

S E C R E T S
of
H A R M O N Y
G R O V E

**MINDY STARNS
CLARK**



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ONE

❖ A large yellow Post-it Note clung to my office door, its message scrawled out in letters big enough to read from several feet away: *Sienna, Ric and Jon need to see you in Ric's office the minute you get in!!!* The note had been jotted in the familiar, artsy style of one of my copywriters, with multiple exclamation points added for emphasis. Obviously, my recent admonitions to her about nuance, subtlety, and the importance of avoiding overkill in her writing hadn't taken. Then again, maybe we could make an exception just this once. It really was a multiple-exclamation-point kind of day!

Juggling briefcase and laptop, I managed to open my office door and turn on the light before setting both in the nearest chair. I had flown from Philly to Boston first thing Monday morning, and now that I was back just a few days later, I couldn't help but grin as I thought about all I had managed to accomplish in such a short time. Judging by the exuberant note on the door, I had a feeling that news of my success in Boston had preceded my return. I had only been working here at Buzz for three weeks, but I had caught on right away that my bosses were very big on congratulating themselves. No doubt, I was being summoned by them now so they could hear the whole play-by-play directly from me and take credit for their cleverness in bringing me on board in the first place.

It would have been nice to share a quick cheer with my creative team first before heading to Ric's office, but at the moment it looked as though none of

them were around. Their desks were all empty; their cubicles quiet. Wondering where they could be, I made my way through the hall, suddenly realizing how empty and still the entire place was. Since the day I started at Buzz, it had been a constant beehive of activity, no pun intended. Now, however, all was oddly quiet, with more than half the staff simply missing. The few employees I passed as I headed down the hall didn't even look up or acknowledge me. Of course, I hadn't really been working here long enough to understand the rhythm of the office yet. Maybe something was different about Wednesday afternoons. Perhaps everyone went on flex time or worked from home.

Then again, I thought, there could be one other possible explanation. Maybe everyone *was* here but they were hiding in Ric's office, waiting to throw me a surprise party! Considering the size of the ad campaign I'd just landed, a celebration would certainly be in order. If that's what was really going on, I was pleased and flattered that they had thought of it—as long as it didn't drag on for too long. Now that Empower had green-lit our basic concepts, it was time for the real work to begin. With only a week to deliver on the next phase, my team and I didn't have much time to spare on frivolities.

As I approached the glass-and-mahogany desk of Ric's ridiculously gorgeous assistant, I was embarrassed to hear my stomach rumble. I hadn't taken the time to grab lunch between the airport and the office, and now I was starving. I could only hope that the festivities would include real food and not just a cake. If someone had thought to bring in little sandwiches or even a fruit platter, I was going to be one happy partygoer.

Pausing at the desk to wait for the woman to get off of the phone, I tugged again at my sleeve, glancing down to make sure it was covering my scars, and tried to keep my face expressionless. Just because I had figured out the party plans ahead of time didn't mean I needed to ruin their surprise.

I could tell she was wrapping up her conversation, and as I continued to wait I tried to remember her name, but all I could recall was that it had something to do with a hotel. What was it? Sheraton? Hyatt? Neither sounded right. I knew it would come to me sooner or later. One by one, I was determined to learn the names of everyone who worked here.

Whatever her name was, she was so beautiful that as I stood there waiting for her to finish her call, I couldn't help but compare my looks to hers.

Though I wasn't exactly unattractive, I was far more cute than pretty, with flyaway auburn hair that never wanted to behave, a heart-shaped face sprinkled with freckles, and youthful features that made me look a good ten years younger than I actually was. I always tried to make up for that with a very professional, grown-up wardrobe, but sometimes even that wasn't enough. Standing there next to this beauty queen, I felt like slinking away to the loser section and not even trying.

Finally, she hung up the phone and turned toward me, the expression on her face surprisingly glacial.

"You're *finally* here," she said, as if I had rudely and willfully kept a roomful of people waiting.

At first I thought she was kidding, but when I realized she wasn't, I couldn't imagine where her attitude had come from. My flight hadn't landed until 1:30 and I had come straight here from the airport. Besides, how could I be blamed for showing up late when I hadn't even known that people were waiting for me in the first place?

