

Results Guaranteed

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A work of fiction, meant for adults. Read something else if you are not an adult, or are offended by stories with sexual content. Then again, if all you're looking for is in-out, in-out, in-out, you should probably read something else. I welcome constructive comments. Enjoy.

What a mistake -- that's the price of pride. None of this would have happened if I hadn't wanted to find an easier way to drop those last few pounds, and to keep them off.

But is it so bad? Am I unhappy? No. Am I in danger, at risk? I don't think so. Do I know what's going to happen next? No. Am I scared, excited? Yes. Who do I have to blame? Me.

But that doesn't help you understand; I should go back to the beginning. It started quite a few months ago when we moved into our new building. We had local TV and newspaper coverage, reporting on yet another Silicon Valley company making it big. Even though I'm one of the founders, I let the others take the limelight. I hang around in the background, getting things done. When I saw the TV tape though, I was startled and shocked. Even though I was smiling, I looked like shit; overworked, overweight -- a disaster. It was a real wake-up call.

My sister had been on my case to ease off, take better care of myself, and enjoy some of the money I had. Hell, the gal we hired to run personnel (sorry, "Human Relations") said the same -- ease off, enjoy things, think about the very long term. The images I saw scared me -- I might be too late.

I wandered around the company in shock before coming up with a plan. Then I wandered around again, watching happy people still unpacking in our new building. Hard to believe three years ago we'd been in a rented house, worrying about running cables all over the place, building the business by stretching credit cards. Now we're multizillionaires. I talked to people, especially the really fit looking ones. Where do you work out? How do you stay in shape? What's important?

I got the best answers from Chrissy, a gal in our mail room. It's hard to believe -- we pay people to take care of mail and packages. She mentioned the name of a local health club I'd heard others mention, and offered to take me there and show me around. When I asked her when would be convenient for her, she told me right away -- she looked at me and as she shook her head she said I needed the help.

We rode over in her new Beetle -- she'd been with the company long enough to have made some money. She asked me if I was serious; I told her I was. She told me it would take a lot of hard work, but it would be worth it, and the people at the club could help.

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She was right. When we got there, she introduced me to one of the staff as another employee at our company, and more or less faded out. We talked, I saw the place, signed up, and started the next morning.

The first week was hell. I started with the exercise bike and light weight work, pushing myself but hopefully not too hard, working with one of their trainers. I learned I needed to go in at the crack of dawn, and on the third day saw Chrissy there. We talked about how I was doing - she recommended a massage therapist for the soreness. I got in to see her the following day and was hooked from the start. She gave me quite a grilling, making a number of recommendations, including a nutritionist to talk to. I scheduled regular weekly massage visits.

Between the workouts, massage, help from the nutritionist and changing what I ate, it worked. Of course having a color print of the video frame with me looking like shit taped to the refrigerator helped as well.

Everybody noticed. My sister was overjoyed when she saw me; I'd only lost about 25 pounds at that time. I was a gym regular, and still am. It's hard to believe how much better I look, feel, sleep, everything.

After dropping about 60 pounds I started having problems. We have a small cafeteria on site; I eat mostly salads for lunch, leafy green stuff, no-fat dressing. I had Karen, the nutritionist, come in and go over the salad bar with me. We had a pointed conversation with the guy that runs the food service -- we subcontract for it. He quickly learned I was one of the founders and that if he wasn't interested in discussing the changes I wanted, the next company to have our business would, and that would be next week. We got changes. I hate broccoli, but I eat it.

The problem I developed was with what I did after my salad. I found myself going back and getting a bag of chips or an ice cream. Nacho cheese corn chips or the strawberry ice cream bars with the white chocolate coating, those are my weaknesses. What the hell, I told myself, I was working out hard; I'd lost 60 pounds. I could do it.

And I put on five pounds in a hurry. Yes, we had a bunch of parties, and I did take two weeks off from the aerobic part of my exercise program. I'd been running on a treadmill and was totally distracted by a breathtaking pair of breasts nearby; I twisted my right knee and scared myself and a bunch of people when I fell.

So I saw the ad in the local daily paper; "Hypnotherapy -- Results Guaranteed." I gave the gal a call. She had a very pleasant voice. I told her I'd lost a lot of weight, gotten into shape, but was having problems slipping, giving in to the Siren's song of Frito-Lay and Haggen-Dasz; that and problems dealing with stress. We talked a bit. Her name was Barbara; she said she could help. Her ad only listed a phone number. When she gave me the address I laughed -- she's in the same building as the gal I go to for massage. I told her I knew where the building was. I had my regular massage scheduled for Friday, and scheduled with Barbara for right after that. I had her fax me any paperwork she needed so things would run smoothly.

Was that the start of my downfall? I know now that scheduling things that way really stacked the deck against me -- or was it for me? When I got to Barbara's office that first Friday afternoon, three doors down from Denise, I was incredibly relaxed. How can I describe that first session? I have the tape from that session, but it only has what Barbara said, not what went on inside me, or what I said.

Barb is in her late twenties, about five foot eight, short brown hair, and gorgeous. When I knocked on her office door and she opened it, I looked at her and sighed. She was also beautifully dressed in a business suit that still showed off her figure.

She chuckled, evidently used to this reaction. "Alex? Come on in."

She indicated the "victim" chair for me; I looked around as I sat down. Books, degree plaques on the wall, a small office but quietly and tastefully decorated.

"I got your paperwork and you check," she said. I'd dropped it off at her office before my massage.

"But I've got to say you don't look like you're having a problem with weight or stress."

I laughed. "That's probably because I spent the last hour on a massage table."

She laughed along with me. We talked a bit, I told her I had weekly massage sessions; they were an important part of my workout program. We talked about my goals, and agreed to spend the first session on relaxation and anchoring, the second one dealing with eating and the third tying things up; we could continue with more after that if I wanted.

I was still wiped out and relaxed from Denise as I slipped my shoes off and reclined in the chair. Barb dimmed the lights, had me close my eyes, and she started talking.

