

## Introduction

*“They that love beyond the world cannot be separated by it.  
Death cannot kill what never dies.” ~ Williams Penn*

Nothing lasts forever. I had learned the hard way that nothing in life was permanent or guaranteed. In the blink of an eye, everything can change. By the end of 2012, I had gained and lost numerous jobs, husbands, and fortunes several times over. Living in South Louisiana and having survived natural disasters such as hurricane Katrina taught me that in at any given moment, all sense of security can be ripped away. Security was only an illusion. Disasters strike, divorce happens, and jobs run their course.

I lived about thirty miles outside of New Orleans with my developmentally disabled daughter, Stephanie, and our pets. Life wasn't perfect but it was happy and peaceful. Every day I strived to do something productive and to be happy with who I was and what I had. What I was not prepared for was her death. Nothing can ever prepare a parent for the loss of a child. In January, 2013, my life changed forever when she died, suddenly.

Stephanie had lived her entire life with me. Because she was mentally handicapped, she never moved out to live on her own. She was always much like a younger child. She enjoyed spending weekends either home with me or accompanying me on travel adventures when the opportunity presented itself. She followed me on film shoots, convention appearances, and the occasional tour. She was my little side-kick or as she liked to call herself, my mascot.

Stephanie had always been in good health for a Down syndrome person. She had some weird infections from time to time but nothing life threatening. In the winter of 2012, she

developed an upper respiratory infection that caused her tonsils to inflame and swell. The doctor noted that her tonsils were so swollen that they were practically touching. We were sent to a specialist for a second opinion.

The ENT specialist agreed that it would be necessary to remove her tonsils as soon as possible. We arranged for her surgery to take place the following month, after the holidays. We went about our business celebrating Christmas and New Year's as usual. Then in January began the preparation for her surgery.

On January 23, 2013, Stephanie was admitted to the hospital for what should have been a routine outpatient surgical procedure. She sailed through the procedure with no problems. Of course she was tired and in pain when she came out of recovery but was alert and able to communicate her needs. I took photos of her in her hospital bed with her teddy dressed in scrubs to accompany her to surgery. She was released the following day after being examined, showing no signs of complications or infection. When she was released she had no fever, no coughing, and was alert. I brought Stephanie home where she slept on and off, waking up periodically to go to the bathroom and drink juice and water.

The following morning she awakened at about 9:00 AM crying in pain. She had slept for nine hours without pain medication so of course she felt pain at that point. I gave her medication which included an antibiotic that was prescribed in the hospital two days before to ward off infection. She went back to sleep after eating a light meal and sipping on a fruit smoothie. At 2:30 PM her caretaker, Nicole, arrived to relieve me so I could go to work. I didn't leave right away but continued to do as I had been that morning, setting up the guest room.

At around 4:30 PM Nicole walked Stephanie to the bathroom. Afterwards she crawled back in her bed and took a few sips of smoothie and some water. She then went back to sleep. In less than a half hour Nicole called me into Stephanie's room saying she "didn't look right." I saw her lying there with bubbles and saliva coming out of her mouth. She was still breathing the same rhythmic breath that she did when sleeping soundly. I grabbed

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her arm to pull her up but she was limp. I felt her shoulder pull a bit at the socket. This frightened me that I would hurt her so I set her arm back on the bed. I was in total shock. I called out to her again and again but she was nonresponsive. I opened her eyes and saw that her pupils were very small. I stood over her in shock, speechless. I couldn't move. I could barely breathe. I was frozen with shock.

"Call 911," Nicole instructed.

The wait seemed forever. She continued to breath but did not respond to my voice. I felt helpless. I paced back and forth nervously until the EMT unit arrived forcing me to leave the room. They worked on her for at least a half hour. I stood outside crying and praying that they could help her. I begged God not to keep her. Something deep inside of me told me that although she breathed, she was not in that body.

"Send her back, I know you can send her back, she's still breathing, it's not too late," I prayed.

With my head spinning, I called friends and family reaching out to whoever I could in desperation to aid me in this helpless state I was in. I felt a sinking feeling in my chest. I wanted to run, I wanted to punch the brick wall of my garage, I wanted to avoid this; to wake up from this nightmare. A large part of me died that night with her. I could not imagine my life without her. Immediately I felt like I was half out of my body. I sat in shock as the coroner went to her room and did whatever it was he did. I watched as my child's body was brought out in a black zipped bag. The coroner walked over to me solemnly and said in his Cajun accent, "Sorry for your loss, cher."

