

***Out of the Darkness* by Heather Graham**

Excerpt

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Prologue

What Davey Knew

The Bronx, New York City, New York, Ten Years Ago

The eyes fell upon Sarah Hampton with a golden glow; the woman's mouth, covered with blood, split into a diabolical smile as she cackled with glee, raising her carving knife and slamming it down on the writhing man tied to the butcher block in the kitchen. Blood seemed to spurt everywhere. Screams rose.

And Sarah, laughing at herself for her own scream, grabbed Davey's hand and followed Tyler Grant out of the haunted house.

"Fun!" Tyler said, laughing, catching his breath.

It was fun. Though Sarah had to admit she was glad she was here as part of a party of six. Fun? Yes, sure...

And creepy! The weapons had looked real. The "scare actors" could have passed for the real thing quite easily as far as she was concerned.

"Ah, come on, the guy on the butcher block—his screams were nowhere as good as they should have been," Hannah Levine said. "He must be getting tired of screaming—long season, long night. But I guess it is Halloween."

"Yeah, I imagine that the poor kid has been at it awhile," Sean Avery agreed. He looked at Sarah's cousin, Davey. "Then again, this place opens for only four weekends, with Halloween weekend, the last, being the boss. Coolest thing ever, Davey!"

Davey gave him a weird little half smile.

Suzie Cornwall—Sarah's best friend—frowned. "What's the matter, Davey? Was the haunted house too scary for you? We were all with you, you know."

"That one was okay," Davey said.

"But now...drumroll! We're moving on—to the major attraction!" Sean said.

"No, no, no!" Davey shook his head violently. "I'm scared!" He clearly didn't want to go into Cemetery Mansion, another of the haunted houses; he seemed terrified.

Sarah looked at her cousin with dismay.

She loved Davey. She really loved him. She had never met anyone who was as kind, as oblivious to what others thought, as willing to help others.

But Davey had Down syndrome. And while most of Sarah's friends were great, every once in a while they acted as if they didn't want to be with her, not if she was bringing Davey along.

And tonight...

Well, it was almost Halloween. And she and her friends had scored tickets to Haunted Hysteria in a radio contest. It was the prime event of the season, but one they couldn't actually afford. Well,

to be honest—and they all had to agree—it was Davey who'd won the tickets. They'd asked him to dial the radio station number over and over again, and Davey hadn't minded.

The place itself was fabulous. Decorated to a T. Bats, ghouls, ghosts, vampires, witches and more—young actors and actresses, of course, but they walked around doing a brilliant job. The foam tombstones looked real and aged; the makeshift mortuary chapel was darkened as if older than time itself. Lights cast green and purple beams, and fog machines set in strategic places made for an absolutely immersive experience.

And now they were all here—she, Davey, Tyler, Sean, Suzie and Hannah. Suzie, tall and well-built, perfectly proportioned to be dressed up as Jessica Rabbit for the night, was her best friend. Tyler was the love of her life. And most of the time, both of them were truly wonderful friends. Tyler had even told her once that he knew right off the bat if he'd like people or not—all depending on the way they treated Davey.

Hannah was a stunner, olive skinned and dark haired—and as an evil fairy, she was even more exotically beautiful than usual. Sarah was pretty sure she'd caused one of the “scare actors” to pause—too startled by her beauty to scare her!

Sean...Sean was charming, the old class clown. Apropos, he was dressed up as the Joker. Every once in a while, his wit could be cruel. Mostly, though, he was a great guy, and the five of them had been friends forever, even though Sarah and Tyler were the only duo in their group.

She had come in steampunk apparel; Tyler had matched her with an amazing vest and frock coat. Davey had come as his all-time favorite personality—Elvis Presley.

They were all nearly eighteen now. Come October of next year, they'd be off at their different colleges, except she'd be at NYU with Tyler, as they'd planned. But for tonight...

It was fricking Halloween. Aunt Renee had asked her to take Davey with her. Yes, of course, Sarah was very aware the tickets really belonged to Davey.

Sarah always tried to be helpful. It was easy to help care for her cousin.

Aunt Renee wasn't in any kind of financial trouble—she had a great job as a buyer for a major chain store—and she had household help and could afford to send Davey to a special school.

But Aunt Renee wanted Davey to have friends and spend time with people his own age—Sarah's age. Aunt Renee wanted a wider world for Davey; she did not want his mom to be his only companion.

Sarah's friends were usually happy to have Davey with them.

But now Sarah could feel that Davey was holding them all back—and they were kids, with a right to be kids. The others were looking at her. Sure, they loved Davey. They were good people. But she could see them thinking *screw it!* They'd come to Haunted Hysteria; they were going in the haunted houses, and Sarah was welcome to sit outside with Davey.

Tyler, of course, had the grace to look guilty. He wasn't eighteen until January, but he was already over six foot three, heavily muscled in the shoulders and extremely fine in the face. Hot, yes. Tyler was hot. And he loved her. He really did. Then, she hoped she wasn't exactly dog chow herself. She was, she admitted, the typical cheerleader to his football hero. Yes, she was blonde and blue-eyed, the fault of her genetics. She was a good student and coordinated enough to be a great cheerleader. She liked to believe she'd been taught by her family to be a lot more, too—as in decent and compassionate and bright enough to see and understand others.

She thought Tyler was like that, too. No matter how cool he was.

They were just right for each other—and their group of friends was nice, too! Something she considered extremely important. Tonight, they wanted to be seniors—they wanted to be a little bit wicked and have a great time.

But being Davey's cousin had long ago taught Sarah about the importance of kindness in the world. Patience, sharing, caring...all that.

All that...

Seemed to go out the window right now.

