were full of many things, but joy wasn't one of them.

He swallowed uneasily, couldn't stop himself from backing away a little.

"Dude," Dean said in a small voice. "That's just twisted." He moved his light from the painting and turned away, swinging the light across the room. There was a raised platform at one end of the room, like a stage. In the center sat an elaborate grand piano, lid and covers down.

Sam's eyes followed the light. "They were painted here. In this room." He walked over to the piano, tracing his fingers along the carved wood, frowning. Curiously, he lifted the cover on the keyboard and folded it back. Lightly fingering the ivory keys, yellowed with age. A few tinkling notes rang out surprisingly loudly in the room. His headache sent a sharp flash behind his eyes.

Dean started and turned to glare at Sam. "Stop that, man!" He flicked his light back at the painting of Iris, those sad, lost eyes. The longer he was in this room, the less he liked it. Those paintings were creeping him out, their twin stares seemed to be fixed right on him. He felt like he was about to jump out of his skin. A new and unpleasant sensation. He noticed Sam rubbing at his temple.

"Your headache gettin' worse?" he asked. A cold thought hit him. "Sam, you're not having a-"

"No. No, it's just a headache." Sam hastened to assure him. "But, yeah, it's gettin' worse." He grimaced. "I think I need to take something. It's too distracting."

"Well. Let's get the hell outta here. There's some aspirin in our kit. Maybe you need to lie down for a while. I can scout around a little on my own." Dean was already halfway to the door, bouncing nervously on his feet as he waited for Sam.

"You're awful jumpy," Sam remarked, as he passed Dean, who slid the doors shut behind them with relief.

"I'm not jumpy! I'm just a little...wound up." Dean headed back toward the stairs.

They could hear voices from the dining room and they seemed a little loud for after dinner conversation. Both brothers paused as one voice suddenly exclaimed.

*"Bitch!"*

It had none of the friendly undertones it did when Sam and Dean referred to each other that way.

"Uh oh," Dean made a face. "Cat fight."

Something crashed and there was a sound of scuffling, screeching and confused male voices.

"C'mon!" Sam said heading that way.

Dean grabbed his arm. "Are you nuts? We're supposed to protect them from ghosts, not each other! I'd rather take on a zombie than try to break up a girl fight."

Sam shot him a look of disgust and walked into the dining room.

In the low light they could see several chairs knocked over and everyone at one end of the room where Jennifer and Lakita were being held apart by their respective boyfriends. Carlyle and Brent were trying to interpose. Miriam hung slightly in the background, a puzzled look on her face, but her eyes were flashing.

"I didn't say I thought you were fat!" Lakita shrieked. "I said you could stand to lose a few pounds!" She tried to thrust herself forward but Rome held on tight.

Jennifer, kicked out at her, barely restrained by Frank. "You take that back, you bony clotheshorse, sex with you must be like sleeping with a pile of broomsticks!"

Lakita screamed and dove at Jennifer, nails clawed as she swiped at her.

"Whoa! Whoa!" Sam yelled. "Break it up! What the hell is going on?"

His sudden rather large presence stopped everyone dead for about three seconds. Dean leaned back against the wall and covered his eyes.

Then the fight was on again. With Sam in the middle.

"All right, that's ENOUGH!" Dean's deep voice rang out after a few more screaming insults and swings and he waded into them like a tank, shoving people away from each other. He caught Sam by the front of his shirt and pushed him out of the way. Carlyle, trying his best to calm everyone, was grateful for Dean's forcefulness and stepped back to allow him to continue.

"It's been a long frigging day and I'm tired! I think everyone has had enough partying and definitely enough to drink for tonight." He pointed his finger around the room at them all. "I suggest you all go to whoever's room you plan on spending the night in and go beddy bye."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Whadaya say? Sound good? 'Cause it sounds like a helluvan idea to me!"

Dean, who could charm the birds out of the sky when he so chose, could also be scary as hell and was definitely wearing his DO NOT MESS WITH ME face right now.

Jennifer and Lakita looked daggers at each other but gradually relaxed and shook themselves free from their restraining partners. There was a general grumbling and shared dirty looks but they finally all shuffled toward the door, except Miriam who followed along more slowly after Brent. As she passed Dean she rolled her head back to watch him with a lazy smile and a wink.

Dean stared after her, frowning. His nerves felt like they were being strummed.

Carlyle came over, mopping his face with a silk handkerchief. "Thank you!" He said with relief. "I wasn't sure how to handle that. I've never been in the middle of a-" he paused.

