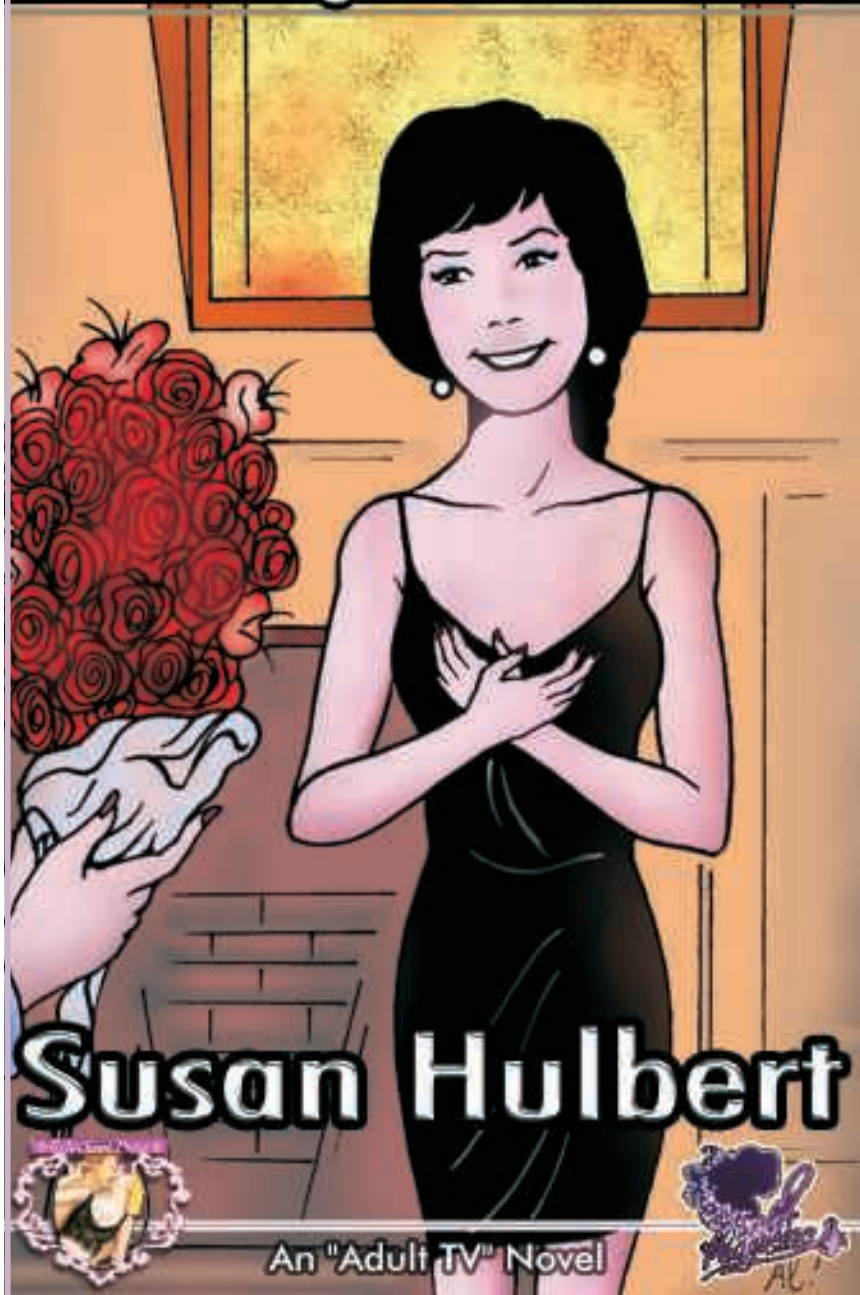


# The Wrong End of the Stick



# Susan Hulbert



An "Adult TV" Novel



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# The Wrong End of the Stick

**By Susan Hulbert**

“We’ve been to better parties,” Paul whispered to Amy as he handed her another drink. “It’s so slow and tame.”

