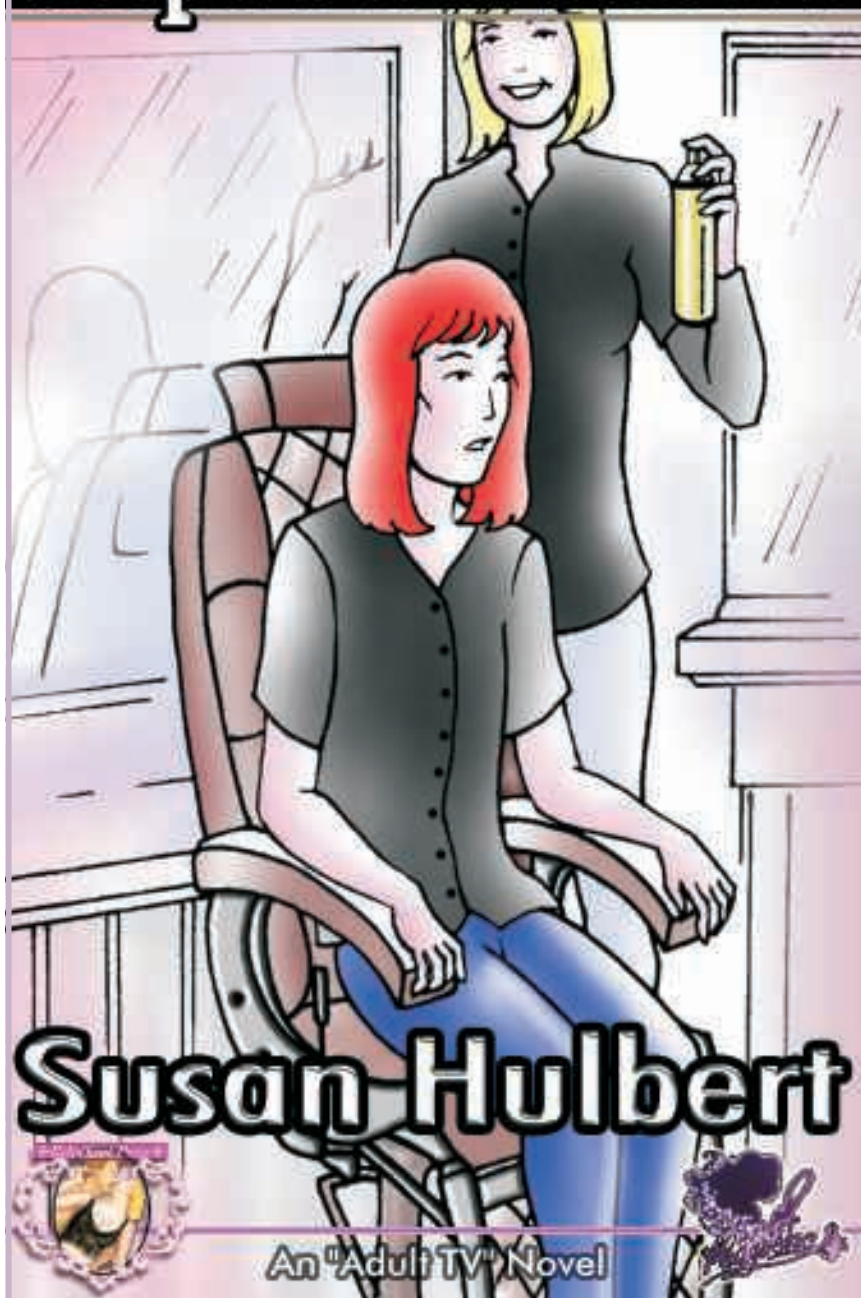


Stepmother's Salon



Susan Hulbert



An "Adult TV" Novel

Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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Stepmother's Salon

By Susan Hulbert

“You’ve weeks of vacation coming up soon. I’ve spoken to your father and you’re going to be working in one of my salons.”

“You’re joking; I can’t even pretend to be a ladies’ hair stylist.”

“Certainly not with that unruly mop you’ve got on your head. We’ll have to do something about that before you start work.”

