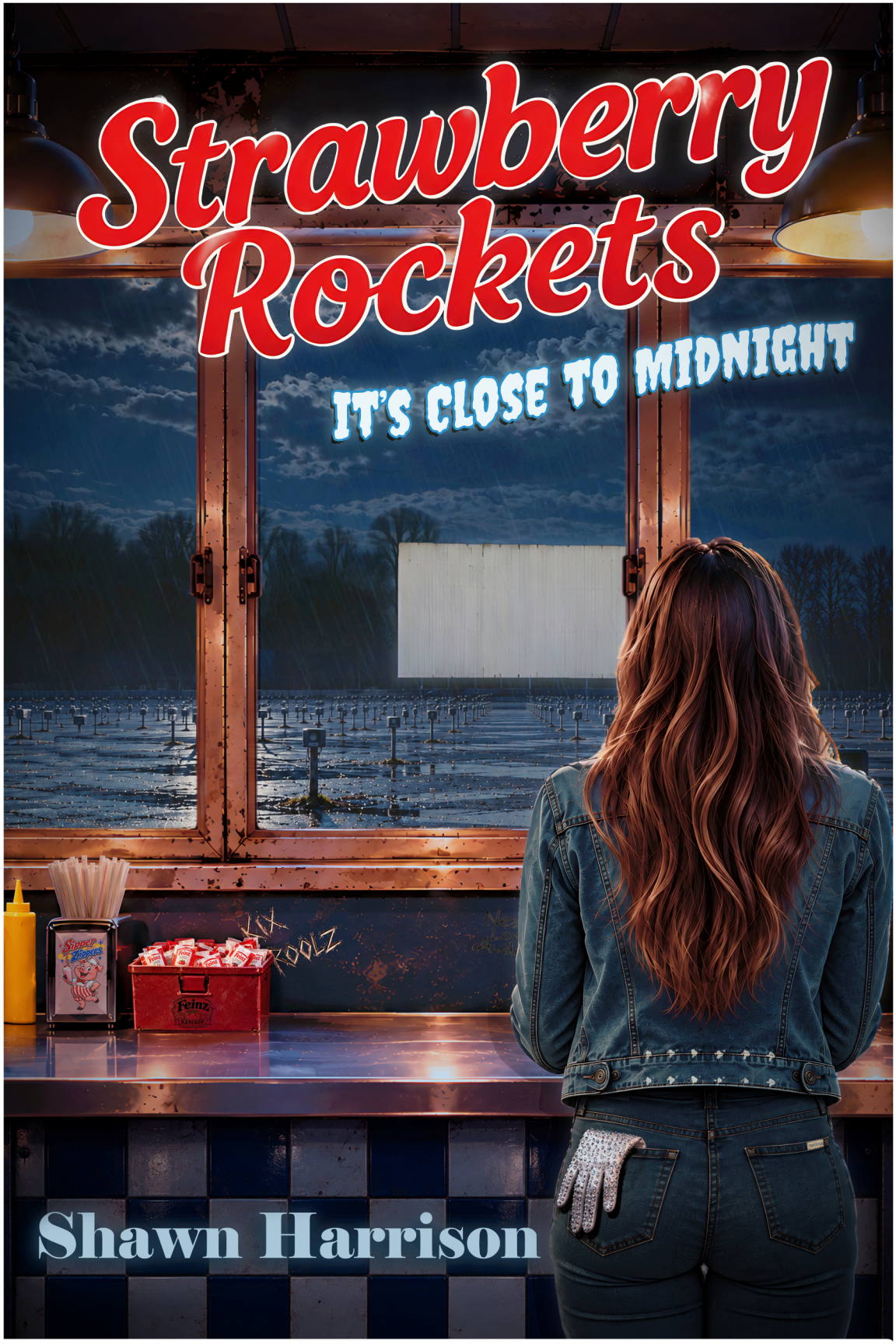

Strawberry Rockets
IT'S CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT
Shawn Harrison


EB IV
BOOKS

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2026 by Shawn Harrison
All rights reserved.

Edited by Nickcoleeta Cruso
Published by EB IV Books
ebivbooks.com

First edition, 2026

Chapter 1 1
Chapter 2 7
Chapter 3 15
Chapter 4 23
Chapter 5 30
Chapter 6 36
Chapter 7 43
Chapter 8 55
Chapter 9 64

Strawberry Rockets

IT'S CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT

Chapter 1

"I can so carry a tune," Marty Robbins said as she flung a yo-yo downward. The plastic Duncan sped toward the floor, its shiny surface faintly reflecting the red and green lights from the extravagant Christmas garland wrapped around the Sears entrance. Then, with a flick of her wrist, she brought it back up into her palm.

"Yeah, but it sounds like you carry it in an old sock," Krista Flemming said, digging through her purse. Long, wavy blonde hair stuck out from under her red knit winter hat. When she located the tube of strawberry-flavored ChapStick, she took it out and applied it to her dry lips.

"Let her sing, Kris," Audrey Peterson said. She sat cross-legged on the marble ledge of a giant concrete planter, eating a soft pretzel from Hot Sam. Behind her, several large philodendrons sprouted from the soil inside the planter.

The girls hung out in the Shermer Falls mall atrium, on the first floor, outside Sears. Around them, hundreds of Christmas shoppers bustled about; a steady murmur of people, both cheerful and frustrated, showed no sign of relenting. Under the din of chatter, an instrumental version of *'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas'* played over the mall's P.A.

"Will you two ever get along?" Shelby Ashlyn asked Krista and Marty, tossing the plastic stick that had held her cotton

candy dessert moments earlier into the trash can. Hanging from the rafters, two stories above her, was a banner reading: *'Shermer Falls Mall Wishes You a Merry Christmas and a Happy 1984!'*

"Maybe if she stops being lame," Marty said, grinning.

Krista brushed her off with a sweep of the hand.

A man, in his early twenties, on the other side of the trash bin noticed her long strawberry-blond hair and green eyes and smiled. "You're with that band, aren't you?" he asked. "The one that plays at the drive-in?"

"Strawberry Rockets, yeah," Shelby answered. Depending on the weather, Shelby's hair was either wavy or curly. When wavy, she noticed she got more attention from men.

"Yeah, Strawberry Rockets. And the band's The Allurettes, right?"

"Yeah."

"You girls are all right. I've seen your band play a few times. My name's Dennis." He reached out his hand.

"Shelby," Shelby said, introducing herself and shaking his hand. Then she motioned toward her bandmates. "And that's Krista, Audrey, and Marty."

For Shelby, this was abnormal territory. Normally, Audrey monopolized the male gaze. Not that she or Marty blamed Audrey; she was beautiful—long, velvety brown hair, soft

features, and eyes so dark brown a cartographer could get lost in them. Marty blamed her height for not attracting the dudes. Shelby blamed her shyness; if The Allurettes had been The Beatles, Shelby would've been George Harrison—the shy, quiet type. Krista was the only one who didn't seem to mind this; her main focus was music.

After waving to the girls, Dennis said, "Say, me and my buddies are having a *Thriller* watch party tonight—big premiere, you know; you girls wanna come?"

"Um…" Shelby looked over her shoulder, hoping to find a little help from her friends.

"We kinda have our own little shin-dig going on tonight," Krista said, sensing Shelby's apprehension.

Marty giggled.

"What?" Krista asked, turning to her.

"Shin-dig?" the shrimp giggled harder. "You talk like my grandma."

"What would we do without you, *little* Marty?" Krista asked, sardonically, pinching Marty's cheek.

"Ow," Marty said, ceasing her laughter and rubbing the spot.

"Thanks for the invite, though," Audrey said to Dennis.

Disappointed, he turned and left. As he did, his buddy teased him: "See, I told you I should've asked them."

"You're such a heartbreaker," Krista said to Audrey.

"Just like Pat Benatar," Shelby said.

Except for Marty, the girls wore winter jackets, hats, and boots. The Allurettes' drummer—she who could not carry a tune—wore her patented black leather motorcycle jacket—an article she never left home without—jeans, and Doc Martens. As for a hat, forget about it. Of the four, Marty was the only one who tried a hairstyle other than long and down around the shoulders. She attempted a new wave hairdo; her long brown locks touched the top of her shoulders while thick, choppy, voluminous bangs—held in place by copious amounts of hairspray—swept across her forehead. By the end of most days, however, her bangs usually collapsed back to their accustomed position. She didn't need a winter hat speeding up this process.

They went to the mall because Shelby wanted a new outfit for the watch party and had gotten secret intel that The Gap was having a flash sale that afternoon. Once there, she found she'd been given a bum steer; there was no flash sale. However, The Limited was having a sale. Shelby picked up a few outfits. One—a red leather skirt and black top—would be perfect for the watch party.

Afterward, Marty remembered she had to pick up a new pair of drumsticks, and Krista needed new bass strings at The

Music Shop—Shermer Falls Mall's version of Guitar Center. As usual, they neglected to consider holiday traffic; their hour-long trip quickly turned into a three-hour hang.

"This is going to be so much fun tonight," Audrey said. "Remember, on the way home we need to stop by the grocery store and pick up stuff to make Chex Mix for our little… shindig." She looked at Krista and winked.

"You guys ready to go to The Music Shop?" Shelby asked.

"Sure thing," Audrey said, tossing her pretzel wrapper in the trash can.

As they fought their way into the horde and made their way down the concourse, Marty started singing Michael Jackson's *'Thriller'* again. Krista rolled her eyes. "I didn't think I'd see the day when our little Marty would be singing pop music."

This shut Marty up quick.

"Krista's right, Marty-mart," Shelby said. "You claim to hate pop music."

Marty thought for a moment, puffing out her cheeks. Had they stumped her? Heck no. "Usually," Marty responded, "you're right. Pop music is a scourge upon our nation… and my ears. But I *am* a horror movie fan. Did you see those gnarly zombies in the commercial?! Those things looked wicked. And this is going to premiere at midnight!" She put a hand over her heart, gesturing that the Michael Jackson video might be the

greatest thing ever. "A midnight premiere is *per*-fect!" She sang a bit more of the chorus, then said, "It's catchy, too."

"Who all's coming?" Audrey asked, pushing through the sea of people.

"I invited Aaron and Roz," Marty said. "But Aaron can't come." She said this with a bit of disappointment.

"I invited Todd, Gary, Debbie, and Wendy," Krista said.

"The giggle twins," Marty said. "Oh, that's great."

"So Debbie and Wendy giggle a lot," Krista said with a shrug. "They're happy people."

