

*“Go inside the Hatfield’s mansion and get me the ball in the master bedroom.”*

Erin gulped. The sweat on the back of his neck was collecting in his shirt collar, making the tag sticky and sharp. Erin shook out his arms, feeling the whispers of mayflies in the air, entangled in their last moments in thick, cloud-like spiderwebs.

Stepping into Hatfield Manor with caution, he pointedly ignored Maxie’s predatory glare, burning like two laser pointers on Erin’s nape. His fist closed like a vise around the badly drawn map in his pocket. Maxie had, in her own words, “graciously gifted” him it out of the goodness of her heart, worried as she was for him on his “harrowing journey”.

*Yeah, right. Like there’s anything remotely good about her.* Maxie was a bully, one with the artistic skills of a pack mule. The “map” was a piece of crumpled printer paper with a lopsided doodle of Hatfield Manor in faded pencil crayon with arrows and instructions scribbled around it. There was a circle around a window with a star on it surrounded by large exclamation points. Maxie had probably made it as a gag, but now that Erin was stuck in some creepy old house on some stupid dare, it was his only lifeline. A sucky one, but still a lifeline. Erin wouldn’t admit it, but he clung.

Jumping as the house lurched, Erin’s shoulders brushed his ears. He shivered, feeling the hands of a long-lost ghost caress his neck. Curling into himself, Erin tried to get away from the walls. They had holes, big, gaping mouths with teeth like claws and lips full of splinters. Listing towards either side of the hall, he felt strangled, phantom hands pulling him into mouse traps and trouble.

Erin breathed out. *No, focus. One step at a time.* His dad had always said he needed to be calm and break hard things into simpler things. His dad had also always said he shouldn't accept dares from hot shot bullies looking to scare his pants off for a laugh, but, well. Both pieces of advice were, admittedly, hard to follow. Erin took another breath.

*Stupid pride,* Erin scolded himself. Just like every other time she decided she wanted to mess with him, Maxie had stomped up to him first thing after classes let out for lunch with a mean glint in her eyes and a snarl twisting her face. She'd had her backpack in one hand and lunch in the other, when, all of a sudden, Erin was soaked in cold chicken noodle soup with a proposition smacked into his face:

*"Meet me at the top of Hatfield Hill tonight at sundown. Show, or I'll tell the whole school you're a wuss."* One or two unoriginal insults to his ancestry later, and he couldn't say no.

Erin pulled the map out of his pocket. He unfurled it carefully, gently smoothing out rumples and creases. He bit his lip as he studied it, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration but his focus never on the map for more than a few moments. Instead, his eyes flitted and flickered about the halls, which were wide, pushed out on either side by ornate couches and dainty looking three-legged tables slanting brokenly into the floor. Vases were shattered in corners, withered flower stems laying on beds of rot stains. Chandeliers, worn and splintered with time, sat innocuously on the carpet, cracked apart in a line through the middle of the hallway. At the end was a spiraling staircase, tall as the sky. Erin could already feel it cracking beneath his feet. He shuddered.

*Get yourself together, Stupid*, Erin inhaled and shook his head. All he needed to do was get the ball, that was it.

Maxie crooned in his head, *but to do that, you have to go through the hall, up the stairs, into the bedroom, and then all the way back*. As always, she was the devil on his shoulder encouraging every stupid whim and fear.

Consumed by thought, Erin failed to notice a grounded chandelier, slightly askew, directly in his path. His boot connected with the pendant of the light and the worn outsole cracked against cloudy glass. It skidded over the carpet, crashing into everything on its way across the hall. He clamped his hands over his mouth as a dust cloud billowed up. A swarm of rats emerged from beneath the stairs. Erin held his breath.

One of the rats, a fat brown thing with pudgy fingers and only half a tail, scrambled up the nearest newel post. Its claws were as large as pebbles, tearing through the rotted wood and leaving scattered scratch marks in its wake. The railing swayed, tipping and bobbing. The lowest step swayed with it, breaking down the middle with a loud *crack!* Erin let a soft squeak squeeze through his fingers. The rat turned. Its eyes were red and beady, glowing. It looked right at Erin.

Erin assumed his best fighting pose. He remembered his dad, feet planted, shoulders squared, staring down a wasp's nest in their porch. The rat bared its teeth and hissed. Erin inched slowly towards the stairs, wearily eyeing the rotted wood as it groaned, lurching with the house. The walls felt like they were closing in.

The rat skittered off the banister, disappearing into some nook or cranny. The stairs loomed in its wake. Erin took a breath.

First step. Erin cautiously tested his weight against the second stair. It creaked but didn't give. Hyping himself up, he squared his shoulders and forced his legs to move, pushing up. Second step. This time, the wood cracked at the sides when Erin put his foot down, metal nails screeching through splintered stringers. Erin smelled blood and looked down. There was a small scrape on his calf.

*What if it gets infected?* His dad's warnings about purpled skin and burning fevers ghosted the back of Erin's mind. You could lose a limb.