“But you can’t expect me to do ladies’ hair.”

“I can’t and I don’t,” Maggie said. “We don’t only do hair; you’re going to be a nail technician. The training is simple, so even you should be able to do a decent job.”

“That’s not a job for a boy. You can’t make me.”

“I’ll be paying you full salon rates.”

“Even at that rate it’s not right.”

“My best nail technicians were men; Neil and Nigel ran the salons they worked in. They left to run one of their own.”

“That doesn’t matter. I’m a boy, for goodness sake. They’re probably gay, and I’m not.”

“I had noticed. You’re a boy with bad personal hygiene who can’t keep a girlfriend. You have the clothes sense of a scarecrow and the work ethic of a sloth on a rest day. These things have to change.”

“And you’re going to make me?” he said over his shoulder as he walked away.

Matt knew he shouldn’t have said that as he slammed the door of his room. He knew that he shouldn’t have allowed Maggie to provoke him so easily. He’d learned always to agree with her, whatever she told him to do, then ignore it. Usually, she left him alone, but when she was mad, she really scared him.

Maggie was his stepmother. Dad had married her quite quickly after meeting her. His mom had left a couple of years before, preferring her professor to Dad, who was an accountant for local businesses, far too lacking for her ambitions. To her, his lack was in drive and assertiveness.

Matt agreed with her, especially now that he was left with Maggie and her daughters. They were in charge and he had no defence against them, least of all from his dad.

He didn’t mind her daughters really; largely because he hardly knew them and they both lived away from the family home. Matilda was the elder; Kirsten was younger. They were both several years older than him and lived in apartments over the separate salons they managed for Maggie.

It was a good business, a small chain of salons spread over several towns nearby. Maggie was ambitious. Matt admired her for that but he didn’t like the way she was gradually taking over his life.

He’d moved from one high school to another when his father sold their old house and moved in with Maggie. It wasn’t a bad house, in fact it was far bigger and better than the one left behind.

His room had its own bathroom as well as space for his desk, a computer work station, and a couple of easy chairs. It had been Matilda's room and still had some of her stuff in the dressing room and the drawers. It was decorated in her style, with pinks and pastel colours, mirrors with lights. There was even a big teddy bear.

It was his last year of high school and he was really unhappy with the change. Friends had been left behind and he didn't manage to integrate easily with his new classmates. Old friends soon became a distant memory. He didn't have a car of his own and depended on lifts and his old bicycle.

The atmosphere was distinctly frosty as Matt came down for breakfast next morning. Maggie was dressed for work, sipping on her coffee, ready to drive him to school.

"I'm sorry..." Matt started.

"So you should be," Maggie snapped, then took a deep breath and smiled. "Maybe I shouldn't have sprung it on you like that but with your dad away for a few weeks, there's only me to look after you."

"I really don't want to do that kind of work," Matt said. "I think I'd be a liability."

"I know you might not like the idea but your dad and I think that you should work and have your own money."

"I could use the money," Matt said. "Isn't there anything else I could do?"

"Not really; we have school girls in doing part-time work. They sweep up and keep the place stocked and clean. They pack the rubbish and the used towels for collection. The only male jobs are either as stylists or technicians."

"Do I have to work for you?"

"Do you have any alternative lined up?"

“No, but I wasn’t planning...”

“You weren’t planning to get a job.”

“I thought I could have the summer off,” Matt replied, knowing that this wasn’t going to help at all.

“You’re not lazing around here all summer.”

“I’m not going to work for you just because you married my dad.”

“You’ll be paid the rate for the job once you’re trained and you’ve proved that you can do the job properly.”

“You’re not selling this to me.” Matt was determined that it wasn’t for him.

“The clients usually tip. The tips are all yours and some of them are really good tippers, especially when you get a good group of regulars.”

“Am I going to be there long enough to get regular clients?”

“Many come every week and more often if they break a nail. It could get you on the way to a car of your own. Nigel bought a new coupe on his tips alone after only one year working for me.”

“Do I have to...?” Matt started to plead but when he saw her look, he realised that it wasn’t going to do him any good.