"They're airheads," Marty shot back.

"And airheads are usually very happy," Krista said.

"They're gonna be laughin' through the whole video," Marty said.

"Pardon me, ma'am, but is that red or white whine?" Krista asked.

"I invited Steve," Shelby said, hoping her interjection would head off another spat between the blonde bassist and leather-clad drummer. "But he said he's going somewhere else."

"Maybe they're going to Dennis' house," Krista joked.

"Forget about them," Audrey said. "We're gonna be together. This is going to rock."

Chapter 2

That night, the girls gathered in an apartment above the Petersons' detached garage, which they fondly referred to as "The Loft." Audrey's father built the open-plan apartment years earlier and intended to rent it. Yet, when Krista and Shelby moved to Maryland and joined The Allurettes nearly two years prior, it became their place.

They called it The Loft, even though it had nothing in common with an actual loft in the architectural sense. The garage steps led up to the loft's kitchen. Next came the living room, followed by the bedroom. Without walls, you could see the entire space from the entrance door. Four large windows around the girls' beds looked out onto a field and the woods beyond, at the back of the place. The only walled-off rooms were the bathroom off the living room and the walk-in closet next to Krista's bed.

While Krista made Chex Mix and Audrey spread icing on a cake in the kitchen, Shelby and Marty were in the bathroom, putting on their makeup and doing up their hair.

"You guys have to hurry up in there," Krista said. "Aud and I have to get ready, too."

"We're hurrying, we're hurrying," Shelby said.

"What time is it?" Marty asked.

"Ten," Krista answered. "We have two hours until the premiere."

Shelby walked out of the bathroom and stood behind the couch. She wore a black cashmere sweater and a jean skirt over black stockings and dark blue legwarmers. "I still can't believe I left my shopping bags outside of Sears. Seventy buck-a-roonies down the drain."

"We'll go back tomorrow," Audrey said. "Someone might've taken them to the lost and found."

Shaking her head as if to say, *'Yeah, sure someone did that,'* she walked back into the bathroom.

"You're making two bowls of the Chex Mix, right?" Audrey asked.

"Yes," Krista said, her voice flustered. "You've asked me three times now."

All the lights in the loft were on. For the party, the girls tidied up; Shelby and Krista made their beds, Audrey vacuumed, and Marty dusted. Still, four half-full cups of various sodas, three open magazines—one Cosmo, one Guitar World, and one Rolling Stone—two open compacts, and one pink-and-white headband remained scattered across the glass-topped coffee table. As for the brand-spanking-new fruit-punch stain on the carpet… well… it was best not to talk about that. Let's just say Marty felt really bad.

The video for *'Love Is a Battlefield'* by Pat Benatar played on television. On top of the set, red globules of wax were doing their 'up and down' thing inside the glass housing of a red lava lamp. Behind the TV, Shelby's white Channel Islands surfboard hung on the wall. Below this, propped in their stands, Krista's Gibson Victory bass and Shelby's Les Paul Standard stood.

"What time are people coming over?" Audrey asked.

As soon as the words left her mouth, someone knocked on the door.

"Now," Krista said, going to answer the door. The moment she opened it and said, "Hey, Roz," the phone rang.

Shelby came out of the bathroom and grabbed it. "Hello." After listening for a moment, she put the phone to her chest and said, "Aud, it's your dad. He says the pizza man is asking for $16.50."

"Oh shoot," Audrey said before licking icing off her fingers. "I forgot about the pizzas. Tell him I'm coming, Shell-Bell."

"She'll be right over, Mr. Peterson," Shelby said before hanging up.

Audrey only had a moment to greet Roz with a hug. "I have to go pay the pizza guy." Then, to Krista, she asked, "Kris, do you have a twenty? I'll pay you back."

Sighing, Krista said, "Yeah, but I need it back next week. I plan on going to the roller rink and need new wheels for my skates."

"Audrey, you're the queen of borrowing money," Roz said. Of all their friends, Roz had the most unique style. Part of her hair was dyed green and another part red, while a third part still showed her natural brown color. She dressed like that new singer Cyndi Lauper—one part eclectic, two parts maximalist, bracelets galore, and eleven-point-three parts thrift store. However, she didn't copy the musician's style; Roz had dressed this way long before the singer showed up on MTV.

"I'm also the queen of paying money back," Audrey said, raising her brows up and down.

As Audrey descended the garage steps, Debbie and Wendy were walking through the garage's side door. Wendy, a blonde with big, poufy hair—teased to perfection—wore pink plastic earrings and a white knit sweater with an all-over geometric pink design. Her best friend, Debbie, a brunette with big, poufy hair—teased to perfection—wore blue plastic earrings and a black knit sweater with an all-over geometric blue design. Although they wore completely different outfits, they somehow matched. And even though they had different hair

colors, they somehow matched, too. Like Marty and Audrey, Wendy and Debbie had been best friends since grade school.

"Hey," Audrey said, hugging them at the door. "I thought you were coming with Todd and Gary?"

"Yeah, well, Mr. Herschel is opening the high school's AV room for some of his old students to watch the movie, so they decided to go there," Wendy said.

"Movie?" Debbie questioned, giggling.

Giggling, Wendy corrected herself. "I meant video."

For some reason, this correction made them laugh even harder.

"Yeah," Debbie said, trying to regain her composure. "They're being totally lame. They think it'll be extra scary if they watch it at the school after hours." After she said this, the girls giggled again.

This would've seemed out of place for anyone else, but Debbie and Wendy were famous for their giggling fits. During senior year, their social studies teacher had to sit them on opposite sides of the room to keep the 'giggle' pollution to a minimum.

"But we're gonna watch it on my father's 32-inch big-screen TV down at Strawberry Rockets," Audrey said. "Why would they want to watch it on one of those small school televisions?"

"Because they're acting grody," Wendy said, giggling. "Plus, Todd's mad at Debbie."

"And Gary's mad at Wendy," Debbie said. This little tidbit got their giggle motors revving again.

"Oh, cool!" Wendy said when she noticed the front of Marty's bass drum—her kit was still set up in the garage from yesterday's practice session. Her enthusiastic declaration regarded Marty's painting of the band's name on the front-facing drumhead: *'The Allurettes'* spelled out in neat black and pink acrylic color, with a few stars surrounding it.

Debbie knelt beside it and touched it. "Who did it?"

"Marty," Audrey said. "She wouldn't let anyone else touch those drums."

"That's one thing I've always wanted to know: why do you guys call yourselves The Allurettes?" Wendy asked.

"Originally we were Allure, but since my mom loved the Ronettes—especially Be My Baby—we added the *'ettes'* to the end of it; it's kind of a tribute to her."

"That's so touching," Debbie said. Audrey appreciated the absence of giggling here.

"Well, everyone's upstairs; I'm going to pay the pizza guy."

When Audrey got to her house, the pizza guy was gone, and the pizzas were on the kitchen counter. "You paid, Dad?"

"Yeah," Hank said. "The delivery guy jabbered like a man without a friend. I wanted to get him out of here."

"Well, here's the money for it." Audrey handed him the twenty.

Waving it away, Hank asked, "What time are you all going over to the drive-in?"

"Probably around eleven. The video doesn't premiere until midnight."

"Well, I rolled the television out into the employee lounge. I don't want anyone in the office, Audrey."

"Sure thing, Dad."

Hank and his late wife Carolyn bought Strawberry Rockets Drive-In years earlier, when Audrey was a kid. For the past two years—give or take a couple of months—during spring and summer, The Allurettes had played their music on a makeshift stage in the parking lot before nightfall, acting somewhat like a house band. After their performance, the four of them would work the concession stand. During December, Hank closed the place. So he let Audrey invite a few people to watch *Thriller* on his new big-screen TV. The television up in The Loft was only 17 inches. Way too small, according to Krista and Marty—one of the few things they ever agreed on—to watch *Thriller's* premiere.

"And if you get into the snacks, don't go crazy."

"I promise, we'll only stay in the lounge. If anyone wants candy, I'll make sure they don't take much. And I'll make sure all the doors are locked when we leave."

"Good girl."

Audrey kissed her father on the cheek and thanked him again for the pizzas. He told her he was going to bed and wished her a fun night.

Chapter 3

When Audrey got back to the loft, Roz was on the phone. Consternation crossed her face.

"What's wrong with her?" Audrey asked Krista.

"I don't know. Her brother, Ian, called and asked for her."

"I hope nothing's wrong."

In the living room, Shelby and Marty sat on the couch with Debbie. Wendy sat on the floor, resting her back against the couch's arm. Except for Marty, each had a handful of Chex Mix, popping pieces in their mouths now and then, as they watched the video for *'Union of the Snake'* by Duran Duran on MTV. While Shell-Bell and the giggle twins—who were living up to their names in spades—debated the hotness of Simon Le Bon, Roger Taylor, and John Taylor, Marty sat at the end of the couch with her head pushed back against the cushion, staring up at the ceiling; the expression on her face asked, *'Why me?'*

"Pizza's here," Audrey said.

Marty was the first to hop up and rush over. Audrey smiled at this. Ever since they were kids, Marty always wanted to be first to the food. Not because she was selfish—she'd share her last bite of food with a stranger. However, she didn't like getting food after it had already been picked over; things like pizza and chicken from KFC. Even if no one touched the

piece she'd chosen, there was always the possibility that someone might've. This was selective too. If it had just been the Allurettes, she wouldn't have acted this way. But with company, and not knowing where *their* hands had been, she needed to be first.

As the others gathered around the kitchen island to grab a slice, Roz hung up the phone.

"What was that all about, Roz?" Krista asked before popping a Cheeto into her mouth.

"My brother and his buddy were driving home from the community college earlier tonight, and he said there were a bunch of cop cars parked outside of the old Franklin Cemetery, out on Frostburg Road. He stopped to see what was going on, and one of the officers said someone dug up a few of the graves, *including* Claire Reeves's. The cop said they think it's some prank because of this *Thriller* video."

"That's ghastly!" Shelby said, picking green peppers off her slice.

"Who's Claire Reeves?" Audrey asked.

"Who's Claire Reeves?" Debbie asked, flabbergasted. At this, Wendy giggled.

Audrey raised an eyebrow. What was the world coming to? *She* didn't know something one of the *giggle twins* knew!

"You live here, and you don't know who Claire Reeves is?" Roz asked, walking across the living room into the kitchen.

Turning to Marty, Audrey used her eyes to silently ask her best friend if she'd ever heard of Claire Reeves. Marty only shrugged.

