



Erik Stoneheart

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Eleven-year-old Erik may look like an ordinary boy, but he is far from it. If he were, then he'd be saddened by the facts that his parents constantly forget him, that he doesn't have a single friend, and that he has to move into an eerie mansion on a secluded island, which they just inherited from his Great-Aunt Brunhilda. Erik's heart is made of stone, unbreakable, and impossible to hurt. At least that's what he believes, even after meeting a peculiar girl named Maria who also lives in their house.

Reading sample

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The Secret Plan

Erik went upstairs, trying not to glance in the direction of the dark door at the end of the hallway, and pushed open the door to his bedroom.

He barely had a split second to make out bright red hair and a dark green witch's cloak before the being charged right at him. Brunhilda was attacking! She crashed into Erik and knocked him to the ground. If the boy had been able to speak, then he'd have cried out: "Why, Great Aunt Brunhilda? Why?! What've I ever done to you?! You don't even know me! And I never wanted to move into your house in the first place!" But not a peep escaped his lips. He tried to shove Brunhilda's soft, white, giant hairy paws away from his throat . . .

Wait, hold on! Soft, white, giant hairy paws? Great Aunt Brunhilda was no bunny . . . or a teddy bear. Erik freed himself from the ghostly death-grip and pushed away what he believed was his late relative. Right on the site where the life-or-death struggle had just taken place lay a huge white teddy bear dressed in a gown and a red clown wing. It stared at Erik with its cute button eyes as if wanting to apologize and insist it had no part in the plan. Erik knew all too well whose idea it had been. He looked back at the doorway. Above it was a clever mechanism with a length of rope that had launched the costumed teddy bear as soon as he opened the door. Erik had no choice but to conclude that the seemingly nasty, angry pipsqueak of a girl who also lived in the house was extremely nasty and angry.

He ran back to the door, flung it open, and shouted into the darkness.

"You can't do anything to scare me! I've got a heart of stone!"

Silence. Moments later, the girl approached from the shadows.

"Huh?" she asked.

The girl narrowed her terrifyingly dark eyes and took another step closer.

"I don't care if you tease me. Or pick fights with me. Or taunt me," Erik said, puffing out his chest.

"Ha, I sure believe that!"

Although it sounded sarcastic, Erik felt like she really did believe it a little. Or was at least somewhat confused by what to think of him.

"Feelings are pointless anyway. I don't let them affect me . . ." he continued.

"Not even pain?" the girl growled,

digging her sharp fingernails into his arm and refusing to let go. She stared straight into his eyes, hoping to squeeze out even the tiniest little tear; even the tiniest little wince.

But Erik's face didn't betray a single emotion. It only became a little sweatier and a tone redder.

Finally, the human vice tired out on her own and released her grip.

"You've got such fat arms!" the girl hissed spitefully before receding into the darkness.

Erik looked down at the red welts on his skin. My arms never throb like this when I'm playing games on my tablet, he thought. Just my thumbs sometimes. And my back and my neck and my butt from sitting for so long. But those were . . . invisible pains. They never left any physical trace. Erik inspected the flushed crescent-moon-shaped marks on his arm, which he had to admit was a little chubby. Nobody had ever let themselves get so bothered by his existence before that they actually lashed out and injured him!

Erik sat in his room for a long time, pondering his neighbors.

So, bad people. What makes a person bad? What about an eleven-year-old girl? Sure, she eats another kid's cookies – right in front of him, to boot! – and scratches him with her nails, which is as bad as it gets.

Suddenly, he heard a noise. Something hit the window. Erik froze and looked outside. He'd taken care to prop a chair up under the doorknob but hadn't accounted for the possibility that the spiteful girl could try to get in through the window. And his room was way up on the second floor!

Bang! Something else struck the pane.

Erik weighed what to do. Why did he immediately assume the same girl had to be behind it? Maybe a big bug was banging against the glass. Or a nice kid who lived nearby had come to meet the new occupants. A good kid to balance out the bad one, maybe?

Erik could no longer withstand his curiosity and went over to the window. He opened it and looked down. Nope, his suspicions were confirmed: the very same girl was standing in their front yard. Yet surprisingly, she was grinning and shyly, almost cutely, tapping her sandal against a rock. Just like any other totally nice, ordinary girl.

"Sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. My name's Maria," she said sweetly and waved.

"Erik . . ." Erik mumbled politely, a little annoyed with himself for not coming up with a better retort. He could've shouted "Whatever!" or "Who cares!", but his 'Frenchish' upbringing got the better of him. Specifically, his mom

believed the world's politest and most self-sufficient children all lived in France, so she'd bought all kinds of French books on raising kids. For years, she'd drilled into him that he should always greet people in a way that "acknowledges their presence".

Yet at that moment, Erik would rather have done the very opposite of acknowledging Maria's presence.

"Very . . ." the girl's grin suddenly twisted into a loathing sneer, "NOT nice to meet you!"

Before Erik had a chance to slam the window shut, Maria produced from behind her back the same weapon she'd used to attack him in the kitchen, and shot an object in his direction.

This time her plan failed, however, because Erik just barely managed to drop flat on his floor before he was hit.

"You missed!" he jeered, leaping back up to his feet.

Maria didn't look disappointed in the very least – she was still grinning that evil grin. Erik realized that even him ducking had been a part of her malicious plan all along! It dawned upon him just what a mean-spirited person he was dealing with. And that wasn't all. A horrible stench, as if somebody had just ripped the world's biggest rotten-egg fart, penetrated his nostrils. Slowly, he turned around. His tablet had taken a direct hit and now, the little projectile was oozing revolting greenish liquid onto the screen and his bed. It was a sludge attack! The reek made his stomach turn.

Who on earth was this girl?!