Within a few minutes I was drifting, floating, so calm and peaceful, in a place I'd never been before. She spoke to me, her words flowing through me. She brought me back up to the world again, and I thought we were done for the day as I opened my eyes, only to have her voice plunge me even deeper, her voice and the room getting amazingly distant. I knew I could return to this place whenever I wanted.

She brought me up again. I was floating back to the world, flexing my fingers, wiggling my toes, when down we plunged again, floating. Her words came from the distance; she spoke slowly, with space between her words, each word floating through me, rippling through, simple words with deep feelings, such as calm, peace, relaxed, secure. Then she let me float for a while and slowly brought me back up.

I moved slightly in the chair, took a slow deep breath, and opened my eyes. I raised my head and looked at her, watching in awe as she wrote something on the notepad she was holding. She looked up at me and smiled.

“You look so relaxed, so tranquil,” she said.

I moved my head slowly from side to side. “That was incredible. I feel... rounder, softer.”

She laughed softly. “That’s how you look. You did very well; this is going to be easy for you. Now remember, for the next week, as you eat, especially if you go back for other things, keep track of what’s going through your mind. Don’t analyze, just be aware of the feelings and try to record them.”

With that she stood up and helped me to my feet. “I’ll see you next week?”

I smiled. “Oh yes, you’ll see me next week. Thank you so much.”

As I went outside it was hard to believe how I felt. I didn’t think it was possible to feel better than after I’d had a massage, but I certainly did now. Amazing.

That next week I slept well, worked well, worked out well. It was as if there were different pieces of me that were finally starting to fit together, to work together.

Mid week, thinking about our next session, I went out at lunch and got some nicer pants and shirts, a step up from the old Levis or shorts I usually wore. It fit in somehow.

Even after a great massage, I think I was more nervous at the start of our second session than I’d been for the first. We talked a bit about my eating habits, my goals. Barb chided me for being so hard on myself, especially in light of what I’d accomplished. She asked a lot of good questions, most of which I couldn’t answer.

Barb told me we were going to do things a little differently; she’d take me into a trance and then talk to me, going over the questions she’d asked. We both agreed I had the answers in there somewhere; she’d work with me once we both had a better understanding.

I slipped off my shoes and reclined the chair back, feeling nervous. She started speaking to me; I was twitchy for a while, then suddenly the bottom fell out of the world.

It was curious; I was floating along so peacefully, and there was a conversation going on somewhere in the distance. I’m not sure if I heard it or not; I’d catch little bits of emotions, feelings drifting by. Then I was wrapped up in warmth and security, hearing her more clearly again, drifting back up.

I opened my eyes slowly; she was sitting there in her chair, smiling.

“You won’t have problems now,” she told me softly.

I nodded my head, waiting for it to clear. I sighed and looked at her again, so soft and warm in that cashmere sweater. We talked a bit and I left.

The next day I went out and bought a pair of dress pants, two shirts, and a pair of dressier shoes. I wanted to look better for her.

Going to my massage the next week I felt pretty good. I'd had a good week. A number of folks at work had asked what the occasion was; even Doug, my school buddy and our president, was surprised to see me "dressing up," especially on Friday. Even Denise commented on how good I looked.

I really looked forward to those massage sessions; I still do. It's a great way to unwind at the end of the week. We end up with Denise spending a few minutes massaging my head and neck; I've learned to really let go, it's almost like being in a trance.

And on that day as she started on my head and neck, and I sighed and let go, Denise started talking. At first I didn't understand what she was saying. Then I did, and heard the magic words Barb uses, and I let go and dropped into that wonderful floating void.

A short time later I heard Barb's voice. She lead me deeper, talking to me. We talked for a while. Again, it was as if I was sort of a party to the conversation, catching snips of it, and the edges of feelings, but not really part of it. Then her voice was back with that slow cadence, words and phrases sinking through me, then letting me float a while in silence.

She brought me back up slowly so I could bring the tranquility, strength, and composure back up with me.

I opened my eyes to see the ceiling, still in Denise's small office; I was on the massage table still, covered only by the sheet pulled up over my feet and a towel across my middle. I looked over at Barb, sitting on a stool a couple feet away.

"Surprise..." she said smiling, "how was that?"

I was filled with sadness and disappointment. I blurted out, "I bought new clothes, just to show you." I closed my eyes, feeling the tears forming. Then I felt a hand on my forehead and heard her voice again. I let go once more to her touch and her voice. We spoke for a while. I started drifting up again.

When I opened my eyes, I knew she'd gone so I could get dressed. I felt relaxed, but still in some turmoil. I got up slowly, stretched some, and got dressed. I left Denise's office and walked down the hall to Barb's, where I knocked on the door.

She opened it. I smiled and said, "Thank you, may I come in?"

She nodded. We sat down in silence. Finally she spoke up.

"Oh Alex, I'm sorry... I wanted to surprise you, and when Denise told me she had to leave right after your session..."

I reached over and took her hands.

“Barbara, there’s nothing for you to be sorry about. It was a wonderful surprise, a wonderful session. I enjoyed it very much. My reaction afterwards surprised me as much as it did you. It still surprises me.”

We spoke quietly about it for a few minutes. I set up another appointment for the following week.

And so it went for a while, the week ending with a massage from Denise, me getting dressed and walking over to Barb’s office. Barb helped me with a number of things -- dealing with stress, listening to others and working better with others, and just plain relaxation. I felt so much more whole; I was sleeping so much better, working better.

Then things got more intense one Monday morning. I’d had a good workout, getting in to work a little after eight -- this is practically the middle of the night for most software companies; chances are if you see someone in our building at that hour, they’ve been up all night. As soon as I walked in our receptionist said, “Peter needs you in his office right away; it’s an emergency.” Peter is the CEO we hired to run the company; it must be something big.

