

Chapter 1

Thirty-eight Years Later

We're here. Inside the car, I'm safe. Or at least that's what I tell myself. I dare to peek outside. The knot in my gut grows three sizes. The lush lawn dotted with more Halloween decorations than a Spirit of Halloween store rises in my vision like my own personal staging area between me and the psychic battlefield a few yards away. It's not the plastic skeletons emerging from the front yard of just about every house in the neighborhood. It's not the fake cobwebs blowing in the autumn breeze from the mailbox. It's not even the twelve-foot blowup of three green-faced witches gathered around a cauldron bubbling with smoke from a hidden fog machine. It's what lies beyond.

A terse knock on the window jolts me into the present. "Come on, Abby!" My husband stares at me from chocolate eyes mostly hidden underneath an oversized red cap with a giant "M." Super Mario raps on the window again as if repeating the motion for the tenth time will lure me from the car faster. He looks forward to the annual Halloween party all year and I'm keeping him from the fun.

One last application of cotton candy pink lip gloss in the passenger side mirror and I am out of stall tactics.

My phone vibrates on the dashboard with an incoming text message. The aggravated energy coming off the device raises the small hairs on the back of my neck. Another text from Krissy:

Where the hell are you?

She's been lighting up my phone for the last forty-five minutes with the same message. Why? It's not like I'm the life of the party. If the line of cars down both sides of the neighborhood road is any indication, the party is already in full swing with a record turn-out. What's one less? No one would notice if I bailed.

I'm an introvert, to put it mildly. More like recluse, possibly leaning toward a hermit wannabe. It started at an early age for reasons I couldn't understand then. Having my entire kindergarten class laugh at me the whole school year because I jumped up during nap time screaming and pointing to terrifying shadows growling in the corner did not infuse me with a lot of extroverted *makes-friends-easily* energy. It took us moving two hundred miles away before I could walk into a school without doing nothing more than stare at my feet when I walked down the halls and hide in the far back corner of the class silently begging not to be noticed. Rosedale Elementary was where I finally met my first friend, Karissa.

As a teenager, I outgrew it for a while. Long enough to snag my hot hubby at, of all things, a fraternity Halloween party in college. My post-graduation career revolved around me meeting

with people and team projects all day, every day for nearly two decades. No problems then either. Then I became a stay-at-home mom (SAHM for short) which I guess is what sparked my empath abilities to roar to life. Or maybe it had to do with early onset perimenopause. Who knows? But now I feel everyone's emotions all the time in addition to those of the nonliving variety. It's exhausting.

Tonight, it's not the crowd of inebriated adults dressed up in outlandish costumes that scares me.

It's what is inside the house at 125 Magnolia Lane that gives me the willies. Always has.

"Please, Lord. Have the angels reinforce my bubble so I can have an enjoyable time tonight. Hide me from whatever spirits wanting to chat and give me courage to actually chat with the living instead," I silently pray while exiting the car.

A faint, "You got this, girl!" speaks into my mind. It can only be George, who I refer to as my main spirit guide (well, he's the most vocal anyway). My guides are great. Wish they were here to bat the ghosts residing in Krissy's house away from me tonight, but—from what they've told me—this is a learning experience, so they'll hang back and cheer me on from the comfort of my home three miles away. Traitors, if you'd ask me.

I attempted every excuse in the book to not go to the Halloween party this year. Not unlike previous years, but after toting home a nasty ghostly attachment from the Fourth of July party, I'm not inclined to repeat the incident. My husband, Tanner, would never understand my excuse. And Krissy has a way of forcing her will on all those around her, especially weak-kneed nutcases like me. So, I sucked it up, ordered a costume, baked some raspberry jam cookies shaped like bloody fingers, and... Here I am!

Climbing out of my husband's fun little, low to the ground, sports car in my insanely high-heel shoes and swaths of faux taffeta, a shiver crawls up my spine. My gaze catches an ominous-shaped cloud's crawl across the bright full moon. Someone is watching from the bushes.

"Aaarrgghhh!" Krissy's boys and their neighborhood friends jump out from behind the bushes dressed as zombies, complete with ghastly green faces and... Is an eyeball hanging from CJ's baseball hat?

"Oh, my goodness!" I gasp with a hand pressed against my chest in exaggerated fright. The boys do this every year. Thankfully, I can handle amateur fright night. But I still gotta act surprised and scared. It's all part of the ritual.

