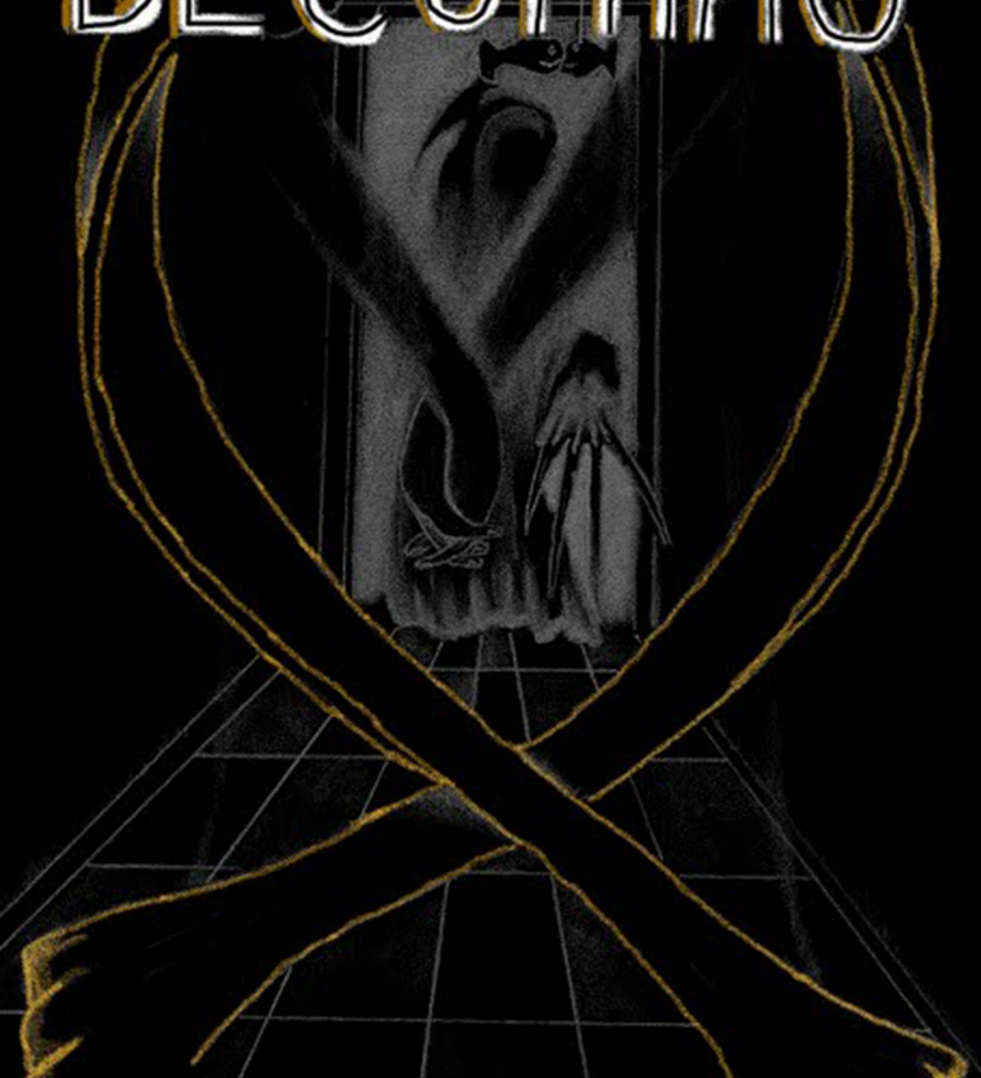


DEATH IS
BECOMING



JAMIE LEIGH HANSEN

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Death Is Becoming

By

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Published by Jamie Leigh Hansen

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Cover design by Thalon Marie-Leigh Hansen

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Smashwords Edition

Dedication:

Thalon

I am more thankful
for you every day.

In Loving Memory:

Pa James

I love and miss you
Your smile is with me forever..

Luke

My little blond haired,
Blue-eyed menace,
I love you and I miss you.

Amanda

This world began with you.

Acknowledgements:

As with any artist, I have been inspired by my culture. The people around me, their lives, their struggles and their art. No one lives in a vacuum, and their characters should not, either. I began writing in this world of spirits when I needed an outlet for my own grief. I hadn't realized I knew so many people who died, let alone that had died of cancer or its complications until I saw the list grow and cover an entire page. For this story, I stepped back into that spirit world and created all but two fictional characters. The two at the end are fictionalized versions of my grandpa, Pa James, and my cousin, Luke. This is how I can honor their memory.

In addition, I have mentioned many trademarked pop culture references. It's usually advised not to do this, as it dates the story, however, I believe seeing a vignette of a certain era can be a wonderful thing. It's certainly a useful element in historical novels. So, this works in 2013. It'll be vintage in 30 years and in 100, it will be historical. By that time, I have faith these trademarks will still be popular.

Special thanks for their contribution to our current culture goes to:

Movies:

Star Trek

Scream

Disney's Cinderella

Nightmare on Elm Street

The Sixth Sense

TV:

Buffy the Vampire Slayer by Joss Whedon

Ghost Hunters

Books:

Harry Potter by JK Rowling

Twilight by Stephanie Meyers

Scrooge by Charles Dickens

Video game:

Call of Duty

Guitar Hero Rockband

Childhood Cancer:

Sacred Heart Children's Hospital

Give Kids the World

Wishing Star

Ronald McDonald

Architecture:

St. John's Cathedral

To my knowledge, and my sadness, there are neither Spooky Doo pajamas nor a band called Marley's Tripod.

Chapter 1

Death. It was a specter she'd dared not contemplate over the years, and yet in the last year death had become her companion. Death stared back at her from pale, bruised eyes every time she looked in the mirror. Death was in the fetid chemical odor she smelled whenever her nose was too close to her own skin. A few weeks ago, death became audible, spoken by her doctor as she was told there was nothing more they could do. Death was coming for her any moment now.

"It's okay, honey. You can sleep. I know you need some rest."

Erin looked at her mom, blinking. Her eyes were so heavy. "Not yet. I want..."

In her head, her statement continued. She wanted so many things. Simple things, complicated things. She used to want everything, but now she'd be happy with far less. When she looked at her mom again, she knew time had passed, but not how much.

"I know, honey. I will call them. Rest and they'll be here when you wake up."

Erin blinked and her lashes fluttered as she fought the weight of them. Then she could fight no more and her eyes closed.

Crash. Erin startled awake amid the reverberating sound of plates and bowls falling from a tray onto the hard linoleum floors. She lay still, staring at the ceiling above her bed. A collage from last Christmas covered two wide ceiling tiles. Friends and family smiled at her from within the pictures, their joy so infectious, Erin grinned with them.

As the seconds passed, she realized the sun through the large hospital room window had darkened to dusk. She had slept longer than she'd thought. Erin pulled herself upright in her bed. There was still an IV in her arm, but all the tubes had been disconnected so she could move freely. Placing her orange and fuzzy sock-covered feet on the floor, she stood and headed for the doorway, thankful the nap had strengthened her and removed her dizziness. Her mom wasn't in the hallway. No one who would stop her was. If patients could move, then the entire area was their playground, but her parents were keeping her close. Her mom might be getting a drink or talking to another parent right now, but she wouldn't be gone long. This might be her last chance for a solitary moment while alive and she couldn't help but want to take it.

She headed out, past helpers delivering dinner trays to several rooms. One open doorway showed her a family watching closely as a bag of blood was hooked to their child's IV. She

looked away, wandering past paper ghosts and spooky decorations. That's right. She'd forgotten. It was Halloween and they were celebrating cancer-kid style.

Meaning, celebrate as if it were the last. Erin looked down at her themed pajamas and smiled.

