

Abuse was nothing new to Shane, and he had resigned himself to a life of being mistreated by his girlfriend, Nia. But when the disrespect from those he loves most hits an all-time high, he hits a new low. Can he find the strength to change things or is this how it's always going to be?


Emasculated

by Jessica Terry

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JESSICA TERRY

EMASCULATED

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Chapter 1

Shane was used to the salty taste of his own blood.

He mindlessly sucked his slightly-swollen lip as he reached for the bottle of hydrogen peroxide from his medicine cabinet, being careful not to make too much noise. He retrieved the cotton balls from under the sink and quietly treated the tingling scratches on his face, already conjuring an excuse for the marks they would leave. His employees were probably going to think he was the most accident-prone guy on the planet.

Finishing, he turned off the light in the bathroom and eased back into bed, glancing over at his girlfriend, Nia, who slept as if she didn't have a care in the world. Shane laid next to her and tried to make himself go to sleep, but it wasn't happening. His face hurt as well as his chest. For Nia to be so thin, she sure packed a mean punch.

Knowing he wasn't going to be getting to sleep any time soon, Shane eased back out of bed and tiptoed across the room, grabbing his laptop from the desk. Glancing back at Nia, he quietly left the room, feeling the anxiety leave his body as soon as he had the door closed behind him. He waited until he was a little ways down the hall before he stopped tiptoeing and resumed his regular gait; Nia often complained of his heavy footsteps and he didn't want a repeat performance of the past hour.

Once in the living room, Shane sighed wearily as he dropped onto the couch, temporarily hanging his head before opening his laptop and pulling up his blog. It was

something he had started a while back as an outlet to get things off his chest and vent, because he certainly didn't feel comfortable going to his friends about the things he blogged about.

Shane began to type, then stopped and hurried to the kitchen to get a pack of sunflower seeds from the pantry. Tearing the pack open, he sat back down the couch, slid the coffee table where his laptop sat a little closer to him, took a deep breath and cautiously glanced over his shoulder before he again started this latest episode:

Hey guys. I hate to say there's more today.

My friend Howard had spent all day at work and just wanted to go home and spend the evening with his girlfriend; maybe watch a movie or something. He picked up some nice flowers for her on the way home; he knew how much she loved orchids. But she must have had a bad day or something because as soon as he walked through the door, she was on his case about every little thing...nothing he did was right. Even the way he was inhaling got on her nerves. After she sent him to the store to get her tampons, he figured her attitude was just her hormones going all over the place, and tried to make her feel better when he got back. But nothing worked; she didn't want a massage, she didn't want him to run her a bath, and she didn't have a taste for anything he cooked.

Howard felt a little defeated and figured he should just leave her alone and go on to bed, hoping tomorrow would be better. He had finally dozed off and was sleeping peacefully when he felt slaps across his face and punches to his chest; he honestly thought he was dreaming at first but his girlfriend was actually hitting him again. His transgression this time?

He was snoring.

Shane saved the blog and sat back on the couch, mindlessly rubbing his sore chest. He knew it was a little cowardly to create a fictitious person like that, but he simply didn't have the nerve to admit, even online and using a pseudonym, that *he* was the one that was getting abused by his girlfriend almost every other night. It was embarrassing enough as it was. Honestly, he didn't even expect anyone to notice the blog, but he had actually been getting comments on some of his recent entries. Not that he had the nerve to actually read them. He got enough ridicule already.

The next morning, Shane yawned as he slid some raisin bread into the toaster and checked the scrambled eggs on the stove. He scooped them onto a plate before they got too hard and he had to do them over again; Nia always preferred her eggs a little on the soft side. Shane checked on the bacon in the oven and sliced up some pink grapefruit, glancing at his watch. He could hear her moving around and knew she'd be shuffling into the kitchen soon, and he wanted everything to be ready when she did.

He was just bringing the plates of food to the table when Nia entered the kitchen, wearing a loose tank top with no bra and a pair of Shane's boxers.

"Good morning," Shane greeted her. He couldn't help but smile at how cute she looked, standing there rubbing her eyes.

Nia looked at him. "You left blood on the sheets."

Shane blinked in surprise, his smile fading. "I did?"

"Wouldn't say it if you didn't."