When I got to Peter’s office he had the other founders and bigwigs there, except for Doug, our jet-setting President who’d gone skiing in Utah for the weekend with his latest girlfriend. I gave Peter a questioning look as I leaned against the wall; all the chairs were taken.

He looked me in the eye as he said, “Doug was seriously injured in a skiing accident yesterday. He’ll be okay, but he’ll be in the hospital in Utah for at least a week.”

Wow -- bad news. Doug was the unofficial spokesman for the rest of us; he worked closely with Peter.

“You know the analyst briefing we’ve got Thursday in San Francisco?” Peter asked me. I didn’t like the way everyone in the room was looking at me all of a sudden. Doug was the guy that handled these things -- he had a flair for it.

I crossed my arms and looked Peter in the eye. “I don’t like the direction this conversation is going,” I said firmly.

Peter, and our CFO Bill, both started laughing. A number of the others in the room laughed as well. I didn’t.

My buddy Jerry, another one of the founders, finally said, “Alex, we want you to do it. We’ve talked about it, you’ll do great.”

Before I could object, Ellen, the other member of our founding team added, “I’ve watched you lead the Pinwheel meetings; we all have. You’ve got what it takes. You can do it.”

Peter chimed in, “And the only thing you’ll have to deal with is Pinwheel. Bill and I handle the general stuff and the numbers. The analysts expect to see one of the founders, and you’re the one, especially with Doug off-line for a while.”

I took another breath. Pinwheel was our new architecture -- my project. I’d been having weekly design review meetings, deliberately holding them around an old fold-up table back in the shipping and receiving area. The people that had been with us for a long time knew that table was one of the first things the company had purchased, back in the rented house days. I felt meeting back there, at an old table and folding chairs amongst the noise and clutter kept us honest. The meetings usually ended with a general bitch-and-bull session; I smiled -- I did enjoy handling that part, and had noticed a lot more people than just the Pinwheel team showing up for the last half-hour of the meeting.

“I can’t do this without a net,” I told them, “I’ll need a practice session Wednesday.”

Peter tried to control it, but I saw him sigh with relief. “Bill and I, and Nancy, will be there with you. We already have Wednesday set for practice.” Nancy was our public relations -- media -- communicate with the outside world person.

“Okay,” I said, “right now I need to go zap my calendar.” This was going to play hell with the things I liked to do, and was supposed to be doing.

Peter laughed again. “Good. At least you won’t need to get a haircut.”

With that everyone chuckled and we dispersed. As I walked into my office and tossed my bag in the corner I thought about that last crack. I was getting a haircut every three weeks now, looking more presentable, mainly for Barb. Oh shit -- I didn’t have a suit that fit anymore, and my sister was out of town on litigation; I relied on her to help me pick clothes. All of a sudden the world closed in on me, and I felt scared, nervous. The thought of standing in front of those analysts... My throat got tight, my stomach churned, my hands were clammy and shaking.

I put my hands on the desk and leaned forward on it a bit, closed my eyes, and took a slow deep breath. I let the relaxation and calm wash over me. Thank God for Barb... That’s the answer... I picked up the phone and called her office.

“Hello?” she answered.

“Barb, this is Alex. I’ve got a real problem and I need your help. Can I come over right away?”

“Yes, of course. I’ve just had two cancellations, so I’m free until late afternoon. What is it?” She sounded concerned.

I managed a little laugh. “I’ll explain in a few minutes; it’s not that bad, don’t worry.”

She sounded relieved as she said, “I’ll do anything I can to help you. See you in a few minutes.”

I hung up and grabbed my bag again. I walked by Peter’s office and told Anne, his secretary, I had some loose ends to tie down, but my cell phone would be on. I went to my car and made the short drive to Barb’s office.

As usual, her dress was impeccable; just what I needed. I sat in the victim chair as usual, but didn’t lean back.

“What’s wrong, Alex?” she asked, concern in her voice, but a smile on her face, so comforting.

I told her I needed her help and confessed that I wasn’t just an employee of our company, I was one of the founders. One of the other founders was injured, and now I had to make a presentation to a bunch of security analysts on Thursday in San Francisco.

She nodded. “Okay, we can take care of presentation fears, that won’t be difficult. You don’t have problems with self-confidence; you’ve accomplished so much, and you know you’re very good at what you do.”

I smiled; she was helping already.

“But I need your help with something I’m totally incompetent at, and I need it now. You can tell me no, and I’ll understand, but I think you can help.”

She got a mild puzzled look on her face and said, “Well?”

“I need you to help me pick out a suit to wear for Thursday. Now.”

She leaned back and chuckled, then leaned forward looking at me with a big smile. “Of course. I’d be happy to.”

It was my turn to sigh. “You dress so beautifully, so well. I’ve tried to improve how I dress for you, but I just don’t know how. I’ll need your help with the other things too; I don’t feel comfortable about Thursday. I freaked out earlier and I’m still shaky.”

We looked in each other’s eyes for a moment. I had changed my dress somewhat, moving away from jeans and rumpled knit shirts to Dockers and dressier pants, long sleeve shirts, but I didn’t feel comfortable picking for myself.

She stood up and I followed. “Do you have ideas? Price ranges? Where do we start?” she asked.

I told her price was no object; I needed to look comfortable, feel comfortable, and have whatever we decided on for our dry run Wednesday.

She nodded her head. "Okay, let's go. I'll drive."

Luckily we have a very good shopping center nearby. Unluckily we had about twenty minutes until stores started opening. We sat on a bench in front of a men's store and talked a bit. I must have been wringing my hands; I was nervous. She took one of my hands. I looked up into her face. She reached up with her other hand and touched my forehead, saying something. My eyes closed and I was floating again.

We talked for a bit, and when I opened my eyes, I felt much better.

"How are you now?" Barb asked softly.

"Much better. I feel relaxed, confident. This is going to be fun," I told her.

She squeezed my hands and I squeezed back. A couple of minutes later we heard the store doors being unlocked. We stood up, and for some reason I reached out and hugged her to me gently. "Thank you," I said softly. She chuckled and gave me a squeeze; we separated and walked into the store, I opened the door for her.

