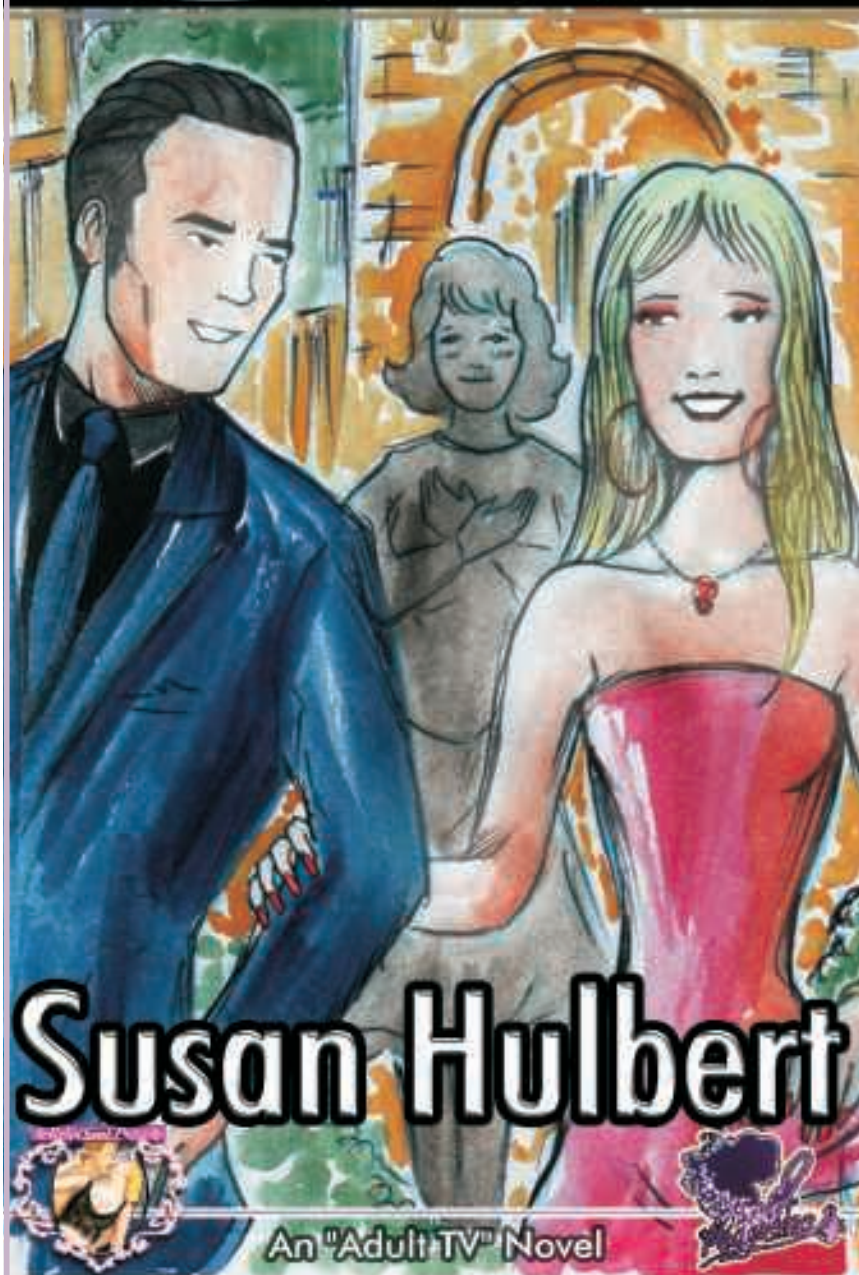


SFX



Susan Hulbert

An "Adult TV" Novel

Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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For information address
Reluctant Press
P.O. Box 5829
Sherman Oaks, CA 91413
USA

Call toll free (800) 359-2116

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SFX

By Susan Hulbert

It was difficult growing up. Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't have it any other way. Like any kid, I didn't realise what the world was about. Having said that, I didn't know where the world would take me.

I was Mother's much-loved second child. My sister was nine years older and perhaps the biggest influence upon me as I grew up. We weren't alike, except that we never really knew our fathers.

It's often said that the acorn doesn't grow far from the tree. Maybe that's a way of saying that something of the father remains in their children. I don't know if that's true.

