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*Aubrey Leatherwood*

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*Direct Connect*

AUBREY LEATHERWOOD

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Libretta sat in the back cubicle against the glass wall. From her desk, one could see out over downtown Birmingham's northern skyline. Houses dotted rolling green hills beyond I-20 and the hulking, sand-colored Civic Center.

In a cramped office resembling a dusty cave filled with boxes, cables, and obsolete hardware, this one spot, where the window was not covered with storage boxes and inventory, this window was like hidden jewel. And just like a secured and expensive jewel that didn't belong to them, the majority of the Desktop Support Team kept their distance.

Three cubes back, Shawn had to stand in the aisle to catch a glimpse of the recent, hot pink sunsets signaling the downfall of summer. He never went back to her area for a closer view. Nobody did unless summoned. Libretta rarely summoned. She preferred IMing even if from ten feet away.

In a few months, if the weatherman reported the rare instance of snow, the Desktop Support Team would likely gather in the aisle, a few feet back from the window and marvel at the rare site in the southern sky. Then, they would return to their warm, toasty, human-sized sconces and work on user profiles, software certifications, and the rare but exciting security breaches Libretta unleashed periodically into their test environment to keep their skills sharp.

When Shawn first got hired into this department, almost five years before, he'd been working as rep in the call center off Oxmoor Boulevard. Freshly graduated, back from Huntsville, and finally on reserve duty, he'd taken the first desk job he could find. When he saw the posting going up to be in IT, he'd jumped at it. So far every job he'd interviewed for externally had been just out of his reach, but he hoped that being an internal candidate would give him the tiniest edge.

Then all *hell* had broken loose on his PC. He'd been in the middle of alerting his supervisor to his problems when, a message flashed on his screen indicating that he was in the test environment. It said that he had the rest of the day to locate and

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correct every problem found on his local drive.

The next day, he met Libretta Lincoln. She gave him the results of his test. He fixed every problem he'd found. He corrected more problems than any other internal or external applicant. He missed about half of what was wrong with the computer. Apparently, it had been enough. She handed him an offer letter, a twenty-four month non-compete clause, and hired him on the spot.

Shawn had been a little startled when she shook his hand in the lobby of the downtown office. Yeah, he knew he was meeting a female just from the name, but she just wasn't quite what he expected.

What the hell *did* he expect? Maybe an older lady? Libretta didn't look much older than him. He put her somewhere between twenty-eight and thirty-two. He knew she'd been with the company in IT for more than seven years—he told him that when she introduced herself—but she could have been fresh out of college when she got the job.

Maybe he was expecting an unattractive woman? Libretta wasn't a supermodel or some chick from a video. She was, however, probably the prettiest woman he'd seen in a long, long time. When she pushed back her glossy, thick black shoulder length hair, flawless skin of dark sienna, covered every inch of her he could see. Not a blemish or interruption to its delicious color and texture could be found. Flawless, perfect. Unadorned. Huge black eyes with finely arched black brows had shown a glimmer of warmth then eased into cool and assessing. The less open expression lowered her lids making their almond shape sleeker, just as appealing. A straight nose with slightly flared nostrils hovered over a delicate mouth. Her lips weren't as full as popular, but the delicate curve of her slightly larger top lip was decadent. Shawn found himself staring at her that first day, unable to stop himself until she disappeared in the back cubicle of his new office.

Maybe he had expected someone who felt more comfortable with computers than people. Bingo. One out of three wasn't bad. Libretta didn't seem to care for people. That first day, she set him up to train with another specialist and monitored him from afar... ten feet afar. She sent emails, IMmed, conducted team meetings in a most belabored fashion, but she didn't connect to any of them on a personal level.

As Shawn's five year anniversary neared, she still didn't

connect. There was still nothing in her cube. Not even paper or a letter tray or paper clips or pens in a mug. Nothing. Just her two laptops, two docking stations, and two ridiculously huge monitors. No pictures of family, friends, or pets. Recently, she added an expensive gunmetal pen in a Plexiglas stand with her name engraved on it commemorating her ten year anniversary. It looked wrong on her desk. But it was neat, free of dust, and pushed up against the wet-cemented colored cubicle wall.

