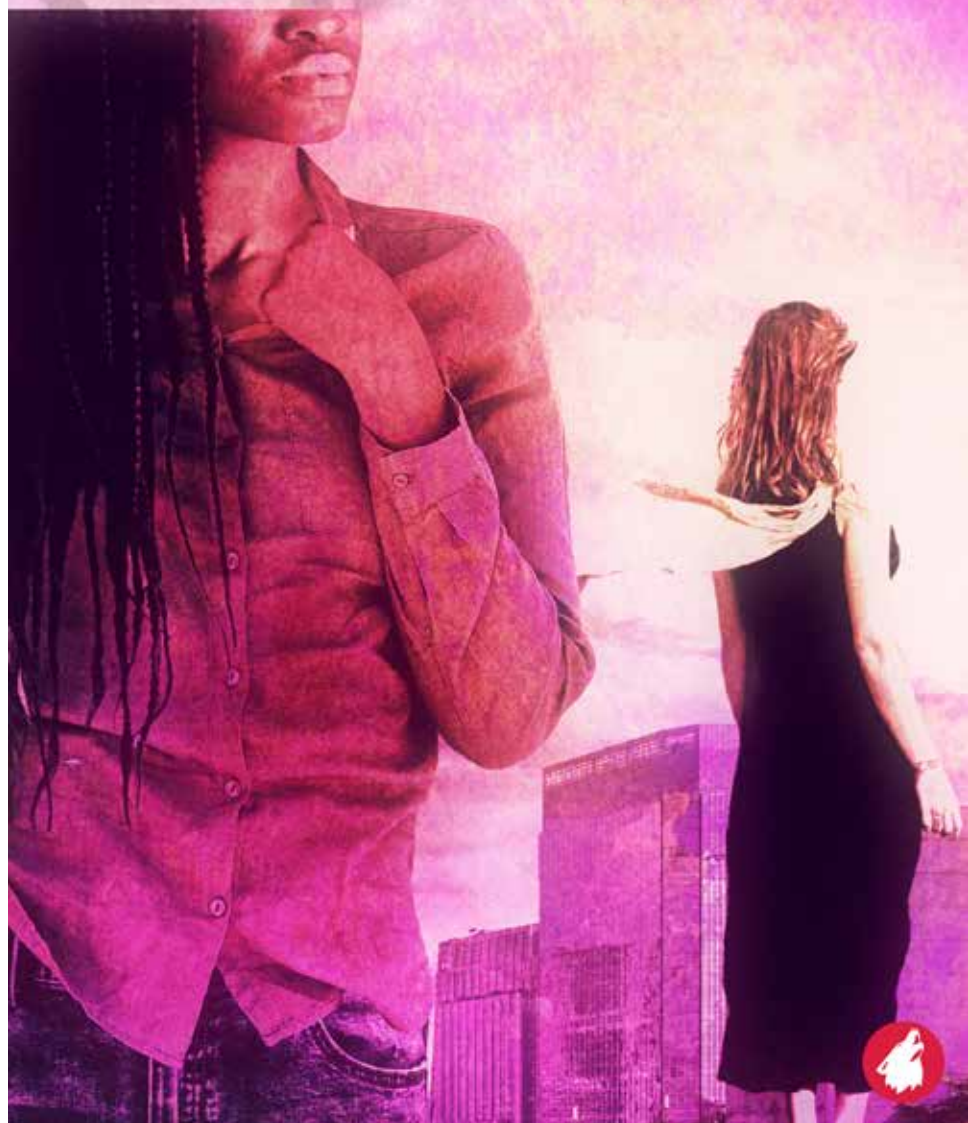


Pink

KD WILLIAMSON



CHAPTER 1

THE SUN REFLECTED OFF THE window, obscuring the view of the shop inside. Still, Shawn was hyperaware of the products on display. She shuffled her feet and coughed but didn't move toward the door. In the window, she caught the reflection of Veda's easy smile, as if she frequented sex-toy stores all the time. Well, Veda *did* used to work there, but did she have to look so damned comfortable?

Stepping back, Shawn took a good, long look at the building. Unlike all the other businesses on Canal Street, this one was a little more hidden away. It was tucked between two other structures and farther back from the sidewalk. There was a shabby neon sign on top. One S was dim, leaving "tumpy's" illuminated. "Why is the building pink?"

Veda snorted. "Because it's New Orleans and nothing normal happens here. You've only been here two weeks. Just wait. You'll see. It took me a month to figure it out."

Shawn rolled her eyes and sighed. She took a minute to try to shake the tension out of her arms, but it didn't help. If somebody bumped into her right now, she'd shatter from all the built-up pressure in her muscles. "I don't know if I can do this. I mean, I'm not shy, but I don't think I can scan and bag porn with a smile on my face."

Veda threw a hand up. Her expression was pinched and aggravated, but her blue eyes were soft and worried. "That's, like, the sixth time you've said something like that in the past hour. Gotta be some kind of record."

"Compared to what?"

Veda shrugged and wiped at the sweat that was dotting her chest and forehead. The lacy green tank top didn't look like it was helping her at all

against this weather. The heat was oppressive, and the sun was a wicked master. It kept on shining like it didn't give a damn. Then, there was the humidity. It left Shawn sticky and wet. And not in a good way.

"I should've done the ponytail thing too. I'm gonna be able to wring my dreadlocks out by the time we get back to Metairie."

Veda arched a brow. "With all that hair, it wouldn't have helped."

Shawn lifted her hair off the back of her neck to improve airflow. To add to the misery, there was the ever-persistent joy of a farmer's tan. Shawn's arms, legs, and face were already two shades darker than her usual golden brown. Unfortunately, black people got sunburned too. It was a good thing she remembered to put on sunscreen or she'd be in even more trouble with this weather.