“You’re right.” Amy sipped her drink. “But we must stay for a while. It’s only polite. Heather said that there was entertainment booked. Maybe that’ll liven things up a bit.”

“Okay, I know she’s your best friend but some of her friends are real dorks.”

“Is that just because they don’t like sports?” Amy scoffed and did that thing with her finger under his chin. “I don’t like sports either, but you like me.”

“Maybe the sport we play is more exciting.” Paul put his arm around her and then let his hand slip down to squeeze her rear.

“Stop it.” She backed away, half affronted, half amused. “Don’t be so embarrassing in front of everyone.”

“No one noticed.” Paul reached for her again.

“I noticed and it’s not polite.”

“No, but you love it.”

“And I arrange better parties than this. Daddy would never forgive me if one of his affairs was as dull.”

“He might make you drive last year’s Mercedes.” Paul’s lips were almost sneering.

“Hi.” A shapely raven-haired lady interposed herself between them. “I’m Crystal and I’m the entertainment tonight. I wonder if you’d help me in a couple of tricks.”

“Oh no,” Paul said rather too loudly. “Don’t tell me you’re a magician.” He laughed out loud.

“Not at all.” Crystal stood as still as a statue so that he could enjoy his forced laughter. “I’m a mesmerist; in your common language that’s a hypnotist, but I’m a lot more than that too.”

“That’s nearly as bad.” Paul chortled again. “There’s no way I’m helping you. It’s all nonsense anyway. You can’t do anything to me.”

“Are you challenging me?” Crystal seemed to tower over him although in fact she was only five-foot-three, plus heels.

Paul looked around to see if anyone had taken any notice. No one was even looking their way. “I guess I am.” He stood back arrogantly.

“I love a challenge.” Crystal winked at Amy. “Is he always an arrogant pig?”

“Who’re you calling a pig?” Paul spluttered.

“I called you arrogant too.” Crystal smiled sweetly, looking down so that he would be sure to see her long false lashes and deep, dark eyes.

Amy laughed at Paul’s discomfort. People were starting to look at them and gather round.

“Let’s see how you meet a challenge.” Crystal held his eyes. “Do you want to be hypnotised quickly or slowly?”

“You’re not going to hypnotise me either way,” Paul said. He was unaware that his eyes were firmly focussed on hers.

“Quickly or slowly?” she asked again.

Amy watched as Paul’s body language changed subtly. Crystal held her hand to his face, palm facing him, touched his nose and commanded, “Sleep.”

To her amazement, Amy saw Paul’s eyes close. Crystal stepped nearer to his, wrapped an arm around him and started to whisper in his ear. She stood back, said “Wake” and turned quickly away.

Paul stood and blinked a few times. Amy took his arm and steered him back towards the bar as the people around them melted away.

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“What happened to you then?” Amy asked as they took their drinks onto the terrace.

“Nothing happened. I played along a bit,” Paul replied. “It was what everyone expected and I always believe in giving people what they want.”

“So you’re a mind reader too?” Amy put her hand on his.

“It was a bit weird,” Paul said. “I don’t believe in all that crap about hypnosis, but there was a feeling of something being in control. I wanted to play along.”

“You were mesmerised by Crystal’s cleavage,” Amy replied. “I saw where your eyes went.”

“She told me to close them.”

“I mean before you closed them.”

“Okay, she was a delicious looking lady; I can’t deny that.” Paul looked across the room. “But I wouldn’t like to tango with her. She’s way too scary.”

“She doesn’t look at all scary,” Amy scoffed.

“Maybe not; but there’s something about her.” Paul looked across the room at Crystal. “She’s more than a match for any man.”

“So keep away.” Amy tugged his hand. “I’m not scary, but if she’s had this effect on you in a couple of minutes, maybe I wish I was.”

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As the party went on, they circulated. Amy left Paul talking sports with a group of loudmouths who bored her. She took her drink and wandered through the French doors onto the terrace.