"You know that old broken-down mansion in the woods behind this place?" Roz asked, nodding toward the back of the loft.

"Yeah. Mulberry Place," Audrey said.

"Claire Reeves and her husband, Sisk, owned that place in the late 1700s/early 1800s," Roz said. "They started the Reeves Academy."

"That massive school on Ashburn Road?" Marty asked.

"It's massive now," Roz said. "But back then, it was nothing more than a two-room school."

"Claire Reeves is, like, totally a local legend," Wendy said, then giggled.

"Totally," Debbie broke in.

"Wait a second." A light bulb went off in Audrey's head. "There are these two portraits hanging in the library of Reeves Academy—one of Sisk Reeves and one of Claire."

"Oh, yeah," Marty said. "Claire's wearing a gnarly-looking gold brooch with a red ruby in that portrait. That thing is ugly."

"That's because you hate jewelry," Audrey said.

"Rumor has it," Roz continued, "the couple killed a transient woman in 1799 and hid her body in the wall next to their fireplace. My grandfather was on the crew that did the restoration in 1918. He told my father they actually found human bones right where the stories said they should be."

"Really?!" Shelby gasped and put a hand over her heart. "In that house back in those woods? Seriously?"

"Yep," Roz said.

A shiver ran up Shelby's spine. "I'm never sleeping with the shades open again."

"The shades are open now, Shell-Bell," Marty said, smirking. "And with all the lights on in here. Any ol' corpse could be looking at us right this very moment, and we wouldn't even know it."

"Ooohhhh," Debbie squealed. "Don't say that, you're like, totally freaking me out."

"I heard Mulberry Place was haunted, but I didn't know all that," Audrey said, ignoring Debbie.

"You all are crazy," Krista said, walking into the living room and sitting on the sofa with a plate full of sausage-and-green-pepper pizza. On MTV, the video for *'What Are We Doing Here'* by Andre Cymone was on.

"You don't believe it, Kris?" Audrey asked. For some reason, Wendy and Debbie giggled at this question. For

reasons easily explainable, Marty rolled her eyes at their giggling.

"It doesn't matter whether I believe it or not. It's a fun story, anyway. Especially for tonight." Krista then leaned over, grabbed a handful of Chex Mix, crunched it up in her fist, and sprinkled it over her pizza. Then she chomped down. Mid-munch, she glanced up at everyone. They stared at her as if they were gazing upon a rare creature not seen by humans in centuries. With a full mouth, she mumbled, "Rye it; is 'ood."

And that's just what Debbie and Wendy did. Giggling, they skipped over to the Chex Mix bowl, grabbed handfuls, crushed the treat in their fists, and sprinkled it over their pizza. Taking a chomp, Wendy mumbled, "Id is 'ood." She then giggled, spewing out crumbs as she did. This got her giggling more.

"And you know what else?" Roz asked, sprinkling some crunched-up Chex Mix on her pepperoni slice. "People say the transient woman they killed was actually a witch, and that whoever disturbs her bones dies a horrible death."

"Did your grandfather die a horrible death?" Marty asked. She didn't try hiding the snark in her tone.

"No, he lived to the ripe old age of 90. *But*… two days after they completed the renovation, his boss—the man who actually handled the bones—was killed when his leg got stuck in a threshing machine's belt."

"What's a threshing machine?" Shelby asked, eyes wide, breath held.

"It's a farming machine that separates grain from stalks. This time, it separated his skin from his body… and his foot from his leg. He bled to death before help could arrive."

"Boy," Marty said, "I bet that threshing machine was like, *'Dag-nab-it, that guy really grinds my gears'*."

"Gross, Marty," Shelby said.

"Totally heinous," Debbie said.

"Totally," Wendy agreed.

Throwing her hands up, Marty said, "The guy died, like…" She started counting the years in her head.

"Sixty-five years ago," Audrey said.

"Thanks. He died sixty-five years ago. Unless he's a ghost too, I don't think he minds a little joke at his expense."

"Also," Roz continued, doing her best to ignore the shrimp, "it's said that when the woman died, she put a spell on Claire and Sisk Reeves, saying that they would walk the world again as the undead."

"So maybe no one dug up the bodies at all," Wendy said. "Maybe they totally climbed out of the graves themselves."

"I'm *so* sure," Audrey said, crossing her arms. "You almost had me until that undead part. Everyone's seen the *'Thriller*

commercial and all the zombies in it; if you're trying to scare us, you should've come up with something better than that."

"Suit yourself," Roz said after taking a swig of Coke. "But don't come screaming to me when old Sisk Reeves comes into your bedroom tonight and tries to eat your brains."

"If he's looking for brains, he'll be pretty disappointed if he visits Marty's bedroom," Krista said from the couch.

"Ha-ha," Marty said. "You know what, Kris, you're about as funny as a witch trying to fly on a wet mop."

"Great comeback, Mar-*tina*," Krista said, grinning, showing she was just messing around.

"Is Martina your real name?" Roz asked.

"Yeah."

"How did I never know that?"

"Because no one ever calls me it," Marty said, sticking out her tongue at Krista. "Even people in my family call me a zillion different things."

"Like what?" Wendy asked, giggling.

"Well, my grandma calls me *Tina*—she leaves the *Mar* off. And my aunt Patty calls me *Mar*—she leaves the *Tina* off. Then my folks have called me Marty my whole life. Unless my mom's mad at me, then I'm *MARTINA!*" It looked as though she was about to stop this little history lesson before continuing, "Oh!

And I have two cousins from Kentucky that called me Mary when they visited last Christmas."

"That's a fitting name for Christmas," Roz said, smirking.

"I told them my real name twice during their visit, but when we took 'em to the airport to see 'em off, they said: *Goodbye, Mary.*"

"Marty," Krista said, "I think you just cured insomnia with that little spiel."

For a second time in moments, Marty stuck out her tongue at Krista.

Chapter 4

Audrey and the giggle twins arrived at Strawberry Rockets in her van at eleven-twenty. At one point, Roz's 1978 Chevrolet Chevette, containing the rest of the Allurettes, was right behind her. Although no one would ever accuse Audrey's van of being top-notch, it was in much better shape than Roz's heap. During the trip, the rusty Chevette fell behind.

Earlier, a shower passed through the area. Because of this, at least a hundred small puddles reflected the moonlight throughout the parking field. Since she was little, Audrey had seen the asphalted parking area over a thousand times. But those times, it also held hundreds of cars. Rarely did she see the lot so vacant this early at night.

Ten or eleven pole lights stood like watchers over the parking field, doing little to penetrate the darkness. If nothing else, their illumination created deeper shadows. Nearly four hundred speaker posts spread out over the space, disappearing into the darkness. The massive, off-white plywood screen loomed over the lot. Behind the screen, on the other side of the chain-link fence that bordered the drive-in, bare tree limbs swayed in a cold breeze. Recalling the tale of Claire and Sisk Reeves sent a shiver up Audrey's spine. This wasn't a bad thing. Knowing they were about to watch the debut of *'Thriller'*, Audrey loved the creepy feeling bubbling up in her stomach.

"Hey, can I get some Milk Duds or is your dad going to make us pay for it?" Debbie asked, getting out of Audrey's van's side door.

"Yeah," Audrey answered. "You can have some Milk Duds. As long as we take it easy, we can have whatever we want."

Wendy tripped getting out of the van and almost fell on her face. Luckily, she regained her balance before needing a trip to the hospital. However, this got both the girls cracking up again.

Audrey had a feeling her bandmates had already had enough of the giggling and stuck her with Muttley #1 and Muttley #2. Now, she loved Debbie and Wendy, but in sips, for God's sake. After an hour, she could've used a break.

The temperature hovered around thirty-eight, sending another shiver up her spine. Crisp air, cleansed by the earlier shower, wafted up Audrey's nose as she stuck the key in the employee-only entrance door lock and turned. Constructed of thick-gauge glass anyone could see through, the door was framed in metal. Like her mother before her, Audrey had asked her father for a completely metal door nobody could see through—she always felt strange taking breaks in there while moviegoers milled about just outside the building—but for years he had balked at the request. Despite having a nice nest egg, her father lived by the motto: *"Only a fool wastes a nail when the house is standing sturdy."*

She flipped the interior light switch, illuminating the employee lounge. "Through that door," Audrey said to Debbie and Wendy, "are the concessions. You can get some things from the snack bar if you want."

She told them this to get them out of her hair for a moment. The whole way over, they talked about Gary and Todd and how much fun they were having, giggling their fool heads off the whole time.

The television—32 inches of glorious screen space—was where her dad said it would be; just outside his office door, against the wall. Maybe it was the emptiness of the place, or maybe it was that in a few minutes she would be watching the premiere of a video she really wanted to see, at midnight, with all her friends, but seeing the employee lounge—quiet except for the hum of fluorescent lights—sent a wave of nostalgia over her. Like the parking field, she'd been in this lounge countless times over the years. Many mornings—after a long night of movies—she found herself in this very room, waiting for her father to finish up his paperwork while she played with her Barbies and her brothers played with their Hot Wheels.

Then, her breath hitched, and she almost started crying when a memory of her mother putting her hair in pigtails flashed in her head. It was so unexpected that a few tears

escaped her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. "Get yourself together, Audrey," she said to herself, wiping the tears away.

A big round table sat in the middle of the room. A counter wrapped around the wall to her right, with cabinets above it. She set two bags on the counter; one contained the second batch of Chex Mix, and the other held a six-pack of Cokes and a six-pack of Sprites. The employee bathroom door was on the wall opposite the entrance, and to her right was the doorway she had just sent the giggle twins through, leading to the concessions and kitchen.

She took the Chex Mix bowl out of the bag and set it on the counter. Next, she opened the cabinet, grabbed a wax paper cup, and scooped out a hunk of the snack mix. She set this aside so Marty could have some that hadn't been picked over. "Marty and her food," she said to herself, thinking about how her best friend ate ice cream with a fork, but peas, corn, and string beans with a spoon.

Outside, Audrey heard Roz's Chevette cough and chug into the parking lot. She went out to meet them.

Before Roz even stopped her car in the spot next to Audrey's van, Marty was out and rushing up to Audrey.

"Aud! What were you listening to on the way over here?"

An odd greeting, but whatevs. "I listened to my *Thriller* cassette. Couldn't really hear it over the giggles. Why?"

"Well you've got to hear what we heard," Krista said, walking up to them, holding Roz's boom box.

Roz, on the other hand, seemed to have another concern. She had gotten out of her car and lifted the hood. "This damn thing."

