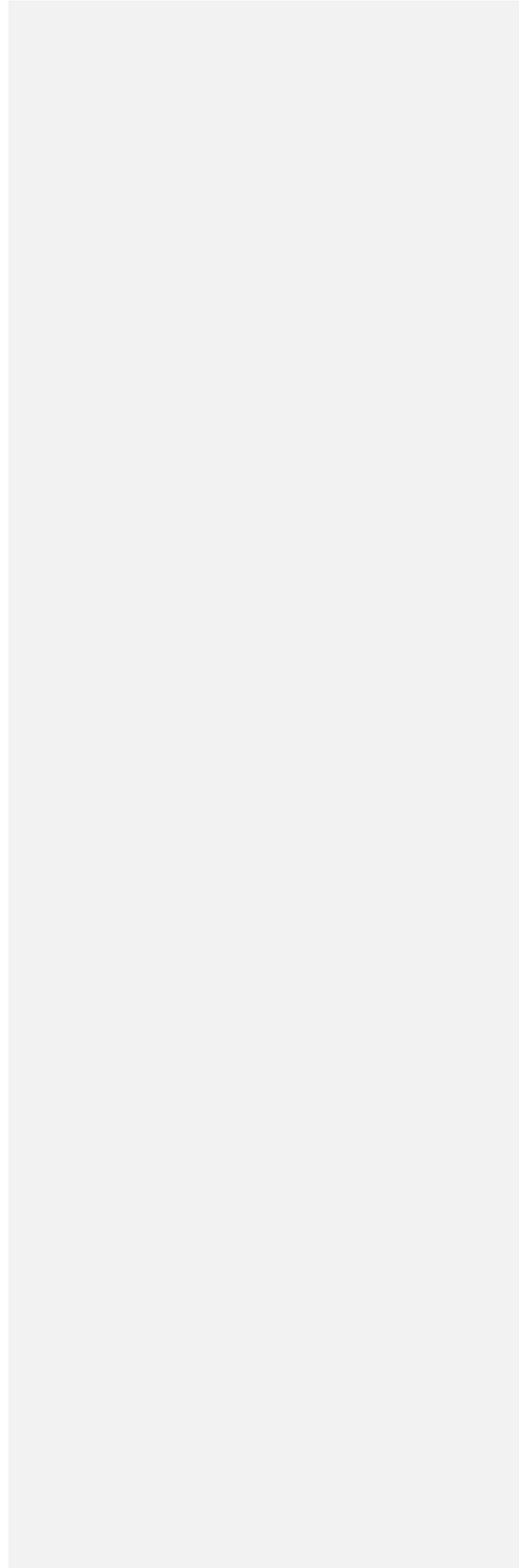


FOLLOW ME



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Blank Slate

FOLLOW ME

A Corrupted Hearts Novel

TIFFANY SNOW



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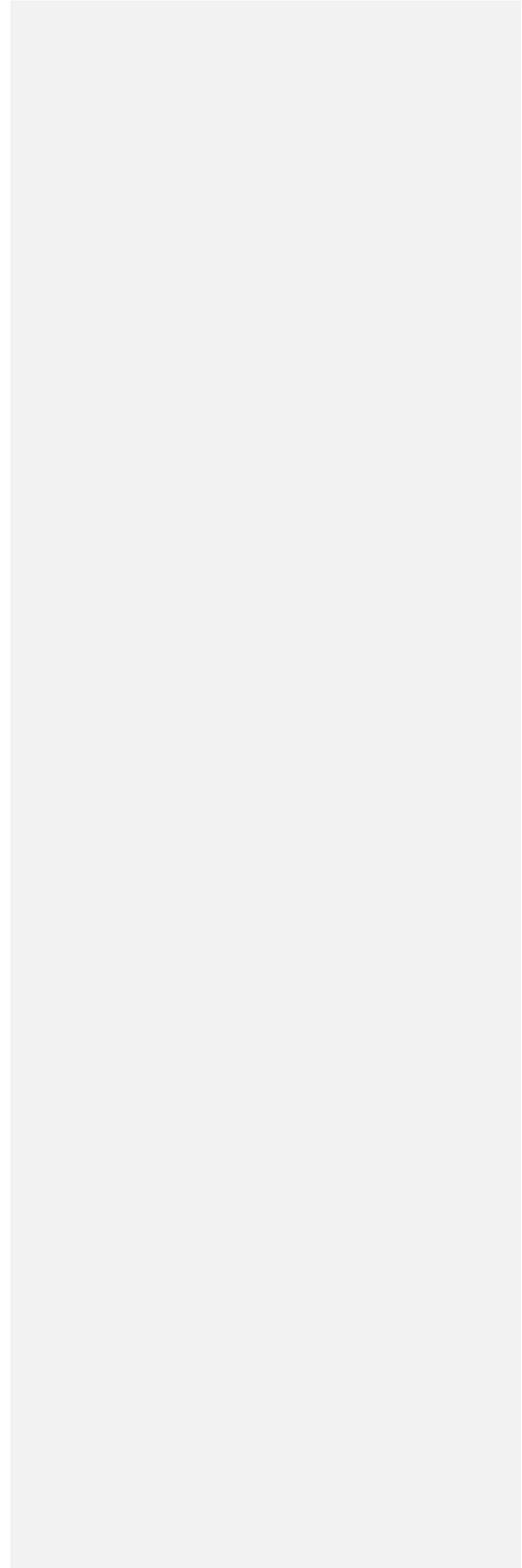
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*For my sister, Tonya. Your praise and encouragement have meant more
to me than you'll ever know.*



CHAPTER ONE

“The Doctor is dead.”

“Again?”

“Yeah.” I adjusted the Bluetooth in my ear so I could still hear my grandma, then grabbed the netted scoop next to my fish tank.

“Did you remember to feed him? I told you that you work too much at that job and then you come home exhausted. You forget to feed yourself, much less—”

“No.” I cut her off before she really got rolling on my lifestyle choices. “I fed him all the time.” The little goldfish floated on top of the water and I sighed as I removed him. Another one bites the dust.

“Then that’s your problem. You’re *overfeeding* him.”

“I thought fish were supposed to be easy to take care of,” I complained, flushing the corpse down the toilet. An ignominious end, but what was I supposed to do with a dead fish? Bury it in a tiny cardboard box? I’d have half a dozen minigraves in the backyard if I did that.

“They are,” Grandma assured me. “You’ll just have to try again.”

“You know, the whole reason I got a fish was that watching them and listening to the water bubbling in the tank was supposed to be relaxing. Instead, I’m stressing out even more about killing them.”

“They *are* relaxing to watch,” Grandma said. “You just haven’t got the hang of it, that’s all. You’ll catch on . . . though maybe you should ask for an old fish this time, one whose time is near. That way you’re not cutting a life too short.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“I’m just being realistic. Do they sell fish by age? I wonder how you tell how old a fish is?”

