

Even with the holes in the roof, the house was noticeably warmer than Chatham Manor. Lake's palms became clammy and she could feel sweat dripping down her back. She tugged her sweater off as she moved along, listening to the sound of her echoing footsteps in the empty parlor, through the bedrooms and back to the front door where her jaw dropped open.

Several long, strange scratches—just like those on the walls of the east wing—now framed the front door, reaching all the way up to the drooping ceiling. They were definitely not there before, just minutes ago. With trembling fingers, she traced one jagged scratch until it seemed to bite her skin. She slowly closed her eyes. This was it. She was finally, truly afraid.

Suddenly, with her eyes closed, Lake realized why she was so warm. She opened her eyes and grabbed the elephant around her neck. It was hot and growing hotter. The air around the elephant wavered like a mirage hovering over asphalt. When Lake attempted to pull it over her head, her ears popped violently. She crashed to her knees, holding her temples and expanding her lower jaw, trying anything to stop the building, pulsating pressure in her head.

When the pressure finally faded and then disappeared, Lake heard the sound of running water. She looked at her phone. 12:06 a.m. Who was running water so late? And where was it coming from? She knew she should head back to the group and find a way to get the elephant off from around her neck, but instead she found herself following the noise into the dining room. In the far corner was a narrow door with a glass knob she didn't notice on her first inspection, and when Lake stood in front of it, the sound of running water surged louder.

Just as she was reaching for the knob, her back pocket vibrated.

It was Madison calling. She clicked *ignore* and placed the phone back in her pocket, but then it began to buzz with texts.

From Madison: *OMG, where r u? Call me right now! Texts*

*working?*

From Ell: *Lake? We're all looking for you. WTF? Take my bag?*

From Madison: *U okay??????? Call me!*

From Logan: *snap your fingers 2x if you're dead in the cellar or just using the bathroom like a boss. jk, hit me back asap...freakin us OUT :P*

No point in worrying them. Lake typed her reply to Ell.

*Went for a walk. Be back soon. Have your tools and bag ;)*

Without contemplating why, she turned off her phone and slowly opened the door in front of her. The noise roared up and over her like the rush of a waterfall.

Her flashlight lit up a set of ancient stairs leading down to a small landing, and off the landing, more stairs to the right. It was now or never, she figured, beginning her descent into the darkness.

Lake stepped off the last stair, hearing a muted crunch as her shoe crushed something hard and lumpy. She aimed her flashlight at her feet, lifting the toe of her Converse sneaker. Beneath her foot was a trampled toy truck.

“What the—” Lake kicked the truck away and swept her beam across the floor, immediately lighting up an old jack-in-the-box on its side, the metal clown corroded and brown. Another few feet and it got worse. Piled on the ground was a stack of children’s toys, dirty and soaked with water, mounting up to her waist.

Lake struggled to make her way through the pile as she moved toward the rushing, growing noise of water. She pushed past plastic dolls, metal cars, and soggy cardboard, shoving aside wooden trains and *Sesame Street* books. Everything was scuffed

and chipped, discolored and soaked through, noxious with the smell of mold.

The further down the hall she went, the moldier and older things got.

Just as she'd decided to stop and turn back—this was officially enough—her fingers caught on what felt like a small cardboard box. When she pulled her hand out of the pile, Lake saw that it was an old deck of cards so familiar to her that she felt a tremor of hope spark from somewhere deep inside her. It was so familiar she could barely register that she was holding it. She stared blankly at the soggy box of Pittsburgh Pirates cards before stuffing them into her backpack along with a handful of green army men, a white baby blanket, a red teddy bear missing its left arm, and a porcelain doll with its hair ripped out. She pulled her trusty hammer out of the backpack and held it at the ready. Ready for what, she didn't know. Then, half in a daze, she aimed her flashlight far down the hallway in front of her—and was immediately dumbfounded.

Rain poured from the ceiling. It didn't drip water here and there, and it wasn't as if a pipe had burst on the first floor and water seeped through one spot in a steady stream. No, the ceiling was raining, just as if she stood under a dark cloud. Twenty feet down the hallway there was a large drain. And all along the two walls were at least a dozen doors, maybe more. It hardly seemed real.

Lake took one step backward and froze. Without trying, she took two steps forward. Suddenly, there was movement down the hall. The first door on the left slowly swung inwards, and water rushed inside. With a shaky hand, Lake aimed her flashlight on the person slowly emerging from the doorway. It was a boy. A man. A young

man. He was shirtless and in tattered brown pants. Skinny but muscular, tall, and pale. His blond hair was cut short, much shorter in some spots than others. The rain bounced off his

strong shoulders and square jaw, rolling down his neck, chest, and in and out of his navel until it soaked the waist of his pants. Sixteen or seventeen, Lake guessed. She swallowed hard, afraid of keeping the light on him, and more afraid of losing him in the darkness.

Somehow, he didn't seem to notice her. Or did he?

He moved slowly, bare feet splashing across the hall. His eyelids barely blinked, even in the downpour. When he turned his head toward Lake and her flashlight, she immediately felt paralyzed by a force she'd never felt before.

Everything about him, his body, his stare, even the space in between them, was utterly captivating. Lake bit her lower lip hard, tasting blood.

The flashlight's beam hit him square in the face, but he didn't squint. His purple lips parted and then pressed together. Lake had the strange feeling that she was standing in a theater's balcony, watching the main spotlight draw the audience's attention to this angelic character crossing the stage. But then, with his head still turned in Lake's direction, the young man opened and disappeared through the opposite door. She stood there for a second and then, almost as if possessed, started to laugh at the absurdity of it all. She barely recognized the sound of her own laughter, and when she caught her breath, she knew why. Echoing through the strange, raining hallway was a woman's cackle, scratchy and wet. She hadn't been the only one laughing.

The elephant around her neck grew hot again, and when she looked down, Lake saw that it was glowing.

Now came a voice—the voice of the laughing woman. It was hard to tell where it was coming from, but it seemed to be emanating from the end of the hallway of endless doors.

*“What color is it? What color is it?”*

Lake spun around, aiming her flashlight everywhere, at every door and back up the stairs. The rain made it impossible for her to see to the end of the hall. When she squinted and thought she could make out a shape, the woman called out again.

*“What cooolor, what colorrr, what coolor, what colorrr?”*

Lake thought she might be dreaming. Something had happened upstairs with the elephant. Maybe she had passed out and this was all a hallucination. She slowly backed into the pile of toys and placed a foot on the bottom stair.

*This is the most scared I’ve ever been. And this time, I don’t like it.*