

## Over Exposed

Featuring Linda Pearl, Private Eye

By Magda McKune

I sat behind my dark oak office desk as my gorgeous redheaded partner Carla McBain occupied the chair across from me. Ours wasn't so much an office as it was a converted stand-alone garage. We rarely needed it to house my little blue Honda Accord, so I had some friends put up walls to partition the building into three rooms; an anteroom for Carla, an office for me, and a storage area in back. A quaint little place to hang my shingle. Linda Pearl – Private Eye. Snoop for hire.

Carla sat in a padded chair with her feet up on my desk, her long slender legs stretched out before her as she read the morning paper. I think she was doing that on purpose so I could peek up under her short plum mini skirt. I leaned back in my desk chair and enjoyed the view. Damn, that girl was sexy. Miss McBain was what some genteel fellows might refer to as *stacked* with a perfect 38-26-36 figure. What's more, Carla liked to show off her exquisite physique by wearing skimpy skintight revealing apparel. Not that I minded at all. Carla was my lady lover and she liked to tease me and keep me excited. It certainly worked.

I was a tad more conservative in my choice of wardrobe. I typically opted for slacks or calf-length skirts with cotton blouses. Call it a throwback to my police department days as a crime scene investigator. Now that I was an official licensed private eye, I wanted to give our clients the impression that I was a no-nonsense kind of gal who took their problems seriously. Carla and I had a very harmonious partnership. She handled the office duties of billing and filing and internet research on potential suspects while I questioned witnesses and beat the pavement looking for clues.

There wasn't enough money in being a private investigator full time, so Carla and I worked a few nights a week at *The Doll House* gentleman's club. Carla was a topless waitress and I was a bartender – not topless, thank God. My figure was not what you would call overly stimulating – small boobs, narrow hips and an unimpressive butt. Roger King, the club owner, permitted me to wear a white tuxedo shirt, black slacks and black bowtie while tending bar. I preferred to think my classy apparel lend a bit of elegance and sophistication to the glorified girlie bar.

It was late morning and I was fighting the urge to get frisky with my lady lover. I felt I was gradually losing the battle. Business was slow that day anyway. No hot cases to solve, not criminals to apprehend, no adulterous spouses to catch in the act. Pretty quiet day for a lady private investigator.

As I ogled Carla's fabulous physique in that skimpy revealing outfit, I was feeling the mood to attack her sensuous body might strike at any minute. I propped my feet up onto my desk, my black pleated skirt sliding down my legs to my crotch. Maybe if I flashed a little leg the lady might take the hint.

Carla remained oblivious as she turned the page of her newspaper. "Hey, look at this," she said. "Here's a coupon for forty percent off on photography portraits."

"So?"

"So we can have our picture taken."

"Let me go get my digital camera from the dresser and I'll take your picture right now."

The girl lowered the paper and frowned at me. "I mean a nice, posed, professional portrait, not naked bedroom shots of us. I'm talking about a nice photograph of us together." Carla paused and tilted her head with a thoughtful look. "Then again, it might be fun to have a nude photo shoot of us together."

“So what’s wrong with that?”

I expelled my breath in a loud guffaw. “You want a nude portrait taken of us?”

“A professional *high-quality* nude portrait,” Carla grinned mischievously. “Think about it. It would be pretty sexy hanging on our bedroom wall, don’t you think? Guaranteed to get you in the mood.”

“I don’t need anything to get me in the mood for you, lover-girl. I’m quite certain that you don’t either.”

Carla set the paper aside and nodded. “It will be a lot of fun. You’ll see.” She reached for the phone book on the bottom shelf of the wall unit. “I’ll call the studio and make the appointment.”

“I see I can’t talk you out of this,” I grunted.

“It will only be our portrait,” Carla assured, leafing through the pages. “If they also do nudes, so much the better.” Carla smiled playfully at me. “I want a memento in the bedroom to constantly remind me of how sexy and arousing you are to me.”

I casually spread my legs wider for her. “You don’t need a memento, lover. You have me.”

Carla finally caught the hint. “Are you tempting me?”

“Who, me?”

“Yes, you.”

“Maybe,” I mused. “All this talk of posing naked with you has got my motor running.”

Carla grinned knowingly and set the phone book aside. “Oh it has, has it?”

“Definitely. I just want you to know how desirable you are to me.”

The woman rose to her feet and moved around the desk to me. “The feeling is mutual.” She leaned over to meet my lips in a tender kiss as her hand caressed between my legs. “Speaking of mutual feeling, I suggest we close up shop for the day and adjourn to the bedroom for some hot licking, kissing, and fondling action.”

I wrapped my arms around her neck and kissed her hungrily. “Most definitely.”

After a quick though energetic romp in the sack, I left the room to wash up while Carla looked for a portrait studio to book an appointment. I returned from the bathroom to find my lover lying on her tummy atop the bed, her sensuous naked form tangled in the rumpled bed sheets. I paused in the open doorway and grinned lustfully at her. “Damn, you are one incredibly sexy woman!”

Carla glanced up from leafing through the phone book and smiled coyly at me. “You always think I’m sexy.”

“Well at this moment, you are sexier than usual.”

“You’re so sweet.” I moved to the dresser and rifled through it. Carla shifted up onto her elbows with her arms crossed under her chest and asked, “What are you looking for?”

“This!” I removed my digital camera from the drawer and moved to the side of the bed. “You said you wanted to have a naked photo shoot.”

The girl laughed. “I didn’t mean right here, right now!”

“Aw, come on! You look so adorable!” I quickly snapped a picture. “Now give me a smile!”

My lover giggled and shook her head. “I love it when you’re so impulsive!”

“I love it when you’re so cooperative.” *Click!* “Now give me demure.”

Carla tossed her hair to one side to hang her long wavy red tresses over one bare shoulder. “Is this demure enough for you?”

“Oh yeah, baby!” I leered, snapping away. “You are so beautiful!”

The girl rose up onto all fours, the sheet falling away to expose her naked body. “How about this?”

“Holy crap!” I gasped as I clicked away. “That is so hot!”

“I’ll give you hot, lover-girl.” Carla tilted her head to one side, her long blood red hair slipping from her shoulder to the bed. She lifted one hand to cup her breast in her palm to the camera.

“Damn, that’s sexy!” I clicked away. My loins began to tingle with arousal. “Show me more!”

Carla sat up and raised her arms to pile her hair atop her head. The girl smiled sensuously at the camera. “Hot enough for you yet?”

“My God! You are the most desirable woman ever.”

Carla lowered her body to the mattress to lie on her side. She propped herself up on one elbow, the bed sheet draped across her crotch offering a titillating view of her naked torso.

“Holy Hannah!” I rasped in reverent awe. “That is the sexiest thing I have ever seen.”

Carla smiled demurely at me. “Come show me how desirable I am.”

I set the camera on the dresser and crawled on all fours onto the bed. “You certainly know how to get this lady all hot and bothered.”

“Oh really?”, she cooed. Carla wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled my mouth to hers. “Let help you with that.”