Shane wanted to remind her that she had just started her period and might have left the blood herself, but knew better than to say that out loud.

"Won't happen again," he replied simply.

Nia smiled triumphantly. "Good," she praised, walking over to give him a hug around the neck. She had a couple of inches on him, which Shane still wasn't comfortable with after almost two years of dating. He hugged her waist with one arm and pulled out her chair with his other hand, smiling tightly when she planted a quick kiss to his jaw before sitting down.

"You have to go into work today?" Shane asked as he took his own seat.

"Ugh," Nia rolled her eyes. "Yes. Though I wish I didn't. I hate being a freakin' waitress."

"Then why don't you try to find something else, babe?"

Nia sucked her teeth. "I've told you, a lot of celebrities come through that restaurant. That's probably my best chance to get discovered. Then I'll be able to do my modeling full-time."

Shane just nodded, then took a long sip of his juice. Nia had been working at Black Bean for over a year now, all in the hopes of someone coming in and whisking her away to Hollywood after one look at her. Shane knew the likelihood of this actually happening the way she envisioned it was extremely low, but there was no way he was about to tell her that. He just wondered how long it would take her to figure it out on her own and realize she needed to actually go out on some auditions instead of waiting for everything to just fall into her lap.

Nia and Shane met right around the time he bought his shoe store, Flats. She had been the one to approach him, and their relationship escalated quickly. Nia wasted no time staking her claim and making sure it was known that Shane was now spoken for; her possessiveness started early and Shane couldn't help but be flattered by that. He'd never been very smooth with the ladies and only had one or two real girlfriends before Nia. He was thrilled to have someone who wanted to be with him so badly.

But just like Nia's possessiveness started early, so did her abuse. They were on their second date when she slapped him the first time, because he ran late picking her up and they missed the beginning of the movie they were seeing. She actually screamed at him right in the movie theater line, and wouldn't sit in the seat right next to his during the movie. But by the time he took her home later that night, it was like that whole scene never happened. She kissed him passionately in the car before pulling him into her apartment, where she seduced him and they made love for the first time. But not once did she apologize for hitting him and embarrassing him like she had. She *never* apologized, and Shane had learned to stop waiting for her to.

The rest of their breakfast time consisted of Nia doing more complaining about her job, and Shane dutifully listening. When she finished eating, she stood from the table and started to head back to their bedroom, not even offering to help clear the dishes. Shane just pursed his lips as he stood and started gathering the plates.

Suddenly Nia stopped and turned to him as if just remembering something.

“Before I forget...”

Shane looked at her. “Yeah?”

“Make sure you soak those sheets you messed up,” she ordered. “You’re gonna need some hydrogen peroxide...speaking of which, why is the bottle half empty?”

Because you scratch me up like an alley cat every time I breathe wrong, Shane thought to himself. “I didn’t realize I had used so much, sorry. I’ll get some more later on.”

“*Today,*” Nia clarified.

“Yes, today.”

“Good.” She walked over to him and wrapped her arms around his neck, rubbing her cheek against his. It was her usual pattern of accusing him of something, instructing him how to fix it to appease her, then rewarding with some form of affection when he apologized.

“I’m the only one allowed to leave blood on the sheets,” she whispered in his ear before gently patting him on the cheek and sauntering back to their bedroom to get ready for work.

Shane tried his best to put the morning out of his mind while he was at work. A couple of his employees asked him about the scratches on his face, and he certainly wasn’t about to get into what happened with them, so he evaded the questions. He tried not to let himself wonder what they were probably thinking of him, and repeatedly reminded himself that what went on in his personal life wasn’t any of their business.

He was in his office when his employee Erica let him know that his friend Brandy was there. Shane groaned, knowing she was going to notice and ask about the scratches, and wasn’t going to be pacified with an ‘it’s

nothing' or a change in subject. He was already working out what excuse he was going to use this time as he trudged his way up to the front of the store.

Brandy was leaning against the far edge of the front counter, leafing through a hair magazine. Shane couldn't help but chuckle, since he'd never seen Brandy's hair in anything but its usual ponytail.

"Hey, you," he greeted her, trying to sound casual. He stopped a few feet away from her.

"Hey," Brandy replied without looking up. "It's kinda quiet in here today."

"Yeah, right now. It's still early, though."

