

The Marilyn Project



Susan Hulbert



An "Adult TV" Novel



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By Susan Hulbert

I can't remember how old I was when it all began. I must have been seven or eight years old. Dad had re-married, I remember that; Sophie and Olivia had come to live with us with his new wife, their mother, who was now my mother too. After living with my grandparents for a couple of years after my real mother died, this was a watershed in my life.

Sophie and Olivia are six and seven years older than me. I wish I could pretend that they were the step-sisters from hell, but they weren't. They looked after me, and included me as much as they could in their friendships and social life. They tolerated this little kid, hanging around and wanting to know what they were doing, and most of all, wanting to be involved.

Inevitably, it was Halloween when they first dressed me up. For a couple of weeks before, they were trying different ways of creating lifelike scars and wounds. They were good too, because they'd learned their makeup skills at the local first aid classes where they produced the most realistic bloody injuries for the trainees to treat.

I don't know which of them first had the idea. It wasn't me, but they decided that a girl ghoul with gaping wounds would be more fun to create than a boy ghoul, and thus began my first outing as a girl. I did look good. I still have a picture of the three of us, setting out to "trick or treat" around our neighbourhood.

"Don't you look cute?" I remember Mother saying as they displayed me for the first time. "I love it that you join in with your sisters."

"He's fun," Sophie said, "He's like our own dress-up doll."

The next couple of years were the same. I let them dress me however they wished and quite proudly went from house to house, sometimes just the three of us, more often in a bigger group. There wasn't a fancy dress party or a competition that they didn't enter, and I was always their stooge.

I never wanted to be Dracula or Frankenstein's monster. I was always happy as the dead girl, the Bride of Frankenstein, or some female vampire.

Things got more intense as we got older. I remained their willing victim each Halloween and remember the last one before they went to college. I was dressed beautifully, but with a short prosthetic elephant's trunk and huge ears glued over my own. My eyes were fabulously made-up, but it was all rather strange.

Sophie left school to begin training as a hairdresser at the local college. Olivia wanted to be a beautician and nail technician and was to follow her a year later. They both had Saturday and vacation jobs, and quickly picked up the basics of their chosen trades. Mother was really proud of them, and so was I.

"We're going to work in the best salon in town, then I'm going to open my own place," Sophie told Mother one day shortly after she'd begun her train-

ing. "I'm going to work with Olivia, and together we'll be so fashionable that we'll make real money."

"What about your brother?" Mother asked. "Can't he be a partner too?"

"Alex is a boy, Mother," Sophie said.

"I guessed that," Mother said sarcastically.

"We're going to be an all-girl business," Olivia replied.

"Boys can work in beauty too," Mother replied.

"Well, maybe Alex could be our hygienist," Sophie relented. "He could do a deep clean when we're closed, and sweep out in the evenings."

"Gee, thanks," I said. "Isn't hygienist another word for cleaner? What makes you think I'd want to work for you anyway?"

It was all light-hearted. I was still at school when they were making their way through college, and I had no idea about a grown-up job anyway.

Maybe you're wondering where my Dad was in all this. He was always around, but always busy. I guess you'd call him a workaholic. He sold parts for an auto spares company, and travelled between China and wholesalers all over the country.

His visits home were always wonderful. He treated us and took us out, but most of all he took Mom out. They were a little obsessive with each other and I guess she always got her own way.

I didn't think anything of it when I was little, but Mom was getting more and more assertive as I grew up. I was happy and secure, with no reason to question her authority. I guess I thought I was so lucky, after losing my own mother.

"I think we can do something really special this year." Sophie was looking through one of her design books. "Look, I'll sketch it for you."

Her pencil flew across the sketch pad beside her on the table. "It's quite simple. Olivia, can you make a prosthetic wide enough to cover the top of Alex's back?"

"I don't think so." Olivia looked over Sophie's shoulder. "We could try body painting, then it could go down his arms as well."

She took the pad and started sketching rapidly. "And I could use some flashing LED lights stuck to his skin to look as if there's a control panel."

"What about me?" I asked. "Don't I get a look?"

"Sure you do." Sophia turned the pad to me.

"So I'm a girl at the front and a robot at the back." I saw the way her sketches were going. "Why a girl robot, can't I be a boy this time?"

"Girl robots are less threatening," Sophia replied. "Besides, we can do more stuff with a girl."