## Chapter 2

After yet another wild sex romp, I lay gasping and utterly spent among the rumpled bed sheets while my lover called a portrait studio she had located to inquire about availability. That gal's stamina never ceased to amaze me. Carla was far more limber and athletic than I was. She and I met at the police station several years ago when I was a crime investigator and she worked in the booking area and jail. Miss McBain had to be in prime physical shape for that position. After we left the police force Carla continued to routinely work out at the local gym. The only exercise I got was during mad sex marathons with my lady partner. I was definitely out of shape. I kept telling myself I needed to go to the gym and get a workout, but rationalized that one wild savage sex session with a sensuous redhead burned more calories than a two mile jog on a treadmill.

Carla found a place that could accommodate us that afternoon. Luckily she allowed us enough time to shower, do our hair, and choose some nice outfits to wear. It was a photo shoot, after all.

We arrived at the studio shortly after three. Harland's photography studio was a modest red wooden building set off beyond a small strip mall containing a sub sandwich shop, a public accountant and hair salon. They all shared the same parking lot.

I parked my tiny blue Honda Accord in front of the studio and climbed out. It seemed like a friendly and inviting place with wide glass windows across the front. The door opened to a waiting area with several chairs and assorted photography magazines atop a low wooden table. Large portraits of smiling brides and giggling babies adorned the dazzling white walls. Another door led to what I assumed was the studio area in back.

The owner, Oliver Harland greeted us warmly. He was a small unassuming man in his mid fifties with short gray hair. "Do you have any particular poses in mind?" he asked.

"Do you do naked portraits?" Carla asked.

I jabbed my partner in the ribs with my elbow. "My friend was hoping we could get a few nude shots together."

The man frowned with a puzzled expression. "Nudes?"

"Yes. Very tastefully done, if you can manage it," Carla grinned. "We want to have something sexy to hang on our bedroom wall."

"Very tastefully done," I nodded in agreement.

The man thoughtfully stroked his chin. "Well, normally I would shy away from that sort of thing. But if you pose with your hands over your breasts and your legs crossed, I don't see why not."

Carla squealed, "Great!" and began to undress.

"What are you doing?" Harland gaped in shock.

"I'm not shy," Carla explained as she removed her blouse baring her perfect bosom to the man. "I work part time as a topless waitress."

The photographer clapped his hand over his eyes. "That may be all well and good for you, but this sort of thing does not happen to me every day."

I chuckled at the shy man as I removed my top, figuring I may as well follow my partner's lead. As long as we were there and Carla had already flashed the man, we may as well go through with it. "Oliver, my boy, today is your lucky day." I stepped out of my slacks. "You may as well look, honey, unless you plan to take our picture with your eyes closed."

Harland parted his fingers and peeked at our naked bodies. "Oh my dear lord."

Carla shrugged casually and set her clothes aside. "I get that a lot."

"Look Oliver," I said, "we know we won't have nice bodies forever. That's why we came to you. We want some nice pictures of us while we're still young, and a real professional to make us look fantastic."

The man gulped audibly. "You sure don't need me to do that."

Carla smiled sweetly and patted his arm with her hand. "You are so adorable! Now, where do you want us?"

Harland gestured to a long white backdrop that hung along one wall and cascaded across the floor. "Sit on here . . . Miss Pearl, you sit in back with Miss McBain in front. That's it. Carla, sit on your hip with your legs out to the side. Draw up one knee a little to cover your crotch. Yes, perfect." The man quickly switched into professional mode, angling and posing us for the best possible shot. "Linda, wrap your arms around her and hold your right wrist with your left hand. That's good. Now raise your arms a little to hide her nipples. Excellent. Now, look at me and think demure. Linda, tilt your head to the left just a little. Perfect!"

*Click!*

"Now give me a playful smile. Beautiful!"

*Click!*

Oliver took a number of pictures of us in various poses and put the digital chip into a reader on his computer so we could view some of the snapshots.

They were incredible! Each picture was better than the last. My favorite was with Carla and me on the floor with me sitting behind the girl holding her in my arms. Carla's favorite was of us kneeling facing each other, our hands clasped at our sides and our breasts pressed together, our lips barely touching in a tiny kiss. Oliver particularly liked the one with Carla and I lying on our tummies next to each other with our bodies stretched out behind us. We were grinning at the camera, our arms crossed below us with our breasts touching the white canvas mat.

"I'll want a bunch of wallet size photos of this one for all the girls at the club," Carla smiled as she shrugged into her blouse.

"I'm going to give our boss Roger King an 8 by 10 glossy of this one for his Christmas present," I laughed.

I could tell our photographer was very pleased with the results. "You two ladies were very sexy and very photogenic. These pictures turned out much better than I expected."

I patted the man on the shoulder. "You are a true artist, Oliver. Then again, it does help to have good material to work with."

The man regarded me thoughtfully. "Would you mind posing for me again sometime? The two of you I mean?"

I gave him a wry smile. "Getting over your shyness, are we? Now that you've seen Carla and me in the buff, you can't get enough!"

"It's not that," he blushed. "I mean in formal gowns and stylish dresses. For advertising purposes, I mean. I can't afford to hire professional models to do it. I was hoping you two may be available for considerably less."

I smiled at my partner. "We'll do it for free, so long as you give us some of your best portraits of us in return."

"It's a deal!"

Carla adjusted her mini skirt and shrugged apathetically. "Personally, I think you should stick with the cheesecake shots. You're a natural."

Harland gave her a glance of embarrassment. “I took some of those types of pictures years ago when I needed the cash. It helped me get started in the business, but when they models got younger and younger, I stopped. Now I wish I hadn’t taken those at all. My past came back to bite me in the butt.”

“What do you mean?”

“I took some lingerie photos of some teenage girls – all totally legit, you understand. However some of those were just kids and the outfits were pretty revealing, bordering on child pornography. I didn’t want to release those pictures of those innocent young girls so I cancelled the shoot and hid the photos. I knew they would prove to be too embarrassing for those girls if they were made public. A few days ago my assistant discovered those old photos while he was cleaning out the shelves in the storage shed. He stole a few of them. I demanded that he give them back, but he wouldn’t. Eddie said they would make him a lot of money. That was my assistant’s name – Eddie Farmer. Eddie is a young fellow in his late twenties. The boy came cheap because he wanted to learn the trade from a professional. I hired him to do part-time work making enlargements and dressing up the set for special photo shoots. Eddie said he wanted to start his own photography business someday. He wanted to eventually make a career out of taking wedding pictures and shooting outdoor events. But when Eddie discovered the old pictures of those young girls and knew he had found a way to grab some fast cash. Eddie intended to use those pictures for blackmail purposes. I couldn’t find a way to get the photos back. I threatened and pleaded with the boy, but to no avail. Eddie was convinced those photographs were valuable and would make him a lot of money. I fired him on the spot. I refused to be mixed up in something tawdry and deceitful and wrong. I wish I had called the police, but I didn’t want those pictures falling into the wrong hands.” Harland sighed and wrung his hands nervously. “What a mess I made of things.”