“No clue. Size maybe?”

“Then get a big one this time.”

###

I kept my grandma’s advice in mind as I perused the goldfish tank at my local pet store. They’d seen me come in a few times now and the employee loitering by the fish tanks was giving me the side eye.

“Having some trouble keeping the little suckers alive,” I said with a forced laugh. The guy didn’t smile, so I dropped my grin, too. Maybe he took fish lives way serious. I tried to look harmless, which wasn’t hard since I barely topped five two.

Pushing my glasses up my nose—a nervous habit I couldn’t break—I asked, “So can I get an old fish?”

“They’re all about the same,” he said, scooping up a random goldfish and depositing it inside a water-filled plastic bag. He tied off the bag and handed it to me. “Good luck.”

I paid and hurried outside, hugging my flannel shirt tighter over my T-shirt and wishing I’d thought to grab a coat when I left home. It was early October and the sun was shining—a gorgeous Sunday morning—but I was too skinny and perpetually cold.

My Ford Mustang shone in the sun, giving me the warm fuzzies and dissolving the twinge of guilt I had when I looked at the blissfully oblivious fish I carried. The car was my one indulgent

purchase when I'd graduated from MIT and gotten a job paying well into six figures. It was fully loaded, complete with a performance package.

I'd been stopped for speeding numerous times, but had yet to get an actual ticket. The cops usually took one look at me—short, bespectacled, unruly mass of hair yanked back in a ponytail—and snorted with laughter. The last time I was pulled over, the officer even asked if I had to use a phone book to see over the steering wheel. Smart-ass.

