

~ A Little Something ~

by KG MacGregor

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Shannon spread her four drawings across Ellen's desk and walked around to stand beside her. "Is this what you had in mind for the story board? Because I have a couple more ideas if they don't work." Drawing a quiet breath, she inhaled the soft scent of Ellen's perfume. Generally speaking, Shannon didn't know one fragrance from another, but she had made it a point to identify this one. It was Shalimar, and it went for about three hundred dollars an ounce. She knew, because there was a tiny bottle in her desk, already gift-wrapped for a special occasion...perhaps even today, if she could get up the nerve to give it.

"Are you kidding?" Ellen opened her hands in obvious delight. "This is exactly what I was thinking."

Shannon smiled at the approval, though she was never surprised to get it from Ellen. She was perfectly attuned to Ellen's wavelength when it came to story boards. "You were pretty clear about what you wanted."

"At least you thought so. No one else here ever seems to listen the way you do," Ellen said, lowering her voice so it wouldn't carry into the hallway. Her frustrations with most of the agency's graphic artists were notorious.

Shannon loved it whenever Ellen pulled her onto her projects, and not just because it gave her a chance to work near her on a day-to-day basis. She felt she did her best work with Ellen, either because she was trying harder to impress, or simply because Ellen had better ideas than anyone else at the agency.

"Any thoughts on the cough medicine?" Shannon asked. The account in question was an over-the-counter pharmaceutical company, Ellen's specialty.

Ellen scrunched her nose. "I've tried a few things, but mucus is pretty disgusting, no matter how you try to dress it up."

"If there's a way to make phlegm sexy, I'm sure you'll find it." A broad smile was her reward. She started out and turned back. "Oh, Ellen...I just want to say..." *Good luck? Break a leg?* The entire office was giddy with anticipation about the staff meeting this afternoon where it was expected Ellen would be named to fill the newly-vacated position of creative director.

"I appreciate it," Ellen said sincerely, understanding the unspoken sentiment.

"I hope we'll still have lots of opportunities to work together."

"We will."

Shannon returned to her cubicle around the corner and sank into her chair, hoping her face wasn't as red as it felt. No matter how much time she spent in Ellen Faulk's company, she found it nearly impossible not to get flustered whenever they were close. The woman was just so...everything. Tall and slender, with thick auburn hair and eyes the color of jade, Ellen turned heads wherever she went.

But it was more than just her looks. Ellen was smart, and tough enough to compete with the sharks on Madison Avenue. In her ten years at Carl Harding & Associates, she had helped it grow from a small agency serving only local clients in Philadelphia to a major player vying for national accounts. But Shannon had glimpsed a soft, vulnerable side, one that Ellen effectively hid from those in the office. Shannon wished she knew more about that side.

She had been nursing this hopeless crush for over two years, since a business trip they had taken to San Diego. Something had clicked for her when she accidentally overheard the cell phone breakup between Ellen and her girlfriend. She had wanted so badly to say something to comfort her, but Ellen probably would have been mortified to know her secret was spilled. Coming out as a lesbian at a conservative agency like this one wasn't a good career move.

Shannon had been fascinated that week to discover her own attraction to women, though her secret obsession seemed to be focused only on Ellen. Unfortunately, it had nowhere to go-the agency had strict rules prohibiting personal relationships among employees. But that didn't stop Shannon's pendulum of bliss and torture whenever they teamed together on a project.

It was all Ellen could do to remember her name whenever Shannon Barlow walked into her office. That poor woman had no idea of the effect she had. She would probably run screaming into the night if she knew of Ellen's lascivious thoughts.

Shannon wasn't like most of the women that drew Ellen's interest. She was quiet and reserved, not at all the sort that shouted "look at me" everywhere she went. She had a wholesome nature, one that almost seemed out of place in the cutthroat business of advertising. As a graphic artist, she had a knack for teamwork, unlike those who took Ellen's ideas and bent them until they were unrecognizable just to prove their own creative prowess. It wasn't that Shannon lacked initiative or imagination; rather she saw herself as an extension of those in the creative department, an instrument in their toolbox. At least that's how she had explained it to Ellen when they teamed up to win the sleep aid contract. It was that sort of pragmatic synergy they needed to go past the latest crazes, ads designed more to dazzle the client than to sell their products.

Ellen did her best work when paired with Shannon, either because she was inspired to excel, or because Shannon executed her ideas better than anyone else. She had pleaded with Carl to set up permanent teams of people who worked well together, hoping to snag Shannon all for herself. But Carl thought it more effective to spread the talent throughout the organization. He argued that being exposed to the best would raise everyone's performance, but Ellen guessed it had more

to do with him not wanting to reward individual success. She had thought more than once about striking out on her own, maybe going back to Denver to be near her family in Colorado Springs. But now that her patience was finally paying off with a chance to move up, she would set her career sights on making partner someday at Carl Harding. And maybe as creative director, she could tap Shannon as her assistant, someone who could lead the other graphic artists by example.

Who was she kidding? What she mostly wanted from Shannon had nothing to do with her artistic talents, and everything to do with her gorgeous brown eyes and a smile that set Ellen's heart racing. With the company rules against dating, it hardly mattered that Shannon probably wasn't even interested in women.

At least fantasies didn't have restrictions.

Shannon slipped into the conference room, too late to grab a chair. But from her position against the wall, she had a full view of the room.