A small group of people walked around them and into the shop. Behind them, the chatter from the crowded sidewalk mingled with the clank of streetcars and honking car horns. Shawn loved the sounds of downtown New Orleans. The tangy smell of garbage and vomit, not so much. While New Orleans had its charm, Metairie was more her speed. Their townhouse and the surrounding area was cleaner, quieter, and, she hoped, safer.

"I know this isn't where you expected to be in life, but keep telling yourself that it's temporary. It's easier to find a job when you already have one, even if it's shitty. On the bright side, it's an easy job. You don't have to go all Vanna White with the merchandise. Just take their money. Most of them get tokens to go in the back anyway."

"Eww, that's..." Shawn refused to get caught up in the particulars. "It *is* just temporary, isn't it?"

Veda nodded. "It is, but don't put it on your resume."

The little speech should have emboldened Shawn, but it didn't. All she could think about was how she'd arrived at this moment. Like a well-deflated balloon, she sank in on herself. She was in a new city, with a new job, and a new life, which was a lot to wrap her head around. Despite having Veda, it was going to take a while to get settled, and a couple weeks wasn't nearly long enough. "She's gonna hire me right? There's no reason not to, especially with your recommendation."

Veda's eyebrows shot up on her forehead. "You used to be confident... hell, even cocky, and now you're like mashed potatoes."

That stung, but it was the truth. “Ugh, thank you so much, I feel like I can take on the world now.”

“You know what I mean. I’m not saying that to be an ass. You need some—”

“Truth. Yeah, I know.” Shawn needed to get away from this subject, otherwise she was going to be a mess for the interview. Nowadays, she was way more emotional than she used to be. “Are the floors sticky? I bet they are.”

“They are, but you’ll be mopping them to keep the stick factor down. Don’t look too closely at anything you find there.”

Shawn stared at her. “You know you just said that out loud, right?”

“Uh-huh. Look, I’m cooking out here and, while I appreciate porn and crotchless panties, I’m tired of standing and staring. We still have a few minutes, but let’s go in. There’s AC.”

Shawn nodded. “Okay, you sure they don’t have anything at Taco Bell?”

“Like I told you, they only pay seven twenty-five an hour so...no. Not for you. Now, if you could be a shift manager like me, that’d be a different story. You’d actually get a salary, but you don’t have the experience.” Veda pulled the door open. It creaked loudly.

“Fine, but let it be known, I don’t like you right now.”

Veda glanced over her shoulder. Her gaze went from Shawn’s head to her feet and back again. She didn’t look impressed. “Like I care.”

The door closed behind them. Shawn pressed her lips together and stared at her surroundings. She was no prude by any means, but damn. Damn. There was a huge selection of vibrators and dildos in various sizes and colors. Some shelves were lined with magazines and DVDs. A blow-up doll in a sex swing hung from the ceiling, swaying softly. Shawn expected the place to smell like Lysol, but instead there was a faint tinge of apples and cinnamon.

It was...interesting.

Toward the back, the hallway was separated from the main area by a subway-like turnstile. It was dark, but there were flashes of light every few seconds.

Veda elbowed her. “You’re staring and your mouth is open. Stop it. You’re gonna make me look bad.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just—”

“Fucking. That’s all. Ways to fuck and make it feel better. You do remember what fucking is, right?”

Shawn glared.

Veda smiled. “Still not liking me, I see.” She didn’t wait for Shawn to comment. She jerked her head toward the woman behind the well-protected cash register. “That’s Phyllis.”

The woman was hidden behind wood and glass. There were pieces strategically cut out of the window so Phyllis could talk, hear and exchange merchandise for money.

“Thank you. Enjoy and remember, no refunds.” Phyllis’s voice was high pitched and matched her appearance perfectly. She was tiny and innocent looking. Behind her glasses, her eyes widened when she saw them. Phyllis waved and gave them a toothy smile.

“*That’s* Phyllis?”

“Uh-huh. You’re staring again.” Veda waved back.

“She looks like a librarian.”

“This is a library...kinda, but you have to pay for everything.”

Shawn met Veda’s gaze. “That glass is always half-full for you isn’t it?”

“Most of the time, yes. Here she comes. Don’t embarrass me.”

This time Shawn was aware of it when her mouth fell open. “You do see where we are, right?”

“You’re being ungrateful, and you’re way too far up on your high horse.” Veda’s smile dimmed considerably. She exhaled noisily. “Look.” Her tone went all gentle. “We’ve discussed this until we were both blue in the face. This situation is shitty and kinda uncomfortable. It’s not where you wanna be, but it’s your best option right now until something better comes along. So, take it or leave it, but no more complaining now that we’re here, please.”

She was right. “Yeah, sorry.” Shawn’s flash of shame quickly turned to anger aimed toward the Midwest, specifically at her ex, Courtney, who was responsible for her shitty predicament.

Veda wrapped her hand around Shawn’s arm. “Wherever you went, you need to come back.”

Shawn shook her head, pulling herself from a haze of feelings.

Three loud clicks sounded in quick succession before Phyllis opened the door to her little wooden fort. That seemed like a lot of locks, but Shawn didn’t dare point that out.

Veda dragged Shawn toward Phyllis.

“Hey, my baby!” Phyllis’s voice dripped with enthusiasm.

Pasting on a smile was almost easy for Shawn. Veda did the same, only hers was probably real. She held out her hand for Phyllis, but she knocked it away and pulled Veda into a hug instead. Veda released Shawn’s arm to return the embrace. “Heyyy!”

Veda was tall, thick and hippy. Phyllis had to turn her head to the side otherwise she would’ve ended up with a face full of boob. Looking away, Shawn pressed her lips together to keep from laughing.

Phyllis stepped back, but kept her arm around Veda as she held out her hand. “You must be Shawna Green?”

“I am, but you can call me Shawn.” She returned Phyllis’s handshake.

“V called me at the right time. I haven’t even advertised the job yet. You got lucky.”