“Well, maybe we can help,” I said. “Miss McBain and I happen to be private investigators.”

Harland furrowed his brow with disbelief. “You’re joking.”

“Nope.” I fished a business card out of my purse and handed it to him. “We can help recover the stolen pictures for you. That is, if you want us to.”

The photographer stared at the small white card. “I don’t know how I could possibly repay you.”

I patted the man on the sleeve. “Just make us look gorgeous in the next photo shoot and we’ll call it even.”

The man let out a sigh of relief. “The gods must have been listening to my pleas for help and sent you ladies to me.”

Carla gave a wry smile. “I’ve never been told I was the answer to someone’s prayers before.”

Harland gave us the address to Eddie’s apartment. The photographer fired his assistant over a week ago and had been struggled over calling the police about the stolen photographs. Harland surmised that would make matters worse. Admitting that the pictures existed would open up those poor ladies to a scandal for sure. Harland hoped Eddie would come to realize that what he was doing was wrong, but after a week of silence he became convinced that Eddie would follow through with his plans.

Eddie Farmer lived on the second floor of a three-story apartment building. The place was a real dive. Broken glass bottles decorated the stairway, loud music blasted from a room down the hall, and a sick baby was screaming its little head off. I hoped nobody was stripping my little blue car while we were visiting there.

I banged my fist on Eddie's door and called his name. No answer.

A very overweight unshaven man in a dirty gray tee shirt and bib overalls appeared from the stairwell and waddled up to us. He instantly reminded me of Junior Samples from *Hee Haw*. "What's all the ruckus about?" Fatso demanded. I couldn't help noticing his teeth and breath needed some serious attention.

"Are you the superintendant?" I asked.

"Who wants to know?"

"Private investigators working with the local police." I added the police part to add a tad more authority to our cause. "Does this apartment belong to Eddie Farmer?"

"I think so. I don't know his last name exactly. He moved in a few months ago and always paid in cash. Why?"

I raised my palm to silence him. I leaned my face closer to the door. "Do you smell that?"

The fat man tilted his face close to the door and sniffed. "Whew, that stinks! What is that?"

"I think I have a good idea," I grimaced, stepping away. "We better call the police."

I was a crime scene investigator for a number of years before becoming a private eye and knew that odor well. You never forget that smell, especially if the body had been dead for awhile. That was one aroma one never tends to forget.

I've seen a number of dead bodies since I became a private investigator. Mostly my cases involved fraudulent insurance claims and missing valuables but occasionally I would work a homicide case with the local police department.

I wasn't all too keen on assisting with this particular murder case. Judging from the odor emanating from the apartment, the poor fellow had been dead some time. Most likely didn't look too pretty either, I bet. I had a hunch Eddie's early demise had something to do with those stolen photographs. Quite a coincidence that a few days after he absconded with the naughty pictures from Harland, the man ended up dead.

About fifteen minutes later, two uniformed policemen arrived and had the disheveled Super unlock the apartment for them. Carla and I stood a discrete distance down the hall. Even at that range I could tell the stench was strong. The cops entered the apartment leaving our obese companion in the corridor with us.

I moved closer and peeked into the room. It was a mess. Either Farmer was an absolute slob or somebody tossed the place looking for something. I had a fairly good guess what it was.

One of the policemen pulled us back into the hallway. The name badge on his uniform said Bierman. "May I ask what you two ladies are doing here?"

"We are private investigators. We were hired to talk with Mister Farmer."

"About what?"

"That's confidential between us and our client."

"I see." Bierman glanced into the open door of the apartment. "It looks like a typical drug-related robbery. We get a lot of them in this neighborhood. The deceased obviously knew the killer. No sign of forced entry. The killer shot the man point blank in the head and took his cash. We found the victim's wallet empty. It looks like the apartment had been gone through as though the perp was searching for any valuables."

"I take it you called the homicide division?"

"Yes. I think Detective Sweet is on his way over."

“Guy Sweet? Good man. We’ve worked with him before. Do you mind if we stick around until he shows up?”

“Suit yourself. Just don’t touch anything in the crime scene.”

“No problem.”

My nose was not wrong. The stench was from his decaying corpse. Eddie Farmer was extremely dead. Luckily the window was partly open allowing some of the foul odor to escape. Otherwise the neighbors surely would have complained about the stink.

According to my estimation, the man had been dead two or three days. Gunshot wound to the head. Twenty-two caliber, if I wasn’t too mistaken.

About twenty minutes later Police Detective Guy Sweet arrived on the scene. I knew Guy from when I was an investigator on the police force and he was working robbery. It was glad he made detective. As I recall, he was one of the few who objected to the mandate to dismiss Carla and me due to our sexual orientation. “Miss Pearl,” he stated formally. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I’m working on a case for a client. Eddie stole something from him.”

“I’ll need to know the name of this client,” Guy said. “If Mister Farmer here stole something, it looks like someone was desperate to get it back. Like maybe your client, for example. I’ll need to establish that person’s whereabouts at the time of the murder.”

“And if he owns a gun,” I added dryly.

“Exactly.”

“I understand.” I wandered casually about the rooms glancing around for the stolen pictures. It was possible Oliver Harland bumped off Eddie Farmer in retaliation for the boy stealing the photographs. Perhaps Harland couldn’t locate the missing pics and hired us to find them. “You mind if I take a few pictures of the crime scene?” I asked.

Sweet shrugged with indifference. “Knock yourself out.”

I removed my digital camera from my purse and switched it on. “What the hell?” I frowned. “Disc full.” I set the display to show the images on the disc. “Oh,” I winced sheepishly. “That’s why.”

Guy peered over my shoulder as I scrolled through the photos of Carla posing seductively on the bed. “Holy shit!” he exclaimed.

“Can’t delete that one,” I mused. “Or that one . . . and *definitely* not that one.”

Carla materialized at my elbow. “HmMMM, that’s nice,” she grinned.

“Do you have a spare memory chip?” Sweet asked.

“Of course.”

“Let me borrow the one that’s in the camera.”

“What? Why?”

“I want to download them for my own personal use before you delete them.”

“Your own personal use!” Carla snorted with her hands on her hips. “You and about a hundred other cops.”

“Consider this a gesture of special appreciation for the thankless job of being an underpaid civil servant.”

“Not on your life,” Carla smirked. “If these pictures got circulated among the boys at the station, it would give a whole new meaning to the term *beat cop*.”

The man winced sheepishly as I ejected the data chip and tucked it in the pocket of my slacks. “You can’t blame a man for trying.”

I put a blank disc into the camera and took some pictures of the dead body and the living room. Carla called to me from the bathroom. Sweet and I joined her. The bathroom was set up to be a makeshift darkroom. I noticed some of the materials had been used.

“Amateur photographer?” Guy asked.

“He used to work for one.” I moved a metal tray to reveal some snapshots hidden underneath. Apparently the murderer did not make a thorough search of the bathroom after he killed Eddie.

“What’s this?” Guy asked, picking up the pictures.

I glanced at the photos in his hand. They were of a blonde teenage girl, very pretty and nearly naked. She was dressed in skimpy naughty lingerie, each photo more revealing than the last.