Ellen was sitting near the head of the table with the other associates, all smiles in advance of the big announcement. Her only real competition for the new job was Bryan Katz, an old-school campaigner with twenty-five years of ad experience, but nothing significant to his credit in the past three years.

Finally, Carl entered the room and took his position at the head of the table, grinning like the Cheshire Cat as he set up his announcement. One by one, he rained accolades on the associates, including Ellen, praising their greatest achievements and trumpeting their future in the firm.

Shannon grew increasingly uncomfortable as she observed the pattern. She didn't like that Carl had skipped over Bryan as he worked the room, as if saving him for last.

"...and so I know you'll join in me in congratulating our new creative director, Bryan Katz."

A shocked silence followed as staffers digested the news. Amazingly, Ellen was the first to react, and she did so by extending her hand across the table. "Congratulations, Bryan."

The room filled with the sounds of sucking up, as each of the stunned associates professed their loyalty and admiration to the new hierarchy. Shannon hung back while the other graphic artists and copy writers followed suit, finally leaning in to offer Bryan a simple pat on the shoulder.

"Thank you." Bryan went on to deliver a pep talk of sorts, words that were lost on Shannon. She was heartbroken at what this meant for Ellen, that she had been passed over for a promotion she clearly deserved.

Ellen had almost convinced herself this couldn't happen, that her performance and hard work

would be enough to overcome Carl's reservations. But when it came right down to it, it was apparent he couldn't look past the rumors about her personal life. And he hadn't seemed surprised or seriously disappointed when she followed him into his office and submitted her resignation.

As she emptied her desk of personal items, a soft knock sounded at her office door. The last thing she wanted was a plea from Bryan to hang on and be a part of his new team.

"Ellen?" Shannon peeked in. "Can I come in?"

"Sure," she answered, unable to keep the misery from her voice as she realized how much she would miss Shannon.

Shannon closed the door behind her, walked over and laid a small box on her desk.

"What's this?"

"Just a little something I picked up for you."

Ellen carefully unfolded the paper to find a small bottle of her favorite perfume. Even as a token gift, Shannon had dropped almost a hundred bucks on it. "Wow."

"It was supposed to say congratulations. Now it says you got screwed and everybody here knows it."

She closed her palm around the bottle, momentarily lost for words.

"I'm so sorry, Ellen. I can't imagine what Carl's thinking. Bryan isn't even in your league."

"Thanks." She sighed deeply and cleared her throat. Her secret didn't matter anymore, now that she was leaving. "There's a little more to this than meets the eye. You've probably heard all the rumors about my personal life. They happen to be true, and it appears that Carl has a problem with it."

If Shannon was surprised, she didn't show it. "I don't pay any attention to gossip. But I know you can run circles around Bryan, and that's what counts as far as I'm concerned."

"It doesn't count here, Shannon. I've done the best work of my life in the last two years, and for what? To work for Bryan?" She shook her head. "I just gave Carl my resignation."

"You're leaving?"

She nodded glumly. "I think it's time to see if I can make it on my own."

Shannon surprised her by standing up and walking around the desk. Twice she opened her mouth to speak, but stopped herself.

"It'll probably take me a while to-

"You're going to need a graphic artist."

"Unh...yeah. But I...I'll probably head back to Denver."

Shannon nodded thoughtfully. "Denver is nice."

Ellen shook her head. "I can't let you do that. What if I fall on my ass?"

"I'd rather take my chances with you than hang on here until Carl makes another bad decision and we all go under." She lowered her voice. "Besides, why would I want to give my best work to someone like Carl Harding when I could give it to you?"

She couldn't believe what Shannon was offering. Together, they could hit the ground running and compete right away for new contracts. If they kept their overhead low, two or three accounts would be enough to sustain them for a couple of years while they got their footing.

But there was still the matter of Ellen's personal feelings, and she had to come clean before allowing Shannon to make a commitment like this. "Look, there's one other thing you should know. Like I said, those rumors are true."

"I'm okay with that."

"And I'm a little...a lot, actually..." *Spill it, you big chicken.* "I find you sort of fascinating."

The words seemed to hang in the air for hours before Shannon finally spoke. "This new company of yours... Is it going to have rules against personal relationships?"

Ellen couldn't read her reaction, and decided to play it safe. "It will if you want it to."

"I don't," she said, her face reddening. "But we're going to be pretty busy for awhile getting things up and running."

"Definitely." Her heart pounded as she digested Shannon's reaction. "We'll need to find some office space...some computers and equipment. And I guess we'll have to hire a secretary and a copy writer."

"I can help with all of that." Shannon's voice was shaking, as though the magnitude of her decision was hitting her all at once. "How soon are we going to make this move?"

"Are you really sure you're up for it? This is a big step."

"I'm sticking with you, Ellen...if you're sure you want me."

Ellen had several answers for that. "I'm absolutely positive. I think we'll make a hell of a team."

"So do I." Shannon smiled nervously and started for the door. "I guess I should go resign."

As the door closed, Ellen opened her palm again and smiled. *She knows my perfume.* She twirled twice in her chair, catching the desk on the third pass. Shannon hadn't actually said yes to anything but working together. But she hadn't run screaming either.

Goodbye, Philadelphia. Hello, Denver.

Shannon said it over and over in her head as she typed her resignation. She kept the letter simple, free of the anger she felt for how Ellen had been treated. She was pursuing other opportunities.

With a woman who finds me sort of fascinating.

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