"So why not ask someone else, like a real girl?"

"That's a bit mean," Mother said. "You should be happy to help your sisters."

I looked at the sketches again, and it was true. They looked really clever. If they could reproduce that, it would be spectacular.

"Could we paint his legs too?" Olivia asked.

"It wouldn't be too difficult to paint him from top to toe," Sophia replied. "But then there are his boy bits."

"You have girl bits," I replied.

“Good point,” Olivia laughed. “Wouldn’t the body paint smudge and wear off?”

“We could use a special stabiliser,” Sophia replied, but there’s always some scuffing if he wears it for a long time.”

“That’s really ambitious.” Mother came to look at the sketches too. “Are those high heels you’ve drawn?”

“Yes, that’s my first idea,” Sophia said. “He’s going to be really feminine from the front and all the robot mechanism is going to be showing on his back, arms, and legs. From the front, he’ll be really glamorous, except for his eyes. They’ll be expressionless. Some contact lenses will hide any expression in his eyes, and he can hold a blank look on his face when he’s on display.”

“I’m going to be on display?” I asked.

“Yes, there’s a competition this year, and I think we could win it.”

“What about the hair?” Sophia asked. “A robot doesn’t have hair.”

“I’ve thought of that,” Olivia answered. “We can use a wig that looks really synthetic, maybe white or a rainbow colour.”

“I’d go for white,” Sophia replied. “It’s easier to match things with white. No strong colour to detract from the body paint.”

“Won’t the heels distract the judges?” Mother asked.

“No, they’re integral to the concept,” Olivia replied. “Our robot isn’t sexless.”

“But I can’t walk in high heels,” I said. “I’m a boy, and boys don’t.”

“You could learn,” Olivia suggested.

"I don't have time, even if I wanted to," I snapped back. "It's not on my list of things to do."

"But you *could* do it," Mother said. "It might be fun."

"Fun?" I snorted. "They've been doing it for years, and they expect me to learn how to walk in heels in a few weeks."

"It's only like riding a bicycle," Sophie said. "After a while, it's instinctive. You don't notice any difference."

"I think I will notice a difference," I said dismissively.

"Hold on," Mother interrupted. "Don't be so mean. Your sisters want to win this prize and they want your help. It would be really mean of you if you didn't give it a try."

"Oh please do," Olivia said, sounding quite genuine.

"You girls have been learning to walk in heels since you were five or six," I said. "It's not something I can learn quickly."

"Let's compromise," Mother said. "I'll get you some low heels and if you can manage those, then you can try the higher ones."

"But I can't do spike heels like Sophie wears," I protested.

"Never say never, little brother." Sophie looked at me with some determination in her eye. "You'll get there easily."

And so it came to pass next day that when I came home from school, some shoe boxes were waiting for me in the kitchen.

"I got you some nylon pop socks too," Mother said, taking some shoes with heels about two inches high from the box. "Put these on and keep them on all the time you're home, from now on."

I took the shoes and went to my bedroom, where I stripped off my trainers and socks. I looked at the new shoes, quite an alien shape to me. They were dark blue, with ankle straps, closed toes extending to a narrow point with a small bow across the front, and a sharply pointed heel.

"These feel different," I said to myself as I pulled the nylon socks over my feet. "They're so thin and smooth."

My feet slipped easily into the shoes but I struggled to get the ankle straps fastened. "It's probably because they're so new," I thought.

I stood and walked somewhat clumsily towards the mirror but of course it wasn't long enough to show my feet. I lifted one leg and then the other, examining how the new shoes looked.

"At least they match my blue jeans," I concluded, before walking unsteadily down the stairs to show Mother.

"Well done, Alex," Mother said after I walked across the kitchen. "You walk as if you've been doing it for years."

"It doesn't feel like that," I replied. "I feel as if I'm leaning forwards all the time."

"Try leaning back a little then," Mother replied. "Imagine you wanted to show off your breasts..." She turned red as she said the last words. "Okay, maybe not that." She laughed. "Maybe pretend you're acting and have to stand out."

"You're not making it seem easier," I replied. "I'm not sure I can do this."

“Give it time.” She turned back to preparing dinner. “I promise you’ll love wearing heels when you get used to them.”

