

Veronica

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VERONICA TILTED HER head back and snorted the derisive kind of laugh Francesca both dreaded and delighted in. When she was the target, as she often was, it was a punch to the stomach that left her gasping. When it was aimed at somebody else, she couldn't help but feel exclusive and superior, as though part of Veronica's most intimate circle. And isn't that what everyone wanted?

Veronica reached out a delicately manicured hand and tapped a bony finger on Francesca's leg. White heat seared where the finger grazed. 'Frankie,' she drawled, her slow and breathy voice thick with fake affection and artificial sweetener. Francesca tingled. It was a pet name she could not stand from any other person. It sounded childish and patronising, but when Veronica used it, it was elegant. Mature.

Francesca lazily raised her eyes, trying to mimic the way Veronica did it, the way she made it look so effortless, but which Francesca had to practise at home in the mirror. She would kill to be able to do these things as naturally as Veronica did them. To have that grace, that style. At the moment she faked it; her sixteen years weren't long enough to have perfected it.

She tried her best to look uninterested, though in fact she was *always* interested in anything Veronica told her to be.

'Check that out.' The same bony finger pointed vaguely off into the distance from the steps they sat at every lunch time. Francesca had no idea what she was pointing at, but she laughed quickly, cruelly, the way she'd been trained. If she hesitated too long Veronica would lose patience and snap at her for being stupid.

Veronica joined in and together they cackled, until Veronica had run out of breath.

She sighed and rested her head against Francesca's leg, as though exhausted from such physical exertion. Francesca's face flushed and she felt hot all over. She was careful not to move her leg, no matter how awkward a position it may be in, no matter how heavy her friend's head got. She was determined not to even let it shake.

Veronica propped the magazine she was reading up on her knee. She lazily flicked through the pages, occasionally bringing them nearer to her face for closer examination, squinting and scrunching her nose up as though it helped her see more clearly.

With her face like that, Francesca saw a flash of what Veronica had been like as a child, before she grew tall and thin, before the boys started wanting to put their hands up her skirt. Before she realised the power she could have over people with just a narrowing of her eyes.

That dreaded narrowing. Francesca knew it all too well, and she hated herself for knowing it. Why had she seen it so many times? Why couldn't she be better?

As glamorous and as elegant as the new Veronica had become, and as much as she wished she could be *just like that*, it was the old one Francesca clung to. It was the miniature version that made all vicious and snide remarks lay forgotten. Remarks designed to cut and bleed, were softened by the memory of Veronica's soft, chubby hand in Francesca's, and the frail 'Frankie!' she'd call while tugging her friend towards a frog.

Now, Veronica was too thin. When she proudly lifted her shirt you could see the bumps where both her pelvic bone and ribs jutted out unnaturally. She looked fragile, but Francesca knew better. She was too thin, and even though Francesca knew it was bad, she yearned to match. Or, even greater, when her dreaming ran away with her, she wondered what it would be like to out thin her. She'd never have the courage though, nor would Veronica allow it.

Veronica's head suddenly shot up, her hands springing to her scalp, and she spun to face Francesca, who'd been lost in thought for a second. Her eyes took on a vicious quality, and Francesca paled at what that might mean. She racked her brain for what could have happened, but there was nothing. She'd lost concentration, and now, somehow, she'd ruined everything.

What had she done?

‘Stop pulling my hair!’ Veronica hissed, and Francesca’s already pale face blanched some more. She began to stutter, trying to explain that she hadn’t meant to, that however she had managed to do such a thing was an accident, but she couldn’t find the words, because she knew there was no such thing as an ‘accident’ to Veronica. Veronica could never understand how someone didn’t have complete control over their actions.

The words didn’t come. Francesca sat, pale-faced, wide-open eyes and mouth agape. Floundering.

Veronica narrowed her eyes, squinting into Francesca’s face, searching for something, while Francesca held her breath tightly, trying to prepare herself for whatever came next. Whatever punishment Veronica was crafting, she would be ready. She would take it, and she would not flinch. She deserved it, for hurting her friend, and she would prove that she was better than Veronica thought she was.

But nothing came next. And that was the last thing Francesca expected.

Veronica, still clutching her head, rubbing it melodramatically, with those terrifying narrowed eyes, shot another look of venom into Francesca. She then tilted her head to the left, pouted ever so slightly, and flopped her head back into her friend’s lap.

Francesca froze.

Veronica seemed to be settled back in, she’d lifted the magazine back up, and continued reading as though nothing had happened. Francesca felt clammy. Tense. Hot and cold at the same time. She didn’t dare move.

She didn’t know how long she’d been sitting there, waiting for something that she wasn’t sure would come. But then, again, Veronica laughed. The sound rippled through Francesca, and brought with it cold. She forced her head to look down and see what the target was this time. Her eyes couldn’t see, but she knew she had to try to choke it out. Her mouth, still wide-open from before, let the first strangled yelp escape, and after that they came easier. Forced, at first, until they joined in with Veronica’s easy bursts of laughter and echoed all around her until there was nothing else.

Nothing but the tinny sounds of two teenage girls, and a joke that no-one else would ever be able to understand.