I appreciated the Men in Blue, but not always their sense of humor.

Sunday was Admin Day—the day of the week I reserved for administrative tasks like groceries, errands, laundry, bill paying, and talking to my grandma.

The cherry red of my Mustang gleaming in the far corner of the lot—furthest away from any other car—beckoned me. The purr of the engine was like an old friend greeting me, only this friend spoke in mechanics and gasoline, via tachometer and speedometer. Those signals were blessedly easy to read, as opposed to actual people with all their body language, obfuscations, doublespeak, and insinuations.

As was my routine, I stopped at Retread, the pop-vintage store that was on my way home. I'd been searching for a mint version of Van Halen's *5150* album and so far, nothing had come in. But there was always a chance one had shown up, or something else was just waiting to be discovered in the stacks the owner hadn't yet sorted. I could use eBay or search online, but finding it myself in a store was its own unique reward. Typing in Google's search box and clicking the Buy It Now button didn't offer the same kind of gratification.

"Hey, Buddy," I called out as I pushed open the door to the shop. A little bell clanged tunelessly as it bumped against the glass, announcing my arrival even if I hadn't spoken. But I always spoke anyway, just so he knew it was me.

A head poked out from behind a dilapidated bookcase toward the back of the shop. The shelves were bowed with the weight of books and records piled up, and I had serious doubts as to how much longer they would hold out.

“Hey, China. How’s it going?”

That’s me. China Mack. Well, not really. My name was China, which was weird enough, but my last name was fifteen letters long and unpronounceable by anyone who’d had the misfortune of having to attempt it. So I went by a shortened version of my middle name—Mackenzie. Thus, China Mack.

“The usual,” I said, wandering over to the “Just Arrived” section, though that was a misnomer. Buddy was so behind, there was stuff that had “Just Arrived” for more than six months now. It wasn’t really his fault. An acute case of ADHD meant Buddy was easily distracted. Kind of like when you start watching a YouTube video on how to repair your iPhone screen and end up two hours later bleary-eyed and watching a compilation video of cats falling off furniture set to the tune of “Flight of the Bumblebee.”

“No *5150* this week,” he said, disappearing again behind the bookcase. “But I got an absolutely pristine version of the Beatles’ *White Album*.”

I grimaced. “I’m an Elvis fan, not Beatles,” I reminded him, crouching down.

“I keep hoping to convert you.”

“Not gonna happen.” Hmm. I saw the corner of something that **looked** interesting, buried under about twenty other albums. Glad I didn’t care if my jeans got dirty.

“The Beatles were **groundbreaking musical geniuses**,” Buddy said, his voice slightly muffled from behind the bookcase.

“They were bubblegum pop who had lucky timing,” I shot back.

Commented [ST1]: AU: Consider changing this to either “might be interesting” or “looked interesting” for clarity. She’s looking at it and thinks it could be interesting.

Commented [ST2]: AU: Per CMOS 6.33, these are not coordinate adjectives, therefore no comma is used.

“I should bar you from my store for that.”

“Then you’d lose half your customers.” I grinned. The Elvis vs. Beatles argument was ongoing between us, with each of us making insults as to the other’s idol of choice.

Buddy grumbled as he worked, but I knew he got a kick out of our friendly rivalry as much as I did. And I wasn’t joking about the customers. How he kept the shop running, I had no idea. I didn’t even know if Buddy was his real name. He’d introduced himself as Buddy and the few people I’d seen come in the store called him that. I assumed it wasn’t his actual name. Who’d do that to a kid? Of course, I wasn’t one to talk. I’d taken a lot of crap over the years because of my name.

I pulled out the album that had caught my eye, grinning. A near-mint condition of Madonna’s *Like a Virgin* album. Sweet.

“Hey Buddy,” I called. “I’ll give you twenty bucks for *Like a Virgin*.”

“Fifty.”

“Twenty-five.”

“Done.”

Thrilled by my new acquisition, I set the album aside and moved farther into the store. I dug around the store every week and still hadn’t been through all the nooks, crannies, and crevices that were filled to the brim with old records, books, and various vintage paraphernalia.