"True," Brandy agreed, closing the magazine. She smiled as she looked up at him, her smile fading immediately when she noticed the scratches on his face. She stepped closer, reaching out to touch them but Shane instinctively moved out of her reach. *Why can't I do that when it's Nia's hand coming for my face?* He asked himself.

"What *happened* to you?" Brandy asked, stepping even closer. She peered at him through her dark-framed glasses.

"Nothing, don't worry about it," Shane said dismissively. "Do you have class today or something?"

Brandy ignored the question. "Where did those scratches come from, Shane?"

"Brandy..."

"*Shane.*"

"It's not a big deal. I just...scratched myself in my sleep, that's all. Guess I had a bad dream or something," Shane lied, chuckling nervously. He adjusted the bin of flavored lip gloss next to the cash register, avoiding her eyes. He grabbed a tube of the lip gloss and pretended to be fascinated by it. "Coconut Mango. Who knew there were so many flavors of lip gloss? Did you?"

Brandy just peered at him.

“Here; you want it? I know you don’t care for makeup all that much but I know you like lip gloss,” Shane rambled on, holding the tube out to her. “On the house.”

Brandy continued to eye him skeptically, knowing he was hiding something. He always tried to change the subject. Brandy knew that stuff about him scratching his own face in his sleep was probably bogus, just like all the other excuses he made when she saw him with a bump on the head here or a bruise somewhere else, but he always insisted that it was because of something he did to himself. He and Brandy had been friends for a few years and she’d never known him to be so accident prone. She knew in her gut there was more to it, but since he obviously didn’t want to talk about it, she let it go.

“I actually love those flavors,” she finally said, taking the lip gloss from him. “Thank you. But I’ll pay for it.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Yes, I do. This is your business and you can’t make money if you’re always giving me stuff for free.”

“It’s a tube of lip gloss, Brandy. Two bucks. I don’t think I’ll take a huge hit because of that.”

“I’m paying for it,” Brandy said with finality, moving around him to where Erica stood behind the other cash register. Shane just shook his head and breathed a silent sigh of relief, glad that she was no longer grilling him about the scratches.

He waited on her to finish making her purchase before motioning for her to follow him back to his office. Once inside, he closed the door behind him then moved his jacket and a stack of books from the chair in front of his desk so she could sit down.

“What’s going on with you today? How’s Carmen?” Shane asked, referring to Brandy’s ten-year-old daughter.

“As grown as ever. But other than that, she’s good.”

“When are you gonna bring her by here? I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“Please, if I bring her by here she’ll be asking for every pair of shoes she can find in her size, not to mention all the lip gloss you have in the place. We can’t go anywhere without her asking for something.”

“Well, she’s a kid. That’s what kids do.”

“Yeah, well, I get tired of it. And I have no problem telling her ‘no’, but I don’t like doing that all the time.”

“Say ‘yes’ sometimes, then.”

“I don’t want her to be spoiled. And it’s not like I’m just rolling in the dough and can indulge her every time, anyway. You think we’re living at Mama’s ‘cause I want to?”

Brandy had dropped out of college when she got pregnant during her freshman year, and decided to go back to school and finish her degree now that her daughter was older. Since she had lost her scholarship and was working full-time, she and Carmen moved in with her mother to save some money. Brandy appreciated her mother taking them in, but she didn’t always enjoy living under her mother’s roof again when she was almost thirty years old.

“It won’t be forever,” Shane assured her. “It’s just a means to an end.”

“That’s true,” Brandy agreed with a sigh, mindlessly perusing her clear-coated nails. “Only two-and-a-half more years of school to go.” She chuckled.

Shane smiled, then looked at his friend thoughtfully. Her smile wasn’t quite reaching her eyes and he sensed there was more behind it than just the fact that she was living with her mother.

“You all right?” he asked her.

“Hmm? Oh...yeah, I’m fine,” Brandy looked up at him, then back down at her hands. “Everything is everything.”

“You sure?”

After several quiet moments, Brandy sighed again and slid her hands under her thighs, hunching her shoulders. “It’s nothing. Just trying to figure out how I’m gonna get some stuff for Carmen, that’s all. Single parent woes.”

“What is it that she needs?”

