

H A U N T E D



# KILL SCREEN

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SUTHERLAND

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To Charles, Bronwen & Fiona —  
The three best kids (and future pre-readers)  
a dad could hope for





I looked at the abandoned cabin in the woods and knew that if I entered, I would die.

But I had to try.

An ancient evil dwelled inside — a spirit from a time before time, a harvester of lost souls, a ghost of the Netherrealm.

The Wisp.

She was hiding somewhere in the cabin and refused to leave. That's what had brought me there. I'd already disposed of every single evil spirit she had summoned, and now I was there to kill her. And if I couldn't kill her, I would banish her back to the Netherrealm. And if I couldn't do that, I would die trying.

But the Wisp couldn't be killed and she couldn't be banished, which left me with only one option.

I hadn't given up; I was simply being realistic. Many had tried before me. All had failed.

This wasn't my first attempt to defeat the Wisp either. And every time I'd faced her I'd died. This would be my 109th attempt.

The full moon lit the cabin's roof and the gnarly trees that ringed it. The forest, silent and still, was full of fog. There was no wind, there were no animals. It was like the entire world was holding its breath, tense and anxious, waiting for something bad to happen.



I checked the Kill Screen strapped to my left forearm. It registered anomalies in the electromagnetic field in my vicinity as well as sudden dips in the temperature, invisible movement through the air, changes in the atmospheric pressure and a dozen other potential sources of paranormal activity. Each and every dial, gauge and meter on its



sleek touch screen was going haywire. I wasn't surprised. It wasn't Casper the Friendly Ghost waiting for me in the dark, dank corners of the cabin.

"You got this, Evie," I whispered to myself. "This is it. This is the time."

I rolled my shoulders, cracked my neck, opened the door and stepped into the darkness. It smelled like death. Not the pungent tang of rotting corpses. It was an odd mix of wet earth, dying flowers, decomposing wood, rotting eggs and, hiding beneath it all, the thick acrid smell of smoke and ash. At least, that's how I imagined the cabin's odour. My Kill Screen registered high levels of biological decay and sulfur in the air, so I knew my hunch wasn't too far off.

Despite the moon being so large and full, none of its light streamed in through the windows. I tapped a button on the left temple of my glasses and the world suddenly took on a bright green hue. They had a built-in night-vision function that worked similarly to military goggles, except my glasses revealed cold spots instead of heat.

No one had lived in the cabin for a long time. The walls were full of holes, the floor was covered in dust, debris and dirt, and there was very little furniture. That's not to say that it was empty. Dark, sticky

stains were splattered across the floorboards, bones stripped of their flesh were piled in the corners of rooms and bloody handprints covered the walls.

Before I took another step, I adjusted the ear-piece in my right ear, which would allow me to hear any voice phenomena that would otherwise be too quiet to detect. Then I pulled the Soul Burner free from my thigh holster and powered it up. It had four different types of rounds that could kill most ghosts with a single shot: iron, salt, chalcedony and a kinetic energy cell. But even with the Soul Burner, I didn't feel prepared. I wasn't facing a run-of-the-mill revenant, phantasm or poltergeist. But I couldn't let that stop me from trying. Maybe I'd learn something new about the Wisp this time — some weakness or flaw that would help me take her down.

Yeah, right. That's what I'd told myself each of the past 108 times I'd faced her, and I was no closer to beating her than the first time I'd entered the cabin.

I cast another look around the filthy room. There was nothing there to help me. One time the Wisp had been waiting in this first room as soon as I'd opened the door; I was dead before I knew what had happened. I never knew which one of the



cabin's thirteen rooms she'd be in before I entered and searched the building. It was unnerving to say the least.

One down, twelve to go. I moved on to the second room, then the third, fourth and fifth. I didn't bother pausing to examine the contents of each. I'd spent a lot of time in them before and none of the objects I'd found — an old doll with a voice box, a rusty wheelchair, a human skull — had been useful in beating the Wisp.

I lingered a little longer in the sixth room, the bathroom. It was small and cramped — you could sit on the stained toilet and wash your hands in the sink at the same time. I turned on the tap. As always, a stream of sand poured out instead of water. I always thought that was weird, even for such a strange cabin. I put my hand under the steady stream and the sand scattered across the floor.

I saw a brief blur of movement out of the corner of my eye, but when I spun around there was nothing there, just the wall. I had a feeling I knew where I'd find the Wisp. I turned off the tap and left the bathroom.