Nineteen was a bit old to be in pediatric oncology, but she'd been in college before her cancer recurred. Still on her parent's insurance and still hooked into the same system that had saved her life when she was twelve, Erin was familiar with Sacred Heart Children's Hospital. That fact had been a comfort in the last year.

A girl dressed like a baby doll strolled into the "teen" room and she followed her. The cushy leather couch had a perfect view of the large flat-screen TV and held a vampire, a zombie, and the masked wraith from *Scream*. VHS tapes and DVDs filled the media shelf on one side and a small desk with a computer and a boy dressed like a transformer filled space on the other. Though it was comfortable, the room was a bit too full for solitude.

"Hey!" Mark looked up briefly between bouts of re-spawning on Call of Duty, his green eyes enormous and joyful. She hadn't seen him so lively in weeks. "You should watch, I'm gonna kick Kevin's ass."

Erin laughed at his cockiness, but the crowded room was stifling. "It's a bit much for me, right now, but you go, dude."

"Hey, no fair! Stick to your own flag!" Kevin scowled and several of the other kids started heckling him. Erin slid silently past baby doll, who was leaning against the open door, laughing.

Walking actually felt good. For the first time in a long time, fatigue and weakness didn't weigh her down and no one was fussing over her and telling her to take it easy. Wherever the boon came from, she wasn't going to question it. Erin continued to wander, her eyes drifting over decorations on the walls.

"Mommy! Look it!" A little bald girl ran by in a pink fairy gown, the tulle skirt fluffing around her. The bulge of her port-a-cath was almost hidden beneath her pink satin shirt. Halloween was a blast at the hospital, though Erin had been much older than the little girl the first time she'd celebrated here. Bowls of candy, small gifts, and a party upstairs—what wasn't to like about that? Would it be movies, a dinner party, or games tonight? Erin hadn't been paying attention when the nurses had told them.

She reached the front desks, where long cushioned benches curved against the wall on her left and a busy, loud playroom filled a small nook on the right. Ahead of the playroom was a ramp up to a windowed wall and door leading out onto the observation deck. It was small, but had a table, a few chairs, and a great view of the 4th of July fireworks. Instead of fireworks lighting the tonight's sky and inviting them to gaze out, there were chains of tiny ghosts fluttering in the wind and inviting a focus in, on the deck area itself. Erin went to the door, but stepped aside as a guy from outside opened it.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to block you coming through." With a charming smile, he stepped back and held the door open for her. "I thought it was too cold for everyone tonight."

Erin nodded and walked past him. "It usually is, but I just feel like breathing in some fresh air."

To her surprise, he closed the door and joined her by the railing. Spokane was laid out below them, bright lights and signs glowing across the landscape. The new guy leaned forward, resting his arms on the railing before he turned a sparkly gaze to her. She'd always loved hazel eyes. And his voice, when he spoke again, emphasized the goose bumps already blossoming all over from the cold air. "Pretty infectious tonight, huh?"

She shook her head at his dry humor. He wasn't a kid, neither did he seem old enough to be a parent, but he had the jokes right. "At a hospital, imagine that."

He widened his eyes, attempting to appear innocent of making a bad pun. "I meant the party atmosphere. The laughter and joy of sick little kids throwing on a costume and parading up and down the hallways. You know laughter is the best medicine."

Erin agreed with a slight smile. "So much better than throwing *up* on a costume."

He chuckled. "Sounds like you speak from experience."

She nodded. "And if you're here as long I've been, you'll learn the same."

"Wow." Humor filled his tone. "I *thought* you looked older."

Erin nodded. "Oh, I am. Positively ancient."

He arched a skeptical brow. "Now that I find hard to believe."

"Nineteen."

His gaze traveled down her black and yellow Spooky Doo pajamas to her orange fuzzy socks with tiny black cats on them. One foot was turned, showing the paw-shaped grippies on the bottom. "Is that what ancient people wear for Halloween?"

Erin nodded with a serious mien and rubbed her bare arms. "This is my sinister disguise."

He winked and stood up straight, a little taller than she was. "Well, sinister lady, don't let it go to waste out here alone. Let's get you inside before your goose bumps sprout scary faces."

Chapter 2

They left the observation deck and walked beyond the front desks and past the family room, crowded with a handful of exhausted parents grabbing dinner provided by a church group. He held the door to the Pediatric Oncology Unit open and Erin wandered into the main hospital hallway without a mask for the first time in months. Oh, well, wasn't like she could catch her death twice.

Directly in front of them was a long hall with one side full of floor-to-ceiling windows. Looking down was a back-alley type area of the hospital, but straight ahead, on a rising hill at distance of 20 blocks or so, sat the most beautiful church she'd ever seen.

He paused beside her and soaked it in. "What a view."

Erin smiled at the awe in his tone. She felt the same every time she saw the tall, pointed spires and stained glass windows. Lit from the base, it was a glorious visual of an old gothic cathedral. "That's St. John's Cathedral. There's an even better view upstairs."

"That's hard to imagine."

It really was hard to imagine. The gothic architecture of the old building was visually arresting from every angle. It might seem intimidating at first, all that gray stone, but mostly the church gave her a sense of steadfastness and hope. Like it could withstand anything and so could she.

She turned her gaze to study the guy beside her. Taller than her and either the same age or a little younger. Lines of wisdom beginning in his brow and on the sides of his mouth when he smiled. He had to be a patient, she just got that kind of vibe from him. "Have you been in Spokane long, new guy?"

He laughed. "Is that your smooth way of asking my name?"

She shook her head at herself and smiled at the floor. "That's me, Erin Kowalski, Miss Smooth."

He started wandering opposite the windows, checking out the large picture boxes set in the wall. Ghostly pirate ships filled with bejeweled, shiny plunder lay inside. "Davis Mathers, and yes, I am new. Just arrived today."

"So everything is bright and shiny, then."

"More like crazy new. Complex, but a lot better than I feared."

She nodded in understanding. Living in a hospital was not an easy thing to do. They reached the end of the hallway and stood in front of out-patient pediatric oncology. It was dark and closed down for the evening. They settled on the cushy sailboat-shaped waiting bench. "How long will you be here?"

Davis smiled at her, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "I'm not sure yet. It kinda depends."

Erin grinned, holding her fists against the bench and straightening her arms. "Only in a hospital does an answer like that make sense."

"Yeah, I bet it can get pretty bad here." His gaze searched her face.

She rushed to assure him. "Not really. I mean, it's not always the best. Spinal taps are the stuff of nightmares, but the rest is pretty standard. MRIs, needles, blood infusions, vomiting..."

His eyebrows drew together as he shuddered.

She wasn't helping alleviate his fears, was she? Erin gave him a sheepish grin. "But that's the disease and those are the tests. The people are what keep it from haunting you every night when you go to sleep. Smiling faces. Kindness." She indicated the bench. "The decorative themes that give your mind something fun to focus on."

Davis nodded at the bench. "They are fun, aren't they?"

"Oh, you haven't seen anything, yet." Erin grabbed his hand and static electricity zapped her. She laughed and pulled him up. "You've gotta see the fish hallway."

His forehead twisted until he managed to look both amused and skeptical. "The what?"

Erin led him back down the windowed hallway and past the doors to in-patient pediatric oncology, where she had people waiting to tell her goodbye. Immediately sobering, her steps slowed.

She should probably leave him to explore on his own and go back to her room. Her mother would panic when she noticed Erin had gone. Her family was stressed and overwhelmed. It was irresponsible of her to disappear on them like this.

But as she looked to her side, saw Davis' charming grin and realized they were still holding hands, she just couldn't let go. One more memory. One moment of excitement. One feeling that her life had been leading to one specific moment. Was that too much to ask for?

Several kids exited the doorway in front of them, the handicap access button holding the doors open for them all as their parents led them to the elevators. Princesses, knights, monsters and witches filed inside the roomy elevators, chatting and laughing. Erin grinned and walked

through the open doorway in front of them.