Five years later, Shawn felt closer to her, but still knew very little about her personally. Her work, he knew well. Comprised of teaching her staff her ninja ways of network security, technical troubleshooting, and wreaking havoc on their test environment and production environment during controlled shutdown periods, her work attracted him. He was in computers because he loved computers, had never tried to repress his inner technofile. Her talent with all things technical amazed him on a regular basis. Not just him. The whole department stood in awe of her.

Shawn had also found that he still couldn't stop staring at her. Everyday he saw her and felt something deep in his belly alternately smoldering and tingling. It wasn't appropriate for a man to feel that way when his boss walked by with a bottled water each morning determined to say as few hellos as possible on the way to her desk. She even had that look sister's got from time to time when they were annoyed. She wore it like a badge of "not right now." But he couldn't help it. For some sick reason, he *ate it up*.

She usually hid her rounded curves in un-tucked button downs and slacks and her luscious hair in a haphazard bun created with an elastic band. Not the most alluring look, but every now and then she wore a dress.

The first one he'd seen her in maybe a year or so ago was a muted green material that clung to her luscious curves, *all* her curves. She wore a conservative pink and green jacket over it, but the office got stuffy in the afternoon sun, even in winter, and the jacket always came off.

From that day forward, Shawn worked late every time she wore a dress. Very late. Overtime.

That first time, she'd been there at five still. Not abnormal

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but he didn't hear the telltale signs of her shutting down. No one else shut down either. If Libretta stayed late, it usually meant you should be staying late, too. She went home at five on the dot every day unless something intense was going on. Sometimes she came in early to catch up on work or worked from home on the weekends, but she didn't stay late.

This night she did. In a belabored tone, she called to tell everyone in the room they could go. They bailed out at record speed. Everyone but Shawn. He stayed as the plan to draw Libretta out formed in his head. Maybe he would finally get to know something about her, *anything* about her on a personal level. So far he'd discovered where she went to undergrad, Stillman, that she went fishing with her father and uncles every summer, and she hated cookies with nuts and/or raisins in them.

After six, when the sun was down for the count, and he'd responded in the negative to Libretta's IM asking if he needed help on his project so he could take off for the night, he took a deep, deep breath and stood, then made his way to the back of the office.

"Hey, Libretta?"

"Yeah," she answered. She looked up at him to deliver a smile. Her lips, a glossy mauve, parted over perfect teeth. Though it changed her face and made it sunny and inspiring, it acted as acknowledgement of his presence. The smile faltered a little and the eyes became more guarded as he struggled to figure out what to say.

"I got a request from the new vendor today. He wants all IP addresses for users accessing the new software."

"Well that's just silly," she stated plainly. "All of our IPs are NAT'd to the same addy. He only needs the source IP to get what he needs."

These were not words of invitation. These were not words meant to lure him closer so she could swoop in for seduction.

"I bet they're contracted with DDG and they gave up individual IPs." DDG was a direct competitor and rumor had it that their IT group had been struggling since they're leader resigned months before.

Shawn cleared his throat. The request had been silly, and he was seasoned enough to tell the vendor exactly what Libretta had said, but he wanted it to be an *in*.

He said something else trying to spark conversation, but quickly realized she wasn't paying him the least amount of

attention. Instead, her eyes were narrowed and her mouth was drawn to a tiny pinch. The face was funny. Then he realized she was looking at her screen.

“I’m glad you brought this to me. Look at this coding. It’s not to spec. The direct connection is set up fine on both ends but this transmission is trash if they don’t recode.”

Shawn could have kicked himself. He thought he’d worked out the issue with the vendor. He’d thought to ask her something simple, something *handled* to segue into something *suave*. Instead, he watched her type faster than he thought humanly possible and address the issue she’d found with his vendor. He watched as she sent lines of recommended code change when that wasn’t even her responsibility or her team’s responsibility.