Before I could decide how to reply, she was on her feet and walking to Ric's office door, moving more smoothly and gracefully in four-inch heels than most women did in flats. She rapped once, opened it slightly, and leaned in to say something I couldn't quite hear. Then, after a moment, she stepped back and gestured for me to go on in myself. As I did, I decided that just for her icy disdain, her piece of cake would be the smallest one, without much icing. Then again, I realized, women who looked like her didn't eat cake. They just stood close and smelled it.

I told myself to act nonchalant as I swung the door wide and stepped inside. As soon as I did, though, my pretense evaporated. No group of excited coworkers was waiting to yell "Surprise!" This was no party at all. Instead, sitting inside the sleek, cavernous office/conference room were simply Ric and Jon, the brothers who owned the company.

"Thank you, Shiloh," Ric said as I stepped inside and she shut the door behind me.

Shiloh. That was it, of course, same as the hotel chain I sometimes used out West.

"Have a seat," Jon told me, his voice oddly flat.

Glancing from one serious face to the other, I was suddenly seven years old and coming to the principal's office for having put gum in Skippy O'Brien's hair. What was going on?

"I hope you weren't waiting long," I said. "Literally, I just got in."

Neither man replied, and a nervous flutter began to stir in the pit of my stomach. Buzz's two young directors were the epitome of metrosexual cool, the owners of the hottest up-and-coming advertising agency in Philadelphia. In the few weeks I had been working here, I had found their agency to be far more intense and high pressure than I had ever experienced, but at least a bit of ongoing levity usually lightened the mood. These two at the helm were often the most upbeat and witty of the bunch.

The mood of this room, however, was anything but light.

"We have a problem," Ric said as I sat in the passion red sculpted Lorenzo chair that was the focal point of his otherwise neutral-toned office. At my previous agency, Biddle & Sons, we hadn't had things like focal points. There, business was conducted and projects were executed amid piles of papers, mountains of discarded media equipment, and the cardboard-cutout detritus of decades of promotional campaigns.

"What's up, guys?" I asked, crossing my legs and trying to look comfortable in the oddly contoured chair. The first time I had ever met these two, they looked so much alike I assumed they were twins. With their precision haircuts and rectangular tortoiseshell glasses, they were almost identical despite the fact that Ric was older by several years.

The two men looked at each other, and for a moment I feared the worst, that the agency was about to declare bankruptcy or something. *Please, no, don't let it be that.* I hadn't even made the first mortgage payment on my new condo yet. If that's what was happening, mine would be one of the shortest, brightest, and ultimately saddest professional meteors ever to arc into oblivion across the Philadelphia sky. *Please, don't be that.*

"There's no easy way to say this, Sienna, so I'll just come right out with it. I'm sorry, but you're suspended. From work. Until further notice."

A bark of laughter escaped from my lips, so unexpected were his words. Suspended? Maybe I really *was* in the principal's office! What on earth was he talking about?

“I don’t understand,” I said. Was this some kind of joke?

“It has come to our attention that you are under investigation by the attorney general’s office. We’re not at liberty to say much more than that. Unfortunately, their investigation has had an impact on us and on our biz. Until we’re able to learn more about what’s going on, we’re afraid we can’t have you working here. I’m sure you can understand the difficult position we’re in.”

I exhaled slowly, wondering if that airplane had somehow brought me not to Philly but to the Twilight Zone instead.

“The attorney general? Of the United States?”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean? What is this about?”

“We don’t have a lot of details,” Ric said. “In fact, we were hoping you could tell us what’s going on, and maybe use this opportunity to explain things from your perspective.”

“My perspective?” I said slowly, looking from Jon to Ric and back again. “I don’t have a perspective. I don’t even know what you’re talking about. If there’s some kind of investigation going on, then surely the government has me confused with someone else.”

“No, trust me. They don’t.”

This was ridiculous. How could I be under investigation? And for what?

“Could it be that I have some unpaid parking tickets or something? Maybe I made a goof on my tax return? I assure you both, if the government has an issue with me that’s in any way my fault, I will clear it up immediately, even if I have to go to the attorney general himself. This is absurd.”

Both men simply sat there, their mouths tightly pursed as they studied me.