"What's wrong?" Audrey asked.

"It barely got us here," she answered. Sticking her arm down into the depths of the engine well, she made some kind of adjustment. Then she hopped back in behind the wheel and turned the key. The engine tried to turn over, but it never quite made it. "Damn!" Roz said, hitting her steering wheel. She got back out of her car, put the hood down, and said, "This car has been nothing but trouble. I hope you have enough room in that van of yours to get us all home." As she walked away from it, she back-kicked the bumper. "Damn hunk'a junk."

They set the boom box on the table as Wendy and Debbie walked back in with an armful of candy—Milk Duds, Snowcaps, Starbursts…

"Guys, I said take it easy," Audrey said.

Wendy and Debbie giggled in response. "This is for everyone," Debbie said.

"Totally," Wendy agreed.

"Hey," Debbie said, glancing at the wall clock over the bathroom door and seeing it was 11:48. "The video's about to come on."

"I think we need to hear this first," Krista said.

"But the video," Marty said. "It's not like we're going to be attacked here."

"Attacked?!" Audrey said. "Wha'da you mean, attacked?"

Before anyone could answer, Roz turned on the television and tuned to MTV. There she found the tail end of Kim Wilde's video for *'Dancing in the Dark'*.

"I suppose you're right, Marty-Mart," Roz said.

"Right about what?" Audrey asked, her brow furrowed.

"Oh sugar-gum-drops!" Debbie squealed behind them.

When Audrey turned, her shoulders slumped. Debbie had dropped her open can of Sprite into the Chex Mix. The lemon-lime-flavored drink now acted as milk in a really big bowl of Chex cereal.

"Great," Audrey said, putting her hands on her hips. "That was the best batch of Chex Mix we ever made."

"Hey!" Wendy said, giggling—Audrey could almost see the light bulb go off over her head—"If Chex Mix tastes good on pizza, maybe it tastes good with Sprite, too."

"I'll go get a spoon!" Debbie said, running back through the swinging door leading to the concession area.

Audrey ran a hand through her hair. "Oh, brother."

"Hey, guys," Marty said, oblivious to the mini-catastrophe behind her, "they're playing that making-of *Thriller* special."

Chapter 5

They watched the special. As this played and the midnight hour ticked closer, the giggle twins discovered they liked Chex Mix with Sprite almost as much as they liked it on their pizza. When everyone else declined to try it, Debbie poured in her box of Snowcaps. After a bite, she realized she'd gone too far.

"Yuck-o," she said.

"Gross me out," Wendy agreed.

Although Audrey didn't forget about the mystery radio broadcast Roz and her bandmates talked about, she figured they'd have plenty of time after the video to discuss it. After all the hype, she really wanted to see *'Thriller'*.

Audrey sat next to Shelby, who hadn't said much of anything since arriving at Strawberry Rockets.

"Hey," Audrey asked her. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Hope I don't get too scared, is all. I have a tough time with horror movies." Shelby rubbed her hands together.

This was true. More of a romantic-comedy girl, Shelby had trouble with horror flicks. Sometimes, they'd get off early and watch some of the drive-in movies on the roof of the very building they were in now. Months before, they watched *The Entity*, and Shelby couldn't finish it. Gore-wise, The Entity was pretty tame compared to some of the movies Marty liked. Still, something else seemed to concern Shelby.

"Is that all that's bothering you?" Audrey asked her.

"Yeah." Shelby bit her bottom lip.

Audrey knit her brow and kept her eyes on her.

Side-eying her friend, Shelby said, "Don't ask me anything else." Embarrassment then overcame her. "I'm sorry," she whispered to Audrey. "I'm not trying to be mean. I just don't wanna talk about it."

"It's impossible for you to be mean," Audrey said, playfully bumping the auburn-haired guitarist. "Just remember… It's only a video… It's only a video."

Shelby chuckled as MTV VJ Mark Goodman came on the screen.

"He is *sooo*, totally bodacious," Debbie said, then giggled.

"Majorly hunkish," Wendy agreed, looking into her compact and pushing her hair around with a hand.

"He kind of looks like Todd," Roz said.

"As if," Debbie said. "I'd be all over him all the time."

"Does Todd know that?" Krista asked.

"Totally," Debbie said, then giggled with Wendy.

"Oh! Darn it," Wendy said, looking through her purse. "I left my hairbrush in Audrey's van. Aud, can I have your keys? I wanna look primo for the premiere."

"You look fine," Shelby said.

"This side of my hair does," the poufy-haired blonde said, hovering a hand over the right side of her head. "But this side is all yuck." She indicated the left.

Audrey dug into her pocket, pulled out her keys, and handed them over.

"I'll guard them with my life," Wendy said before giggling.

"Ah, o-kay," Audrey said with a smirk.

"Make sure the video doesn't start without me!" Wendy said, rushing toward the door.

"Sure," Marty called out. "I'll get on the horn with MTV right now and tell ol' Mark to hold up a sec 'cause Wendy needs her *hairbrush*."

"I think I'm gonna go get some candy," Audrey said. "Anyone want anything?"

"A box of Good and Plenty's," Roz said.

"Goobers," Marty said.

"Goobers for the goober," Krista said.

"Shell-Bell?" Audrey asked. "You want anything?"

Shelby shook her head. Audrey crinkled her brow. What in the world was bothering her so much? Could it be what they heard on the radio? Audrey almost brought it up again, but seeing it was so close to go time, she figured a few more minutes of not knowing wouldn't hurt.

"I want a Fun Dip," Debbie said.

"You had enough candy," Audrey said, backing through the swinging door.

In the concession area, the lights were off. Still, a dim glow from the Frogger, Pac-Man, Q*bert, and Galaga machines, along with the outside building light, provided enough illumination for her to see. The deep shadows increased the anticipatory excitement already twisting her stomach into knots. Maybe Roz's story about Claire and Sisk Reeves had something to do with this, too. Not that she believed everything she said—or even most of it—but in the quiet part of the building, after hours, free of distractions, where her mind could roam without consequence… let's just say she wondered how easy sleep would come later.

She went behind the counter and grabbed a box of Good & Plenty, a box of Goobers, and a Butterfinger for herself. Then, rolling her eyes, she picked up a Fun Dip for Debbie. Michael Jackson video premieres weren't an everyday thing; her father wouldn't be too upset about how much free candy she gave her friends.

Walking back around the counter, Audrey stopped when something outside caught her eye: a man, on the far side of the parking field, roaming near the exit, at the base of the screen.

He walked as if a board ran up his back. Pursing her lips, she stared for a moment.

The swinging door opened, and Marty appeared. "Hey, Aud, it's about to start. Come on."

She didn't like a strange man—likely a drunk—using her father's business as a shortcut, but she had more important things to tend to just then.

At the same time she and Marty reentered the lounge, Wendy came back in, too, running a brush through the left side of her hair. "Oh, Aud, I accidentally locked your keys in your van."

Slumping, Audrey said, "Oh, that's so totally rad. And here I was just thinking how primo the night has gone so far, and how much it was missing a calamity to make it perfect."

"Are you being sarcastic?" Wendy asked.

Shaking her head, Audrey didn't answer her question. Instead, she asked one of her own: "What happened with protecting them with your life?"

"Well, they're safe and sound, just on the seat of your van. Don't you have, like, a slim-jim or something?"

"Yeah… In my van."

Debbie giggled at this. "Why is it in your van?" she asked.

"Where else should she keep it, up her nose?" Marty asked.

"It is interesting, though," Wendy said, staring off into the distance as if she'd just had the deepest thought ever. "If you need your slim-jim when you lock your keys in your car, but have to carry the slim-jim *in* your car…" She trailed off, confusion masking her face.

"Tell me," Marty said, "when the airplanes take off in there"—she tapped Wendy on the forehead—"is it really loud?"

Debbie giggled at this before saying, "I don't get it."

Snatching her box of Goobers from Audrey's hands, Marty strolled over to her seat. As she went, she said, "Hey, Wendy, I got one for ya. Why do the little buttons on the drive-up ATM have Braille on them?"

"So the blind people can read them, silly."

"Yeah… think about that one. It'll blow your mind." She then sat down in her chair and faced the TV, leaving Wendy even more perplexed.

"Guys, let's just watch the video," Roz said. "We'll handle all the vehicle stuff after."

Chapter 6

The video began with a personal message from Michael Jackson, stating that the video in no way endorses the occult.

"How the heck bad is this gonna be?" Shelby asked.

While this increased Shelby's unease, it excited Marty. "With a warning like that, this might be really gnarly."

The video opened with Michael Jackson, along with his date, played by Ola Ray—the girls learned this during the special—pulling his '57 Chevrolet Bel Air convertible off to the side of the road after running out of gas. When the King of Pop told Ola they really *had* run out of gas, Roz shouted, "Don't believe that, girl." Then she turned around to the group and said, "Toby Hauser tried that one with me once."

"Did it work?" Krista asked.

Roz nodded. "Had to hide that hickey from my parents for a week."

On screen, Michael and Ola walked through the woods under a full moon, presumably taking a shortcut to a gas station.

"Her sweater's beautiful; I love that color pink," Audrey said, speaking of the actress' top.

"She's beautiful," Krista said, speaking of Ola.

"That's what we were thinking," Debbie and Wendy said in unison.

"Do they share a brain?" Marty whispered to Roz.

During the first few moments of the video, Shelby sat as quietly as she had since arriving at Strawberry Rockets. Yet when Michael Jackson began telling his date he wasn't like other guys, then bent over—seemingly in pain—before looking up at Ola with scary, bright yellow eyes and telling her, "GO AWAY!" Shelby jumped in her chair and covered her face. All of them jumped, actually, but Shelby jumped the highest. When he turned into *'Wolfman Mike,'* she kept her eyes covered. Audrey, side-eyeing her, noticed a sliver between the middle and ring fingers of her right hand and grinned.

Then, a minute later, when his date ran from him and *'Wolfman Mike'* jumped in her path and knocked over the tree with a swipe of his arm, the sliver between those two fingers closed, and Shelby cringed. Sitting next to her, Audrey could almost feel her bandmate fold in on herself in fear.

Audrey put a hand on her arm and rubbed. "It's cool, Shell-Bell." These comforting words didn't convince Shelby to drop her hands.

As the video continued, Audrey found out the whole *'Wolfman Mike'* part was a movie within the movie, if you will, and that the *real* Michael Jackson and Ola Ray were sitting in a theater watching actors—who looked so much like them it was uncanny—on the silver screen.