I clumped back to my room and sat at my computer. I tried to concentrate on my homework assignments, but the research didn’t flow. The history was okay, but the mathematics sucked.

Maybe it was something Mother said but I found myself looking at heels on eBay.

Dad came home about this time. I hadn’t really seen him for more than a few hours in ages. He was in good spirits and showered money on Olivia, Sophia, and me.

He took us all out to dinner and on holiday for a few days where he and Mother went off to dinners and the theatre. We three were left to our own devices in a big city.

What did we do? We spent money. Olivia and Sophia, being girls of a certain age, bought clothes and makeup galore; far more than they needed or could ever use. When they complained that they were running out of money, they got more.

I bought a couple of things for my computer and wandered through the art galleries and museums. I wasn’t into shopping.

“I’m really proud of you, son.” Dad and I walked through the park late one afternoon. “I thought it would be too hard for you with a new mother and me away. You seem happy.”

“I *am* happy, Dad,” I told him. “She’s a bit strict sometimes and my sisters boss me about, but it’s better than staying with grandparents.”

“They’re really girly,” he said. “No tomboys there.”

“They’re all right,” I defended them. “They use me as a model sometimes and treat me as if I was their little sister, but they mean well.”

“As long as you’re happy.”

“I am,” I said. “I really like being part of this family. I only wish you could spend more time with us.”

“It’s not going to be anytime soon,” he said. “Business never rests, and I need to keep ahead of the competition.”

That was our longest conversation since he remarried. After that, it was back to normal.

A couple of weeks later, there were sketches and designs all over the walls of our den. They’d measured me carefully and these drawings were to exact scale.

“I’ve no idea how you’re going to be able to do all that detail,” Mother said, looking at them for the first time. “It’s so complicated.”

“There’s a secret to that,” Olivia replied. “We’re producing some transfers on a new printer in college. I only have to pay for the inks and the special paper it needs.”

“So the reverse of that goes on Alex’s skin,” Mother asked. “I hope all these paints are safe to use on skin.”

“They are really safe.” Olivia held out a bottle. “You can read the label; they’re mostly based on vegetable colours, without too many heavy chemicals.”

“Heavy chemicals don’t sound good,” Mother looked sceptically at the bottle.

“There’s no other way,” Olivia replied. “These have been used by body painters for years without any harmful effects.”

“So will they come off?”

“There’s a solvent cream we’ve bought to remove it all.”

“Okay,” Mother replied. “Please tell me that you’re sure.”

“We bought Alex some new shoes,” Olivia said.

I noticed the quick change of subject but if Mother did, she didn’t say anything. Olivia handed me a bag with a shoe box inside.

“You’re walking in the two-inch heels like you were born with them. We thought you’d like to try three inches next.”

“I don’t think you’ll notice the difference,” Sophia said, taking the box from me. “Here, let me put them on for you.”

I sat and watched as she undid the ankle straps on my shoes and wriggled my toes.

“These are really going to look good, but maybe don’t go with your jeans. We should have got you some super skinny ones to make your legs look longer. They’re much more fashionable now.”

“Hey, I’m not a girl,” I protested. “I’m only doing this to help you out.”

“I know you are.” Mother hugged me. “I’m so proud of you, doing this for your sisters.”

“It’s okay, Mom,” I said as Sophie fitted the shoe to my foot.

It was a black shiny shoe, again with super slim heels and an ankle strap. The toe was pointed again,

this time with a band of shiny silver studs across the front.

I stood tentatively. “You’re right,” I said with astonishment as I walked across the room to try them out. “They don’t feel much different from the heels I was wearing.”

“You’re a quick learner,” Olivia said. “Now if you could just learn to wiggle your hips as you walk, the boys would be mesmerised.”

“Not until he’s in five-inch heels,” Sophia added. “Nothing less will do for the guys round here.”

“He’ll be in them by the end of the month.” Olivia held out her hand for Sophia to take her bet.

“Don’t I get as say?” I asked. “I don’t think I want to wiggle to attract the boys.”

“No, you do as you’re told,” Mother replied. It was with a smile and I took it in good heart.

Needless to say, the super skinny blue jeans appeared the very next day. They were lying on my bed when I got home from school. I’d come up as usual to change into my heels. I don’t know why, but I’d taken it to heart. It was a challenge to walk in the heels and to make it look as easy and natural as my sisters.