Shawn had drill the following weekend. Not one of the guys he’d see there would understand how fast or strong his erection had come as he stood beside her, smelling the soft floral scent of her hair, taking a very inappropriate peek down the front of her dress covered in a very loose sweater with an even looser knit, and watching her slay cyber dragons. It was ridiculous, but never the less it was there. His hands flexed as he wanted to run them over her soft arms, through her silken hair, and use the cup her breasts as he—

“Shawn?” Her voice was soft but startled him out of his reverie.

She was staring up at him from her seat. Actually she wasn’t. When she turned she’d nearly eye-level with his belt. Damned if his erection didn’t take the opportunity to flex in his boxers and make itself known.

He wanted to apologize. It would have been the right thing to do in the embarrassing situation.

Only... Libretta didn’t look embarrassed.

Libretta looked *connected*. Oh, her expression had changed very little, but for a woman who didn’t let people in and rarely gave her emotions away with expression, it told Shawn what he needed to know. But it didn’t tell him what to do next.

“Shawn, you work for me.”

He wanted to take his rejection and go. He wanted to say something like, “You misunderstood.” *Something*. What came out was unrehearsed, un-forecasted, un-thought-through.

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Apparently, his body decided to act on its own. "I won't say anything."

She tilted her head and a little snort escaped her curled lips.

Shawn decided to jump off the ledge. He bent down and turned her face up to his. He kissed her. There was no art or gentleness to it, just his body making confession to hers.

And she responded. In less than a minute, her hand curled against his cheek holding him close as their lips and tongues connected. She sighed softly into his mouth when he pulled her to her feet and pressed her body to his.

Without preamble, her voluptuous curves enfolded him more as she lifted one of her knees opening the hot heart of her to him.

Shawn didn't miss the opportunity. He dropped one hand to caress her backside then ease up the material of her dress. His fingers slipped her panties to the side with ease then launched an assault against her wet petals.

She moaned and started to push him away, but her thigh was locked to his hip.

"Do you want me to stop? Hell, I'm fired already for this, but if you want me to, I'll stop."

He couldn't tell whether she said something or not, shook her head or not, but he knew she wasn't resisting. She raked up his shirt out of his pants and was kneading the muscles in his back. When the hand made it around to the front of his pants to grip his erection, Shawn almost doubled over from the pleasure.

"Do you want that?" he whispered.

Again, she didn't respond, instead, she leaned over her to computer and even with her hips pressed to his she opened an application.

"What are you doing?" he rasped.

"Shutting off the lights and setting the Office Unoccupied Alert."

Shawn pulled his hands away from her. "We're in here. Won't the guards come running?"

"Not as long as you're at my desk, they won't. Pass the printer and it will trigger the alarm. I set it to make sure we'll know if anyone comes toward the office and we'll have time while they verify identify."

Shawn didn't know how she could think at a time like that, but he was grateful for it. Sure, he'd had fantasies about having her at work on her desk, but in none of those fantasies, had he

been caught. While she secured the perimeter, Shawn pulled a condom from his wallet, opened the packet, but left it on the desk.

She blinked slowly when she turned back to him. Her fringe of black lashes seemed heavy with the movement. Shawn had studied more than once how long they were. The lights winked out.

He leaned forward to kiss her, but Libretta didn't press her body to him again. Instead, she turned toward the window, away from him, and shimmied out of her panties. She tilted her head to the side and her sheet of black hair brushed forward. One silky-looking wave defined in the dim light of the moon through the window, caressed her shoulder where she had removed a band from her ponytail earlier—just an enticing half-circle bend.

Shawn dipped his head to taste to gently—scent flesh of her neck. She granted him more access. Desperate for any indication that she enjoyed what he was doing, Shawn sent up a silent prayer then eased one hand around her torso to cup her breasts through the material of her dress. Wanted to feel the firm, fullness flesh-to-flesh, Shawn tugged the stretch knit of her dress down dragging her bra with it until the wedged beneath her breasts pressed the higher, fuller, the nipples hard against his palm.