"Where are all the gnarly zombies from the commercial?" Marty asked while Michael serenaded Ola, walking down a deserted city street. "This is just him singing."

A moment later, once Michael and Ola skipped past the graveyard and Vincent Price's monologue began, Marty got her wish. The undead began emerging from the ground. Having a father indirectly adjacent to the movie business… in a vague sort of way, Audrey felt she could fairly judge special effects. And everything from the zombies crawling out of the ground to their clothes and makeup impressed her.

"Vincent Price's voice is so spooky," Roz said.

"Yeah," Krista agreed. "When I was a kid, I saw him on *The Muppets*, and even his regular voice scared me."

During the singing portion, Shelby had uncovered her eyes and started getting back into the music. After all, she bought the album when it first came out over a year ago. Though when the zombies made their appearance, she tensed up again.

"Oh, they look rad," Marty said, leaning in. "Look at that one!"

As one of the zombies arose from beneath a manhole cover, Vincent Price mentioned the '*Funk of Forty Thousand Years,'* and Marty said, "The funk of forty thousand years?! Hey, Kris, he's talking about your morning breath."

"Or your drumming," Krista shot back.

Out of the corner of her eye, Audrey noticed a shadow disturb the dim light in the parking lot. Tearing her eyes from the video, she looked out the glass entrance door but saw nothing. After a moment of staring, she figured a leaf or maybe a discarded paper plate, caught in the wind, had flown a little too close to the pole light, giving the illusion of something bigger.

Her attention was ripped away from the door when the giggle twins, Roz, and Marty, all shouted in surprise. On screen, Audrey saw Michael Jackson had turned again. This time he wasn't *'Wolfman Mike,'* but *'Zombie Mike'!* If that wasn't gnarly enough, a whole slew of zombies stood behind him as if he were their leader. *And* if *that* wasn't *wicked* enough, they started a choreographed dance!

"This is so silly," Krista said, rubbing her temples.

Audrey had a similar thought. Although she did like the dance. MTV had showcased some of the choreography during the specials leading up to the video premiere, so it wasn't completely foreign to her. Beside her, Shelby had begun swaying her shoulders to the beat; this set Audrey's heart at ease.

This comfort didn't last for long. Outside, a noise—like someone bumping into something—filtered in. Krista, Marty, and Roz, the three closest to the television, must not have

heard. And if they had, they didn't acknowledge it. Shelby heard it, though. Her head snapped toward the door. And when Audrey looked over her shoulder, the giggle twins were looking out the door, too. Debbie turned to Audrey; her brow crinkled. When Audrey pursed her lips and shrugged, Debbie looked back out the door.

"What was that?" Wendy whispered.

"I don't know," Debbie said.

Neither Audrey nor the other three saw anything, so they turned back to the music video, where the choreographed dance was still underway.

Audrey continued keeping a close eye on Shelby. She seemed okay until the end of the dance, when *'Zombie Mike,'* along with his merry band of undead, followed the beautiful Ola to a haunted house. Immediately, Shelby's leg began bouncing. Then, when the zombies chased Ola into a room and started busting out the windows and coming up through the floor trying to get their hands on her—trying to get to her brains—Shelby's hands went back up to her face. When Audrey noticed the familiar sliver between the middle and ring fingers of her bandmate's right hand, she grinned.

Finally came the grand finale: *'Zombie Mike'* grabbed the turned-away Ola by the shoulder—the sliver in Shelby's fingers closed—and when the actress screamed and turned to face

him, she found a… a perfectly normal-looking Michael Jackson.

"I knew it would be something like that," Marty said. "I've seen enough horror movies to feel a fake-out coming a million miles away."

"Anyone could see that coming," Roz said.

As soon as those words left her mouth, Michael Jackson turned to face the camera, and his eyes were *YELLOW!* Yellow, with thin black vertical slits down the center of each.

"Choice!" Debbie yelled.

"Totally," Wendy agreed.

Finally, the credits rolled. Krista got up, slapping her lap as she did, and said, "That was kind of… I don't know, disappointing."

"I thought it was cool," Marty said.

"You thought the zombies were cool," Krista said.

"Duh. The zombies were, like, half the video."

"Well, for a narrative story, I think the Mr. Roboto video was better," Krista shot back.

"You would think that," Marty said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Krista asked.

"Styx is lame," Marty said. "Kilroy? Who even is that?"

"If you'd pay attention to the lyrics, you'd actually like the song, Marty," Krista shot back.

"I'm so sure." Marty crossed her arms.

Audrey wanted to tell Marty she agreed with Krista, but refrained from doing so. If she had, she would've risked prolonging the argument.

"It's hard to imagine that a band's bass player and drummer—the backbone of any song—have so little in common," Roz said to the two girls.

"Although," Audrey said, "they say you pick on the ones you love the most."

Marty rolled her eyes and turned away.

Without a word, Krista took her chair and slid it back under the table.

"I think you unearthed their deepest, darkest secret," Roz said, laughing.

"I liked the dance," Krista said, changing the subject. "But I think MTV hyped it too much."

"Yeah," Audrey agreed, "and next thing you know, everyone's gonna start making fifteen-minute videos."

"It would be cool if Rush made a short movie for 2112," Shelby said, her tone low.

"That would be gnarly," Audrey said brightly, hoping to lift her bandmate's spirits after such a… ahem… frightening video. Then she asked Marty, Krista, and Roz, "Did you guys hear that noise outside a few minutes ago?"

Chapter 7

Although Marty, Krista, and Roz hadn't heard the noise outside, Audrey, Shelby, and the giggle twins had; this fact circled back to why Krista brought the boombox into the employee lounge. Roz informed them that, earlier, while driving to Strawberry Rockets, they had heard a breaking news story saying zombie-like creatures had been seen in the area.

"*Pah*-leeze," Audrey said. "It was a goof because it's Thriller night."

"No," Marty said. "It was real, Aud."

"Marty," Audrey said, chuckling, "don't be a space cadet. It's a goof."

Audrey calling Marty a space cadet got the giggle twins going again.

"Great," Marty said, throwing her hands up. Then, to Audrey, she asked, "I wonder if the old saying is true: *The happiest people are too busy to notice?*"

This quieted the giggle twins as they pondered this question. Debbie, with a finger to her chin, said, "I don't get it."

"Here," Roz said to Audrey, turning the boombox toward her, ignoring Marty, "hear for yourself."

She turned on the boombox. A DJ was on the air and in the middle of delivering breaking news. *"Gang, let me tell ya, we've*

had a number of reports from around the Shermer Falls area, just outside of Hagerstown; listen to this: zombie-like figures walking around. I know that sounds insane considering this is premiere morning for Michael Jackson's newest video, Thriller, but these reports are coming from Hagerstown P.D."

The DJ's voice sounded panicked, as if what he was reporting didn't compute. Recalling the man she saw on the far side of the parking field and the noise outside, Audrey furrowed her brow. If it had just been her friends telling her of the news report, she wouldn't have believed it. Yet, hearing the radio report, Audrey began wondering what the hell was going on.

"Police are investigating these reports," the DJ continued. *"Some theorize this is a sick joke by local kids, fewer wonder if this is a strange promotion by Epic Records, while others have said they've seen these creatures up close, and they're very real."*

Shelby ran a hand through her hair and shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

"Officials are telling us," the DJ went on, *"that if you feel like your life is in danger, call the police immediately."*

"Switch the television to the news," Audrey said. "Let's see what they're saying."

Behind them, Debbie knocked the bowl containing the Sprite-and-Chex Mix concoction to the floor. Soggy pretzels, wheat, and nuts spattered on the tile.

"Oh, shoot," Debbie said, then giggled.

"I'll go get towels," Wendy said. "Where are they, Audrey?"

"I'll get them," Audrey said, walking across the room, through the swinging door, and into the concession area. This time, she flipped the light switch. After the radio report, she didn't like walking into the concession area dimly lit only by video game cabinets and outside pole lights. Then, when the lights made it harder to see outside, she turned them back off.

Before getting the paper towels, she looked out the windows at the parking field. She saw nothing but the lonely-looking speaker posts, spread out evenly like sentry soldiers awaiting orders. The wind had picked up since they arrived, and debris—hot dog wrappers, crushed wax cups, snuffed cigarettes, and leaves—moved along the ground like living things. Fortunately, that was the only thing she saw out there moving. No dead, or undead, or whatever the heck they were.

Sighing, she rolled her eyes. She couldn't believe she almost fell for the radio gag. Of course that's all it was. A DJ, likely inspired by Orson Welles' *"War of the Worlds,"* screwing around with his listening audience. As for the man she saw earlier, that was just some dude who had had too much to drink. *Chuggers*

and Buggers bar wasn't far from Strawberry Rockets, after all. And the noise she heard… that was just the wind blowing one thing into another. Absolutely, positively solved, solved, and solved.

After grabbing the paper towels, she went back into the employee lounge and found Wendy scooping soggy Chex Mix into her hand and dumping it in the trash can. Marty stood in front of Hank's massive television, smacking the side of the remote control. "This sucker isn't like my tiny TV in my bedroom, I'll tell ya that," the frustrated drummer said.

Shelby and Krista picked up the empty soda cans and half-eaten boxes of candy and threw them away while Roz messed with her hair in the bathroom mirror.

The radio was still on; the DJ was basically repeating what they had already heard. Now convinced this was a *"War of the Worlds"* type act, Audrey barely paid attention. She ripped off some paper towels, knelt beside Wendy, and began wiping up the mess. "Where's Debbie?" she asked.

"She took a bowl full of this crap outside to pour it in the dumpster."

"And, guys, I can't believe I'm saying this," the DJ said, *"but earlier reports of Claire and Sisk Reeves' bodies disappearing from their graves have been confirmed."*

This little tidbit grabbed Audrey's attention. Unless Roz and her brother were in cahoots with the DJ—which is so far-fetched she didn't even consider it—how did the jockey know about… "So you weren't joking about the graves?" Audrey asked Roz as she dropped a hunk of Sprite-drenched paper towels into the trash can.

Crossing her arms, Roz raised her brows as if to say: *'I told ya so.'*

Debbie burst through the door, holding her neck. Blood ran from between the fingers clasping at the wound. "Ewwwww," she cried. "Some dead chick just bit me! It was totally grody!"

"Oh my God," Wendy squealed. "You're, like, totally bleeding to death."

"She's not bleeding to death," Krista said, rushing to her to have a look at the wound.

"Don't touch her, Kris," Marty yelled. "She's gonna eat your brains."