"Cat fight," Dean supplied helpfully.

"What happened?" Sam asked. "They were having fun when we left."

Carlyle shrugged, helplessly. "I'm really not sure. They were admiring an item of clothing one of the girls had given Ms. Desmond and the next thing..." he shook his head, making a "who knows" gesture with his hands. "It was really quite bizarre."

"That piano in the music room," Sam said suddenly, "Is it the one Lucia Blackmoor owned?"

Carlyle stared at him, then realized what Sam had asked. "Oh, yes, actually it is, it was part of the acquisitions in the last month. The original piano was sold when the house was cleared out. We managed to locate it at a plantation house in Louisiana that was having an estate sale. Why?"

Sam shook his head gently. "No reason. We may be up looking around later, is that a problem?"

Carlyle shook his head. "No, not at all, if you think it'll help. Did you notice anything earlier?"

Shrugging, Sam pressed his fingertips to his forehead. "I'm not sure. We just want to look around some more."

Dean touched his arm. "Let's get you some aspirin. Mr. Carlyle, we'll let you know if we find anything."

Carlyle nodded, looking a little worried. "Good night." He bit his lip and turned back to survey the mess in the dining room.

They were halfway up the stairs when the lights flickered out. They didn't come on again.

"Great," Dean snarled, thumbing on his light so they didn't fall down the stairs and break their necks.

\* \* \* \*

Sam choked down three aspirin and lay down on the huge old bed. It was so high off the floor he almost had to hike himself up to get in it. Dean would have to jump. His head hurt so bad he couldn't even be amused at the thought.

And God, it was soft. He felt as though he were sinking into a warm bag of pudding. His eyes closed.

\* \* \* \*

Dean had accepted candles from the silent man, Walter, who had accompanied Mrs. Keller. They flickered unsteadily but banished some of the darkness.

He had tried to lie down and sleep but he was too jittery, even though he was exhausted, and after an hour of staring at the ceiling and then pacing the perimeter of the room three times he stopped by the bed where Sam appeared to be asleep. He hated to disturb him. but reached out and gently shook his shoulder.

Sam's eyes fluttered open. "What?"

"It's okay. I can't sleep, man. I'm gonna take a look around. Just wanted to tell you."

Sam started to sit up. "Wait, I'll go-"

"No. You get some sleep. I'm just gonna wander a little."

Sam shook his head gingerly, his headache was better, but still there. "No," he replied, sitting up and swinging his legs off the bed. "I'm okay. I don't like the idea of you wandering around here alone since our phones aren't working." He rolled his shoulders, popping his neck.

Dean eyed him dubiously. "You sure?"

"Yeah, my head's better and everyone else oughta be asleep by now. 'S good time." He picked up his gun from the table, checked it and grabbed the flashlight. "Where do you want to start?"

"How about the daughter's room?" Dean suggested. "It's just down the hall."

They slipped quietly out the door and stood in the hall listening. Dean thought he could hear soft voices a few doors down but otherwise everything seemed quiet. He flipped on the flash and walked down the hall to where the corridor split to go right or left. Turning right, he approached the door at the end of the hall. He remembered Carlyle saying this was Iris' bedroom and it was kept locked unless being shown as part of the house tour.

It was still storming and flashes of lightning threw blue light into the windows and across the floor. The tingling sensation on his skin grew more pronounced and he had to resist an urge to claw himself to try and relieve it. He tried the knob, not surprised to actually find it locked. He tucked the flash under his arm and withdrew his lock pick, going down on one knee. The old lock wasn't even slightly challenging and after a few seconds the tumblers gave and the door opened with a tiny creak.

Once inside they closed the door behind them and swept their lights over the room.

"Oh my, God," Sam said in surprise. Instead of the restored room that they were expecting, this room was in serious disrepair. The furniture hung with cobwebs, and covered in dust. There was a monstrous four poster bed against the wall, bed canopies hanging in tatters,

the bedclothes hanging half off the bed, trailing across the dust covered floor. Everything in the room was in the same condition. The mirror on the dressing table was smashed and glass littered the top and floor. A ragged dressing gown was draped across a velvet covered chaise, a dressing screen, a painted oriental garden scene still discernible on each of the four panels of the screen.

"Why would they leave it like this?" Sam asked rhetorically as they walked slowly across the floor. "The rest of the house is so beautiful."

"Sam, there's no other footprints on this floor," Dean's voice was low and intense.

Sam glanced at the floor where their footprints were clearly visible in the dust.

"Carlyle said the take people on a tour of this room; why aren't there any other footprints?" Dean asked.

