

**Ruben**

“That brother of yours... He got a half-crazed smile on him, don't he?”

Ruben was fairly certain he was not supposed to hear that. He did not exactly know how he knew this. It could be because the words possessed the hushed vibrations found in whispers in the middle of the night. Or possibly because they were spoken so serenely only minutes after orgasmic bliss. Or perhaps it was because he had overheard them as he walked between the walls of his sister's old bedroom, unheard and silent as a secret.

His eyes peer through the boards eagerly.

He watches as his sister rolls over to her side beneath the sheets, facing her fiancé with an exasperated expression. The hulk of a man places his hand over her waist casually. A practiced sort of intimacy that rendered no reaction except the mocking furrow of a brow.

“You are the worst at pillow talk,” says his sister.

Her fiancé chuckles, letting his thumb rub the thin sheet over her skin. Ruben fixates on the movement.

“C'mon. You gotta admit, he's kinda...” The Brute let his words linger. Ruben tilts his head.

“You're seriously going to talk about my brother...now? In bed?” His sister looks torn between amusement and disbelief. She had been holding that expression for most of the family reunion.

The Brute shakes his head, “Nah. No. Forget about it.”

Interest seemingly peaked, his sister sits up, letting the blanket pool at her lap. Her naked shoulders soften under the pale glow of the streetlight just outside her window. *They* had often snuck out

through that window as children, shying away from the light, lest it expose them. Now, Ruben thought it only made his sister look older.

“No, no.” She smirks and lightly slaps at her fiancé’s bicep. Ruben’s ears ring. “Tell me about it. You got me curious. What’d my dear brother do to freak you out?” Her teasing tone is familiar; she often used it with him.

The Brute adjusts his body, outwardly trying to appear ready to sleep- but Ruben knows better. He sees the muscles tighten, ready for the opportunity to join her side against the headboard.

“Nah.” He dismisses, “You’re right. I’ll just...” He lets the words hang again. Such cheap manipulation.

Ruben presses his palms against the walls, leaning close enough to kiss the splinters between the crevices. His sister takes the bait with a playful smirk, “What, he give you the shovel talk or something? Threaten you with a shotgun?” Ruben almost scoffs. A shotgun? How crude.

It had been a bread knife.

With a groan, The Brute’s muscles spring into action and carry him to sit up, his gaze satisfied, but contaminated with something wary. He rests a hand on his lap, prompting his loving fiancé to cradle it with her own. Ruben watches as her fingers play with the hairs on his knuckles. He momentarily flicks his gaze on his own, bare hands.

The Brute groans, “Well, not really. I don’t know if there even *was* a shovel talk.”

His sister laughs, “How does one not know if they’ve been given the shovel talk? You either have, or you haven’t. No in-between.”

“I know. I know that. It’s just- The way he talked, it was just... There was something odd there. I don’t think he likes me.”

His sister laughs heartily at that. Ruben's lips split into a smile identical to her own. "He's Ruben. He likes everybody."

"I think I'm an exception."

"Seriously, you're overthinking this."

"Am I?"

"He told me he likes you."

"Really?"

"Yes! And he'd never lie to me." Ruben feels something flood his chest like liquid joy. She was right.

"My brothers lie to me all the time!"

"Not Ruben. We don't lie to each other."

"And you trust that?"

His sister nods, sending a curled lock of dirty blonde hair cascading down her chest, "With my life." The hair hangs just below her left breast like a pendulum. Ruben's fingernails scratch at the decaying wood.

"That a creepy twin thing?"

Ruben counts the split ends that tickle her skin.

"Absolutely." She smiles mischievously, then lowers her voice as if telling a dire secret, "Also, when we were six, I took his favourite teddy bear and made him swear *never* to lie to me." Her azure eyes sparkle with warmth. They were Ruben's eyes. He wonders if her fiancé has noticed.

The Brute raises an eyebrow, “What’d he do to deserve that?”

His sister shrugs, “Buried my American Girl in the backyard.”

He huffs a laugh, “Little cruel, don’t you think?”

A click of the tongue, “Nah, he deserved it-” He had. “*and* we’re digressing here. You haven’t even told me what he did that got you so upset.”

The Brute laughs. Ruben knows his pupils have shrunk to mere pinpricks at the sound.