“Hell, what *doesn’t* she need? Every time I turn around she needs money for a field trip or she’s grown out of something, or more money needs to be put on her lunch account...it can get to be a lot. But I make do,” she quickly added, never liking to complain.

“Brandy...if you need help, why don’t you just ask? You know I’ll help you if you need it. And so would Sunny and Chase,” Shane replied, referring to their friends.

“It’s not y’all’s responsibility. Carmen is *my* daughter.”

“And we’re your friends. And friends help each other, right?”

Brandy looked up at him and smiled. Shane had to be one of the nicest, sweetest men she knew. “I appreciate that. I’m good, though; was just having a little mini pity party. It’s over with.”

Shane hesitated, wondering if he should say what was on the tip of his tongue. He figured he would get the same response he always did, but figured he’d go ahead and ask, anyway; maybe this time would be different.

“What about Carmen’s father?” he asked gently. “It shouldn’t be all on you. Carmen is his responsibility, too.”

“No, she’s not,” Brandy quickly and automatically replied, as she usually did. “He’s out of the picture; you know this.”

“He could’ve shown up...”

“That’s not gonna happen,” Brandy bitterly assured, a slight frown marring her smooth brow. “It’s always been just me and Carmen and that’s how it’s gonna stay. He’s not a factor.”

“But-”

“Shane,” Brandy interjected, her voice strong but her eyes almost pleading. “Can we please drop this?”

Pursing his lips, Shane just nodded, not wanting to upset her. The subject of Carmen’s father had always been a touchy one, and Brandy never wanted to talk about him or give any details about where he was or why he wasn’t in Carmen’s life. She just always insisted that he wasn’t worth mentioning.

“I’m sorry,” Shane said after a few pensive moments.

“Its fine,” Brandy insisted, holding her hands up. “I know you’re just asking out of concern. But I’m focused right now; I don’t have time for men or a relationship. They’re nothing but pain, anyway.”

“Men are? Or relationships?”

“Hell, pick one. But I was mostly talking about relationships. I have yet to be in one that didn’t bring me more heartache than happiness. And if you’re not happy with the one you’re with, then why bother?”

Shane smiled tightly. “Right,” he weakly agreed, turning his eyes to some of the papers on his desk. He suddenly felt uncomfortable and resisted the urge to wipe his brow, which seemed to automatically tingle and sprout nervous beads of sweat. Brandy might as well have been talking about him, with that question she just asked. Shane never sat and considered what he thought about his relationship with Nia, but he knew *happy* wasn’t a word he would use to describe it.

So why was he even bothering?

Chapter 2

Shane would be willing to bet that Brandy had no idea the turmoil she set off inside of him with her question.

If you're not happy with the one you're with, then why bother?

It just kept replaying over and over in his head, and every time he tried to stop it, it just blared louder, like a reminder for him to finally wake up after he kept hitting the proverbial snooze button in an attempt to put off facing it.

And it wasn't like it was the first time he'd ever questioned his happiness with Nia; they'd been together two years and he couldn't say he was any happier now than he was when they first got together. If anything, the happiness steadily *decreased* over time, instead of increasing.

Part of him was still rather amazed that he and Nia were still together; this was by far his longest relationship. He was an average-looking guy who led a simple life; he didn't go out much or have the kind of personality that drew people to him. He just kind of blended into the crowd; always had. Nia certainly wasn't like that; she thrived on being the center of attention. He never thought she would even give him a second look but she approached him and had been stuck to his side ever since. Sure, she wasn't perfect but...who was?

Shane did his best to put all of this out of his mind as he got ready to go visit his mother, Josephine. She was

always able to tell when something was going on with him and he didn't have the energy to do his usual dance of denial when his mother asked him about his relationship with Nia. Not that it would matter...it seemed like he was never quite able to please his mother, regardless of what the subject was.

He willed himself to stay positive as he pulled up to his mother's small, fading yellow house. He grabbed the bag containing the lemon pound cake he bought for her and headed for the front door, opting to ring the doorbell instead of using the key that he'd had for years.

Josephine eventually swung open the door, smiling at her only child. "You made it."

"Of course," Shane replied, stepping into the house and leaning down slightly to kiss her cheek. He was only an inch or so taller than her. "Did you think I wouldn't?"

"I never know one way or the other," Josephine said with a wave of her hand, turning to go back into the living room. "Make sure you shut that door up all the way."

