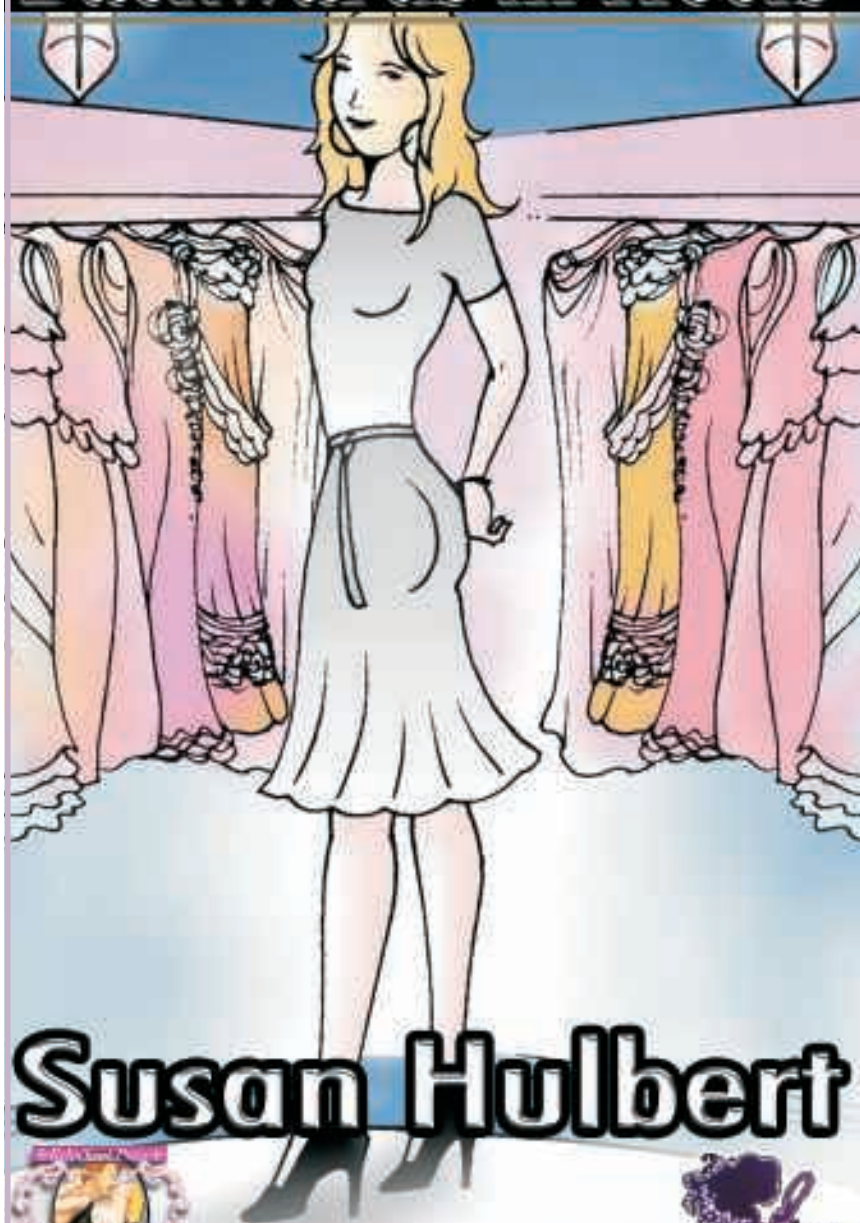


# Backwards in Heels



# Susan Hulbert



An "Adult TV" Novel



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# Backwards in Heels

**By Susan Hulbert**

I'd been trying to do the bigger and better performances ever since I started in this business. I know that wasn't so long ago but I had ambitions. It wasn't to be, no matter how much I trained and worked on my body's flexibility.

I knew how to lead and to be lead through all kinds of routines. I knew how to fall and sway. I did a few movies as a stand-in. I was often directed to keep smiling to the camera, but never in close up; that was for the star.

I was the one wearing impossible heels and a tight dress with a blonde or brunette wig flowing in the breeze behind me. I did it so often that it became something of a joke. I never thought of a witty response. All I said was that at least I was working most of the time.

So how did I get to be a big star on the stage?

