

## Maroon Lips

Vero's neck ached, even after three pain killers and a warm compress. There was a low throbbing to it that pulled her focus away from work. She wasn't bad with numbers, but they weren't her favorite thing in the world. She had to focus on them and her sore neck wasn't helping at all. She saved the file and locked her computer before making her way to the water cooler. It was ostentatious with options of flavoring and sparkling or non-sparkling. It was a novelty, a waste of money, but sometimes she needed some carbonation to wake her up. She was just finishing up when her supervisor, Mrs. Nguyen came up to her.

“Veronica, did you get my email about that overtime you requested?”

Vero's stomach dropped. “No, ma'am. Did you just send it?”

“Glad I caught you then,” Mrs. Nguyen started filling her own container of sparkling white grape water. “It's been approved. We need your team to stay late while the auditor finishes up. You should be out of here by nine at the latest.”

Vero nodded and forced a smile as she listened, but she couldn't help the twinge of fear she felt. She had asked for more overtime the previous week, and the thought of a larger paycheck was always welcome, but these past few days had Vero on edge. She wanted to get home before it got dark and wasn't too sure why. She tried to remember, but all she could come up with was a tingling in the back of her mind that told her she needed to be at home with the door locked when it got dark if she wanted to be safe. She wasn't sure from what. There had to have been something on the news about safety that she was forgetting, but with Mrs. Nguyen in front of her, all Vero could do was smile.

“I'll go around and let everyone know right now. Thank you.”

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It was already two hours past her normal clock out time and the auditor still wasn't done. It was easy money at this point, really. She had gone through all her emails and managed to just finish her part for the Heel presentation for the following week. It had taken her a good four hours to get the data spreadsheets done after talking with her team about overtime. As expected, everyone was on board. Aside from Vero, the rest of her team was doing well, they were even a little bit ahead in the sheets. So, while Vero had continued the day's work, her team went off to get dinner.

The smell of enchiladas wafted through the air and had Vero looking up from her computer screen. Her roommate, Bonnie, stood with a takeout bag in hand.

"He still not done?" she asked as she handed over the bag as Vero made a small squeal of excitement.

"Nope. And he hasn't come out asking for anything for about," Vero looked at the time, "an hour now. Wonder if he's still alive."

Bonnie borrowed Morgan's chair and wheeled it over next to Vero. "Where'd everyone else go?"

"Poplar's," Vero managed to say before shoving a forkful of enchilada in her mouth. *Casita* was her favorite place for Mexican food when she didn't feel like cooking, and Bonnie knew it. Bonnie had seen Vero going to town on their combos before, so Vero held no qualms about shoving her face full of food.

"Were they gonna bring you anything back?"

"Pastrami for you and me."

"Nice!" Bonnie stole Vero's fork and scooped up some beans before adding, "I can just have yours then, since you're going to be too full to eat."

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“That’s gonna be my lunch for tomorrow! Don’t get stingy!”

Bonnie handed the fork back over and stole a sip of Vero’s water. “Did you hear they caught some creep that was going around robbing people?”

Vero shook her head as she continued to eat.

“Apparently he matched the description of some anonymous tip. They found him a couple blocks away from our place, right by that family-run convenience store.”

Vero froze. She turned to look at Bonnie, her eyes wide with disbelief.

“Uh, yeah, I know,” Bonnie’s eyebrows were raised as she nodded. “Apparently, he was going around mugging people late at night. One lady came forward and said he sexually assaulted her. They said when the cops arrested him, he looked beaten to hell, and had scratch marks on his face. They think he tried to assault someone, but they were able to fight him off and call in the tip. No one came forward, though.”

