

SECRET OF THE ROSE

By Susan Hulbert



ILLUSTRATED BY CHAS

A 'HER TV' NOVEL

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THE SECRET OF THE ROSE

by Susan Hulbert

I hardly know where to start. I'll have to write it all down some time. Perhaps no one will ever see my story, perhaps no one will ever believe it, but it is my story. I'll write it for myself, so that I can come to terms with all that has happened to me.

How on earth did I get into this mess in the first place? I just wanted a quiet little business of my own, to retreat from the rat race, and take it easy.

As I look down at the hands typing these words, I can see just how much I have changed. I could type faster when I was a full-time programmer, but I didn't have such long, elegant finger nails to reduce my typing speed.

Where do I start?

I'm looking at my hands again, trying to decide how to tell this story. I don't really know *how* to tell you everything, it all seems so unbelievable. I was just an ordinary guy, working in software development. I saw the writing on the wall as waves of layoffs swept through the company. I volunteered to jump before I was pushed, taking my golden handshake while the offer remained good. Between savings and a small inheritance, I had sufficient money to take care of things for a long time, and now I had an idea how I could make my living. How differently it all turned out.

I'm *still* looking at my hands. These long crimson finger nails keep catching the wrong key; often an extra letter appears in the words as they form on the screen. It slows me down, but now that I've decided to write this story, I'm going to take my time and continue.

I look again at my hands. They don't look like *my* hands, but they are. Let me tell you what else I see. On the third finger of my left hand, there are five rings. The first is a broad, plain band; then there is a thinner band with five big diamonds across it. They're big and they're real. There is another plain band, thinner, to create space before the next ring, a big solitaire diamond, very pure and just as real as the other stones. Finally, there is a smaller plain band, the one which keeps these on my finger. It is thin, but it was deliberately chosen to be a couple of sizes too small and forced over my knuckle. The skin swelled around it because it was so tight, with the result that I cannot take any of them off. Not ever.

I'll come to how I got these rings forced upon me later. It was a shock to me then, and now serves as a reminder of what has been done to me, how I've been changed for ever. But I've not finished my description yet. I have a single ring on the middle finger of my left hand. It's very feminine, an oval ruby surrounded by diamonds, very opulent, again secured by a tight keeper ring so that I can never take it off.

My right hand is just as well-dressed as my left. On the ring finger, I wear another set of five rings. The first is set all around with diamonds, then a ruby and diamond

cluster before a thin plain spacer ring. Then I have a smaller ruby and diamond cluster before the inevitable keeper ring which is so tight that I cannot move it. On the middle finger, I have a really wide band, set with pave diamonds. Reaching almost to my knuckle, it's big and extravagant. It, too, is kept on with a tight keeper ring.

All this was done to me so that I would never be able to disguise my hands, to disguise these symbols that show I have been taken over, and made to become something quite different from the man who left with the "golden handshake" just three years ago. It was certainly true that I could not hide these rings. Nor could I remove them without having the keepers cut off, thus damaging them beyond repair.

It seems like my hands were stolen. My male hands, the ones which did all the work to set the business up in the first place, were taken from me at a single stroke. In return, I was fitted with these elegant and bejeweled hands, these extremely feminine hands which are now typing the words to tell my story. Think about that as you read these words. It's impossible to hide your hands from everyone. Every time you pay for something, or pick anything up, your hands are on display.

Let's go back to the beginning. I left my job with a substantial sum of money, not just the golden handshake, but all the money I had saved over the past five years. I'd been very well paid, and received good bonuses on top, as well as stock options which I cashed in at the top of the market. I was twenty five, with no ties, and an idea which would take me through the remainder of my life in comfort, or so I foolishly thought.

I moved away from all the friends I had made in the computer industry. I was no longer part of it. It soon became apparent that I had little in common with my former colleagues. They spoke a different language from me anyway. All we ever had in common was work; now that this common thread was no longer there, conversation became impossible. I had thought of setting up my business without moving my home, but as I thought about things, this came to look like a mistake.

With no reluctance at all, I sold, then packed up, and found myself putting what little I had in storage as I set off in search of a new life. I hardly knew what I was looking for, but with all the naiveté of the enthusiast, I set off to find my new business. I traveled light, and alone. I traveled westward, looking for warmer weather nearer the coast. I avoided the cities, and began to concentrate upon the smaller communities inland, but far enough inland to be off the major tourist routes.