I passed three boxes that held familiar clay figures. “Buddy, I told you to quit accepting Chia Pets. No one buys them.” I shook my head. Buddy could dicker over prices all day, but he couldn’t turn down free merchandise.

“They discontinued Chia Teddy Bear,” he said. “It’s rare.”

Commented [ST3]: AU: Consider eliminating either “LP” or “album,” as they are redundant. LP = long playing, vs. single.

“No, it’s not,” I absently told his disembodied voice. “They began reissuing it as Chia Bear in 2006.” I was distracted by a milk crate full of paperbacks, and crouched down. *Vintage Harlequins* . . . *cool!* My grandma had read them by the bucketful when I was little. She still did. She was going to be ecstatic at getting a box of these.

“How do you know this shit?”

I let out a girly scream and fell back onto my butt at the voice right next to me. Buddy had come out from behind the bookcase without me even noticing.

“You scared the crap out of me, Buddy!”

“Sorry,” he said, looking abashed. “Still, I don’t know how you know all the crap you do.” He shook his head and walked away as the bell on the door tinkled again.

I went back to pawing through the collection of romance novels. Yes, I had a really good memory for completely useless crap and anything to do with my work, but ask me to tell you last year’s Oscar nominees for Best Actress and I’d give you a blank look.

Whoever had dropped off the books had dug them out of a dust pile because they were coated in dirt and cobwebs. I brushed them off as I stacked them—**Silhouettes to one side, the Harlequins** on the other—grimacing at the layer of grime starting to coat my hands and clothes. My nose itched and I sneezed, then sneezed again.

“Bless you.”

Eyes watering, I glanced over to see a very nice pair of Italian leather shoes, which were at the end of long legs encased in black slacks. I looked up, then up farther to a leather belt and a button-down black-as-coal shirt of thick cotton. I swallowed, reluctantly lifting my eyes until my gaze fell on a familiar and wholly unwelcome face.

“Find something worth buying, China?” my boss asked.

Commented [ST4]: PM: A very small point: Harlequin purchased the Silhouette line from S&S in the early 80s. How vintage are these? Do we care that post 1984 this was the same publisher?

Commented [TS5R4]: STET please, but thank you for the research.

Oh shit oh shit oh shit.

Jackson Cooper owned the company where I worked and, for anyone else, seeing their boss outside of work wouldn't be a big deal. For me, it was a disaster of gargantuan proportions. Tall with eyes a deep, warm brown and chestnut hair, he had the intellectual stamina of a genius and prodigy rolled into one. Combined with the business acumen of a savant and the smoldering sexuality of Christian Grey, he was the epitome of every woman's fantasy man. Well, maybe not every woman, but definitely me.

Which meant, of course, that my limited social skills fled in his presence. At work, I could at least pretend to be occupied with my computer and keep my earbuds on when he walked by. Now, he was looking at me and talking to me and obviously expecting some sort of half-way-cogent response.

"Um, yeah" was the best I could come up with. I felt my face get hot and nervously shoved my glasses up my nose.

Jackson waited, apparently in the vain hope that I'd say more, but I just pressed my lips together and stared. It wasn't hard to stare at him. I did it all the time from the limited privacy of my cube.

"Okay then," he said, offering me a polite half smile. "Enjoy your books."

He walked past as I sat there on the floor, surrounded by paperback romances, their covers adorned with women and men in clinches and bodies half-naked as an invisible wind tore at their clothing.

Oh God. I wanted to die right then. He probably thought I was actually going to buy all these romance novels, which, who was I kidding, I probably would, but that wasn't the point. They were for my grandma, not me.

Commented [ST6]: AU: I suggest "on" to distinguish between earbuds and earphones. This slight discrepancy occurs multiple times in the book, so all instances would be adjusted.

Commented [TS7R6]: I'd prefer to switch to earbuds and use the verb "in" for all instances.

A moment later, I heard the door open again and Buddy call out a stammering “Bye. C-come again,” which meant Jackson had left. Buddy always *tried* to be friendly, but it usually just came across as awkward and vaguely creepy to people who didn’t know him.