Mother said that Karen, my sister, inherited all the wrong bits of her father. She was dark and no matter how she ran and dieted, she remained on the chunky side. She didn't have much height to compensate. Her hair was dark and impossible to tame, hanging

halfway down her back. Her lively mind and irrepressible good humour made up for a lot.

I don't know what I got from my father. I was more like Mother. I was easily taller than Karen before I was ten, but stopped growing when I got to five foot six. I was super slim and had my mother's tawny blonde hair. I loved the way she wore it, straight and silky. She tells me that from a very early age, I protested when I had to have it cut. As soon as I was able to impose my own choices, I never had it cut short, even though the other boys had fashionable short crops.

It's brought me here. I live on Corsica. It's a French island in the Mediterranean, rugged and fiercely independent, with traditions going back centuries.

I don't belong to the island and have only learned their traditions since I came here with my late husband several years ago. I've been fortunate; his investment in several vineyards when the prices were low has paid off handsomely. Wisely too, he left the running of them in the hands of traditional farmers, and paid them according to the profits. I have continued this and I have reaped the rewards handsomely.

It's been a good life and I wouldn't change anything. I've no close family, and the relatives I have are on California. I've decided to write my version of my own biography. You have to remember though, that everyone is the hero – or heroine – of their own story.

I'm conscious that I'm recording my impressions and interpretations. Others may disagree but they can just write their own story.

What prompted me to write my story? It came to me as the vendage—that's what we call the grape

harvest here—was ending last year. As usual, I ordered a huge celebration with the mayor and the priest, the usual rack of local dignitaries, and most important of all, my workers and all their extended families.

It looked like it would be a good year and so it has proven to be.

I'd ordered a special dress for the day. I loved the way my local dressmaker could always make me feel special. I'd asked for something in white. The cotton cloth she used was that rustic weave that's oatmeal rather than pure white.

I wanted sleeves to protect my shoulders from the late summer sun which can be fierce in the island, and an off-the-shoulder style so that it would be cool under the sunshades as the eating and drinking continued. I'd bought a wonderful silk scarf from my last trip to Nice which I was looking forward to wearing with it.

It's not that I'm one of those people who hide from the sun. I'm tanned and think I look good now that I'm of a certain age. I always take care that my public appearances, even when I am going round my vineyards, is appropriate. I always have my lipstick, kohl, and mascara round my eyes. I don't think I've ever been seen outside without this bit of makeup.

I looked out from my bedroom window and saw the courtyard, decorated and already noisy as the first guests arrived. I saw the children running, the girls in their colourful dresses, the boys standing to one side to watch them in the early afternoon sun.

I tried to guess who was watching who and who would end up with who after the sun faded in the evening and the pleasures of the day, not forgetting the wine, had their effect on young hearts.

It was then as I remembered my childhood and early experiences that I decided to write this account. Maybe no one would read it, maybe no one would be interested, but it would be there. I'd already decided that my estate would be given to a worker co-operative after I passed, with my home as a centre to tell the story of the vineyard. Maybe this history could be part of that.

Enough, I hear you saying. Get on with the story!

Karen was a great artist. She could draw so perfectly that it was as close as a photograph as possible. She tried to teach me, but I failed. I didn't see things the way she did. She was good with her hands too. Her model making was inspired, and her life-size clay model of Mother's head won prizes in her final year's examinations.

These natural abilities crossed over into makeup and hair, fashion design and dressmaking. She was always perfect when she went out and spent hours with her friends making them look amazing.

I guess that without these skills they'd have dumped her. She didn't match their social status or fit in with their ideas as glamorous group of girls on the prowl. She'd always be the fat friend or the wall-flower but she accepted her place and seemed to thrive.

Her final year of school was the first time she used me as a model. She wrapped my hair on a plastic cap, pulled it tight as far as it would go, and put plugs in each of my ears.

‘Sit still and breathe through this tube,’ she said as she smothered my face in cream. “I’m making a head cast as a base for your Halloween look.”

She started to smear blue goo all over my head. “Close your eyes. It’s going to be uncomfortable, but it will prove and dry hard in a few minutes.”

It was claustrophobic. I tried to speak but breathing through the tube was a hard enough. The sounds went fainter and I could feel a tightening as the cast dried. It became quite rigid and the movement in my neck was restricted. I knew I had to hold still but it was a weird feeling as my neck was held stiffly too.