Vero’s blood ran cold. The side of her neck pulsed angrily and the back of her mind nagged at her. Something felt off about the news, but she couldn’t put her finger on what exactly. She thought back to the other night, when she woke up with a strange hangover and a bottle of wine she didn’t remember buying. She couldn’t remember how she got home that night, but nothing else was amiss. All her items and money were on her. She had no strange markings, no pain besides her neck and head. Nothing pointed to being drugged, but she couldn’t remember anything after leaving work. She slowed her eating as she thought about what this meant. She was lucky, truly. She could’ve been attacked, but instead she just got black out drunk. It was a strange thing in and of itself, but compared to what could have happened...

“Well, it’s a good thing they caught him when they did. I don’t need to worry about that whenever I leave tonight,” but as she said it, Vero felt no sense of relief. She still feared going

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out in the dark. Something inside of her still told her there were other monsters out in the night waiting to devour her.

Just then, Mrs. Nguyen came down with a sharply dressed woman beside her. Where Mrs. Nguyen's style was more on the relaxed side of business casual, the woman she walked with was on the complete opposite end. Her hair was pulled up tight, no doubt held in place with copious amounts of hair spray and bobby pins; her suit was crisp, not a wrinkle in sight; and she walked with an air of authority that had Vero sit at attention. She was painfully *exactly* Vero's type. Her eyes locked on Vero as they made their way toward her, causing a warm flush to brush across Vero's cheeks. Both women stopped just off to the side of Vero's desk.

"Veronica, Bonnie, glad I caught you two. This is Ms. Diaz. She's here to help with the audit, since, apparently, it shouldn't be taking this long."

Ms. Diaz looked at Bonnie and Vero giving a slight nod of acknowledgment.

Vero cleaned her mouth before speaking, "Well, I was just telling Bonnie that the last email I got from him was about an hour, an hour and a half ago. He hasn't asked for anything else yet, so I just assumed he was doing fine."

Ms. Diaz's maroon lips pulled into a smile as she replied, "He's one of our newer hires, so some bumps are to be expected. No doubt he got caught up, which is why I'm here. Veronica, do you mind showing me what files you sent, so I'll be able to get right to work?"

Bonnie rolled her chair out of the way as Ms. Diaz went to stand by Vero's side. Vero moved her dinner off to the left, muttering a small apology before bringing up the files.

"Don't worry about it. We've all got to eat sometime, right?" Ms. Diaz rested a hand on the desk and leaned forward, just on the edge of Vero's personal space.

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Vero smiled politely, but didn't respond. The throbbing in her neck was back and it felt like someone pressed a branding iron against it. She pressed her hand to it as she brought up the files Ms. Diaz had requested. She tried not to show her discomfort as Ms. Diaz read over her shoulder, taking the mouse from her hand, and navigating through the files.

She looked over her shoulder and saw Bonnie talking to Mrs. Nguyen. Neither seemed in any hurry, nor seemed to think anything of the auditor's supervisor being so close to Vero. It was fine, really. Ms. Diaz wasn't doing anything distasteful. It was just Vero's personal space. She could always move.

As she tried to move her seat away just an inch or two, Ms. Diaz's attention snapped to Vero, causing her to sit up straight.

"Veronica, were these all the reports Jeremy asked for? I don't see last quarter's report."

"Oh, that one he had at the beginning. I could send it to him, so you'll have it when you get there, if you'd like."

Ms. Diaz nodded. "Yes, please. That boy does his job well, but he's very forgetful."

Vero pulled up the file and was just about to send it off when a nail touched her neck, right where the discomfort was. A jolt of electricity rocked her, causing her to jump, her hand flying to the spot. Ms. Diaz's hand hovered in the air, index finger extended.

"Looks like you've got a bit of a burn there."

The smile she gave Vero seemed too calculated to be genuine, her maroon lips stopped, just shy of a smirk. It was almost like she knew a secret between the two of them. It sent heat rushing to Vero's face.

"Uh, yeah, sometimes the flat iron doesn't want to work with you, you know?"

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Ms. Diaz reached out and clapped her hand on Vero's shoulder. "Thank you for the files, Veronica. Mrs. Ngueyn, shall we continue? I believe I have what I need. We should be done within the next two hours, if not sooner."