A movement from the shadows startled her. “I’m sorry; I was relaxing away from the crowd in there.”

“You’re Crystal.” Amy held out her hand. “I’m Amy. We almost met when you did your thing with Paul earlier.”

“I remember you.” Crystal smiled easily. “I’m sorry about that. It’s what I’m paid to do when I entertain at parties.”

“No apology needed,” Amy replied.

“I only prepared him for later.” Crystal sipped her drink. “I’ve a few people like that and they’re going to be the entertainment later.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Neither do they.” Crystal smiled back. “That’s the magic bit of these parties. They’ve no idea what’s going to happen, and they won’t know until it’s too late.”

“I wish I could do that to him sometimes. He’s away talking sports with a boring bunch of guys, and I get forgotten.”

“So why are you with him?” Crystal asked. “Surely Cameron Hall’s daughter could get someone more to her liking.”

“So you know who I am,” Amy replied. “Yes, you’re right, maybe I should dump him, but Daddy gives all my boyfriends such a hard time. Paul’s the only one he approves of.”

“Is that because he’s a pig too?” Crystal laughed and Amy found herself laughing too.

“You’re cool,” Amy said. “I wish I could do something as fascinating as you do.”

“If you’re serious, I give lessons.”

“But would it work... on him, I mean,” Amy stuttered. “Or on anyone really?”

“It could if you and I work on it together. I could try and teach you.”

“I don’t know if I’ve the confidence. I mean, you must be amazingly strong to do what you do.”

“I’m not really. It’s just a mask I wear. I have to prepare carefully for each occasion. I get a new dress and shoes, I change my makeup and hair, wear some special pieces of jewellery. It’s like a ritual I go through to build my confidence.”

“You amaze me. I thought you’d be telling me something completely different.”

“I’ll give you my card.” Crystal opened her clutch. “If you want to talk it through, call me.”



“Thanks. I’ll watch the act with more attention now.”

“In advance, let me say a big sorry for embarrassing your partner.”

“No worries. He probably deserves it.”

Half an hour later, Amy watched as Crystal started her show. She was surprised as several guests “volunteered” to be part of the act, Paul included. They performed a number of scenarios. Some forgot their names, others couldn’t count. Paul tried to “chat up” a mop placed on the chair next to him, convinced that it was the most glamorous girl he’d ever seen.

Cameras flashed as people recorded bits on their mobiles. It was saved for posterity, and probably for embarrassment later.

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Amy plucked up the courage to call Crystal. She’d been thinking about it for a week or two, and watched some YouTube videos where all sorts of things seemed to happen. She wondered if some were faked, but then decided that they all couldn’t have been written and rehearsed. She finally decided that she was really interested and searched for the card with the telephone number.

A man’s voice answered the telephone. “Is this the number for Crystal?”

“Crystal.” He sounded surprised. “I’ll see if she’s available.”

There was a rustling sound from the telephone as if it was being carried through the house, wherever it was.

“Crystal speaking; may I help you?”

It wasn’t quite the voice Amy was expecting to hear, but then she thought the performance voice must differ from the everyday one.

“I’m Amy from the party the other week. You were the entertainment and gave me your card.”

“I remember you. You’re the delicious blonde with that boorish man who went on about sport all the time.”

“I took your advice and dumped him.”

“Did Daddy approve?”

“Surprisingly yes, he did. I even got a raise in my allowance.”

“So you’re footloose and fancy free?”

“Until I make the next bad choice.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. All you need is confidence and a good looney detector that flashes when the wrong man comes into view.”

“I was wondering if I could come and see you. . . , professionally, I mean. You said you might be able to tell me more about what you do and how you do it.”

“I’m not really a teacher.” Crystal didn’t want pupils right now. “It’s more about confidence and learning a process.”

“And I’m not sure that I could ever hope to do the things you do, but I’d love to talk to you.” Amy was beginning to wonder if this call was a good idea.