"This is the fish hallway." Smiling, she watched him take in the ocean of blue under his feet and the dangling laminated fish hanging above his head. Each one bore a caption and a name. The walls were windows, looking down on the hospital from the skywalk.

It was a space for childish delight. Even her parents weren't immune to the charm. Whether waiting for her to emerge from surgery or just crossing through the building for tests, passing through this area was like a blanket of peace settling over them, encouraging smiles.

Davis looked her way, his eyes lighting up. "What are the fish for?"

"Donations made."

He nodded. "I love the theme."

"Me, too. It's carried all the way through to the main peds unit. Kinda soothing." It certainly had been to her every time she'd needed it. So much could be ignored, if not forgotten, in the right surroundings. Like the fact that it really was time to leave him. "I really should get back..."

Erin trailed off, looking toward the doors they'd entered.

Davis faced her and held both her hands in his, the strength of his hands wrapping around hers causing her nerves to hum attractively. "Are you sure? Anything I can do to persuade you to stay with me for just a little while longer?"

Promise me forever? Yeah, like that could happen. They'd just met, knew practically nothing about each other and that thought occurred to her? Well, of course it would. It wasn't about him. It was about living long enough for some of her dreams to come true. Erin grimaced. It was time to say goodbye.

The doors at the opposite end of the hallway sprang open and another group of children ran through, pulling bewildered parents after them. Screaming, pale and appearing genuinely terrified, the children passed Erin and she stumbled back into the handrail along the skywalk, narrowly avoiding getting run over. "What on earth?"

Then the menacing object of their fear appeared. Taller than anyone she knew, a wraith with a billowing black cloak Voldemort would envy and a black face more twisted than a *Scream* mask, flowed toward them. Charcoal wisps of smoke extended in tendrils around him, inspiring fear and dread that trickled ice through her veins.

Erin stared in awe. "That is the most amazing costume I have ever seen."

Davis tugged on her hand. "Costume. Right. Let's go."

Her brows drew together as he pulled her through the other doors, still open from the children. As were the elevator doors they slid through just before they closed. "Do wraiths scare you?"

Davis met her gaze, took a deep breath to speak, then froze. Several thoughts seeming to cross his mind before he said, "These do."

Chapter 3

Within seconds, the elevator dinged and the doors slid open on the fourth floor, where a life-sized Ronald MacDonald occupied a bench. The wall beside him alternated with projection pictures of Halloween pumpkins and bats. The display showing the season, but sweet enough the kids wouldn't get really scared. In the hospital, there was plenty of darkness to fill nightmares. No one wanted to make it worse.

Which made the wraith even more confusing. Why would someone wear a genuinely scary costume to the pediatric section of a hospital? Granted, dark humor was a way of life here. Otherwise everyone would sound like whiny, over-sensitive drama mavens. But an outfit like that? "That costume crossed the line. There's no reason to make kids who face a possible death sentence every day fear death like that."

The more she considered it, the angrier she grew. Her lips pressed tight and her forehead scrunched from her frown.

"I have to agree." Davis shrugged, his hands going deep in his jeans' pockets. "Except, maybe it wasn't a representation of death?"

Erin scoffed. "What else would it be?"

They walked the few feet to the Ronald MacDonald house, which was a little bigger than the family room in inpatient. The door was open for all the families who were living in the hospital during long hospital stays. There were beds, laundry facilities, food and a "living room" type area. Would she see one of her parents up here? Was she ready to?

Erin wandered in and sat on one of the benches. The TV was on, the volume a low background noise. The season one finale of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was playing, before it cut to a commercial announcing a *Buffy* marathon.

"He didn't have a scythe."

"Huh?"

Davis sat beside her and turned to face her. "You asked what else the wraith would be but death."

"Okay. Say he's not death, as in grim reaper." Erin crossed her arms and leaned back. "But a wraith is a spirit of the dead, correct?"

Davis nodded. "Which makes you wonder what would make a spirit look like that." At

her strange look, he added, "I mean hypothetically. *Buffy* had ghosts, but they always looked like regular people. *The Sixth Sense*, *Scooby Doo*, and so on."

"A wraith is pretty much called that instead of 'ghost' because it is generally considered evil, isn't it?"

"Or it's a spirit that was seduced to the dark side."

She laughed. "And that is what the dark side of ghosthood looks like? Getting scary and terrifying people? Children?"

Davis shrugged. "It is a possibility. I mean, you've heard all the stories about how children can see what adults can't, right? How about children who face death? What does death look like to them?"

What does death look like to them? Even she didn't know, despite having it hang over her head since she was younger, other than some dark void of nothingness. A state of no longer *being*. This was it. This was her. What did her emotions, her experiences, her learning become after life? What did *she* become?

"So, some spirit went to the dark side and decided to spread its misery by haunting children? Showing them their worst fears?" Erin nodded. "Okay, I can see it. In this hypothetical situation, people who would put on a costume like that in a place like this will die someday and become these wraiths?"

Davis grinned. "Wow, that about sums it up. Talk about justice."

Erin stared at his grin and the glint in his eyes. Talking to him was fun. Not many people she knew could get this random with her. "Okay, what other powers would they have? There would have to be something or *Ghost Hunters* wouldn't exist as a show."

Davis looked at the ceiling, seeming to consider the question. "How about, if a spirit dies angry, evil or overwhelmed by grief and unable to let go, they become a wraith. A wraith like a hive-minded Borg from Star Trek, where they all hook into one mind and feed each other misery, using their collective mentality to ensnare new recruits."

Erin giggled. "A Borg. Really? And why grief?"

Davis smirked and gave her a look from the corner of his eyes. Then his expression turned serious and he faced her fully. "Jealousy, anger, greed, selfishness, those are kind of momentary. Grief is a pain that can last forever."

Those words struck her like an arrow to the heart. Grief could last forever. Her parents'

grief would never diminish. They loved her too much. Her friends would grieve. And Davis would grieve.

No one could forget meeting someone in this place, bonding with them even for a short time, and having them die on you. She'd been there and done that too many times to count. He would feel it. Not as deeply as her parents, perhaps no longer than the occasional reminder from something simple, like seeing the view outside peds onc, but he never would have experienced the sadness of her loss at all if he hadn't met her wandering the halls. If she hadn't showed him around and spent time talking and flirting. Holding his hand. How long would he miss her when she was gone?

She could have spared him that pain. She could still minimize it, if she left him now. Erin stood, wrapped her arms around herself and squeezed tight. "I need to go. I have family waiting for me."

Davis stood, frowning. "Did I say something wrong?"

Erin shook her head as Buffy delivered the line that never failed to make her cry. *'Giles, I'm sixteen. I don't want to die.'*

Being nineteen doesn't make it any easier, Buff.

Her eyes burning, filling, Erin left the room, hearing Davis rushing to follow. Ahead of her, a man and woman stepped from the elevators. Their child was a few rooms down from hers in peds oncology and his prognosis was not good. They were worn down to their souls and the last thing they needed was to run into her as she was crying.

Erin turned right, heading past doctors' offices and toward the rooms where spooky sounds and little kid screams burst through the walls. A haunted house? She actually might be able to cry in privacy there and avoid freaking out her family or Davis. An icy feeling of dread stalked her, similar to what she'd felt when the wraith had appeared in the fish hallway, only this time, her tension was augmented by thoughts of a hive mind directing its minions to gather more souls to feed their misery.

And then came the footsteps behind her. Davis calling her name. And in that moment, she couldn't decide what would be worse. Facing Davis and telling him she only had a questionable amount of hours to live, a handful or a weekend, and that getting to know her better would only prolong his grief later? Or giving into the icy death waiting behind her and allowing her own anger and resentment to envelop her?

