

## The Straw That Broke My Brother's Back

"Hey bro, give me another Twizzler," my brother Charlie says from the couch where he's sprawled out. From my spot in the recliner, I sift through the jumbo bag of multi-colored and flavored Twizzlers, grab a yellow one, and toss it over. Charlie catches it out of the air and frowns.

"Yellow *again*?! I wanna different one. Give me red or purple."

I clutch the bag to my chest and fold up my knees in front of it, pretending I didn't hear him and intently staring at the TV. Some action movie plays.

"*Come on*, Terry."

"They're all gone. Only yellow left," I lie. On the screen, the hero and bad guy are duking it out on a rooftop, with punches and kicks flying everywhere.

"Bullshit. Just throw over a red Twizzler. It's not that fucking hard," Charlie snaps.

I wrap my arms tighter around the bag as it crinkles. I grit my teeth and continue staring at the blaring screen, but it's hard to focus when Charlie's glaring a hole in my head.

"Terry," he growls, "just *share*."

I stay still, purposely continuing to not glance over. See how much I care, Charlie? You're not getting *any* of the reds and purples. They're *mine*.

I guess Charlie must be fed up by now, 'cause he swears and pushes himself off the couch, then drags his stupid ass next to the recliner. I feel him tower over me. His breath stinks of Doritos. Seeing me continue to ignore him, he huffs and reaches for the Twizzlers, but can't wedge his hand in at all. I snarl and jerk away.

"What the hell, Terry?! Quit being a little shit and share the goddamn Twizzlers!"

He reaches out for the bag again, only to flinch back when I whip his pudgy hand

with a Twizzler. Charlie's nostrils flare as he sucks in air through them, jaw clenched, and fists trembling. I smirk at his red, sweaty face as I slowly wave a *red* Twizzler back and forth. Come on, Charlie, I *dare* you. Lose control.

Instead, his face smoothes over and he slowly breathes out, tension melting away. "Terry, this is stupid. We shouldn't be fighting over *Twizzlers*. We're too old for this shit. Let's just forget it and watch the movie. I can grab another snack." He forces a stiff smile and holds his hand out for a shake. Looks like the anger management's been working.

Damn.

I tighten my grip around the Twizzler, feeling the grooves dig into my palm. It's not going to be that easy. I blink wide-eyed at his standing form. My mouth curves again.

"Can't go five minutes without stuffing your face, huh, fatass?"

Charlie's smile strains to stay on. His hand drops to his side. "I'm not fat. I'm big-boned."

"Yeah, you've got a big bone in your *ass*. You're disgusting, you know that?"

The smile fades completely. My brother tenses up for a moment, and then turns away. He's walking towards the doorway. Are you trying to be the better man, Charlie?

"Vanessa thinks so, too!" I call out. Charlie freezes at the doorway to the kitchen, his hand clutching the doorframe, knuckles white and back steel straight. Good.

"The only reason she dated you *at all* was because she felt *sorry* for you. She told me she hated it whenever you touched her, that it was like being with a *pig*." I'm standing up now, grinning so wide it aches, heart racing, eyes boring into my brother's back. The TV's blare buzzes in my head and mixes with my thoughts. Next to the doorway is a picture of us as kids at the beach, arms slung over each other's shoulders with halos on our heads from the sun's glare. Charlie's other hand is on the doorframe next to it. His back is still turned.

I push farther. "Know why she still comes over all the time? It's for *me*. Vanessa *loves* the things I do to her--"

I cut off as Charlie whirls around, red face twisted with hatred and rage. *The volcano has finally erupted*, I think triumphantly. Glass cracks as Charlie slams his fists back, and then with a roar he charges like a bull across the room and jumps on me. I fall backwards onto

the recliner and it tips over, sending both of us to the carpet, me beneath Charlie's larger body. My head knocks to the side from a blow on my cheek. I wildly kick to escape and claw at his face, grabbing a hold of Charlie's lip and yanking down *hard*. Charlie screams incoherently, spit flying as his huge hands wrap around my throat and squeeze. I sputter and tear at his hands, jerking crazily from side to side to throw him off. He's so *heavy*.

I jam my finger into his eye and Charlie shrieks, hands flying to his face. I take the opening and roughly shove him off, staggering and wheezing for oxygen. Charlie glares with one eye screwed shut and launches his fist at my face, knocking me right in the middle of my mouth. I feel my teeth clank and blood flow down my chin as I'm swept off my feet again. Slammed to the floor, I groan and prop myself up with my arms. Charlie is yelling, "All you had to share some stupid Twizzlers, Terry! That's it! But you always have to fuck up everything!" Charlie's muscles strain forward as he reaches out for more of my blood, but he's held back by both my parents and uncle.

All three of them grip his arms tightly like cuffs, keeping Charlie from ripping free and pounding my face in. Mom's desperate voice joining Dad's stern one and Uncle Sebastian's soft tones in a jumbled chorus telling him "calm down," "what the hell happened?!", and "it's over now, let it go," but Charlie doesn't look at them, just glares at me as he says "I hate you" over and over again. *When did they get here?* I foggily wonder. There's someone beside me, holding me up. I look over at my Aunt Vera's long worried face. Her mouth is rapidly moving but I don't hear anything she's saying. My mouth's numb and my side throbs and my throat hurts like a bitch and I'm still wheezing for air *but I won*. See, Charlie? Even with all your therapy and diets and exercise and studying and trying to be better, I *still* brought you down. Nothing you do matters, because you'll always be as low as me. I'll make sure of it.

The yelling has stopped. When I look up Charlie's gone, and so are Mom, Dad, and Uncle Sebastian. The picture on the wall is covered with cracks splintered throughout the glass so much I can't see the boys in it anymore. I suddenly can't *stand* anymore and my knees buckle, but I don't fall to the hard floor. Aunt Vera's still holding me, arms grasping my middle. I lean against her tall frame as she helps me limp over to the couch to lie down,

and sits next to me on the floor. With big eyes and jaw hanging open, she looks over the mess: the broken picture, toppled recliner, blood on the floor, and finally fixes her eyes on the crumpled Twizzler bag.

“Jesus! Was this all because of *Twizzlers*?!”