As I stepped in, I almost laughed. A few minutes ago I was feeling very intimidated at the thought of even walking into a place such as this. A salesdroid walked up to us, looked me over, and said to Barb, "May I help you?"

I laughed at that. He gave me a funny look. I looked him in the eye; I wasn't going to put up with any shit. "I need a suit for a high-stakes analyst meeting on Wednesday afternoon. If we pick something out are you going to be able to get the alterations turned around by Wednesday morning?"

His demeanor changed remarkably. He said, "Yes sir, of course. What do you have in mind?" Now very helpful.

I almost sneered. "We'll look around a bit and let you know. Scat."

He looked mildly shocked and took a moment to recognize he had been dismissed.

"Very well. Let me know what I may do to be of assistance."

"Thank you," I said, smiling now.

He walked away; Barb put her arm in mine and lead me over to one side of the store.

"That was impressive," she said softly, laughter in her voice.

I squeezed her arm to me; it felt great. "Thanks -- without your help I probably would have peed my pants. Now bail me out."

She laughed out loud at that. She has a great laugh; I smile just thinking about it.

We picked out a suit, two shirts, and a tie. Our salesman inquired about shoes and socks, but Barb said we didn't need them. I followed along.

I put on one of the shirts and the suit for the tailor droid. As he started marking up the suit coat, Barb had him take it in more at the waist. "He works out hard -- let's show off some of that," she told him. I smiled at her in the mirror. Once the coat was done Barb had me slip it off. She looked at the shirt and frowned. "We'll just have to go with the shirts as is for now," she told the tailor.

"And when would you be needing this?" he asked.

"After five tomorrow afternoon," our salesman said with a firm tone. The tailor got the hint and nodded. "That won't be a problem, sir."

"I won't be able to pick it up before six," I told him, might as well give him a little more time. He gave me a smile and another nod.

I went back and changed into my normal clothes. I walked up to the counter where Barb was standing and gave the salesman my credit card. He rang up the sale very efficiently, I signed the slip, and he wished us a good day and would see us tomorrow evening. We thanked him for his help and left.

Outside the store I took Barb's arm again; she started laughing.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I told him you who you were with, that you were one of the founders, and you'd probably be doing a lot of presentations and travel in the future."

Unfortunately, I had to agree with her, especially if I did well on Thursday; my stomach tightened up again. I stopped and turned to her, she faced me.

"What?" she said.

"I think you're probably right about that. I need your help; I'm scared."

She smiled and said, "Relax. You'll do fine."

I took a breath and tried to relax. It's easy when I'm looking into her eyes. "So what was so funny?"

She smiled and held up the receipt, waving it. "No charge for the alterations. He's fishing for your business."

I smiled. “Well, should we give it to him?”

She laughed.

“I do need shoes though, and probably something other than white socks. And that shirt itched like crazy.”

She sighed. “I’ll drop off both shirts to get them cleaned and pressed; they’re full of sizing still. Next stop is shoes and socks. Do you have any jewelry? Should you have a different watch for this?”

I snorted. My watch for the last half year or so was a Polar heart rate monitor. “I’ll wear the watch I’ve got. I figured out why Peter wants me to do this.”

She tilted her head and asked, “Why?”

I smiled. “I’m the only one of the founders other than Doug who doesn’t have pierced ears.”

She laughed at that and I laughed with her. We went to another store and got shoes, socks, and cufflinks for the shirt.

We were standing outside the store; I was catching my breath. I looked at my watch.

“What now?” she asked.

“May I buy you lunch? I’m starved!”

Another wonderful laugh and we walked to Max’s Café. We had a wonderful lunch. I was enjoying her company, her conversation, just her presence so much.

Then I’d paid the bill; we were ready to leave, and the real world kicked me in the stomach again.

“What now?” she asked.

I sighed. “Thank you so much for your help. I think that’s about it for today, but I’m going to need more of your time, if that’s possible. And I want to be sure you’re compensated for it. Could you be available Wednesday afternoon and early evening?”

She looked in my eyes and took my hands. “Alex, of course. We’re going to get together tomorrow night after work to pick up your suit. We’re going to get you dressed and then you will take me to dinner; I’ll make the reservations. We’ll have time to help you through the rough spots. I’ll be at your disposal Wednesday, and Thursday if you need me. And yes, I will send you a bill.”

I smiled. "Thank you. I'm just very glad you are here to help."

"So am I, Alex, so am I," she said as she stood up. We hugged again, gathered our bags, and headed back to her car. We stopped at a cleaners and she dropped off the shirts.

At her office I started walking to my car, but she said, "Where do you think you're going? We have more work to do."

I gave her a sheepish grin and followed her in. She sat me in the victim chair and reclined it quickly. As I looked up at her she slid her hands along the sides of my head and started speaking in a soft voice. The sensation was incredible as my eyes closed and I drifted away.

I opened my eyes and shook my head a little.

"What's the matter?" she asked, sitting in her chair taking notes.

I took a breath. "Wow ... a little disoriented, that's all. I'm better now."

She stood up and helped me to my feet. "I took you a lot deeper than we'd gone before. Did you like that induction?"

I held her hands and sighed. "That was incredible."

She smiled; there was something extra in that smile. "Good... Well, I've got a calendar to rearrange. Be here at six sharp tomorrow night."

We dropped our hands. "Thank you again, Barbara," I said softly. She smiled, and I let myself out the door.

I drove back to the salt mines, and walked by Peter's office. He waved me in; I shut the door behind me.

"I was wondering if you'd come back," he said.

I laughed as I sat down. "I'm here. I had some loose ends to take care of."

He looked me straight in the eye and said, "What were you planning to wear Thursday?"

I smiled and looked straight back at him. "The new suit I'm picking up tomorrow night."

He looked mildly surprised, then tilted his head a little.

I answered his next question before he asked it. "And I had very good help picking it out; I didn't do it on my own."