“Just some dirty pictures,” I snorted in disgust, snatching them away from him. “As you said, he was an amateur photographer.”

“Let me see those,” Sweet insisted.

“Don’t be such a pervert.”

“These are evidence, Miss Pearl, and you know it.” Guy took the pictures away from me and examined them in closer detail. “One of these ladies may be our killer.”

“I doubt that. They’re only kids.”

“I’ve seen kids younger than these do some pretty nasty things.” Sweet furrowed his brow with a perplexed expression. “Hey! I think I know this girl.”

Carla glanced over his shoulder. “Oh my God!” she gasped. “He’s right! That’s Trista Purnell!”

“Who?” I asked.

“The famous fashion model. These must have been taken years ago when she was much younger. Ten years ago at least.”

The police detective frowned at me. “How could an amateur photographer have in his possession a photograph of a supermodel from ten years ago?”

I raised my palm to him. “All right, all right. I’ll come clean. I’ll tell you everything, only let’s get away from this dead body and this foul stench first.”

“Fair enough.”

I led the way out of the apartment complex to my little Honda in the parking lot. I was relieved to find it was still there and not up on blocks. I leaned my butt onto the front fender and crossed my arms over my chest. “Our client is Eddie Farmer’s former employer, Oliver Harland. He hired us to get those pictures back for him.”

“Where did Harland get them?”

“He took them himself years ago and hid them in his personal files. Harland told us Eddie stole those photographs from him. Harland begged Farmer to give them back. Harland was afraid Farmer would try to blackmail Miss Purnell with those photos. Apparently the man tried his hand at blackmail and got a bullet in the brain for his trouble.”

“Or maybe Harland shot Farmer to get the photos back.”

“I thought about that. If Harland called the police and had you discover the body, you’d find those photographs too. They’d be booked as evidence. I doubt he would take the risk. Eddie was dead at least two days, maybe three. That’s a long time to leave a corpse while you ponder what to do about it. I can’t imagine Harland sending us over here to investigate knowing that Farmer was already dead.”

“Maybe Harland was getting anxious for someone to discover the body.”

“He could have made an anonymous phone call to the police to do that.”

Sweet nodded in agreement. “You realize I have to ask Harland if he had anything to do with Farmer’s murder.”

“Yes, I know. You want Carla and me to help you out on this case?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not really.”

Sweet drew in and expelled a long breath. “In that case, I will accept your help, Miss Pearl.”

I extended my hand to him. “Call me Linda.”

The man accepted my shake. “Guy.”

“The photos, if you please, Guy.”

“What? Why?”

“Carla and I are going to pay a visit to Miss Trista Purnell and ask if she was being blackmailed by Eddie Farmer. I think she may be a bit more forthcoming if two ladies approached her rather than a hard ass cop.”

The detective scowled at me as he handed over the pictures. “I am not a hard ass.”

Carla moved up to him and patted him on the rear. “No honey, you have a very nice ass.”

Sweet snorted and ruefully shook his head. “I know I’m going to regret this.”

We hopped into my car and headed home. I furrowed my brow with a perplexed expression. “So how do you propose we go about finding Trista Purnell?”

“Leave that to me,” Carla smiled. “I’m the computer genius of this partnership, remember? If she’s anywhere on the web, I’ll find her.”

I grinned and patted her knee with my hand. “I love it when you flaunt your brains at me, lover-girl!”

“How’s about we stop and pick up some food on the way? I could eat something.”

“Me too. I worked up quite an appetite modeling at Harland’s. Let’s get something with a great aroma to counteract the stench in my nostrils.”

“Chinese takeout?”

“Perfect!”

Carla selected the speed-dial number to ‘Wok Fast’ on her cell phone and placed an order for pick-up. A few minutes later we had moo goo gai pan and pineapple chicken from the drive-up window. Fast and easy, and we didn’t even have to leave the car.

My partner set up her laptop on the island counter in the kitchen while I fixed our food onto dinner plates. Carla was whiz at navigating the internet. “Hot diggety!” she exclaimed in victory as she brought up a screen displaying Trista’s portrait. “Miss Purnell is working for a modeling agency called ‘Crystal Blue’ right here in town. I have an address and a telephone number.”

I moved behind her and wrapped my arms around her waist and nibbled her neck. “You know how much it turns me on when you flaunt how brilliant you are.”

“*Yeah yeah,*” she sighed, patting my hand over her tummy. “I’m not simply another pretty face, I know.”

“You have a pretty everything, my love.”

Carla turned her head and met my lips in a quick smooch. “If we didn’t have hot food ready, I would show you my pretty everything.”

I kissed her neck and hugged her body. “That’s what microwaves are for.”

My friend giggled. “Food first, and then we’ll see.”

“You are such a tease!”

Crystal Blue modeling agency was understandably reluctant to give out the location of Miss Purnell's photo shoot that afternoon. I managed to persuade the young lady receptionist by informing her that I was a private investigator working with Police Detective Sweet and she could call the police department to verify my story if she liked. It was either us or the cops and we were far nicer to deal with. The lass eventually acquiesced and told us that Trista was at a studio on the North Side of town.

Carla and I met a security guard at the door. He was a good-looking young black man with a shaved head and dark walnut eyes. I flashed a business card to the fellow. "Linda Pearl, private investigator," I stated matter-of-factly. "This is my partner Carla McBain. We're working on a case with the police department and would like to ask Miss Purnell a few questions. Would that be all right?"

"Questions about what?"

"I'd rather not say at the moment. It would only take a minute or two. Do you think she'd mind?"

"Well . . ."

Carla moved closer to the man and cooed seductively. "What's your name, handsome?"

He stared at her. "Uh . . . Ken."

"We would be very grateful, Ken, if we could have a word or two with Miss Purnell." Carla opened the top two buttons of her blouse. "Very grateful indeed."

The guard swallowed audibly. "Oh, well . . . I guess it would be all right. But don't interrupt the photo shoot, okay?"

Carla smiled seductively. "Thank you ever so much, honey-bun."

The guard opened the door for us to enter. I gripped Carla's elbow and ushered her through the door. "Honey bun?" I scowled.

My partner grinned with satisfaction and buttoned her blouse. "It worked, didn't it?"

I let out my breath in an irritated huff. "How come the hot looking babes with the perfect bodies always manage to get doors opened for them?"

Carla giggled with amusement. "That's why you have me along."

The photography set was little more than a big empty garage. I think they used to work on semis and dump trucks in the building before that. There was a huge open space with a grayish sheet on the floor and a black backdrop suspended from metal poles. A number of bright lights illuminated the area from high telescoping stands. I guess they needed the space to get the proper lighting effect and have plenty of room to move about for the best camera angles. Plus they needed extra room for makeup tables and a booth for costume changes. I suppose I imagined a lavish Hollywood set with people bustling back and forth pushing racks of clothing and a director with a pencil thin moustache hollering through a paper cone, "Quiet on the set!" This was nothing more an abandoned garage with fake furniture and muslin backdrops. So much for the glamorous world of high-fashion photography.