Sam swallowed. "Maybe they set the room up after the tours so that it looks like no one's been in here." It sounded good, anyway. He picked up one of the bottles on the dressing table, pulling it free from its nest of webbing, lip curling at the sight of the leggy spider that crouched back behind one of the other bottles. He pulled the stopper from the bottle and sniffed the contents. Jasmine. *Why would someone prop a room with real perfume? And real spiders?*

Dean was working his way around the room, getting more and more alarmed with each bizarre discovery. "Sam, there isn't any electric in here either. These are friggin' gas lamps."

He stopped when he realized he could see his breath in the light of the flash as he spoke. It was freezing in here. Belatedly he jerked the EMF out of his pocket and turned it on. The lights shot across the dial and the needle bounced wildly accompanied by a wavering whine.

He slapped a hand against his ear. The whine turned into a hum that was rapidly becoming louder until he could feel it against his skin. "God, what is that?" He exclaimed.

"Dean, we got a problem..." Sam gulped, backing into Dean. He clutched Dean's arm to get his attention.

Dean grimaced, looking up, trying to get past the ringing in his ears. "What! Aw, hell-" he moaned.

He tried to draw his gun but the figure he planned on aiming it at flickered in and out of existence in a series of choppy hesitations. First here, then there, finally so close to Sam he had to back up as the tattered specter faced him toe to toe, swaying slowly back and forth. Sam could feel the heat being sucked from his body.

"Do something!" Sam ground out at Dean.

Dean was curled against the wall, his skin prickling so badly it was actual pain, his ears aching from the vibrations assaulting them. The gun he held fell from his fingers and banged on the floor.

Crushed against the wall, Sam couldn't draw his own weapon. He couldn't move. The flashlight was locked in his grip and still on, so he could see but it wasn't necessary: their visitor

brought her own light with her. He could see it reflected on his skin and clothes as she drew nearer.

She barely came to his chest, her emaciated body wrapped in rotted bits of cloth. Her head rolled loosely, as though she couldn't control it and Sam could see dark marks ringing her throat. Long, colorless, tangled tresses fell around her bony shoulders. Her clothes and hair moved and drifted as though blown by a phantom breeze. Even though her eyes were empty black sockets, her head moved in a way that made him feel she could see him. When she suddenly rose upward to look him straight in the face a quick glance down confirmed that she had no feet or legs. Not that uncommon but it still made his flesh crawl.

"Whadya want?" Sam forced out, turning his head away with an effort. Next to him Dean slumped to his knees. Sam's head was about to split open but not from whatever Dean was hearing and feeling.

The ghost's mouth opened revealing the same empty blackness as her eyes, no words came out, just an anguished moan. Her hand's lifted and cupped in an imploring gesture, brushing Sam's chest and leaving ice in their wake. He gasped. After a few wavering seconds her arms curled around herself and she drifted back moving in a slow turn before sinking into the floor, the sound of her moan fading away with her.

The room was instantly warm again. Both flashlights went out. Sam stumbled away from the wall, holding his head. It felt like his brain was dangling at the end of a short chain and every movement sent it crashing into his skull.

Dean coughed and slowly pushed himself back up the wall. "What the hell was that?" he croaked, running his hands over his skin to try to get it to lay down again. He slumped back against the wall, head reeling from the after effects of whatever the hell had come over him.

"Are you okay?" Dean sounded breathless.

Sam could hear him slapping and shaking the flash. "Yeah, I think so. My head's killing me...you?"

"My ears are buzzing like my head's full of bees, but yeah."

Light finally stabbed through the inky blackness and Dean searched along the ground for his gun. He reached down to grab it, shoving it in his jacket pocket. Looking at the floor he stretched out a hand, dragging his fingertips along the wood before straightening slowly, shining the light on his fingers.

Sam massaged his temples, noting Dean's action. "What?"

Dean held out his hand. "Dude, where's the dust?" They traded looks and Dean slowly moved the beam of light around the room. There was a click and Sam's light joined his in a sweep of their surroundings.

Gone were the dangling cobwebs, the dust, the ragged bed dressings, the spiders, the air of long neglect.

The bed was sumptuously made, crystal bottles on the dressing table sparkling, mirror

intact, floor spotless.

The room was as pristine and perfect as a museum display.

\* \* \* \*

Dean sat at the small dressing table and stared at himself in the mirror, the glow from the flashlight revealing that his eyes were bloodshot and the left one had developed an annoying tic. He pressed his fingers against it in a vain attempt to get it to stop.