"Davey, I know you were scared in the first house, but we're all with you," she said.

"Hey, buddy," Tyler told him. "I'm bigger than the damned ghosts!"

"You can go between Sarah and Tyler," Suzie said. "They'll protect you."

"No! No—the things in this house—they were okay. They weren't real. But that house...that one, there. There are things in it that are real. That are bad. They're evil!" Davey said.

"Oh, you're being silly," Hannah said.

"It's true," Davey said.

"How do you know?" Sean asked him.

"My father told me!" Davey said. "He helps me see."

Sarah bit her lip. Davey's dad had died over a year ago. Aunt Renee was alone with Davey now. Davey's dad had been a marine, and he had been killed serving his country. Her uncle had been a wonderful man—good to all the kids. She'd loved him, too, and she'd known he loved her.

"Davey, your father isn't here," she said. "You know...you know your dad is dead."

Davey looked at her stubbornly. "My father told me!" he insisted.

"Davey," Sarah said softly, calmly, "of course, the point is for it all to be very scary. Vampires, ghosts—but they're not real. It's a spooky fun place for Halloween. There are all kinds of made-up characters here."

"No. Real bad things."

They all let his words sit for a minute.

"The actors in there—they're not evil, Davey," Suzie said. "Come on, you've seen creatures like that before—and the ones who walk around, they're high school kids like us or college kids, and now and then, an adult actor without a show at the moment! You know all about actors, buddy. There are pretend vampires—and werewolves, mummies, ghosts—you name it."

"No. Not werewolves. Not vampires," Davey insisted. "Bad people. Like my dad said!"

"You love actors and movies," Sean said. Sean knew Davey had a skill for remembering everything about all the movies and, because of that, he always made sure Davey was on his team for trivia games. When they weren't playing trivia, however, Sean had a tendency to ignore Davey.

Sean seemed to be trying with the rest of their group to engage Davey, but he kept looking at his watch. He wanted to move on.

"You shouldn't go in! You shouldn't go in. It's bad. Very bad," Davey said.

"It's just a haunted house!" Tyler said.

"I love you, Tyler," Davey said. "Don't go. My father...he was next to me. Yes. He was next to me. All the things he taught me. He's dead, I know! But he's with me. He said not to go in. He said there would be bad men and you have to look out. He was smart. My dad was a marine!" he added proudly.

"That's kind of sick!" Hannah whispered to Sarah. "Does he honestly think..."

"Davey," Sarah said softly. "Your dad loved you—you loved your dad. But he's gone."

"I'm not going!" Davey said stubbornly.

"He should come," Tyler told Sarah. "If you give in to him all the time...it's not good. Don't make him into a baby. He's several years older than we are." He turned to Davey. "You know I love you, buddy, right?"

Davey nodded. "We don't have a weapon. I'm not going."

“Davey, I’m begging you…please?” Sarah asked.

Davey shook his head, looking at her. There were tears in his eyes; he was obviously afraid she was going to make him go into the haunted house.

“Just go,” Sarah told the others. “Davey and I will get a soda or…hey, there are a bunch of movie toys over there. We’ll go look at the toys.”

Tyler sighed. “I’ll stay with you.”

The others had already fled like rats.

Not even Suzie—some best friend—stayed behind.

Just Tyler. Staring at her.

“Go,” she told him, suddenly feeling put-upon.

“Sarah—”

“Go!”

He stiffened, squared his shoulder, shook his head—and walked on quickly to join the others. “I’m still so confused. What scared you so badly?” Sarah asked Davey, leading him to a bench. At least she could sit. Her steampunk adventurer boots were starting to hurt like hell. “You were fine when we first got here. The haunted house we went in was made up to look like that one from the movie—you know, when the kids get lost in the woods and they find the house, but everyone in it is crazy! The father likes to hang people, the brother plays with a Civil War sword, the sister sprays poison and the mother chops up strangers for dinner. It was creepy cool—and they were all actors.”

“Yes, they were actors,” Davey said.

“Then why are you afraid of that one?” She pointed to the house where her friends were now in line, Cemetery Mansion. It was a good, creepy representation from a horror film where people had built over a graveyard and the dead came back to kill the living for disturbing them.

“It’s evil,” Davey said. He shoved his hands into his pockets and shivered. “I saw them. Dad told me to watch—I watched. That house is evil.”

“How is it evil? It’s honestly much the same. The themes are different. There are a lot of fabricated creatures—some cool motion-activated stuff, like robots—and then more actors. People just pretending. We went through the one house—it was fine.”

He nodded very seriously and then pointed at the Cemetery Mansion.

“That one,” he said. “It’s wrong. I’m telling you, Sarah—it is wrong. And I like Tyler. And Suzie,” he added. He didn’t say anything about Sean or Hannah.

“You mean—you’ve heard they got the characters wrong somehow? We haven’t been in it to see what the house is like, Davey.”

“No, we can’t go in,” he said insistently, wetting his lips as he did when he got nervous. “No. It’s wrong. You can feel it. It isn’t scary—it’s bad. Evil.”

She looked at the house. It *was* spooky—the theme park had done a good job. Images were hazily visible in the windows: creatures that had just crawled from the grave, bony, warped, black-and-white, like zombies or ghosts, horrible to behold.

“You should stop your friends from going in there. Make Tyler come back. He wanted to stay with you. But you were all stubborn and mean.”

Sarah heard the words and spun around to stare at Davey. But he didn’t even seem to realize he had spoken to her.

He was looking at the stand where there were all kinds of toys.

Sarah suddenly smiled. His eyes were wide; he was happy to look at the toys. Davey loved the movies and he loved toys—that made movie-inspired props and toys extra special.

“Let’s go see what they have,” she told him.