I thought you'd never ask. It was luck, capricious fate, a domineering mother, a shrewd agent and a few other things along the way. It didn't harm that I had pretty full breasts and few inhibitions about showing them. Why should I, when they weren't really mine anyway; at least not what I started with.

I don't do stunts anymore. Well, not unless you count my three husbands and a few affairs along the way as "stunts." One of the gossip magazines accused me of that recently when I was pictured at a premiere with a man to whom I was not married.

Nuts to them! A girl can only have so much fun.

But it didn't start in the movies. I was a dancer, and that's what I always wanted to be. The stunts and movie deals came much later.

Perhaps I'd better start at the beginning and explain. We'd better start when I was quite young.

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"Eric, you're not going to lie there all day." Mother pulled the bedclothes off and stood there, looking down at me. "I'm fed up with your attitude."

"Leave me alone," I grumbled, turning my back to her.

"That's enough." She slapped my rear. "Get up and get dressed. You're going to dance class with your sisters."

"That's for girls." I said, turning over again.

“It’s for girls and for *you*.” She pulled me off the bed and stood over me, daring me to disagree. “You’ll get yourself dressed and out there right now.”

I knew better than to disobey.

It had always been Father and I as long as I could remember. Then one fateful day when he’d come to collect me from the dance class he used for weekend child care, I was with Amber. She and I were partnered in a child’s dance troupe at the club where we met. Seven-year-olds make friendships in all sorts of ways.

Dad and I had rubbed along on our own for as long as I could remember and I guess he must have been so lonely with only me for company. Young as I was, I understood that he wanted to be with someone. As Amber and I talked that day, our single parents talked and to cut a long story short, eventually they married, so she wasn’t really my sister and her mother wasn’t really my mom. And her older daughter Madison and I didn’t easily see eye-to-eye.

My new older ‘sister’ was something I was struggling to get used to. She was older than I was, and much more confident and bossy. I was ordered about, snitched on when I sneaked out of chores, and generally treated like something between a pet dog when she wanted to be nice to me and an insect when she didn’t.

I hated the dance classes at first; I went along because they fit with Dad’s schedule. There was no escaping them. Amber’s mom owned the dance studio but she also taught the really experienced competition classes, not the kids like us.

I’d wanted to do the gymnastics and judo, but they decided that Amber and I were better doing the same

thing at the same time. I found it truly awful. I can hear the instructor now. "Poise and elegance, girls," she'd say, beating time as we went through our exercises.

She was a severe looking woman. Tall and very slim, always in perfect posture with bleached hair piled on top of her head with so much lacquer. It never moved, even when she demonstrated the most athletic dance steps. We'd joke that even a hurricane couldn't get a hair on her head out of place.

As time went on, I found some release in the dance. I was a quick learner and could follow any beat, any routine, even though I had to pretend to get it wrong, act clumsy and pretend that I hated it all. Eventually, I gave up faking it and got it right.

Boy, how that annoyed them all.

I could never admit it but I liked the dance classes eventually. Ballet and tap, modern and jazz; my feet seemed to know where to go and how to keep rhythm and posture. They hated me for it but couldn't say anything. That would have been to admit that I was good at something.

I envied the girls, though. They got all the attention as if I was something tagged on to make them look good. I envied the way they could dress up or dress down. It was compelling and fascinating at the same time. I quite envied the colours, not only of what they wore, but the hair, the nails, and the makeup. Don't even ask me about the heels!

When dance almost naturally turned to something more serious and competitive, I was already supple with a strong sense of balance and style. I moved up a group with Amber, but this time her mom was the instructor. Again, I found it so easy that I took a few

fails and a few falls simply to keep the peace and let them think I was finding it hard.

So that's where it started: dance classes.

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Out of the classes came the competitions. It came to feel like fun. Amber and I were partnered through to about age fourteen. I didn't realise it at first but suddenly she was taller than I, not just a bit, but she grew taller *and* slimmer. I stayed slim and tiny.

"You can't possibly enter competitions like that," Mother told us one day after we'd learned a complicated Latin routine. "The boy should be the taller and lead, not the other way 'round."

"Surely that's so Twentieth Century," I chipped in, only to receive Mother's cold glare.

"Don't be stupid," the reply came sharply. "If you want to continue to dance with Amber, go away and come back taller."

I couldn't help myself. I burst into tears and ran from the studio into the changing room to hide.

"I'm sure Mom didn't mean to be cruel." Amber had followed me and hugged me close.