I was just driving aimlessly when I came upon the place I eventually bought. It had been a road house at one time, but was long neglected. It had been built in the Art Deco style which would have been really fashionable once upon a time. Inside, it was well-preserved. The more I thought about it, the more I could picture it as a gathering place for musicians, performers, artists and the like. I wanted to be with creative people, people creative in their lives, in the *real* world. I was tired of virtual reality.

So, I bought the place, and set about cleaning it up. I got it at a good price. The old lady who owned it liked the idea of it being restored, or so her lawyers told me. I could have it cheaply, provided I undertook to restore it, and not make any major alterations to the premises until the old lady died, or five years elapsed. It seemed a good deal, and thus I became the owner of the "Traveler's Rest". Yes, I know the name's not original, but it seemed suitable to me.

I worked hard and long, using manual skills I had not used for some time. In those days I was always able to turn my hand to construction or electrical work. Whatever I didn't already know, I got from books, and set to work. Within a few weeks, I was ready to open the front bar. I was impatient to get some part of the building open, for a sense of progress and also for the company it would bring. Once I could get people coming, I thought, it would help me to get on with the rest of the building work, and get the other rooms ready.

But I'm leaping ahead. I haven't told you what the buildings look like at all. I said that it was an old roadhouse, but it was more than that. There was quite a big front-age onto the lane. At one end was the front bar which I intended to open first, then the remainder of the front was the reception area and the old restaurant. Behind that there was a much larger room with a bar back to back with the front one and, at the other end of the room, a raised stage which had been used in the past for all kinds of performances, from the local dramatic group, to cabaret acts.

There were storerooms, kitchens, dressing rooms and all had an air of much-faded glory. Upstairs, there were ten guest bedrooms, each with its own bathroom, and a smaller wing which I guessed may have been intended as staff rooms, four in all.

I had the proprietor's accommodation on the second floor. It was a big apartment, with a separate entrance along with the one through the hotel. There was all I could ever want there: a big kitchen, well laid-out, but in need of modernizing, three big bedrooms, and a dining room as well as a large lounge. As if this were not enough, I had a large terrace, across the flat roof from the lounge.

This description makes it all sound much grander than it was in reality. Although the building was sound, every part of it was bare, or old, and everything needed cleaning and decorating, refurbishing, and refitting before it could be used. My capital was sufficient for me to be leisurely with my plans. I had no great need to be earning money at the moment; I still had some investments bringing in an income on a regular basis, so I resolved to make everything right before I opened the separate parts of the business. I intended for it to be self-financing. I wasn't going to pour every cent I had into the place; it had to pay for itself, despite my reserves.

I had worked alone to open the front bar, then worked alone in the bar itself, and was pleased with the trade I attracted. I was on the outskirts of the village and had no close neighbors, so it was gratifying that people soon began to drift in regularly. At this point, I was opening just in the evenings, Wednesday to Sunday, working the rest of the time on the building. It may seem like a lonely life to you, as you read about my beginnings, but I was happy, and my days were busy.

I was getting busier on the days when I was open. As the summer came, I was contemplating both speeding up the work on the rest of the rooms and opening longer when fate took a turn. As the last customers were leaving one Sunday evening, a man about my own age, perhaps a little younger, seemed to hang back. When we were the only ones in the bar, he walked over to where I was refilling the shelves.

"I'm new around here," he said, in a soft voice with an eastern accent, "and I wondered if you were looking for any help."

"I've been thinking about it," I said, looking at him properly for the first time.

He was about five foot six inches tall, very thin, and well suntanned. Despite this, his complexion was smooth, almost too smooth, as if he took care not to tan excessively. His hair was fair and long, tied back into a pony tail which hung down his back. He had the look of someone who had been traveling for a while, and I remember seeing a couple of things which did not strike me as significant at the time. There were marks on his ear lobes, where he had obviously worn earrings at one time. More strangely, I saw a gap in the suntan on the backs of his fingers where, I guessed, he had worn several rings until quite recently. His hair was showing a change in color as if the sun had bleached it blonde, then it had grown natural again.

