



*Reluctant Press* presents:

# Pinnacle Of Success

Laura Sexton



ILLUSTRATIONS BY C. PAGANI

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**A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL**

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# Pinnacle Of Success

By Laura Sexton

On Thursday Trudi had a nervous breakdown. On Friday she came to work wearing a flax-colored robe and sandals and put her keys on her desk, turned around, and left Pinnacle Enterprises, presumably forever.

I didn't learn about any of this until Monday morning, when Angie called. "Have you found a new job yet?" she asked brightly. Too brightly, I thought.

"I've got a bunch of ads circled and I was just getting ready to pound the pavement," I said.

"Would you be willing to come back?"

"Why?"

I had been working for Pinnacle Enterprises for six months on a temporary basis, first as a data entry operator, but gradually making myself more and more valuable to Trudi, who saw herself as the office manager. She began referring to me as her personal assistant. However, when Jack decided he needed to make some cuts, one of those cuts was me. And Trudi had done nothing on my behalf. It had been Angie, Barb, and Callie who tried to keep my job.

Ironically, Trudi lasted less than two weeks without my help. Typical. She had great ideas but no implementation. And once she realized she couldn't follow through with them, she fled. It didn't really surprise me.

I had been lucky to get on in the first place. Jack's idea of EOE had been to hire cute, bubbly women under thirty for the office and men and minorities for the warehouse. As he could find no other cute, bubbly women under thirty willing to work for the crappy wage he was offering for a two week assignment, I got the job, much to his dismay. When I finished my original task (in less than two weeks), Barb found something else for me to do. And then Angie realized she needed help

with a project. And then finally, Trudi got into the act and batted her eyelashes at Jack in order to keep me on – like a pet.

“You’re the only one who can do Trudi’s job.”

“Gosh,” I said, “I’m flattered. But I’m not going back to work at Pinnacle for the sole purpose of teaching some cute chick how to do the job so Jack can get rid of me again.”

“Oh gee,” she said, in mock surprise, “You’ve figured us out.”

In retrospect, working at Pinnacle had been a mistake. I had no health benefits, no vacation or sick time, and had been paid barely enough for me to pay rent and the minimum on my credit cards. I lived on beans and rice, and even though I had signed for unemployment, I hadn’t gotten paid for that first week out of work. If they wanted me back, they would have to pay.

“I want \$20 an hour and guarantee of a month’s work.”

There was silence at the other end. “Oh my,” Angie finally said. “I’m not sure Jack will agree to that.”

“I was let go without notice the last time I worked there. If you want me back, it’s going to cost you.”

“I’ll have to get back to you.”

“Don’t wait too long,” I said. “I’ve got fifteen minutes to catch the next bus, so you have ten minutes before I leave.”

“I’ll call you in five.”

It took two minutes to agree to \$16 an hour with a four-week contract. That was exactly twice what I had been making. I hopped the bus and arrived at precisely ten-thirty. I said hello to Callie, who was sitting at the reception desk in the outer office. I entered the second office and plopped myself down at Trudi’s desk.

“Oh,” said Barb, when she saw me enter the office, with a fluttering of her lashes, “I do believe Greg has come to save us.”

I was about to say, “Yeah, right,” but I had always been good with impressions, and Trudi had been a relatively easy one to do for me. Not the pitch; that was too high for my voice, but the cadence, rhythm, and word choices. She had more stock phrases than Captain Kirk.

So I made the Trudi arm movements (she pointed, gestured, and waved her hands when she talked) and said in my best Trudi voice, “Let me tell you how it is. I’m not going to tell you exactly how to fix this situation, but it can be fixed.” It had always been Trudi’s habit never to divulge the necessary information after making one of her grand pronouncements.

Even as the two women laughed, Jack came out of the room with a paper in his hand. “Is Trudi back?” he said, before noticing me. I saw him deflate visibly. “Oh. Hello, Greg.”

“Hi Jack,” I said in my own voice. “Is that my contract?”

He thrust it at me with little relish. Until that moment I had tried not to think of him as an idiot, but the obvious disgust he showed at my being here and helping to save his ass proved to me what a fool the man was. If it hadn't been for the girls in the office and his warehouse manager, I was sure the company wouldn't make it.

I read over the paper, signed both copies, and handed one back to Jack. "It's a pleasure doing business with you," I said, giving him my biggest fake smile. He scowled, and returned to his office.

I turned my attention back to the girls. While it was fun doing impersonations of Trudi, she had absolutely no sense of humor. I had to pick my spots: those times when Trudi was out of the office, that one occasion we went to the bar after work, the weekend I helped Barb move.

Now I could play as much as I wanted. "I don't mean to intrude," I said, gesturing toward Barb and Angie with my wrist flopping and all four fingers pointing, "But..." using the pause that signified that whatever followed would mean trouble.

"But it would make so much more sense if you rearranged the furniture to put the filing cabinets over there and the copier against that wall."

Barb and Angie looked at each other. "Wow," said Barb. "That does make sense. I wish the real Trudi could make well-thought-out suggestions like that."

"She was the one who wanted the copier where it is in the first place."

"Then it's settled," I said in Trudi's voice, then "Let's do it," in my own. I went to fetch the hand truck from the back room. I moved the filing cabinets and the copier. When I finished, we agreed that things were much more efficient. I made a big show of brushing off my hands, then went back to work.