"She's probably right," I sobbed. "You're tall and elegant. We can dance together and get away with it in practise, but in competition when you're wearing heels, it isn't going to look right."

"Don't say that." Amber wiped a tear from my cheek. "We could always get you some shoes with lifts."



“That isn’t going to work.” I knew in my heart that it was a no-hoper. “Lifts may give me a couple of inches, but in proper heels you’d still be way taller. Your mom’s right, it wouldn’t make sense.”

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So Amber graduated to another partner. I didn’t resent it; Darren was a decent guy who met the height qualification and didn’t exclude me from their friendship group even when it was clear that as a couple they were dancing very well together and heading for success.

Freed from her step-brother, Amber developed fast, both as a dancer and as a teenager learning how to handle the boys. Come weekends, she and Darren were off all over the state and beyond in competitions and showcases.

I hung around the classes; it had become part of my life by now. I partnered a few different girls but, like Amber, they outgrew me, and anyway they weren’t very good.

Mom started using me to give individual tuition and to demonstrate steps. Sometimes I could partner the girls coming to class who seemed likely to have talent; I was taller than the younger ones, but they still outgrew me eventually. Mom partnered the boys and helped them towards regular partners for competitions.

It was a strange world. At school, I was one of the boys, even if I was the smallest. I tried to chase the girls but didn’t have a lot of success. I was too small for football or hockey and gymnastics didn’t have the glamour – or the cheerleaders.

The trouble started a year or so later when I was thinking of college. Mom was dancing with Dad one evening. Dad wasn't the greatest dancer but together they danced socially once or twice a month. Dad was always proud to show her off. Attempting to do a real "show off" set of steps, he tripped them both up and they fell heavily. Mom broke her ankle and returned from the emergency room with a huge cast up her leg.

"It's a complex fracture," Dad announced. "She's had to have it pinned."

"Is that bad?" I asked.

"It means I won't be demonstrating anything for a good few months," Mom replied. "The doctor warned me that I have to be careful and that I may not get full movement for a long time.'

"What are we going to do?" I had no idea.

Classes were cancelled and Amber came home for a few days. She couldn't stay for long as she and Darren were booked to do exhibition dancing on cruise ships in the Gulf and then for competitions all over the place. Darren's elder brother, Tom, came to help out. He'd graduated to dancing in Broadway shows. I didn't know him because he was a few years older and our paths hadn't crossed.

Dad had a contract that was going to take him to somewhere in Brazil, and then to Africa.

"There's too much money to turn this one down," he explained. "At least we can pay the medical bills and the rent for the studio. I want to save something towards Eric's college fees, even if I do have to be away for long periods."

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Dad went quite soon afterwards. I graduated High School and failed to get in to the college I had hoped to attend. It didn't worry me too much though. I was happy to wait and I knew that Mom needed someone around to help her whilst she recovered and to drive her around. Not going to college postponed the fee problem anyway.

Mom sat in the studio through the classes, doing her best to carry on despite one ankle in a plaster cast and hobbling round the studio, shouting and trying to direct elegance into untrained feet.

Tom was a great help with the girls. He had a natural poise and grace; the elegance which comes from confidence and knowing where his feet were going instinctively.

He even danced with me. It was a shock at first, but he was a natural lead dancer and I was easily able to follow him. I had to take the girl's part more than once or twice to demonstrate how the girls should glide across the floor.

I hated that. I hated the way the whole studio laughed when I got it wrong and I did so many, many times. He'd break away into a complicated routine that I'd never dreamed of, let alone seen and rehearsed. I hated it more when we were giving private lessons to individual couples. They treated me like some sort of freak for dancing the girl's part.

It didn't feel right being Tom's partner. It felt far from right, but there were other feelings lurking inside, *deep* inside. I had visions of Fred and Ginger as he twirled me round and expected me to come back exactly in step. As the dances became more about ex-

hibition and style, I failed quite often, especially when someone was watching.

“You can do much better than that,” Mom chided me so many times.

I blushed and looked down each time. I was ashamed that she should be disappointed. I knew I was a much better dancer than the students.

When it was only Tom and I and the music, it was much more fun. We danced in exercise clothes. He taught me more and more of the stage stuff he’d been doing professionally. I lapped it up. Of course, with no one watching, I loved it.