She reached behind her. The muscles in her arms were working. They were working on him. She ran her palm over her moisture and used slick palm to circle his erection and milk pleasure out of him until he was moaning and demanding that she stop. Shawn grabbed one of her wrists not wanting to come unless he was insider her and asked if she was ready. When she nodded, he reached for the condom on the desk and slipped it on.

Then, with her back still to him, Libretta reached down to lift her dress over her blessed bottom. As of its own accord, Shawn's erection swayed forward reaching for the soft folds. She brought one hand back around her and circled him. She stroked the length of him then guided him into her drenched sex. *Direct connect.*

Wet and hot, Libretta was the snuggest of fits.

Shawn brought one hand down to her round hips and slammed into her. He was surprised when she didn't even move,

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then noticed the sheer beauty of her as she braced herself against the window, bent her legs a little and arched her back. He pushed deep into her again and she let out a guttural moan. His body tightened hearing that moan. Still she didn't move and he brought his hand to her arm to feel how tense her muscles were as they held her steady.

He started moving faster in and out of her, then felt her clutching him inside which prompted him to ram into her twice more and grab her around the hips. He pulled her back and leaned his shoulders back so he could angle inside and hit that spot that would make her weep. He went faster, squeezing her hips. And when, every time he slammed home, he wrenched a high sob from her, he kept going. He reached down with one hand then to flick her clitoris and she buckled. She went weak and she sank toward the carpeted floor.

Shawn didn't let go, he couldn't because of the sheer bliss of being inside her. He couldn't get enough of her. So tight and so hot and so wet. He knelt behind her holding her hips to ensure he stayed inside her heaven. But she crumpled even further until she was in an impossible curve. Her face and chest was flat against the floor even as her butt was high, bolted against his hips.

Shawn knew she'd come, and he was glad, because there was no more time for sensitivity. He flexed his hips, pumping into her warmth so fast and hard that she slid once, twice against the floor, then rose up on her forearms. Sweat ran down his body in rivulets, as he squeezed his eyes shut and nearly forgot anything but the tightness as he fucked her.

Her pleasure came out in racked sobs and the hoarse exclamations, "so good, so good."

When he felt that quiver inside against and her body clamp around his flesh, he came, and he shouted with it. He collapsed and, shaking, pressed his sweaty face into the back of her neck. He had released inside of her, and it had been powerful. Powerful because hell the sex had been some of the best he had ever had, but Shawn was no fool. It was powerful also because he'd been carrying an almost four-year-old Jones for her by then.

Libretta rose on her knees and pulled her dress down over her legs and up over her breasts. She went to her computer immediately and typed something in.

The lights came on before Shawn had properly disposed of his condom.

“Please put it in paper,” her voice sounded distant, but of course Shawn complied. He wrapped it in paper and tapped it closed before putting it in the trash can.

He ran a hand over his head. He needed a cut. He breathed out, waiting for her to speak or to at least look up from her computer.

“You should leave first. I’m going to finish up some things and leave later.”

“O-kay.” Shawn didn’t budge.

“Shawn I could lose my job for what just happened.”

“I know but—”

“Please, you have to keep this between us.”

She looked worried. As much as Shawn felt conflicted about the way she was dismissing him, he hated the expression. He’d never seen it before and didn’t want to again.

“It’ll be like nothing happened.”

“Thank you.”

“But if you don’t want it to happen again, don’t wear another dress to work.”

Her lip curled up on one side and Shawn felt warmth flush over him at the subtle acknowledgement that she was flattered, that she’d enjoyed herself, that she just might like him a little bit.

Nothing changed in the office. Shawn didn’t understand it. True enough, he didn’t come in trying to sing to blue jays or talk to flowers, but he had felt like he deserved a little bit of a swagger. But, he’d sat at his desk, done his work, and fantasized over his pants and pony-tail wearing boss—because that’s what she came to work in the next day. Actually, fantasies mixed with memories this time and he took a longer than usual lunch to help tamp down the urge to sit her on the copy machine and do what came natural.