We found Miss Purnell seated in a chair by a makeup table with a large lighted mirror. A slender young lady with short auburn hair was touching up the model's mascara. Trista's normally shoulder-length blonde hair was now a pile of tight curls atop her head with a few twisted strands dangling beside her ear. She wore a white and gold tunic and looked like a genuine Greek Goddess. Even at a distance I could tell she was a very beautiful woman.

I walked over to her side. "Miss Purnell?"

Trista moved her eyes to see me without turning her head. The makeup girl dabbed at her lashes. "Oh hello!" the model lilted prettily. "I didn't realize this was a group session."

“I beg your pardon?”

Miss Purnell’s attendant turned to her supplies on the vanity table. The model gave us a bright warm smile. “I’m so glad you can join me on this shoot. It makes me feel rather self-conscious when I have to pose on a set all by myself.”

“Well, actually we’d like to chat with you for just a moment.”

“Yes yes, I know . . . you are my biggest fans, admire my work, etcetera, etcetera. We can talk all you want after this session is over, okay?”

I glanced at Carla and she returned an apathetic shrug. “Okay.”

“Wonderful! Hey, Larry! Come over here, will you?”

A tall man with a gray beard in a red polo shirt and tan slacks came over to us. A Nikon camera hung from a strap around his neck and I deduced he was most likely the photographer. “Yes?”

“Larry, I think it would be absolutely marvelous if these two models were to be in the shot with me. I mean, I’m supposed to be some sort of goddess, right? These ladies . . . what were your names again?”

“I’m Linda and this is Carla.”

“Linda and Carla can be like nymphs in the background. It would add a bit more animation and depth to the shot, don’t you think?”

Larry looked at us and nodded thoughtfully. “Sure. Why not?” He glanced over at the set. “Hey Stan! Get me a roll of that sheer white gossamer fabric we’re using for the backdrop. I want to make some makeshift togas for these two girls.” He turned to me. “You don’t have a problem wearing semi see-through, do you?”

“Hell no,” Carla snorted. “We both did a nude sitting only a couple hours ago.”

I balked slightly. Those shots were a private performance. These would get national exposure. However, I kept my mouth shut. I needed to get some answers from Miss Purnell. Besides, it wouldn’t be too revealing. We would be wearing garments after all.

“Great! Go with Stan and he’ll get you set up.”

Carla and I followed Larry over to a heavy set dark-haired man with horn rimmed glasses. He was already gathering up a bolt of semi-transparent fabric for us to wear. Carla glanced at me and asked, “We’re nymphs?”

“Not nymphs, *nymphs*. Female playthings.”

She shrugged. “Same difference.”

We stepped into a side room and quickly peeled off our clothes. This undressing for strangers was starting to become a habit. Good thing I had my beautiful and curvaceous partner along to draw the attention away from my unexceptional body or else I might feel a bit self-conscious about the whole ordeal.

Stan cut some of the see-through fabric and fashioned some wrap-around togas for us. The man didn’t seem to be all that aroused by our blatant nudity. I guess he had seen enough models changing off-stage to make him somewhat cavalier about the whole thing.

Larry grinned widely as we strolled up to him in our bare feet and sheer outfits. Our skin showed through the opaque material like silhouettes making our bodies appear light and ethereal like a couple of angels or fairies.

“Perfect!” he nodded. “Go up onto the set, behind Trista.”

We walked onto a staged area that looked like a Roman bath house. There were tall white Styrofoam columns and statues that looked like they were made of marble and draped sheer material

similar to what we were wearing hanging from the dark gray backdrop. Trista lay on her side atop a stone curved bench propped up on one elbow. The photographer began snapping away, asking us to float and flit and dance behind her, tossing flower petals and olive leaves into the air. It was actually a lot more fun than I thought it would be.

It felt a little silly prancing around as a woodland nymph. Carla of course had no inhibition about dancing half naked for strangers. Hell, the lady bared a lot more and for a bigger audience at the gentleman's club. But this was different. We were supposed to act sweet and innocent and ethereal. I pretended I was a ballet dancer in *Swan Lake* and my transparent toga was a tutu. I skipped about on tiptoe and twirled around my impish partner. Carla's big boobs made her look more like Aphrodite than a flittering and floating fairy.

"Excellent!" Larry exclaimed as he set his camera aside. "You two lovely ladies really made the shot come alive!"

"It was fun!" Carla laughed. "I hope we didn't flash too much skin in these revealing outfits."

The man dismissed her with a flap of his wrist. "Don't sweat it. I can always airbrush out any over exposed areas from the final product." He gave Trista a smooch on the cheek. "You were marvelous, as always."

"Thanks, Larry." The model led us over to the makeup table. "I couldn't see what you were doing behind me, but Larry sure loved it."

"We were dancing and floating around like a couple of screwballs," Carla laughed.

"I'm so glad you joined me," Trista sighed with relief. "When Larry is alone with me, he gets to be so bossy and demanding, 'Raise your eyebrow! Turn your chin! Give me more! Give me more!'" Trista sat in the makeup chair and beamed brightly at us. "You made it more fun that it usually is for me. Thanks a lot." She pulled a baby wipe from the dispenser and began to remove her makeup. "So what did you want to talk to me about?"

I glanced down at my nearly transparent garment. "Well, seeing myself in this skimpy outfit almost fits in with what we wanted to ask you. I understand you posed for some very revealing photos in rather racy negligees when you were younger."

Trista frowned at the mirror as she dabbed at her eyeliner. "I don't remember every photo shoot I ever did. Sorry."

I nodded to my partner. "Carla honey, would you please get my purse from our clothes in the changing room?"

"Sure."

Carla wandered off and I turned to the model. "Has anyone approached you in the last few days demanding money for some pictures that were taken of you some years ago?"

"No." She glanced at me. "You sound like a detective on one of those police shows."

"Actually, I'm a private investigator working on a case with the local police department."

"What? Are you telling me you're not models?"

"I'm afraid not."

Her jaw dropped in shock. "Oh my gosh! I am so sorry! You two gals were so pretty I thought you were a couple of models sent here by the agency! How embarrassing!"

I rested my hand on her arm. "It's all right," I grinned. "Carla and I had a blast posing with you."

"You really mean that?"

"Yes I do. It was a lot of fun."

Trista checked out Carla's figure through the see-through garment when she returned with my purse. "You can't blame me too badly. You really do look like models."

“That’s very sweet of you to say.” Carla removed the photo we found in Eddie’s apartment and asked, “Do you recognize this picture?”

Miss Purnell took the snapshot from me and expelled a loud guffaw. “Oh my gosh! I look so young! This must have been taken when I was eighteen!”

“I take it nobody has shown you this picture and demanded money from you for it.”

“No. I would have remembered that.” She handed the photo back to me and gave me a curious expression. “Demanded money?” she asked. “Why on earth for?”

“Your wardrobe was rather revealing.”

Trista flapped a wrist to dismiss me. “Hell, what I’m forced to wear these days is much more scandalous. She looked at me with a puzzled frown and asked, “Why? Has something happened?”