*You won't, unless you're a wuss,* Maxie's voice snapped back. *Now get the ball. Time's a wastin'.*

Erin felt the memory of a hand on his shoulder. *Don't let her talk to you like that.* His dad had never let anyone do anything he thought was out of line, and he always told Erin to stand up for himself. Erin had always wanted to, had always done so, too, but—

*Crash!* A window behind him smashed across the floor. Jagged glass shards were splattered over everything, some laying flat and reflecting light and shadow, some stuck in the rotting walls. In the middle of it all was a lopsided pebble just larger than Erin's palm. Maxie.

"Get a move on, Loser!" Her voice was like a crow's call, loud and annoying and a signal for all the worst things in the world. "High knees, ya hear me!?" Erin took a breath.

*Alright, here goes nothing.* He grabbed two fistfuls of his capris and hiked them high over his thighs. *Sorry, Dad. She wins. Again.*

*It's okay, son. Just this once, eh?* The hand left his shoulder, like it always did whenever his dad got pulled away after one of their little pep talks.

Erin nodded to himself, like his dad would've made him do if he were around to. *But it's not just once*, he knew. Erin was always getting pushed around by Maxie, always letting her challenge him and laugh at him and make him do all her work. Every day, she went out of her way to bruise his ego, threatening his reputation and social life at every turn for her own amusement. And every day, Erin would shake in his boots and complain about her to himself, calling exasperated, whiny insults at her back from within the safety of his own head.

*Is it worth it?* And every day, Erin would think about how disappointed his dad would be if he were around, just for that one second before he did something monumentally stupid, something undignified and embarrassing and everything his dad had taught him not to do.

*Does it matter?* He'd never questioned things before, not really. He had doubted, let his fear of Maxie be overtaken by shame or shock, but he had never stopped, never hesitated. Erin was a coward, and Maxie was absolute, in every way that kids could be.

Slapping his calf, Erin swatted the flaky sweat and grime soaked into his socks. He pulled his pant leg up higher and folded the rolls to be more secure. After all, it was probably better to expose the wound to moldy air than whatever dust monster was nesting in his capris.

He squinted. Outside, the sun loomed over the horizon, pale yellow fog filtering into the house through grime caked windows and painting creaky floorboards in frozen silence. It was thin and reedy, like spoiled milk, and it mixed with the sweat pawing at his eyes. He ignored it and braced himself to press onward, like a good, thoughtless lackey. *I guess it doesn't, not really.*

*But why? Why let her walk all over me?* Because that's the way things were, and how they always would be. Maxie was the decision maker, his decision maker, in everything. There was no saying no.

Erin scanned the map again. Maxie's scratchy instructions stared up at him, daring him to back out. Erin almost wanted to, but one look outside at the setting sun was enough to push him onwards. What would he say, if he came out after all this time without anything to show for it? Maxie would snarl at him, maybe punch him. And everyone would know, "*Erin Stern is a wuss*". Another step. Erin paused at the lump under his foot.

Peeking out beneath his shoe was the severed half of a rat's tail. He screamed.

Erin hopped from foot to foot as he switched between batting at his boot with the map and trying to scrape the tail off against the floorboards. His back hit a wall, and he scrambled to *get away, get away, who knows what monster died there*, arms flapping wildly and knees flailing like they weren't attached to him. The tail held strong.

Underfoot, glass crunched like ice beneath car tires. Foggy crumbs pressed into the rubber of his shoes and stuck to the tail. Erin stomped, uncaring of the cut on his calf as he shook his leg aggressively, twisting his foot into the carpet. *Maybe, the musk on it'll stick to the wretched thing more than it's sticking to me.* With a huff, he straightened his shoulders and let go of the map, glaring enviously as it fluttered nicely in the sunlight. Like a butterfly, or one of those pretentious white messenger birds.

Erin flipped his foot, knee bent backwards to prop it in the air. With quick, panicked hands, he poked at the area around the tail. Slowly, it peeled off the sole of his shoe, unsticking with a series of small squelches. It hit the ground with a soft thump. Calmly, it stared up at Erin, resting innocuously on Maxie's map.

*Oh*, he thought.

*Go on*, said his dad.

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Double doors crashed open, dust trailing behind him. Erin resisted the urge to cough the taste of disease out of his mouth and stalked down the lawn. Maxie was waiting for him.

"Where's my ball, Wuss?" She asked, arms crossed over her chest and cheek pinched with judgement.

Erin didn't hesitate. "I don't have it."

“Wh—but” a pause. Maxie’s shoulders were slack with bewilderment.

“I said I don’t have it.” It felt good to say it out loud. She had no power over him. Maxie’s map crinkled as he loosened his tightened fist.

“The ball! The dare!” Maxie’s eyes were wide with surprise, shining with something almost stunned, angry. “Aren’t you gonna get my—”

Erin shoved the map against her collarbone and allowed himself a moment to revel in her shocked shriek. A rat tail, grimy and sticky, sprung free of its paper confines and curled around her throat like a promise. “Get it yourself.”