"We saw what we saw, right?" he finally asked, breaking the drawn out silence. *If his ears would just stop ringing.*

Sam, sitting on the end of the bed, grunted affirmation. "We sure as hell saw something." He frowned. "There is something really weird going on here."

"Figured that out did you?" Dean groaned, putting his head down on his arms.

"No, I'm serious. She wanted something, to tell us something, ask for something...I don't know. She didn't try to hurt us."

"Speak for yourself."

Sam ignored him, sliding his feet to the floor. "There's got to be some explanation for why we're all acting so strange. I've had a headache since we got here and your nerves are wound up so tight you're about to screw yourself into the floor."

Sam returned Dean's dirty look with interest. "C'mon Dean, you're jumpy as hell, admit it. I got the impression Miriam and her friends are pretty close and they're physically fighting. It's possible this is what happened when those people were killed."

Sam charged out of the room with Dean hot on his heels.

"Carlyle said the trouble started when they brought in that last load of inventory," Sam mused as he and Dean went back along the corridor. "I just remembered something I heard about that gave me an idea."

"And what's that?" Dean asked, not having a clue what Sam might be talking about.

"In some stuff I ran across one time I read about the effect of sound on the human nervous system."

Dean frowned at him in confusion. "I'm sorry, did I have a lost time episode? I must have missed something. What's that got to do with what we just saw?"

"I'm not sure," Sam replied. "I think it's tied to this but I haven't figured out how yet. Maybe something in the house is affecting people, something we can't see or smell but we can feel; it's hitting everyone different. Maybe what happened with the Blackmoors wasn't a result of...I don't know...anger or being crazy. Maybe whatever this is caused them to act that way. Made 'em lose control."

Dean just stared at him.

Sam stopped outside the music room door. "Okay, look. The human nervous system is reactive to stimuli, it's what tells us our bodies are feeling pain, feel good, whatever. It's very sensitive, but what affects one person may not even be noticed by someone else, and the reaction between people receiving the same stimuli can be at totally opposite ends of the scale."

Dean groaned, trying to follow Sam's meaning. "Crap, now I've got a headache. Again...What the hell does that have to do with this? Are you talking about a sound? 'Cause I'm not hearing anything except this frigging ringing in my ears."

Sam nodded. "No, you can't hear it. It's like a dog whistle, but just 'cause you can't hear it doesn't mean it's not making a sound. It's just not something you can hear. But you can *feel* it. That's why your ears are ringing, why you're on edge. Why my head hurts...hell, I'm pretty sure that's what set off the fight last night-

"Sam, what are you saying?" Dean demanded in frustration. "For God's sake just spit it out!"

"Did you notice how much worse we both felt when we went in the music room? It still bothered us in the rest of the house but it was worse there."

"Yeah, so?"

"When I was researching the house I found out a lot of things about it and the area around here. That room was built to be acoustically perfect, so that the piano would produce the best possible sound. The room is in the center of the house. This house is built on an outcropping of minerals that are great conductors of sound vibrations. For example the ocean waves hitting the shoreline.

"Bear with me here, 'cause I know this is reaching. I think through some fluke of design coupled with natural elements, this house is a giant sounding board. All the surface vibrations in the ground, the water, hell, *us*, all combine to create a vibration that can be felt by the people who live here, but it's so subliminal they're not aware of it. But they can be affected by it just the same. Affecting how they feel, how they react to things.

"Certain levels of sound, even if you can't hear it, produce vibrations that can cause sensations of fear, anger, nervousness, euphoria, even hallucinations."

"But what's that got to do with the piano?" Dean was really trying, but none of this made any sense to him.

Sam opened the sliding doors and walked to the gilt piano.

Dean followed him in, nerve endings already thrumming like an over strung harp the further into the room he came.

"This piano was built to exact specifications," Sam continued. "Again, to complement the room it would be in. When it was delivered it took the tuner a week to get it tuned properly. Carlyle said everything was fine before the piano was set back up. I think the piano, in this spot, in this room, is so sensitive it acts as a channel for all the vibrations in the house and exacerbates-" he stopped at the look on Dean's face, "-makes it a lot worse," he amended.

"No one really knows what happened during the time Lucia, Daniel and Iris lived here, the diaries are gone and it's just stories now. What if there were things going on the whole time but they kept it hushed up? We know Daniel lost it after Lucia died; who knows what may have happened during that year after her fiancé was killed. I mean if you're already on shaky ground mentally, maybe what I'm talking about would be enough to tip you over." Sam ran his hands over the surface of the ornate piano.

