

“How could it be worse? I’ll tell you how. I’ve been out of work for six months, doing assignments for peanuts. I even spent a month waiting tables at Bernardo’s. Can you imagine how degrading that was for me?”

“I’m truly sorry you’re having a hard time of it, but I can’t take you back. You’ve just got to keep looking until you find the right opportunity. You can’t be totally out of money. I gave you a generous severance package.”

“Generous. You call two months generous? And, yes, I’m practically out of money. I’ve got bills. You can’t go out for a job looking like a bum. I couldn’t keep up my payments at Spartacus, but I had to have a gym. All that costs money.”

“I’m glad you’re still working out. Now, if you don’t have anything new to show me, it’s time for you to leave.”

“I do have one new thing to show you.” Troy stepped back from the table. He hesitated for a second, then pulled a handgun from behind his back.

“What! Are you crazy? That’s not real, is it?” Gloria said, starting toward Hyder.

“Stop right there. You’re damn straight it’s real.”

Gloria took another step holding out her hand. “Give it to me before I take that away from you.”

Troy stepped away from her. “That’s pretty tough talk for someone who’s looking down the wrong side of the barrel.”

Gloria dropped her arm. “Seriously, Troy. Get a grip. You’re way out of your league. Go home and I’ll forget all about this visit.” She walked back to the dining table and opened her handbag. “Here. Let me give you a loan.”

Troy lowered the gun somewhat. “Not good enough. I don’t want a loan. I don’t even want my job back.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I thought you’d be happy to see me,” he said. “That it would be like old times. I even brought the kind of condom you like.” He pulled a packaged condom out of his pocket.

“Why the gun, then?”

“It gives me choices...like I not the one who always gets the shaft.”

“Okay. I get it.” Gloria sat down on her sofa. She hoped acting calm would be contagious.

Troy raised the gun. “Bull! You’ll never get it. And, who told you to sit down?”

She stood up. “I thought we were having a conversation and that it would be okay to sit down.”

“Well, it’s not. Now put your hands in the air.”

She hesitated. What should she do? “Don’t be silly. I’m not going to do anything.”

He motioned at her with the gun. “Raise them.”

She complied.

“That’s better,” he said. “A minute ago you threatened to take the gun away from me. Go ahead try it.”

“Please don’t talk like that, Troy. It scares me. I didn’t really think I was strong enough to take your gun away.”

“You’re damn right.”

“So, put the gun down and let’s talk about how you can get a job. Have you talked to Ben Hendricks?”

He lowered the gun a bit. “The last time I checked, he was still waiting for the letter of recommendation you promised to write.”

Gloria blanched. He was right. She’d never sent off the recommendation she’d promised to write for him. “I’ll write the letter first thing in the morning. It’s not too late.”

“You’re wrong. It’s way too late.”

Gloria lowered her arms. “Common Troy. Be reasonable.”

“I’m tired of arguing with you. Now lie down on the floor.”

## Making the Grade© by Peter G. Pollak

Prologue: 9:45 P.M., Sunday, September 24, Menands, New York

The front door buzzer startled Gloria. Don't tell me he's come back, she said to herself. She looked up at the clock. She hadn't finished preparing for her upcoming board of director's meeting scheduled for Monday and it was almost ten. She sighed, walked to the front door and hit the intercom button.

"Who is it?"

"It's Troy. Troy Hyder. I know it's late. I have some information that you ought to see."

*Just what I don't need.* "About what?"

"The First Albany account."

What information? What was he up to? "What about it?"

"Why we lost money on it. I've got the numbers. Do you want to see them?"

Gloria hesitated. She had avoided Troy's calls for days, but maybe he had something she ought to see. Almost a year ago her company, The Tricando Agency, had started losing money on three major accounts that had always been profitable. Troy Hyder had been account manager on two of them.

"Okay, but you'll have to make it quick," she said opening the multiple locks to her front door.

She stepped aside to let him in. "You look like shit," she told him. He was wearing jeans, a wrinkled golf shirt and a jacket that looked too heavy for the warm September evening. His hair was uncombed and he clearly hadn't shaved in several days.

She'd fired him when he couldn't explain away the problems with his accounts, despite the fact that he'd been her lover for a short time in addition to being one of her operations managers.

"I haven't been sleeping well," he replied. When she first met him, she had been attracted to his casual good looks and bold, reckless style. After a while, she lost confidence in his judgment.

"You, on the other hand, look hot," he told her.

Not expecting company, Gloria had forgotten she was wearing gym shorts and a sleeveless tee. But she wasn't worried. She had always been able to control him. That's probably why she tired of him.

"Let's see what you have," she said, motioning him into the dining room.

"I'm thirsty. Do you have anything cold in the fridge?"

"Help yourself," she answered, "You know where the kitchen is, but leave those papers with me."

Troy gave her a folder and went into the kitchen. He was back in a few minutes pulling on a bottle of imported beer.

"Nice stuff," he said saluting her with the bottle.

"What's so special about this information? Haven't we gone over this already?"

"Maybe," Troy answered. "But, let me show you."

Gloria moved aside. Troy shuffled the papers and began to tell her how they'd under-bid on a particular First Albany ad campaign. "I knew that it would be tight, but I also knew how much you wanted the account...and I thought we'd make it up on extras down the road."

"I already had the account in my hip pocket," Gloria said, getting heated. "You didn't need to underbid. We've been over this before, Troy. You're not telling me anything new."

"You still don't understand," he said. "You made it seem like we'd lose the account if we priced it too high."

"No, you're the one who doesn't understand. You're all over the place. One day you're the client's best friend, the next day you think he's a jerk. The same thing at the office. People couldn't count on you because they didn't know whether to trust you or not."

"I thought I was doing what you wanted, and what happens? You fire me," Troy stated, his voice rising with frustration.

"Face it, Troy. You had risen beyond your level of competence. If I kept you on, things would have only gotten worse. As it is, I'm still struggling to get back into the black."