My mind was racing, but I truly couldn’t think of a single reason why Uncle Sam would have any interest in me whatsoever. My life outside of work, what there was of it, was extremely quiet. Except for my family, a few close friends, and the man I was dating, the only people I interacted with on a regular basis were the clients who trusted me with their advertising needs and the coworkers in this office whom I had barely yet had the chance to get to know.

“You guys need to back up a little bit,” I said, wishing one of them would say something, anything, to explain what was happening. “This doesn’t make any sense.”

Ric pulled the glasses from his face and carefully wiped them using the tail of his nonchalantly untucked Armani shirt. I had never seen the man wear a tie or jacket, but I had a feeling he spent more on clothes per month than my previous boss had per year.

“We can’t go into specifics here,” Ric told me. “Suffice it to say that we have learned that you are under investigation by the AG’s office and are suspected of illegal activities of a significant magnitude. I can’t tell you anything more than that. All I can say is that now that we know, we have no choice but to distance ourselves and our company from you before even more harm is done.”

“We discussed our options,” Jon added, watching his brother as he finished wiping his glasses and put them back on his face, “specifically of letting you go completely. But if it turns out you’re innocent, that wouldn’t be a wise move. So, after a lot of convo back and forth, we agreed to suspend you without pay until the sitch is resolved one way or the other. For now, we need you to get your things from your office, and the guard will escort you out to your car.”

“We should add,” Ric said, “that if you are exonerated by the government, you’ll be fully reinstated and the salary you missed will be paid in full.”

“What about Empower? I can’t leave them hanging.”

They had several ideas about how to handle that, none of them in any way acceptable considering that these were *my* clients, brought to this agency by me. I was so sure this government mess could be straightened out quickly that I begged them to let me contact the people in Boston to tell them I’d run into a “personal emergency” and ask for a small extension on next week’s deadline. Ric agreed to go the extension route, but only if he could make the phone call himself.

“Fine, as long as you do it right now, while I can hear what you say,” I replied.

Our negotiation reached, I gave him my contact’s name and number and then sat back and listened as he made the call. The man was smooth, I

would give him that. Within minutes it sounded as though he had the directors of Empower in the palm of his hand.

If I weren't careful, he just might end up romancing them right out from under me—which, I realized now, might have been his intention all along, his and his brother's. Maybe that had been their plan, to bring me here with the lure of big money, insinuate themselves with my biggest client, and then toss me out with some trumped-up charges that would likely disappear as soon as I did.

Was that what was really going on?

If so, then I had to wonder how it was that I found myself sitting across from these two schemers, they of the artfully absent consonants, who used words like “convo” and “sitch” as they cut me off at the knees. Talk about a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn! Had it really been just a month ago that they had finally wooed me over to their agency with an offer too good to refuse? The night I accepted, the three of us had toasted each other over tapas at Amada, smug at the knowledge that with their resources and my connections we would soon own the advertising in this town. Now it seemed as if I didn't even own the pencils that were in a cup on the desk in my office.

How could I have misjudged things so completely? I had always been a competitive person, driven to succeed in business and in life. Though I had celebrated numerous small victories while at Biddle & Sons, it was my biggest achievement that had caught the eye of the boys at Buzz, a wildly successful advertising campaign for Empower Sportswear for Women, based on a slogan and a marketing angle that had been mine from the start.

By jumping ship and coming over to Buzz, I wondered if I had let ambition cloud my better judgment and dollar signs obscure the truth. How ironic that my prize-winning slogan for Empower just happened to be “In It to Win It.” By wanting to win in business at any cost, I may have ended up destroying everything I had been working for all along.

“Extension granted,” Ric said, hanging up the phone and interrupting my thoughts. “But if things aren't cleared up by this time next week, I'm reassigning the account.”

His tone was final, as if I had now been dismissed. But I wasn't about

to just get up and walk out of there. I fought the good fight for another ten or fifteen minutes, begging for more information even as the two of them insisted that a suspension was their only option and that they couldn't tell me anything more than they already had. They remained aloof but firm the entire time, except when I questioned their motives, at which point they both seemed genuinely offended. Either they were two very good actors or this suspension wasn't about trying to steal my clients after all.