“Your training starts after school every day and on the weekends. Go straight to my office and I’ll have someone show you the basics. If you pay attention, you could be earning as soon as the vacation starts.”

“Okay,” Matt mumbled, knowing he was defeated.

“And use some deodorant before you come to the salon. There’ll be a uniform for you to wear when you get there. Now, we’re wasting time, let’s get going.”

Matt was silent on the way to school. He thought and thought but couldn’t come up with a way out of it. It was humiliating, he thought, doing woman’s work.

The money would be good, but was that enough?

Matt's father, Alan, was an accountant in private practice. He filed accounts and tax returns, specialising in dealing with smaller companies. He was a mild and retiring man, with a highly successful business that took him all over the state. He met Maggie when she approached him to deal with her expanding business.

Their courtship was conventional, with Maggie in the driving seat. When they married and Matt came into the equation, Alan was content to leave family management to her. She was in charge and he wanted an easy life.

"These overheads are killing my business," Maggie grumbled, going through the mail in her office. "And we have to negotiate new leases soon."

She put the bills into a folder for the accountant and noticed that it was getting thicker and thicker. She flipped through them all; electricity and water charges, rent and business taxes, supplies and sundries. They all mounted up.

"I need to check where we can save," she said to Alan, then looked again at the bills.

She turned on her laptop and pulled up the bills from the previous years. Ezra Properties were the owners of several of the premises that she rented and she noticed that their charges had increased way above the other landlords she dealt with.

"Maybe you could negotiate some deal with Ezra Properties?" Alan suggested. "You pay rent on quite a number of their properties. If you were to pull out, they'd struggle to fill all those places at once."

"But I'm tied to notice periods," Maggie replied. "And I intend to expand the chain, not to close salons. That would send the wrong signal to the industry and to my clients."

"No problem then; you can give notice and look for other premises," Alan replied. "Either way, they

could take a hit. It would be simpler and easier for them to negotiate something with you.”

“It’s William Sands I need to speak to,” Maggie said. “His grandfather Ezra founded their property empire a long time ago.”

“William’s a hard nut to crack,” Alan said. “But a re-negotiation would be a good step forward. I think he’s leaving the smaller places like yours to his son, Joshua. I overheard something about teaching him the business.”

“Melanie, could you step into my office when you have a space between clients, please?”

“I’m not in trouble again, am I? That lady with the broken nails hasn’t complained, has she? I told her that I couldn’t do any work on top of the mess from whoever had done them before.”

“No, she hasn’t complained and if she did, I’d tell her that you were right,” Melanie said.

“She was so rude.”

“I’d rather we turned away people like that,” Maggie replied. “A reputation for not doing second-rate nails is a good one to have.”

“What have I done then?”

“It’s not a problem, Melanie. You’re my favourite technician.”

“But you never come to me to get your nails done.”

“That’s because you’re always busy and I know that I don’t need to check on the quality of your work.”

“So when you go to the other girls, you’re checking them for quality?”

“Of course; someone has to check from time to time,” Maggie said. “I think that’s your client. Come and see me when you’ve time.”

“I’m not in trouble?”

“Not at all, I promise.”

It was several hours later when Melanie knocked on the boss’s door. She entered as soon as Maggie called and flopped down when Maggie signalled that she should use the easy chairs at the other end of the office whilst she finished whatever she was doing on her laptop.

“Hard day?” Maggie asked.

“Very busy,” Melanie said. “Mostly regulars but I may have picked up a couple of new clients who seemed so pleased that they’ll come back.”

“That’s good; I hope they tipped well.”

Melanie just smiled in response. “I did have one horror though. They hadn’t had a fill in ages and I didn’t want to touch them as they were.”

“That’s always a problem. Clients think we can do magic on anything. They think a coating of nail varnish will cure it.”

“Fortunately, she was reasonable so I took it all off and gave her a lovely set. I think she’ll be back but it took a bit of convincing to get her to let me start.”