Erin opened the door to a dark room full of mocking laughter and spooky moans. Davis could see her enter but the darkness inside made it the perfect place to hide.

Chapter 4

As the door closed behind her, the darkness became absolute. There were padded wall-like sections guiding her forward toward the lights and screams. Haunting music blared from overhead, mixed with mechanical mocking laughter and eerie voices. It tried too hard to be scary, so it wasn't.

Erin leaned against one of the walls, but when the wall started to give way, she jumped forward. Holding her hands out, she felt her way back to the door and the solid wall on one side of it, slid to the floor and leaned back.

Sitting right by the door probably wasn't the best of ideas, but maybe anyone who entered would walk right past her without noticing her and she could have a few moments alone. Erin pulled her knees up and hugged them to her chest, resting her head on them. Short hours left to live and she wanted time alone. Time to run through familiar halls and flirt with cute guys. Time to live, period. How selfish did she really have to be?

Her mom and dad were probably looking for her now, getting frantic the longer they couldn't find her. They didn't deserve that. Not after the past several months as their worst fears were confirmed when each treatment they tried failed. And yet, knowing they searched for her changed nothing. Going to them was impossible. She wasn't ready to accept her death, that in days or minutes her life would be over.

But there with them, in that room with pictures, stuffed animals and cards, there was nothing else to think about but saying goodbye.

For a moment, Erin closed her eyes and pretended she was back in college just before getting sick. Staying up late, eating junk food, cramming with her study group. She'd only had one thing to worry about, really. Getting her degree. Moving forward. Then she'd returned home for vacation, come in for one of her regular check-ups with the doctors and had tumbled back into the good ol' life and death struggle she'd thought she'd finally escaped.

No one had ever claimed saying goodbye would be easy, but the sheer multitude of things to say goodbye to were overwhelming. Goodbye degree. Goodbye future goals and aspirations. Goodbye family and friends. Goodbye cute boys to flirt with.

Fingers touched her head, smoothing over her skull and tangling in her hair. Davis. She couldn't see him, but it didn't seem to matter. There was this slight electrical surge whenever they

touched. It was a cheesy thought, but it was true. The only question was how had she not noticed when the door opened?

Davis settled at her side, his hand caressing down her hair and over her shoulders. "They try so hard to make this a soothing, sometimes fun, healing place, but even so, they can't hide its purpose."

Erin swiped a hand over her eyes. "At least there're no rusty showers and metal tables."

"And they don't have to operate with corroded tools and leather straps." A grin showed in his tone.

Erin smiled. "You've seen too many scary movies. This place is terrifying enough without seeing ghoulish ghosts wandering the corridors and leading patients astray."

"Well," he stiffened, "not ghoulish ones, anyway."

This time she laughed out loud, until a chill wafted under the door and she shivered.

"Where on earth is that draft coming from?"

Davis sighed and took her hand. "Let's go finish this maze, shall we?"

"I really do need to get back." Using his help, she rose to her feet and dusted off the back of her pants.

"You will, don't worry. But I have to see what's in here first or I'll never sleep. Of course, if there is a clown around the corner, I'll probably never sleep anyway."

Erin giggled. "Seriously?"

"Hey, don't laugh. That's just mean."

Davis pulled her forward to the end of the first section of the maze where a life-size skeleton glowed green in the darkness. Just after that, the ghosts of past, present and future played Rockband. A cardboard plaque hung from a chain around each of their necks identifying them as Marley's Tripod.

"The detail is amazing."

"No kidding. Playing guitar while wrapped in chains is a trick unto itself."

Erin snorted, thankful for his ability to distract and amuse her. She pulled him to the next scene, but when she stopped, she almost fell to the floor with her laughter. A yellow lamp shone down on a green sheet littered with grass and leaves. Cardboard trees surrounded two people. A shirtless man with fake vampire teeth knelt before a gorgeous woman with wavy brown hair. His skin sparkled bright with glittery body-paint while he begged the woman to marry him.

"Come on, cruel lady." Davis tugged her past the screen. "It's probably going to be hard enough to wash that paint away from every nook and cranny without hearing your cackle in his head while he does it."

"Ack!" Erin knocked into a small table and the bowl on it moved, or at least, the disembodied hand on top of the bowl moved to protect the candy inside. A scary moan from within its depths tried to warn the scavengers away. "Okay, now it's getting dangerous in here."

Davis snickered, shaking his head and leading her around the table to the next scene. A very warty looking witch stirred a smoking cauldron. She stopped and cackled at the group surrounding her and ladled them each a cup of "brew". Some kids drank the lime-green liquid, others shuddered.

One boy leaned close to his companion and said, "Isn't that what they give us to help us throw up?"

The second kid laughed. "No, dude. I think it's just Gatorade."

The line of kids began to move forward while Erin and Davis following behind them. When a few of the smaller children started crying, parents and older kids gathered around, trying to soothe them. Looking for the disturbance, Erin saw the wraith guy again.

He stood blocking the door, his cloak blowing in wavy tendrils around him. The chill she'd felt earlier enveloped her again, along with a return of the hopeless desperation she'd cried over earlier. But there was something new this time: the muted sounds of moans and screams that weren't in the least mechanical-sounding. They were muffled, as if coming from within his robes, and the sounds sent chills down her spine.

"Back this way." Davis tugged her hand. "Quick."

"But-"

"Please."

The genuine worry in his eyes and tone convinced her to go and they hurried back through the maze toward the first door.

Chapter 5

The door slid shut behind them and Erin stopped, while Davis continued until, with their clasped hands, she pulled him to a stop as well. "Okay, now we are away from the guy with the freaky, inappropriate costume again. Why are we running and where can we even run to?"

Davis looked at her, frustration twisting his features. "It's just really not a good idea to be around him right now."

Erin squinted at him. "Right now? As opposed to later? Do you know him?"

Could a guy look more squirmy? He was older than she was, or had seemed to be, but at the moment he didn't seem so. Davis focused over her shoulder, then at his feet, then... everywhere but at her. He finally settled on staring to the side, but his every movement was awkward. "In a way."

"Well, that's vague," Erin mocked. Every time she was ready to leave him, the wraith appeared and Davis wanted to run. Something she hadn't been able to do for weeks and she was wasting her newfound energy when it was time to quit avoiding her impending death and spend her last moments with her parents. "Care to explain? He was a bully at your school. Or a bad neighbor..."

"Just another jerk who likes to spread misery and fear." He shrugged, seeming to want to say more, but hindered from doing so in some way. At least she wasn't the only one getting frustrated.

"Like a wraith." She nodded as if she understood, but she really didn't. Was the bad costume guy a family member she'd been insulting all night? That could explain his reluctance to talk about it.

"People like him really give the rest of us a bad name." He opened his mouth, inhaled, then clicked it shut.

Yep, sounded like a family issue. "You're not responsible for the way other people act. So the reputation they create isn't yours to bear."

"True. Let's just keep away from him as long as possible, though, okay?" His shadowed eyes pleaded for her to follow along with that plan.

Erin looked to the corner they'd turned. The main hallway seemed empty, but she could almost feel the menacing presence waiting to waylay them. She didn't have "as long as possible"

and as fun as exploring with Davis had been, it was time. "Honestly? Life's too short for avoidance."

That lesson had taken her long enough to learn. She slipped around him. Davis grabbed her arm and swung her back, practically dancing them in a circle until she stopped against his chest. "You're the one I'm worried about. Avoidance seems to be what you need."

Erin gasped, and not only at his words. His arms now surrounded her, holding her in place. His chest was broad enough to make it difficult to see around him to the hallway he now had his back to. It felt good to be held against him like this, but she wasn't one to accept being manhandled. Especially not when it hurt.

If he was lucky, the bruising wouldn't be too bad.

Keeping her voice low to avoid spoiling the evening for the family she could hear leaving the haunted house, she broke his grip. "Do not grab me."