He laughed at that. "Good -- we were worried."

Actually, this was the best time to ask. "Peter, I want someone else at the dry run on Wednesday, and possibly with us on Thursday."

"Who?"

I took a breath. "The therapist I've been seeing for a while. She's been helping me deal with stress and a lot of other crap. I need her help at least through Wednesday. She'll sign the usual paperwork, that won't be a problem."

He gave me a fatherly look. "Anything I should know about?" He was concerned.

"No, no deep-seated problems. I needed some help with eating habits, handling stress. She's helped me a lot -- especially in dealing with others. You've seen how I've changed."

Peter nodded. "We all have; that's why you are the right one for this, and may be for a while. It will probably be three weeks before Doug can even move back home, and longer before he'll be up and about. You may have picked up a new career here."

I nodded. "We had that feeling this morning. I had the feeling I may be buying more suits."

He laughed and asked where I'd gone. When I told him, he shook his head, telling me they were very good, but charged for everything they did, almost including the air you breathed while in the store. I took the receipt out of my pocket and showed it to him, pointing out the "no charge" on the alterations. He looked at me and shook his head.

"The first time I went into their store in San Francisco with the wife of a friend, I almost pissed my pants I was so scared," he told me.

I smiled at him and nodded. "I had help."

We looked at each other for a bit. Then he handed me a pile of paper and a disk. "Don't know if you wanted it on dead trees or as bits -- here's your reading material for the meeting, and a sketch of what you'll need to cover on Pinwheel. Let's get together tomorrow at two to go over your part in detail."

"Okay boss, but I've got a hot date tomorrow night -- I need to pick up my suit."

"No problem. I've been told I have to be at a PTA meeting. Relax, you'll do great."

I chuckled, picked up my reading material, and headed to my office.

The rest of the day was a blur. I got through my stuff, shuffled my schedule, even took care of some technical things. I gave my team leaders about a month's worth of work each, which would keep them busy through Friday probably. About seven I sprung for pizza for the bunch that was still hanging around working, and amazed some newbies by beating them at pinball, somehow forgetting to mention that it was *my* pinball machine we were playing on.

I got home a little before nine. I was wound up. I repacked my bags for Tuesday, including the dark socks, shoes, tie, and cufflinks for later in the day. I knew I had to go to bed early as I'd be getting up at the usual five twenty in the bloody morning to work out, and didn't expect to get to sleep.

Surprise, surprise -- I did my usual bathroom routine, set the alarm, crawled into bed, took a deep breath, and went right to sleep. The next thing I knew the alarm was going off.

I woke up feeling great. I knew who to thank for that, and I'd get the chance that evening. I felt as if I had to hold myself back during my workout, I was so full of energy. I was a whirlwind at work as well.

Then a very weird thing happened at lunch. I made my usual salad, and got a couple of cartons of low-fat milk; I'd been drinking milk again for a while. When I sit down to eat I pause, close my eyes, and take a deep breath, relaxing, almost like shedding a skin. For some reason I drink the milk right out of the carton using a straw. I was sipping milk, eyes closed, and something popped into my mind from a session with Barb. It must have been our second session; we'd been talking about eating habits. She asked what I really wanted. I remembered saying, "Your nipples," seeing her in the cashmere sweater she'd been wearing that day.

My eyes popped open as I choked on the milk. I put it down and coughed a bit. Where in the hell had that come from? Well, that might explain why I hadn't been getting tapes of our sessions. Of course I hadn't asked; I had a tape from the first session, and if I listened to it, I was under in nothing flat.

I looked at the milk carton as if it was some strange creature I'd never encountered before. I'd finished the first one, and had a little left in this one. I picked it up slowly, closed my eyes, took a breath, and then took a sip. Yes, there was a deep feeling about this, something about sucking and milk -- a very deep, satisfying feeling. I went with it; I felt as if I could fish up her words if I wanted to, but right now I didn't want to know.

I finished up lunch and headed back to my office. I polished up the presentation for my two o'clock with Peter. We had a good meeting; I'd done what he wanted, and more. Even Nancy, our public relations gal, agreed -- at least with the parts she understood.

We finished a little after four thirty. Nancy left, and I started to. Then I stopped and looked at Peter.

"What is it?" he asked.

I smiled. “Dad, I want to borrow your car tonight for my date.” He’d driven his slick two-seat Mercedes; I had an old reliable Volvo sedan.

He laughed. “You’ve got more back-seat room.”

I laughed and blushed at that. He fished his keys out of his pocket.

“Trade you. Take good care of it, and be careful. It’s you I’m worried about, not the car. And have fun.”

I gave him my car keys, picked up his and shook his hand. “Don’t worry, I will.”

Luckily I had my shoes and extra bits in my office; when I went to leave, Peter was already gone with my car. I loaded up my stuff in the Mercedes and headed over to Barb’s office.

When I knocked on her door she stepped out and gave me a hug with one arm, my shirts still wrapped in plastic from the cleaners in the other arm. “Let’s go. I’ll drive.”

I took her arm. She looked and smelled delicious. “No you won’t; I’m driving tonight.”

She gave me a mild look of surprise; I took her arm in mine and walked to the car.

“Ooh... where did you get this?” she cooed as I opened the door for her.

I laughed. “Borrowed it from Peter, our CEO. Told him I had a hot date.”

I closed her door, walked around and got in. “Did you really?” she asked.

“Yes, I did. And I also talked to him about having you join us tomorrow afternoon and possibly on Thursday. You’ll need to sign a nondisclosure agreement, but it’s fine with him.”

“And what did you tell him... About me,” she said softly.

I took her hand and said, “I told him you were the therapist I’d been seeing for a while, you’d helped me very much, I needed you help still for this meeting, and that the changes they’d seen in me recently were because of your help.”

She smiled and said, “Thank you.”

