

## Veronica's Children

By Caesar Morales

Veronica sat in a large booth with plush, red leather seats in the dimly lit, empty pub. Outside it was drizzling and cold. Inside the pub it was warm and cozy. One could easily lay on the long, wide seats in one of the booths and fall asleep.

As Edwin was pushed by her goons towards the booth Veronica was sitting in, he couldn't help but be awed by her beauty. He wondered how someone as stunning as her could bear such hideous children. Veronica's two eldest, Arthur and Frank, were deformed, muscle-bound freaks whom she'd take with her when she collected from those who owed her or wanted to threaten a rival. There were always those who thought they could move in on her territory. Even after seeing her sons, there were those who thought they could out muscle her. They were wrong. And yet, there was always some new gang, some new wannabe "boss" that thought they could do what everyone else had failed at.

And then there were those like Edwin. Down and out losers who blamed their awful existence on not having enough privilege or opportunities. Those like Edwin who convinced themselves that they were smart enough to get ahead if someone would just give them a chance – and a large amount of money. Edwin was warned not to borrow money from Veronica. But Edwin, like so many unfortunate others, thought his plans were fool proof. The problem with fool proof plans is that they're usually thought up by fools. Edwin had convinced himself that his plan would make him wealthy. And that he would easily be able to pay back Veronica and then some. Because it's like the saying goes, 'You need money to make money.'

However, he now found himself pushed and prodded into a booth. He'd have to explain to Veronica why he hadn't been able to pay her back. He'd have to explain how his fool proof plan failed horribly and how he'd lost \$10,000. He'd have to try to convince her to give him more time. And if he couldn't, he'd have to deal with her children.

As mentioned, there was Arthur and Frank. Despite their unsightly appearance, they were well known around town and often went out with their mother. But there were rumors she had other children she kept locked up and hidden. Arthur and Frank she could control. They listened to her. They had the mental capacity to reason and think for themselves. Some people in town had even managed to have conversations with them. Their younger siblings were reportedly more like feral animals. Or like alien creatures. Some of the rumors that Edwin had heard were that if you owed Veronica money, she'd

forgive your debt if you spent some time playing with one of her other children. Only one person had ever survived a playdate with one of Veronica's children. Edwin knew someone who knew the guy who survived. According to Edwin's acquaintance, the list of injuries the guy received included losing an eye, a broken jaw, a fractured eye socket, broken back, three broken ribs, collapsed lung, ruptured spleen. But as promised, Veronica had forgiven his debt.

Edwin was shoved into the seat across from Veronica. He couldn't help but stare at her and be entranced by her beauty. Straight, jet black hair that fell to the middle of her back. Clear, porcelain skin. Big, round, bright green eyes. Full red lips. Tiny little button nose. Small, round little ears. Everything about her was perfect. She was like a life-sized porcelain doll, albeit a cruel one. Edwin could easily see why men would be seduced by her. In spite of her reputation, if a woman like Veronica came onto you, it would be hard to resist such beauty. However, Edwin wondered what became of the men who fathered her children. She was always alone, aside from her goons and her two boys. Maybe she was like a Praying Mantis or Black Widow Spider, disposing of her mates after copulation. There had been gossip that she would imprison her lovers and feed them to her children once they were born. And as ridiculous and absurd as these tales may have seemed, the existence of Arthur and Frank – as well as the sudden and mysterious disappearances of certain individuals and those associated with other criminal groups and the testimony of the one guy who'd survived playing with one of Veronica's children - were enough to make people believe in them.

Veronica smiled at Edwin as he shifted into the booth. It was a smile that instilled both attraction and fear. It was a smile that made him aroused while simultaneously feeling like he might shit himself. Arthur and Frank were nowhere to be seen. It was just Veronica's two goons who had escorted him in. Edwin didn't know whether that was good news or bad.

"Where's my money, Edwin?" Veronica asked with the sweetest, softest, most threatening tone Edwin had ever heard. She'd gotten straight to the point.

Edwin didn't know what to say. He didn't have it. There wasn't any way he could think of to get it. At least not without another huge loan. And who was there to ask? Only Veronica.

"I don't have it. The deal didn't pan out like I thought it would."

Veronica raised her eyebrows. Edwin wasn't sure if the look on her face was curiosity or contempt.

“When people come to me for a loan, I never ask what it’s for. Because they know, and I know, that if they don’t pay me back my money, they will still pay me back.”

Outside the drizzle turned into a heavy downpour. Edwin thought the droplets of rain falling against the windows mimicked tiny bodies being thrust up against them. The thought made him shiver.