He opened his mouth, but she pushed him back a few steps and interrupted, her independent streak on a roll. "Do not tell me what to do."

Cancer was enough of a control freak, she wouldn't let anyone or anything else dictate to her. She'd decided that when she was twelve and she was sticking to it.

He held his hands up and away from her in a placating gesture, but she wasn't finished. Erin pushed him a little into the hallway. "In fact, if any guy ever wants to pull me into his arms, it better not be in a foolish attempt to control me."

"I'm sorry!" Davis reached toward her, not grabbing for her, but his expression begging her to listen, to understand. "Erin—"

She fended him off, pushing him farther into the hallway and making room to escape around him. That was her intention, but as he stepped back, a little Cinderella ran through him. Not past him. Not around him. Not into him. *Through* him, and his image actually disappeared for a fraction of a second.

Erin blinked, shock and disbelief holding her frozen.

Davis lowered his hands and resignation settled over his face. The little girl's parents continued after her, each of them passing through Davis as well. He disappeared for a breath, then returned, his image flickering with each one of them.

Her eyes bulged. She couldn't suck in enough air to be effective. The lack of air was all that kept her from screaming. Instead, she ran down the hallway to another set of elevators,

sliding in with the family before the doors closed, blocking him..

The regret and sympathy on his face haunted her the entire thirty seconds of the ride. When the elevator stopped and the doors opened, she walked out. Davis stood beside her, his finger pressing the button for the elevators to stop on this floor. Behind her the dad leaned out and looked both ways before retreating inside the elevator and pushing the close doors button. "I guess whoever it was changed their mind."

Erin's eyes widened at the man, then burned with the prick of tears. She forced them away and ran to the doors to pediatric oncology. He was there before her, pushing them open so she could run to her room. His words about avoidance hounded her every step, but it couldn't be.

Her lungs swelled and emptied with every breath. Her heart pounded away, pumping blood through her veins. Her hands even shook, for God's sake. But when she reached her room, her worst fears were confirmed. Her family surrounded her bed, crying and holding her dead hands.

Dead. Tears rained down her face as she stared at them and tried to comprehend what she was seeing. There were no more IVs in her arms or her ports. No monitors beeping with the sound of her heart rate. No bags of fluid that made her need to pee every two hours. She sure as hell never thought she'd miss those.

Harsh breathing and sounds of grief filled the room with an oppressive weight. No one talked as they struggled with their loss. Erin's arms went around herself, only to feel Davis's arms already there, holding her. "I was supposed to be here with them."

"You were." He said quietly, his strength supporting her when she wanted to fall to the floor and wail.

"No I wasn't. I was with you." Regret sliced deep.

"Yeah, but the dying part...you were here."

"Why didn't I know? I thought I was alive. I thought *you* were alive, but you aren't, are you?"

Davis shook his head, his expression full of regret.

"You mean this whole time we were both dead?" She pulled away from his embrace and faced him.

Davis nodded, compassion in every word. "You've been dead since you woke up from your nap."

Chapter 6

Erin ran her gaze around the room, her mind struggling to latch on to something, but all she could do was repeat, "I was supposed to be here."

"Your part of this process was done. This is their part."

"The grief."

"Yes."

Erin watched her mom's pale, tear-reddened face. "I want to help them. Comfort them."

"You really can't. We should leave."

Erin scowled at him. Just who did he think he was, ordering her to leave? "What do you mean I can't? Why?"

"Because affecting the physical world is only an illusion. I can't really hold open doors and press buttons. And you can't hug them or whisper anything they would hear."

"Are you sure about that?" She pressed her lips together in mutinous determination. She reached out and tried to touch her dad's hand. Hers went through his and he didn't react at all. No sudden shiver. No rush of comfort. Nothing she'd thought ghosts could do at a time like this. Erin tried again, her movements frantic, desperate, until she finally stopped and sobbed, "Why?"

"Because loss is loss. They have to say goodbye, using all the rituals of death we know. The funeral, the eulogy, the burial and the reawakening party where they all gather and tell stories about you. That's how they do it."

"And how do ghosts do it? How do *I* do it?" Her voice was raw, dragged from the pit of her stomach.

"Without holding on or looking back while your grief is fresh. You say goodbye, walk away and maybe tell me stories of them." His words were definitive, confident. A speck of dry land in the midst of a tsunami.

Calm could suck it. "And then what? Go into the light, or something?"

"And then we wait. Some wait for reincarnation. Some wait for judgment day. Some believe this is the heaven we've all dreamed of. Some believe this is purgatory. We make friends, perform jobs and when the pain has lessened, we check in on our family."

Erin knelt by her mother, watching her cry. It hurt when Mom cried. She could never stand it. But in this moment, her mom didn't have to be strong. And she wasn't. Grief crumpled

her in her chair, her sobs almost harder than her body could handle. Erin laid her head on her mom's lap, just half an inch or so above it so she wouldn't sink through her mom. Like Davis had said, it was an illusion of comfort, but in that moment, she'd take it. "You make loss sound as simple as going off to college."

"In a way, it is. You just can't text home whenever you want."

She laughed hollowly. "I'm sorry. I'm just not buying what you're selling."

And then she cried, her sobs blending with her mother's and her father's until the sounds of grief filled the room with their pain.

"Erin..." Davis rubbed her back. "You can't do this."

She ignored him.

Davis shook her arm. "Erin, we have to leave."

She sobbed harder. There was no way she could leave.

"Erin...Erin...no!"

His shout made her eyes blink open just enough to see what made him sound so scared. But she couldn't see him or what he was looking at. Instead, what she could see was smoky black tendrils wrapping around her hand and her mother's hand, binding them together. Erin raised her head, ready to tell the wraith to get lost. This was *her* mother. *Her* father. *Her* family's grief and third parties were not welcome.

But as the smoke wrapped like black ice across her eyes, she knew something else, something more, was very, very wrong. She opened her mouth, screams of darkness rushing in so fast she could barely get out her cry for help. "Davis!"

Then she was yanked away from her mother, shoved out of the room and pulled to the left, around the counters, to enter the outpatient section the back way. Screams and cries grew louder in her ears. They reached the doors, but Davis didn't stop and open them like he usually did. He simply pulled her through them.

They could do that? Erin pondered that, but only for the fraction of time it took her to move through the door. It felt like wading through gelatin. This was really faster?

They didn't quit running until they hid in one of the outpatient rooms that resembled a smaller hospital room, complete with TV, desk and private bath.

Davis pulled her to the couch/bed by the large window and pushed her to sit. "Take deep breaths."

Panic sent electric tendrils of fear down her spine, over her shoulders and down her arms. Every time she tried to breathe, more of the black smoke rushed inside of her. Erin shook her head.

"Yes, you can." Davis grabbed her hands, his voice grim. "Your parents seemed nice." She nodded rapidly.

"They must have been wonderful, if you feel so much pain now."

More tears fell down her face, blurring his darkened face even more.

"I bet your mom taught you how to cook and your dad taught you to ride a bike."

More like the other way around, but Erin couldn't speak to correct him.

"So who was the picture-snapper when you went to prom?"

Her dad. She could see it in her mind so clearly. He'd held the camera to his eye, snapping away at her and her date. Catching them from every angle. Before they'd left, he'd paused with her date, showing him each image on the digital camera, then he'd looked her date in the eye, his face completely serious, and warned, "Just so you know, I shoot guns even better."

Erin laughed, then stopped, shocked she could make a sound. The tendrils had receded a bit, no longer in her mouth.

"That's it, sweetheart. Happy thoughts. When did you get your first car? Your college acceptance? How did you celebrate your high school graduation?"

With each memory, the darkness pulled back until Erin could look Davis straight in his thick-lashed, worried hazel eyes. "That's how wraiths are created, isn't it?"