Years past, our twin boys, Davis and Easton, joined in on the fun. But I'd insisted they stay home this year with their sister watching horror flicks after an incident last year. Actual Halloween had landed on a Saturday so there were still children trick or treating in the neighborhood. My boys may have been a bit overzealous by chasing after some of the smaller children. One little Dora the Explorer fell and busted her lip, requiring stitches. We'd paid the doctor bill, the boys apologized until they were hoarse, but Janelle Wildwood has yet to forgive them. Best to avoid one of her notorious meltdowns by keeping them away.

"You really got us this year, boys! Great job!" Tanner, ever the affable coach, commends them on their scare tactics. "But where is Louie?"

The youngest of Krissy's boys peeks out from behind a palm tree a few yards ahead, "Hiya, Coach!" He's decked in an all-black body suit. It even covers his face. He could've hidden in plain sight, and I wouldn't have noticed him.

"Louie," Troy, who had been squatting behind the mailbox, scolds him. "You're like supposed to hide until they reach you. You're like the last second fright before they escape to the house. I told you this like a thousand times already."

"Sorry," is barely heard.

Poor kid. Being the youngest and smallest, Louie takes a lot of ribbing from the other boys in the neighborhood.

But Tanner's throat clearing signals a lecture is on the way. "Troy, now what have I told you for the last three years, every year?"

The boy visibly slumps. It's obvious this isn't a new topic of conversation with the team. "Do not use 'like' in a sentence unless it is the proper use of the word."

If nothing else, Coach Tanner will have all the boys on the team speaking proper grammar at their first job interviews. They may not be able to rocket a ball over the fence for a homerun, but they'll have impeccable speech. My husband should have been an English professor instead of a tax attorney. He's an awesome coach. The boys worship him. And he means well with the etiquette lectures. Tanner just needs to learn when to chill. Some of these boys haven't reached double digits yet.

"Exactly." I grab Tanner by the hand to lead him away before he devolves into a full lecture of "like" and other speaking pet peeves. This isn't a night for that. Besides, the boys have to listen to his lectures enough in the dugout. I flash what I hope is a reassuring smile to poor Louie.

There it is. The front door with two giant grim reapers stationed on each side. Their red eyes flickering, daring anyone to enter. A fog machine adds to the ambience. If Krissy only knew she did not need Halloween decorations to make her house scary. At least not to me.

Tanner places his hand on the small of my back. Its warmth is reassuring. Leaning down, his breath warms the side of my neck, he whispers, "It's going to be fine, sweetheart. They are our friends, remember? Parties are for having fun."

Still, the knot in the pit of my belly tightens when he leans around to push the doorbell. It cackles like a witch from *Hocus Pocus*.

A frightful zombie, with fake blood oozing from her cheek and a zombie baby protruding from her belly with a rubber knife, answers the door. "It's about damn time! What took you so long?"

"Sorry, Kris. You should know to expect us to show up fashionably late. When have we ever been on time for anything other than team practices and games?"

Krissy and her husband, Cal, have been our friends since their oldest boy, Cal Jr. (a.k.a. CJ) joined the tee ball team with our twins, Davis and Easton. Cal and Tanner are practically inseparable. They coach the boys' travel baseball team since they graduated from tee ball. Krissy and I, along with several other moms already inside the party, carpool, and coordinate team snacks. We're not besties. I have no bestie if I'm being honest.

Every year, Krissy and Cal throw a baller Halloween party. Krissy plans the event for an entire year and as soon as Labor Day is over in September... Bam! Halloween decorations go up! I barely manage to put out a plastic pumpkin with candy for the trick-or-treaters and turn the porch light on.

With a deep breath, I dare my feet to obey my mind's commands to step over the threshold. Immediately the atmosphere thickens, pressing around me like a vise. Still, I force a well-rehearsed smile and hug Krissy.

Krissy looks me up and down. Her eyebrows furrow and fists are jammed on her hips, then she bursts out laughing. "A princess? Princess Peach? You? Now that's funny!" Her warm hazel eyes slide to Tanner. "Welcome, Mario! Do you only rescue princesses?"

Without waiting for an answer, she abruptly turns to lead us into the kitchen where shot glasses are lined up on the ebony granite counter: Jell-O shots, shot glasses with clear liquid (someone must have got their hands on a few jugs of moonshine again this year), and some glasses with a mass of something white floating in them (Oh, crap! Zombie brain shots again! Those made me retch last year). My strappy silver heels slip on something wet on the dark hardwood floors. Thankfully, Tanner grabs my elbow, before I crash onto my pink taffeta-covered butt.