“Now to our business,” Maggie said. “You’ve already met my stepson. He’s not bad but he’s bone idle; no pride in his appearance, and dresses like a scarecrow with clothes that look like they came from an electric crumpling machine.”

“I’ve had boyfriends like that, but not for long. Bad personal hygiene is a real turn-off.”

“I’m pleased to hear it.” Maggie smiled at the thought. “I want you to teach him how to be a nail tech.”

“Does he want to do that? Most boys would run a mile rather than work in this industry.”

“He’s not going to have a choice,” Maggie replied. “His father’s away but he’s agreed that Matt needs to

be civilised and he's given me free hand to use whatever means I need."

"Are you saying that I'm to be the means of civilising him? That's too tall an order."

"I think you'll be a good influence and I'll not hold it against you if you fail."

"Okay," Melanie said cautiously. Does that mean that you'll go along with whatever I do?"

"As long as he doesn't become less civilised than he is now, you can do with him whatever you want."

"That's a very wide brief." Melanie thought all kinds of things as she said it.

"The first job, though, is to teach him about nails. I've told him that he'll be having a full manicure with nail extensions as a first job as soon as school closes for the summer."

"He'll know what it feels like straight away."

"That's the idea, then you're to teach him how to be as good at the craft as you are."

"That's a tall order," Melanie smiled back. "I don't want anyone to be better than me."

"You can guess what I mean."

Matt walked very slowly towards Maggie's office after school. He thought about going home and pretending he'd forgotten where he should be. That wouldn't work. He thought some more; he could fail the training. Complete incompetence might be his best way out of this.

Of course, he couldn't be too obvious about it. They were going to train him on what to do. What if he got it right a few times, then messed up some clients. Maybe that would work?

He thought again. Much as he hated the idea, he couldn't damage the business. If he messed up, it would be so obvious that it was deliberate. He'd get

into more trouble. Perhaps he should follow his dad's example; keep quiet and get on with it.

The office was through a separate entrance beside Maggie's biggest salon. He pushed the entry phone and when the buzzer sounded, he opened the door and went upstairs. He'd never been here before and wasn't prepared for anything.

At the top of the stairs was a big reception area with a dark-haired girl sitting behind a computer station with a couple of telephones on her desk. He told her who he was and that he had to see Maggie.

She smiled and he found himself looking into the most beautiful brown eyes. She stood and hugged him like a long lost friend.

"Do I know you?" he asked, not wanting to push her away.

"No, but I think I know you. I'm Melanie and I've been told to look out for you. I've heard so much about Maggie's wonderful new family. Maggie says you're really nice and I should take care of you. She's been like a different person since she married your dad. I've never seen her so happy."

"I didn't think I was making her happy."

"Step families are like that," Melanie said. "Mine was awful one minute and wonderful the next. It got better as I got older."

"Do I go into her office?"

"No. She's in conference with a representative at the moment; the guy from Ezra Properties. It sounds a bit heavy. If you like, you can go into the waiting room or you can keep me company. They shouldn't be long."

"I'll stay here."

"Maggie said you were going to work here for a few weeks," Melanie said. "I'm signed up as two of your practice hands."

She held up her hands to show him the deep blue nails she was wearing.

“They’re so long. How can you use the keyboard with those?” he asked.

“It’s easy when you’re used to them. It’s a flat keyboard and I use the balls of the fingers rather than the tips.” She laughed. “It took me two weeks to figure that out.”

Before they could say more, the office door opened and Maggie came out. She exchanged a few words with the man she escorted to the top of the stair, then turned to Matt.

“I see you’ve met Melanie.” She came to hug him in greeting. “Come into the office. I’ll give you a quick briefing and then Melanie’s volunteered to introduce you round.”

Matt looked at Melanie who never stopped smiling. “That’s going to be very nice.”

At her insistence, Matt changed into the regulation uniform, then they went down to the salon.

“It’s not your size and it’s the uniform we changed last year,” Melanie examined his look. “The top’s too tight and the slacks are too loose and short but it will have to do. I’d get into trouble if I let you wander about in your old clothes.”

“This looks a bit chaotic,” Matt said, looking round the salon. “It smells of so many perfumes all at once.”