We danced cheek-to-cheek and in close position. I could smell his aftershave, mingled with a little honest sweat. My heart flew away when he hugged me close after a really special routine which we danced perfectly.

“That was amazing.” I recoiled in shock as I heard Mother’s voice from the shadows at the back of the room. “I only wish I could have seen that routine as boy and girl.”

I ran out of the room, blushing all the way. At the moment before Mother had interrupted, I was wishing that too. Well, really I was wishing that I could have *been* the girl.

What did it all mean? Was my mind shifting? Was I being manipulated into wanting the girl’s role or did I really want it for myself? I cried myself to sleep that night, my mind in turmoil. What did I really want?

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Mom and I were in the studio one evening after classes had finished. Tom had gone to the airport to meet Amber and Darren for a weekend visit. I was being directed in a part from a Latin routine that Mom was working on for a wedding party's first dance, when they arrived.

"I think I've an idea to help out until you're out of plaster," Amber announced as we sat together.

"Any suggestion welcome," Mom replied, looking interested. "We're losing some good students and I can't afford to keep on like this for much longer."

"Well it's like this," Amber began. "Tom's doing all that Eric used to do; he partners the girls, demonstrates steps to the boys, and is such a great enthusiast that they learn easily."

"I know that and I really appreciate him," Mom replied.

"I haven't finished." Amber looked at her. "What you need is another great dancer to partner him." She looked at me.

"That doesn't work." I told her. "They laugh at me when Tom gets me to demonstrate the girl's part."

"I know. Two boys dancing together look wrong. It shouldn't in the Twenty-first Century but when you've a mixed group, they'd rather see a boy and girl dancing together, especially if they've got to learn the steps. The girls need someone to emulate; preferably pretty, fashionable and elegant."

“So have you anyone in mind?” Mom asked. “I agree that’s the best solution. I don’t expect I’ll be dancing for a few months. I can’t think of anyone who could step in and even if I did, I’ve no idea where the money to pay them is going to come from.”

There was a silence as Amber stared at me. “Oh no,” I gasped. “Don’t tell me you’re thinking I could do it.”

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking,” Amber replied. “You’re an excellent dancer and you know exactly how to move elegantly. I’ve seen you partnering Tom and wished I could put him with a partner exactly like you.”

“Surely you mean exactly like Eric but female,” Tom butted in.

“You know what I mean.” Amber gave him a cold stare. “With a few lessons on how to act, a bit of voice coaching, and a lot of makeup, you’ll have a dancing partner like no other.”

“You can say that again,” I said sullenly.

Maybe I hated it that she’d read my thoughts, but I couldn’t say that. Not then; maybe not ever.

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I stormed out of that discussion. I slammed the door as I went and barricaded myself in my room. I switched off the lights and lay there.

Anger gave way to a bit of self-pity. How could they think of me that way? It was simply unspeakable; awful.

Part of me wanted to do it. When I closed my eyes and imagined how it would feel, I *really* wanted it. But I didn't want anyone to know that. I imagined being made-up, with hair just so. The dress, the shoes, the music; I could glide across the floor as elegantly as any of them.

My mind wandered. I saw myself in Amber's dress and heels, twirling onto the floor. I could see it all in my imagination. It was so exciting. And then the dance began. A few steps and then everything started to go wrong. The dress hung off me and I tripped and stumbled. I had some makeup on, but I looked like a clown. I cried.

I don't know how much time had passed when I realised it was dark and I was cold. I slipped into bed and curled up. I must have dozed off and started to dream.

This time, I *was* the girl. I looked right and saw my partner smiling as he held out his hand to me. The music played and, on cue, we started to dance.

This time, I could feel the rustle of the strapless dress I wore and I remember worrying if it would slip down, even though it hadn't in the dress rehearsal. I felt the way my feet described a figure as I stepped elegantly in really high heels. I looked up and there was my partner staring down at me with admiration, or maybe something more.

We danced to a break and then we were back on the floor. I don't remember dreaming it step-by-step, but my dress was short and sassy now. My hair was loose and full and from the fleeting glimpse that I could grasp in my dream mirror, I knew my makeup was heavy to show up under the lights as we danced.

And how we danced; the applause when I spun and fell into a deep curtsey at the end made a tear come to my eye. I looked at my partner and he pulled me close into a deep kiss. I felt his tongue pressing through my lips.