“Did you see that?” Buddy asked when I set a stack of two dozen paperbacks on the counter.

“Yep,” I said.

“*The Jackson Cooper* was in my store.” Buddy’s voice was a mixture of awe and fear.

Everyone knew who Jackson was. And why wouldn’t they? He was a genius bazillionaire who looked like Brad Pitt circa 2000. Women practically killed each other in their rush to land him, and he’d made the *Forbes* Ten Most Eligible Billionaire Bachelors list. Twice.

He’d hacked into the NSA at fourteen and started working for secret government agencies by the time he was sixteen. By twenty-one, he was disillusioned (or so the rumors said) and left the government to start his own business in the private sector. And he’d done phenomenally well, creating a social media platform that hit huge. Which he then sold for top dollar.

With his new hundreds of millions, he’d founded Cysnet. Companies who couldn’t find anyone else to solve their tech problems came to Jackson. They were charged exorbitant rates, but got what they paid for—Jackson made sure of it. From the development of sci-fi tools such as flexible, paper-thin computers, to biotechnology and bridging the gap between computers and humans, Cysnet was on the cutting edge. Everyone knew Apple, of course—developers of the beloved iPhone and iPad devices. Apple was to Cysnet what Wile E. Coyote was to the Road Runner.

To work at Cysnet was an industry coup—it meant you were the best of the best. But it also demanded long hours and dedication to the job. I’d been approached by Cysnet as I was finishing up my degree at MIT. Even if they hadn’t dangled a jaw-dropping salary at me and the chance to move to Raleigh, North Carolina, which was one of the top-ten tech cities in the country, I

Commented [ST8]: AU: Per the Forbes website, it appears these lists are generally formatted without the possessive. Adjusted accordingly

would've jumped at the chance to work for them. Bragging rights alone were worth the fifty- to sixty-hour weeks I put in.

"I still can't believe you work for them," Buddy said, shaking his head as he rang me up. "It's so freaking cool. I bet you guys work on like supersecret stuff."

"Could tell ya, but then, well, you know the drill." I smiled and winked like it was a big secret, and it was (we weren't ever supposed to discuss what we worked on), but when it came down to it, I just worked long hours in a cube in front of a computer screen. Not exactly the stuff movies are made of.

Buddy rolled his eyes as I handed him my money. "Yeah, you're about as threatening as a miniature dachshund. I remember the time you screamed bloody murder because a spider was in one of the stacks."

"It wasn't just 'in the stack,'" I argued. "It *attacked* me, like *jumped out*"—I used my hands curved as claws to demonstrate—"and *landed* on me." I pawed the air like I was a cat. Buddy just looked at me. I dropped my arms in defeat. "It was a big spider."

He nodded the way one does when there's no point in arguing and handed me my change, then a paper bag overflowing with used Harlequins, plus the Madonna album. "See you next Sunday," he said.

"Bye, Buddy."

Back at home—my three-bedroom duplex in a complex that boasted nearly a hundred of them—I lugged everything inside. I carefully deposited The Doctor in his new home and watched him swim around as he inspected the sunken SpongeBob pineapple house and plastic scuba diver.

"Welcome home," I said to him. "I hope I don't kill you." Not exactly comforting words, but it wasn't like he could understand me.

Commented [NAP9]: Added for clarity, otherwise it may read as though the scuba diver is made of both plastic and pineapple. (An interesting image, for sure!)

I was behind on my schedule but had caught up by 7:00 p.m. Seven to ten was laundry time and I ironed in front of the television, watching classic reruns of *The Bionic Man*. Lee Majors had been quite the hottie in his day.

Since the autumn equinox had passed, it was officially a new season, requiring a different set of pajamas. I'd packed away my summer *Star Wars* pajamas (Tatooine and Boba Fett graphics) in favor of my fall *Star Wars* (Endor with Ewoks) pajamas. Hoth with tauntauns was reserved for the winter. (The only spring set I'd ever found had Naboo on them, with Queen Amidala and Anakin in a love clinch. Since I pretended the prequels didn't exist, I couldn't buy those.) I set a glass of water on my nightstand (on its coaster), checked my alarm clock, and climbed into bed at precisely ten thirty with a sigh of satisfaction.