“It’s incredibly well-organised,” Melanie replied. “Everyone knows what they’re doing. It’s a busy time right now; every station is active.”

Melanie started to show him round but Matt’s mind was far away, not taking much in.

“I understand your concerns but a reduction in your rent charges would be impossible.” William Sands sat across the desk from Maggie a few days later. “We all want to maximise our income but I have shareholders to consider.”

He gave the outward impression of being friendly, but there was steel in his gaze; tough and uncompromising, from the soles of his hand-made shoes to the polished elegance of his suit and crisp white shirt.

His son, Joshua, was with him, dressed like a junior to his father's senior executive. He didn't speak but held a document wallet, ready to hand anything needed to his father.

"I thought you were a family business."

"We are but all the members are shareholders." William's fake smile never left his face. "Joshua's going to be dealing with your rents in the future so you'll have to negotiate through him. I'm heading to retirement, before it's too late to enjoy myself."

"Surely you can see the logic of reducing the rents on your properties," Maggie tried again. "If we had more in our reserves, we may be able to expand into some more of your properties; the empty ones, and that would turn some of your liabilities into assets."

"You make a persuasive case but the answer isn't going to change." The smile stayed.

"You can't afford to end these leases. You've nowhere else to go," Joshua added.

"I don't know. I've not looked yet." Maggie smiled this time. "I wanted to give you the chance to go with us on plans for expansion first."

"I know the property market and you can't pick up enough suitable replacement premises."

"You know the vanity market is bottomless," Maggie tried again. "Women want to treat themselves. Times may be tough but looking good makes them feel better. The better they feel, the better they work."

"I can understand the logic but I don't have any problem with my employees. They work or they get fired. I don't care about how they feel away from work." Joshua sounded as unyielding as his father.

The discussion continued with no concessions being won. Maggie walked with them to through the salon, as far as the door.

“Don’t I know you from school?” Joshua spotted Matt across the room and went to him.

“I don’t think so,” Matt spluttered, embarrassed to be recognised in the salon, especially dressed as he was.

“I’m sure I was in a class above yours,” Joshua persisted, despite Matt wishing he could fall through the floor, until he was saved by William calling him as he was waiting to leave.

“I could have done without that.” Matt’s shoulders slumped in dismay after he’d left. “Now he’ll be able to tell everyone that I’m doing a girl’s job.”

“Maybe you’d better try and keep him sweet?” Maggie looked thoughtful. “It couldn’t do any harm.”

Matt broke away from Melanie and headed to the office. He was so shaken by encountering Joshua that he had to hide. It wasn’t intended but he bumped into Maggie who was returning after showing out her visitors.

“I’m glad I found you,” she said. “I wanted to continue explaining about this place and your position in it.”

He didn’t take in all he was told about pay rates and the expected length of appointments. The schedule of treatments and all the different styles went over his head too.

“I suppose all this is second nature to the girls who work here.”

“Yes, it probably is,” Maggie replied. “But it’s not rocket science, I’m sure you’ll pick it all up quickly and start earning. I always thought that you have real talent in your hands.”

“You thought I have talent?” Matt was surprised to hear this.

“Yes, a real talent. I could see it in your artwork. Your dad showed me things you’d done.” Maggie said. “That’s why we agreed you’d be able to do this.”

“Wait a minute; did Dad really know all about this job?”

“Of course he did,” Maggie smiled. “You didn’t think I was going to be the wicked stepmother, did you?”

“Here’s your uniform in the new style. Get changed before you go anywhere. That old uniform looks hideous now. I can understand why the girls wanted a change.” Maggie handed Matt a paper-wrapped package. “There’s a smock, slacks and some flat shoes that should fit you. I took the sizes from your clothes at home. Melanie will show you where you can change.”

Before Matt could ask anything, Maggie’s mobile rang and she took the call, sat at her desk and waved him away. He walked out of the office.

“I’ll show you where you can change and then I’ll take you round the salon,” Melanie said.