“Of course you may come; you must. It would be lovely to see you again. I will be free on Friday afternoon from about three, then I have another engagement on Friday evening.”

“Friday evening,” Amy repeated. “Is there any chance I could come with you. I could be your assistant, carry your bags and that sort of thing.”

There was a silence from the other end of the conversation.

"I know it's awfully presumptuous of me, but I would so love it... if I could... if you would..." Amy heard herself prattling on. She wasn't usually so vague.

"Maybe we'd better talk about that when we meet," Crystal said. "You have my email, if you send me yours; I'll send back my address."

"I'll do it now," Amy replied, hearing the sound of the connection being broken while she was still speaking.

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"Thanks for allowing me to come," Amy gushed as the door opened and Crystal stood back for her to enter. They half-hugged and air kissed a little self-consciously as strangers do.

"Nice house." Amy looked round. "And you have a garden and terrace too."

"I think I did really well when I decided to buy this place," Crystal said. "It's so nice when someone else likes it too."

Crystal was dressed formally in a little black dress, tightly fitted, which fell to calf-length, and hugged her thighs. Her raven hair was pulled back into a tight French pleat, and pearl earrings dangled on long golden threads. She wore no rings, but her nails were carmine red and looked newly manicured with square tips.

"I brought you these." Amy held out a bunch of red roses. "I always give roses; any other flower seems less than perfect for a friend."

"These are truly beautiful." Amy turned. "Come with me and I'll get a vase."

"I do hope you don't mind me calling you a friend," Amy continued. "I really hope we can be best friends if you'll let me."



“Of course you can call me a friend,” Crystal replied. “But remember, we come from such different places. I may not be what you think. After all, you only met me once before.”

“I’m a bit short of friends at the moment,” Amy confessed.

“They all sided with Paul: am I right?”

“He’s a popular person.”

“But not with you.” Crystal carried the vase through to an open and airy living room which opened to a sun lounge and patio.

“If it’s any consolation, I think you deserve someone far better. Heck, I think you deserve someone with a brain.”

“He’s not very sparkling, is he?” Amy tittered as if it was naughty to tell the truth about the date who’d been her duty for so long.

Crystal turned quickly, bumping into Amy who clung on for balance. They stood, arms around each other, looking into each other’s eyes. A breath; a pause; frozen for a moment. A tingle of electricity hit them both, and then the moment was broken.

“I’m sorry, I lost my balance.” Crystal turned away.

“My fault, I shouldn’t have been standing so close.” Amy moved to a window seat.

“May I come with you tonight?” Amy asked. “I do so want to see you in performance again.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Crystal replied, seeing Amy’s face drop. “There’ll be people you probably know at the party.”

“I could get myself invited as a guest.”

“You don’t know where it is or whose party it is.”

“You could tell me. I’ve a pretty good line in persuasion and I’m sure they’d invite me,” Amy pleaded.

“What if Paul’s there?”

“I’ll have to see him sometime,” Amy replied. “And you could probably turn him into a frog for me.”

“I’m a hypnotist, not a magician.”

“Or a witch doctor,” Amy laughed. “Please let me come. I’ll dress really dowdy, no makeup and wear a wig. No one will recognise me, and I’ll carry your bags.”

“Okay, do that and you can come with me,” Crystal laughed. “I may regret this... and I don’t have any bags for you to carry.”

“I’ll go home and change.” Amy’s eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. “You won’t recognise me what I’m back.”

“Dress formally, with a little makeup, nothing striking so you don’t stand out. I’d like you to look unthreatening and unremarkable. Wear the wig and make sure that no one can recognise you.”

“I can do that, but why?”

“You can be my assistant,” Crystal replied. “It’s easy really; you stand there and watch what’s going on. You’ll know if you spot anything that you think I should know. You move the chairs, and try to make it go smoothly.”

“That’s a big order,” Amy said. “I don’t know if I can do all those things.”