"Marty, stop it," Krista said, taking Debbie's hand away from her neck.

"I've seen enough horror movies to know that when you get bit by one of those suckers, you'll turn into one!"

While this unreal convo about the undead was happening, Shelby dropped the trash she had gathered in her arms,

beelined to the door, and turned the lock. After securing it, she looked out. "Yikes!" she said, backing into the room.

"What is it?" Roz asked, hurrying past her and having a look for herself.

Audrey did the same. At the door, she now saw much more than speaker posts. Four people, or, ah… or former people… slowly meandered around the right side of the lot, near the dumpster. That's why she didn't see them a few moments ago while in the concession area; that part of the building looked out on the left side of the lot.

It was hard to make out their faces with only the pole lights illuminating the area, but she could tell they wore dirty clothes that hung off them like old, moth-eaten rags. When one of them—a woman in a dress, perhaps Claire Reeves—stepped beneath the dim glow of the light, her skin was grayish and tattered, peeling like pieces off a well-worn fake leather jacket. Another, a man, judging by the old tie-and-suspenders combo—perhaps Sisk—stepped under another light; his face was skeletal and gray.

"What the hell?!" Audrey yelled, backing away from the door.

"The phone's dead!" Shelby cried, holding it in her hand.

Unable to believe this, Audrey ran over to Shelby and snatched the phone from her. When she put it to her ear, her

eyes grew wide. Her strawberry-blonde friend was right! "The phone's dead!"

"I just said that!"

"Police are telling citizens that if you come into contact with one of these things, stay away from it. Run to the nearest phone and call 9-1-1."

"That's what we're trying to do!" Marty yelled at the boombox.

"No! Stop!" Krista yelled.

All eyes snapped in her direction. There, Debbie had her mouth clamped down on Krista's neck! The blonde bassist pushed her off, and Debbie immediately started blubbering. "I'm, like, so totally sorry, Kris. It's just that your neck looked so bodaciously scrumptious!"

"I told you that was gonna happen, Kris," Marty said.

Pulling her hand away from the bite, Krista saw blood on her fingers.

"Oh, no," Marty said. "Now you're gonna turn." Then she said to Audrey, "You know how hard it's gonna be to find a new bass player?"

"Hush, Marty," Krista said.

BOOMP!

Everyone jumped. Shelby and Wendy yelped. At the door, one of the… Audrey couldn't believe she was thinking this, but

one of the un-frickin'-dead was banging on the glass. It was the woman zombie she'd seen seconds earlier.

"We need stakes!" Roz yelled.

"Stakes only work on vampires," Marty said.

"Strawberry Rockets doesn't sell steaks!" Wendy said. When Marty and Roz dropped their shoulders and returned her comment with boorish expressions, Wendy said, confused, "They only sell hot dogs and hamburgers."

BOOMP!

"Quick," Marty said, "send Wendy out. If they're looking for brains, they might figure we're all like her and leave."

"Hey." Wendy knit her brow. "That's mean." Then, her features softened as something occurred to her. Audrey hoped it was an idea about getting out of this, but considering it was Wendy… well, the old expression about hoping in one hand and spitting in the other came to mind. "I get it now," she said. "Why *would* Braille be on the drive-up ATM buttons when deaf people don't even drive?"

"Good grief!" Marty hit herself upside the forehead with the butt of her palm.

Out in the concession area, Audrey heard movement. A moment later, they heard pots and pans clattering in the kitchen as they fell to the floor.

"How'd they get in there?!" Shelby yelped, eyes full of terror.

"I don't know," Audrey said.

"Somebody needs to go in there and get them out!" Wendy said.

"Well, it sounds like you just volunteered," Roz retorted.

"Tell ya what," Wendy said. "We can, like, do eeny-meeny-miny-moe."

"Totally," Debbie said, staring at Krista as if she were about to take another chomp.

"You don't do eeny-meeny-miny-moe in a situation like this," Shelby said.

Shrugging, Wendy said, "Okay, how about one potato, two potato, three potato, four."

"How did you survive nineteen years without forgetting to breathe?" Roz asked.

"I'm feeling, like, really cold," Debbie said, shivering and hugging herself.

"Me too," Krista said. Then, the blonde bassist caressed Audrey's hair. "Aud, I've always admired your… *brains*."

Jumping back, Audrey brushed Krista's hand off of her. "No, no, no. Kris, Deb, you guys have to go into the bathroom and stay there until we figure this out." She then looked at

Marty. "Marty-Mart, how do they handle these… these things in the movies?"

"Shoot 'em in the head," Marty answered without a thought.

"You're gonna shoot me in the head?!" Debbie said. "That'll mess up my hair!"

"Totally," Wendy agreed.

"We're not shooting anyone," Roz said. "Kris, Deb, get in the bathroom. We'll get'cha in a sec."

"Folks, I'm gonna keep y'all spinnin' and grinin' during this morning with the villains," the radio DJ said. *"Up now I have an oldie but goodie for ya, it's Buddy Holly and 'Blue Days-Black Nights' here on WKKT Shermer Falls Community College Radio."*

As Buddy Holly's song began, Audrey begged someone to turn it off. Not that she minded Buddy Holly; she liked his songs a lot. Just not while one of her bandmates was trying to eat her brains. Plus, she always found 50s songs haunting when heard in the wee hours.

Before anyone could reach the boombox, however, a zombie came through the swinging door. His hair had chunks of dirt in it; his clothes were holey and ragged; he smelled like… he smelled like the *funk of forty thousand years;* and his teeth were mangled and displaced.

Shelby screamed, and ran into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. Audrey grabbed Marty by the arm and fled toward her father's office. When she put her hand on the knob, she turned and yelled for everyone to come on! But it was too late for Wendy; Mr. Zombie Man was dragging her away. The blonde with big poufy hair screamed and fought. In the end, her protest was futile. Her screams became faint as she was dragged through the swinging door and into the concession area.

"I'm coming, Wendy!" Roz yelled, disappearing behind the door.

"Me too," Krista said.

"Me three," Debbie said. "She's, like, totally my best friend."

"Me four," Marty said.

"Marty," Audrey said, her eyes pleading with her not to go.

"Aud, this is my destiny. I haven't watched all those horror movies my whole life just to go all loopy when I'm living one."

"Then I'm coming with you."

"No. Stay here. Keep a lookout. Maybe we can distract them. Then you and Shell-Bell can drive to get help."

BOMP!

Audrey looked up at the zombie woman still beating on the entrance door. "Marty, my keys are locked in my van, and Roz's car isn't running."

"Oh, yeah. Well… you and Shell-Bell are pretty fast. Just run."

Chapter 8

In a chair just outside the office door, Shelby sat hunched over, her head in her hands. Audrey paced the floor, shifting her eyes from the interior swinging door to the glass door leading to the parking lot. Yes, her auburn-haired bandmate was scared, but so was Audrey. It was already a chore getting her out of the 'john'. But with Shelby bent over, likely crying into her hands, it didn't help.

"Shell-Bell, everything's gonna be okay." Audrey hoped she was telling her bandmate the truth.

She decided to keep the music on. After Marty went through the swinging doors, Audrey needed something other than Shelby's fear to keep her company. *'Only You'* by The Platters had replaced the Buddy Holly song.

Outside, the zombie woman kept pounding on the door. Whatever Marty and them were doing in the concession area wasn't distracting this undead lady. Now and then, she'd look in. Audrey didn't know if a zombie brain worked like a living person's brain. Did they know they were looking at a human being—as they used to be—or did this woman see Audrey like a shark sees the legs of an unsuspecting swimmer? If they got through this, she would pay for a door no one could see through.

Suddenly, Audrey noticed something. "Shell-Bell, look!"

Shelby lifted her head.

"On the woman's dress, look!" Audrey said, pointing. Pinned to the tatters was a golden brooch with a ruby gem in its center. "It must be Claire Reeves… from Mulberry Place?!"

"Oh, God," Shelby said, burying her head back in her hands. "I wish this was over."

"Me too, Shell-Bell. But if we're gonna—"

Audrey's words were cut off when Marty came through the swinging doors. She still wore her leather jacket, but her pants had blood on them. So did her face. So did her… Audrey gulped. "Marty… Your head. It's bleeding." She also noticed her best friend's new complexion… "Marty… You're pale."

Behind her, the office door shut. When Audrey turned, she found the sweet and shy and loyal Shell-Bell had left her all alone in the employee lounge. *Thanks a lot,* she thought, then turned her attention back to Marty.

Her leather-clad buddy—the girl she'd known and loved since grade school—had a distant look, as if her eyes saw her, but didn't comprehend her. "Marty?... Marty-Mart? You feel okay?"

Slowly, Marty began approaching Audrey. Her gait was stumbling and off-kilter.

"Marty, you're scaring me."

"Brains… Brains…"

BOMP!

The corpse of Claire Reeves, not wanting to be left out of the brains du jour, pounded on the glass.

Audrey ran to her father's office door. The door was locked!

"Shell-Bell! Let me in!"

"How do I know you're not one of them?!" Shelby shouted back through the door.

"Because I'm not. Let me in!"

"That's what you would say if you were one!"

"Shell-Bell! Please!"

On the radio, The Platters were replaced by The Five Satins singing *'In the Still of the Night'*. Of all the 50s songs, this one sounded the most haunting to Audrey. *Of course this would play,* she thought.

"Brains…" Marty closed the distance, sluggishly.

Audrey started pounding on her father's office door. "Shell-Bell! Shell-Bell!"

That's when Marty's hand closed around Audrey's shoulder, and the brown-eyed girl turned and screamed!

"What's the problem?" Marty said before smiling. The shrimp of a drummer then took a tissue from her pocket and wiped some of the blood from her head, revealing… no chomp marks. Some of the makeup wiped off too, showing no paleness underneath.

Stunned, Audrey could only stare. Her shock only increased when Krista, Roz, the giggle twins, and one of the zombies walked through the swinging door. Each of them wore big-ass grins.

Finally, the office door opened behind Audrey. Turning, Audrey came face-to-face with a very guilty-looking Shelby. "Don't hate me, Aud," Shelby said. "I didn't wanna do it. They talked me into it on the ride over here. I felt terrible about it all night." Shelby looked down at the tile floor and began twisting in place.

"Wait a minute…" Audrey asked, still perplexed, her heart rate slowing, but not fast enough. "This was all a goof?" Turning to face everyone, she continued, "This was all… *all*… a *goof?!*"

"They say you pick on the ones you love the most," Marty said, flashing puppy-dog eyes and playfully bumping her arm against Audrey's.