Edwin and Veronica sat silently across from each other for a few moments. Edwin looked down at the dark maroon, square patterned carpet. He could feel Veronica’s bright green eyes boring into the top of his skull.

“You’ve heard the rumors, I assume. About how I will forgive any debt to those who spend time playing with my children.”

“Yes.” Edwin squeaked. His throat felt as if it was being squeezed. He looked up, wondering if it was, but the two goons he’d entered with were still just standing there over them, hands in their pockets.

“One more week,” Edwin piped up. “I promise for real this time. One more week.”

Edwin knew he wouldn’t be able to get the money he owed in one week. But he sure as hell could get the hell out of town by then. If Veronica let him go, he’d be gone by morning. He wondered why he hadn’t left earlier. What did he think he was going to accomplish by sticking around? As soon as the deal went sideways, he should have left. He should have gone as far as he could, as fast as he could. But like many others, Edwin overestimated himself. He thought there was some way to fix it. He hadn’t been able to fix his life in forty years. What had made him think he could fix it in a week?

Veronica looked at her two goons. They looked almost similar, except one had brown hair and one had blond hair.

“Who got to play last time?” Veronica asked.

“Anabeth, ma’am,” the brown haired goon replied.

Veronica looked back at Edwin.

“Twenty-minutes. If you play with my daughter for twenty-minutes I’ll forgive your debt.” Veronica nodded to her goons. “Take him to Lenora’s room.”

The two goons grabbed Edwin and dragged him out of the booth. He cried out. He caught himself and realized how pathetic he sounded. He pleaded with Veronica.

“Please. Give me more time. I’ll promise I’ll pay you back!” Edwin cried.

Veronica laughed. “But you are paying me back. You have to understand that money means nothing to a mother compared to her children’s happiness. And my children, although different, are still children. They don’t have the same opportunities to play like other children. So, when situations like this arise, I truly am grateful for them. I’m grateful for people like you, Edwin.”

Veronica gracefully scooted out of the booth and led Edwin, flanked and forcefully held by the two goons into a back room, through a secret door, down into the cellar, through another door and into a passageway that led into an underground bunker. They walked along a corridor and came to a large metal door. On the door was a small plaque, much like you’d find on the door of a little girl’s bedroom door which read “Lenora’s Room” surrounded by disturbing drawings of grotesque kitty cat faces.

Edwin was sobbing, pleading with Veronica to please give him more time. She slid back and lifted the large metal latch on the door and pushed it open. The goons tossed Edwin inside the dark cement room, dimly lit by only a night light plugged into the wall in the far corner.

Veronica called out to her daughter, “Lenora. Sweetie. I have a friend for you to play with.”

She looked at Edwin. “Twenty-minutes.” She pointed to her goons. “Harold and Gerald will pull you out exactly at twenty-minutes. If you’re still alive. Have fun!”

Veronica giggled with that last line and pulled the door shut, locking it behind her.

Inside the room Edwin could hear something walking around. Long nails clacked on the cement floor at the very far end of the room, which was covered in shadows. He could barely make out a large, queen-sized mattress on the floor in the corner, covered in tattered blankets. He heard a little girl giggling. It was a tiny giggle and temporarily eased Edwin’s fear. That was until Lenora appeared out of the shadows.

Edwin screamed so hard and so loudly that he damaged his vocal cords and started coughing up blood. What lumbered towards him was no little girl. He wasn’t even sure if it was human. The creature giggled again – soft and girlish. The tiny sounds coming from this abomination of nature were belied by its grotesque appearance. Edwin pissed and soiled himself, eliciting an excited coo from the monster. It moved towards Edwin on its long, spindly legs. Twisted, dark toenails clicking on the cold cement floor. Edwin could see the blue veins running underneath the monster’s pale, nearly translucent white skin. The only semblance at all to Veronica was the creature’s long, wispy black hair that ran from the top of its head down to its waist and the large emerald green eyes sunk deep into a bulbous white skull, with skin

stretched over it so that it looked like it was actually wearing someone else's skin that was two sizes too small. It reached out with a large, bony claw-like hand and grabbed Edwin by the shoulder, immediately cracking his collarbone. The thing put its face close to Edwin's and grinned, showing rows of razor sharp, black teeth inside its mouth.

"Hi, I'm Lenora," the creature giggled in a cutesy, tiny little munchkin voice.

Edwin managed to stay alive for the next eight, excruciating minutes as Lenora played with him. When Veronica's goons checked in after the twenty-minutes were up, he had already been mauled and maimed beyond recognition, so they decided to just let Lenora keep playing with his corpse until it was time for dinner. And despite some of the rumors, Lenora did not eat Edwin. It was, after all, spaghetti night and Lenora loved spaghetti.