“I’m sure you can, and don’t worry if something should go wrong. It makes the show seem more human and they love that. There’s no training for your role. It’s all common sense.”

“I’m sure I have that.” Amy’s face lit up. “After all, I had the sense to dump Paul.”

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Amy was back in a couple of hours. Crystal met her at the door and they hugged again. Both seemed to linger in the other's arms a little longer than necessary. They broke, both feeling the same confused embarrassment. They couldn't meet the other's eye for a moment.

"That's a good look for the show." Crystal looked Amy up and down. "That wig really looks natural, and the general non-threatening appearance couldn't be better."

"I don't think anyone will recognise me." Amy looked at herself in the mirror. "I don't think I'd recognise myself."

"I know," Crystal replied. "And I do prefer the way you looked before. Please don't stay like this. You are never that dowdy."

"It's not my favourite look, but it's making it so that I can come with you." Amy's eyes looked really excited. "I hope I don't let you down."

"I'm sure you won't." Crystal walked to the door. "Now I have to go and change and get ready, so if you'll excuse me..."

"Can't I come and watch?"

"I think you'd put me off." Crystal closed the door behind her.

Amy flopped onto the couch, feeling rejected and excluded from something she knew she'd have liked to watch. Crystal getting into performance mode was something which really excited her.

It seemed ages before Crystal re-appeared. Her hair was different, very formal and strictly styled with blonde streaks running through the deep russet up do. The biggest change was her makeup. It was so dramatic; huge false lashes on very darkly made-up eyelids, eyeliner winged out heavily, and her lips,

clearly lined with a pencil, looked plumper and glossier than ever.

Her dress was deep red, low-cut, but revealing nothing more than the slightest hint of cleavage. The bodice and waist were close and so tight, it was a wonder that she could breathe without splitting a seam. The skirt was tight across the hips and tight down the thighs to the knee where it flared out and trailed on the floor at the back.

“Wow.” Amy looked her up and down. “I’d submit instantly if I saw you like that.”

“Be careful what you say,” Crystal giggled. “People may think you’ve become a lesbian.”

“Not with my record of boyfriends.” Amy felt the fabric of Crystal’s dress. “That’s a beautiful dress.”

Her heels were high, with the thinnest stiletto and the skinniest straps that Amy had ever seen. Her nails were long and in a colour which matched her dress. There was a gold band on the second toe of her left foot.

Crystal saw her staring at it. “It’s stuck there,” she said. “I never could get it off past the knuckle, if that’s what toes have.”

Her earrings were long and dangling, heavy with red stones which matched her dress. A simple necklace hung halfway to her cleavage. A couple of gold bangles rattled on her left wrist and she wore a wedding set on her left hand. The solitaire diamond glittered with class.

“This dress is so lovely.” Amy held it to her face. “It’s so soft and I can smell your perfume all over it.”

“Perfume is one of my secrets,” Crystal said. “If you’re trying to hypnotise any man, the scent will distract them a little and that lets me in.”

“Is that true?”



“Probably not, but I like to think it could be, so that I can excuse myself for wearing more.”

“You’re really wicked underneath.”

“I’m pleased that you’ve noted that. It may save us problems later.” Crystal’s voice was severe, but her eyes told a different story.

“May I try that dress sometime?”

“Of course, but you must promise not to look so dowdy,” Crystal said. “I expect you to be really glamorous and exciting when you do.”

“Now who could be accused of having secret lesbian thoughts?” Amy replied.

“You don’t really want to know,” Crystal replied.

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“That was amazing.” Amy flopped onto the couch when they were back at Crystal’s home. “I really loved watching you.”

“It was a good performance all round,” Crystal sighed, flopping into a huge chair opposite Amy. “Now I can relax.”

“Do you always use the same routine?”

“More or less,” Crystal replied. “People expect certain tricks. They’ve probably seen them on television, but seeing their friends in that situation is always special to them.”

“The failing to count fingers bit was really funny, and I really liked it that I could stand behind you and watch the way you handled them all.”