“I’m going to take it off now. Be very still or I’ll cut your ears off too.”

I could hear the craft saw buzzing, then a couple of tugs and a little twist and I was free. “Is that what I look like?” I asked, seeing the two halves on the workbench.

“It’s a mould.” Karen ran her fingers around the model. “I use it to make a cast of your head, then when I make prosthetics, I know they’re going to fit you when the time comes. It’s how they make the aliens for those films you like.”

“What’s a prosth...whatever you said?”

“It’s a piece of moulding. I stick it onto you with something like spirit gum, then colour it and your skin so that the seams are invisible.”

“I thought all the monsters were made in a computer.”

“Some are but when they want a monster to appear in some live action, on stage, or even at a convention, they have to do it this way.”

“So what kind of monster am I going to be?”

“You can be a witch, a wizard, a zombie or a robot,” Karen said.

“Which is best?” I asked.

“I’ve done some work on witches for my girlfriends and I have some stuff already prepared that I could use.” She looked thoughtful and went to look in her craft boxes. “I guess a witch would be the best disguise if you didn’t want anyone to know who you were, after all, Halloween’s coming soon.”

And so it was agreed. My first time as a member of the opposite sex, although not the most attractive one, was sketched out.

Halloween arrived. The afternoon was set aside for witch making. Karen let me hang around as her friends came to have scars and bloody smears added to their faces. Teeth were blacked out and fangs added. I was ejected from the process several times as the girls said I was taking too close an interest in it all.

She’d set up a workshop in our spare room. It had a workbench and mirrors with lights all round. It looked a proper salon/studio. And Mother said it kept the rest of the house tidy.

My turn came after all these friends had been finished. I wish I had a picture to show you of that first transformation, but I can't find one. I remember my skin was yellow and I had rotten looking teeth with gaps. My nose was hooked, with a thin tapering point. I had bulging cheeks and warts, scars, and pockmarks. My neck was saggy and lined with veins. I looked really horrible, and wasn't I pleased?

Mom was horrified because Karen got one of her friends to pierce my ears. She dangled long chains with small bats on the end through each of them.

"No one will guess he's a boy underneath," she explained to Mother. "Boys don't have pierced ears."

"But what about school?" Mother asked.

"It'll never be noticed," Karen replied. "And if it is, then he's one of the cool kids who dared to do it."

"Yes, I can live with that," I said to Mother. "I've never been in with the cool kids before"

She sighed and shook her head as she left us to get on with it. "It's too late now whatever I say."

"Only a few more things to add, little brother," Karen said. "I know you've had contact lenses for class, and I've got some for a witch."

"How did you afford these?" I asked.

"I begged them off the suppliers. They're free if I send some pictures of you that they can use for advertising on their website."

"That's not fair," I said. "People will recognise me."

“If they do, I’ll be shocked. I’ll have failed completely.”

“Okay,” I said, not really convinced.

I took the package from her and went through my usual routine for putting them in. I didn’t really examine them closely, other than to note colours were on the lens whereas mine were usually clear. I put them in and blinked a few times. They seemed a little bigger than my usual ones, and it took a minute or two for my eyes to stop watering.

I went to the mirror. “My eyes are yellow and the pupils are shaped all wrong.” I was shocked.

“What do you think a witch would say about that?” Karen asked.

“Oh, she’d probably say that I look normal for a witch.” My shock evaporated into a laugh.

“Now hands,” Karen said, taking out a bowl of deep-coloured liquid. “I can’t use ordinary makeup on your hands. It’s going to wipe off as fast as I put it on. This is a temporary dye to yellow your skin.”

“How temporary?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Karen replied. “It’s the first time I’ve made anything like this. “It should come off in a day or so but if it lasts longer, it will just have to wear away.”

“Wear away?” I didn’t understand.

“Yes. Your skin cells shed all the time, so it will eventually come off,” Karen said, and then looked

pensive. “Maybe we’d better not do this. Your hands could still be yellow for school next week.”

“Let’s do it,” I said and impulsively placed both hands into the bowl. The liquid came over my wrists and I sloshed it even higher up my arms.

“It’s too late to consider anything sensibly,” Karen chided me.

“How long does it take?” I asked.

“That long,” Karen replied, handing me a dry rag. “Rinse them off and see what the damage is.”

“They’re really yellow,” I said as the clear water ran over them. “Did you mean it to be this deep shade?”