I loved being on schedule and having everything exactly right and in its place. It gave me a warm, comforting feeling of being in control. I lived alone by choice because people were just too upsetting and taxing. They took a lot of effort. I got a little lonely sometimes, but it was okay.

Overall, my life was pretty close to perfect.

###

At exactly seven in the morning, I walked into Cysnet. Security required my ID badge and handprint scan before I was allowed through. Four armed guards manned the two entrances to the building and they weren't the friendly, chatty kind of guys. I always tried though.

"So . . . busy morning, right?" I asked, giving the one scrutinizing me a nervous smile. He didn't smile back.

"Backpack, please," he demanded, polite but no-nonsense. I hurriedly handed it over and waited as he pawed through, wincing slightly as he touched my carefully arranged things. Now I'd have to reorganize and straighten it.

Commented [ST10]: AU: A small point, but throughout the book she mainly wears jeans, T-shirts and long-sleeved shirts—no dress shirts/slacks that would need ironing/creasing, etc. If she irons her long-sleeved shirts (or all her clothing, even), it might be worth mentioning as one of her quirks.

Commented [ST11]: Per the Star Wars Encyclopedia (reference for licensees)

He handed it back and I fixed what he'd mussed before heading straight through the lobby to the set of glass stairs leading to the second floor where my cube was located. For about the thousandth time, I wished I could move to a different area. I sat right outside Jackson Cooper's office, which was nice sometimes when I was feeling—a certain way. I could watch him covertly and admire how very handsome he was, how broad his shoulders were, and how very nicely he filled out a pair of slacks.

But most of the time, he made me nervous, so I tried to block him out the best I could with my earphones and never-ending classic-rock playlists. Once I got into my coding, it was easy to forget where I was.

Stowing my backpack in the bottom drawer, I sat down and logged in. I checked out the project I'd been working on, grabbed my notebook, a Red Bull from the minifridge underneath my desk, and began.

I knew when it was ten o'clock because that's when my cubemate, Randall, rolled in. He was a night owl and liked to code long after everyone had gone home for the day, but the latest management would let him come in was ten in the morning. I pulled out one earbud and caught the package he tossed my way.

"Bacon-egg McMuffin with cheese," he said.

"Thanks." My stomach was growling since I hadn't yet eaten. Who could eat at the crack of dawn anyway? Maybe the same people who killed themselves at the gym before the sun rose, running miles on a treadmill or climbing endless stairs. Not my thing. "I'll get lunch."

Randall nodded, already sitting down and unwrapping one of his four sausage burritos. This was our normal routine. He'd grab breakfast—I'd spot him lunch. It worked out pretty well because by the time we were ready for lunch, I needed to stretch my legs.

Commented [ST12]: AU: As currently constructed, China is grabbing both her notebook and the Red Bull from the fridge. Revised to avoid that confusion.

Commented [ST13]: AU: See my earlier comment to distinguish between headphones and earbuds.

It was another hour and I was in midchorus of “Highway to Hell” when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I jumped, startled, spinning around in my chair to see who the hell hadn’t gone through protocol—i.e., step in front of my cube so I could see them.

It was Jackson Cooper.

My irritated reprimand died on my tongue and I yanked out my earbuds, hoping I didn’t have any McMuffin on my white I ♥♥ NNY T-shirt.

“Yes, sir?” I asked.

He opened his mouth to speak, then stopped and frowned, glancing down at me. I waited until my nerves couldn’t handle the suspense and I looked down. Nope. No crumbs.

“How can you sit like that?”

Oh. *That’s* what he was looking at. Okay, I did sit kind of weird, but I was short. I crossed my legs and sat on my feet, so my legs were in the chair, knees pointing to the side. Then I’d settle my Bluetooth keyboard on my lap and work.

“It’s, um, it’s fine for me,” I said, then hurriedly added, “but I could stop, if it’s like . . . against the rules, or something—” Were there rules for sitting? I’d read the employee handbook cover to cover and could recite most of it. I scanned my memory for anything that mentioned employee posture and came up empty.

“No, it’s fine,” he interrupted. “It was just a question. Listen, China, can you come into my office for a few minutes? I have something I’d like to discuss with you.”