He swore he saw her smile once or twice during the day. She was in a good mood, too.

Two weeks later they were both in a bad mood. Nothing had been said, nothing had happened, and yet the tones of emails and messages and even conversations had been strained. The day after a particularly tense exchange between them had Jerry the telephony guy raising his eyebrows. Shawn was certain he was the only one acting like a jackass, but that didn’t put him in a

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better mood.

But on Friday, she wore a skirt to work: a dark gray sweater over a black skirt with black tights. Not a dress, but Shawn had been drawn to her legs all day. Did it mean something?

She worked late. He worked late.

“Are you angry with me for some reason?” She asked. “Your work’s not suffering but I—”

“I’m not mad at you.”

“Oh?” She uncrossed her legs and sat forward in her seat.

That’s when Shawn noticed it... Her tights were gone. Her luscious legs were bare.

“You had hose on this morning.”

She averted her eyes to the nightscape beyond the window, but she didn’t deny it.

“You had hose on this morning and you’re wearing a skirt.”

She chewed her lower lip.

“Set the Office Unoccupied Alert?”

She did.

Shawn went to his knees in front of her.

“I wasn’t mad I was frustrated.”

“Yeah,” she responded.

He grasped a fleshy thigh in each hand. He pressed them wide. He half expected her to be shy about opening herself to him this way. Most women were. They were shy as he studied their petals, but Shawn had never found any lacking. He didn’t this time either. Her sex was like purple eucalyptus leaves unfolding and glistening with dew. Her scent was earthy with a hint of jasmine. He wondered where that smell came from. He slipped closer. He drew in a deeper breath.

He touched the tip to the central, the dark pink bundle of nerves. He delved his tongue into her shallow depths. She tasted sweet. He pressed his fingers inside of the wet warmth waiting for him as he continued to taste from her fountain. Involuntarily, her hips rolled against his lips impaling her farther on his fingers. She did it again and again while Shawn coaxed her to come for him.

When her body started to shake, he lifted his head even as continued to use his fingers. He needed to watch her find heaven and know that he’d been the one to take her there. He hadn’t seen it the last time, although he was certain this time her response was different. Her face didn’t change. Even though her body moved with him as if they were one. Only the occasional,

breathily “ahh,” indicated to him when he was doing something right until her whole body shook and shook violently, and her legs clamped tightly around his hand. Then it was over. She leaned over to grab a napkin from her desk. She wiped herself beneath her falling skirt. Then she threw the napkin in the trash can. She stood and smoothed her hair down.

“Sit down,” Libretta ordered.

Shawn was sure he looked appalled at the thought. No one sat at her desk, even when she wasn’t there.

“Sit. We have to talk.”

He sat down noticing she hadn’t pressed him into her seat but the armless chair where the rare visitor sat. “I haven’t said a word, Libretta. I swear.”

“I know.” She nodded and as if to show good faith she leaned down to give him a very sweet kiss. Only, it lasted longer and grew hotter than either of them had planned. By the time the kiss was done, both of them were panting and Shawn had already covered up.

“I have to get this off my chest,” Libretta said when she stood away from him.

“Come here. Let me try to get something off your chest.” He grabbed for her and she neared him helplessly. Shawn put his head under her sweater to drop a kiss on her belly and through the delicate lace of her bra. One hand went up her skirt to test the flesh of her backside.

“I can’t get involved with you,” she whispered even as she raked her nails across his head and bent down to kiss his lips. “This can’t happen between us any more. Not with you working for me.”

Still tense from days of silent antagonism between them, Shawn grumbled, “You just let me make you come and *now* you don’t want to mix business and pleasure?”

“Shawn, I—”

“No,” he wrapped his hands around her arms and drew her closer. “If that’s how it is, then let’s just call it over and done with. Let me get out—”

Before he could finish his sentence he hissed, “Fuck!” so loud it cut through boxes and cables to echo in the small office.