“I had no idea.” Karen looked at them and patted them dry. No dye came off onto the rags. “I was going to do a patch test but you plunged in before I could say anything.”

“This is going to have to do,” I said. “I’ve never had yellow hands before.”

“And you’ve never had fingernails to match,” Karen said, holding out another packet. “I’m going to glue these over your nails. The glue is really strong so they won’t fly off. They’re much longer than your own, so you won’t be able to do much with your hands either.”

“Can I wave my hands menacingly and bring spells on people?” I asked.

“I suppose, but you’re not to bring any toads home.”

“That’s okay then,” I replied. “I could like being a witch for the evening.”

There were a few more things to do before I was ready to face the world. My face was made up as yellow as my hands, with black lines over and under my eyes and some hideous shade of purple lipstick. It went down my neck; darker shades emphasised bulging veins and flabby skin.

My hair, which had been pinned back out of the way, was covered by a tight cap, and a black wig was pinned securely over it. It was uncombed, straggly and looked matted in places. It was horrible. It was perfect for the job, as was the yellow paint applied to my front teeth.

I hardly need to say that my costume was all black. Black boots with short pointed toes, reaching a long way in front of mine and heels which went to a sharp point, worn over black stockings with a black shapeless dress from neck to knees, and a rough rope for a belt. I looked awful.

Karen insisted on taking pictures of me from every angle and more. Close-ups, and full body shots; my nose and eyes, my hands with the claws. Every wart and scar seemed to have its own frame shot.

I turned to Karen and gestured that we should go and show Mom. I followed her into the house, tripping a little on the boot heels. I hadn’t really noticed them as I put them on, but walking in them was a different matter. I had to take short steps.

I cackled as I thought a witch might do.

“Oh my lord.” Mother looked really surprised. “Karen, what have you done to your brother?”

“I’m Griselda, the wicked witch of the west... or east, or wherever wicked witches come from,” I said reaching out a shaking yellow hand with long yellow nails.

“You two take care this evening,” Mother said. “I’m going over to see your aunt and her kids; I’ll maybe stay over and see you tomorrow.”

Karen had changed into her own costume very quickly and easily. She was going as the Good Fairy; perhaps a little too large but she liked the sparkly dress and the fibre wings which flapped in the gentle breeze as we walked along.

It was getting dark. If the sight of a witch and a fairy looked incongruous, the whole community knew it was a big thing for all the schools and the dance we were going to was a big charity fund raiser.

“I like to do other people’s makeup and things,” Karen said when I asked her about this. “I don’t really like doing it on myself. I know I’m not as attractive, whatever I do, but we have to work with the things we have. I know what I’m good at.”

“Where are we going?” I asked Karen as we walked out of the house that evening.

“The big party is in the community centre but because we can’t buy beer, we’re supposed to stay in the annex. I guess the boys will have beers or something stronger.”

It was the first time that I’d thought of my sister in terms of boys and beer.

“How old do witches have to be to buy beers?” I asked.

“Don’t go there,” she replied. “I don’t want to get you into any more trouble than you can get into yourself.”

I followed her into the hall, and into her group of friends. They were on the glamorous end of the witch kingdom, with the odd boil or scar doing little to detract from their usual flawless perfection. They primed and preened. They talked loudly and laughed just as loudly; all the time looking over each other’s shoulders to find their perfect boyfriend for the rest of the evening.

“And which witch are you?” One boy put his arm round me as if we were old friends. I felt his arm drop and his hand rub across my behind.

“I’m Griselda.” I turned and exposed my yellowed teeth in a grimace rather than a smile. Despite the cape and the orange face, I recognised Greg from our senior class, everyone’s idea of a good boyfriend to have. “If you’re not good to me, I can make bits of you fall off.”

“I’d better take care of you then,” he replied. “If I can drag you away from your coven, I’m sure there’s something refreshing over there.”

The girls stared open-mouthed as he took my arm and led me away. I made sure to cackle loudly as we walked across the floor.

“Do you have to cackle?” he asked, handing me something which smelled stronger than lemonade. “It’s quite coarse and draws attention.”



“Don’t you want attention to be drawn?” I asked. “If you didn’t, you shouldn’t have chosen the only real witch here.”

“There’s one sort of attention,” he replied, “And then again, there’s another sort of attention.”