She was lucky, and appreciative. It was time to pull the stick out of her ass and swallow down the little pride she had left. Just because she had two college degrees didn’t mean she was too good for this. Hell, for anything. “I know. Thank you so much. Is there an application or something I need to fill out before we start the interview?”

“There is. We can go up in the office and get situated. I’ve only got a few questions, and since this one here can vouch for you...” Phyllis leaned into Veda. “Tomorrow I’ll start you on a trial basis at minimum wage. If you can hack it for two weeks, I’ll bump you up to ten.”

“That’s too sweet, Phyllis.” Veda’s eyes widened.

“Oh hush, least I can do. You helped me through a tough time.”

“All I did was listen.”

“Well that’s exactly what I needed, Ms. King, exactly,” Phyllis said.

Shawn watched the exchange, but she wasn’t surprised. Veda was incredible. She knew when to push, when to pull, and when to back the fuck away.

“Let’s get on with it, then. I got customers. I’ll wait on them while you do the application. Follow me.”

Shawn nodded and did as she was told. “No problem. Thanks again for this.”

Veda stayed behind. When Shawn glanced over her shoulder at her, Veda grinned, and she tried to concentrate on that instead of the huge display of porn mags behind her.

Shawn scooted toward the window. The metal was cool against her side. The bus had been late, but it showed up right before she melted. Veda sat down beside her.

“Well, that was easy.”

Shawn hummed in agreement. “I have a question, though.”

Veda grumbled. “Fine.”

“Is Phyllis the genius behind Stumpy’s? Or is she a figurehead like Ronald McDonald or something?” Shawn tried like hell to hide her grin, but she wasn’t all that successful.

Veda blinked. “You’re not allowed to speak again until we get home.”

Shawn kept on smiling and looked out the window. This was shaping up to be one of the better days she’d had since moving from Indianapolis. She needed something to go smoothly after the whole Courtney situation. It wasn’t easy starting a whole new life. As the bus ate up the miles, the scenery whizzed past Shawn until it was a moving blob of colors.

“Stop.”

Caught by surprise, Shawn jumped and turned quickly. “What?”

“You’re thinking about her.”

She wasn’t going to lie about it. “Yeah.”

Veda grabbed her hand and squeezed. “I know I’ve said this before, but I need you to understand that I’m not kidding. If I ever get ahold of that ex of yours, I’m gonna put my foot so far up her ass she’ll know my shoe size just by swallowing. I fucking hate what she’s done to you. I knew she didn’t have any common sense. The tiny forehead was a dead giveaway.”

Part of Shawn wanted to laugh, but the rest of her tried to pull away. Veda wouldn’t let her. “It’s not all on her. It takes two—”

“Do you need to talk to my foot too? I have on sandals right now so you’ll be able to taste the leather.”

Shawn clutched at Veda’s hand in return. “No, I...” She stopped herself from responding further because it wasn’t going to be pretty. Shawn didn’t want to seem any weaker than she already was.

“Something good just happened. Enjoy it, or try to. You should also look forward to all the tips you’ll probably get. Flash that smile and maybe

a little cleavage too. Hell, some of the customers might even try to pay you to smack them around a little.”

It was very hard to stay somber around Veda. She had a way of sniffing it out like a bloodhound. So, for the moment, she let the morose thoughts go. Shawn stared at Veda.

“What? What did I say?”

“Do you wanna talk to *my* foot?” Shawn asked.

Veda laughed. “I’m serious. With those big brown doe eyes and those tits, you might make a killing.” Veda glanced down at Shawn’s breasts, making Shawn look as well. Her nipples hardened and pitched a little tent in the front of her T-shirt, as if they knew they were being discussed.

“Look at that. It’s like fingers pointing at you.”

Shawn crossed her arms over her chest. “Shut up!”

“Might wanna tape those things. Could put an eye out.” Veda’s pink lips curved into a wide smile.

Shawn laughed and pushed Veda away.

“Better?” Veda’s gaze was full of amusement and understanding.

“Better.”

* * *

Shawn got comfortable in her bed, laptop open and ready to go. Even though she’d already checked her email from her phone, she did it again on the computer. There was nothing to see. No responses to her resume, despite years of experience working with kids with mental health issues. Still, she had a job and should have felt at least a small sense of accomplishment, but she didn’t.

She opened a browser and checked her ever-dwindling bank account. Shawn had enough to pay rent and her part of the bills for at least two months, if she squinted. Her mood fell further into the toilet, but she didn’t want to be there. Set on clawing her way out of gloom, Shawn fired up Netflix and scanned her queue quickly, trying to avoid the movies and TV shows Courtney had added. Shawn couldn’t bring herself to delete them. Not yet. She settled on the BBC series *Black Mirror*. The lives of the people depicted were a damn sight worse than hers. The British really knew how to entertain. A horror movie or a good thriller was usually her thing, but she needed a break from that every once in a while.

“In for the night?”

Shawn looked up to see Veda standing in the doorway. She'd changed clothes and was now in a different frilly top and shorts. “I guess.”

“It's barely four o'clock. You know that, right? Didn't you promise me a few hours ago for the umpteenth time that you were gonna try to be a little more lively?”

“V.” Shawn sighed irritably. She knew what was coming.

“Don't V me. I know that tone. You only use it when I'm getting on your nerves.” Veda stepped into the bedroom. “You've been hiding in this room since you got here.”

“I'm not hiding.”

Veda raised a brow and pursed her lips. “What would you like to call it then?”

Shawn didn't feel like doing this. She didn't have the energy. “Resting. I'm fucking tired. It feels like I've been wrung out.” She shook her head. “I'm probably not explaining it right.”

Veda sat on the bed. “You are. You're not the only woman who got cheated on and dumped. I'm sure there's some statistic that shows it happens every nine minutes or something.”