"I've worked in bars all over," he said as if to reassure me. "I was traveling in between student scholarships, and bars have always been good to work in."

He was standing in front of me and, as I considered whether I really needed staff now, his eyes seemed to be pleading with me over and over again for a job. I knew I would have to think seriously about employing someone soon. I could not carry on doing the construction in the day and the bar work in the evenings for much longer. Without any further thought, I decided.

"Right," I said, "you're hired. I don't know how much I'll pay you, but if you want to come back in the morning, we'll work out something."

As we shook hands, I felt how soft and gentle his grip was, then watched him leave. I felt I had made a good decision; it was an instinctive feeling that came to me. He seemed quiet and ordinary and despite his reference to being a student, he was not going to be too intellectual for the customers I had been serving. I went to my apartment, happy at the idea of having engaged my first employee.

In the morning, I was up early, and spotted my new assistant asleep in one of the chairs outside at the back, where the customers took their drinks in the evenings. I guessed he had been there all night. I did not wake him, but went about my business for the day, waiting for him to come to see me. I did not have to wait long, as he ambled through the door almost as soon as I opened it, before I had time to think about what exactly I was employing him to do.

I heard myself saying, "you can start whenever you want. There's staff rooms on the first floor. If you want one, you'll have to clean it out first. Everything's a bit primitive, and fixing up the first floor is phase four at best."

"That's great." He smiled, a warm smile, with more than a little relief in his eyes. Again we shook hands; there was no need for me to offer my hand but I wanted to check the feeling of his fingers again. Had I been correct in my impression from the previous night? I had and after, as he walked to the stairs, then out of my sight, I remember thinking how feminine his walk appeared. It was none of my business and I told myself I was imagining things."Wait," I called after him, and stood as he walked back into my sight. "We haven't talked money. I'm not making much here yet, so it will be basic." I named a figure.

"That's fine," he replied without pausing to think. "How much is the deduction for the room?"

“That's included,” I replied, surprised at the question, “but you'll have to rough it, fix it up for yourself, do what ever you want. When there's a cash flow here, I'll do it all up, but not this year.”

I turned and started on my tasks for the morning as I heard him go out, then come in again carrying a small bag. He was going up the stairs when a thought hit me.

“What do I call you?” I shouted after him.

“Oh,” he paused, as if thinking, “I guess you can call me Morgan.” He turned and continued up the stairs.

The next few days were a revelation. Morgan seemed to know how to run a bar, all right. He worked steadily through the day, making his room comfortable and cleaning out one of the small bathrooms in the staff wing. I left him to it, and only realized how hard he had worked when he invited me to see his room. It was like new, with the old wooden floor polished, the blinds washed and the windows cleaned. He had a camping roll on the floor for a bed, a chair salvaged from one of the guest rooms, and several packing cases used as tables, each covered with a clean and bright piece of cloth. It was so different.

In the bar, Morgan was quick and friendly. I watched him carefully at first, but soon realized that he was as honest as he was efficient. Quite soon I felt comfortable leaving the bar to him while I took a few days off. I didn't have any idea where to go, but simply felt the need to be away to recharge myself. I had accomplished my first objectives and it was time to think how I wanted to proceed.

I was away only six days, but when I returned, I could feel a new atmosphere in the place. Morgan had obviously been working flat out. It was cleaner and brighter than before and as I approached it, I could see that the glass sparkled; it seemed that all the windows in the building had been polished and cleaned. When I parked and went in, the difference inside was striking. I don't mean that anything was changed. It was just that it was more cheerful, more inviting than I remembered.

Hearing me come through the door, Morgan appeared. He was dressed in shorts and a tee-shirt which clung to his body. He wore an old white carpenter's apron over this and, despite the way it flapped as he walked, I thought I detected something about his chest which should not have been there. He was obviously cleaning something out back. His arms were bare, and I saw a small tattoo on the top of his left upper arm. “Hello,” he said, as if expecting me, “I was just making a start on the small kitchen. It's not too bad. I could start some food going here soon, if you like, just small scale so that I can still do the bar.”

“Yes,” I heard myself replying, “that's great. Tell me when you want supplies ordered.”