He nodded and rose to sit at her side. "That's the grief part. When you collapse in misery and let the darkness overtake you. You have to fight it with happy thoughts and happy feelings. You have to keep that balance at all times."

Erin closed her eyes for a moment, shaking her head at how close she'd come to disaster. But how was keeping emotionally balanced at all okay when such devastation happened? She wanted to scream and throw a tantrum like she had when she was three, not sit here and pretend to be mature. "And when the smoke was tying me to my mom?"

Davis held silent so long she forced herself to meet his gaze. "The wraiths can absorb all of your pain, all of your misery. And through you, they can attach to the living, sucking the joy and healing found in living right out of them."

"Can that kill them?"

A muscle ticked in his jaw, the pulse of it steady no matter how much he clinched it.
"Eventually."

Chapter 7

Erin bit her lip and clenched her fists in her lap. He'd warned her. He'd told her to leave. He'd all but begged her not to stay there and let her grief take control. And her refusal to listen may have more consequences than she'd ever imagined. "Did I just kill my parents, Davis?"

He looked at her, his face grim. The long pause as he considered how to answer her stabbed her with sharp blades of guilt. "Not if we're careful."

Hope sprang from inside her like bright beams of light. "We can stop him? How?" She leapt to her feet and tugged his hand. "Let's go get rid of him right now."

Davis pulled her back to sit beside him. "It's not that easy. You aren't strong enough yet. You just died and almost became a wraith."

"But I can't just sit here if there is something I can do to stop him."

He crossed his arms and raised a challenging brow. "Okay then. What will you do to stop him?"

That damn eyebrow pushed every hot button she had, but after chewing over a few smartass remarks, Erin slumped back. "I got nothin'."

Davis nodded. "Of course not. You have to learn a few things first. Like the devastating fact that you only get one, maybe two, shots at this. If you are lost in the battle, your parents will be unrecoverable."

Oh. Yeah, that was important to know.

"Then you'll tell me how to fight them?"

"Fighting is not my usual job, but we are all taught how to survive in case we ever need it."

"You mentioned jobs before. What do you mean? How can we work? Why would we work? Do we need to pay rent on where we haunt?"

He laughed. "No rent, but in a healthy community where one type preys on the other, we separate into specialties and help each other. Some of us are really good at protecting others and keeping them safe. Some are recovery agents, who specialize in turning wraiths back to people. Then there's me. I help ghosts ease into their after-life."

"Why do you want to do that?"

"Because once upon a time, very long ago, someone helped me. I like to meet people, get

to know and understand them and help them adjust to this change."

More people than just her. She'd wanted to flirt, smile and have fun with a boy, but in the end, she'd been his job. "That's what you did with me tonight."

Davis smiled. "Yeah, but I gotta say you are the most fun."

Erin snorted. "Right."

"No, seriously. Accidents happen everywhere, all over the world. I've met some fascinating people who've done amazing things. But death was usually sudden and they took their losses really hard."

She raised a brow. Did he think her loss wasn't taken hard?

He acknowledged her silent point, but shrugged. "Tonight, in this place with you, I had fun. You were expecting to die, so your delayed realization and reaction allowed your curiosity to pour out. I got to know the living you, before there was a dead you."

She bit her lip, understanding his point, even feeling complimented, but still feeling too crushed to enjoy it.

"Plus," he shook his head, "I lived in a time where hospitals weren't nearly this fun for children. Life was one horror show after another. I don't want death to be the same. For anyone."

He hadn't talked about himself before. She'd been so focused on what she'd wanted and how she was feeling and what was happening in her life that she'd assumed he was a patient with a story similar to hers and never questioned her assumption. There was too much she didn't know. "Were you a patient? Did you die in a hospital?"

"Yes, but no. I had cancer as a child, but I actually died years later in a car crash."

"So now you haunt hospitals in order to explain death to the patients who pass?"

He shrugged. "I woke up in the hospital and there was this witty, sarcastic old man who made the whole thing seem like the most exciting adventure ever. Which can be appropriate in some cases. But when the person who just died has known it was coming, has been counting the seconds and trying to make each one count..."

Erin shifted. "Like me."

He nodded. "Like you. It's better to move slowly in that instance." He inhaled a rush of air. "There is supposed to be more time. Hospitals are protected and wraiths don't come so close."

Erin looked out the window, but the cityscape looked the same as it always did. Branches

of lights in every direction with dark mountains in the background, hugging them close. "Is something particularly bad tonight?"

He frowned. "I don't know what's happening out there, but the wraith who's been chasing us is our problem to deal with."

"Right. So how do we do that?"

Davis took her hands in his and leaned forward. "Wraiths win by exploiting our negative emotions. Anger, jealousy, grief..."

Erin nodded, her eyes on his hands as they held hers. A man's hands had always been fascinating to her. Large knuckles, long fingers, skin that felt soft to the touch, but looked porous and rough. Capable hands. Davis had a man's hands. "So we hold them off with happy thoughts."

"Essentially, yes, but not just any happy thoughts. Not when he's standing over you and feeding you terror with his appearance and the sounds of souls from their collective."

She jerked back. "Those are real?"

"They don't talk. They are created from rage and terror to inspire rage and terror. The screams are the externalization of what they hold inside them."

Her hands tightened on his, drawing her gaze as she absorbed his words. She'd resisted becoming a wraith when it was just her own feelings she was fighting, but what he described was very much a battle with emotions becoming the weapons. "So which happy memories are good enough?"

"Usually the most exciting moments of a person's life. The birth of a child, marriage..." His words trailed off as if he just realized what he was saying and didn't know how to continue.

"And if you didn't live long enough for either of those?"

"Pick others. Moments you've won, when you've felt accomplished. When you had fun with a friend, graduated, got your license, fell in love." He looked around as if searching for more examples. "Whatever made you the happiest, it has to be a memory that will feed you despite your worst moments in life."

"And if I fail and the negative emotions overtake me, I am assimilated."

"That is one of the effects, yes."

"What else is there?"

"Once they have you, they have a tie to everyone you loved and/or who ever loved you. They become living batteries to constantly feed grief, despair and defeat to the wraiths. Until the

battery runs out."

Chapter 8

"You really think this is a good place to confront him?" Erin looked around the outpatient toy room, remembering the puzzles, crafts and games. The plastic tub full of fun gifts she'd pawed through as her reward for dealing with needle pokes. The "poke box" had never made her forget the pain, discomfort and fear of weekly port accesses, but there had been the coolest journal for her to write in all through to high school. The jokes on different pages had kept her smiling through some dark times.

"If this doesn't work, we can try the fish hallway. That place was pretty cool."

The lightness of her thoughts dived into darkness again. "You don't think that's too far for a quick escape?"

"Not if we go through the walls."

Erin frowned. "Like we did with the doors, but not the counters. Now, how does that work? We can run through walls, but sit on chairs and not fall through floors."

Davis chuckled, the sound a happy memory in itself. "Man-made objects are more solid than air, but not impossible to pass through. Kind of like gel. The thinner they are, the better, because it's difficult for most new ghosts to wrap their minds around passing through barriers."

"And natural things, like trees and caverns..."

"Hurt when you run into them."

She made a face. "Good to know."

He squeezed her hand and pulled her close to his side. "You'll do great."

Great? She was terrified and trying not to be. How could her surroundings be so familiar, yet so strange and new at the same time? "You're sure he'll find us?"

"Absolutely. He'll be pulled to us first. Like a magnet." His voice was as grim as the thought. To forever be a magnet to misery? That just sucked.

She opened her mouth to ask another question, but when she inhaled cold air, words fled her mind. Cold air. Fear. Good warning system. Before her trepidation and self-doubt could take over, she pulled up her happy memories from this room and others. She didn't have one single moment of stunning elation to draw on, so she compiled them all. Maybe the sheer number of them would bolster her.