“It’s not that he did anything. Well, I guess he...” Tension begins to ache within Ruben’s jaw. He realizes he’s begun to grind his teeth and stops immediately. “You know earlier, when you left us in the kitchen to go help your parents with the cable?” His sister nods with a hum. “He asked me to help him with the potato salad-”

“Which tasted great, by the way.” She interrupts, giving her fiancé an adoring flutter of her eyelashes. The Brute chuckles bashfully and squeezes her hand. Ruben feels his heart pump behind his eyes.

“Yeah, well, it was mostly him. I just chopped the potatoes, which is actually when things got a bit weird.”

“How weird?”

“He kept smiling at me. Not like a ‘I’m having fun’ smile, or a friendly smile. He just... stared at me and smiled.”

Ruben smiles widely at the memory.

“Yeah, he does that.”

The Brute looks incredulous, “He does?”

“Yeah, he gets dazed real easy. Always has. Probably didn’t even know he was doing it.” Oh, he knew what he was doing. He just couldn’t help it. The Brute had been so ridiculously inept. It was like watching a gorilla attempt to peel a banana for the first time.

The Brutes huffs, “That’ll explain *this*, then.”

Ruben tilts his head, but cannot see what The Brute is referring to.

“Oh, come on, babe, he said he was sorry! He sewed it up and everything. Didn’t even charge you for it.” Ah, the hand. Of course, he didn’t charge. It was the most painful and inefficient emergency stitching he had ever performed. He made sure of it.

“How generous.” Sarcasm drips from The Brute’s mouth like poison.

For the first time, the set of his sister’s mouth turns severe. It sends a familiar shiver down Ruben’s spine.

“Are you seriously accusing my brother of hurting you on purpose?”

The Brutes flounders, “No! No, of course not, it’s just. I just... find it weird that- that-”

“That what?”

“He’s a nationally ranked surgeon! You’d expect that to mean something when it comes to handling shit!”

“For god’s sake, he’s still human!”

“Yeah, and every surgeon just goes around ‘dazing off’ and accidentally cutting people-”

“He dropped a knife!”

“Well, I sure as hell hope he doesn’t drop one on his patients.”

The Brute winces as soon as the words leave his throat. Ruben begins to smile, but suddenly finds his attention drawn downward as a weight settles over his foot. Huh. A rat has sat atop his left shoe, curious as it sniffs at his pant leg. Ruben remains still.

The Brute's voice barely pierces through his awareness, "Fuck, I'm sorry."

The rat begins to nibble at his shoelaces. He liked those oxfords.

His sister speaks, "Honey, I get it, it's been a stressful day- Hell, it's been *a week*, to say the least. But that doesn't mean the world's out to get you. Not mom. Not dad. And sure as hell, not Ruben."

Slowly, he begins to lean down, keeping his legs straight so as not to frighten the rodent.

The Brute sighs, "I know, I know. It's just-"

"Listen, I know you didn't want to do this, and- Hey, look at me. I appreciate you coming to meet the family. Really, I do. And I get that this isn't your kind of thing. But just give them a chance. I can't promise you'll like mom and dad much, hell, I don't- But Ruben's my best friend-"

He reaches for the rat.

"-and I *really* want you to like him. You got a lot of things in common."

"He drives a Bentley."

"He's also a huge dork who I used to swirl every morning."

The rat perks up, feeling something amiss. He strikes.

The Brute scoffs, "Of course you did."

His sister hums, "He's friendly and awkward at parties, too, just like someone else I know."

The rat hangs by its tail, pinched viciously between his fingers. It fights to orient itself. He pinches it harder.

“He also has a great sense of humour. Remind you of anyone?”

The rat squeaks as he tosses it into the air. He catches it before it lands and engulfs it with his palm. He smiles.

“You’re both great men. Good men.”

He strokes his thumb gently over the rat’s crown. It tries to bite him. It fails.

“And you’re both very-”

He squeezes. The rat tries to scratch its way to freedom, but its legs are trapped. He tilts its head back forcefully. It snaps its teeth in the air.

The sound of sheets rustling. “very-”

It’s begun to squeak desperately. He shushes it as he squeezes tighter. He can feel its fluttering heartbeat press against his own.

The sound of a kiss. “wonderfully-”

The rat chokes as its eyes roll back. It goes soft and limp in his hand, like a heart.