"So, assuming what you're saying is true, these sounds, vibrations, whatever, could be enough to cause someone to become totally irrational? Kill?" Dean grappled with the concept, even though in a strange way it made sense; at least it had the possibility of making sense. "Damn, Sam. I can't believe you came up with that." Dean shook his head. "Dude, you really scare me sometimes. So what about our friend from yesterday? She sure as hell wasn't a hallucination!"

"No," Sam rubbed his eyes. "But I bet she's the direct result of the other. And I think she wants us to help her." He walked over to a window and yanked the heavy velvet curtain down. Bundling it up he walked back to the piano, lifted the lid and propped it on the brace.

"Help her with what? What are you doing?" Dean demanded in a low hiss.

"Deadening the strings. I don't know about you but my head's about to split open." He proceeded to stuff the bulky fabric into the body of the piano. To his amazement, when Sam was done, the prickly sensation on Dean's skin dropped from crawling unbearably to merely annoying. *Son of a bitch!*

Sam lifted the keyboard cover, running his fingers over the inside of the lid, the keys.

"Help me," he said to Dean.

"What are we looking for?" Dean asked helplessly, spreading his hands.

"I'm not sure, but we'll know it when we find it."

"That's real frickin' helpful!" Dean snapped.

"What are two doing?" The sharp voice caught them both off guard. Carlyle stood in the doorway looking a trifle unsteady.

Dean looked at Sam, at a loss. He didn't *know* what they were doing.

Sam straightened. "This piano hasn't been retuned or anything that you know of?" he asked.

Carlyle squinted in the dim light, swaying slightly. Sam could have sworn Carlyle looked like he'd been drinking. "No," he finally replied. "As a matter of fact it was still packed in the original case from when it was sold from this house. The gentleman who bought it died shortly after it was purchased and it was put into storage. Why, for heaven's sake?"

He walked closer, unsteadily, and Sam could smell the liquor on him. "I think there's something about this piano that'll explain what happened here when the Blackmoors lived here. What happened when those last two people killed each other, what's happening *now*. I think the piano is the key to the cause."

"What on earth are you talking about? It's just a piano! It's very valuable, I can't allow it to be damaged."

"Mr. Carlyle-" Dean stepped forward.

"No, you were hired to protect the guests and find out what's causing this, not to vandalize the property. It's late, please go to your room, I have to figure some way out of this fiasco." He slumped down on the piano bench, slamming the lid down over the keys.

Sam opened his mouth to protest again, but Dean caught his arm. "Let's go, Sam. Mr. Carlyle needs some time to feel sorry for himself. I'm tired, let's get some sleep."

"But-"

"C'mon," Dean pulled him along. As they were leaving the room there was a loud strum as Carlyle jerked the curtains from inside the piano. Dean felt goose pimples rise on his skin instantly and he slid the door shut with a bang.

"Dean, I know it's the key-" Sam stopped suddenly and rubbed his eyes, making a pained sound. His headache had settled into a steady pound he could feel with every beat of his heart.

"Sam, c'mon man, it's after midnight." Dean gave him a shove toward the stairs. "We need to get some sleep, this'll all still be here in the morning." He didn't think he'd be able relax enough to sleep but Sam needed to rest and if that meant Dean had to lay there and stare at the ceiling for the rest of the night so be it.

\* \* \* \*

He had no memory of falling asleep but his eyes fluttered open to grey morning light. He groaned before he could cut it off, stiff and sore, his body half on and half off the chaise.

"You could have slept on the bed," Sam drawled from across the room. "I guarantee I'd have kept my hands to myself." He was seated at the table tapping on the computer.

Dean creaked upright, stretching his back muscles. He must have twisted some strange way when he'd been thrown off the gangplank. He managed to limp over to the table and steal the cup of coffee Sam had somehow miraculously acquired.

"I already drank out of that," Sam remarked.

Dean gulped half the cup. "I don't give a damn," he growled, slumping into the chair opposite Sam. "If you have anything, I've either already gotten it or I'm gonna, so who cares." He massaged his eyes. "How's your head?"

Sam shrugged. "Little better than last night. You?"

"Other than my head feels like it's full of bees, great." He downed the rest of the coffee.

Sam closed the laptop. "I don't understand why Carlyle wouldn't let us search last night. He sighed. "What's his problem? You talked to him."

Dean shook his head, wishing he had more coffee. "He's trying to prove something to his old man about this project. So far it's not going well."

Sam made a face. "Isn't he a little old to care about what his father thinks? He's successful man."