“I know what I went through is nothing new, but I'm me. This has never happened to me before, that I know of, and I'm dealing with it my way.” Shawn closed the computer and pushed it off her lap.

“I get that, but you picked up and moved to Louisiana for a reason. You need support and to be around somebody who actually understands you.”

“I know that too.” Shawn looked down at her hands.

“Good. Then listen to what I'm saying. Get your ass up. You've wallowed long enough. I know you still care about her, but you guys were over way before she started cheating on you. This isn't you. You're strong, confident, charming, and funny. You have to get that back, and it's not gonna happen by staring at your computer.” Veda's words had fire behind them, but her gaze was sincere.

“That's the me you knew back at Indiana U. I've chang—”

“Bullshit. Even after I left, we were on the phone every other day. Don't try to sell me that line of crap. I *know* you.”

Shawn swallowed. Veda was right about everything. Shawn didn't even recognize herself. Instead of responding, she looked at her.

“Oh, honey.” Veda patted her on the leg.

“The thing that hurt the worst was that I wasn’t enough for her and then there were all the lies. It’s good that I don’t love her anymore.” Shawn clenched her hands. “I feel... I don’t know, but I still think about her a lot. It’s been over a month since I’ve seen or talked to her.”

Veda squeezed her knee. “That’s progress, then. I’m off tonight. We won’t do the tourist thing because it’s muggy as hell and you live here now. But, let’s get out and do *something*. We can celebrate your job, as pissy as it is. I’ll google the lesbian hot spots and—”

“I don’t think I’m ready for something like that.”

“Okay, let’s see where the men hang out, then. You probably won’t have to worry about anybody hitting on you every two minutes.”

Shawn snorted. Maybe she could have pulled that off back in college, but now? Veda was obviously smoking something.

“What? I’m serious. Have you seen you?”

“I know what I look like, thank you.”

“Well, I know I’ve joked about it a million times, but this is a million and one. I’m not kidding. If I were a lesbian and saw those dreads, eyes, that smile, and experienced that brain of yours, I’d be all over you, trying to make you forget whatshername.”

Shawn was flattered. Veda talked about her like she was the black, female version of Casanova. She smiled. “Thanks.”

“So, are we going out? I’m sure I can find somewhere that’s not over the top.”

Shawn took a deep breath and nodded. She wasn’t ready to jump in the water, but getting her toes wet was probably what she needed. Maybe it would help her feel less out of sorts.

“Good.” Veda pulled the ponytail holder out of her hair and shook it loose. Being blonde suited her. She’d let her hair grow since the last time Shawn saw her, but it worked. When she wore her hair down, it framed her face in a way that brought attention to her high, chiseled cheekbones. Up in a ponytail, it was like seeing the freshman version of Veda all over again. “I get to play dress up. I haven’t been out in a while. It feels like all I do is work. Gay men complimenting me would make me feel like Miss America. I could use some of that right now.”

So could Shawn.

CHAPTER 2

GOOD FRIENDS. THE NAME SUITED the bar. It was small, cozy, and had a piano. Shawn wouldn't have been comfortable with strobe lights, throbbing music, and the press of gyrating bodies. There were plenty of men of various ages and only a handful of women. Shawn sipped the last of her vodka cranberry and wished it had been a bit fruitier. She glanced up in time to see Veda heading back to their table with new drinks. She wasn't alone. Two men trailed behind her.

Veda sat down with a big smile and flushed face. "Okay, this one"—she put her hand on the shoulder of the man closest to her and he leaned into the touch like they'd known each other forever—"is Mr. Leather 2013, and this"—the other man scooted closer to Shawn—"is Mr. Leather 2015."

Shawn smiled, but it felt awkward, like that part of her face was stiff. Mr. Leather. What the hell did they get for winning *that* contest? Shawn decided she didn't really want to know. She was a bit rusty and wasn't sure what to say. Courtney had been a homebody, and Shawn had become one as well in the five years they were together. It had been a while since she'd reached out to make new friends. "Uh..."

"There's no way we broke her already. We haven't said anything." Mr. Leather 2013 smirked.

"She's fine. Let's just say we're on the path of rediscovery." Veda pushed a fresh vodka cranberry toward Shawn.

She took a huge swallow. "Sorry. I really do know how to speak."

"Good to know." Mr. Leather 2015 chugged on his beer before setting it down. "I'm Jaime and that's Brad."

"Shhh, leave her be. I think the aloof butch thing works for her." Brad waved Jaime's words away.

“Plus, those cheekbones and lips.” Jaime grinned.

Shawn’s face heated and her gaze went from one man to the other. Then, she glanced at Veda. Her drink was pressed against her lips, but Shawn saw the smile in her eyes.

“They’d eat you up at GrrlSpot.” Jaime continued to grin at her.

It felt good as hell to hear all that, especially from strangers. Still. “I’m not ready for that.”

“Break up?” Jaime asked.

Shawn nodded. “Yeah, almost two months ago.”

“Baby steps, then,” he encouraged.

“I’ll make out with you if that’ll help.” Brad smiled saucily.

Veda laughed. It was loud, boisterous, and Shawn couldn’t help but be pulled in by it.

When she was able to get her amusement down to a chuckle, Shawn held up her drink to Brad. “Thanks for the offer, but I don’t kiss—”

“Men,” he interrupted. “Shame. I don’t discriminate, especially with the hot ones.”

Warmth gushed through Shawn, and she did her best to hang on to it. “Next round’s on Veda.”

Shawn and the Mr. Leathers laughed. Veda glared.

Jaime finished his beer. “No, drink up, everybody. I’ll get the next one.”

Twenty minutes later, Shawn was laughing so hard she couldn’t breathe. “No way.”

“I’m not kidding. I’m a nurse. I wouldn’t lie about this kind of shit. It broke off inside her. I can understand a cucumber, but a frozen smoked sausage? That was a disaster waiting to happen.”