I guess I should have hesitated and thought more about it. I never gave a moment of consideration of where this might be leading in a wider sense. My mind was focussed on the immediate costume project and nothing else.

I struggled into the jeans; they were so tight that I wondered if they’d deliberately bought a size too small. This time, I went to where there was a mirror that I could adjust, and looked at the reflection. It did look good from the waist down.

My legs were really shapely in the jeans. The way they clung to my bottom left nothing to the imagination. There wasn't a bulge or even a spare inch of fabric as they clung so tightly to me, and the heels looked perfectly matched. I may have been young, but I recognised the shape of these legs.

It was when I came to the top of the stairs that I noticed a difference. It wasn't as easy going down as it had been coming up. I really thumped my feet clumsily as I came down, and then walked easily into the kitchen and across to where Mother was sitting. I saw her watching me closely as I walked towards her.

"Alex, you've really got something," she said as I sat beside her. "If I didn't know you for my son, I'd have guessed you were a girl the way you walked across the floor."

"I don't know if I should say thanks or feel ashamed," I replied, blushing seriously.

"I think you should feel good." she replied, ruffling my shoulder-length hair as she stood. "Your sisters are going to be amazed."

"But I struggled to come down the stairs," I confessed. "It felt so awkward. How do you come down in heels?"

"I never thought about it," Mother replied. "Maybe you'd better ask your sisters to show you. I haven't worn heels like yours for a while."

So I did ask. They laughed at the question like I was stupid or something. Then they showed me; feet slightly to the side, they said, and bend from the knee. I know it sounds easy but it took me a lot of time and a lot of practise before I got the hang of it.

It was a few days later. Olivia was the first home, after I'd been there for the afternoon.

“Olivia, please could you drive me to the mall? I forgot to get an ink cartridge for the project I have to hand in tomorrow,” I asked.

Without thinking, I got into her car. I hurried into the mall, picked up the cartridge and was on my way out when I realised. I was wearing skinny jeans and three-inch heels. I looked around. Had anyone noticed?

I broke into a cold sweat. I’d be dead if anyone from class had seen me. No social life for Alex. I wanted to sink into the ground quickly, but I couldn’t do that. I ran out but after a few paces, I realised that the heels were clicking louder the faster I went. I slowed down, but still hurried out to the car.

“Why didn’t you warn me?” I fell into the passenger seat in a cold sweat.

“Warn you of what?” Olivia asked innocently.

“I was in heels still.” I snapped back.

“I’m sorry, Alex,” she replied. “I’m so used to seeing you in heels, I never thought. You didn’t fall, did you?”

“Of course not, but what if anyone had seen me?”

“In those jeans, they’d have thought you were a scruffy girl.” she replied.

“I mean what if anyone who knows me had seen me, prancing around like a girl?”

“Well, as you’re asking that question, I’d guess that there was no one there to recognise you. No harm done.”

I wished that I could have taken it as calmly. I sweated the thought all the way home. My mind wasn’t really on the assignment as I printed it out, or I’d have noticed some silly mistakes.

The four-inch heels were quite different. I thought I'd mastered walking in heels but now my balance was really shifted. It was like walking on tip toe all the time, with a heel to stabilise or trip you up. I knew that I'd be able to master them but in the meantime I feared that I'd break my ankle or something worse.

The shoes were pointed toe court shoes in a nude colour, with a heel that was as thin as a pencil. They were quite comfortable considering the heel height and on the flat, I could do anything in them. Going up stairs was easy but again, I struggled to balance walking down. I remembered how I'd adapted before, and tried going slower, but more evenly.

"I wish I could handle four-inch heels like that," Sophia said one evening as I came to table for dinner.

"Thanks, sis," I said, being rather unconcerned by the heel height now that I'd been wearing them for so long. "I thought you could do it easily."

"It's just for show," she replied. "I'm really insecure sometimes. You do it like a natural."

"Maybe I should be worried hearing that?" I asked. "I'm only doing this because you made me do it."

"No, I didn't mean it like that." Sophia didn't explain how she meant it. "You'll love the designs we have for the competition. I've been working on the final look."

"You showed me the transfers," I remembered. "Is there more?"

"Of course. The transfers only cover part of your body, not your head and face. We haven't worked out what to do with your hands either. "Do we leave them natural, or try smaller transfers. If we do, will they be durable enough?"