Shane obediently closed and locked the door, then followed his mother as she passed through the living room into the kitchen. She lifted the lid off one of the big pots on the stove and peeked inside before grabbing a wooden spoon and stirring the contents.

"I brought you some cake, Mama," Shane informed her, lifting the bag slightly. "Lemon pound cake, your favorite."

Josephine glanced at him, then looked back at the food she was stirring. "Trying to get my sugar up, huh?"

Shane frowned, confused. "You don't have diabetes."

"It can still get my sugar up!"

Slightly defeated, Shane just sat the bag on the kitchen table and took a seat in one of the wooden chairs. He glanced around the small kitchen, noting that it was pretty

much the same as it had always been. Shane had offered to help her redecorate and get some more updated appliances, but Josephine insisted that what she had was just fine.

“As long as it still works, ain’t no need in gettin’ rid of it,” she always said.

“What are you cooking?” Shane asked after several moments.

“Some stuffed cabbage soup. You want some?”

“Um, not right now, thanks. Not really hungry.”

“You trying to lose weight or somethin’?”

Shane immediately looked down at himself before looking back at his mother in surprise. “Not really...I just ate a little while ago, that’s all.”

“Hmm.”

Shane eyed her. “Why? You think I *need* to lose weight?”

“Couldn’t hurt.”

Shane didn’t want to be offended by this but he couldn’t help it. His body wasn’t perfect and he knew it, but he thought he looked okay. He was just under six feet tall and had a little bit of a stomach, but overall he was pretty firm. At least, that’s what he thought.

“You don’t work out or anything, do ya?” Josephine asked him, putting the lid back on the pot as she turned off the stove.

“Sometimes, I do. I go to the gym with Chase every now and then.”

“How is Chase? He got a girlfriend yet?”

“Oh, you know Chase. He’s not trying to settle down any time soon.”

“And what about that girlfriend of yours? How are y’all doing?”

Shane resisted the urge to look away. “We’re doing fine.”

Josephine eyed him, the skepticism on her face obvious. “Fine, huh?”

“Just fine.”

“Y’all gettin’ along?”

“Sure.”

Josephine looked at her son like she knew there was something he wasn’t telling her. Shane fought not to avert his eyes. His mother had no idea about the real deal in his and Nia’s relationship and he wasn’t about to tell her now. There was no telling what she’d think of him.

Taking a seat in the chair across from him, Josephine looked at her only child with kind, old eyes.

“Just make sure you treat her right, baby,” she said, reaching over and taking his fumbling hand in hers. “Always treat her right. You remember how your daddy treated me, don’t you?”

Shane certainly did remember. His father had emotionally and physically abused his mother ever since Shane was five years old; at least, that’s the first time he recalled seeing it. Only God knew how long it went on before then. There were plenty of nights when Shane laid huddled up in his room, crying under his blanket as he listened to his father whipping his mother with a belt the same way he would to do Shane when he misbehaved. And as Shane got older, he always wanted to do something to help his mother, but feared his father too much to do so. He punked out. And part of him wondered if that was the reason his mother was the way she was towards him now, because he never tried to stop his father.

“Yes,” Shane simply replied.

“Don’t do your woman like that. Always show her respect. Never put your hands on her. A *real* man don’t do that.”

Shane just nodded, wishing he could tell her that he wasn't the one that needed to be getting this advice.

"I would never do that," he assured his mother.

"Good." Josephine patted his hand. "You might look like your daddy but thank the Lord you don't act like him."

"Miss, can we get some more napkins, please?"

"Yeah, in a minute," Nia responded dismissively as she sauntered right by the customer's table. She was in a bad mood, just like she usually was when she was at work. The last thing she wanted to be doing was being a servant to a bunch of strangers. She didn't even like serving her man.

"Hey, did you forget about the water we asked for?" another customer asked with a slight attitude. "It's been, like, ten minutes."

Nia sucked her teeth lightly. "We're busy; I'll bring it in a second."

"You're not even doing anything; you've just been walking around."

"And now I'm 'bout to *keep* walking, since you wanna get smart," Nia retorted, resisting the urge to curse the woman out like she really wanted to.

"I wanna speak to your manager!" the woman screeched.