I looked again at his tattoo, and saw that it was a very delicate tracing of a red rose, quite beautifully done, and unlike anything I had ever seen before. It was a surprising emblem for a man to choose to wear so permanently. He saw me staring, and self-consciously fingered his rose.

“It's just a remnant of a past life,” he said, laughing. His eyes were not laughing though, as he turned and began to walk back to his work.

I thought no more about it as I went up the stairs, almost unable to believe the difference he had made. I knew I was hardly paying for this quality of work, but Morgan wasn't complaining, so why should I? It was when I opened the door to my apartment that I got a real shock. It was just as I had left it, but cleaner and much more comfortable. Like Morgan's room, the floors were polished and the blinds were fresh and clean. Everything was bright and tidy.

"I'm sorry if I shouldn't have done your apartment." Morgan's voice came from the doorway, I hadn't heard him coming up the stairs. "I had all the cleaning equipment rented for other jobs, and it seemed a waste not to do this part as well."

It was beautiful, and I told him so. He just smiled and went down the stairs again, leaving me to settle back into my newly welcoming home.

The next few weeks passed quite quickly. Morgan started cooking for the customers. Meals were ready at a fixed time, and had to be ordered in advance. There were only the two of us working—me behind the bar while Morgan prepared and served the meals. Then we both cleared the tables and served in the bar until closing time. Soon we were turning away as many people as we were able to feed. The receipts went up and up. I knew they were, but it came as a shock to me when I sat down and worked out just *how* much money I had cleared. Looking back, I don't know how we managed.

I realized that it was all due to Morgan's work. I had been leaving so many things to him, while I began to work on the large bar. It was time to take stock; the first thing I did when we closed on Sunday night was to call Morgan over to sit with me. I didn't know where to begin, so I thanked him for all his work. I wanted him to know I appreciated it all. The conversation didn't go the way I expected. I offered him a little more money, which he accepted, but I was surprised that he didn't ask for more, or a share of the profit. "Does that mean we can fix up the place better?" Morgan asked. It was a surprising first question.

"Yes, we can get some contractors to do the first floor."

"Good," he exclaimed, before I had time to say more, "because I have a few ideas."

He walked to the bar, reached underneath, and pulled out a buff-colored folder. He handed it to me with such a look of anticipation that I opened it at once. It was a floor plan of the first floor, with drawings of all the rooms, each decorated and furnished quite luxuriously. The rooms looked both tasteful, and inviting. I smiled as I went through the folder, and saw that was not all. There was a recognizable sketch of the back lot, landscaped and looking just as inviting, far more so than the few tables and chairs we had out there at present.

"These are wonderful," I said, and hesitated as the practical side came into my mind. "Have you asked for someone to cost these plans?"

"No, I wanted you to approve them first."

I approved and said so. On this one, I would give Morgan his head, he deserved it, after all. It was money he had earned for me that I would be investing. We talked into the night, but it was all about the future of the place. I revealed more than a little of my previous life, but I soon realized that Morgan was not going to volunteer anything

about his past, other than the little he told me when he got the job. I wondered how much of that had been true.

I had been intending to open the big bar next, but Morgan convinced me to go for the bedrooms, followed by the restaurant. He argued, quite logically, that I should get a quality reputation before risking promoting entertainment, and that there was more money in food and accommodation, with less hassle. I asked a few questions, but soon saw it his way. Over the next few weeks, I spent and spent.

I spent far more than I had made in profit, but found myself to be the proprietor of an expanding empire. The trouble was that, although I had now refurbished the big kitchen as well as the small one Morgan was using, and had the bedrooms and the restaurant restored to perfection, I had to admit that I had little idea of how to capitalize on these new assets. I had outrun my capabilities.

Morgan seemed to sense this, because he handed me a new folder to look at. It contained every idea which I lacked. There were plans for menus, and staffing; there were work schedules for cleaning, and hours of opening; there were suggested prices for everything, and a way of computerizing all the billing which I recognized as one I had developed years ago. In short, here was everything I needed.

I had to take time to think it all out. I decided to offer Morgan a cut. I was out of my depth. I was just the owner."No, I just want to work here," he said when I made my offer.

He seemed frightened, but I could not guess what he was afraid of. Eventually he agreed to become my general manager, and to accept more money. He would organize the new setup and make sure it ran smoothly. He wouldn't take anything else from me; I couldn't persuade him into a vacation, or a company car. He said he was afraid to drive. Above all, he wanted to make sure he always had a low profile, and to keep his room upstairs.

