

Negative Image

A Constable Molly Smith Mystery

By Vicki Delany

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Chapter 1

Rachel Lewis knew she was pretty, but she also knew that being merely pretty wasn't good enough.

You needed a substantial dose of luck.

There were plenty of models and no-talent celebrities who were nothing special when you saw them without make-up, lighting, tousled hair arranged exactly so. They were simply women, ordinary women, who the camera, with the right photographer behind it, transformed into something extraordinary. Rachel worked hard at keeping her body lean and in top shape, and although she was only five foot seven, short in the modeling world, she could walk with grace, and sex appeal, in the highest of heels. Her hair was mousy brown and thin, as common as dirt,

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but that's what wigs and extensions were for. All she needed was to be photographed by the right photographer, someone who had not only skill behind the camera, but who also had fame, a reputation, contacts, and she'd be heading straight up the ladder, on her way to the big-time.

At last Rachel Lewis's luck had turned. She'd found him.

She parked her cart in the hallway, and knocked loudly. When no one answered, she opened the door with her key. Tucking the small folder containing her even-smaller portfolio under her arm she eased the door open.

If the boss found out she'd approached a hotel guest on a personal matter, it would be enough to get her fired. To Rachel, that was a risk worth taking. She was tired of working here, anyway; the skiing season was over and she had no other reason to hang around.

"Housekeeping," she called. Still no answer. She walked into the room. It was a pig-sty, but then again, it always was. It didn't matter to her if he was a pig, all that mattered was that he was a fashion photographer and he'd agreed to look at her portfolio.

She'd been lucky, yesterday, to catch him coming out of his room. Although luck had little to do with it: she'd been waiting next door, listening to the sounds of a man getting ready for

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his day. When she heard the door open, she'd run into the hallway, and made her pitch.

She'd studied acting in school, and had rehearsed her lines as if she were going to be on the stage. He looked her up and down, with a lazy eye. The light in the hotel hallway wasn't good, much too bright, illuminating every flaw, but she'd put on a cap that came low over her forehead and designer sunglasses that cost three hundred bucks. She might look strange, a hotel maid wearing sunglasses indoors, but figured it was worth trying for the effect. Same with the four inch heels she'd stuffed into a pocket of the housekeeping cart for just that purpose, and the belt that cinched the waist of the hideous black and mustard uniform.

He'd moved his eyes up and down her body, while she posed, one leg in front of the other, hip slightly forward. He told her he was in a hurry, but she had good lines and he'd look at her portfolio. If he liked what he saw, he said, he'd invite her for a... drink, and discuss her prospects. Leave it in his room, sometime. He walked away, and she'd gone back to the room she was supposedly cleaning and let her knees collapse underneath her. Today she'd brought the portfolio on which she'd spent every last penny of her savings with her to work.

Room service dishes. The food, cheese and pâté, bread and crackers, grapes and slices of melon, was untouched. She lifted

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the uncorked champagne bottle out of the pool of water in the silver bucket and was surprised at its weight. She held it to the light streaming in through the open drapes. Almost full. Lifting the bottle to her mouth she took a deep drink. Delicious. She held the champagne, bubbles gone, in her mouth for a few moments as she flicked through the detritus on the desk. Computer printouts, photographs of the mountains, tops still covered with snow but grass and trees coming back to life in the spring sunshine, shaking off the memory of a harsh winter. A few shots of people in town, women, young women, with jackets unzipped and pockets bulging with gloves and faces turned to the sun. Nothing, no one, special, she thought.

One old picture, yellowing and turning up at the edges, was pure porn, and not a very good photograph at that. She dropped it back on the desk. You saw a lot of secrets cleaning up after people. Her own portfolio, she would lay out carefully on the bed after making it.

Clothes littered the floor. Underwear, socks, a thick hand-knit sweater. No women's clothes. His wife - at first the staff thought she must be his daughter, perhaps even a granddaughter - had another room. Rachel took a quick glance at the door to the adjacent room. The lock was turned. Interesting that he'd shut his glamorous young wife out at night.

What did they say: *the rich are different than you and me.*

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She popped a couple of grapes into her mouth and took another swig of champagne, *Moët et Chandon*, before settling down to work.

Someday she'd be the one discarding underwear on the floor for someone else to pick up, and leaving full bottles of *Moët* for the trash.

She took her cloths and bottles of cleaning supplies and pushed open the bathroom door.

The champagne and grapes rose up in her stomach.

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