All I can remember is barely being able to utter a word at that time. My world became dark and dismal. I wanted to die myself. I remember vaguely only being able to take short, shallow breaths. I felt as if I was going to suffocate. My mind was jumbled and I could not string a concise thought together much less a sentence.

I became crippled with grief. Most days, I was plagued with sudden panic attacks and uncontrollable crying. Even though Stephanie was an adult in age, she was still a child mentally. She

was my “forever” child. I had spent almost thirty years caring for her. Every decision in my life revolved around her. She was my reason for existing. She had been my life. Most resources agreed that to lose a child at any age was the most profound type of grief known. But to lose someone like Stephanie was even more difficult. The attachment between the mother and a child with special needs is different from normal bonds.

Having spent the past almost twenty years of my life writing about spirit communication, I expected immediate signs from her. In hindsight I did get quite a few very significant signs in the very beginning, but I was so grief-stricken and still in shock that most of the signs overwhelmed or frightened me. Then I second-guessed myself, wondering if I had experienced what I did because it was what I wanted to believe. My world became a living hell. I later came to understand that grief was to blame. No one can understand the how grief takes hold until it happens to them.

Once the dust settled and the funeral was over and everyone else went back to their own lives, I wanted more signs but got nothing. All I felt was the searing pain of loss. What I wanted was not possible. I wanted my daughter back. Every day was a nightmare. The emptiness I felt every morning was unbearable. Most nights I would cry for a while in my driveway before I could even bring myself to go inside. I desperately wanted signs to comfort me that she was still somewhere and that it was a good place.

In the following weeks, I was in a fog. My heart literally ached for her. I felt as if my very soul had been pulled apart. A piece of me was missing. My every thought was on her. Where did she go? Why was she taken from me? I played the last few moments of her life over and over again in my head. What did I do wrong? Why was God punishing me so? I felt robbed. My beautiful daughter was gone forever from my life and I could barely breathe. I was stuck in a state of panic.

I called the surgeon who was equally perplexed at her unexpected death. He and I went over each minute of the last two days of her life. At the end of it all, we both agreed that

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neither of us could have done anything differently that would have created a different outcome. No one saw this coming. No one could have predicted nor prevented it. She had no symptoms and was on antibiotics for two days.

My belief that all things work for the best for all concerned no longer applied. I no longer believed that God never gave a person anything that they cannot handle. In fact, I hardly even believed in God at all at this point. How could I? My daughter was ripped from my life without warning! In the throngs of grief I was overcome with emotions. It seemed that with Stephanie's passing, all bets were off. I believed nothing that I had before. Everything I had researched, written about, or thought I knew went out the window; as did all logic.

"She was recovering remarkably well then with no warning, she died in her sleep. It didn't make sense. It wasn't fair," I lamented.

For the first few months following her death, I desperately sought out anything and everything to confirm that she was still somewhere and that she was okay. The thought of my daughter just disappearing into nonexistence drove me insane. It challenged every belief I ever had. I became so confused that I was no longer sure what I believed anymore, if anything at all.

I read numerous books on grief in the hopes of working through my misery. I came upon a section on one web site that said a symptom of grief included seeing, hearing or smelling the departed loved one but that it merely represented a *harmless memory*. The thought that my experiences were nothing more than memories drove me to madness.

"I just imagined this?" I screamed inside myself, "None of it was real? The signs I've seen my entire life were nothing more than fantasies? If that is the case, then where is Stephanie?"

I became obsessed with probing further into proving the existence of an afterlife. I had spent so many years investigating paranormal activity but dealt with hauntings left on the physical plane. It had already been determined that over ninety percent of all hauntings were not an intelligent spirit but an energetic impression; a residual haunting.

Kalila Smith with Stephanie Link

“What if,” I wondered, “all hauntings were simply residual energy? What if there *is* nothing else beyond this world? What if I’ve made all of this up; convincing myself of nothing more than fairy tales?”

I began peering beyond the veil that separated our world and whatever there was on the other side. I was so disillusioned that I was not sure anything even existed at all beyond this world. I hoped that I could prove myself wrong. I became my own worse skeptic. But I would examine all of the evidence and try to sort out what was real and what was not. I hoped to find answers and some solace that my daughter who had been my entire world was still somewhere and that I would see her again.