I booted up Trudi's computer and tried to figure out what had driven her away. I knew that she had been appalled at how often our sorry-ass vending machines had broken down. One of my projects had been to research the cost and availability of replacement machines. I had also researched alternative snack food choices for our ever-changing clientele. Vegetarians, lo-carb dieters, diabetics: you couldn't just sell Snickers bars and Doritos any more.

However, none of my research ever made it to Jack. This is what made me suspicious. I half-suspected she was amassing the information in order to start her own company, but hearing about the abrupt nature of her leaving the company made even less sense.

I discovered to my relief that not only had Trudi not bothered to change her passwords, but it had taken less than two weeks for her to screw up my whole system. The extent of her disorganization was incredible. Hard copy, computer files: nothing made sense.

It did make perfect sense. Trudi lived by the philosophy that good-looking people were perceived as being more competent. Consequently she spent more time (and money) on her looks than she did on work. Expensive suits, makeup, trips to

various salons and spas (nail, hair, face, skin), and constantly looking into the mirror to make sure everything was still perfect.

Then there was the stuff she kept in her drawers. She had lipstick, lip gloss, and nail polish in one drawer, hairspray and more cosmetics in the top side drawer, two pair of pumps in the bottom drawer, (one black, one navy), a spare blouse in a locker, and a bag full of purchases from Victoria's Secret with the receipt dated from the day before she had quit. There were panties, stockings, a bra, and some body lotion. Still spending to the end, I thought. I began to have second thoughts about her reasons for leaving.

It was about four thirty when I reached the end of my tether. Everybody else was getting that antsy ready-to-leave look, but I had a few hours to make up if I wanted to get my forty in. And believe you me; I wanted those extra two hours, especially since it was Jack who had to pay for them.

With this in mind, I decided to kill a few minutes before the girls left. So I reached into Trudi's desk and pulled out her compact and lipstick, then struck a pose with me appearing to peer at my reflection with the lipstick poised at my lips (not that I would actually apply any) and waited for them to notice.

It took about five minutes. Rather than stare at my ugly mug, I turned the compact so I could watch them. When Angie glanced in my direction she did a double take, then began whooping. Barb turned to her with a "What?" while Angie pointed in my direction. When Barb looked at me, she also broke up.

I put the lipstick and mirror away. "It's about time you two noticed. I was getting a cramp keeping that position."

Angie said, "When I looked your way, I swore I saw Trudi sitting there. It was the pose. She was always looking at herself and touching up her lipstick."

"Let me tell you something," I said in Trudi's voice. "Looks are important. Don't let anyone tell you different. Looks are what get you through the door."

Both of them rolled their eyes.

At five on the dot the place emptied out. Jack was first, followed quickly by Barb and Angie, with Cassie staying until ten after. Although I intended to stay until six or six thirty, I barely lasted until twenty minutes after five. I shut off the computer, turned off the lights, made sure all the doors and windows were secured, set the alarm, and used Trudi's keys to lock the front door. I started across the parking lot to the bus stop when I noticed Trudi's car sitting in her parking spot. I stopped. Trudi had a nice car. It was a very nice car. A late model silver Beemer two-seater, convertible, with top end stereo. I rode in it once. That had been a mistake. Trudi had told me how much it cost.

I had the car keys in my hand. I also had her house keys, as well as numerous other keys on her key chain (with the Super Bitch fob thing). I stood there, looking at the car, thinking of how she had dropped a mess right into my lap when she ran away. I should take the car, I thought. That would serve her right.

Even though that would not be the right thing to do, my mind kept coming up with reasons why I should. I finally settled on: the car was not safe where it was. It could get vandalized or stolen if left in the parking lot overnight. But then, my apartment wasn't much better. Trudi's house at least had a garage. I could drop the car off there and take the bus back to my place. If I could remember where she lived.

Like everybody in the office, I had been invited to her housewarming party last month. However, that didn't mean I knew how to get there. Although the #14 bus stopped three blocks from her house, that didn't help much in trying to drive there. As anyone who doesn't drive knows, street memories for the walkers and cyclists are different from people with cars. There are bike paths to follow, one-way streets, no left turns, and short cuts through subdivisions. And bus riders don't pay attention to routes as much as they do stops.

I found myself walking to the car and unlocking the door before I was conscious of what I was doing. I mean, the BMW really wasn't safe there, and it had nothing to do with how Trudi had acted toward me. I was doing her a favor. Being a nice guy. It would take me far longer to get home than I normally would if I had merely left the car where it was and took the #14.

It was nearly six-thirty when I found her place, and put the car into the garage. The car had more power than what I was used to and I hadn't been driving much in the last year and a half. I only stalled it four times and squealed the tires three times. But other than that, and the fact I got lost more than once, everything went well.

It was then, standing in the garage with the GDO light on, that I realized I had to either go into her house or open and then shut the garage door again and sneak out before it closed. The decision was made for me. I had to go to the bathroom. Bad. I unlocked the door, found the inside light switch and tried to recall the location of the half-bath on the first floor. I was dancing in my pants by the time I finally figured it out and got the door open, the light flicked on, and lifted the seat with my foot while I fumbled with my zipper.