Debbie and Wendy giggled as Mr. Zombie Man walked over to the glass entrance door, unlocked it, and let the late Claire Reeves in. Two other zombies followed her in. Claire grabbed the nose on her face and pulled. Latex began ripping under the yank, and as the zombie tore more away, revealing a guy underneath, Roz stepped up and said, "Audrey… Everyone, I'd like you to meet my brother Ian."

The other zombies began ripping off their faces, too. When they were finished, Audrey recognized two of them as Todd and Gary, Debbie and Wendy's boyfriends. The other guy, she didn't know. That was until he spoke up. "Gang, let me tell ya, we've had a number of reports from around the Shermer Falls area, just outside of Hagerstown, of zombie-like figures walking the area."

"The radio DJ!" Audrey felt the breath knocked out of her.

"This is my buddy, Jordan "Live at Five" Meltzer," Ian said. "He runs the radio station out of Shermer Falls Community College."

"Hello, gang, this is Jordan "Live at Five" here, spinning your golden oldies to get you through that rough, rush hour drive," Jordan said in his best DJ voice.

"What you're listening to isn't a live broadcast, Aud," Roz said, walking over to the boombox and pushing the stop button on the tape player. "Jordan recorded it a few days ago, when we planned this. I played a tape and acted like it was the radio. And my brother…" Roz turned to him.

Picking up the cue, Ian said, "And I'm studying film and the arts. Surprisingly, Shermer Falls Theater Department has peak—choice—costumes and a wide variety of the gnarliest makeup."

"Tubular," Audrey said to a smattering of chuckles and giggles. "How long have you known about this?" Audrey asked Marty.

"Just tonight," Marty said.

"Yeah, right."

"I swear, Aud."

"It's true, Aud," Krista said. "Roz talked us into it on the way over here."

"That's why you got stuck with the giggle twins," Roz said.

The giggle twins giggled until they realized what Roz said. "Hey," they exclaimed in unison.

"And that's why you were acting so weird," Audrey said, turning to Shelby.

"Shell-Bell didn't want any part of lying to you," Krista said. "That's why she just… went along with it rather than participate."

"Until she locked me out of my father's office," Audrey said, side-eyeing Shelby.

When Shelby's expression dropped, Audrey softened. "It's okay, Shell-Bell. I'm not mad." She gently bumped her forehead to Shelby's.

"None of us really wanted to," Marty said, speaking of The Allurettes. "But Roz…"

"I was very convincing," Roz said. "I promised it was all in good fun."

"You don't hate us, do you?" Krista asked.

"Of course I don't hate you. I feel kinda… left out, is all." She looked down and scuffed the toe of her sneaker on the tile floor.

"I didn't tell The Allurettes how far I was gonna take it, Aud," Roz said.

"That's true," Krista said. "Once everything got going, though, we kinda… kinda just… just got caught up in it."

Marty pushed a hunk of Audrey's brown hair behind her ear. "We're sorry," she said in the soppiest tone she could muster.

A ghost of a grin worked at Audrey's lips.

"We really are," Krista said.

The grin widened.

Wendy reached into her pocket. "I didn't really lock your keys in your car." She tossed them to Audrey, then giggled… along with Debbie.

"And my car isn't really broken down," Roz said. "I disconnected the distributor wire thingy. All I have to do is reattach it. We needed to be trapped for the prank to work."

"And what about the phone?" Audrey asked.

"I disconnected it," Marty said. "From your father's office. Did it when you went to get snacks earlier."

Then Audrey looked at Ian. "How'd you get into the building?"

"That was us," Wendy said, speaking of her and Debbie. "When we first got here, and got snacks…"

"We totally unlocked the concession door," Debbie finished. Then giggled.

"I know I should be mad, but…" Audrey trailed off, trying not to crack up. Really, a part of her was upset, but damn was the gag good. "So… no one disturbed graves at Franklin Cemetery?"

Smirking, Roz shook her head.

"I don't know what I should be more disgusted by," Audrey said. "You all pulling this prank on me or you two"—she looked at Debbie and Wendy—"eating Chex Mix in a bowl of Sprite."

"You ate Chex Mix in Sprite?" Todd asked.

"It's so totally good, babe," Debbie answered. "It's, like, breakfast with a seltzer kick."

"Totally," Wendy said.

"You mad at us?" Marty asked.

Audrey put Marty in a headlock and gave her noogie. "As if, goofy."

Pulling away, Marty took a comb out of her back pocket and ran it through her hair. "Watch the locks, Audra-reno."

Chapter 9

That night… rather… that morning, Audrey crawled into bed around three. Exhaustion worked her over as a prize fighter works over a street thug. As her bed warmed under her body heat, her muscles relaxed, and she let out a satisfied sigh. Few moments beat lying in a comfortable, warm bed on a cold winter's night, especially when so impossibly tired. As she lay there, The Allurettes popped into her head. She smiled.

Before the sandman took her by the hand and eased her off into slumberland, Audrey thought about the prank again. Her smile turned into a giggle. She should've known the whole thing was a goof after none of them, except for Shelby, seemed to be taking anything too seriously. It's just that everything was so real. Given more time, she would've gotten it. At least that's what she told herself.

Once the sandman arrived, Audrey refrained from taking his hand. All the Cokes she drank finally caught up to her. Staring up at the ceiling, hoping Mr. Sandman would wait for her to get back, she flared her nose. Why, oh, why did her bladder have to wait until she got comfy to beg for release? Sighing, she threw off the sheet and blanket, got up, and went to the bathroom.

Instead of turning on the bathroom light, she decided to keep it off. She didn't need harsh light piercing her tired eyes—

that might've kept sleep at bay for another half-hour. The tiny nightlight under the sink mirror provided enough glow for her to see—she'd been using the same bathroom her whole life after all.

The bathroom, which at one time belonged to her and her two brothers and now belonged only to her—thank goodness—had a small square window next to the toilet. From this window, she could see the exterior of the garage. The lights in the second story apartment—The Loft—were out. Either that or Shelby—good to her word—pulled all the curtains. She chuckled.

Part of her felt strange about being the butt of a prank. Yet, the way her bandmates… her friends… her sisters… comforted her after seeing how badly she felt was a much stronger feeling. And although the bathroom was cold, warmth ran through her veins as she thought about Krista and Shelby sleeping next door. Suddenly, she wanted to be with them and Marty.

Twenty feet away, in the Loft, Marty lay on the couch, drifting off to sleep. She had forgotten her house key and didn't want to wake her parents by knocking on the door to get in.

"And here I thought you said the giggle twins were airheads," Krista teased.

"I only forgot my key. Deb or Wendy would've poured Sprite on their house keys and tried to eat them."

Krista couldn't help herself; she broke up.

Good as her word, Shelby drew the shades on each window surrounding the twin beds.

"Shell-Bell, it was all fake," Krista said, pulling the covers up to her chin.

"The old abandoned mansion exists," Shelby said, leaning over Kris to draw the shade beside her bed. "So it's not *all* fake."

"Yes, the mansion exists, Shell-Bell," Marty said, her voice sleepy. "But Roz embellished the story."

"Embellished," Krista said. "That's an awfully big word for you, Marty."

"I'm too sleepy to give a primo comeback, Kris. Remind me to give you *'what-for'* tomorrow." Marty yanked a pink throw up to her chin and curled up, pushing her head deeper into her pillow.

Shelby took off her slippers and slid under the covers. "I want you two to get along better in '84. Promise me you'll make a New Year's resolution."

"Check," Marty grumbled.

"We don't need to do that, Shell-Bell," Krista said. "Just because we don't get along doesn't mean I don't love her."

"Love you, too," Marty said, her voice getting sleepier by the second.

"That's soooo sweet," Shelby said. "Love you guys."

Now that the shades were pulled, the only illumination came from the kitchen, where Shelby left the range hood light on over the stove. Normally, Krista and Shelby slept without a nightlight. Marty had asked for this—actually, Marty had asked to keep MTV on all night. Krista denied this request. Neither gave her crap for such a juvenile request—the horror movie fan who needed a nightlight.

"I wish Audrey was here," Krista said.

"Me too," Shelby said.

"Me three," Marty mumbled.

A soft knock sounded at the door. A moment later, Audrey walked in. "Guys," she whispered. "You asleep?"

"Yes," Marty said.

Shelby sat up in bed and turned on her lamp. "We were just wishing you were here."

"I wanna sleep in here with you guys."

"There's no room," Marty said.

"I'll take the floor," Audrey said, lying down beside the couch. "Gimmie a pillow, Marty-Mart."

"But I need to have a pillow between my knees," Marty whined. "I can't sleep with my knees touching."

"Well I can't sleep with my head on the floor."

"You have a nice bed over at your house."

"Marty…" Audrey said in a tone reminiscent of a parent scolding a child.

Grunting, Marty took the pillow from between her knees and handed it down to Audrey. "Thank you."

With a big smile, Shelby turned off her lamp, slid under her covers, and fell asleep.

One minute later, give or take, Audrey's groggy voice drifted up, waking everyone. "It's cold down here."

Grumbling, Krista said, "We don't have any more blankets, Aud."

Shelby turned on her lamp again and got up. "We need to be good hosts, Kris." She collected her winter jacket, Krista's winter coat, and Marty's leather jacket, and laid them over Audrey.

"Thanks, Kris," Audrey said, halfway between reality and dreamland.

"I'm Shelby."

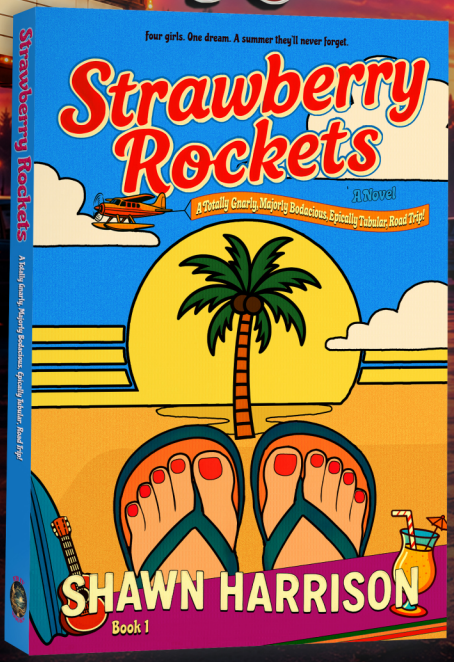
"Thanks, Shell-Bell."