Matt opened the package and looked at the contents. “This is a smock like yours,” he said, wrinkling his nose in disgust. “The slacks are flared. And just look at the shoes, they’re like ballet shoes with little tassels. I don’t think this can be right.”

“Of course it’s right,” Melanie said gently. “We all have to wear the same uniform at work, girls and boys.”

“Boys? How many are there here?”

“Well, right now there’s only you. Neil and Nigel went to open their own salon.”

“I really can’t...”

“Of course you can,” Melanie said. “Come with me and I’ll show you the changing room. I’m looking for-

ward to showing you round. It's not every day that a girl like me gets to deal with the boss' son."

Matt started to say something rude, then he looked at Melanie's earnest face and decided that it might not be too bad after all if she was going to show him round. But then he'd have to say something to Maggie. If she was intent on forcing him to work here, he wanted something better to wear; something more manly.

"It's probably too late for the full tour," Melanie said when he emerged from the changing room. "It's going to be better tomorrow when we're open later."

"Do you mean I got dressed up for no reason?" he replied. "I feel like a fool in this getup."

"It's the same as mine." Melanie looked hurt.

"But you have the curves to fill it out." Matt grasped at the surplus material across his chest. "I don't."

"But you could have," Melanie said. "Anything's possible."

Matt turned to the mirror again, wondering exactly what could be possible.

"You will wear my uniform," Maggie said when Matt tried to raise his objections when they got home that night. "Don't you dare say another word against it?"

"But Maggie..."

"No more arguments." She held up her hand. "What do I tell your father? You refused a perfectly reasonable request to look clean and tidy in the salon uniform?" Or do I tell him that you're going to be a good student and earn your keep."

"I thought I was to earn money for myself."

"It was a figure of speech. Of course the money's yours."

“When do I get paid?”

“It’s a month in hand, and training is paid at half the normal rate.”

“That means I only get paid in the second month.”

“Correct, we do what the industry does. You can ask for an advance after your first month,” Maggie said.

“But then it would be deducted when I’m paid.” Matt pulled a face. “That seems a bit mean.”

“If you study hard, and work hard, you’ll be on full rate very quickly,” Maggie said. “Looking at the signals Melanie was giving you, I think she might be happy to help you with extra tuition.”

“Do you think so?” Matt suddenly brightened. “I really liked her. She seems a lot older than I am though.”

“Only a year or so; she came to work from school but she’d done some beauty, nails and hair in her final year. She was already partly trained.”

“But she’s in your office, doing none of those things.”

“That’s just part of her career development and she’s only in the office occasionally. She’s a far brighter girl that she realises, full of bright ideas, and I want her to succeed.”

“Hi Matt.” Melanie was waiting for him when he reluctantly trudged into the office after school the next day. “I got you a smaller smock today.”

“Does that mean I have to change again?”

“Of course; everyone has to wear the uniform when they work here. Maggie’s very strict on the dress code.” Melanie looked at him closely. “She’ll probably insist that you get your hair re-styled too.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my hair.”

“You may think its okay but she wants all of us to look like we’re freshly styled. That way, we advertise what the salon can do for a customer.”

“They probably don’t get many customers like me,” Matt scoffed.

“No, we don’t,” Melanie said softly. “Most have already tried to look their best, then they come here because they’ve heard that we are the best.”

“Is that a way of saying that my hair’s a mess?”

“You can take it that way if you want,” Melanie said. “Nice hair usually goes with a nice person.”

“And mine’s a mess.”

“You said it.” Melanie stepped back as Matt stepped forwards. “It could look so much better if it was styled... or at least combed.”

“Leave me alone,” Matt said more harshly than he intended. “It’s my style and I like it.”

“Okay, but don’t say I didn’t try,” Melanie indicated the changing room. “Get ready and I’ll introduce you round the salon.”

It was a very self-conscious afternoon for Matt. He felt uncomfortable wearing what he thought of as the girls’ uniform while Melanie introduced him to the stylists, beauticians and nail techs. He never guessed how many there were and his opinion of Maggie’s business changed. It was much more than he’d imagined.

Names seemed to fade into each other and if they weren’t all wearing name badges, he’d have no chance of remembering them all.