Before I finished, I felt the rumbling of my stomach. It was pretty insistent, all the more so because I hadn't eaten in nine hours. I wondered what Trudi kept in her fridge and considered that all I had to eat at home was rice, beans, and Ramen noodles. The thought of having to make something from that combination yet again was making me sick.

Telling myself that all her perishables would be going to waste anyway, I went into the kitchen. It was a mess. Dishes were piled up in the sink, with the dishwasher full of more dirty dishes. Most of the grime had been caked on. I opened the refrigerator door and found some Chinese takeout, as well as a bowl of chicken. I heated it up, and while I waited, looked once again at the mess in the kitchen.

I figured, that as long as I was going to be eating her food, I might as well clean up her mess. It was the least I could do. Actually, I wanted an excuse to stay there as long as possible. I soaked the dishes in the sink and ran the dishwasher on the

longest setting while I grabbed some milk due to expire in a couple days, and took the food to the big screen TV in the living room.

As I sat eating her food and watching her television, I was busy coming up with rationalizations for staying. At least I would have to stay until the dishes were washed and put away. But that would only kill an hour or two. I wanted to spend the night in a place like this. Hell, I wanted to live here. Just the thought of returning to my crappy studio apartment with the faulty shower head and cheap secondhand furniture, the television that only got half the broadcast stations clearly, the neighbors who were either fighting or fucking, and my futon that was about ready to fall apart, made me depressed. Worse, it would take at least an hour to get there by bus. Here the shower worked (as well as the Jacuzzi), there was cable television, nice comfy beds, a computer with DSL, and all the amenities I couldn't afford. And Trudi wasn't coming back. At least not tonight. I was almost certain of it.

After I finished eating and took out the garbage (I wondered what that smell was), I toured the place, rationalizing that I had to make sure that Trudi wasn't lying dead on her bed, with a misspelled suicide note and empty bottle of sleeping pills on the nightstand next to her, even though I knew Trudi wasn't the type to do herself in, unless it was to spite a lover. Giving up and joining a cult or commune; I'd believe that, but not killing herself.

Trudi lived in Phase I of an urban development that consisted of townhouses set in one block arranged on opposite streets, with the garages opening up to an alley between the homes. Each home was narrow, only as wide as a two-car garage and back doorway would allow. According to Trudi, the homes were 75% sold.

On the next block, Phase II had begun, with designs for condominiums set over a parking garage with boutiques and shops at street level, creating a community in what had been an industrial area. Once that building was finished they would close the street between the two phases and put in a clubhouse and pool.

I had learned that the townhouses followed similar plans. The living room, kitchen, dining room, and office/nook were on the main floor, with a front yard that consisted of a square of lawn and circle of flowers next to the steps that led to the front porch. The upstairs could be partitioned however the homeowner wished. I remembered Trudi telling us about it during one of the tours.

"The model home had dual master bedrooms and baths. I was thinking of doing that, but then I thought, why share? I don't need a roommate. And I certainly didn't want the family plan. That's three bedrooms and two baths, if you didn't know. But let me tell you, when they said I could turn the upstairs into a loft, that was exactly what I wanted. It opens up the whole front of the house and gives me a bigger walk-in closet and master bedroom. I mean, why not pamper myself?"

Trudi had further explained that if she needed more bedrooms, she could always convert the master bedroom into two smaller bedrooms or enclose the loft, converting that space into a small bedroom (she kept a futon couch there now for the occasional guest, she explained). She could even turn her office into a small



bedroom, and if she was really desperate, there was space in the basement that could be converted. She already had a half-bath there, with the plumbing setup should she want to put in a tub.

At present however, the place was a mess. She had dirty clothes lying all over the place. I began picking them up and sticking them into the already full hamper. Everything was there: panties, bras, blouses, slacks, jeans, skirts, dresses, towels, socks, and a blanket. I didn't know why I was cleaning up after her, but I felt I had to. I couldn't stand to see such a nice place turned into a pigsty.

By the time I started picking up after her, I had already decided I would stay there that night. I had no desire to catch the bus back to my place. If anyone asked, I would tell them I was house-sitting. Trudi wasn't there to disapprove of it. I'd sleep on the sofa in the living room, or maybe the futon couch in the loft, or, dare I think it?, in her bed. I felt like Goldilocks.

And Trudi was the Papa, Mama and Baby Bear.

I found myself carrying the hamper full of dirty things down to the basement and putting them into piles for washing: darks, lights, delicates, whatever. I found myself holding up a black satin and lace bra in my left hand and picked up what must have been the matching panty in my right, looking from one to the other.

"What am I doing?" I said out loud. My voice echoed against the unfinished concrete walls.

Suddenly I heard Trudi's voice in my head. I could see her talking and dismissing me with a wave of her hand. "Obviously you think you can do my job better than I can. You obviously think you can do my laundry as well."

I replied out loud in her voice. "Obviously," I said, making sure to sound as scornful as I could, "Since you obviously don't do laundry, any laundry done is better than how you do it." I dismissed her by tossing the panties and bra into the lingerie pile.

While I was finishing getting her laundry ready, I noticed that my clothes felt a bit grungy. I might as well do them also, since I realized I would have to wear the same clothes to work tomorrow. It was only natural. My things were dirty too.