“Dammit!” Krissy curses. “I just had these floors professionally cleaned, and already there’s stuff spilled all over it. It will be impossible to clean all the sticky crap off tomorrow.”

Tanner makes some remark about why clean before the party, but all I hear is a shrill whistle in my ears. It is not coming from any of the party guests, nor the stereo blaring tunes from the back patio. If I could compare the sound to anything, it would probably be a dog whistle, except I am not a dog (despite what my inner nasty little mean girl says). But I am the only one who hears it.

Dozens of costumed couples mill around the first floor, with more out on the back patio by the pool—everything from vampires by the queso and chips to a couple posing as bacon and eggs refilling their Solo cups with beer from the fridge tap by the tiki bar. And through the large bay window encasing the breakfast area, there’s a mixture of Disney characters and slasher movie killers congregating on the far side of the pool with a large cloud of smoke whirling above them. Looking around, I’m surprised to see the costumes so tame this year. Last year’s event had been overrun by the majority of moms trying to outdo each other with the sexy siren, sexy vampire, sexy nurse, ...

You get the picture.

Maybe a Jell-O shot or two will do me some good.

A tingling sensation as if someone lightly trailed icy fingers down my spine sends a rash of goosebumps over my arms. I shuffle over to my left and avert my eyes. Even if I have to stare at the stainless-steel refrigerator all night, there is no way I will risk turning around to acknowledge what stands behind me. Not making eye contact is key.

If there’s any hope of avoiding a conversation with the “real” dead in this house, I’ll need some help putting them on mute.

Without so much as a word, my hand grabs the proffered blue Jell-O shot in one hand and an orange one in the other. The vodka burns its way down my throat to my empty belly. *Maybe I should have eaten something beforehand.*

“Whoa, girl! Slow down. We got plenty more!” Jillian, Krissy’s bestie, laughs while handing me a shot glass of moonshine. “You gotta try this. It’s birthday cake flavored. Don’t ask Cal where we got it though, cuz you *do not* want to know.”

Jillian. Now she can easily pull off sexy and scary at the same time with her long legs that never seem to end, breathtaking cornflower blue eyes, and flowing blonde hair envied by every tennis tart at the racquet club. Even a mermaid would be jealous. And she’s killing it tonight. Next to Jillian, I pretty much feel like a Teletubby.

With a shrug, we both throw back the shots at the same time. Fire scorches a path from the tip of my tongue all the way down my throat, eviscerating my gut, and blasting out to my fingertips and toes, before threatening to come back out of my mouth in a fireball. Gasping for cool air only makes it worse. Someone shoves a glass of water in my hand which I chug, water drizzling down my chin. Not that it helps much, but it staves off the worst.

A large warm hand pats my upper back. Tanner's laughter booms through the kitchen. Yes, my own husband loves to watch me get lit up. It's a rare event, reminiscent of our wild and woolly days before we had three kids and the obligatory minivan.

Even though my lungs burn as if I've inhaled acid, and the heat torches the lining of my esophagus, the liquid has the perfect effect. The high-pitched whistling stops.

"That's better." The others probably think I mean something else, but it doesn't matter. Whatever supernatural shadowy thing hovering on the balcony overlooking the party has shut up—or at least I'm deaf to it now.

Daring a glance up, a black mist dances erratically, all the while its piercing red eyes glare at me. It's not happy to be ignored again.

Screw you, whatever you are! I'm off the clock.

Jillian hands me another shot glass. Oh, fantastic! The zombie brains concoction. "Count of three... One, two, three."

The pinging at the base of my skull signals the alcohol I've already consumed is going to lead to one hell of a hangover. Still, that has not stopped me from allowing some dude I don't recognize in a Humpty Dumpty costume to refill my mug with the latest concoction from the bartender. On the other hand, I know that's a non-alcoholic beer in Cal's Yeti mug. He whips up amazing cocktails, but he's always the clear-eyed, stable one at his own parties.

At this point how the drinks taste no longer matters as long as the alcohol keeps the snarly spectral creature away from my awareness. It's been mute since the earlier zombie shots, but it hasn't disappeared. The misty entity sneaks around behind my back like it was my own creepy shadow.