Dean glanced at him. "Maybe you never outgrow that kind of thing."

Whatever, Sam was going to say was cut off by their door being flung open and banging against the wall.

Without thought, they both automatically jerked out a weapon and pointed it at the intruder who yelped and fell back against the wall.

"Whoa! Hold it guys! Chill!" Frank put up both hands, trying to look as undangerous as he could in the face of the two guns pointed at him.

Dean relaxed and shoved the gun into the back of his jeans. Sam laid his back on the table.

"What the hell are you doing?" Dean snarled. "You just lookin' to get shot?"

"I'm sorry! Rome said to come get you." Frank kept his hands up.

"Dude, put your hands down!" Dean said, disgustedly. "Why?"

"We can't find Jennifer. I went downstairs to get some coffee, I wasn't gone that long but when I came back she wasn't in the room. We've been looking for her, but..."

"What happened after the fight last night?" Sam asked, pulling on his boots.

"She was really upset," Frank admitted. "I don't know what happened. She and Lakita have been friends forever. Jennifer has a self esteem problem. You may have noticed she's a little overweight." Frank shook his head. "I can't get her to believe me when I tell her she's beautiful. I love her just the way she is. What Lakita said really hurt her."

"Let's go," Dean groused, this was all they needed. He jerked up a shirt and pulled it on, gesturing for Frank to lead the way. Just as Sam stepped out of the room Dean held his hand up.

"If Carlyle is gone, check out that piano again."

"You sure? He was pretty mad last night." Sam looked doubtful.

"I can handle this, go on. He's probably sleeping it off." Dean tapped Sam on the chest and followed Frank down the hall.

\* \* \* \*

Sam eased down to the music room and carefully opened the doors to look inside. The ache in his head instantly doubled and he slipped in, grabbing the curtain off the floor where Carlyle had thrown it, stuffing it back into the main body of the piano.

Carefully, but with a serious sense of urgency he once again began searching the piano.

\* \* \* \*

Dean joined the rest of the group in the upper hall. "Has anyone seen Jennifer at all?" Miriam finally looked upset. Considering what had happened up to now, it was nice to know she could be concerned about something. "I left her with Frank around two a.m., she'd calmed down by then but she was really depressed. I thought she was okay, though."

"This is my fault," Lakita said brokenly, "I don't know why I said what I did. I would never hurt Jennifer deliberately like that." Rome put his arm around her.

Brent, looking like a thundercloud, pushed forward. "I thought you and your brother were supposed to keep the guests safe?"

"Brent!" Miriam exclaimed.

"Listen, gigantor," Dean shoved Brent against the wall, just to warn him. "We aren't babysitters. If your little friends decide to wander there's nothing I can do about it. Now do you want to find her or not?"

"Of course," Brent said between grit teeth. Something about the smaller man, some look in his eyes, successfully warned him off from trying anything.

Dean released him instantly. "Fine, then let's get to it. We need to split up into pairs, no one goes alone. Rome, you and Lakita check outside, it's quit raining. The rest of us check out the house. Brent, you and Miriam do downstairs, see if Mrs. Keller or that Walter guy have seen her." He gestured at Frank, "You and me'll check upstairs. C'mon. Yell out if you find her."

They separated into their pairs without argument.

\* \* \* \*

Sam knelt and felt along under the piano, looking for indications of hidden compartments or just anything *off*. Even with the strings muffled, his teeth felt like they were humming and it was intensifying his headache to the point that he was feeling sick, but he kept looking. He knew the answer lay here somewhere.

\* \* \* \*

After half an hour of searching the muddy grounds, Rome and Lakita were sure that Jennifer was not outside. They returned to the house, meeting up with Brent and Miriam in the kitchen. Their luck had been no better.

"Where could she be?" Lakita was becoming frantic, overcome with guilt at what had happened between her and her friend.

"Lakita, it's not your fault. People get into arguments all the time. I'm sure she just went off to think." Miriam did her best to comfort Lakita. "We'll find her, you'll tell her you're sorry and everything'll be okay."

Rome and Brent looked at each other over the girl's heads and shrugged uneasily.

"Let's find Frank and Dean," Rome finally said. "Maybe they found her."

\* \* \* \*

"What the hell are you doing?" Carlyle yelled, rising unexpectedly from the couch that faced away from Sam.

Sam fell back in shocked surprise. "Holy crap!!"

Carlyle stumbled to his feet, clutching at his head with one hand. "Get away from that piano! I told you, it's incredibly valuable. I'm probably gonna have to sell it just to keep this from becoming a total loss!"