I started up the car and we drove over to the shopping center. We parked reasonably close to the store. I changed shoes and socks right there. Barb got a shirt, the tie, and cufflinks and we went in. Our salesman greeted me by name, addressing me as “Mister.” Barb looked over the suit before handing it to me so I could change. I went into the changing room and put on the shirt and the suit. The shirt felt much better; the suit fit very nicely. I wasn’t sure about

the cufflinks; Barb still had the tie. I was wondering what to do next when she walked into the little dressing room.

I was about to say something when she put her arms around me and gave me a kiss. I held her gently, closed my eyes, and let go.

"I remembered I had your tie," she whispered in my ear some time later.

I squeezed her to me. "Mmmm..."

She laughed and stepped back. I held her hands as she did. She looked down and laughed some more. "Take off the coat," she told me. I did, putting it back on the hangar.

She took one sleeve and started working on the shirt cuff. "You've got the cuffs inside-out. Let's fix those first. Do you know how to tie a tie?"

I looked her in the eye. "No clue -- Didn't study that at Stanford."

She sighed, but with a smile. "You nerds..."

With the cuffs fixed she helped me with the tie. I put on the coat and turned around.

"How does it feel?" she asked.

I wiggled a little. "It feels great, really comfortable now."

She turned me a bit this way and that, then grabbed my face with both her hands, pushed me back against the wall, and gave me another kiss. I put my arms around her and squeezed. She squeezed me and said in my ear, "Feels good to me too."

I laughed. "I like the way you build my confidence."

We packed up my "old" clothes in a bag and went back out into the store. The salesman and the tailor fussed over us long enough to demonstrate some semblance of concern. We thanked them and left.

We drove over to the restaurant Barb had chosen, a place I'd been before with my sister and her husband. They had valet parking. As I got out and handed the keys to the kid who was going to take the car, I held them a moment until he made eye contact. I looked him in the eye and said, "Be *very* careful with my baby." His smile disappeared and he said, "Yes sir!" He got in a little slower and drove carefully away.

We went in and were quickly seated at a corner table. I was madly trying to remember everything I'd been taught, and the last time I'd been here. Then I laughed to myself and decided to relax and have fun.

Our waiter asked if we'd like anything to start. Before Barb could speak, I said, "Kir Royale, two." I gave her a questioning look; she nodded in approval. The waiter nodded and left.

"You've been here before?" Barb asked.

"Yes, with my sister and her husband. It's one of their favorites."

We had a relaxed and very good dinner. We also took our time. I paid the bill; I'd talk to Peter about the company picking it up. I bailed out the car and started back to Barb's office.

"Well, how did I do? Any major gaffs?" I asked her.

She put a hand on my arm and laughed. "You were wonderful. You looked very relaxed and comfortable. Some minor things such as breaking your bread before you butter it, but you did very well. You might be trainable yet."

I sighed. "I'll do anything to please you, Barb. Thanks for all your help."

She squeezed my arm. "My pleasure."

In the parking lot for her office I pulled up next to her car. I opened the door for her and helped her out. As she started to speak I put my arms around her and kissed her.

She slid her arms under mine, holding me gently. She smelled and tasted so good. We held each other and kissed for a while. When we paused I stepped back a bit. She had the most wonderful smile on her face.

"Thank you for all your help. I'll pick you up a little before one tomorrow?"

She sighed and said, "That will be fine. I had a wonderful evening. Thank you so much."

I sighed and smiled, helping her into her car. I stood there until she drove off, thoughts and feelings rumbling deep inside me.

I got back in the car and drove home. I hung up my fancy new clothes and packed my gym bag for the next morning. I got into bed without washing my face -- I wanted to keep her perfume with me as long as I could.

I had a night of deep, weird dreams, but slept well. I had a pretty good workout the next morning, not pushing myself too hard. I didn't want to do anything stupid right before a big deal like this.

Getting dressed in the locker room after showering, I was at a loss when I got to the damn tie. I gave up and just let it hang around my neck. As I walked out past the front desk, the

morning gal commented on how good I looked. I turned and gave her a smirk. “Well, I wish I knew what to do with the damn tie,” I told her.

She laughed and came around the desk. Tina is a couple of inches taller than I. She was wearing a tight fitting lycra exercise outfit that let you count freckles; a real knockout.

“I can help you with that,” she said as she walked up to me. I put my bag on the counter and she took the tie from around my neck. She flipped up my shirt collar and put the tie on, knotting it deftly and then smoothing out the collar. She spoke to me the whole time, but I don’t remember a thing she said, I was so captivated by her smile and her presence so close to me. It wasn’t until she smoothed out the lapels of my coat that I realized she’d had her hips pressed up against mine, pressing me back into the counter the whole time.

I took a breath and said, “Thanks, I appreciate it.”

She gave me a sizzling look and sort of growled, “My pleasure,” then turned and walked back behind the desk with an incredible sway in her hips. She sat back down and gave me another look.

“See you Friday morning, beautiful,” I said.

She laughed. I picked up my bag and headed out the door.

When I got to work I noticed my Volvo was parked in the President’s spot in front of the building; that and Peter’s CEO spot are the only two reserved places in the lot. I parked Peter’s car in his spot, got my bags, and went into the building.

Our receptionist looked up from her desk and said, “Good morning sir, may ... Aaugh!”

I started laughing; I nearly dropped my bags.

“Alex, is that really you?” she said, standing up in shock.

“Yes, it’s really me,” I told her.

“I... I didn’t recognize you.”

“I guessed,” I told her. “It’s okay, I think that’s going to happen a lot to me today.”

As I walked by Peter’s office his secretary glanced up and nearly choked on her coffee. She put it down and coughed, saying out loud, “Peter!”

Peter stuck his head out of the office and looked at me. He whistled. “Very nice.” Both of them looked me over and approved. Peter’s phone rang, so I headed to my office.

I got some work done that morning, mostly prepping for the afternoon. People kept coming by the office to look.

Even Chrissy came around. She said, “I heard a rumor someone put your head on a marketing geek’s body. I wanted to see if it was true.”

