

Making the Grade
A Novel
by
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Prologue: 9:45 P.M., Sunday, September 24, 2000, Menands, New York

The front door buzzer startled Gloria. *Don't tell me he's come back.* She looked at the kitchen clock. She hadn't finished preparing for her upcoming board of director's meeting scheduled for the following afternoon and it was almost ten. She sighed, walked to the front door. She was about to open it, but hesitated and hit the intercom instead.

"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. About a year ago, her company had started losing money on several major accounts that had always been profitable. Troy 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. 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 hadn't shaved in several days.

"You look like shit," she told him.

When he couldn't explain the problems with his accounts she'd fired him despite the fact that he'd been her lover for a short time.

He brushed back his hair. "I haven't been sleeping well."

When she first met him, Gloria had been attracted to his casual good looks and bold, reckless style. In time, she lost confidence in his judgment. "You, on the other hand, look hot," he told her.

Gloria was wearing gym shorts and a sleeveless tee without a bra. 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.

"Thanks," he said saluting her with the bottle.

"So, 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 under-bid. 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 were all over the place. One day you were the client's friend, the next day you called him 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'd kept you on, things

would have only gotten worse. As it is, I'm still struggling to get back into the black."

"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 fell behind in 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."

Troy stepped back from the table. "I do have one new thing to show you." 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 him.

"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, but kept the gun aimed at her face. "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 room table and opened her handbag. "Here. Let me give you a loan."

Troy lowered the gun. "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'm not the one who always gets the shaft."

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

Troy raised the gun. "Bull! You don't 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—"

"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. She studied his face. *Why hadn't she seen this could happen?*

"A minute ago you threatened to take the gun away from me," Troy said. "Go ahead try it."

Her arms were getting tired. "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 to—"

"You're wrong. It's way too late."

Gloria lowered her arms. "C'mon Troy. Be reasonable."

"I'm tired of arguing with you. Now lie down on the floor."

She felt a knot of fear in her stomach. "Troy, please don't do this." How could she make him

stop playing this stupid game?

"Do it!" he said menacing her with the gun.

She slid onto the floor. What choice did she have? The neighbors were too far away to hear her scream.

Troy pulled one of her arms behind her. She felt him tie a piece of rope around her wrist, then tie both wrists together.

The rope cut into her skin. "That's too tight."

"Shut up." He tightened the knot.

"Troy," she moaned. "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Please stop."

Troy took a roll of duct tape out of his jacket. He pulled off a long strip, rolled Gloria onto her side and secured it across her mouth.

He stood over her. "Now, I don't have to hear any more of your bullshit."

She started to cry. She'd never been so afraid in her life.

She watched him tie her legs together with another strand of rope and drag her toward her bedroom, letting her head bounce on the hardwood floor. She tried to kick him but his grip was too strong.

When they got into the bedroom, he lifted her up, threw her face down on the bed.

She couldn't believe what was happening to her. He stood over her taunting. "You're not such hot shit now are you? Now I'm calling the shots."

Tears were streaming down Gloria's face. The back of her head ached. *Dear God. Make him stop.* She'd forgive him if he'd only stop hurting her.

"I guess this condom is going to get used after all," she heard him say. He untied her legs and yanked down her shorts.

Oh my God. He's going to rape me. The tape started to come loose on one side of her mouth. "You're going to pay for this," she screamed at him.

Pain exploded in her head as he struck her with the gun.

"Please. Stop," she whimpered through the pain.

Ten minutes later, Troy rolled off Gloria's back, his passion spent. He couldn't tell if she was conscious. It didn't matter. After a minute he got up and looked for some tissues to wrap the condom in. He knew he couldn't leave it there.

He had to make what he was about to do look like a burglary. Putting on the pair of rubber gloves that he'd brought with him, he emptied Gloria's pocketbook out on the table. He stuffed the cash and credit cards into his pocket.

He'd have to take the beer bottle with him. Burglars didn't stop to drink a beer.

He wiped the refrigerator handle with a damp paper towel and put that in the bag with the condom and beer bottle.

Okay. It's time. He went back into the bedroom. There was a jewelry box on the dresser. He'd take that also. But, now it was time to do what had to be done. She'd given him no choice. She had to pay. She was the first, but there were two others on his list. They wouldn't get away with what they'd done to him either.

He unsheathed the hunting knife he'd taped to his leg. He tossed it from hand to hand, admiring the blade that he'd cleaned and sharpened earlier in the day.

He leaned over the bed and whispered into her ear. "You're finally going to get what you deserve bitch."