Vero turned and watched as Mrs. Nguyen continued to guide Ms. Diaz, talking along the way. Vero was too busy processing what had just occurred. She was lost in her thoughts when a sharp tap on her cheek brought her back. She winced, turning to see Bonnie staring at her expectantly.

"Where'd you go? Did you hear anything I said in the last five minutes?"

"Diaz was kind of weird, don't you think?"

Bonnie nodded. "Yeah, she definitely has Big Boss Energy, but that's not what I was asking you. Are you going with me to the *Quince* on Saturday? Martín's really excited to show you the dances he's been practicing."

Vero looked back in the direction Mrs. Nguyen had taken Ms. Diaz in. They had since disappeared, but Vero couldn't shake the strange impression Ms. Diaz left on her. She still felt the press of her nail against her neck, but as she reached up to touch the spot, the throbbing she felt earlier was gone. She turned to look back at Bonnie who was looking at her expectantly.

"Sorry, what?"

"Martín? Your tiny boyfriend? He's all excited and wants to see you."

One of Bonnie's youngest cousins, only eight years old, had the biggest crush on Vero. It was sweet. He was a good kid, a bit too energetic for his family, but good nonetheless. Vero smiled and feigned coy, smiling over her shoulder.

"I'm not sure, yet. Has he been asking about me? *Mi novio chiquito?*"

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“Only always. He’s been on his best behavior this week,” Bonnie reached over and started to eat some of the already cold enchiladas. “He’s been helping my *tía* clean the house without her asking him to.”

“That is impressive,” Vero’s eyebrows raised as she smiled. “Of course I’m going. I got my dress and everything. Make sure to tell him I’ll save the first and last dance for him.”

Vero only had to stay another hour before Mrs. Nguyen let everyone go for the evening, the auditors were done, and everything was seemingly fine. With Bonnie accompanying her home, Vero didn’t have to focus about the anxiety she felt about going home after dark. It lingered, but she was able to keep it at bay.

She checked her neck while getting ready for bed. There was no red mark, but as she looked at it, she felt the slight throbbing creeping in. It wasn’t as strong as before, but it felt like it would be coming back with a vengeance. She downed some more pain pills, right before crawling into bed. She relaxed and as she cuddled her pillow she realized just how tense she had been the entire day. It wasn’t too long before she was plunged into a deep sleep.

She walked down a cobblestone street, enjoying the warm sun and slight breeze.

“Paris is so lovely this time of year,” a voice called out to her, caressing her ear.

‘*Paris?*’ Was she in Paris? She looked around and saw a canal just off to her left. Yes, a canal, so she was obviously in Paris. How nice. It was so good to be on vacation here. All the sounds and sights as she walked through the city; all the different smells danced around her nose, but there was one scent in particular she picked out.

‘*Pastries.*’

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She kept walking, following her nose until she came to a cute little bakery. The cakes and pies in the window looked picturesque, and the price... As she looked at the price the numbers danced away.

*'Of course, a reasonable price.'*

She opened the door to the shop and the sound of the bell rang loud, dull, a heavy thud that had her flinching. She grabbed her purse and threw it.

The loud sound of her pillow hitting something startled her awake. She opened her eyes and scanned the dark room. Her pillow was on the floor, by the window, in front of a tall shadow. She froze. A shadow? She looked down at her pillow, her heart racing. She saw the pillow move as the shadow approached. She grabbed her second pillow and chucked it as hard as she could. She felt a pinch in her shoulder. She flopped back down and yanked the covers over her head. She tried to calm her breathing, but it was so loud. The shadow could hear her. She needed to be quiet. She tried breathing through her mouth, evenly, quietly. She closed her eyes, seeing lights dance behind her lids. How long was it going to draw this out? Why wasn't it attacking her? She could run. She could toss the covers and get to the door before it reached her. She could do it. She had jumped out of bed plenty of times before, when she was running late. She could get a good distance, especially if she threw her blanket at the intruder. She would give it thirty seconds, and then make a break for it. She counted.