“You’ll have to explain.” I was puzzled.

“You see, I know who you are under that wonderful makeup,” he said. “And as you’re so well made-up, I can pretend to be fooled. I’ve watched you for ages.”

“Watched as in... what exactly?” I asked.

“As in I’d like you for a girlfriend.” His face looked sincere, with no hint of mockery.

“I’m sure there are others who want you more,” I replied, blushing under my yellow complexion. “And if you know who I am, you know I’m not a girl.”

“But you have that grace and charm, that little extra to offer,” he whispered. “I’d rather have you. Come let’s dance.”

He took me onto the floor and, much to my surprise began to lead me into something like a slow dance. I saw the girls with Karen, whispering, pointing and looking daggers at me.

“I don’t think you should be doing this,” I said as we turned around the floor.

“Why not?” He even kissed my forehead. “I can be laughed at as the biggest dupe in town on Monday, but at least I’ve had this chance to talk to you.”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this,” I hissed as we went round again and I glimpsed the girls to the side. “They’re going to make mincemeat of your reputation.”

“I don’t care. I go to college in the Fall and I may never see them again.” Greg pulled me closer so that I moved in time with his body.

I knew what I was feeling and why he’d pulled me close to hide it. “You’re not pushing me away,” Greg said. “May I take it that you don’t object to what I’ve said?”

“That’s not fair.” I pulled away. “Maybe we’d better sit this one out.” I walked away with a cackle to keep in character, not that I’d been doing that for a while.

Greg went to the corner where the girls were gathered. I heard them laughing together, then he was dancing again with what looked from the distance like the prom queen from last summer. She was blonde and thin, hair tumbling to her waist as they danced elegant turns and generally showed off.

I went looking for Karen, trying to analyse my feelings. I knew I hadn’t tried dating, yet the idea of dating Greg? I was hopelessly confused. Was he kidding—or worse, was he serious? That could really damage my reputation in town.

Karen was flushed from dancing. She was with a tall guy who I recognised as the town pharmacist’s son. I couldn’t remember his name but he seemed a good sort for Karen. She was smiling and looked radiantly happy.

She saw me and excused herself to come over. “What were you thinking?” she asked. “Dancing with Greg?”

“I think he was using me to play up to his girlfriends,” I replied.

“He certainly did that,” Karen said. “You should have heard them. Fortunately none of them guessed who you were.”

“You’re doing well.” I nodded back to where the guy was obviously waiting for her. “You’d better get back.”

“Thanks, little brother.” She kissed my cheek. “You look out for yourself.”

I took my chance to slip out and walked home alone.

I let myself in to the empty house, and went to strip off the costume. The prosthetics came away easily, and I put them with the wig, onto Karen’s workbench. I unzipped the boots; no mean feat with the hideous yellow fingernail” and flipped the dress over my head. What a mess I looked as I stood in front of the mirror. I went to the shower.

After a long scrubbing and shampoo, I dried myself and looked in the mirror. I recognised what I saw. My hair was dripping down my shoulders and all the yellow had gone from my face and neck. I was pretty normal except for my yellow hands and fingernails. Nothing seemed to lift the colour and the nails were as firm as ever. I’d have to wait for Karen to do something about that.

“Remind me to be a white witch next time,” I said to myself. “I wonder what it would be like to be the pretty one.”

I dismissed the thought and dried my hair so that it hung smooth and loose once again and slipped on an old bathrobe. Then I went to make a drink and watch some TV.

I couldn’t concentrate. Greg filled my mind. I hadn’t thought about the sex thing with any seriousness. I knew how I felt as she said those things to me. I was certain that he knew who I was.

“I’m not girlfriend material,” I told myself sternly, yet I knew that there was a new power in the makeup and the feelings beginning within me.

“If I can be a witch, I wonder if Karen can make me a prom queen as well.” I pictured myself differently now. “But I don’t have the right plumbing and I don’t have the right shape.”

I thought some more. “I can’t ask Karen to do anything like that and I don’t have her skills. She’ll probably hate me if I ask. I’d be better putting this down to experience and forgetting the whole thing.”

These thoughts were interrupted by a soft tapping at the window. I ignored it, then it came again, more insistent this time. I went to the curtain and peeked out. I got such a shock that I rapped back on the window, then hurried to the door before anyone should see.

“Greg, what on earth are you doing here?” I hissed to him.