"Join the club," Nia muttered, going towards the kitchen. She stopped one of the other waitresses as she was about to pass by her. "Hey, Joanne, I'm about to go on break. Cover my tables for me?"

"Didn't you just come *off* a break a little while ago?"

"No," Nia lied. "I just went to the bathroom. That wasn't a *break-break*."

“But you were gone for like thirty minutes.”

“What, are you clocking my bathroom time now? Can you cover my tables or not?”

Joanne just shook her head. “Yeah, fine. Which ones did you piss off this time?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Nia said with a smirk. “Thanks a bunch.”

“Uh-huh.”

Just then, their manager Rob came around the corner, looking extremely frustrated. Nia and Joanne looked at each other pensively.

“Nia, my office. *Now*,” Rob ordered, not even pausing or looking at her as he stalked past them.

“Wonder what that’s about,” Nia mused innocently, as if she had no idea.

Joanne just looked at her knowingly. The whole staff was well aware of what an incompetent waitress Nia was and they all wondered why she hadn’t been fired yet. She by far got the most complaints from customers than anybody else.

Nia smiled sweetly at Joanne as she followed Rob to his office, her smile fading slightly as she got closer to the door. She could only guess that Water Lady had complained about her, and while it was certainly not the first time a customer had told on her to the manager, she never quite knew how Rob was going to react.

“Close the door,” Rob instructed once Nia entered the small office. He was perched on the edge of his desk, his toned brown arms folded across his chest.

Doing as instructed, Nia turned and looked at him expectantly.

“I’m getting tired of this, Nia,” Rob informed her. “Every damn day I’m getting multiple complaints about you.”

“I’m doing the best I can do,” Nia protested, shrugging her shoulders.

“Yeah, you can keep that bullshit. I’m sure you know I know better than that.”

“Okay, I’ll do better.”

“That’s what you always say. But you never do.”

Nia looked at him, biting her lip. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry, huh? I don’t think you understand that when you come in here and piss off these customers, they go and give us bad reviews. The owners see all that. Or maybe you *do* understand it and just don’t give a damn.”

“I’m not *that* bad. I didn’t curse anybody out or anything like I wanted to.”

“You are not this stupid and I know it. This is *customer service*; you’re here to service the customers. And that also means you can’t just talk to folks any way you want to.”

Nia knew Rob was frustrated with her; he was always putting out the fires she caused with her mouth and attitude. She had no idea how long he was willing to keep doing that and figured she better straighten up at least a little bit.

“Okay, okay; I’m sorry,” she said again. “Really. Give me another chance? Please?”

“Give me one reason why I should,” Rob replied, standing to his full six-foot-three height. His deep-set brown eyes shot daggers at her. “You are a headache I really don’t have to have. So give me *one* reason why I shouldn’t send your ass packing right now.”

Nia looked at him for a moment before turning and locking the door. Her eyes took on a lustful slant as she turned back to face him, a naughty smile curling her lips. She put extra sway in her narrow hips as she crossed over to him, stopping when her body was a mere breath away

from his. She boldly slid her hand between them and caressed his crotch.

“I think I can come up with a reason,” she murmured, looking at his lips then back up into his eyes, which had already darkened with desire.

Rob moaned, his eyes on hers. “Better make it a good one.”

With that, Nia dropped down to her knees, unbuckling his belt as she did so. Yanking his pants and briefs down in one urgent motion, she grabbed his already-throbbing shaft and stroked it a few times before sliding her thin lips over it, moaning in pleasure right along with Rob. He immediately grabbed the back of her head, his fingers digging into her scalp through her short dark natural hair, thrusting himself deeper and deeper down her throat. Nia squeezed her eyes shut as Rob gripped her head and repeatedly and aggressively pulled it towards him, his other hand gripping the edge of the desk.

“Stand up,” he said after a while, his voice gruff. His moves were swift and erratic as he undid her black work slacks and pushed them down, his short nails scratching her dark brown skin in the process. Nia tried to kiss him but he turned his head away. He didn’t look at her.

“Get on the floor,” he ordered, pushing her down by her shoulders. She quickly did as she was told as he got a condom out of his desk and covered himself before lowering his body on top of hers, wasting no time entering her. Nia immediately started to moan and groan in pleasure, but he quickly clamped a hand over her mouth.