“Are they all being so nice because I’m related to the boss?” he asked Melanie as they returned to the office.

“I don’t think they know,” she replied. “We often take on new people. Sometimes they come here for training, then go back to their own employers.”

“When does my training begin?” Matt was resigned to his fate, not entirely reluctantly, as he found himself warming to Melanie. “School finishes on Friday.”

“I thought Friday evening would be good for your first set of nails,” she replied.

“What do you mean; my first set of nails?”

“It’s standard.” Melanie looked at him as if he should know all this. “I give you a full set of nails.”

“But I don’t want a full set of nails. I’m a boy; how do I hide my hands? How do I use them?”

“That’s one of the reasons you start with a full set,” Melanie said. “You watch and learn while I do them and you can ask questions as we go along.”

“But don’t you take them off afterwards?”

“No, that would defeat one of the objects of the lesson. You need to know about the feel of the nails; how it affects your hands and movements; what it’s like having elegant nails throughout the day and night.”

“That sounds like torture. It should be banned.”

“Think about it. You’ll be doing a client’s nails. You don’t know anything about them so you talk nails,” Melanie said slowly, as if talking to an idiot. “If your nails look good, then you’ve something to talk about.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You can talk colour, length, shape, and how you do things. How you use your mobile and rummage through your purse...”

“I don’t have a purse,” Matt said. “I’m not a girl.”

“With real nails, you’ll need one.” Melanie laughed at him and held up a hand again. “How do you think I could get into pockets with these?”

“I still don’t see why a boy should have nails like that.”

"It's so that you can talk clients through the process when you work here. Doing the nails is one thing, but living with them is another."

"But they're simply too long for anything."

"Not always." Melanie held up her hands in front of his face again. "I love these. They're coffin shapes; see the flat ends?"

"But they're way over the end of your fingers."

"That's the point." Melanie flexed her fingers. "It looks impractical, maybe even exotic, but I'm used to them and I can do everything easily."

"It's too much."

"Let me give you a clue," Melanie said. "Imagine you're sitting opposite me in a club. You've bought me a drink. I wrap my fingers round the glass and smile seductively at you."

"So what?"

"Think of my hands round that glass, all shiny red nails or blue or any other colour. I play with the glass and the nails make you watch. In a few seconds you'll be thinking what it would feel like if those hands with those nails were running across your chest, or maybe wrapped around another part of your anatomy."

Matt blinked; Melanie laughed as he got the picture.

"End of introductory lecture," she said. "You'll have that picture in your mind at least until Friday."

"Can't you tell her that I don't want a set of false nails?" Matt asked.

"Melanie will be in charge of your training. She's very good and if she says that's what happens, then I'm not going to interfere. It's a requirement that you have good nails. It's called advertising."

"But it's your salon."

“I know and trusting my staff to do their jobs is one of the reasons that I’ve a successful business. I can’t do everything myself and I’ve learned not to interfere.”

“But it’s going to be so humiliating.”

“Maybe you need to learn a little humility.” Maggie looked at him sternly. “You’re either going to do what you’re told, or there will be consequences.”

“But Maggie...”

“No buts about it,” Maggie said firmly. “Why did Melanie want you to experience having nails from the salon?”

“She said something about being able to advise customers and that if I’d experienced it myself I’d know what I was talking about.”

“That’s right. Customers expect a level of competence and expertise,” Maggie said. “And you’ll be expected to have the most elegant and exotic nails all the time when you’re working.”

“I can’t... I won’t.”

“You *will*. Think of it as demonstrating and selling the product. What better way is there than to show the client, so that they know when they see you doing their nails that they can be adventurous and try the latest styles?”

“You can’t do this to me.”

“I can,” Maggie said. “You’ll have to find a way of adapting your behaviour if you think you’re going to be so limited by such a little thing as having attractive hands.”

“But they’ll be like girls’ hands,” Matt sneered. “It’s not what boys have.”

“Maybe it’s time that changed. You can be a pace setter,” Maggie said. “So stop these silly objections and learn to enjoy the opportunity.”