And then I woke up with a feeling of shock and panic.

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“Eric, don’t be so dog-in-a-manger about it all,” Amber snapped at me. “This isn’t the time for petty objections. Mom needs you to help, so stop thinking negatively.”

“That’s easy for you to say.” I could feel myself colouring up with anger. “It’s not your sex change here.”

“And it’s not yours either,” Amber came back at me. “It’s a bit of makeup and a bit of dressing-up. You can do that.”

“So what do we tell the students?” I asked. “Can you see the posters saying ‘learn to dance with our female impersonator. Come and dance with Eric in a dress?’”

“We could make sure you’re not recognised,” Amber continued her assault. “You know everything we teach and you’re really so poised and elegant on the floor.”

“And you can dance backwards,” Tom added, unhelpfully, I thought.

“But not in heels.” I glared at him.



“You can get used to that.” Mom looked thoughtful. “It could be fun as well as helping us out of a hole.”

“And putting me into a bigger one,” I sneered. “How much of a reputation will I have round here?”

“You’ll be the one who helped his family in their time of need,” Mom said softly.

“I’ll be the guy who dresses like a girl,” I said bitterly. “Think how good that’s going to make me feel. I’ll never live it down.”

“What if Eric goes to college and his cousin Erica comes to help us out?”

Amber looked at Mom.

“That’s *not* going to happen,” I almost shouted. “How obvious is that?”

“Okay then, Charlotte or Amelia?”

“Whoa there,” I said. “It’s not going to happen. The name doesn’t matter; they’ll guess it’s me.”

“What if no one could guess it was you?”

“That would be better,” I agreed. “But I’m not doing it, and that’s final.”

We left it there for tempers to cool and before Amber and I came to insults and possibly to blows. It was a silly idea. Next morning brought a different crisis.

Amber knocked on my door and called me down to the kitchen. Mom was there, looking ashen-faced.

She looked like she'd been crying. Darren and Tom arrived as I sat down. We waited for Mom to speak.

"There's bad news," she said, wringing a handkerchief in her hands. "Eric, your father has been infected by something they think is dengue fever or something worse. He's very seriously ill and being flown to a hospital at some regional capital I can't even pronounce."

Amber put her arms round me as I burst into tears. The telephone rang. Darren answered it and handed it to Mom. She turned away and took it to the back door. I could see her shoulders shaking as she handed the phone back to Darren. Amber and I went to her.

"He's dead," she wept.

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The next couple of months were difficult. Father's body had to be buried immediately due to the fear that his remains could spread fever. The funeral was in Africa somewhere; obviously, with the plague risk, we couldn't attend. We couldn't afford it anyway. The local consul attended and sent some pictures.

There were lawyers and accountants meetings which Mom and Amber attended. Tom and I tried to keep the dance studio running, with some help from Mom when she could.

Once the funeral was over, Amber and Darren left. They had a contract to do exhibition dances on another cruise ship and then they were off to Brazil where they'd been invited to a big competition.

“I’m really excited.” Amber could hardly contain herself as she explained it all. “I’ve always loved the rhumba and tango. This time, we’re going to have some lessons from one of the world’s tango masters.”

“That’s great, sis,” I told her. “The opportunity is too much to miss. I expect you to come home with at least an armful of trophies.”

“And the prize money,” she said. “We’re doing well with the appearance fees, but a prize or two would be the icing on the cake.”

A bit of gloom descended after they’d left, but we carried on. Tom and I worked as hard as we could and Mom turned out, even when she was in real pain. Sadly, we could see the clients slipping away.

Fortunately, the internet allowed us to keep up with Amber and Darren. We watched some clips of their displays on the cruise. Of course, we were all experts and criticised as much as delighted in their style and elegance.

The videos they sent back from Brazil were really more tourism than dance. We saw the sights and the beaches and some of the other competitors in rehearsal, but nothing of their performance.

“That’s really strange,” Mom commented. “I thought that Amber would want us to see everything.”

“Maybe it’s going to be a surprise,” I said. “They’re having lessons and working with that Brazilian choreographer. They want to show us the finished performance.”

“I can go with that,” Tom chipped in. “They don’t want any comments from us until it’s polished and ready to go.”

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“Come and look at this,” Mom shouted as Tom and I were closing the studio one evening. “Amber’s sent us a video of the winning tango, and it’s amazing.”