She waited.

She listened.

She froze.

She counted to sixty. Still in bed. She counted to eighty. She couldn't move. She was going to die if she didn't move, now.



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She tossed the blanket and launched herself from bed. She reached the door in two leaps and turned back to look at the murderer.

Her room was empty. She looked around. Nothing. She turned the light on, a grunt escaping her throat as her eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness. She was alone. She checked the other side of her bed and under it, but saw only carpet and a forgotten lone sock, while the two pillows laid under the blanket. She rubbed her face before making her bed. With the lights off, she laid herself down and tried to find sleep again. She tossed and turned before a dark, dreamless sleep snatched her in its grasp.

In the morning, she struggled to get out of bed. Grogginess clung to her like a tick in the summer. She managed to get herself up once Bonnie knocked on her door, calling out that the shower was available. Vero rolled out of bed and grabbed the clothes she left out on her desk chair. She hissed as her foot stepped on something sharp. She ran her toes over the carpet, looking for the offending party. She ended up kicking something out of her way. She dropped to her knees and looked closer, figuring she'd better grab the sticker now or have a repeat later that night. It took her a moment before she found what could have been the only offending culprit—a black bobby pin.

By the time Saturday afternoon came around, Vero had mostly forgotten about the strange night terror she'd had. More importantly, her neck was fine. Friday night before bed, it had only hurt for a brief moment, but she chalked it up to a muscle spasm and left it at that. By Saturday the pain she had experienced for the past week was no longer at the forefront of her mind. She attended the *Quinceañera* service in the morning and had a reception to help set up for in the evening. In the afternoon she had enough time to shove some fruit and *pan dulce* in her

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face before changing, grabbed her evening outfit and then booked it to the reception hall. She hadn't been asked to help, but since it was Bonnie's family, she felt no reservations putting herself to work. The Vázquez family was practically a second family to Vero at this point. She knew most of them, and had an easy time getting along with extended family members she was always meeting.

When the two arrived, there was no time spent in greetings. They found Bonnie's *Tía* Betti, got a quick kiss on the cheek, then they were put to work. They set up tables, chairs, and decorations. They helped the caterer bring in the food, and rearranged the tables no less than three times at *Tío* Juan's request. By the time the guests were arriving and everything was ready, Vero was in desperate need for a drink. She took a shot from Bonnie's father, Hector, and *Tío* Juan, then went and changed into her burgundy dress.

The restroom was full of cousins, *tías*, and best friends, all putting the last touches on their outfits. It was crowded, loud, humid, but the energy was infectious. Vero helped zip up an older lady's dress. Cousin Nicole helped re-curl Vero's hair, after it was put up to stay out of her face earlier. There were jokes, laughter, and words of encouragement. It was a great start to what would be a night to remember.

It was already well past midnight when Vero said goodbye to a very sleepy Martín that was being carried away by his mother. Vero stayed on the dance floor for about three more songs before heading to the bar, out of breath, but a large smile on her face. She ordered a water, but one of Bonnie's cousins came up and convinced her to try one of the margaritas they had. It was tasty, it was strong, but it was cold. It was exactly what she needed. She downed half of it before getting caught up in a conversation with some guests about how great the *Quince* was. They kept

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talking to her long enough that the margarita no longer cooled her down, and she needed to excuse herself for some fresh air. She took one more large gulp, then tossed the nearly empty cup in the trash before heading out.

The night air was crisp, cool, and quiet. Vero stood away from the door, close enough to still be in the lights, but away enough that she didn't have to worry about moving as people came and went. The music boomed from inside and she caught herself swaying along. Her stomach was full, she was having fun, and she was still holding her liquor. It was a good night. She was checking her phone when the throbbing in her neck flared up, nearly causing her to drop it. She winced and cupped the side, applying pressure in hopes to counteract the pain. She was so focused on the pain that she didn't notice the sound of heels against the pavement until they were right beside her.

