

Carrie woke up to her ringing cellphone. She rolled over and scooped it up from the floor. "Hello." Her voice sounded groggy.

"So what the heck is going on with you?" asked the woman on the other end of the line.

"Louise?"

"Yes, Sweetness, it's Louise. Karl and I ran into Steve and Allison last night at Hernando's. Allison said Doug dumped you at the state fair, and that for the past few weeks you've been camping out in your photography studio, even though they've offered you their guest room. So what the hell happened?"

"I got dumped. Doug found himself some bimbo who he's decided he's in love with. I really didn't have a choice. I had to move out."

"What about the house?"

"It's deeded solely in Doug's name, but even if I were to make a claim on it, my mother's creditors would end up with the money."

"So why haven't you found an apartment?"

"I've been looking, Louise. The problem is they all want to collect some hefty deposits up front, along with the first month's rent. Unfortunately, because of Mama, I just don't have the cash to do it. Once I pay off my monthly expenses, the rest has to go to help pay her bills. Nursing homes aren't cheap, you know."

"I know that, but you need to find a decent place to live. Your studio isn't in the best part of town, and you're probably violating some city code by staying there. Not to mention the fact that Christmas is only three weeks away. I'll bet you don't even have a tree."

"Actually, all things considered, I'm doing just fine." Carrie tried to sound upbeat. "Yes, I'm renting warehouse space in an industrial area, and no, I won't be putting up a Christmas tree this year, but you needn't worry. I'm okay, really. The tent city jail is nearby so there's plenty of police and sheriff's deputies around. My break room has a mini kitchen, and I'm sleeping on an air mattress in the back room where it's surprisingly quiet. And back when I signed my lease I had the landlord put in a shower for the models to use. So you see, I'm okay. I have all the amenities I need to live comfortably. It's not like I'm living in a cardboard box underneath a bridge."

"I understand," said Louise. "However, the reason I'm calling is because I think I may have a solution for you, that is, if you don't mind doing another modeling gig."

"I haven't done a modeling job in years. You know that. Besides, I've just turned thirty. In the world of print modeling, I'm ancient."

"It's not a print modeling job. I need an art model. I've just picked up a private commission. Some well-to-do couple in Berkeley just bought themselves a big house. Apparently, they're serious practitioners of tantric yoga, or some such thing, and they want a series of black and white photos

of a female nude, with some curves on her, to display in their new home. You'd be perfect for the job."

Carrie let out a sigh. She desperately needed the extra cash, but she wasn't sure if this would be the best way to get it.

"I've done some nude work, Louise, but I was always behind the camera, not in front of it. All the photos were done for advertisements. Even though the models were nude, you didn't see anyone's privates."

"I understand if you feel a little shy about doing this, Sweetness, but you'd be working with me. They want something erotic so yes, they'll want to see all the goods in the photos, but they won't know your name or anything else about you. You'll be completely anonymous and I promise you the photos will be tastefully done. It's fine art, not pornography."

"Who would see the photos?"

"They'd be for the client's personal, private use only. That's what's written in the contract. They can only be displayed in their home. The only people who would ever see them would be the couple themselves and whoever visits them. They're not allowed to publish them anywhere, not even on their personal blogs or websites."

Carrie let out a sigh as she thought it over. "How much does it pay?"

"Enough to put you into a decent apartment in a good neighborhood. It should cover all the deposits plus your first month's rent."

"All right. So when and where do you want to do the shoot?"

"Next Saturday, at my home. Karl has an early-morning tee time and will be spending the entire day on the golf course. It'll be just you and me."

"What time?"

"It'll be a fairly long shoot, so let's have you here early, about eight o'clock in the morning. Bring a curling iron and some nice barrettes along with your makeup kit. We'll be doing some different hairstyles, so we'll have to spend some time working on your hair and makeup throughout the day. And do you by chance have a pair of strappy, opened-toed shoes? Preferably in black."

"Yes. They're black patent leather."

"They'd be perfect, so bring them along." The excitement was building in Louise's voice. "The shoes, barrettes, and some costume jewelry are the only things you'll be wearing. You'll also need bathrobe that you can slip on in between shoots."

Carrie still wasn't sure. Louise must have sensed it.

"Look, Carrie, you don't have to do this. I can call the agency and have them send another model. I just figured that right now you needed the money."

"I know, Louise, and you're right. If the city were to find out I'm living here, they'd probably fine the heck out of me before my landlord kicked me out on the street."

"Good. We'll have you living in a decent apartment before you know it. We might even be able to get you a Christmas tree too. But I need to let you know one other thing."

"What's that?"

"I have a show coming up at Hanson Sisters Fine Art in February. I'd like to include five prints from our shoot as a series of hand-signed limited editions. They'd be sold with the same restrictions as the ones going to the couple in Berkeley. You'd remain anonymous, and the photos cannot be published or displayed anywhere in public, except of course for the gallery, but that would be the only time."

Carrie let out a sigh. There had to be a better way for her to get into an apartment. She glanced at the calendar hanging on the wall. It was the first week of December, the time of year when business normally slowed down. This year would certainly be no exception and things wouldn't start to pick up again until late January. If she didn't act now, she'd be living in her studio until March or April, and the longer she stayed, the greater the chances of someone finding out and reporting her to the city. She let out another sigh, knowing she had no other choice.

"Okay, Louise, I'm your girl. I'll be there, Saturday morning, eight o'clock."

"Good. You really won't regret this, Carrie. You'll be proud of these photos, I guarantee it. I'll email a contract and release form for you to sign. Make some copies for yourself and bring them with you on Saturday."

Carrie couldn't shake the bad feeling she started getting after she ended the call. She thought it over and realized she was probably just nervous. She'd never been photographed in the nude before, and the idea of total strangers looking at her naked body made her feel uneasy. Then again, she'd be doing it for Louise, and she owed her success to Louise's hard work. She looked at the clock. It was time to get up. She had work to do and she'd be better off focusing her thoughts on the nice apartment she'd soon be living in.