“The police found this picture in a man’s apartment. They wanted to make sure the man didn’t try to extort money out of you for it.”

“You mean like blackmail?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Carla shrugged. “Well, it is rather revealing and a tad racy for a teenager. A picture like that could potentially hurt your career.”

“Now that you mention it, I suppose you’re right. I don’t do cheesecake shots. Only high fashion and advertising promotions. This is a tad naughtier than the type of pictures I take these days.”

“Did you do a lot of that when you were younger?” Carla asked.

“No. Only that one time. I was new to the business and didn’t know any better. Me and three other girls I think got that job to model some very sexy lingerie. It was quite revealing, a step or two below Victoria’s Secret, as you can see. The photographer was a very nice man as I recall, and he argued that young teenage girls should not be seen in erotic sleepwear like that. I think he talked the promoter out of using the pictures after all. At least, I never saw them released.” She smiled at me with fond recollection. “Such a nice man. He paid us for our time out of his own pocket. I remember how touching it was for him to watch out for a group of complete strangers like that.”

We snapped our attention to a man in a dark blue double-breasted blazer hurrying over to us. He had slicked back hair and a pencil thin moustache. I thought his salmon ascot was not the most suitable choice to go with that jacket but I didn’t say anything.

“Sorry I’m running late,” he apologized, smooching Trista on the cheek. “I had a hundred phone calls to make.” He glanced at me, his eyes panning my near-nudity in the sheer garment. “Who are you?”

“This is Linda and that is Carla,” Trista announced. “Ladies, allow me to introduce my agent, Carl Wheeler.”

The man did not offer his hand to shake. “Did the agency send you?”

“No. Actually we stopped by to visit with Miss Purnell and she invited us to be in the photo shoot with her.”

Wheeler’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Did she now?” Apparently he did not like his client sharing the spotlight with anyone unless he approved it.

“Yes Carl,” Trista smiled sweetly. “It was so much more fun with the two of them joining me than it would have been all by lonesome.”

The agent snorted nonplussed. “What exactly was the reason for you two ladies to just happen by?”

“They’re private investigators!” the model gushed giggly. “Isn’t that fascinating!”

Wheeler's face took on a stony expression. "Are they now?" Apparently he didn't like private eyes snooping around his photo shoot either.

I nodded. "We're working with the police on a case that may affect Miss Purnell." I handed the man the photograph. "This is one of several revealing pictures that were taken by a local photographer a number of years ago. The police were concerned that Miss Purnell might have been approached by the man who stole them in order to extort money from her."

The agent's expression remained unchanged. "One of several," he murmured under his breath, glancing briefly at the photo. "I see." He handed the picture back to me. "I hope you catch the creep."

"I believe we already have. We're merely helping the police tie up a few loose ends, that's all."

Wheeler glanced at his watch, appearing a bit agitated. "I have a number of errands to run. Good luck ladies with your investigation." He kissed Trista on the cheek. "I'll call you later."

"Goodbye Carl." The man hurried from the room. "Carl is always running here and there," Trista sighed, "taking care of every little detail for me so I don't have to worry about it." Miss Purnell beamed brightly at me and rested her hand on my arm. "What do you say we go back to my place for a cocktail? You can tell me all about your exciting life of being a private eye."

"Sure," Carla smiled graciously. "Sounds like fun."

I grabbed hold of my partner's elbow and muttered. "Will you excuse us for a moment?" I ushered Carla to a few feet away. "What do you think you're doing?"

"What?"

"In case you have forgotten, Miss Purnell is a prime suspect in a murder investigation. It would not be in our best interests to become bosom buddies with her right now."

"*Au contraire, mon cher.* I think it is a great idea. Getting her comfortable on her own home turf might make the lady open up and be more forthcoming with information about the case. She may tell us things over a martini that she may not otherwise reveal with a bunch of photographers and her micromanaging agent skulking about."

I frowned at my partner. "Damn it, you are so sexy when you flaunt your brains at me like that."

Carla smiled. "You go back to Trista's place and probe her about the case. I'll take the car and do a little probing of my own."

"Like what?"

"I'll call Guy Sweet and have him check Farmer's phone records to see if he called the studio, Miss Purnell, or her agent Carl Wheeler." Carla smiled demurely and adjusted the makeshift toga over her near-nakedness. "But first I'm going to grill that security guard Ken to see if he had seen Eddie lurking around the set. Maybe the man saw something useful."

I frowned at her. "Aren't you going to change first?"

Carla grinned knowingly. "I'll probably get more answers out of him this way." She gave me a peck on the cheek and turned away. "Catch you later!"

"Naughty girl," I snorted under my breath. I crossed back to our hostess. "Carla has to leave to pursue another angle of inquiry, but I'm free for a while to join you if you like."

Miss Purnell beamed broadly. "I would love it! Give me a moment to get changed and we'll be off."

I glanced down at my revealing attire. "I suppose I better change too."

I left my car keys with Carla's clothes in the dressing booth and hitched a ride with Trista, thinking I'd hail a cab from her place later. I was surprised Miss Purnell had such an open and

friendly personality. I expected someone of her celebrity status to be more distant and aloof. Perhaps it was the novelty of my profession that intrigued her.

Miss Purnell led us to a sparkling white Lexus with gold trim around the wheel wells and windows. “Nice ride,” I nodded with approval.

Trista smiled and pressed the button on her keychain to unlock the doors. “It helps to maintain my supermodel image to be seen driving a stylish car.”

I moved to the passenger door as she crossed to the driver’s side. “I think I understand. When we first met you, you mentioned something about besieged by adoring fans.”

“Not so much anymore,” she sighed ruefully, opening her door. “I suppose it is both a blessing and a curse. Not being mobbed by fans means I’m not as popular as I once was.” Trista expelled her breath in a deep sigh. “Fame is such a fleeting and fickle thing.”

I smiled with genuine sincerity over the roof of the car at her. “Well I for one happen to think you are absolutely gorgeous.”

Miss Purnell beamed brightly. “Thanks! Hop in!”

We jumped into her car and Trista pulled away from the lot. “So how long has Carl Wheeler been your agent?” I asked casually.

Trista glanced over at me from the driver’s side with a wide smile. “Are you grilling me?”

I laughed. “I was trying my best to make it sound like relaxed conversation.”

Miss Purnell giggled with glee. “How thrilling! I feel like I’m in an episode of *Cagney and Lacy!*” She glanced at me. “Carl has been my agent for about four years now. He handles everything for me – my appointments, my interviews, my photo shoots – everything. He discovered me in a modeling agency among about a dozen other girls. For some reason he took an immediate shining to me. I don’t know why. Maybe he thought he discovered the next super star like Marylyn Monroe or something. I suppose in a way he had. Carl took me under his wing and in less than a year my face was everywhere. My name became a household word.”

“Sounds like a real Cinderella story.”

My companion nodded soberly to the windshield. “I guess so.”

“You don’t sound all that happy about it.”