“Did she and Darren get a place?” I asked.

“Surely, Amber would have said if they’d won anything.” Tom took his place in front of the laptop screen as we gathered round to watch the YouTube clip.

“She didn’t say anything about their winning anything.” Mom started it playing. “She’s going to call tomorrow when she knows we’ll be closed at the studio.”

The music started, a bit discordant through the laptop. Even with the tiny screen, we could see that the dance was something else; something amazing that we’d never seen before. The man stood arrogant and tall, moving with precision. The woman was imperious, matching him in poise and attitude, allowing him to approach just so far, before seeming to dismiss him.

Hips swaying, long elegant steps followed an open embrace as the man lead the dance into more complex figures. He was tall and dressed in the traditional black, whilst his partner was all in red.

I watched in awe as she never put a foot wrong. Her hair was black and swept up into a severe style, but with a high pony tail which fell to her lower back.

Red earrings dangled almost to her shoulders. Her red dress exposed bare shoulders, with the tightest bodice falling into a skirt which was little more than diaphanous strips of matching material which must have been weighted to make them move in that way. She was super slim; the overall effect held us spellbound and left us speechless when it was over.

“Amber called.” Mom came into the studio next day. We weren’t open but I was doing some odd jobs. “They’re on their way home, and guess...”

“I give up,” I replied immediately.

“They won.” Mom jumped and clapped her hands. “That was Amber and Darren in the video.”

“But Amber’s blonde and not that slim,” I blurted out.

“That was then.” Mom hugged me. “She’s super slim now and dyed her hair. She’s got a deep suntan too. The lessons they had weren’t only choreography. She says it was about image and presentation. She’s had lessons in self-confidence and projection too.”

I finished up and by the time I got home, Amber and Darren had arrived. She was tremendous. She was dark and tanned; slimmer than ever and with an air of self-possession and authority that I’d never seen before.

“I had a good teacher,” was all she’d tell me when I asked her about it.

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Eventually, it was time for a family meeting. It was a grim affair; just Mom, Amber and I sitting round

the kitchen table. Mom spread some documents in front of us.

“The house and all our debts are cleared by your dad’s insurance. I have a small pension, but it’s not enough for us to live on. If that weren’t enough, I have to have another operation on this ankle.”

“How will we pay for that?” Amber looked shocked at the news.

“I’m covered by Father’s insurance. Treatment started when I fell and its continuing care,” Mother replied. “I’m not going to be able to do much teaching for quite a while longer.”

“I’ll get Darren to cancel our engagements,” Amber said immediately. “We can take over, I’m sure he’ll understand.”

“No, that’s out of the question,” Mom said firmly. “You have a career to make out there and my studio isn’t going to stop you. You’ll earn far more and see the world.”

“That’s as may be, but what about you?”

“My reputation will go up if you keep winning competitions and become really famous.”

“I’m certain we’re good enough,” Amber smiled. “But it’s going to take time before that happens.”

“Tom’s going to stay on. I’m sure he’ll be able to find someone to partner him and help in the teaching. Eric’s here too. I’m sure we’ll be okay,” Mom reassured her.

“But the studio’s accounts are grim,” I chipped in. “We’ve been doing our best but students are drifting

away and without you there, people aren't sending their daughters to class like they used to."

"I did suggest how we could get Tom a partner immediately," Amber glared meaningfully at me.

"Not that again," I said.

"What if we could convince you that no one could recognise you?" Amber asked. "I think we could make it so Eric wouldn't be suspected of anything."

"How could you do that?" I knew I shouldn't have asked that the moment I said it.

"Give me a week or two." Amber sensed that she was winning here. "I have some contacts and a few friends who could tell me how to fix it so that no one would ever guess."

"So I'm to become some sort of dancing queen?" I asked.

"You said it."

I stood, trying to think of something to say, but instead spluttered angrily.

"Hey, you two," Mom interrupted. "Amber, don't gloat. If Eric's willing to do this, you should be gentle with him. It's going to save the studio if it works. Eric, please be nice to Amber. She's trying to help, and you may have some fun fooling people."

"Okay, Mom," I said grudgingly. I wasn't convinced that this was going to be a good idea.

"I promise that if you don't think you can do it when I've finished your disguise, then we'll give up with no hard feelings."