

The old house groaned as the wind whipped through the trees, knocking the broken shutters against the dirty, cracked windows. Oliver gripped his flashlight tight, the beam flickering like it was scared too. His stomach lurched as he counted the steps taking him further away from his friends, their dare still echoing in his mind.

“He won’t be able to do it,” he heard them giggle behind him. “Ten minutes in that old creepy shack? Ten bucks says he doesn’t make it past the door!”

But Oliver was determined to prove them wrong, even if his insides were churning. As he cautiously tiptoed up the cracked front steps, he could feel his legs shaking. Slowly, he crept towards the front door, his ears tuned to every sound around him. Another gust of wind rattled the windows, and what sounded like a moan wailed from inside. Oliver put his hand on the doorknob, closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and pushed it open.

Dust floated through the air like tiny ghosts. The musty smell of wet wood caught the back of his throat, and he coughed, hacking dust mites back into the stale air. The warped floorboards creaked loudly as he stepped into the hallway. Faded wallpaper clung to the walls, peeling off in thin curls, like twisted claws that reached towards him. A broken picture frame hung crookedly, showing a lone, aged face, unsmiling, with eyes that seemed to cut to his soul. He felt a scream crawl up his throat, and just as he opened his mouth, something brushed against his shoulder and up into his hair. A high-pitched, strangled sound wrenched through the air as he turned and flailed his arms blindly. Something flapped wildly around him, and his knees hit the floor as his arms wrapped protectively around his head. It was then that he realized, the strange high-pitched sound was his own scream. He clamped his mouth shut, hearing the *THUMP-THUMP-THUMP* of his heart hammering in his chest.

The flapping echoed upstairs, and from somewhere in the depths of the house, Oliver heard the slow creaking of a door. And then silence. Oliver froze, waiting for what might emerge inside this haunted shack. And then he heard it. Soft at first, so soft he could hardly tell if it might be his imagination, but another few terrified seconds confirmed his fears. Footsteps. Slow and uneven, like somebody walking with a limp. Five steps, then six, seven, eight. Silence again. Oliver inhaled suddenly - he hadn't realized he was holding his breath. He had just built up the courage to lift his head when *CLANG!* The sound of something heavy and metallic crashed above him and the ceiling rattled. Oliver could no longer feel his limbs. A loud jangling sound, like heavy chain being dragged, scraped overhead. Oliver's mouth went dry. He opened his mouth to scream again, but this time nothing came out.

Suddenly, a huge gust of wind blew the front door open, and it slammed against the wall, the old doorknob rattling, an echo of his shaken mind.

"Oliver!" Something whispered his name from the direction of the door. "*Oliver!*" the voice whispered again, more urgent this time.

His heart hammered as the chain continued to scrape. Slowly, he turned and dared to peak in the direction of the voice. His eyes adjusted to the light coming in through the open door, just enough to see a small wooden chair sitting in the doorway he had walked through only moments ago. On it sat a porcelain doll with a cracked face, its head tilted slightly to the side.

"Oliver," he heard again. And then everything went black.