“Carl is very controlling. He not only organizes my life, he runs it. I’m not allowed to go anywhere or do anything without his knowing about it. That includes dating. I can’t see anyone that doesn’t meet his approval first. Even then, it has to be someone who will advance my career. Definitely not someone who could damage my image or cause a scandal. Forget about chemistry or sexual desire. It’s all just one big show.” Trista expelled her breath in exasperation. “Do you have any idea how frustrating it is not to be able to be intimate with someone unless another person gives you their blessing first?”

“I can’t say I’ve ever had that problem. You see, Carla is not only my business partner, but she’s my bed partner as well. We worked at the police department together for years until the mayor passed down an edict that officers had to conform to a rigid code of decency. That included no relationships other than the heterosexual kind. Carla and I left the force and started our own private detective agency. We do everything together and are true partners in every sense of the word.”

“You are a very lucky woman.”

“Yes, I happen to think I am very lucky indeed.”

Trista grinned at me. “Grill me some more!”

“Okay. What would be the worst case scenario if those old photos of you were to be made public?”

Trista casually shrugged a shoulder. “There would probably be a minor scandal over it. I guess I’m seen as America’s sweetheart; the pretty girl next door, so to speak. Seeing me in those revealing pictures would tarnish my squeaky clean image a bit I suppose. I would be seen as more of a Playboy Playmate than a fashion model. I’d get offers to pose in girlie magazines and skimpy lingerie. No big deal. I’m not getting any younger you know. I’m rapidly approaching the ripe old age of thirty, which is downright elderly in this business. I know I can’t be a fashion model forever. If people want to see more of my skin, so what? I’m not as young and sexy as I used to be. I have a few wrinkles and sags here and there. Heck, in ten years they’ll be begging me to cover this body up and not expose any skin at all.”

“You are a very pretty woman,” I stated honestly. “You have a great figure and are still very sexy.”

Trista smiled at me and noticed the genuine sincerity on my face. “That’s very nice of you to say.” She returned her attention to the road. “I guess those pictures might cause quite a stir, but they wouldn’t ruin me. Merely a bump in the road of life. I may no longer be sought after as a top fashion model, but I wouldn’t be devastated by it. Life goes on.”

I nodded to the buildings passing by my window. “I suppose so.” I thought about the reaction Carl Wheeler gave when I showed him those photos. Come to think of it, he showed no reaction at all. Strange that the man would not be shocked or angered or embarrassed at seeing his client in skimpy naughty lingerie. One would think that picture would get some sort of rise out of him.

Unless he saw it before.

I quickly drew in a sharp breath. “Stop the car!”

Trista slammed on the brakes, the vehicle coming to a screeching halt in the middle of the road. I glanced out the back window, grateful that nobody was following us or we’d have caused a pileup in the middle of the street.

My partner gaped at me, her eyes wide. “What is it?”

“Pull over.” Trista steered the car to the side of the road. “Tell me, Trista; does Carl Wheeler own a gun?”

Miss Purnell furrowed her brow with a perplexed expression. “I think so. He bought one a few months ago for my protection in case I was accosted by some crazy stalker or overly amorous fan. Why?”

“Because if I’m not mistaken, we have no time to lose if we want to save a man’s life.”

“What do you mean?”

“Head for the East Side of town and I’ll explain everything on the way.”

Trista gasped, her eyes wide. “How thrilling! I feel like Angie Dickinson on *Police Woman!*” She pulled the car into traffic. “Trista and Linda are off to save the day!”

I dug my cell phone out of my purse and called the police department in my speed dial list. “Let me talk to Detective Sweet.”

Trista glanced at me. “Sweet?”

“Guy Sweet. It’s his name.”

“Oh.”

The detective got on the line. “Sweet here.”

“This is Linda Pearl. Meet me at Harland’s studio. Unless I’m wrong, our killer is there demanding the rest of those old photos. Oliver’s life may be in danger. Trista and I will be there in a few minutes.”

“Trista Purnell?”

“Yes. I’ll explain later. Hurry!”

My companion glanced at me. “I take it Carl is the man we’re after?”

“Yes. You told me yourself that he is very protective of you. I’m betting he’d go to any lengths to keep those photographs from being made public.”

She frowned as she drove. “All this over a bunch of old pictures?”

“This isn’t just your career we’re talking about. It’s Carl’s too. If word got out that his client posed for borderline kiddie porn, he’s become a laughing stock. In his mind, Wheeler is fighting for his life.”

We pulled into the parking lot of Harland’s studio and noticed a black Mercedes already in the lot. “That’s Carl’s car,” Trista said.

“I hope we’re not too late.” I climbed out of the car and hurried to the door. Miss Purnell hustled to my side. I turned to her. “It might be safer if you waited out here.”

“Not on your life! We’re a team and this is one caper you’re not going to talk me out of.”

“All right. Just stay behind me.” I checked the knob. It was unlocked. I eased open the door and peeked inside. Trista pressed her body close to my back and peered over my shoulder to see. Oliver Harland was facing away from us in a chair, his body bound with a long piece of cord. I didn’t spot any other people in the room. “Stay close,” I whispered to my partner.

“Right.”

I crept into the room over to Oliver’s side. He had a cut on his lip and his eye was swollen. The man appeared groggy but conscious. Wheeler must have tried to beat the information out of him. I struggled to untie the knot on Harland’s wrists. It appeared to be some cord from the drawstrings used to roll up Oliver’s canvas backdrops. Heavy braided nylon cord too thick and tight for me to untie. “We’re going to get you out of here, Oliver,” I murmured into his ear. “Where is Wheeler?”

“In my office,” he groaned. “That crazy man came in here demanding the photos of Miss Purnell. I didn’t know who he was. I wasn’t going to give anything to that creep that he could use against that lovely lady. She doesn’t deserve to suffer because of something I did years ago.”

Trista moved to his other side. “You are such a brave man to protect my honor like that.”

Harland turned his face to her. “Miss Purnell! What are you doing here?”

“We came to save you.”

I fought with the binds at his wrists. They were too tight. I needed to find something to cut him loose. Carl Wheeler returned from the office with a bunch of photographs in his left hand. “This better be all of them – ” He stopped at the sight of me and his client beside his bound captive. “Trista! What are you doing here?”

“Miss Pearl told me you were behind this. I didn’t want to believe her. How you could be mixed up in something so awful?”

“This isn’t what it looks like.”

“It looks like you have been beating this poor innocent man.”

“Innocent?” Wheeler cursed, shaking the photos in his fist angrily at us. “It was the girls in these pictures who were the innocent ones. What kind of man takes filthy photographs of children in disgusting erotic outfits like these?”

“Mister Harland was trying to protect Miss Purnell,” I stated firmly.

“And so am I.”

“By murdering a man?”

Trista balled her fists on her hips and scowled angrily at her agent. “Carl! How could you?”

“Eddie Farmer was nothing but a thief and a dirty blackmailer. He could have ruined you.”

“But did you have to kill him?”