My mouth was hanging open and I shut it with a snap. “Sure. Yeah.” I scrambled up from my chair—not the most graceful of moves—and grabbed my notebook. Looking around my desk, I didn’t see my pen. I shuffled some papers . . . nothing. Opened my drawer and peered inside . . . nothing. Stepped back and looked at the floor . . . nope.

Commented [ST14]: DES: Please ensure heart symbols are retained in final layout.

“What’s wrong?” Jackson asked.

“I can’t find my pen,” I said. Yes, I had other pens but I *liked* a certain one. Where the hell was it?

“You mean this one?”

I looked up in time to see him standing right next to me, reaching for my hair. I froze in place and felt the slide of metal as he pulled the pen from where it had been tucked behind my ear.

“Voila.” He smiled a crooked half grin which, combined with him being so close I could tell just exactly where the very top of my head met his shoulder, made my knees want to melt like Field’s metal stuck into a mug of boiling water.

I was mesmerized by his eyes. I didn’t think I’d ever stood this close to him before. He had cologne on—I could smell it. And he’d touched me . . . My eyes fluttered shut and I rocked forward slightly, inhaling the sweet aroma—and bumped my nose right into him.

“You okay?” he asked, grabbing my shoulder. My eyes flew open. “You’re not going to faint, are you? Did you stand up too fast?”

My face turned so red I could feel the heat radiating from my neck upward. “I’m fine. Sorry.” I snatched the pen from his hand. “Yeah, just stood up too fast.” I forced my lips to curve in a smile and shoved my glasses up my nose. He was going to think I was so bizarre.

Jackson looked quizzical for a moment, then turned and headed for his office. “Follow me,” he tossed over his shoulder, and I rushed to obey.

I felt eyes on me as I walked. Jackson usually only met with the managers, not the staff directly. I reported to a guy named Brad who happened to be on vacation this week. I supposed that was why I was heading into Jackson’s office instead of Brad. Whatever it was, it obviously couldn’t wait.

“Have a seat,” he said, gesturing to the seating arrangement in his office. His desk stood to one side, diagonal to the windows that lined the wall. A sofa and two chairs were arranged facing each other on the opposite side, which was where he’d pointed.

Okay then.

Sofa or chair . . . sofa or chair . . .

I stood in indecision, frantically going through the pros and cons of each seat inside my head. *The chair would be good but it faces the windows and there’s a glare. I’ll be squinting. Sofa is better but what if he sits beside me, then I’ll be craning my neck to see him and my feet won’t touch the floor. The other chair is in a better location but it’s higher than the sofa and if he sits on the sofa then I’ll be above him and that may be insulting since technically I’m not “above” him—*

“China,” he interrupted my train of thought, brushing past me and taking the chair I’d been leaning toward choosing. “Have a seat.”

That was a command. I could recognize the tone. So I plunked myself down in the nearest spot, which put me on the sofa. Except I’d misjudged the softness of the cushions and I sank, putting me even lower than I thought I’d be, as I faced him. I forced a smile.

“Cushy couch.”

Okay, that was something a teenager might say. Not a grown woman with degrees piled behind my name and several years of experience under my belt. My smile turned into a grimace. I started fiddling with my pen and shoved my glasses farther up my nose.

“Brad would usually be the one to hold this discussion,” he began, “but since he’s out of the office right now, I thought I’d handle it.”

Commented [ST15]: AU: Consider adding “interrupted my train of thought,” because she wasn’t having this dialogue out loud.

My palms began to sweat and I went cold. This sounded like the beginning of a conversation I wasn't going to like. I searched my brain, trying to think of what I could've done to bring about a disciplinary meeting with the CEO.

"If this is about that argument between me and Toby last week, then I want you to know it's resolved. He dinged my Mustang and refused to admit it, but when I had the paint samples compared, they totally matched."

Jackson gave me an odd look. Okay, that wasn't it then.

"And I'm not the one who keeps stealing Janine's Diet Coke from the fridge," I blurted. "It's Megan in accounting. I caught her but she swore me to secrecy because she saw me borrow one of Blake's Kit Kat bars that he keeps in the freezer." I took a breath. "*Borrow*'s not really the right word, I guess, since I ate it. But I did replace it the next day." I grimaced. "And ate it again. But I really am going to bring him more. I swear."