I entered the seventh room: the kitchen. The open fridge was filled with squirming maggots and skittering cockroaches. It looked like the garburator

had been used as a meat grinder, and the Wisp—

A ball of air caught in my throat even though I was expecting to see her. I raised my Soul Burner and pointed it at her. She was hovering in the corner, a metre off the ground.

The Wisp didn't flinch. She didn't even blink. She stared at me with glassy, black eyes. Her gaze made me feel like I'd been lulled into hypnosis. She was surrounded by a cloak of white fog that swirled around her. Her pale, smooth skin appeared to be made of light blue mist that glowed faintly.

She held her left hand palm-up in front of her chest, right where her heart would be if she had one. I'd never seen her move that hand before, and she always held it in the exact same place. Floating above her hand was an orb of bright yellow light that blurred the air, like the waves that radiate off asphalt on a hot summer day.

"I have come to send you back to the Nether-realm," I said. "You are an agent of darkness and are not welcome here among the living."

My voice echoed and boomed throughout the cabin. The last piece of high-tech ghost hunting gear I wore was permanently pierced in my tongue, a skull-shaped metal bead called a Ghost Box. But this was not simply a piece of jewellery — it was one of



the most formidable pieces of equipment I owned. It contained an incredibly small but phenomenally powerful microphone that simultaneously cranked the volume of my voice and transmitted my words at exceptionally high frequencies heard only by spirits. Many times I'd just had to speak to make a ghost do what I wanted without needing to fight.

The Wisp merely laughed, softly and quietly.

Silence followed.

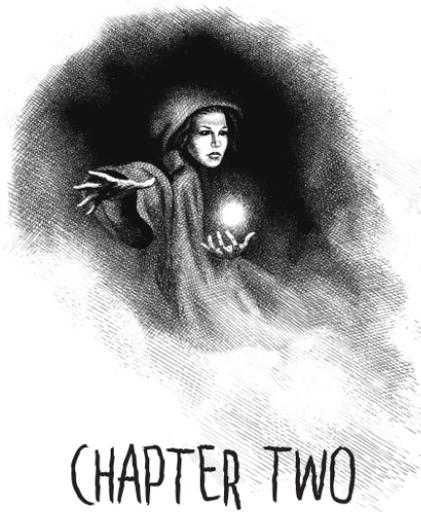
I wondered if I could get two shots off before she killed me this time. None of the four types of ammunition had had any effect on her before. But if I could combine two types — salt and an energy cell, maybe . . .

Her voice flowed into my ear, swirled around my mind and filtered down through my body like cold rain and firecrackers. “You are not worthy to live,” she said without anger or hatred. The only hint of emotion I picked up in her tone was anticipation. “But you are worthy to die.”

I practically mouthed the words with her. Her speech was always the same. So was what followed.

The room grew darker, the Wisp glowed brighter, the air became heavy, her fog crackled with electricity, and then . . .

I died.



## CHAPTER TWO

I threw my wireless video game controller across the basement in frustration, sat and stewed for a moment, and then rushed over and picked it up.

“I’m sorry,” I told Toni, my controller, as I checked him for damage. I called him Toni after Toru Iwatani, the creator of *Pac-Man*, using the first and last two letters of his name. Toni looked okay. “I shouldn’t take out my anger on you.”

Toni was a limited edition *Kill Screen* controller worth all the gift money I’d received on two separate birthdays and a Christmas. And yes, sometimes I talked to him, but that wasn’t so weird. Plenty of hard-core gamers did the same. And besides, he had never talked back, so I knew I wasn’t crazy.

“You know you’re crazy, right, V?”

“I’m not crazy,” I told Harold with a sneer. He was my best friend despite what he thought of my



mental condition. I flopped down onto the couch beside Harold and took a big slurp of orange pop. “So don’t even start.”

“All righty, then.” Harold looked at me like I was crazy-pants.

“It’s this game,” I said in a whine, pointing at the video game console in frustration. “It’s impossible to beat.”

“Try not to beat yourself up,” Harold said. “*Where There’s a Will—*”

“*There’s a Wraith,*” I said, finishing *Kill Screen’s* tagline. “So cheesy.”

“I noticed the bathroom glitch again.”

“Yeah, me too.” Sometimes, when the Wisp was in the kitchen, the left half of her body bled through the bathroom wall. It was one of many glitches in the game, and even though it gave me a heads-up on the Wisp’s location, that had never helped me at all.

“Has anyone else beat the game yet?” Harold asked.

I shrugged. “Let’s check.”