“He left me no choice. I demanded he give me the photographs. Farmer said if I didn’t pay he’d sell them to the highest bidder. I refused to deal with that filthy little lowlife. I pulled my gun on him and demanded he give the pictures to me. Farmer started crying like a baby and said he only found the photographs and didn’t have the negatives. I shot the filthy little scum to shut him up. I thought the matter was over until Miss Pearl showed the picture again. I knew I needed to find the negatives before this situation turned into a scandal.”

Trista scowled at the man. “No picture of me is worth a man’s life!”

“It wasn’t only your life I was thinking about, but mine as well,” Wheeler snarled. “Farmer would have brought you down into the gutter with these tawdry photos. I worked too long and too hard to let that happen. He was a miserable thief and blackmailer. It was no big loss if he was eliminated.”

Harland winced in the chair beside me. “Would anyone mind if someone cut this cord off of me? My wrists are beginning to throb and my hands are going numb.”

“Shut up!” Wheeler barked.

Trista gaped at him incredulous. “I can’t believe you’d let something from my past drive you to such madness.”

“I did it for you, Trista,” Carl explained. “I did it for us.” He removed a pistol from his coat pocket and pointed it at Harland’s head. “I want those negatives. Tell me where they are or you’ll join your dirty little assistant Farmer. I’ve killed before and won’t hesitate to do so again.”

“He doesn’t have them,” I blurted. “I do.”

Wheeler and Miss Purnell looked at me and asked in unison, “You do?”

“Yes. After I discovered Eddie Farmer’s body, I told Mister Harland about it. Oliver got worried that someone would come after him as well. He gave me the negatives for safe keeping.”

Carl pointed the gun at me and held out his palm. “Give them to me.”

“Promise me you won’t shoot me.”

“I promise you I will if you don’t hand them over.”

I removed the data chip from the pocket in my slacks and gave it to him. “Now go away and leave us alone.”

“Not before I verify these are genuine.” Wheeler moved to a laptop computer on a side table, all the while keeping the barrel of the gun trained on my chest. He inserted the chip into an adapter and clicked on the image viewer. “What the hell!”

Trista gaped at the naughty images of Carla posing seductively on the bed. “Those aren’t of me.”

I frowned with a puzzled look. “They’re not? Gosh, imagine that.”

Guy Sweet suddenly burst through the door. “Drop your weapon!” he demanded.

“It’s about time you got here,” I snorted with my hands clamped on my hips. “This psycho was about to shoot us all.”

Harland turned his head to me. “Please don’t irritate the man with the gun pointed at us.”

“You drop it,” Wheeler snarled, aiming his gun at me. “Or I shoot your private eye girlfriend.”

“I am not his girlfriend!” I protested hotly.

Trista scowled at her agent. “Carl, if you shoot her, I promise I’ll never speak to you again.”

Wheeler gestured his gun barrel at me. “Step aside, cop. I’m walking out of here or your private eye friend gets it.”

I put my hand on Trista's shoulder and shoved the woman aside. She fell onto a pile of canvas backdrops. I wrapped my arms around Harland and pulled him to the floor. I dived on top of him as gunfire suddenly exploded around us.

I lay on top of the man and listened. All was quiet. I didn't feel like I was bleeding anywhere, thank God. I looked at the man pinned under me. "Oliver, are you all right?"

"You're crushing my arm under my side, but other than that, I think so."

I climbed off him and looked around. Wheeler lay on the floor on his stomach facing away from us. He wasn't moving. I glanced at Guy. He was leaning against the wall holding his right arm. It was bleeding. "You're hit!" I said.

"Just a flesh wound." He moved to help Trista to her feet. "Are you all right?"

"I'm okay." She looked at Carl. "Is he dead?"

"I imagine so."

"You saved my life!" Trista squealed with joy. She hooked her hands behind the cop's neck and kissed him passionately on the mouth. After a long embrace she let him up for air and grinned widely. "My hero!"

The detective smiled shyly and held his bleeding arm. "I'm glad I could be of assistance, Miss Purnell."

"Call me Trista," she cooed adoringly. "My previous agent never let me date anyone." She smiled demurely at the man. "I have a feeling that aspect is going to change."

Harland groaned from the toppled chair on the floor. "Would someone please untie me?"

Carla stood barefoot on the bed and adjusted the portrait on the wall above the headboard. "Does that look straight to you?"

I smiled and admired the huge three foot square photograph on the wall. It was one from our second photo session with Oliver Harland. He had Carla and I dress in formal gowns for his advertising purposes. I wore a gold silk formal dress hanging diagonally from one shoulder leaving my other shoulder bare. Carla donned a red strapless number with the top coming to just above her full bust with matching red elbow gloves. The picture had me standing sideways with Carla beside me, one gloved hand resting on my bare shoulder. I held her waist, the two of us smiling demurely at the camera. Harland promised to give a big picture to us of our favorite shot as payment for our modeling services.

"Looks good to me."

Carla hopped down from the bed and moved to my side. She nodded with approval. "I like it."

I draped my arm around her waist. "You look very sexy as always, girlfriend."

"You're biased."

"You're right."

Carla nodded her head to the other picture hanging by the window. "Personally, I like that one better."

It was from our first photo shoot where Carla and I posed nude. It was of the two of us kneeling and holding each other, our boobs crushed together and our lips touching. "You would!" I giggled. "As long as we're on the subject of photographs, I got a call from Trista Purnell this morning. She told me she was going to reveal those pictures to the world after all."

"Really? Why?"

“She said after all the grief and trouble they caused, the world deserved to see them. Miss Purnell said she plans to use them for good and become an advocate against child pornography. She’ll use those pictures of herself to illustrate how young innocent girls can so easily be exploited.”

“Good for her!”

“Of course, she insisted on compensating Oliver Harland for all the trouble those pictures put him through. Twenty thousand dollars would go a long way to replace any damaged equipment Carl Wheeler ruined in his studio.”

Carla let out her breath in a low whistle. “Wow! Twenty grand for some pictures the man took ten years ago is one heck of a profit!”

“A drop in the bucket, my dear. Trista intends to sell them to Playboy Magazine for a million.”

“What!”

“Trista said she’ll use them as part of a before and after shoot of herself and act as a springboard to launch her anti-kiddie porn campaign. Posing for a skin magazine should be just the thing to bring attention to her cause.”

“But won’t that hurt her modeling career?”

“I doubt it. Trista said she’s been the cute and innocent girl next door for far too long. If the world wants to drool over her body like some centerfold cutie, then let them. Besides, this stunt would probably make her popularity skyrocket. She can capitalize on all the notoriety in the tabloids from the Carl Wheeler and Eddie Farmer murder scandal. Think of it; *Supermodel catches killer over cheesecake photos*. The Tonight Show would be begging her for an exclusive interview. Miss Purnell would be doing the talk show circuit for months.”

Carla chuckled and shook her head. “All’s well that ends well, I suppose.” Carla set the hammer on the wooden dresser and dug through the middle drawer.

“What are you looking for?” I asked.

“This.” She removed the digital camera from the drawer. “As long as we’re here in the bedroom . . .”

I laughed. “More cheesecake photos?”

“Yes, darling,” Carla smiled seductively. “This time it’s your turn.”