“What did you think of the chicken routine?” Crystal asked. “I only do that with the women. It seems to work really well with them. I have no idea why that should be.”

"I really thought it was a great way through the set," Amy said. "The way you had some of them randomly clucking without realising was fantastic."

"I like that too. I never know when one of them is going to do it."

"Neither does anyone else," Amy laughed. "The whole random thing had them all guessing who was going to be next."

"I used to do the chicken walk, but I gave up on that idea." Crystal said. "It didn't feel good."

"So you didn't have full confidence in it. I can understand that."

"My favourite is always the mop routine." Crystal smiled at the memory. "I try to get the most arrogant man I can find, then before he knows it, he's trying to chat up the mop and ignoring the fact that he's not getting any replies."

"That's what they do anyway," Amy said. "I'm so fed up of men like that; narcissistic egos all."

"But the mop shows it so well; matching Paul's brain."

"Ouch, that's really catty," Amy laughed, taking off her wig and running her fingers through her hair. "I wish I'd brought a change of clothes with me."

"I usually stay in costume after a show," Crystal replied. "It helps me to wind down and then I make notes of what went well and more importantly, what could have gone better."

"I've had a wonderful day. I never expected anything so good. Can I do it again please?"

"Of course you can," Crystal replied. "It's been really good to have someone there on my team."

"You're not just saying that?"

“I’m not just saying it; it’s true,” Crystal said. “Sometimes it can be really difficult, especially with an audience of sceptics who’re determined not to join in. That takes a lot of work. Fortunately, I’ve learned not to take gigs where that’s likely.”

“How do you do that?”

“It’s largely instinct. When I’m talking to the host or hostess, I get a sense if it’s something I want to do. I’ve learned that shying away does me no harm at all.”

“I can see that.” Amy came to perch in Crystal’s chair arm. “You refuse the ones you think could be bad. You accept the ones you think could be good. It gives an air of exclusivity, and you have a rarity value too.”

Amy’s hand slipped onto Crystal’s shoulder and started to play with her earring. “I think you’re the most exciting person I’ve met for a long time.”

“Are you sure I haven’t hypnotised you to say that?” Crystal took her hand, catching her diamond ring in her hair as she did so.

“It would be really exciting if you had.” Amy took her hand back. “I’d love to be deeply hypnotised and be your plaything.”

“Hypnosis doesn’t work like that.”

Crystal looked up and saw Amy staring at something on her head. “Are you wearing a wig?” Amy asked.

“I do most of the time.” Crystal thought quickly. Some of the lace front must have been dislodged when her ring caught in her hair.

“I have an alopecia problem. My own hair is very patchy.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“It’s all right. I’ll go and fix it.”

“Don’t trouble just for me.” Amy blushed. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“It’s all right, but you must forgive my vanity. I’ll fix the wig; meanwhile why don’t you fix us a drink? There’s everything you need in the kitchen, first cupboard along, and you’ll see the wine rack and the wine cooler.”

“Okay,” Amy said brightly. “And I really am sorry.”

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Crystal took a deep breath to calm down and then went to her vanity and glued the errant piece of lace. She held it until she was sure that it couldn’t come away again.

“That way disaster lies,” she whispered to herself. “Another time, another place, and Amy would be wonderful.”

She went back to join Amy.

“I opened the champagne. I thought we could drink to friendship. I feel like I’ve known you for ages.”

“It’s all an illusion,” Crystal said. “But I love it.”

They toasted each other, then toasted hypnotic susceptibility and a few more followed. A second bottle appeared as they talked and talked into the night.

“I don’t think I should drive home.” Amy slurred a little as she spoke.

“It would be a bad idea,” Crystal agreed. “Shall I call a cab?”

“Can’t I stay here?” Amy sighed. “It’s so comfortable and I don’t want to go to my big, empty house. It’s so lonely there.”

“Of course, the spare room is always ready, and it’s really comfortable.”