Libretta had spread her legs and straddled him in the chair

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—thank God it didn't have arms—then she let out an exclamation of her own. She gripped the back of his seat for leverage then rocked her hips against him. Sometimes she leaned forward to kiss him and grind her body against his. Sometimes, she planted her feet on the floor and used her thighs to move up and down on his shaft without touching any other part of his body.

They both came in minutes holding onto each other in the most intimate of embraces, whispering to each other, until they ascended from the afterglow.

When they had dressed once more, Libretta started toward the door.

Shawn rushed to stand in front of it.

"I'm going first this time."

"How about not going at all?"

"Huh?"

"Why don't you stay and talk to me, Libretta?"

"Stay and talk to you?"

That hurt. Her absolute blank stare *hurt*. "Foreign concept, I see. But for real, can't you take five minutes to talk to me?"

She crossed her arms over her chest but nodded. She didn't go back to her desk but sat at Jerry's desk across the aisle from Shawn.

"So..."

"So?"

Shawn was hard pressed to figure out what to say. He'd succeed in getting her to wait, but what then?

He found himself telling her he thought her name was pretty.

"Thank you. My mother liked the word libretto. God knows where she heard it, it's not like a fan of opera. Then she decided to feminize it, change the O to an A. So my entire life I've been—loosely translated—little book girl."

"I still like it."

"Thank you, again."

"So your mother named you, huh? What do your parents do?"

"Listen, Shawn. I can't do this. We aren't on a date. I mean, obviously I find you attractive. I'm guessing plenty enough women find you attractive. But you don't work for them, so it's all good with them. Not me. I'm not ready for a commitment. The way the past couple of weeks have gone, it doesn't look like

I'm ready for *this* either."

"But you wanted it."

She swallowed and hefted the strap of her laptop case higher on her shoulder.

"You still want it."

She didn't deny it.

"Is our work situation the only thing keeping you from letting me in?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she turned to Jerry's computer and tsked that he hadn't shut it down for the night, S Support Team no-no.

Her hands moved on the keyboard.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to log in as Jerry, so I can shut it down."

"Why don't you just turn it off?"

"He might have something running in the background."

"Then log in as Admin."

"I could do that," she answered absently. A gray screen popped up to tell her that the user ID she was using had been disabled. "Unlock me."

"That's Jerry's ID."

"I know that, unlock Jerry."

Shawn turned to his computer. "You know you can just—"

He stopped when felt a brown-eyed glared beamed his way. "Unlocked."

Her keys moved on the keyboard once again.

"What are you doing?"

"My job. I'm going to figure out his password and leave him some fun things to sort out in the morning. That's what happens when you leave your computer running overnight without getting prior approval."

"So you're teaching him a lesson?"

"Yep."

"And not having fun at all?"

"Nope." She looked over at him grinned.

*Connection.*

That night, they parted on good terms though no conclusion had been made regarding their intensely physical and wholly inappropriate relationship. No conclusion was made for months

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of sexual encounters late night at least once or twice a week. Sometimes more.

No conclusion was made between the two of them, but conclusions were being drawn with the rest of the staff. They didn't say much, but it was obvious they suspected something was going on. Jerry, the most suspicious of them all, had insisted on staying late more often, probably as a scout for the rest of the team.

After a couple nights of that, Shawn knew what was coming. Libra—he knew now that's what her mother and sisters called her, though she was an Aries—was going to break it off with him. Again. For the hundredth time. After he'd worked hard to get to know her. After they'd left town for the weekend more times than he could count with plans to escape people who might know them. After he'd confided in her about his time in a detainee camp over seas. After he'd fallen in love with her and come to believe that she might like him a little bit, too, she was going to try to end it all. Again.

Too smart to puzzle over why when she seemed so strong and in charge of every other aspect of her life, yet fell prey to the tiniest nuzzle against her soft throat, Shawn spent more time wondering what he could do to stop her from cutting off or *trying* to cut off what had turned into the strangest and yet most intense relationship he ever had.