“Obviously, she needed to go grocery shopping,” Veda snarked, which sent them into laughing fits all over again.

Brad stood. “Okay, hold on. No more stories till I get back. Anybody else want a refill?”

Everyone raised their hand.

“Well, shit. I need help then.”

“Let me pee, and I’ll help,” Jaime offered.

When they were alone, Shawn felt Veda’s gaze. She glanced at her.

“You’re having fun.”

“I am,” Shawn agreed.

“Told you so.”

“You did.” Their outing had been way better than any BBC show.

“Fuck Courtney.”

Shawn actually smiled. The pain didn't cut as deep. Maybe it was the drinks. Maybe it was the company. Maybe it was that she'd let herself enjoy life, even if only for a few hours. She held up her glass. There was only a sip left, but she tilted it toward Veda. “Fuck Courtney.”

Brad smiled and set a new drink in front of Shawn. She muttered her thanks.

“Okay, you see that woman at the bar? The light-skinned one with the short curly hair and the blue shirt?”

They all turned to look.

“Don't look!” he hissed.

“What, why?” Shawn asked.

“She asked me about you.”

“Oh.” Three sets of eyes zeroed in on Shawn.

“She's one of the hot ones too,” Brad said.

They were all still staring at her. Shawn took a sip of her drink. “Thanks for letting me know.” It was getting uncomfortably warm, and she was pretty sure the drinks weren't completely responsible. Shawn's stomach churned, and her heart raced. She was flattered but full of anxiety too.

“Shawn, this is exactly what you—”

“No. I haven't done the casual thing since college, and it wasn't all it was cracked up to be. You know me better than that, V.”

“No one's saying you have to fuck her. Go talk to her. It's nice feeling wanted every once in a while,” Brad chimed in.

Jaime was suspiciously quiet. He turned his head from side to side like he was watching a tennis match.

Shawn glanced toward the bar. The woman in the blue shirt was staring right at her. She was definitely one of the hot ones—Halle Berry hot, complete with smoky eyes, high, angular cheekbones, and full red lips. She smiled, and Shawn swallowed, hard. “I wouldn't even know what to say. It's been years—”

“Well, you've already proven you know how to speak. I think you'll figure it out,” Veda interrupted. “Courtney moved on, and you have to start somewhere.”

“Kiss for luck?” Brad smiled crookedly. “Last chance.”

Shawn chuckled and realized that this was the most carefree she’d felt in months. She stood. She could so do this. What was the worst that could happen? Rejection? Being laughed at? Shawn’s alcohol and group-induced bravado went down a notch.

Someone grabbed her hand, and Shawn glanced down.

“Stop it. Don’t think, just do it,” Veda said.

Veda’s words put the brakes on her thoughts. Shawn nodded. She picked up her glass, intending to take a sip, but three vodka drinks were enough. The buzz she was feeling was nice, and she didn’t want to screw that up. Shawn set her glass back down and walked around the table.

Shawn took deep breaths to soothe last-second nerves as she closed in on the bar. Her heart hammered even harder than before, but she was going to do this. The woman turned as Shawn got closer. She grinned, brought a shot to her lips, and tossed it back, eyes dancing the whole time.

Don’t think! Shawn screamed at herself as she slid onto the stool beside her.

“Took you long enough.”

Shawn froze, but she couldn’t look away. The challenge in the woman’s eyes made something unfurl inside her.

“I’m Keisha.” The woman held out a hand.

Shawn accepted it, but instead of shaking it, she gripped lightly and let go. “Shawn.”

“Drink?” Keisha asked.

“No, I’ve had enough.” Shawn paused, searching for something to say. “I want to be sober enough to enjoy this.”

Keisha hummed.

Shawn’s sudden sense of relief was damn near overwhelming. It wasn’t an awful start. That line was all kinds of smooth. She was amazed it came out of her.

Keisha reached out and closed her hand around a mass of Shawn’s dreadlocks. She let the length sift through her fingers. “How long have you been growing those?”

“Seven years. I usually touch them up myself. I don’t like people seeing me cry.” Maybe this was like riding the proverbial bicycle. Either that or

the bartender laced her drinks with something wonky. Was Spanish fly an actual thing?

Chuckling, Keisha leaned closer. “Thanks for the information. I’ll try not to pull too hard later.”

Goodness. Shawn sucked in a surprised breath. This was really happening. She wasn’t sure what to say, so Shawn met her gaze and waited.

As the seconds ticked by, Keisha’s eyes dimmed a bit, but she didn’t move away. Shawn’s stomach sank regardless. She was about to fall off that bike and skin her knee.

Keisha sighed. “So, let me guess. You’re one of those butches that has to be in control of everything?”

“Well, that’s not stereotypical at all,” Shawn answered irritably.

Keisha dragged her gaze from the top of Shawn’s head all the way down. When she looked up again, she quirked a brow.

Shawn laughed. She wasn’t sure where it came from, but she went with it anyway. She glanced down at her clothes: a sleeveless T-shirt and cargo shorts. “Okay, yeah. I dress the part. Doesn’t mean anything.”

The light returned to Keisha’s eyes. “Is that right?”

“It is. I read. I think, and I feel too,” Shawn answered sarcastically. “We already talked about me crying.”

Keisha’s smile turned into laughter as she pushed her drink away. “I think I want to be sober for this too.”

Heat blossomed in Shawn’s chest and trickled to the pit of her stomach. Jesus.

They talked, laughed, and every time Keisha touched her, Shawn grew a few inches taller. She’d forgotten how good flirting felt. She’d forgotten what it was like to have a woman focused on her.

“Your friends are getting up. You weren’t planning on leaving with them were you?”

Shawn turned slightly to see Veda coming her way. She should probably go. This wasn’t her thing. She tried to push away how good this whole night felt...how good this conversation felt.