It isn't exactly a new sensation. I've felt things that weren't *there* for most of my life. Seen some weird stuff. Heard weirder stuff. It was easier to brush it off as my overactive imagination during my childhood. My parents insisted that was all it was and paid the doctors good money to make sure I towed the line. I was warned to never ever say anything about it again or they'd lock me away at Mountain View, a now defunct mental hospital thirty minutes from our hometown. So, I got really good at pretending to be the little "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" monkey.

A few years earlier, home alone watching cheesy chick flicks while folding laundry, the smell of decay like fresh compost and mulch in the garden choked me so badly I had to stop denying the truth to myself. They (the ghosties) do not like being ignored. The longer I pretended they weren't there, the more aggressive they got. Finally, I shouted to the empty air, "All right! What the holy fudgsicles do you want?"

Okay, so maybe I used another F word at the time, but I'm trying to work on my language after both of my twin sons were sentenced to one week in-school detention for cussing. Their excuse? They learned the bad words from their mom! Shocker, right?

Turns out the spirit needed help finding his way to the *light*. After trying to get my attention in other ways, he'd decided to gross me out with the stench of his rotting corpse in his coffin six feet under in a cemetery adjacent to a ball field we'd visited in Augusta for a baseball tournament. Not knowing how to assist this lost soul, I pulled out my phone to look up what to do. You'd be amazed at what you can find on the internet!

And this has been my life ever since. Carrying on conversations with the dead while trying to hide these chats with empty air from my friends.

“Just my friggin’ luck!” I mutter under my breath before gulping down more of my mystery drink while watching in horror while the black mist slinks around the other guests, sniffing women’s hair, and even pinching the German beer wench on the ass. Is that Susannah from across the street? I almost didn’t recognize her with the blonde wig and pigtails. She instantly pivots to slap an innocent cowboy with a beer in one hand and his wooden toy stick horse in the other.

Closing my eyes, I recite a calming mantra. The alcohol muddles my brain so only gobbledygook comes out. When I pry open my eyes, one after another, the shadow creature is nowhere to be seen. “Thank you, God!” For the first time all evening, the crimped muscles in my shoulders relax.

Tanner and Cal huddle by the television over the patio bar watching college football. Tanner has lost the oversized gloves in order to keep a better grip on his whiskey glass. Cal may be the host of the event, but he does the least as far as dressing up for Halloween. This year he’s wearing his referee shirt with a whistle hanging from his neck and black sweatpants.

I attempt conversations with several groups of people throughout the evening but end up suffering from standing around in three-inch heels, being uncomfortably silent and listening in to others’ conversations. I melt into the background as I always do at these events. Cleopatra wearing a white flowing tunic with a massive, golden headdress and snake-shaped armbands—and whose name I can’t recall—bumps into me, spilling her drink and mine all over me.

“Oops, didn’t see you there, Abby.” She saunters over to the bar where Cal pushes another glass to her without even taking his eyes off the game on the television.

An icy breeze washes over the nape of my neck. Something whispers in my ear. I feel its fetid breath on my cheek. “You’re just as invisible to them as we are, but the difference is you aren’t dead...yet.”

Too annoyed to argue with the spirit, I walk outside to brave the cooler weather and take up a spot on a cushy loveseat by the firepit all by myself. Besides... It’s not lying.

Bonus points for giving me an excuse to kick off these blasted silver heels. One more minute in those things I’m sure to either break my ankle or stumble into the pool.

It’s a glorious starry night with a perfect full moon, the Hunter’s Moon or Harvest Moon, I forget which. My knowledge of astrological stuff and how solar and lunar phases affect us all is rudimentary at best. Full moons signify completion, at least that’s what I heard from some astrologer’s podcast a couple of years ago. I’ll gladly accept the completion of this evening so I can return home to pop a couple Ibuprofen, guzzle a Gatorade, and fall into bed.

Sitting crisscross applesauce on the loveseat, I take several deep breaths, inhaling through my nose and exhaling from my mouth. Each inhale a second longer, each exhale a second longer than the inhale. My eyes close. A gentle energy like a soothing breeze off the ocean washes over me from the crown of my head to the tip of my toes.

“Sorry, darling,” George, my most vocal guide, whispers in my ear. “Things are about to get a little spicy.”

The hairs at the base of my neck and my arms stand straight up rocketing me out of my cocoon of calm. My alcoholic fog evaporates in an instant.