As I began washing the first load, I felt a glow of productivity come over me. I got productive, washing her clothes, emptying the trash, doing the dishes, and trimming and feeding the plants in the living room to keep them from dying. When I took the two loads of garbage to the dumpster, I fetched her mail.

There were a lot of bills. I put them on the desk in her office, next to her computer, and went to do another load of clothes. I had already figured out, that except for some blouses and slacks, Trudi didn't have enough stuff for a white load. All her towels were pastel-colored. Her underwear was colored. So were her sheets. But then, nothing I had on was white either, so I threw my stuff in with a dark load of permanent press. Only after I had stripped and tossed my things into the washer did I realize I didn't have anything to put on while I waited. I didn't want to run around naked. And yet all her things were far too girlie for my taste. Even the sweats were pink, fuchsia, and peach-colored. And the T-shirts had say-

ings on them like “Bitch,” “Goddess,” or “Sexy,” if they didn’t have hearts and flowers.

Realizing that I would probably stretch out her bitch goddess T, I chose a pinkish-colored satin robe. I decided it would have to do for now, knowing I couldn’t allow to let anyone see me in it. I put it on and made sure to tie it tightly before I took a hamper full of clean, dry, folded clothes upstairs. It felt weird having the robe rubbing against my skin. It also reminded me that I needed a shower. But I couldn’t while I was still doing laundry. I’d have to wait until I had hot water to spare.

While waiting on the fifth load, I happened to notice one of Trudi’s credit card bills lying on the table. My eyes were drawn to the totals, having gone through my own share of debt troubles. She had a balance of \$14,782.96 on a credit limit of \$15k that was due tomorrow. Obviously it had not been paid, and at this rate, was not likely to. Her credit rating would be ruined. Even though I didn’t like her, I didn’t want to see that happen.

It was then I began to snoop. I opened up each of her bills and spread them out in front of me. She had three credit cards (two maxed out) and two store credit cards, with debts totaling around \$36,000. I wrote down the minimum payment on each on a sheet of paper, as well as her house and car payments, water, heat, electricity, phone, cable, and cell phone (all of which I found by going through her checkbook).

Holy crap, I thought. What she owed each month was close to \$3000, and it looked like she took home about \$2000 per month. Even if she dropped her cable, DSL line, either the cell or home phone and ditched the car, she would only save about five hundred, and unfortunately she needed a car and cell phone for work.

Or did. I wondered if she had enough equity in this place to take out a debt consolidation loan. She might have to get a roommate to help pay her off. She had jewelry she could sell, but hadn’t seemed keen on collecting art or antiques or other stuff she could buy for investment purposes.

As I delved further into Trudi’s financial life, it occurred to me that I was acting as though she was coming back when the evidence seemed to point in the other direction. Trudi had made a mess of her life and had walked out. It was as simple as that. If I wanted to, I could steal anything of hers and it wouldn’t matter. \$10k in jewelry? No problem. The car? Easy. Run up credit cards for things I needed? Piece of cake. I had her life in my hands.

So I fired up the computer and tried to help her. I didn’t know why; I couldn’t stop myself from doing it. If she did happen to change her ditzy self-absorbed mind before her next payments came due, she would have something positive to come back to.

Evidently someone had helped her choose the software and hardware. The computer had just about everything (except for games; Trudi obviously wasn’t a computer game enthusiast). It had a ton of memory, a super fast processor, and plenty of RAM. There was a DVD burner, CD-RW drive, and even a Zip drive. She had a firewall program, virus protection, and financial software. I decided to listen

to Internet radio through her surround sound speakers while I delved into her financial software.

Trudi's last financial software entry had been made prior to moving into the house. Fortunately for me she had already established online accounts with her bank and all three credit card companies and was such a ditz that she had checked the "remember my password" box for each account. It didn't take me long to download her current information.

I got to work. I paid the minimum on the credit card that was due. I did a balance transfer of all the money from the Department store card (23.5% interest? Ugh) and \$700 on the Fashion card to the credit card that still had some credit left (with a 4.9% interest rate for six months). I logged onto the bank's site and transferred all but one dollar from Savings into Checking. I signed up for free online bill pay and paid the cable, phone/ISP, and Electric (all were late). The other bills would have to wait. By the time I finished there was only \$5.46 left in the checking account.

I discovered that Trudi had automatic deposit and payday was coming up this Friday. She would have two more week's worth of salary (as well as unused vacation) for me to play with. I also noticed that she had a \$10,000 certificate of deposit that would mature in two months. If I could transfer it to her savings account, I could keep this game going for at least four months. It could be interesting.

It was after two when I finally shut the computer down. The laundry had been long folded and put away, and I had been working for the longest time, still wearing that stupid robe. I felt kinks throughout my body as I slowly rose from the chair. I decided I really needed that bath.

I took the last light beer into the bathroom and drew a bath in the big Jacuzzi. While I was removing the robe, I knocked the box of bubble bath beads into the tub. "Shit," I said, as I reached for it and managed to pour some more in, so that by the time I stepped into the hot water it was full of bubbles. By then I had finished the beer.