When the wraith appeared in the doorway, towering over them both, she held her ground

and gripped Davis's hand tight. The twisted black mask swiped at her memories of making plaster handprints and putting together puzzles and knocked them aside like plastic logs in a windstorm. A windstorm of hate and fear, anguish and hopelessness. When the screams erupted all around them, any happy emotions those memories held just couldn't last.

Pressure squeezed around her, holding her immobile and helpless. Not only was she trying to keep the damn wraith from overwhelming her with the weight of the souls trapped inside, she also had to fight the rising darkness inside of *her*. The crushing despair at the unfairness of life, death and grief. A sense of impending defeat vibrated through her muscles. Unable to take more, she gasped and cried out, "Davis!"

Davis pulled and they ran. The first wall in their way passed quickly with only a slight squeeze. After that, it was as if the walls themselves were fighting – on the side of the wraith. The doors to the fish hallway hurt, scraping with each jagged sliver of wood that formed them. Erin fell against the handrail, gasping and holding on. "That didn't feel like running through gel, Davis."

He sat on the floor and pulled one knee up, breathing heavily. "You're right. More like wet cement. The first few walls were easy but after a while, they became almost impossible."

Erin collapsed beside him. "You really don't do this often, do you?"

"The hospitals are protected, so I don't face wraiths very often. When I do, I just need to know how to run."

She batted her lashes up at him. "You're so good at running, Davis."

He laughed and shoulder-bumped her. "Mock me all you want, but I wasn't looking to spend my after-life in one endless battle after another. I prefer to go to the root of the problem and help people *before* they are lost to their own misery."

Understanding bloomed inside her. Like with her cancer, people would do what they could, skew a few battles, but ultimately the fight was hers. Only she could win the war for her soul. She smiled gently. "What you do is admirable. And if I mock you, believe me. I am mocking myself as well. I do not feel empowered by this challenge."

Davis cocked his head, curiosity filling his tone. "What does make you feel empowered?"

Erin thought about it for a long minute, cut short by the appearance of the wraith. She sighed and rose to her feet. "Getting tired of chasing us, are you?" Raising her hands, she curved her fingers and wiggled them. "No more slow build-up as you walk slowly down the hall like

Freddy, scraping your claw-like blades over the walls?"

Davis gasped, his disbelief and horror clear. "Erin! Do not taunt the wraith."

Erin laughed and the wraith flinched. "You asked what empowered me. How about this?" she put her hands on her hips. "I. Am. Stubborn."

Davis rounded her side, his disbelieving face now in front of her. "You're stubborn. *That's* the defense you want to go with?"

Erin shrugged at him. It was the best she had at the moment. She faced the wraith, all the attitude she'd developed during years of facing her monstrous disease now propping her up. "You cry and scream. You inspire fear. You look scary. None of this is any different from getting poked. Needles and spinal taps and blood transfusions and MRIs. All of it knowing that at the end of the day, you still might hear bad news. I have faced those battles twice in my life. It took a lot of time and a lot of battles to kill me. *What* makes you think you can take me down *now*?"

The wraith stood there, his tendrils of hatred and anger swirling around him. The sounds of screams and cries abounded, pulsed air throughout the hallway.

She stood strong, her chin out and her back straight. "That's it?"

Scary laughter came from the caricature of a face staring at her. Long, gnarled fingers crossed in front of the wraith, slowly dragging the edges of his cloak open and showing her a shiny black surface over his chest. Slowly, dulled and darkened images became clear and Erin stumbled back.

Her dad held her mom, tears drenching their faces as they battled through all the small, devastating decisions that had already been decided but now seemed wrong. Was it really good to take all the posters and pictures down and empty the room now? Or should they leave it long enough for the doctors and close friends to come say goodbye? Should they start the phone calls or just take the next hour or two to grieve on their own?

Erin clenched her hands. "I can't believe you went there, you bastard."

"Don't get angry. That's what he wants." Davis took her hand in his, worry clear in his eyes when the plan had been for him to focus on his own happy memories, also.

She was messing it up. Anger had bored a hole straight inside her and now it blossomed all through her system. So much injustice. The cancer, her early death, her parents' pain and now she couldn't even face a wraith with the happiest moments of her life because, damn it, there

hadn't been enough of them.

Chapter 9

It wasn't clear how he did it, but light flashed from Davis and the wraith fell back. Struggling to distance herself from the view of her parents, Erin felt Davis grab her hand and she followed wherever he pulled her. They might not get far, but every step farther away from the wraith they could get for now was a blessing she was happy to accept.

When he stopped at the elevators right outside the fish hallway, Erin shook off her distraction and yanked him back. These weren't quite far enough, not yet. They ran past inpatient peds oncology, down the windowed hallway to the sailboat bench and the elevators there. The wraith kept a steady, persistent pace behind them. Never speeding up, never flinching if it passed through a door or a wall. Like the pain was just one more negative emotion to feed it.

Davis did his illusion thing with pushing the button and it was like whatever charge she felt when he touched her now transferred to the wires, because within seconds, the elevator arrived at their floor. Not sure she could stomach passing through something solid, she breathed her thanks when the doors quickly opened. They rushed inside even before the ding ended.

Feeling the lift, Erin grabbed the bar on the back wall. "What are we going to do?"

Davis shrugged. "Fight, or panic and give up?"

Erin rolled her eyes. "Funny."

He shook his head. "I'm serious. Those are our options. Keep trying to stop him, even when it should be impossible, or give up."

"But then we abandon the hospital to him. My parents." Erin hugged herself. "Or would he follow us outside the hospital?"

Davis stepped forward, cupping the side of her face in his hand. "I wasn't saying giving up was an actual option to consider. No, he wouldn't follow us. He wouldn't want to work that hard. Without us, the hospital is fair game. If we have to run ourselves into exhaustion, we will."

His eyes glittered with hard green lights, determination firming his jaw. Impressive and attractive. She could believe what he said. He would fight, run, whatever it took for as long as he could. Drawing strength from his straightforward gaze, Erin inhaled. "And when we can no longer run?"

A small smile of approval tilted his lips. "I'm sure that at some point the protectors will come and he won't have freedom to roam the hospital anymore."

He offered hope by mentioning the protectors, but they might not come in time to save them or her parents. For now, Erin and Davis were all the protection available. The elevator dinged and the doors slid open.

A few steps and they were in the observatory. Large, open and surrounded with floor-to-ceiling windows, the room was filled with conversational spaces throughout. But the most prominent spot was the south wall and its floor-to-tall-ceiling view of St. John's Cathedral. The deepest of night had descended fully, darkening the evergreens to shadows. At the base of the gothic church, large floodlights shone up the sides, casting the stone in a bluish glow.

"I told you there was an even better view."

"You really did. I never should have doubted you." Davis's awed gaze took in every turret, the large cross and the multihued stained glass windows. "It's truly amazing."

His eyes had brightened upon seeing the vista. Her eyes couldn't look away from his profile. She'd always wanted to be independent and accomplish things herself. Especially after her cancer experience where everything, even her ability to live, had depended on someone else. She'd never quite understood her parents' insistence that it was much better to go through life with someone by your side, someone who has your back and believes in you than to face everything alone.

Suddenly, she understood. Davis had been right beside her through all the trials on the worst day of her life. Death. Afterlife. Whatever. He didn't do it all for her. She was still independent, just not alone. And she was really happy to have him there. "Thank you."

His gaze swung her way. "Don't thank me. If I had done my job better, faster, there would be no danger now."

Erin touched his arm and shook her head. "You were just coming in to work. I was the one who didn't want to face the truth. I ran you around the hospital, showing you every distraction there was so I didn't have to."

He grinned and ran a gentle touch down her cheek. "If I hadn't wanted to hang out instead of breaking the bad news... if I hadn't dreaded killing that amazing smile of yours, then no. You would not have distracted me."