“What the hell?” The words barely pass my lips when an earsplitting shriek pierces the quiet. Every party guest inside the house bursts through the patio doors screaming, some tripping over each other. Everyone floods outside.

Some guests climb over the fence to run around the neighbor’s house. Others congregate around the patio tiki bar, talking all at once. Cal, blue eyes wide, screams for them to shut up because he can’t understand a word anyone is saying.

“Hey, anyone seen Krissy?”

The acid in the pit of my stomach bubbles up. I know without even having to look inside. This isn't your typical mishap. There's no fire or other *normal* emergency. This is *my* kind of emergency. The kind I don't like to deal with in front of friends and family, not even my hubby.

“Good luck, kiddo!” Spirit guide George hauls me to my feet, then smacks me on the tush. “You got this!”

What is it that I've got exactly?

While the crowd surrounding the tiki bar tries to hash out what's happened, I sneak behind the crowd to slink inside, my heart beating a rock-n-roll solo in my chest. Krissy's missing and so is my shadow friend who's been tailing me all night.

There are no such things as coincidences.

The disco ball hanging above the banquet table set with Halloween-themed desserts splatters circles of light across the ceiling and walls. Dropped Solo cups and the tiny Jell-O shot cups litter the kitchen. The contents of a Jameson bottle spill over the granite island countertop. Peeking around the corner, the living room is vacant. The tv perched above the fireplace mantel still shows the football game without sound.

Krissy's nowhere to be seen in the living room or kitchen. The foyer is empty except for the photo booth she sets up every year. It guarantees pictures of all the silly shenanigans at the party will be posted to her social media by noon tomorrow.

Maybe not this year.

“Kris! Kris, where are you?” I should be yelling, but all I manage is a whisper.

All the lights flicker, then go dark. A raspy voice echoes in my head, “Follow me if you want to find your friend.”

Something colder than a meat freezer encircles my wrist, leading me up the spiral staircase to the second floor. The house lights all burst back on at the same time. And go dark again as my feet stumble midway up the stairs. Shadows dance along the walls and whisk by at ridiculous speeds.

Swallowing the lump of abject fear in my throat, I grasp the railing for balance. I may not have come to the psychic game until the last few years, but I know enough to not be afraid, or at least not to show fear. Then again, up until tonight, less than one percent of the spirits I've dealt with have been malevolent. Generally, they only want help to move on. Simple stuff. Others? Well, I'm ashamed to admit it, but I am not above pretending I don't see them. If they think I can't see them or hear them, maybe just maybe they'll go away. Usually, they become more enraged.

Kinda like tonight.

This darkness oozes with a ribbon of evil, true evil. This is far more than the mischievous entity shadowing me all night.

Maybe it's time to call in the Ghost Brothers or some television psychic like Amy Allan.

Reason Number One I have worked overtime to avoid whatever resides in this house along with the living—the supernatural elements here are way above my pay grade. Not that I have ever actually been paid for clearing houses or anything. Oh, goodness no! That would entail letting people know what I am and that is *not* going to happen if I have anything to say about it.

No, being in the proverbial psychic closet is fine with me. It's cozy in here.

But Krissy's missing with all her party guests scared out of their minds outside.

“Kris!” The knot in my gut from earlier in the evening returns with a vengeance, twisting my insides into pretzels.

At the top of the stairs, my white-knuckled hands grasp the iron railing on the landing. The house is empty. Drinks are splattered all over the Brazilian cherry wood floors. From this angle, it

looks like the patio door has been torn off its hinges. And the smell... What the hell is that stench? Not quite sulfuric, but still pungent enough to make my nose crinkle in disgust and my eyes water.

"Come, little one." This voice is smooth, honeyed, but sounds as if transported down a long pipeline underground.

Seriously? Even the damn ghosts have to make derogatory comments about my height.

The voices from outside fall away. All that remains is the disembodied voice and my own thundering heartbeat. Straightening my spine, I swallow the lump in my throat for probably the thirteenth time tonight. "Okay, lead the way."

The icy grip on my wrist tightens, pulling me toward the playroom over the garage. Invisible concrete weighs down my every step, causing the muscles in my calves to burn with the effort. It's a good thing I ditched the impossible princess high heels earlier.