The words YOU’RE DEAD floated around the screen in a cloud of mist above PLAY AGAIN? YES/NO. I quit the game and turned on my phone. I kept a browser page open to Grim Reapings’s website at

all times. Grim Reapings was the indie video game company that created *Kill Screen*. The game became a massive international hit simply because no one had been able to defeat the end boss, the Wisp.

Word had spread that there was a poorly designed game on the market that was supposed to be impossible to beat, and sales skyrocketed. The task of taking down the Wisp was like the quest for the Holy Grail, at least in gamer circles. Thanks to a steady diet of fantasy books and movies, geeks were hardwired to love a good challenge.

I'd bought a copy two months earlier during March break, and it felt like I wouldn't be able to rest until I beat the game. I'd been addicted to video games for a couple of years, but my addiction had reached new heights with *Kill Screen*. And something about the fact that Grim Reapings was located in Halifax, an hour's drive from my hometown of Wolfville, made me want to be the first to beat the game all the more.

I clicked on their message board, logged in with my username, 'V,' and scrolled through the most recent posts. "Nope, no one's beat it yet."

"So there's that," Harold said with an encouraging smile.



Good old Harold. We didn't have a lot in common. In fact, in most ways we were opposites. He was a little on the short side and a bit round, while I was tall for my age and athletic. He rarely played video games, and while I might have been a gamer geek, I used to play on our school's soccer and basketball teams. He got really good grades, and I . . . not so much. Craziest of all, he was a Trekkie and I was into Star Wars. Like I said, opposites.

But for most of my life our houses were side by side and we'd grown up together. Other than my family, I'd spent more time with Harold than anyone else. He made me feel good about myself and I often made him laugh — either with me or at me. So although we weren't identical, we were best friends. And he'd been there for me after the accident, when I'd needed him most.

I opened a message board thread I had started back when I'd begun playing *Kill Screen* and quickly typed a new post.

ATTEMPT #109: DEAD.

Other gamers had started similar threads of their own. I wasn't the only person who had come close to beating the Wisp, but I had reached her more times than anyone else. It wasn't only

impossible to beat her; it was nearly impossible just to reach her cabin.

People started posting encouraging responses as soon as I'd published my comment, but since I was with Harold I didn't read them. I clicked some buttons on my controller and returned to the game's home screen. "You want to play a little multi-player?"

"Nah. You'd mop the floor with me. I prefer watching you play."

"You sure?"

Harold nodded and rubbed his nose. "It's fun."

I looked at him skeptically.

He raised his right hand as if taking some sort of oath. "I'm serious. You're going to beat the Wisp one of these days, V, and I want to be here when you do it."

"Thanks," I said, genuinely touched. I picked up the video game case and stared down the cover illustration of the Wisp. "Hear that? I'm coming for you, you and your weird glowing orb."

I dropped the case on the couch between us and Harold picked it up. "Her orb reminds me of something," he said quietly, more to himself than to me.

"What's that?"



Harold looked up. “Oh. Her orb — it looks like a will-o’-the-wisp.”

“And that is . . . ?”

“A soul that leads people off forest paths late at night, straight to their deaths.” Harold shrugged and tossed the case on the coffee table. “I read about them on Wikipedia.”

“You read too much Wikipedia.”

“True,” he said with a sheepish shrug. “You start on one page, which leads to another, and another . . . It’s like falling down a rabbit hole. I also read that some people believe ghosts are made of untapped energy that can never be destroyed — even Einstein said something like that . . . I think. Don’t quote me on that.”

“Evie!” It was my grandmother, shouting down from the main floor. I still didn’t think of it as my house, even though I’d lived there for two years. “Are you and your *boyfriend* still down there?”

She’d known Harold for years — he’d come over a few times a week since I’d moved in — and yet she still teased me about him being my boyfriend.

“Grandma! That’s gross. No offence,” I said to Harold.

“None taken,” Harold replied. “The feeling’s mutual.”

“Is he staying for dinner?” Grandma shouted. “I made mac ’n’ cheese with cut-up hot dogs in it.”

My favourite. “How can you say no to that?” I asked Harold.

“Like this: No.” He looked at his watch. “Besides, I should go.”

“Your loss.” I faced the stairs and shouted, “He’s not interested, Grandma. He wouldn’t know fine dining if it bit him in the mouth, the tongue *and* the stomach.”

“If you eat a plate or two of mac ’n’ cheese with hot dogs,” Harold said, “it’ll bite you in the stomach later on, I can promise you that.”

I started to laugh as Harold rose from the couch to leave, but my head suddenly drained of blood and I froze.

I’d spent the past three hours fighting pixelated ghosts. But now, hiding in the shadows across the room, stood a real one.