Two hours later, I woke up. The water was cold and the bubbles had long gone, leaving only a film on the surface of the water. I drained the tub and rinsed everything down, dried off, looked around for my clothes. Realizing I had folded and put them away with Trudi's stuff, I put on the "sexy" T-shirt and found a pair of silky gold shorts I couldn't tell were panties or hot pants and sunk into Trudi's newly-made bed and fell back to sleep.

\* \* \*

It was light when I woke up. Nine o'clock. I was late for work. I jumped out of bed, all confused, stumbled over to the phone. I called the office. Cassie answered. "You're late," she said.

“Duh,” I said. “I just woke up. I was up until...well, let’s just say I was busy working late last night. I’ll get to the office as quickly as I can.”

“Don’t worry about it. Jack’s not here yet either. He’s in a meeting with Don at the warehouse.” Don was the warehouse manager. He was obviously telling Jack about the machines ready to fall apart. That was one of the bullet points Trudi had put on her to-do list: Discussion with Don about getting new machines.

I used one of Trudi’s pink disposable razors and her leg shaving goop to shave my face, then made another valiant attempt to find my clothes. I was not entirely successful. I found my pants, but couldn’t locate my socks, underwear, or shirt. The clock was ticking. I had to reach the office before Jack did.

I picked out a pair of black trouser socks in a silky material and put them on. They seemed to fit. I didn’t want to wear those shorts, because I was becoming more and more certain they were hot pants, so I reached into the panty drawer and picked out the least feminine, least uncomfortable pair I could find. The pair I chose did not have any lace, no ribbons or bows, no strings, wasn’t a thong, but was colored bright blue (boy color) and made of satin. Trudi didn’t own any underwear that wasn’t made from satin or lace. Except for the black rubber pair at the bottom of the drawer, but I didn’t really want to go into that. Literally.

Finding a shirt was a problem. Not only were they all too small, but the ones with buttons buttoned the wrong way, and they were all silky. I managed to find a cotton blouse in a pale blue. It seemed to fit well enough. However it had no front pockets and that extra stitching at the chest to accommodate boobs. I found a gray unisex sweater which I put on over it. I had a quick breakfast of Special K (with the slim and trim woman in a swimsuit on the cover) and packed a lunch of an apple, a cup of yogurt, two energy bars (made for women, but then beggars can’t be choosers), and a diet cola.

I hopped in her car and made it to work at 9:43, fully five minutes before Jack got in.

“We all agreed that you clocked in at eight-thirty today,” said Angie when she saw me enter the office. “We even turned on your computer and opened up one of the files in case he arrived before you got back from running your errand,” she said with a smile. “Nice sweater. Is it new?”

“Uh, thanks. Not exactly. But it’s new to me.” I sat down. I wanted to tell them what I had found at Trudi’s, but didn’t think that was the time or the place.

Jack arrived in mean spirits, went into his office, and closed the door. “What was that all about?” asked Barb.

“It was a little something Trudi left behind,” I said. “New vending machines. Don obviously told him what they are going to cost.”

“It’s about time we got some new equipment.”

At ten-thirty I received a call from Callie. “There’s a man on the phone,” she told me. “His name is Carl Brenner. He’s asking for Trudi. Should I send him your way?”

“He doesn’t know that Trudi is gone?”

“Doesn’t appear to.”

“Put him on,” I said.

When I heard the click I said, “Hello, Mr. Brenner? Trudi McMillan is out of the office today. I’m her assistant, Greg. May I help you?”

“I need to speak to Trudi,” said a gravelly voice on the other end of the line. I wondered if Trudi found him “hot,” then wondered why I had wondered that. “It’s very important. I was supposed to call last week but I had an emergency that didn’t leave me free until now. She gave me her cell number but I lost it. Actually, my planner got stolen.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Trudi had never mentioned any Carl Brenner to me. I wondered what he wanted. “Is the nature of your business company-related or personal?”

He paused for a long time before answering. “It is of a business nature,” he said slowly. “I’ve lost too much time and I need to act quickly. That’s why I need to get in touch with her.”

I wasn’t supposed to give out private phone numbers to anyone, but I had the feeling that Trudi had been putting even more irons into the fire than she had told me. And I figured that Brenner might just be one of those irons. I was intrigued enough to give him the number.

When he had rung off, the two women were staring at me. “Well?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I’m going to have to do some research. Also, I may need an excuse to go out. I want to fetch Trudi’s phone. Is there anything that needs to go to the post office? How about the dry cleaners? Drug store?”

“You’ve got Trudi’s keys,” said Barb. “There must be something she took home with her that you need today.”

“Good point,” I said. “I’ll have to make a run back to her place to see if I can find the folder.” I was starting to notice the panties acting funny.

“Yes, the folder,” said Barb. “You need that folder,” she intoned.

“I certainly do,” I replied. “But not just yet. I want this Brenner guy to leave a message – and let’s hope that phone is there.” I was certain it was in her purse, which she had left on the kitchen counter. “Meanwhile, I have work to do. I’m hoping she left something on this computer.”

It took me until mid-afternoon to find what I was looking for. There was nothing in any of the files on her computer. There was nothing on the floppies she used as back-up disks. There were no hard copy files. But I did find a scrap of paper with what looked like a user name and login for an e-mail address written on it in Trudi’s handwriting. Bitchgoddess78. Two of the names from her T-shirt collection and the year she was born. I logged on to the e-mail site and tried it.