"Kris!" Cal's voice breaks through the heavy atmosphere. It would probably be better if no one interfered until I figure out what is going on—at least, not until I have a better grasp on the situation. Having Cal burst in like the hero in an action flick is not the greatest idea right now. But if one of the *Ghost Hunters* dudes ran up the stairs and saved the day, I'd swoon in relief. I'm not one to turn down a hero. I would rather it not be me.

"Abby, what the hell..." A strong hand yanks me around. "What are you doing?" My husband's dark chocolate brown eyes radiate concern, uncertainty, and more than a touch of annoyance. "You won't believe the stories the others are telling outside." His voice trails off; his eyes catch sight of the gigantic chandelier swinging in a haphazard circular motion over the living room. Any more force and the chandelier will crash down.

Cal races up behind Tanner, followed by Jillian in all her slinky vampire glory, her light blue eyes shining so brightly I'm surprised laser beams aren't shooting out of her eye sockets.

In unison, they squeak out, "What the hell..."

Hey, this is what you get when you throw a Halloween party in an actual haunted house!

"Guys, why don't you go back downstairs? I'll be okay. Just gonna find Kris and we'll meet you outside. She's probably gone to the bathroom." Despite frayed nerves sending shivers throughout my body, I can't believe I delivered such a lame line without so much as a tremor in my voice.

Both men shake their heads. Neither takes another step forward. Jillian, on the other hand, swallows hard, reaches out and grasps my wrist. Her grip tightens, but the entity holding onto my other wrist yanks harder in the opposite direction. I'm caught between an angry spirit and the brutal strength of a friend only trying to help.

Not gonna lie. I'm more terrified of Jillian.

Tanner pleads, "Please, Abby. You don't know what's in there." The panic in his eyes is easy to read.

An inexplicable burst of anger snaps me out of my funk—a more common occurrence since I hit the big four O. My head spins around to glare at him. "Neither. Do. You."

Where did that spunk come from?

Despite keeping my typically mild-mannered, epitome of respectable husband in the dark about my "gifts" for the entirety of our married life, he's about to learn the full-on ugly truth the hard way. I'd prefer to take an oath of honesty on the Bible and lie through my teeth in order to avoid telling him. I'd rather roast myself over a pit with an apple crammed into my mouth.

You get the general gist, right?

Don't get me wrong. Tanner is the absolute best husband and father! Truly, the total package. But he's your quintessential non-believer in all things paranormal. Everything must have a rational explanation. One plus one must equal two. No debates.

When my spiritual gifts had been on hiatus, everything had been fine. I was happy. We were happy. Why would I want to bust that up by going delulu on him? Every time I've attempted to confess to him, my palms go sweaty, and my throat closes. The last try robbed me of my voice for over a week.

So why am I barking at him like it's his fault for not having a friggin' clue?

No time to break it to him gently. I'll think about that tomorrow. If there is a tomorrow.

Every step grows harder to make the closer I get to the playroom door. My invisible cement shoes aren't helping, but neither is Jillian yanking me in the opposite direction.

Yep, I may need a chiropractor after this.

Shadows cluster along the walls, up the ceiling, slithering by my feet like a snake along the wooden planks. A wave of dizziness crashes over me, intensifying with every step until my fingers finally reach out toward the doorknob.

"Abby." Tanner calls out, but it is too late. The door swings open. I hadn't touched it.

Windows cover the outer wall of the room. All closed. A frigid wind circles the room, sending a mass of toys into a mini tornado. The large screen television lets out an eerie flickering glow. Despite the wind and the tv, it's quiet. No... Silent.

Jillian rushes into the room, screaming for Krissy, only to be violently tossed back into the hallway like a ragdoll. She shrieks, followed by a loud crash. The guys yell for me to get out of there, but the french doors slam shut leaving me alone in the room. The walls, ceiling, and floor shake with the force of the wind.

Something soft smacks the tip of my nose. Looking down, a foam dart lays at my feet. Good thing they don't have real darts because that would've hurt!

At first, I don't see Krissy and open my mouth to call out for her, but whatever held onto my wrist now whips me around to the left so fast the bones in my neck crack.

There, standing plastered against the far wall with her hands spread wide above her head; her usually hazel eyes shining with an iridescent silver light; strawberry-blonde hair streaked with red and black hairspray splayed across the wall; and the toy zombie baby straining against her shirt as if trying to break free waving the plastic knife like a horror film doll, is my friend, Krissy, with her mouth opened in a soundless scream.