"Veronica, what brings you out here?"

She looked off to her side and saw a figure just outside the reach of the light. She recognized the voice, but the throbbing made it hard to place just exactly from where.

"You okay there, *cariño*? You look a bit in pain."

Vero shrugged one shoulder, "Just a muscle spasm. It'll pass."

The figure took a step into the light, allowing Vero to see their face. They wore a garnet-red pantsuit with a black leather jacket over the blazer. Their red stilettos matched perfectly and gave them a solid four inches of height over Vero. Their dark maroon lips pulled into a smirk.

"Ms. Diaz? What are you doing here?"

She put her hands into jacket pockets and shrugged. "It's a *Quince*, no?"

"How do you know *a la familia Vázquez*?" Vero leaned away from Ms. Diaz, not wanting to play nice with her neck throbbing like it was.

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Ms. Diaz reached out and took Vero by the bicep, gently pulling her closer, “What’s going on there? Maybe I can help.”

Vero resisted. She tried to pull her arm free, but Ms. Diaz’s nails dug in. She winced, then curled into herself a bit, the throbbing in her neck more angry and harsh with each passing moment. Just then, the door opened and music spilled out into the sidewalk. An elderly couple came out, and before Vero could look their way, she was pulled out of the light and into the darkness. Her back pressed against the rough wall, the shocking sensation of the cool building against her skin had her arching forward. A force pressed itself against her, pushing her back to the wall. Ms. Diaz loomed over her, looking down at Vero like a cat that got the cream. She brought a finger up to her lips and any words of protest died in Vero’s throat. She didn’t like being this close, her personal space was completely disregarded, but she needed to be quiet. And quiet she was, as the elderly couple made their way opposite to them until they rounded the corner and were out of view.

Ms. Diaz brought her finger down and Vero felt a brief flash of vertigo. The alcohol must have been getting to her. She leaned away from Ms. Diaz, the throbbing side of her neck pulling painfully as she tried to put any distance at all between them.

“Get away. I’m not comfortable with this. Leave now.”

“*Cariño*, please don’t be like that. I’m just here to help us both. I bet your neck is absolutely *killing* you right now, no?” Ms. Diaz looked at the area as she spoke, her tongue poking out for a moment.

Vero began to tremble as she turned her head to the right, the pain causing her to breathe heavily. “Ms. Diaz, *please—*”

“Call me Mateo.”

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“...let me—*Mateo*? Like the boy’s name?” Vero couldn’t help, but look at Ms. Diaz, her brows furrowed in confusion.

“Names are just names, *cariño*. They don’t have gender and can be used wherever by whoever.”

Vero blinked, not sure how to respond. Her cheeks flushed softly due to the reprimand. Of course names didn’t have gender, she knew that, but that was a discussion for another time.

“I’d like you to get out of my space please, *Mateo*.”

Mateo leaned back so their bodies were no longer pressed against each other, but she still held a grip on both of Vero’s arms. Vero was able to take a breath. It was something, at least, but still not good enough.

“Mateo, I’d appreciate it if you let me go now.”

“I could, but I won’t. Your neck, *cariño*, the throbbing is nearly unbearable isn’t it?”

Vero’s blood ran cold. She hadn’t mentioned her neck, least of all the specific throbbing. The name had caught her off guard, but she knew she had never mentioned her neck pain around Mateo. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“That’s my fault, I’m afraid. I bit too deep and did a sloppy job healing it up once I was done. I was content to just let you deal with it; never see you again, but fate had other plans, it seems.”

Vero’s breath quickened. ‘*What on Earth is she talking about?*’

“This time I’ll be more careful, and I’ll make sure to take care of you, *cariño*.”