“Shut up before someone hears you,” he hissed into her ear, his hips still thrusting. Nia just bit her lip and nodded, wrapping her long, thin legs tighter around him.

This was how Nia had managed to keep her job despite being totally incompetent. She had begun sleeping with

Rob early on, ever since the first time he threatened to fire her, and willingly opened her legs to him every time it seemed like her employment there was in jeopardy. As much as she hated being a waitress, she felt she needed to stay there so she could get discovered like she always dreamed of. And she knew the chances of her getting another waitressing job where she could almost do as she pleased like she did there were slim to none.

Rob continued to have his way with Nia on the floor of his office, eventually flipping her over and taking her from behind until he reared back and gritted his teeth in an intense but restrained release. It took several moments for him to catch his breath and gather himself, then he just glanced down at her and wordlessly stood up.

Nia looked up at him, her body still burning, and reached for him. "Come back."

"We're done," Rob said gruffly, turning away from her as he pulled up his pants and buckled his belt.

"I'm not done," Nia persisted, rubbing her foot against his leg.

Rob stepped away from her. "Doesn't really matter if you are or not. You're trying to stay on *my* good side, remember?"

Dejected but knowing she couldn't disagree, she just quietly replied, "Right."

"Hurry up and get up so you can get back out there; I don't want anybody getting suspicious," Rob ordered. "And I would hope I wouldn't have to tell you this but I'll do it anyway; don't tell anybody about what we do in here."

"I won't."

"It'll be my ass if anybody finds out I'm just letting you stay here 'cause your head game is on point," Rob continued. "I can't be losing my job over you."

"Nobody's gonna find out," Nia assured him, quickly tucking her shirt back into her pants. "Not even your girlfriend."

Rob just looked at her, then ran a hand over his low-cut black hair as he walked around his desk. "You just worry about *your* situation."

"There is no situation," Nia quickly replied. "I'm wide open."

Eyeing her, Rob adjusted himself before taking a seat in his desk chair. Nia had always given him the impression that she was single; she never once mentioned Shane, even though she had been with him the entire time she'd worked at Black Bean. For whatever reason, she didn't want Rob to know she was in a relationship. It might put her sex safety net in jeopardy.

"Just get back out there and don't let anybody else have to complain to me about you today," Rob instructed, his eyes on the computer on his desk.

Knowing she was already dismissed, Nia just quietly nodded and turned to leave the office.

Nia managed to get through the rest of her shift without incident, and didn't speak to anyone when it was time to leave. She just clocked out, grabbed her purse and strutted out the door, wondering how much longer she was going to have to endure this menial and mind-numbing job.

Not wanting to go home, Nia decided to pay Shane a visit at his store. She wanted her man to take her mind off of her horrendous work shift, and see what new inventory he had in. His store carried some of the cutest shoes, though they were mostly of the casual variety; she hated that there weren't more high-end options.

"Hey, Nia. How are you?" Erica, the cashier, pleasantly greeted Nia when she entered the store.

"Hey," Nia replied dismissively as she strode right by her towards Shane's office. She never felt the need to be friendly with Shane's employees; she only really acknowledged them when she wanted them to do something.

She knocked once on Shane's office door before entering without invitation. Shane was sitting at his desk on the phone, talking in a low voice. Nia was immediately suspicious.

"Who are you talking to?" she demanded to know, stalking over to his desk and looking down at him with her hands on her hips.

"Hold on," Shane muttered into the receiver before placing it against his chest. "Hey, baby. I didn't know you were coming by here today," he said to Nia.

Nia's eyes narrowed. "Why? Planning on doing something you have no business doing?"

Shane frowned. "What? Why would I-"

"Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about, Shane! Men always try to get over when they think they're not gon' get caught!"

"Nia, I'm at *work*," Shane hissed, glancing towards his office door, which Nia hadn't closed. "Can you not yell in here, please? I don't want any customers to hear-"

"I don't give a damn! You don't need to be worrying about what anybody thinks but *me*! Now *who* are you talking to? Is it Brandy again?"

Shane sighed, his insides burning with embarrassment. He could just imagine what anyone within earshot of Nia's shrill voice was thinking. He wanted to get up and close his office door but knew Nia would stop him.