Keisha yanked on her shirt, and Shawn met her gaze. Keisha pulled her closer and flicked her tongue over Shawn’s lips. She didn’t expect the flare of arousal, but there it was, curling in her belly.

“I can make you a better offer.”

Keisha had Shawn's full attention.

"Come home with me so you can feel how wet I am." Her voice was thick, urgent.

Sweet baby Jesus. Shawn was speechless. What the hell did she do to cause that?

An arm slid over her shoulder. "I'm gonna get an Uber. See you in the morning." Veda was grinning like a proud parent. Brad and Jaime were too. Shawn's mouth opened, but nothing came out. Veda stepped away and staggered toward the door.

Keisha snaked a hand up the inside of her thigh, and Shawn whipped her head back around. Then, Keisha stood and took her hand. "Let's go."

Shawn nodded and followed.

* * *

Shawn didn't think it was possible to be a step away from an anxiety attack and aroused at the same time, but she was living, breathing proof that it was. They had barely touched on the way, but Keisha talked a good, filthy game. The kisses they'd shared when they finally stumbled into the living room nearly melted Shawn's face off.

Now, she sat on Keisha's bed and stared at the closed bathroom door. What was she doing? This was a bad idea. It had to be. What if this was some kind of scam and she was about to be robbed? God, what if Keisha was recording this and the video ended up on YouPorn?

Shawn picked at her nails and tapped her foot against the hardwood floor.

Did Keisha expect her to be naked when she came out? Shouldn't she at least take her shoes off and try to look comfortable? What if she didn't like Shawn's technique? What if—? Shawn exhaled noisily and inwardly screamed at the voice in her head.

The bathroom door opened, and Keisha walked out wearing a short, satiny red robe that stopped right at the top of her thighs. It clung to her. Moisture dotted her chest, and thanks to the light behind her, Shawn could see the outline of every curve.

This had to be some kind of YouPorn trap.

Keisha untied the belt to her robe, giving Shawn a tantalizing peek of her full breasts, slightly curved stomach and her neatly shaven sex.

Shawn's mind went blank. Then her thoughts started to whirl.

Keisha smiled and slowly walked toward her. "I meant to mention earlier. I'm recently tested and disease free." Suddenly, she paused and tilted her head to the side. She let out a soft laugh. "You're nervous?"

Shawn swallowed and stared. She'd been with the same woman for the last five years. The possibility of STDs didn't even occur to Shawn. It should have. Her anxiety went up a notch. It was conclusive proof that she had no business doing this, but here she was with a naked woman a few feet away.

"That's so sweet." Keisha started moving again. "You still want me?"

In Shawn's opinion, that wasn't the question that needed to be asked. "Do you...still want me?"

Keisha eased the robe off her shoulders and lowered herself onto Shawn's lap. "Fuck, yes. You're different, and that's so fucking hot."

Shawn's breathing went ragged and loud. She slid her hands around Keisha's waist, up her back and down again until she was palming her ass. Keisha's skin was soft, hot, and slightly damp.

"How long has it been?"

Shawn couldn't believe that they were still talking. "Six months."

"Don't worry. It's not something you forget." Keisha pulled Shawn's hands away from her ass and placed them on her breasts. She arched her back, pressing her hardened nipples into Shawn's palms.

Shawn groaned, and within seconds, she was tweaking, pulling, and then sucking.

Keisha whimpered, and at that moment, Shawn was a giant. All it took was being wanted. It didn't matter that it was probably only for the night.

Their mouths met and breath stuttered between them.

"Fuck me," Keisha whispered.

Shawn knew what to do. Spreading her own legs, she ensured that Keisha's thighs were splayed wide. Shawn grasped Keisha's left hip, lifting her slightly. It gave her just enough room. As she glided into wet heat, Shawn moaned. Immediately, she set the pace, hard and deep.

The breathy keening sounds that fell from Keisha's lips were like little bits of fire that dripped all over Shawn, igniting her in a way she hadn't felt for a long time.

Keisha met her thrust for thrust, and as she promised earlier, she wrapped several dreads in her hand and yanked as she came. Keisha's body quaked, and as she slumped forward, she continued to clutch and pulse around Shawn's fingers.

"Don't stop."

Shawn shivered, pulled Keisha into a kiss, and started again.

* * *

Shawn stood on the sidewalk and looked around her. The stretch of Canal looked familiar. Seeing the CVS on the corner helped. Her phone vibrated against her hand for the umpteenth time, but this time Veda was calling instead of texting.

"Yesss."

"You're not answering me."

"I'm trying to get situated." Shawn started walking again.

"You're not gonna be late are you?" Veda sounded alarmed. "It's training, but still."

"No, I'm not. I just figured out where I was."

"So..." Veda dragged the word out.

Shawn smiled. "What?"

"I will cut your hair in your sleep if you play with me."

Shawn chuckled. "She dropped me off downtown. I wasn't comfortable telling her I worked at Stumpy's sex shop."

"I do believe it's called an emporium, but I don't blame you. Stayed the whole night, huh?" Veda's tone was hopeful.

"I did." For the first time in a while, Shawn didn't feel like the gum on the bottom of somebody's shoe. Was it healthy? Probably not, but for now, it worked.

"I'm willing to listen to details if you wanna gush about the whole thing. You know, if I must."

"How gracious." Shawn walked further down the street until she saw pink.

"Isn't it, though?" Veda paused. "No regrets?"

"Not yet."

“I don’t know if it was the drinks or the sex, but you sound more relaxed. Feel better?”

“Somewhat.”

“Hallelujah. You’ll get no slut shaming from me. I’m glad it helped.”

Shawn leaned against the building. “Me too.”

“Okay. Would you do it again?”

Shawn looked out at the busy street. Life was going full steam ahead around her. “I don’t know. She gave me her number and told me to call if I wanted.”