Shockingly Carlyle produced a .38 that he pointed at Sam, who immediately dived under the piano and came up on the other side, keeping low, making sure the massive legs of the piano were between him and Carlyle.

"Are you nuts?" Sam yelled back. A .38 didn't leave that big of a hole and the piano would probably stop a slug but Sam really didn't want to test the theory out.

Carlyle waved the gun at Sam and then used it to gesture at himself. "Am I nuts? Hell, yes! I'm letting a doddering old man control my life. I have to be nuts. I'm a rich man, I'm successful and I still can't get that bastard to acknowledge that I'm worthy of his approval!"

Sam's mind skidded. This was what Dean had been talking about, Carlyle's obsession with getting his father's approval. "Hey, listen, please let me keep looking here, we can fix this..."

Carlyle moved the muzzle of the gun to his temple "Nothing can fix this," he breathed.

\* \* \* \*

Frank looked up as he turned the corner onto the second floor balcony, stopping dead with a throaty gasp. "My God...Jennifer!"

Dean, a few steps below, shot his eyes up, following Frank's, and felt his heart clench.

Jennifer stood barefooted, precariously balanced on the second floor railing. A rope trailing from her neck to the railing she stood on. Long enough to fall, but too short to allow her

feet to reach the floor below. Tears streaked her face and she didn't appear to be aware of their presence.

Frank reached out to touch her. She shifted away, rocking slightly on her perch. Frank snatched his hand back. "Jenny, what are you doing...? God, please..."

Dean swallowed, eyes and mind searching frantically for a way to keep this from happening. He shook his head, pressing a hand to his ear. He couldn't think over the noise...

\* \* \* \*

Sam stretched out a desperate hand. "Mr. Carlyle, please, for God's sake, don't do this. I swear we can make this right."

His eyes widened and his mouth fell open as a tattered figure in white suddenly rose through the floor at Carlyle's feet. His arm was struck and the gun was knocked out of his grip to go flying across the room. Sam ducked as it went off with a loud report, removing any doubt that the safety was on.

Carlyle screamed, flailing as he fell forcefully into the side of the piano.

Sam jumped back with a cry as the heavy rear leg of the piano suddenly broke free and the piano collapsed toward him.

\* \* \* \*

Miriam and her friends entered the first floor foyer, spotting Dean halfway down the stairs and Frank on the landing. The sight of Jennifer balanced on the rail with a rope around her neck brought horrified screams from both Miriam and Lakita and cries of shock from the men.

Dean gestured frantically for them to shut up, eyes gauging distances. He slowly lifted his knee to the rail next to him.

Frank was almost in tears. Jennifer looked over at him, one hand warning him away.

"You deserve better than me," she said through her own tears. "Someone pretty..."

"Jennifer, I love you!" Frank wept. "You're perfect just like you are!"

Jennifer smiled sadly and allowed herself to fall away, the screams of her friends echoing through the hall. Frank grabbed for her but missed.

Dean launched himself from the rail, his knife gripped in his fist, leaping across the empty space, slashing through the air, the razor sharp blade parting the rope at its touch.

Jennifer plummeted into the waiting arms of her friends, knocking them all into a twisted heap. Frank tore down the stairs.

Dean's head slammed the wooden trim on the bottom of the balcony, the follow through of his knife leaving a long gash in the woodwork. His momentum carried him into the wall under the stairs. A familiar, agonizing pop exploded in his shoulder as he hit the floor and a burn sliced into him as the fall drove the blade of his knife along his arm.

He heard the frantic voices hovering around him and felt their touch and then they vanished into the dim buzzing in his head.

\* \* \* \*

"Dean...c'mon bro, open your eyes."

Dean groaned softly. His head hurt, his arm hurt and his shoulder was beyond description, the last thing he was interested in doing was opening his eyes. But he knew the voice was Sam's and he knew how stubborn Sam could be when he put his mind to it.

He opened his eyes. It was a lot more effort than it should have been.

Sam's face was so close to his, he jerked backwards, which was a mistake. He caught his breath at the fire burning in his shoulder. His left arm was bound across his chest. He couldn't move it an inch.

"What...happened?"

"You seriously dislocated your shoulder. I'm not even sure I got it back in place. You may have torn something."

"No, Jennifer...and Carlyle..." Dean realized he was in the music room, lying on one of the couches. Miriam, Rome, Carlyle, all of the other guests, including Mrs. Keller and silent Walter were gathered in the room. Jennifer and Frank were sitting close by each other, hands locked together. Dean struggled to sit up more as Sam braced him up, Miriam slipped a couple of pillows behind him.