I had a light lunch and went over to pick up Barb; I still had Peter’s car. I knocked on her office door and she came right out, dressed better than ever. I was going to say something but she swept me up in a soft cloud of perfume and a soft warm kiss.

We finally got out to the car. “Thank you again for last night, and for all your help,” I told her, opening the car door and helping her in.

“I enjoyed it too,” she said, “One question though...”

I got in, buckled up, and started the engine. “Yes?”

She straightened my tie. “Who did your tie this morning?”

I laughed. “Caught again! The gal at the health club.” I looked at her, looked into her eyes.

“I would have done it for you this morning,” she said softly.

I touched her cheek with the back of my hand, sliding my fingers down her neck. “Thank you,” I said, almost whispering, “You’ll have the chance, I promise you.”

We drove back to the salt mines; we parked and went to Peter’s office first. He was just putting his coat on.

“Peter, I’d like you to meet Barbara. She’s the person I’d mentioned.”

Peter turned on the charm. “Barbara, it’s a pleasure. You’ve worked wonders.”

We talked for a few minutes; Peter had her sign a nondisclosure agreement, giving her the quick talk about confidentiality and not trading in stocks unless she wanted us all to go to jail. She told him she understood.

We walked over to the fancy conference room. Peter opened the door for us. I walked in and nearly filled my pants; three of our venture capital folks were sitting there. My heart started to race in my throat and my stomach flipped inside out.

Peter stepped in behind me and clapped me on the back. “We thought you’d get more out of it with an audience,” he chuckled.

I took a deep breath and squeezed Barb's hand. She looked at me and smiled; that made all the difference in the world. I relaxed and said, "Nothing like live fire to keep your attention." I turned to Peter and said, "Thanks for not warning me ahead of time, you rat!"

That got a good laugh. Barb sat in the back; we got to work. We went through our pitches, everyone getting pointy questions. I had fun. We took a break, spent some time revising stuff, and did it again. This time during my part I got a lot of really wild questions. I learned quickly how to hand them off to Peter, Bill, or Nancy, but then they stopped letting me hand them off and I had to deal with them myself. When I'd start to feel as if I was losing it, I'd look back at Barb. A couple times I looked up and she was standing in the back of the room, making motions with her hands, calm down, slow down. I'd take a breath and she'd smile.

We did our final tweaks on the materials and our visiting sharks (sorry, "angels") left. On the way out, one of them stopped and shook my hand. "Alex, you'll do fine tomorrow," he told me, "Just remember -- technically they're idiots, but they can smell fear."

A few minutes later we were done. Barb came up from the back of the room; I gave her a big hug, which she returned. "You did great," she told me. The others echoed her opinion. I looked in her eyes. "Thank you. You were a big help."

Peter asked her, "Are you going to join us tomorrow?"

Barb and I said, "Yes," at the same time, then laughed.

Peter and Nancy chuckled as well. "Okay, here's the drill. Our schedule was shifted a little bit. We're going to leave from here about ten thirty; lunch with the analysts in the City, then the presentation, then we can celebrate."

My hands went cold; Barb saw and felt the shock. She put a hand on the back of my neck. I took a breath.

Nancy put a hand on my shoulder. "You two will ride up with Peter, I'll ride with Bill. That way you won't have to drive."

I exhaled; people laughed. I smiled a bit. "Okay, I'll live."

Peter turned to me. "May I have my car keys back please?"

I laughed and fished them out of my coat pocket. "I don't know whether to thank you or not; driving that gem may have cost me money."

Barb rubbed my back a bit. "Your Volvo is just fine." I gave her a squeeze.

A few minutes later we were standing out in the parking lot. It was after seven. I'd agreed not to work out in the morning, sleeping in. I put an arm around Barb.

“Dinner with me tonight?” I asked.

She nodded.

I took a breath. “Breakfast in the morning?” I whispered.

She put her arms around my neck and we kissed. I took that as a “yes.”

We drove over to her office and from there I followed her to her place, a small town house. I stood around while she gathered things into bags, and then we were off again in my car. We went to a local Japanese place for dinner, then back to my place.

*

I woke up at my usual time, about half past five in the morning. I reached over and touched Barb’s hair next to me; she was still there. I got up as quietly as I could and went to the bathroom, then returned to bed.

When I got back into bed, she quickly pulled me to her. “Oh please hold me,” she said. We snuggled up together; I slipped one arm under her and another over her. Before I knew it a nipple touched my lips, a hand found the back of my head, and I was floating in the warmth and softness of her embrace.

I don’t know if I went back to sleep or what; it was an incredible state. At one point she tried to get up; I held on and probably moaned some. She squeezed me to her and I heard her voice as I drifted off, falling away from her, falling away from the world.

Some time later I awoke to her weight on top of me, kissing me with her whole body.
>>>

We got to the office later than my usual, with just enough time to talk for a few minutes before leaving for the City. When Barb and I walked into the conference room, Peter looked up at us from where he was sitting, smiled, and shook his head. The glow we felt must have been obvious. I held a chair for Barb, helping her sit down, then sat next to her.

Bill looked at Barb and said, “How do you want to be introduced?”

She turned to me and smiled.

“Programmer?” I said. She frowned. “Sorry, how about personal assistant?”

She smiled again. “Yes, I like that.” She turned to Bill again. “Alex’s personal assistant.”

“Okay...” Bill muttered, looking down at his notepad.

We talked logistics; we had two identical copies of the presentation graphics on two laptops. Nancy had printed copies. We should be all set.

Barb and I rode with Peter in his Volvo wagon. I wanted to sit with Barb, but ended up sitting in the front passenger seat. Once we got going, Barb put a hand on my shoulder; that helped. Peter peppered me with questions pretty much all the way up there. I don't know if he was testing me, or just trying to keep my mind occupied. I wanted to be held.

As we walked into the building lobby from the parking garage I got nervous again, practically shaking. I glanced at Barb as we got in the elevator; my stomach was tight, and I think the lump in my throat was my balls... She put her hand on my back, whispered something in my ear. I exhaled and the world shifted, I was now calmer, relaxed but focused. I slipped an arm around her waist and gave her a hug.