“Hmm, it’s always good to have options.”

She heard the smile in Veda’s voice, and Shawn grinned as well. “True. I’d better go, though. I’ll see you when I get home.”

“I’m going in at nine. I switched with the morning manager for the week. You know what bus to catch to get to our townhouse, right?”

“I do.”

“All right, but I expect dinner on the table.”

Shawn chuckled. “It’s actually your night, but if I have to cook, we’re having movie night too.”

Veda groaned. “Fiiine, but nothing too gory or scary.”

“That’s a prerequisite for all horror films.”

“Right, how could I forget.” Veda voice was full of sarcasm. “Just know, if it keeps me up, you have to stay up with me.”

“Deal. I’ll see you later.”

CHAPTER 3

AFTER HEARING THE DOOR CREAK open, Shawn glanced up at the video feed. A man entered the store. A few minutes later, he gathered an armful of what looked to be cock rings. Confused, Shawn went to the window. Sure enough, the man was walking toward her with quite the load. He only had one cock. Was he going to try to put them all on? That was probably going to be painful, but people had their kinks.

“Hey.” The man plopped all the cock rings on the ledge.

“Afternoon.” Shawn tried to smile.

“Can you make a recommendation?”

Telling him to grow a vagina because they were much easier to deal with didn't seem like a good idea. Shawn scanned the merchandise and did her best to keep a straight face. “The blue one. It matches your eyes.”

The man smiled. He *smiled*. “That's sweet. Thank you.”

Shawn nodded.

“I'll put the rest back for you.”

He was sweet too. “Thanks!”

Shawn snapped on a pair of gloves and scanned the cock ring.

“I want a token too.”

She paused and then nodded. Maybe he really did need to grow a vagina for his own personal use. Shawn gave him his token and change. “Enjoy!” She grinned. She couldn't help it.

He smiled again and walked toward the back.

Shawn watched him. The only bathroom was at the other end of that hallway which was where he was headed. There was no way she was going to use it, ever. She didn't mind the eventual urinary tract infection from

holding it in. There was a perfectly clean restroom in the drugstore next door, waiting for her to finish her shift.

A little while later, Shawn decided to have lunch. She opened the microwave, stuck her finger deep into the leftover bowl of pasta, and burned the crap out of herself. “Shit!” She shoved her finger in her mouth and used the bottom of her shirt to carry her food to the little table and chair Phyllis had set up in the office. It really wasn’t that bad. Shawn had access to a mini fridge, microwave, Internet, and even porn if she wanted. It was like her own little fortress of solitude. There was a TV too but it had shitty reception.

After her first day alone, she’d learned pretty quickly that if the customers weren’t flowing in constantly, working at Stumpy’s was boring. She’d been bringing her laptop since. That was a week ago. Since then, she’d been selling vibrators, tokens, and various volumes of *Fuck Me with Power Tools* like crazy. With the help of a customer, Shawn had been educated on the fact that there were ten installments in that series.

The most important thing she’d learned was to keep a pair of latex gloves handy so she didn’t have to handle money or tokens post-jerk off. The cock ring guy had been her only customer in hours. Things had been slow, but she was willing to bet most of the real porn connoisseurs were working. Things would pick up soon enough.

Shawn sprinkled a few drops of Napa Valley Habanero hot sauce on her food. The bottle was almost gone, but she had quite a few other sauces in her collection to choose from in the future. She stuck a plastic fork in her pasta, opened her laptop, and clicked on Netflix. Starting *Jessica Jones* was tempting since she was probably the last person in the free world to see it, but it was going to have to wait. The new season of *Wentworth* came first. For shits and giggles, she’d brought *Ringu* and *Audition* from her own horror movie collection, in case Netflix got old. Japanese horror always hit the spot.

* * *

Shawn’s phone rang. It was much too early for that because it was her day off. She groaned and reached out to blindly search the nightstand.

“Lo?”

“Is this Shawna Green?”

“Yeah, who’s this?”

“This is Neil Pastor with Boys and Girls’ World. I received your resume a couple weeks ago.”

Shawn sat up in bed. “Yes, thank you for the call back.”

“Hmm. It says here that you have almost seven years of experience with children.”

“That’s correct. I worked with them in the home, school, and community.”

“I see, and you have a Bachelor in Social Work?”

“Yes. I’m open to getting a Master’s but the position said ‘either or.’”
Why was he reading her resume to her?

“Okay, thank you.” He hung up.

Shawn took the phone away from her ear and stared at it. “What the hell?” It was probably safe to say that Boys and Girls’ World was a lost cause. She shoved her cell phone under the pillow and pulled the covers over her head.

Sometime later, Shawn’s pillow started to vibrate and ring. She jolted in surprise and fished her cell from its hiding place. Shawn cleared her throat before she pressed talk. Maybe things would go better if she pretended to be coherent from the start.

“Yes, this is Shawna Green.”

“Hey.”

A warmth seeped into her chest. At first, Shawn was relieved to hear Courtney’s voice. She was okay. It had been almost two months, and Shawn didn’t think she’d ever hear from her again. Some part of her remembered the way they used to be. The way they used to laugh, talk, and do everything together. Those memories brought with them recollection of the fights and the things Courtney had said in blatant attempts to hurt her. Then, it was as if someone had flung her off a mountain. There was no other way to describe the breath-sucking sense of anxiety and impending doom.

“What do you want?” Shawn practically growled the words.

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I didn’t exist for you while you were out fucking around, and now you pretend to be concerned?” Shawn sat up in bed. She gripped her phone

hard enough to break it, and her body felt like it was about to come apart. She was trembling.

“You’re still angry with me. I guess I can understand that.”

“You guess? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Don’t curse at...” Courtney’s voice trailed off.

Shawn heard somebody talking in the background. Abruptly, all sound disappeared.

“Hello?”