"You all right?" Sam asked, watching Dean closely.

"I'm okay," he groaned. He could see the piano lying on its side on the floor. On the coffee table in front of him, lying incongruously on a pillow, was an object bundled in graying cloth and a pile of yellowed paper, roughly ripped down one side.

Obviously something had happened. He just couldn't work out what it was. Then he realized that the buzzing in his head was gone. It hurt like crazy but it was actual pain, not that ungodly hum.

"What is that?" he asked, indicating the cloth wrapped object.

Sam sighed and made a face. "That is the body of Iris Blackmoor's and Kenneth Amstead's baby."

Dean stared at the tiny bundle and then back at Sam, swallowing. "Huh?"

Sam reached out and picked up the torn pages next to the tiny form. "These are the missing pages of Iris' diary." He indicated the wrecked piano. Mr. Carlyle fell into the piano, it collapsed. The leg was hollow. This," he lifted the papers, "and this," the wrapped body, "were inside." He shuffled the diary pages. "The earliest entries are Iris', the last few are Daniel Blackmoor's. They're not pretty to read. Blackmoor really believed Iris was Lucia." His mouth tightened. "He raped her. He didn't call it that, that wasn't what it was to him. He found out she was pregnant, he thought it was his. What he didn't know was that she was already pregnant the night he killed Kenneth Amstead, with Kenneth's baby.

He sighed sadly. "Iris told him whose child it was the night it was born. I guess she'd had all she could take. The baby died shortly after it was born." Sam stacked the papers neatly and laid them back on the table. "When Iris told Blackmoor the baby was Kenneth's he lost his mind and choked her to death. After that he strung her up from the second floor balcony to make it look like a suicide. He must have shot himself after that. The entries stop after the hanging."

Dean lay back with his eyes closed, good hand massaging his forehead. "So that's what she wanted, for us to find her baby." He dropped his hand and struggled to sit totally upright.

Sam put a hand on Dean's uninjured shoulder. "What are you doing?" he demanded as Dean put his feet on the floor.

"Sam, you know what we gotta do."

Sam nodded, "Yeah, I know."

\* \* \* \*

The early afternoon sun drifted in and out of the clouds as Sam doused the body of Iris' baby and set it aflame. Miriam and her friends stood in a circle around him as he did so. Dean stood next to him, holding his injured arm tightly against him.

Surprisingly, none of the others had objected to what Sam and Dean had told them they were going to do and why. As the tiny pyre flamed higher Sam dropped in the pages of the diary. What had happened so long ago really didn't matter anymore. His theory about what had happened would always be just that, although recent events certainly added weight to his side of the equation.

Carlyle had not joined them. He had withdrawn back into the professional host, and was trying to reach the mainland now that the storm was over to arrange transportation off the island for Miriam and her friends.

The word "helicopter" had been bandied about, and sure enough, late Saturday afternoon a chopper had appeared over the water and made a noisy landing on the south lawn.

Jennifer and Frank had stopped by the chair Dean was resting in on the veranda to say thank you, moving quietly away after Jennifer bestowed a gentle kiss on Dean's cheek, her hand twisted tightly into Frank's. Lakita and Rome followed at a short distance. Halfway to the helicopter, Jennifer reached out and took Lakita's hand as well, drawing her closer.

Sam rose, backing up slightly as Miriam appeared behind Dean with Brent in tow.

Brent punched Dean lightly on his good arm. Dean winced slightly. "Sorry for what I said earlier," Brent offered. "You and your brother are okay." He smiled, turned and walked to the waiting helicopter.

Miriam leaned down and pecked Dean on the cheek as well.

Dean squinted up at her. "Well, I guess you got what you wanted," he said without rancor.

She looked puzzled.

"You wanted to spend the weekend in a haunted house. You didn't get the whole weekend, but I think you got your money's worth, don't you?" Dean smiled at her.

She laughed softly. "Be careful what you wish for," she replied. She paused, looking up at Sam. "God, you do have gorgeous eyes." She patted his chest and went to the helicopter.

"Aren't you going with them? You need a doctor."

Carlyle walked across the veranda and stood next to Sam, who snorted softly.

Dean eyed the flashing helicopter blades and imagined the sensation of feeling it lift off of the ground. His eyes closed in horror at the thought.

Crossing his good arm over his bad one, he shook his head, sinking down further in the chair.

"No thanks, I think I'll wait for the ferry."

The End