He concocted a brilliant plan.

The day after Jerry stayed late to check the routing on some old circuits—a useful but low priority project—when Libra said she wanted to break up. Shawn said okay. After all, he cared about her and he didn't want her job in jeopardy.

True to form, she'd showed little in the way of emotion about it. Anyone who had studied her features less than Shawn wouldn't have been able to realize the subtle disappointment registered in a small furrow in her brown and an almost imperceptible downturn in her lip.

After that, she did her best to ignore him. Well... normally, she didn't interact with people that much at work anyway. But he had sent her a couple of work-related emails to which she hadn't responded and her instant message app said she was "busy." Ten feet away and she was avoiding him. She hadn't even given him his five year anniversary plaque. She'd handed it to Jerry and asked him to pass it to Shawn.

Shawn considered downloading porn to his desktop. That

would get her attention. But that was assured to get him the *wrong* kind of attention.

Instead, he waited until he heard her stretch, a sure sign she was getting ready to leave, and sent her an IM.

*You're wearing a dress today.*

She wasn't, but what did that matter?

Libra stayed and, reluctantly, the rest of the group started to file out of the office.

Shawn didn't make a move for a moment. There was a better way to get her attention.

"Shawn, can you come to my desk please." Her voice rang out. Not an email or an instant message. A voice, across the open field of cubicles.

"Sure, *Libretta*." Shawn stood up and walked back to the cubicle beside the window. Libra touched her computer screen and looked back at him. Shawn lifted a brow. "You know you can't do this."

"Sure I can."

She lowered her voice to a hiss at him, "You've been doing *job searches* from your *desk*! You know we don't allow that. Plus, you know—we all know—enough to get completely around the network alerts, why would you stay on the network proper and look for a job?"

He handed her the folder he'd brought with him to her desk.

"What's this?" She flipped the folder open and those big, beautiful brown eyes got bigger.

"It's my five-year anniversary present to myself. I didn't really care for the plaque."

"Shawn, no one has left this department in eleven years."

"You can check in but—"

"This is *not* a joke." Her voice went up just a notch still she managed to keep it from carrying beyond the cubicle directly next to here where the printer and fax was situated. She blinked and blinked again. Shawn had only seen such physical responses when they made love. "You're not going to find another job at your level that pays you what I do."

"Maybe I'll find a job at a different level."

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“What’s that supposed to mean? The only job open at a higher level in town is at DDG and you can’t work for them. So back to square one: You won’t find another job like this one.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I’m more worried about not finding another you.”

Her face crumpled and she looked dangerously close to tears. Shawn wasn’t sure he was ready for that. “Don’t, Libra.”

She chewed her lower lip and didn’t look at him, but she kept her eyes dry.

“Gabriel let me out of my non-compete.”

“Gabriel doesn’t let anyone out of anything.”

“He does if he’s worried about rumors that you and I are closer than we should be.”

Her eyes bugged, and even though he knew it was wrong, wrong, *wrong*, he liked that look of horror.

He knelt in front of her. “There weren’t rumors. I told him that I had started to develop feelings for you. I confessed that I was serious even though you refused to be with me because of our professional relationship. Who knew he was a romantic.”

“Who knew?” She murmured dazed. Then, her gaze snapped to him, alert and intelligent. Her almond eyes narrowed, no more tears. “When you go work for DDG, I’m going to crash your network every day.”

“Perfect. When they ask me why you’re crashing the network every day, I’ll just say ‘That’s how I know she loves me.’”

And then she did start to cry. Then she put her arms around him then she whispered it to him. She whispered that she loved him.

## *About the Author*

Aubrey Leatherwood is an author who loves language and the way it can be used to communicate the beauty of physical sensation. She adores the body and the way it interacts with... well... other bodies. She is also fascinated by the mind and its power. As a result, her characters are always intensely physical but intensely cerebral beings as well. Frequently, they possess an awkwardness or nuance that endears them to the reader.

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