All of the messages were from some person named bigdaddy36. After reading his emails to Trudi, and going into the Sent Mail folder to read her messages to

him, I concluded that bigdaddy36 was most likely Brenner. And no, he wasn't into kinky sex. He seemed to be an investor of some kind. More telling was the message that said he looked forward to meeting bitchgoddess78 last Wednesday. After I brought up the subject to the girls, they looked puzzled.

"I think Trudi had a lunch date set for Wednesday," said Angie. "But she had to cancel. Cassie would know."

I went to the outer office. The underwear was really doing a number to my privates. I didn't think I needed that much stimulation in an office that consisted of such good-looking women, especially since they were of three different types. All had long hair. Angie had kind of dark blonde hair, while Barb's had a more red hue. Cassie had dark hair and dark eyes. I had heard that she was a mixture of Native American, African American, and Asian – I think Korean, but I wasn't sure. Whatever it was, it was a nice mixture.

"Yes," she said. "Trudi had a lunch date for Wednesday. She was bugging me the whole morning, asking if there were any calls. She wouldn't even leave her desk she was so worried. Evidently she got stiffed, because nobody called."

"Do you know the name of the person who was supposed to call?"

"Nope. She was very secretive about that." There was silence for a few seconds. Cassie was looking at me strangely. "What's with the shirt?" she blurted out.

"What do you mean?" I tried to make myself look more confused than fearful.

"That's a woman's blouse, isn't it?"

"Uh well..."

"What's up? I saw you driving Trudi's car, and then you come in wearing a sweater. I've never seen you wear a sweater before. It's too warm for a sweater. And the shirt looked kind of faggy, especially the collar. Then it struck me. You're not wearing a man's shirt."

"It's not my fault," I said. "I couldn't find my own shirt. This was the least faggiest one."

"You stayed over at Trudi's?" she said. "Are you some kind of pervert?" She was smiling as she said it.

"I don't know. Probably. I was only going to take her car back to her place, but I had to go to the bathroom, then I got hungry, so I picked out some leftovers and then I noticed what a pigsty her place was and before you know it I was doing both her dishes and her laundry. I have no idea how it came to that."

"Yup," she said. "Pervert."

"I'm wearing women's underwear too," I blurted out. "It's driving me crazy."

She started laughing. I felt my face turning red. I tried not to think about what I had just said, and was trying to refocus on any plans that Carl Brenner guy and Trudi might have made. "Do you think Trudi's coming back?"

"Why?" she said, still laughing. "Do you want to try on her dresses now?"

My mouth was wide open. I felt my ears burning. I had to get out of this predicament. I looked away from Cassie, out the window. I had learned long ago that if you were being teased and/or mocked, the best defense was to take the ball and run with it rather than try to stammer your way out of it. I turned back to her. "If I get to drive that car of hers, I will wear the sexiest dress in her closet. I'll get my ears pierced and my nails done at that salon she goes to." I made a motion with my hand.

She had tears coming out of her eyes. "Stop it," she said. "You're killing me."

"Have you ever ridden in that car?"

Her laughter subsided. She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. Some of her mascara came with it. When she could speak again, she said. "Are you kidding? I'm not good enough. I's just a colored receptionist."

"You're colored?" I said, making my eyes go wide and my mouth a big O.

She started laughing again. "You're making my stomach hurt. Oh, I don't know what we'd do without you."

"Well yeah, but I'm a guy and you know how Jack feels about competition."

She tried to make herself look serious. "Maybe if you told him you wore women's underwear, he'd let you stay." She couldn't keep a straight face, and ended up snorting with laughter.

I rolled my eyes. "I don't want him to think I'm gay. He probably hates gays worse than straight guys."

"Believe me, if Jack has to keep you working here, he'd probably prefer that you were gay."

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"Equal Opportunity Employer. I am the person who fills the quota. Besides, I like working with Barb and Angie. We go to the same health club, you know."

"Do you want to take a spin in the car?" I asked.

"I'm working," she said. "And so should you be. Jack has just emerged from his lair."

"Thanks," I said, turning back.

Jack had been trying to work up a conversation with the two girls, but when I entered the room he cast me a look and cut his talk short. Soon he returned to the office.

I left at five-thirty and drove straight to Trudi's place. It was as I had left it, which was good. I found I didn't want Trudi to return. As long as she was gone, I had free rein, not that I would do anything foolish. At this point in my life I just wanted a nice comfortable place to live and some security. I didn't even care about a girlfriend, or a social life, or anything like that. It had taken me nearly ten years to recover from my last mistake, and I didn't want to start that mess again.

It suddenly dawned on me that Trudi was in far worse shape than I had been in. True, I had once been deeper in debt, but I hadn't been so insecure or ditzzy as to keep spending. I had tightened my belt and gotten myself out of my mess.

I found the cell phone in Trudi's purse. When I finally accessed the messages, I found three from Carl Brenner wanting to meet Trudi so they could discuss the acquisition of the Pinnacle Vending Company. Not for the first time that day I discovered my mouth hanging open like the village idiot.

My mind reeled. If Jack sold the company, I could keep my job. I'd be making more money and could get on the health plan. I could move, get a car. Or I could just continue to use Trudi's and make the payments myself. I would certainly be able to take over the car, cable, phone, and utilities with what I would be making, though I would use her \$10,000 CD to pay off the rest. Maybe I would get a roommate.