In the end there wasn't a thing I could do, especially once they asked Shiloh to summon the security guard. He must have been hovering just outside, because a moment later he appeared in the office doorway, arms folded across his beefy chest, waiting to walk me out. Though I hadn't done anything wrong, and I knew this was just some terrible mix-up that would soon be straightened out, I couldn't help but feel embarrassed as I glanced over at him, my cheeks burning with heat.

I stood and stiffly walked to the door, pausing there to look first at Ric and then at Jon, my eyes boring into each man in turn.

"I'm not going to waste any more breath on defending myself against charges that you won't even explain, but I will be speaking to my lawyer about this, and I can assure you that when this absurd mess is straightened out, you'll owe me more than mere back pay. You'll also owe me a massive apology and a full explanation of how you think it's acceptable to treat an employee—any employee—like this."

Turning back around, I marched toward my office, my shoes clicking rhythmically against the distressed faux-pine floor. If not for my new condo—not to mention my new car—I wouldn't have merely threatened them with a lawyer but would have, in fact, quit this job entirely. I dearly loved playing with the big boys, and my time at Buzz had already become a daily roller-coaster ride of career high points, but when push came to shove, they were shoving me out the door, and I didn't know if that was something I would ever be able to get past or not.

At least Ric and Jon had had the decency to give much of the staff the afternoon off. The few people I passed as I marched down the hall with the guard in my wake made a point of not looking my way, not even for a moment. In a sense, their discreet avoidance was almost more embarrassing

than if they had simply turned and stared, as I knew they all wanted to. To make matters worse, when I got to my office I saw that someone had put an empty cardboard box on top of my desk. Were they trying to insult me or be kind? Neither, I decided as I sat down and began opening drawers. They were simply being efficient. Everything at Buzz was all about efficient.

As the security guard watched silently from the doorway, I packed up all the personal items from my office. The whole process took only a few minutes, which wasn't surprising considering that I hadn't been there long enough to collect many things of a personal nature. That single, small cardboard box, once packed, was almost an embarrassment, really, as I couldn't help but compare it to the cases and cases of stuff I had carted out when leaving my ten-year stint at Biddle & Sons.

At least I had come into this job with my own laptop, so I wouldn't be computerless while this mess was being straightened out. It was still in its case on the chair, and once I was ready to go, the guard carried the box and two potted plants while I handled my briefcase and laptop.

We were silent when the elevator doors closed on the two of us and we rode down to the first floor alone. Once we stepped outside into the cool October air and began walking toward the lot half a block away, I wanted to say something, to tell this man that I hoped he knew this was all a big mistake, and that not only had I not done anything wrong, but I didn't even know what I was accused of doing. But I held my tongue. Why bother? Obviously, with these people I was guilty until proven innocent.

My mockingly shiny new Sebring practically glowed from its slot in the parking lot. We put the plants and cases in the front passenger seat, and then I popped the trunk and told him to set the box inside, next to the suitcase that was already there. I couldn't believe that just a short while before I had been wheeling that suitcase out of the airport, the return of the conquering hero. Now, as the guard simply turned and walked away, back toward the cold steel-and-glass skyscraper I had begun to think of as my new professional home, I couldn't help but feel like a military general who had been stripped of his stripes and left to slink from the parade grounds in shame.

Looking at the building, I let my eyes rove upward as I counted ten

floors. The blue-and puffy-clouded afternoon sky reflected from the modern structure, making it impossible to see inside at this time of day.

But I didn't need to see to know that there were at least two pairs of eyes looking down at me, probably more. I resisted the urge to wave—or to make any other hand gestures that came to mind—and instead simply got in my beautiful new car. Even as I gripped the smooth leather wheel, it was as if I could feel the grip on my identity slipping away.

Who was I, Sienna Collins, if not the rising young star, creative genius, and mastermind behind one of the most successful sportswear advertising campaigns since Nike's "Just Do It"? I had never had to ask myself that before, so consumed had I been with my stellar career in the ten years since graduating from college. Now it looked as if I might have to face that very question. The problem was, I already knew the answer.

If I wasn't that person—that star, that genius, that mastermind—I wasn't really anyone at all.