

Red Jacket ~By Jessica Dominguez

I was getting home late – again. Lina was going to be mad. She’s always upset when I work late.

“It’s important that we have at least one meal as a family.”

This is what she always says when I walk through the door, later than I’d promised.

When she was growing up, Lina’s father wasn’t home very much – always working- and she swore to marry a man that made time for his family. Normally, I try but tonight there was nothing I could do about it. Two guys in my crew called out sick and I’d already given the client a deadline that his kitchen would be finished by the end of the week. I drove the truck and picked up the rest of the supplies myself. I had to keep on schedule.

In this business, word of mouth is everything and I couldn’t afford to have him complain to his rich friends that I couldn’t deliver a job on time. I know Lina understands this, we’re the same, but she still gives me a hard time. She was sitting at the kitchen counter drinking tea and reading, as I walked into the house.

“It’s eight. Do you want me to heat up your dinner or did you send the guys out to get you something so you could work through mealtime?” She asked looking up from her book but didn’t give me time to answer.

“I also picked up the car from the shop, today.” She continued.

“I had to pay nine hundred dollars to fix the dent in the bumper. Nine hundred! We probably went to the most expensive damn shop in San Fernando. I still can’t believe you backed into that pole – I think you need glasses, honey.”

“I’m fine, Lina.” I replied, tossing my keys on the side table.

“I’m not hungry. I’m going to take a shower and watch the news before I go to bed. I have an early day, tomorrow.”

Lina took a sip of her tea and squinted at me over her glasses.

“Uh, Hugh.” She sighed.

“Well, make sure to see Raquel before you go to sleep – she’s back, again. She’s in her old room. It’s only been a week since the last time... I didn’t even bother cleaning anything out - I figured she’d be back soon. I pulled out the cot so little Lucas can sleep next to his mother. It’s a good thing we had extra clothes for him because, this time, she didn’t even bring anything with her.” She said pulling up her glasses and rubbing her eyes.

“And explain to her she needs to get a job. We can’t have her staying here and not contributing. She’s setting a bad example for the boys. It’s bad enough you’re always getting her out of her messes. That’s why she doesn’t learn.” She judged. Lina always judged my parenting.

I kept walking. “Yes, Catalina, I’ll talk to her.” I said as I continued my way towards the hallway. I could still hear her –

“I don’t want Marco and Elias thinking they can drop out of school and have us support them too.” She complained, louder now so I wouldn’t miss a word.

“Oh wait, I also need to talk to you about our account statement. There’s something wrong – there are withdrawals that I don’t recognize. I made an

appointment for you to go to the bank later this week and find out what's going on."

Her voice trailed off as I disappeared into the hallway.

There she was, sitting in her old room. Her room. The same room she grew up in. It would always be her room. The walls were the same pale pink color we painted them before we brought her home from the hospital - perfect for our baby girl. She was reading a magazine and twirling her hair. It was long, brown, and curly just like her grandmother's. She looks just like my mother. She has long curls too but always keeps them in a tight bun. Raquel rarely puts it up – just lets it go wild. She never let us pull it back, even when she was little. Back then, we loved that she was so willful – I thought my kid had spunk! I was told that my mother was spunky as a child too. It's fitting they share the same name.

"Mija, where's Lucas?" I asked as I stood in her doorway.

"He's playing video games in the boy's room. He loves being with Marco and Elias." She replied, never looking up from her magazine.

"Are you here to stay this time? You know, your mom wants you to get a job but I think you should finish school. You can stay here until you're done. We'll help you raise Lucas, he's happy here, with us."

"Dad," She said putting down the magazine and finally raising her head to look me in the eyes.

"Me and Eddie just got into a little fight. Like, now that I'm eighteen I want to do my own thing and he needs to get used to it, that's all. I'm just here to cool off. I think I'm going to go back tomorrow. One night without Lucas and he'll get it."

“That’s not a good situation for Lucas to group up in. He’s only two. You can come back here and have a life. That boy is a dead end for you, why do you want to go back.”

I didn’t give her a chance to reply – I was tired and not in the mood to get into a fight over that loser she chose as the father of her son. The last time I laid eyes on him was two years ago at the hospital, when Lucas was born. I was hoping that would be the last.

Raquel stayed a few more nights than I, or she, expected but I knew she would go back soon. I overheard her talking to him on the phone. It was five in the morning, and she was still sleeping as I walked through the hall. Lucas was in the small cot, holding his blanket up to his face as he sucked his thumb – he looked just like his mother. I reached for her jacket hanging behind the door. It’s red and has pockets everywhere, including a secret inside pocket – she loves that. She always loved the secret pocket in her jackets. When she was a little girl, she used that pocket to hide candy from me and Lina. I bought her that jacket a couple of months ago, during one of her stays. It was getting cold and that good for nothing loser couldn’t even get her a decent coat. I rolled up three hundred dollars and put them in the secret inside pocket. I turned to walk away when I heard her groggy voice.

“Papi, I’ve been wanting to tell you, thanks for not telling mom about the car.” She said rubbing her eyes, trying to focus on my face.

“Go back to sleep, mija.” I whispered and left for work.

I barely made it to the bank before they closed. I had to leave work early, but Lina called and said I couldn't miss the appointment. I didn't want to disappoint her, again. Everyone showed up for work this morning – and saved me a night on the couch. The assistant manager met me in the lobby.

“Sir, thank you for coming in. I know you had to rush here from work. Please follow me.” She said as she led me to her desk.

I sat down and noticed her name plate, Karen Fisher.

“Your wife called in about some unauthorized withdrawals on your account.” She continued as she laid out some forms on her desk.

“I want you to know that we take these matters very seriously and we intend to prosecute whoever is responsible. Since the withdrawals were made at the ATM, we were able to retrieve pictures of the individuals that used your card. There are five withdrawals in total, according to your wife's claim.”

As she spoke, she took out the pictures one by one and placed them in front of me.

“We need to know if you recognize any of the individuals, for our police report.” She continued as she pointed at the pictures and explained the process.

“The young man taking the money from the machine appears to be in his early twenties. The young girl behind him looks like a teenager and she a small child with her – can you believe it?” She said, shaking her head.

“Taking a baby with them while they steal. If this were my child, I’d be mortified. Sir, it’s also part of my job to tell you that, if you know these individuals, you will need to agree to prosecute in order for us to pay you claim.”

“I understand, thank you for explaining.” I replied.

“I’m going to give you a minute to look everything over, I’ll be right back.”

She walked away and left me with the pictures... I *was* mortified. There they were – that good for nothing loser, my grandson, and my only daughter. She was wearing the red jacket I bought to keep her warm. My head was dizzy, and my heart was pounding, but I hid it as I noticed Mrs. Fisher walking back towards me. I felt all the blood rush to my head and my palms were sweaty as I shuffled through the pictures.

It was late when I got home and I stopped by the side door, before going inside. I stared at the cracks in the paint and thought about the day. Through the door window I could see Lina sitting at the kitchen counter. She was reading her book and drinking tea – waiting for me. I knew what she would ask as soon as I walked through the door. The pictures felt heavy in my hands as I stood waiting for the courage to walk inside.