What's more, Jack would be gone. There would be new vending machines and better snack foods.

There was, however, one teensy tiny flaw to the grandiose plans I was making in my head. Brenner wanted to talk to Trudi. Trudi had fled, making it impossible for the two of them to follow through on their plans. This was not a total loss, as there was in fact someone standing in the very room that could do a pretty good impression of her. It had fooled Jack more than once, and I was reasonably sure it could fool this Brenner guy. I debated calling him back. Even though I had no business pretending I was Trudi, I suddenly had the strong desire to get rid of Jack.

I punched in the number and got Carl Brenner on the third ring.

"This is Carl," he said.

"Hello," I replied. "This is Trudi M. I heard you had some problems last week. What happened?"

He proceeded to tell me about the emergency in Boston that kept him busy until Monday. I made sure to interject Trudi's standard "oh dear" and "My gosh" and "That's appalling." At the end of it, I said, "Well, let me tell you, after you broke our lunch date, I was so distraught I just had to take a few days off. But now that I know it wasn't your fault you couldn't call, I feel better about it."

"That's good. I've emailed the contract to your box."

I walked over to the computer and turned it on. I kept talking as I accessed the e-mail. "You know," I said. "I came up with an idea today that might work to our advantage. Actually, Greg came up with the idea. He told me he had a brief conversation with you and I'm afraid I spilled the beans with him. I hope you don't mind. It's just that he's been indispensable."

"I thought you got rid of him."

I gave a girlish laugh. It was ridiculously easy. "Let me tell you, I was so wrong to do that," I said. "Those two weeks without him made me realize what an asset he is. Anyhoo, would you like to hear our plan?"



“Certainly,” he said.

“Today Greg told me that Jack had a meeting with Don, the warehouse manager. According to Greg, Don told Jack that the vending machines were breaking down and it would cost plenty to fix or repair them.” I pressed the button that started printing the contract. I made a mental note to get a faster printer.

“We budgeted twenty-five new vending machines for the next quarter,” he said.

I giggled. “Jack doesn’t know that.”

“Oh.”

“If we can get Jack to believe that the cost of everything is going up, perhaps we can bring the price of the company down.”

“That’s an idea,” he said.

“But I’m going to need help. If we can convince him that the cost of snacks are going up, that the fleet is in need of repair, and that oh, I don’t know, the cost of insurance is rising – which it is – Jack might be so eager to leave the business he might pay us to take it off his hands.” The contract finished printing.

“We have to hurry,” he said. “If I don’t get something concrete by the end of the month, we might lose funding.”

“Oh dear, that is trouble.” The end of the month was coming up next week. “I might be able to have something by Friday, or Monday at the latest. Friday would be better. It would give Jack something to think about over the weekend.”

“Friday is what we discussed earlier.” He suddenly sounded mistrustful.

“Yes but we’re behind now, thanks to that wasted weekend,” I said.

“How about I make up that lunch date tomorrow?” he said.

I felt my heart skip. “Tomorrow?” I said. “That’s too soon. “There are too many parts of the plan that need to be set in motion. I believe Friday would work much better.” What was I telling him? Friday? Never would be much better, especially when he found out the truth about Trudi.

“Friday it is then.”

That sounds excellent,” I replied. “Friday. Will you give me a ring tomorrow afternoon to set a time and place?”

“Certainly,” he replied.

After he hung up, I made myself a big drink and plopped down in front of the TV. What the hell had I gotten myself into? Even though Brenner had never met Trudi, there was no way I could pass myself off as her. I needed a way to cancel the lunch. Faking a death or two looked viable. Except for the part about losing my job and having to move out of this house, it seemed like an excellent plan. Maybe I could have Trudi catch a cold or something. I couldn’t think of any other way out of the predicament.

I took a big drink and grabbed the contract from the printer. I sat in front of the TV reading the contract. It was a nice contract. It basically said that Brenner

would purchase the company. He would be the CEO and CFO, providing cash and expertise to allow the company to grow, but he would turn over the day-to-day operations to Trudi. She would be the company president.

Sheesh. Trudi the company president, overseeing what, 25-50 employees? She couldn't run her own life, much less a company. How had she managed to convince Brenner that she was competent? It couldn't have been her looks. Brenner had never met her in person, so she couldn't use that much vaunted charm she kept trying to project.

The key to her success must have lay in all the work I did for her. Now that I thought about it, each individual project I worked on had been related to every other one. There was the asset inventory I performed. The income report I did. The investigation into the short and long term cost of new vending machines had been my research, as was the inquiry into alternative snack foods. There were also the service records and questionnaires we had distributed to the customers. None of the results had been on the computer at work.

Which meant it had to be on this computer.

It didn't take me long to find the folder labeled "Pinnacle." When I opened it up, I not only found the reports I had gathered, but a mission statement, a one-year plan, a five-year plan, and prospectus. My jaw dropped. Trudi had obviously done her homework. Those documents were enough to impress any venture capitalist. I could tell they had been generated by a law firm or whoever it was did that sort of thing.