No answer. Shrinking to nothing was a strange feeling, especially since a week ago she was damn near ten feet tall. The universe had to be laughing at her. Figures Courtney would call when she’d taken some baby steps forward.

“Sorry,” Courtney whispered.

“Are you trying to hide me from her? What did you do? Lock yourself in the bathroom?” Shawn stumbled out of bed and stood in the middle of the room.

“I just thought it best that—”

“There is something really wrong with you. You know that?” It was getting hard to breathe. “You’re not gonna treat me like I’m nothing. Like I didn’t exist. We were out in the open! What you did with her was the goddamn secret!” Shawn’s chest heaved.

“You don’t want me to call?” Courtney had the nerve to sound hurt.

All of Shawn’s other emotions were pushed to the side by sudden indecision. What did she want? Underneath everything, there was a part of her that was happy to hear from Courtney. Wavering on the subject made Shawn even more pathetic.

“I need some kind of contact with you. It doesn’t feel right not to,” Courtney said.

Shawn’s bedroom door opened, and Veda walked in. “I thought I heard you talking. I was getting ready to le—” Veda met Shawn’s gaze and didn’t finish. “Is that Courtney?”

Shawn wasn’t sure how Veda was able to tell who it was. Maybe because her mouth was hanging open and she was floundering like a dying fish.

“Hang up.” Veda’s tone was firm.

Shawn wanted to. She really did.

Moving quickly, Veda snatched the phone out of Shawn's hand, but the damage was done. It hurt, falling from the high she'd been on.

Veda stared at her. Her face was red, and her lips were pressed together. "Don't let her do this to you. Don't let her pull you down."

Shawn looked away.

"Oh, honey."

"Shawn? Hell—"

Veda ended the call, interrupting whatever else Courtney had to say. Shawn's cell chimed as it was powered down completely.

She closed her eyes. Shawn didn't want to hear the pity in Veda's voice.

Veda sighed. "Truth. This was a setback, but you have to decide if it's gonna be a tiny one or something huge."

If Shawn could sleep, maybe when she woke up, the stinging in her chest would be gone. "V. Give me the phone and go to work."

Veda stepped closer and rubbed a hand down Shawn's back. The touch made her tense up even more but the warmth was still welcome. "You should block her or get your number changed." She set the phone on Shawn's bed.

There were probably a lot of things she should do.

Veda squeezed her arm as she stepped away. "I'll see you later, but I'm here for you. So, if you wanna make little voodoo dolls and burn her ass in effigy, it'll be just between us."

Shawn's eyes burned, but she didn't cry. "I know."

Veda nodded and walked away. A moment later, the front door opened and closed.

Even after Veda left, Shawn still stood in the middle of her room. Grimly, she looked around her. Everything she owned was right in front of her, and it all fit in a couple of boxes. She'd sold all the furniture. It had been secondhand, anyway. She pretty much had nothing except her clothes, computer, an extensive horror movie collection, and an even more extensive hot sauce collection. This was what she'd let herself be reduced to.

Shawn reached for her phone and powered it back on. Then, she searched through her few contacts until she got to Keisha Vance.

* * *

Keisha's cries of pleasure were sharp and loud.

Listening to them didn't completely fill the hole Courtney's phone call had left, but it helped. She was in control of this woman's pleasure, and it felt so damn good to be in control of something. It wasn't a butch thing. It was a human thing.

Keisha's back was slick with sweat. Her entire body moved with each downward thrust. Shawn liked the view of her from behind. The play of muscles, her fisted hands holding on to the sheet, the arch of her spine, and the curve of her ass were all things of beauty.

She spread her legs wider, and Shawn went deeper. She watched her latex-covered fingers disappear and appear again, wet and slippery. Steadily and for the third time, Shawn increased the pace, and Keisha was there to meet it.

Leaning forward, Shawn pressed against Keisha, allowing herself to enjoy the skin on skin contact. Shawn's hardened nipples scraped against Keisha's back, making her shiver and moan.

"Oh...fuck," Keisha whimpered brokenly. The smooth rhythm of her hips became jerky, disjointed. Then, her body quivered as she called out, "Fuck!"

Keisha's inner muscles clenched and throbbed, pulling Shawn deeper. She followed, riding out the wave of Keisha's orgasm.

It wasn't enough, and as Keisha's upper body slumped toward the bed, Shawn began pumping, harder, faster than before. The bed squeaked with her efforts.

"God yessss!"

It wasn't long before Keisha came once more.

* * *

Keisha hummed and trailed her fingers up Shawn's stomach and around her left breast. "I have to get to work soon, but I'd be happy to do that thing with my tongue—"

Covering Keisha's hand with her own, Shawn squeezed. "Thanks, but not this time." She'd gotten as much satisfaction as she could out of the past couple hours.

"Mmm, too bad." Keisha yawned. "For future reference, I'm not a fan of one-sided sex."

Shawn met Keisha's gaze for a hot second before looking away. "Sorry."

Keisha sat up. "Hey, no. Don't apologize." She sighed. "All of this"—she waved her hand between them—"isn't you, is it? I'm not just talking about the sex. One minute you're confident and then you sort of disappear."

It was a little weird that Keisha was so observant, but it was a relief as well. Shawn exhaled noisily. "No, it really isn't. I'm struggling right now."

Leaning back against the wall, Keisha waited silently for more, but Shawn didn't have the energy to give it to her.

"Okay, I get it. I'm gonna use your shower, then." She got out of the bed and looked at Shawn expectantly.

"Right around the corner. You can't miss it."

Keisha nodded. When she got to the doorway, she stopped and turned. "I'm glad you called me. Hope I was able to help with whatever."

Shawn sat up in the bed and pressed her back against the wall. She smiled softly. "You did."

Maybe tomorrow she'd have it in her to block Courtney's number.

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PLEASE PURCHASE

PINK

BY KD WILLIAMSON

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