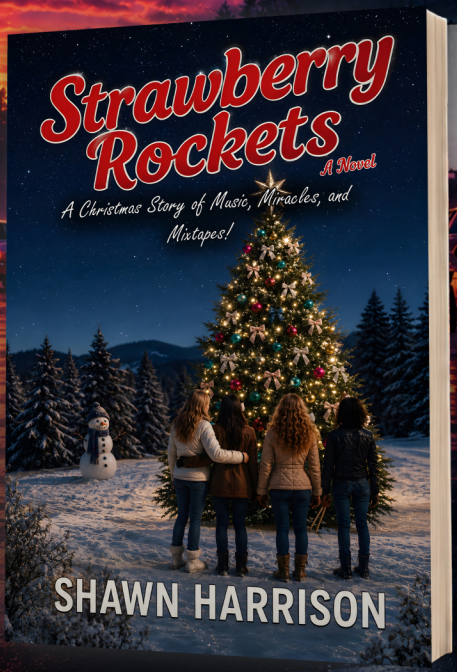
With the widest grin on her face, like a mother who had just put a blanket over her child, Shelby lay back down and turned off her lamp.

About an hour later, while the girls slept, in the field behind the house, two corpses—one man and one woman—lumbered toward the woods on their way back home to Mulberry Place. The man stepped with his left foot, then dragged his right leg. Took a step, then dragged. A step, then drag. The woman walked with a limp and kind of shimmied. At the edge of the woods, she tripped on a dead root and fell. The man stopped, turned, helped her up, and they continued on their way, disappearing into the darkness.

The night doesn't have to end...

Strawberry Rockets





Book 1

Four friends. One broken-down van.
The family business on the line.

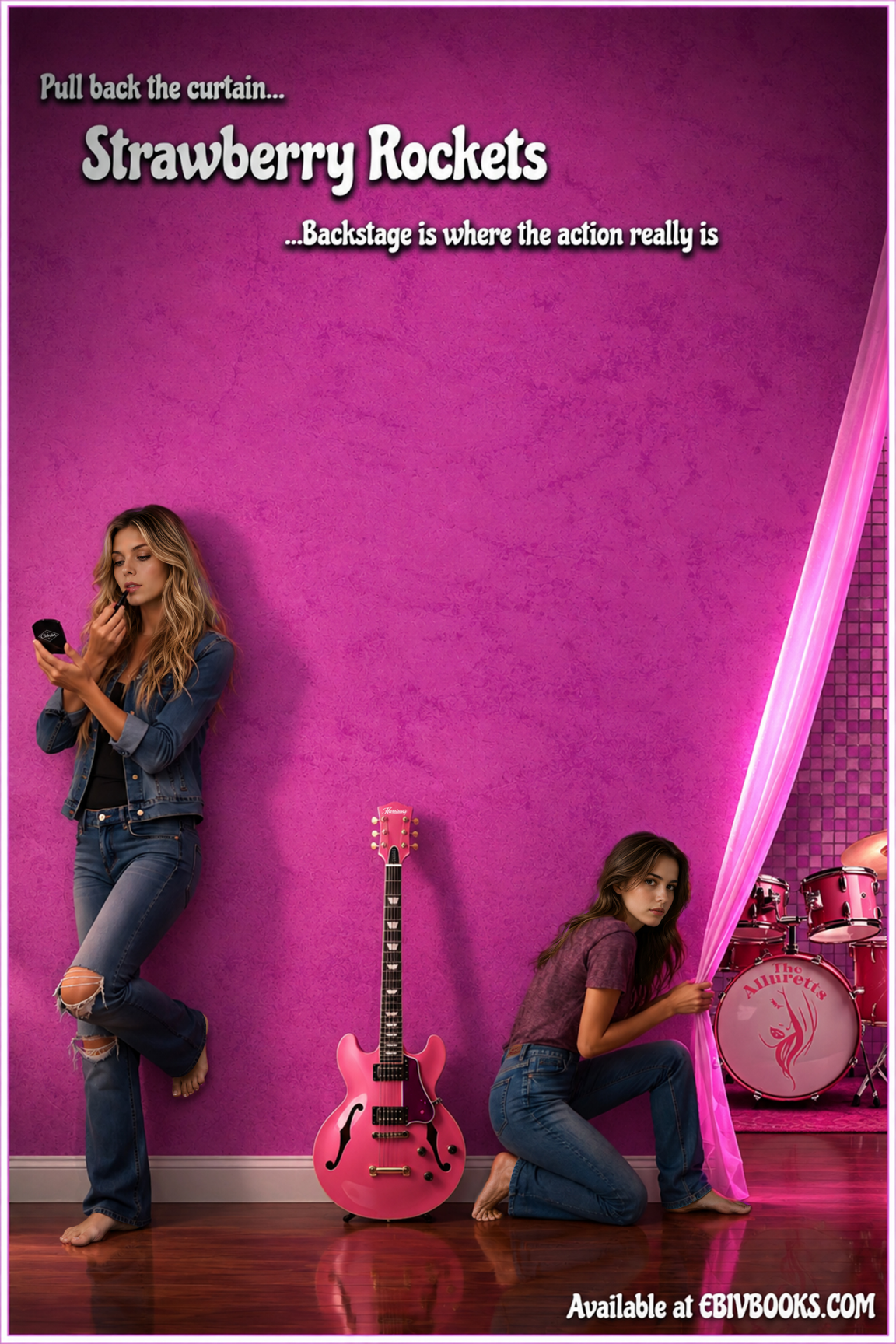
Book 2

Christmas '83. Music, miracles,
mixtapes—and a whole lot of chaos.

PAY WHAT YOU CAN

Both ebooks are available directly from EBIV Books.
You choose what you can afford—even $0.00

TAP OR CLICK HERE → | EBIVBOOKS.COM


Pull back the curtain...
Strawberry Rockets
...Backstage is where the action really is
The Allurettes
Available at EBIVBOOKS.COM







Audrey Peterson



Role: Lead singer of The Allurettes
Hometown: Shermer Falls, Maryland
Hair: Long brown
Eyes: Dark brown
Style: Casual, feminine, and unmistakably '80s
Best Friend: Marty Robbins

If The Allurettes are a family, Audrey often holds everybody together. Warm, outgoing, and fiercely attached to the people she loves, Audrey has a habit of worrying about her friends even when she has plenty to worry about herself. She can be sentimental, stubborn, playful, and occasionally a little too willing to believe she has everything figured out. Growing up around her family's drive-in theater gave Audrey a love for movies, music, and nights spent with the people closest to her. She might roll her eyes at Marty, worry about Shelby, and find herself caught between Marty and Krista, but nowhere would she rather be than with The Allurettes. Of course, being the sensible one in this particular group is relative.

Most Likely To: Steal food off your plate
Favorite Band: Kix
Dream Gig: Madison Square Garden
Favorite Movie: The Outsiders

Favorite Book: Tiger Eyes
Favorite food: Chicken with Gravy
Favorite Arcade Game: Any Pinball Game
Favorite TV Show: Three's Company







Marty Robbins

Role: Drummer for The Allurettes
Hometown: Shermer Falls, Maryland
Hair: Brown, New-Wave Inspired
Eyes: Dark brown
Style: Leather Jacket, Jeans, plenty of attitude
Best friend: Audrey Peterson

If The Allurettes have a troublemaker, Marty would probably consider the title an honor. Sarcastic, energetic, and rarely at a loss for words, Marty has been Audrey's best friend since grade school. She loves teasing the people closest to her—Krista in particular—and has a knack for turning almost any situation into an opportunity for a joke. Underneath all the wisecracks, though, Marty is fiercely loyal to her friends and more affectionate than she'd probably like anyone to know. She's also the Allurette most likely to enjoy something spooky. Horror movies, zombies, creepy stories—bring 'em on. The scarier things get, the more fun Marty is having. At least until it's time to turn off the lights.

Most Likely To: Prank the girls
Favorite Band: Girlschool
Dream Gig: On The Moon
Favorite Movie: Alien

Favorite Book: Bunnicula/Anne of Green Gables
Favorite Food: Bacon
Favorite Arcade Game: Frogger
Favorite TV Show: Mork and Mindy







Krista Flemming

Role: Bassist for The Allurettes
Hometown: Düsseldorf, Germany
Hair: Long Blonde
Eyes: Blue
Style: Cool, casual, and accessorized with a pair of roller skates
Other Interests: Roller Skating

If The Allurettes need someone to bring everybody back down to earth, Krista is usually the one doing the pulling. Dry, practical, and armed with a sharp sense of humor, Krista isn't easily impressed and has little trouble saying exactly what she thinks. She and Marty can bicker over practically anything, but beneath all the jabs is a friendship much stronger than either one usually bothers to admit. Onstage, Krista is the steady foundation of The Allurettes, holding down the low end on bass—sometimes while cruising around the stage on roller skates. It's an unusual combination, but Krista has the confidence to make it look perfectly natural. She might roll her eyes at her friends' silliness, but she's usually right there in the middle of it. Just don't tell Marty that means they have something in common.

Most Likely To: Be Honest
Favorite Band: Blondie
Dream Gig: Stonehenge
Favorite Movie: One Flew Over the Cukoo's Nest

Favorite Book: The Bell Jar
Favorite Food: Steak and Eggs
Favorite Arcade Game: Don't Play Them
Favorite TV Show: Laverne and Shirley







Shelby Ashlyn

Role: Lead Guitarist for The Allurettes
Hometown: Hampton Bays, New York
Hair: Long Strawberry Blonde
Eyes: Green
Style: Feminine, soft, and effortlessly pretty
Other Interests: Surfing

If The Allurettes have a sweetheart, it's Shelby. Shy, gentle, and nurturing, Shelby is often the softest voice in a room full of much louder personalities. She dislikes confrontation, worries easily, and has a habit of looking after everyone around her—even when she's the one who could use a little reassurance. But Shelby has an adventurous side that might surprise anyone who only knows her quiet personality. She loves surfing, can hold her own onstage with a guitar, and feels perfectly at home with The Allurettes. She may be easy to scare, but when her friends truly need her, Shelby's loyalty usually proves stronger than her fear. Just don't ask her to watch a horror movie. And definitely don't tell her the old abandoned mansion down the road is haunted.

Most Likely To: Wear designer clothes
Favorite Band: Duran Duran
Dream Gig: Opening for Duran Duran
Favorite Movie: Harold and Maude

Favorite Book: Anne of Green Gables
Favorite Food: Grilled Salmon
Favorite Arcade Game: Q*Bert
Favorite TV Show: WKRP in Cincinnati