Lunch went well; we were split up among the tables, each sitting with a few sharks. I fixed myself a salad from the buffet; light on the lettuce, heavy on the shrimp and blue cheese. Lunch was mostly small talk; I deflected questions that were in someone else's sphere and told 'em to wait for the presentation for things that were mine. I glanced over at Barb a couple times; she seemed to be enjoying herself; as usual, the laughter was coming from tables other than the one at which I was seated.

We took a short break after lunch, some other folks arrived, and we moved into the large conference room for presentations. Peter and Bill are pros at this -- they looked relaxed as one of the support geeks put wireless mikes on them. Then it was my turn; the microphone clipped to the lapel of my coat, the transmitter in the coat pocket. I started to freeze up, then remembered Barb's hand on my back. I took a breath through my nose and relaxed; this was going to be fun.

And it was fun, in a weird sort of way. Peter kicked things off, handling some questions, bouncing some to others. When someone asked about Doug, Peter bounced that one to me. I told them I'd spoken with him the previous day, and we all really, *really* wished he was here, like *right now*. That got some laughter, and a good smile from Barb in the back.

I did my part of the show. Peter and Bill had gotten some weird questions from a guy sitting in the second row near the right aisle. Pretty much as soon as I started my presentation, he interrupted and asked if this new architecture was going to be able to guarantee the same kind of growth we'd had over the last few quarters.

I stopped and shook my head. "Look," I told him, "my background is physics and mathematics. I don't think the growth rates we've seen in this industry are sustainable in a rational world." That got some laughter. I continued. "And if you want guaranteed growth, you shouldn't be talking to us, you should be talking to my uncle..."

I paused for a few seconds to see if he would take the bait. He did, so I told him, "He runs a sod farm in the Central Valley -- guaranteed growth."

That got laughter from the whole crowd, except for one individual. I gave Peter a sideways glance and he was laughing as well. Nancy, our PR gal, had her head in her hands. I went through the rest of my pitch without any more wild-ass questions from the second row.

We finished up with a general Q&A session. When we got a question about competition, who our biggest threat was, Peter gave that one to me.

I looked at Peter, then back at Barb. “The biggest threat to our current product, other than ignorance, is Pinwheel. I want to eat their lunch. Other than that, our biggest competitor is a bunch of kids sitting around a table somewhere, telling each other that we don’t know what the hell we’re doing, and they can do better. That’s the great thing about this business.”

That answer seemed to go down pretty well; Peter and Bill nodded their heads. Nancy seemed to like that one as well.

I was about to say, “Thank you, Barbara,” when Peter jumped back in to bring things to a close. We got a round of applause from those that didn’t immediately run for the doors. Some folks hung around for a few minutes for follow-up discussions.

I finally excused myself and went to the men’s room next door. I unzipped my pants as I stood in front of the urinal. As I started to pee I gave a loud sigh and said to the empty room, “Holy shit... What an ordeal... Actually, defending my Ph.D. thesis was worse. Of course I didn’t have Barb to help me then... God, I love being in her arms.”

When I walked back in the conference room, Peter and Bill were still laughing along with some of our hosts. Nancy had her head in her hands again, shaking her head back and forth. Barb looked a little red as she walked up to me and said, “Let me take this...” as she took the wireless mike off me. Oops...

To hell with it; as she started walking away I tapped her on the shoulder. She turned and I gave her a big hug. I wanted to give her a big kiss as well. Well I actually wanted to throw her on the floor and make love, but I do have some sense of decorum. So I settled for a hug, saying, “Thank you,” in her ear.

Peter walked over to us, followed by Nancy and one of our hosts. Peter clapped me on the shoulder as I separated from Barb. “You did great; much better than I expected.” Terry, one of our hosts agreed. Nancy nodded her head, smiling slightly.

I told her, “Nancy, you can’t tame engineering geeks...”

Barb put a hand on my back and said, “Oh I don’t know about that...”

It was my turn to blush, and to laugh along with the crowd. We moved next door to the small room, sat down, and debriefed for over an hour, going over pretty much everything. I was surprised at the notes Nancy had taken, what Peter and Bill remembered about audience reactions, and especially at the things Barb noticed. Once she started contributing, Peter and Bill

were impressed by what Barb added as an observer of people. We made some tweaks to our materials right there on the spot.

We wrapped up a little after five. We were sitting around the table packing things up when Bill looked over at me, then to Peter and said, “You going to tell him, or should I?”

I looked at Peter, giving him a frown. Peter chuckled at me and said, “Barbara, why don’t you come over and hold on to Alex.” Barb had been sitting down the table a ways from me; she got up and stood behind me, her hands on my shoulders. She gave them a squeeze and I took a deep breath, relaxing under her touch.

Peter smiled. “Alex, you did a terrific job, better than anyone expected. We’re doing Chicago, Phoenix, St. Louis, Boston, and New York in two weeks.”

I closed my eyes and let my head fall back against Barb. “That’s fine,” I said, “let me know how it goes...” I’d halfway been expecting that.

I heard Peter and Bill laugh, felt Barb shake a bit as she joined in. Then Peter said, “Actually, we thought you’d be there...”

“My eyes are closed -- I don’t know who you’re talking to,” I suggested hopefully.

I could feel Barb moving more as she laughed. She kneaded my shoulders a little; I wanted to let go but knew I shouldn’t. She said, “We’ll be there.”

I opened my eyes and smiled. The only thing I could see was her shelf right above me, a few wisps of her long hair. I raised my head off her tummy and looked at Peter. “We’ll be there,” I told him.

Peter gave me his fatherly smile. “Good. And Barbara, from what you spotted today, I would like you there as well.” Nancy was shaking her head affirmatively.

I put a hand on hers. “Yes, please.” I said softly.

Work in Progress
Rev 2/25/2002

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