“You need to get away from me right—” but the rest of the words died on Vero’s tongue as she watched Mateo’s lips pull back into a smile. Her teeth exposed, Mateo’s canines grew right before Vero’s eyes.

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“I got you, *cariño*.”

Vero only had enough time to take a breath of air before her head was turned, exposing the right side of her neck. The throbbing seemed to get worse right before she felt a sharp piercing. She whimpered, trembling from both the fear and the pain, but then, the pain was gone. It was replaced by warmth, slowly consuming her. It spread out then became a wave and crashed over her.

Her mind felt light. She could hear soft music, something ambient and sweet. Her body swayed as if she were floating in the ocean. She tried to lift her hand and found it was weightless, reaching out, caressing soft multicolored lights. They danced in front of her eyes until they grew bolder and began to brush against her skin. One bumped against her cheek and she turned to look at the jellyfish. Hundreds of soft luminescent golden jellyfish danced around her, welcoming her into their cove. Sightless, they bumped into her as she made her way through the water. One tickled her neck, following her as she swam. She turned to see her new friend, but it just swam away. She followed them, aimless in direction, until their numbers began to disperse. She watched as the last one swam up to her and booped her nose, before disappearing into the calm waters. She swam up and breached the surface. The soft hues of the sunset welcomed her. She lay on her back and let the soft waves carry her afloat. The colors in the sky melted into a starry night, cool air brushing against her skin. The waves rocked her until they drew out, leaving her to float down in the air. She closed her eyes and sighed with contentment.

When she opened her eyes, Vero was no longer outside. She found herself in the backseat of a car, the leather soft and supple beneath her. A touch on her cheek got her attention, and she lolled her head toward it. Mateo sat next to her, head propped up against her fist.

“Welcome back,” she whispered.

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Vero closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to shake the last remnants of lethargy.

“Where am I? What did you do?”

“In my car. Nice isn’t it?”

Vero looked around. It *was* nice and it was clean. The leather made it feel fancier than anything she could ever hope to afford. She hummed in agreement.

“Veronica, I’m sorry about earlier.”

Vero turned back to her, eyebrows furrowed and lips pulled into a soft pout.

“I didn’t mean to scare you. You were enjoying the evening and I soured it. For that, I am sorry.”

Vero’s head felt heavy and had it not already been reclining it would’ve flopped back against the headrest.

“I’m going to leave, and let you get back to the *Quince*. You’ll go back in there, and not worry about what just happened. The rest of the night you’re just going to enjoy yourself, and you’ll give more serious thought to *this* tomorrow. I’ll send for you at a later time and then we can have a discussion.”

Vero gave a small nod, then felt that wave of vertigo again. She clenched her eyes closed and tried to steady her breathing. She felt Mateo brush a strand of her hair back behind her ear.

“Before I let you go, Veronica, I need to know—what made you wear that dress?”

Vero looked down to her burgundy dress. “I bought it months ago. It’s cute and fun without causing a scene with the older folks.”

Mateo let out a soft laugh as she ran a finger over the edge of the skirt. “You’re absolutely stunning in it. I hope one day you’ll wear it again, just for me.”

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There was a moment of silence where they just looked at each other. Vero blushed, and spoke so soft she didn't think Mateo would hear. "Maybe."

Mateo smiled, eyes shining. "Goodnight, *cariño*."

Mateo exited the car first, then held out a hand. Vero accepted it and stepped out into the night. There were significantly fewer cars out in the parking lot.

*'How long has it been?'* she wondered, as she tried to steady her footing on the gravel.

"Go. Have fun." Mateo, still holding Vero's hand, brought it up to her lips and kissed it before moving to the driver's side of the car.

As Vero walked back to the entrance, the fog in her head began to clear more and more. She jumped when she reached the double doors, startled by the loud rev of an engine. She turned back to see a deep red Maserati kick up gravel as it tore off into the night.