Sincerity filled his eyes, resonated in his tone. Erin brought one hand up to circle his wrist, grasped his lapel with the other and rose to her toes. His hands cupped her jaw, his fingers tangling in her hair as he lowered his lips toward hers.

An icy blast of terror warned them they were no longer alone.

She pulled back. "His timing sucks."

"Maybe." Davis smiled and brought her closer to him. "Ignore him."

Erin smiled and when his lips settled over hers, forgetting the menace of death so close to them was easy. She sank into the kiss, caressing his lips with hers, sucking in his tongue so she could taste him. It was the best kiss she'd ever had. A happy moment that she could remember forever. Bright light flashed over her closed eyes, but she didn't care. There was no longer room for negative emotions.

Chapter 10

Uncontrollable choking pulled them apart and that's when Erin saw what they'd done. The wraith had fallen to his knees and the black smoke around him had lightened to charcoal. "What's happening to him?"

"Happiness. Misery starves when happiness is present. And it weakens it enough for the person inside to fight."

"The person inside?" Erin turned wide eyes to him. "He can be saved, like I was?"

She rushed forward but didn't make it a step before Davis stopped her. "No, Erin. He's still too dangerous. He needs professional help."

At that moment the elevators dinged and the doors slid open. Two men strode out, looking from them to the wraith.

"Damn, son. And here I thought you weren't a fighter." The heavy southern accent accompanied a smile as big as Texas. Davis faced him, but kept an arm around her waist.

The speaker was a tall and lanky older man in a cowboy hat. Beside him was a younger guy who looked fresh out of a punk rocker high school. The kid was grinning at them both.

Were these the protectors Davis had mentioned?

"Nah," Davis said. "I'm more of a lover."

Erin raised a brow, but Davis grinned at her. "Now, anyway."

The two men stood on either side of the wraith, each placing a hand on the charcoal shoulders. Almost immediately, the smoke turned lighter and the silhouette of a person could be seen inside.

"Pa James and Luke are recovery agents. They help protect new ghosts until they are placed in a safe environment, and they specialize in helping remnants face their grief and pain so they can be themselves again."

Erin watched the smoke disappear from the wraith, the wispy tendrils floating away and disappearing altogether. "What about all those faces I saw inside him? The other souls?"

Davis eyed the young boy who now knelt, sobbing while Pa James and Luke whispered in his ears. "Those, unfortunately, were just manifestations of the collective."

Her eyes widened with the horror. "You mean they're still trapped?"

He grimaced. "Yeah. We can only save them one soul at a time."

She shuddered as the two men rose, the deadly menace, who was simply a young boy drowning with sorrow, braced between them. With a nod to Davis and Erin, they left through the elevator. The boy was probably in enough pain, they wouldn't want to pass through walls and floors.

Silence settled in the observatory again and Erin turned back to the man with his arm still around her. "The wraith was just a kid?"

"Yeah. They aren't too picky about whose souls they take. They just want more."

"Is he going to be okay?" And then a terrifying thought occurred to her. "Are my parents okay?"

Davis squeezed her to him and met her gaze with confidence. "They will be fine. With him detached from the collective, and you never completely attached, there are no more links to your parents. As for the boy," he cast a quick glance at the elevators, "there are many who can help him now. They just needed to reach him."

Erin eyed his jawline, then the curve of his lips before raising her gaze to his. "Our kiss reached him?"

His eyes warmed with a tenderness she'd only witnessed in movies. "Don't you know?" He caressed her cheek. "There's no room for anything bad when you kiss me."

Erin smiled at the melting sensation inside of her. "I like that."

"Me, too." He lowered his head, his eyes watching her lips, then glancing up as if requesting permission.

She lifted up on her toes, meeting his gaze, then watching his lips. "So, how does that flashing light thing work again?"

He chuckled and showed her.

Special Note

When my 8 year old daughter was diagnosed with a brain tumor the day after Thanksgiving 2003, I was 28 and clueless. I had no idea what lie in store for us. Family and friends surrounded us, offering to help, and all of their efforts were so appreciated. I have no clue what we would have done without them.

But chemo lasted a year and a half and surgeries to drain the cyst that had formed lasted a few more years. Braces for her left wrist and foot were necessary, along with a variety of different occupational and physical therapies lasting to this day. Our lives were altered drastically and it has effected how we have and will live the rest of our lives.

Even the bestest of friends and the most well-meaning of family members don't adapt and change in the same way a family experiencing cancer will. That is not to say there aren't [ways for friends and family to help, like these](#). Being in a wheelchair and with Friedreich's Ataxia, I didn't drive. My husband quit work to transport us to doctor's appointments 5 days a week. Yes, it was hard to survive, but parents need to be at the hospital with their kids and in our situation, I just couldn't do it all. We learned to live with the minimum of what was necessary. We drastically changed our diet to be more healthy. We learned to never take family time for granted. And we learned there are people and organizations out there that will help you during your darkest hours.

Which is why I support The American Childhood Cancer Organization. I was sitting in the hospital at my daughter's bedside, learning words like "port" and "access" and white blood counts when I was approached by two very loving and caring members who handed me a Welcome folder full of information. All this time, I'd studied how to be a writer. With their support and guidance, I learned so much more.

They have helped with necessary information, fun activities a child weak from chemo can participate in, support groups on and offline, gift cards for gas and groceries, the outpatient snack basket, the Ronald McDonald family rooms and more things than I have room to list. Real, practical help to a family suffering a life-altering, traumatic trial that tests endurance, resilience and faith.

In my family, we decorate for Christmas the day after Thanksgiving. We enjoy the lights on our tree during the otherwise dark days of winter. But as my daughter was waking up from a sedation for her MRI, we were told, "They found something." Immediately, we were admitted into the hospital. By the end of the night, her surgery was scheduled for early that coming Monday. Of course, this means Christmas was looking extremely bare that year.

Wishing Star is a non-profit foundation that specializes in granting wishes to children with life-threatening illnesses, but they actually do so much more. Because of them, we had gifts to open that Christmas. The following Christmas was our wish trip to see family and stay at Give Kids the World in Florida, a volunteer run resort of small houses, amusements like putt-putt golf and arcades, great food including free pizza delivered to the door. This was amazing for the days and nights she didn't feel well enough for Disney World.

Wishing Star's help didn't end there. During chemo, they gave my daughter tickets to see the Spokane Chiefs and she fell in love with hockey. Tickets were gifted to her for several years after that.

Now, I would love to do what I can to encourage my readers to support these three organizations. Which might make you wonder why this book is free if I would love to raise funds for them.

It's actually very simple. Awareness of these organizations, your time and your skills are just as important as money.

They are operated by volunteers, for the most part. People who donate time and skills to handing out welcome packets, stocking family rooms or wrapping Christmas presents. They need things as simple as 2" three ring binders and pens, small toys and gifts for the "poke" box, donations of blankets, quilts, knit hats and gloves. Even airline miles are a huge boon.

Then there are always uses of cash donations for gas, food, utility assistance, durable medical equipment not covered by insurances, granting wishes, shopping for and wrapping Christmas presents and more.

Giftng this story and this appeal to all of your friends and family also counts. Remember, spreading awareness of the struggles these children face and how they need your help is just as important as a cash donation.

Please consider what you can give.

The American Childhood Cancer Organization:

<https://www.acco.org/inlandnw/GetInvolved.aspx>

Wishing Star Foundation:

<http://www.wishingstar.org/1536.html>

Give Kids the World:

<http://www.gktw.org/volunteer/>

If you'd like to know more about my books, please visit:

My website: www.JamieLeighHansen.com

My twitter: www.twitter.com/JamieLHansen

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Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Jamie Leigh Hansen

Coming October 9, 2013:

Betrayed by Jamie Leigh Hansen