"Hang up!" Nia demanded, taking his silence as admission that he was in fact on the phone with Brandy. "Now!"

“Nia-”

“*Now*, Shane!” Nia surged towards him, her hand raised. Shane automatically flinched and slid back slightly in his rolling chair.

After a couple of seconds of Nia’s warning scowl, Shane meekly brought the receiver back to his ear.

“I have to go,” he said, sounding like a punished child. “No, everything’s fine...I’ll talk to you later...okay, thanks.” He hung up the phone and looked at her, hoping her attitude would disappear now that she had gotten what she wanted.

Nia glared at him. “Why didn’t you just hang up on the heffah?”

“Why are you so angry? I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You know damn well I don’t like you talking to that lame Brandy,” Nia reminded him, grabbing the arm of his chair she could turn his seat around. Lowering herself onto his lap, she slid her arms around his neck. “She’s trying to take what’s mine and I’m not having it.”

“No, she’s not,” Shane refuted, hating that he kind of liked how Nia wanted him all to herself. “Brandy and I are just friends.”

“She’s jealous of me, Shane. Jealous of how I look...jealous of how I’m not a grown woman saddled with an illegitimate kid and has to live with her mama...and she’s jealous that I have the man she wants.” Nia planted a peck on Shane’s lips. “You’re *mine*, and I’m not sharing you.”

“You don’t have anything to worry about, Nia. You can trust me. Just like I trust you.”

Nia’s mind automatically flashed to the image of her and her manager Rob on the floor of his office just hours before. But that was a necessity to keep her job, so that

wasn't really the same thing as cheating, in her mind. She was just doing what she had to do.

She gave a small smile to Shane, caressing the side of his face with her hand as she graced his lips with another lingering kiss. He really was a good man, and she *did* feel like she could trust him. It was other women she didn't trust.

"Well trust me when I tell you that woman wants you, then," she said against his lips. "You're just too naïve to see it."

Shane marveled at how Nia could go from threatening to loving to patronizing in a matter of minutes.

Choosing not to comment any further on the subject, Shane gently patted her back. "I need to go check on things out front."

"How much longer are you gonna have to stay here?" Nia whined, not moving.

"I'm gonna stay until close tonight."

"Why?? Aren't you the boss? Isn't that what you have employees for?"

"This is my store, Nia. I don't just pass everything off to them. I like to keep watch over everything."

"Then install some cameras or something. I want you to come home with me *now*."

"I can't come home now, Nia."

Nia's eyes narrowed, an all too familiar thing for her. "Can't or won't?"

"*Can't*. I have a lot to do here today."

Sucking her teeth, Nia stood up in a huff. "Well, since you wanna be all difficult and leave me hanging, I'll just go pick me out a pair of shoes and go home by myself. That can be your way of making it up to me. Y'all got anything new?"

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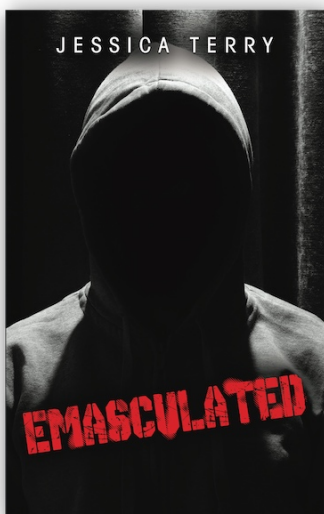
Pursing his lips, Shane did his best to hide his frustration. He hated that Nia often expected free shoes, and he hated more that he never had the nerve to just tell her 'no' when she asked for them.

"Yes," Shane simply replied.

Blowing him a kiss, Nia turned on her heel and sauntered out of his office. Feeling suddenly drained, Shane got up and closed the door behind her, then sat back down at his desk and laid his head down.

And when he heard Nia loudly berating his employee Erica, he wished he could just vanish into thin air. He would have to apologize to her, yet again, for Nia's behavior.

With a loud sigh, he picked up the phone so he could call his distributor back and resume the conversation that Nia had demanded he hang up on.



Abuse was nothing new to Shane, and he had resigned himself to a life of being mistreated by his girlfriend, Nia. But when the disrespect from those he loves most hits an all-time high, he hits a new low. Can he find the strength to change things or is this how it's always going to be?

Emasculated

by Jessica Terry

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