Still nothing. His eyes were a bit wider though. Surely that couldn't be a good sign?

"And I'm not the one that keeps adding *h-o-g* to Liam's nameplate." The guy's last name was *Hedge*. Really, he was just asking for that one.

"Or—"

"Stop!"

I clamped my lips shut.

Jackson cleared his throat. "While I appreciate your willingness to, um, clear your conscience . . ." he paused, "none of those things are why I brought you in here."

"Then why did you?"

"I was getting to that, before your impromptu confessional."

Oh. I shut up again.

“I had a project come in and need a programmer with certain skills,” he said. “You seem to be the only person on staff familiar with LISP.”

I was still processing the “need a programmer” part so my brain took longer than usual to catch up.

“LISP?” I asked. “Um, yeah. I went through a phase where I was studying the first programming languages. I learned FORTRAN and LISP. Not a lot of stuff being written in those nowadays, but it’s helpful to learn for maintenance purposes.” I shrugged. “Besides, I was bored.”

“You were bored,” Jackson echoed. I nodded. “And how old were you?”

“Thirteen.” Not every thirteen-year-old girl wanted to host sleepovers and paint their friends’ nails . . . Okay I *had* really wanted to have a sleepover, but the smell of fingernail polish gave me a headache. And since there was no one to have a sleepover *with*, I learned coding languages.

“I see.” He sat back in his chair and crossed his legs, one ankle resting on the opposite knee. My eyes were drawn to his shoes.

I had a thing for a really good pair of men’s shoes. Not to wear or anything—I wasn’t *that* weird—but I could appreciate the expense and quality of well-made leather footwear. And Jackson Cooper always wore nice shoes, polished to a gleaming shine. His clothing was almost always the same palette of gray or black pants paired with a button-down shirt, also in a gray or black. He never wore a tie, and his shoes were never the same two days in a row.

I could feel his gaze on me and I kept mine on his hand, which was draped on his ankle. His hands were large and looked strong, but weren’t roughened by manual labor. The fingers were long and tapered, almost like a pianist’s. Looking at them made my thoughts wander in an unprofessional direction and I hastily averted my eyes.

It was **nerve-racking**, being in here alone with him. I'd worshipped him from afar ever since he'd first made his name in tech. Yes, empirically speaking, he was closer to the Ten on a scale of One to Ten and I wasn't blind. But his main draw, at least in my opinion, was how smart he was. Compared to him, most of the population were just jabbering monkeys, myself included.

Whereas my hands had been cold, now they were clammy with sweat and I had to consciously stop myself from wiping my palms on my jeans. That would look really gross. I pushed my glasses up my nose instead and focused on Jackson's eyes rather than his body.

Oh geez. It felt wrong to even be *thinking* that word in reference to my boss. *Body* . . .

“. . . currently working on—the version upgrade for MTS—let's take you off that for now,” he was saying. I nodded like I'd been listening all along. “I'll e-mail you a brief of what I need and the project outline. You can look that over and we'll meet tomorrow to work out anything that needs clarification.”

Which was a really nice way of saying *anything I didn't understand*, because I had no doubt that I'd have to wade my way through what Jackson would view as a light bedtime story.

Jackson looked like he was waiting for an answer or some sign that I was comprehending the words coming out of his mouth.

“You betcha!” I blurted, then inwardly cringed at how ridiculous I sounded. I forced a smile that widened until my lips were sticking to my dry teeth. This time he didn't even bother with a polite perfunctory smile back. I couldn't blame him.

“Okay, thank you,” he said, rising to his feet and heading for his desk.

I was up and off the couch like a shot, or I would've been if the couch hadn't fought me. There was a gravitational pull of black-hole proportions and it wanted my ass to stay right there. After fumbling for a moment in the depths of the cushions, I struggled my way to my feet. I could feel

Commented [ST16]: M-W first preferred spelling

Jackson's eyes on me and my face burned, but I didn't dare look at him as I hightailed it back to my cube.

Only after I'd curled up in my usual semisquat in my chair did it hit me: I was going to be working side-by-side on a project with none other than Jackson Cooper.

Holy shitballs.