“kind.”

Ruben strokes the rat tenderly and raises his eyes to look through the cracks, his soul soaring.

The Brute has his lips pressed against his sister’s, her arms wrapped around his neck in an awkward, but devoted embrace. She grabs one of his hands -the uninjured one- and guides it to her mane of blonde waves. He keeps it there, firm, and she deepens the kiss as she trails her fingers down his chest until her hand disappears into the sheets.

Ruben can't help it. He laughs- a sharp bark torn from his throat. He suffocates the sound as soon as it spills from his lips.

Not quick enough.

The Brute's head shoots up, drawing a noise of complaint from his fiancé. Ruben holds his breath. Seconds pass as The Brute stares towards the wall, every muscle in his body tightened with alarm. His sister asks a question, but Ruben cannot fathom what it was as his eyes follow the other man's own. The Brute steps out of the bed, nude and half risen. Ruben can barely keep hold of the laughter bubbling in his chest.

The other man makes his way toward the wall cautiously, as if a monster were waiting behind the boards. Ruben longs to smash his hand against the wall, if only to see the pasty ape piss himself. He has long understood there is no such thing as monsters.

But The Brute is close now, so close that Ruben can smell his putrid stench through the miasma of dust and mold. He unknowingly meets his gaze, searching through the cracks. Ruben stares back with savage intensity, refusing to blink even as his eyes sting with sweat and delight. His fingers dig into the cooling flesh between them, just barely enough of a reprieve to prevent himself from screaming.

His sister has turned her eyes to her fiancé, brows bowed in concern as he continues to glower into the green wall, searching for something that isn't there.

"You hear that?" The Brute asks.

"Hear what?" Ruben smiles wide enough to split his lip. Yes, idiot, hear what?

"Sounded like somebody."



His sister narrows her eyes, “Probably Ruben. He’s got insomnia, so he likes to walk around when he can’t sleep. Either that or rats. Dad thinks there might be a colony nearby.”

The Brute frowns, “You sure about that?”

His sister scoffs playfully, “What else do you want, a ghost? Come on, get back here.”

The pressure beneath Ruben’s ribcage has grown to a sharp ache as The Brute turns away, slowly making his way back to the bed. It whines as he settles on it, hands rubbing at his forehead. His sister places her hand on The Brute’s jaw, guiding his eyes towards her. Her expression is that of saintly worry.

Ruben licks his bleeding lip and breathes out with a satisfied grin.

The Brute exhales through his nose, “Sorry. Just thought I-” He gives Ruben one last, searching look, “Forget about it. It’s been a long day.”

His sister leans up to drink the pain from his lips with a chaste kiss. Her mouth must taste like acid.

Ruben’s tastes like iron.

“Maybe I can make it better?” she offers. She raises herself, the sheets falling away to expose the curves and folds of her body. She swings a leg over her fiancé so she straddles him, and leans down for a kiss. The arching of her back exposes the natural dark hair nestled between her thighs. Ruben studies it. Studies *them*. How they touch each other. Worship each other. Lie to each other.

A moan rises from the pile of writhing bodies.

Ruben leaves.

He weaves his way through the walls until he returns to his room, stepping through the shadows to rest on his bed.

He drops the tepid rat under his mattress as an afterthought and closes his eyes to let his hearing paint the picture around him. The creaks between the walls have settled now that he is no longer there to make them. Even the wind had receded, permitting stillness and absolute quiet to settle upon the house, the only sign of life being the sound of his breaths and the pulsing of his heart within its cage of bone.

He must have drifted at some point, for when he wakes up, it is still night, and the wind continues to sleep. He slowly registers the sensation of warm, soft flesh against his own. Something has joined him under the sheets, nuzzling at his neck and pressing kisses to his jaw. A hand ghosts over his chest, slowly making its way down his frame, lower, and lower.

He grabs at its wrist and turns to look at his companion with a fond grin. She grins back. The game is over for tonight.

In the morning, he wakes up to the sound of a bloodcurdling scream.

The dead rat under his bed is gone.

His sister must have delivered his gift; she must have liked it.

Her fiancé must have liked it even better.

He hears the frantic panic bleed through the walls and stretches, sighing with the pop of his rested joints. Daylight shines through his window like a greeting. Ruben basks in its warmth, content, and smiles like the sun.