I was stunned. She had done it. She had orchestrated a buyout of Jack's company, planned it to the last detail, had contracts written up, and had even found suitable funding; and one week before seeing her plan come to fruition had apparently suffered some kind of breakdown. All that work had been for nothing. Nothing. Only Trudi could make the scheme work and she wasn't here.

I needed to think. For some reason I decided that a bath might help. I needed to relax and to let my mind come up with a plan. The bath I had taken the night before had certainly relaxed me. All those bubbles and hot water had soothed me. I finished my drink, shut off the television, and went upstairs. For some reason, I hadn't removed the panties; in fact, I had forgotten I had them on.

I walked into the Master Suite changing room/foyer thing, a small 6 x 8 foot room, full of doorways and mirrors. There was a mirrored vanity table next to the bathroom door. There was a full-length floor mirror on the wall opposite the vanity, angled toward the center of the room. Two full-length mirrors hung from the two walls between the bathroom and door that lead from the Master Suite, evidently used for checking your appearance one last time before entering the public sphere. In addition to all those mirrors, there were a couple small decorative ones filling up other spaces on the wall.

A vampire didn't stand a chance in that room.

To my right was the bathroom, with its toilet, sink, shower stall, and Jacuzzi, and more mirrors. In front of me lay the bedroom, with the king-sized bed, cedar

chest at the foot, the dresser (with mirror), night stand, an armoire, a pair of chairs with footstools and a table in one corner, and lots of empty space. The big walk-in closet stood to my left.

There had been something about that closet that bugged me when I rooted around in it that morning. I turned on the light. Naturally there was a full-length mirror at the opposite end of the closet, but that wasn't what had been bothering me.

As I looked through the closet, I noticed how orderly it was, despite it being packed with clothes. There were dresses, slacks, blouses, and skirts on hangers. Boxes were piled high on shelves. There was a dresser that held sweaters and accessories, with a large jewelry case on top of it. There were hangers for belts, another one for purses, and a contraption that held shoes.

Then I saw what had bothered me. In the corner sat a purple trunk, about four feet long, two feet deep, and a foot and a half high. That was not unusual except that shoe boxes had been placed in front of the trunk and bags of linens rested on top, as though Trudi had been trying to hide the trunk. I wanted to know why.

There was a padlock on the trunk. I reached into my pocket for Trudi's excessively large key chain and looked for a key that might fit. There was only one with a name that matched that on the padlock. I inserted it into the hole, twisted, and heard the satisfying snick. I pulled the trunk away from the wall so I could open it. The thing was heavy. I had to brace myself to drag it to the center of the closet.

I hadn't expected a body to be stuffed inside it, but I did expect to find something that embarrassed Trudi. What I found surprised the hell out of me.

The trunk was full of women's clothes, all folded neatly. There were dresses, blouses, skirts, slacks, bras, panties, a corset, waist nippers, and hosiery. There were also three pair of black shoes. A pair of loafers, a pair of high heel pumps, and one pair of high heel sandals. The flats were size 9, the heels sized 8 and 7. The shoes in Trudi's collection were all size 6. I know. I checked.

The clothing was all sized larger than what Trudi wore. One pair of slacks looked like they could have fit me, as did a pinkish blouse and a blue/gray sweat shirt. The other clothes were of varying smaller sizes. The smallest was size 7-9 and the largest (the slacks) were a 14T. I assumed the T stood for tall. Except for the blouses, all the clothing was black, though one of the dresses and one of the skirts had floral patterns.

But the clothing, as puzzling as it was, wasn't what shocked me. The trunk also held a collection of wigs, eleven in all, in varying colors and lengths. Red, auburn, brunette, blonde, curly, straight, and one shoulder-length blonde wig with highlights that looked remarkably similar to how Trudi kept her hair.

I also found a small collection of breast enhancers. There was one full enhancer in size C. I knew this because it said so on the box. Another box said its contents added a full cup size, while a third evidently "added lift and volume" to the breasts, and the fourth added even more volume and lift. The tag on the two bras read 36C, but there was a bra extender hooked on the back of one. There was also

a contraption that looked like it was made to tuck in a guy's penis, and a pair of hips. I held the wig in my hand and wondered if Trudi enjoyed dressing guys up as girls. Maybe she was so vain that she dressed guys up to look like herself.

Whatever the answer was, it gave me an idea. Maybe I could pass myself off as Trudi. There were clothes, padding, even a package of false nails in that orangish red color that the package said was coral that I had seen on Trudi's fingernails before.

Most of the blouses had high collars, I noticed. There were also clip-on earrings, a watch, and what looked like cheap necklaces and bracelets. It would just be like Trudi, I thought, to make her subjects wear cheap imitations of the expensive gold and diamond pieces to which she treated herself.

I looked at myself in the mirror. Without help there was no way I could pass myself off as Trudi. I was a good three inches taller and about forty pounds heavier. My eyes were gray and hers were aqua. My nose was bigger and the shape of our faces differed. I was about fifteen years older, though I did look young for my age. But with the wig, nobody would notice I was losing my hair. With cosmetics, I could approach how she looked, and with my natural impersonating skills, I might be able to do it. The only thing I couldn't copy, I thought, was her eye color.

Then I saw the package of contact lenses.

Okay, I thought, this is getting freaky. Cassie had asked me if I wanted to wear Trudi's dresses. Now it looked like I might get the chance.