While I was surprised, I was completely happy to agree. I could not manage all that was planned for the business; I was an innocent in such matters. The place had developed far beyond my expectations, and my capabilities, to organize. From this arrangement, our roles changed. I took much more of a back seat as I began to employ more staff, not just to work in the place, but to look after the finances as well.

Needless to say, the restaurant took off. Not only that, it became more fashionable than I ever imagined it could. The bedrooms were completely cleared and left to the contractors, who were instructed to follow Morgan's designs. He had done so well so far, that I thought it natural to follow his ideas again. Soon, we were booked most weekends, and a few days during the week. Soon there was money to spend on the big bar. When I mentioned it though, Morgan was not at all as enthusiastic as I had expected. "We're doing really well," he said, "I think we should consolidate, let the restaurant become our main business. Perhaps we could extend it into that room."

I heard his arguments, but I did not listen. If I had, everything would have turned out differently.

“No,” I said, “I promised the old lady who sold me the place that I would restore it, and restore it, I will.”

Slowly the work came together, slowly the large bar was modernized. Tables and chairs were delivered, and a small dance floor—my idea—was installed in front of the stage. The stage itself was fitted with new lighting and sound systems, new curtains and electronics. I wanted it to be really superb, to attract good acts. The dressing rooms were just as attractive as the rest of the place; after all, class acts needed to feel appreciated.

I tried to discuss all this with Morgan, but he was always too busy. Eventually, he agreed to work out the logistics of the place, but surprised me with his plan.

“I want to appoint a deputy, someone to manage the new room,” he said. “I think it's too much for me to do as well as the bars, and the restaurant, and the hotel. Anyway, I want to concentrate on what I do best.”

“Right, go ahead.” What else *could* I say? “You're sure you have the right person for the job?”

“Don't worry about that,” Morgan said, “I just don't like mixing...” He hesitated. “I'm not happy where there are people performing...on stage.”

I'd never seen him like this before, but he'd not let me down, and I had no reason to doubt him now. Whatever he was afraid of, he wasn't going to tell me, and I knew better than to ask. Morgan retained his privacy; in all our time working together, he had not volunteered a single hint of what his past life had been like. Thinking back to those days, I remember that he was always careful never again to allow anyone a glimpse of his chest, or for that matter, his rose tattoo. Over the next few weeks, these thoughts didn't trouble me, as things progressed towards the completion of the work.

Eventually the opening night arrived. I organized as much publicity as I could in advance, with a big spread in our local paper. I wanted a big picture of all the staff to feature in this spread, but when the photographer came, Morgan flatly refused to appear. Nothing could persuade him to come into the picture, and the more I tried, the angrier he became. I knew when to withdraw, and gave way gracefully.

The room opened and soon it was in regular use each Friday and Saturday evening. On these occasions, I promoted the entertainment, usually booked through one of the agencies in the nearest city. On other occasions, as word spread, I was contacted by managers of various acts, wanting me to book their clients. I was careful which I allowed to appear, because I wanted a wide range to be available to my customers.

With hard work, the “Traveler's Rest” prospered. I made the new room available for hire on the other evenings in the week, retaining the right to veto acts which I considered to be out of keeping with the reputation I was trying to gain. I welcomed all kinds of theater groups, both amateur and professional, as well as musical and cabaret performers. It was a wonderful mixture, and I was amazed to see just how the audiences developed. I felt, however, that Morgan was not taking his share of the good fortune and resolved to speak to him.

“I'm just glad everything's worked out so well,” was all he said at first.

“You deserve a bigger share here,” I insisted.

“No, there's nothing more I want from you, just the job I've got. You took a chance on me when I was...well, quite desperate for somewhere to stay. Now, all I want is to stay here, keep out of the limelight, and work. I really enjoy it here. There's nothing else I want from you.”

I assured Morgan that he could have what ever he wished. I always found him to be a very private person, and it was clear that I was not going to penetrate his reserve on this occasion. I gave up, respecting his privacy, allowing him to keep to himself. It was reasonable; after all, he gave me more work than I had a right to expect from him. The least I could do was to allow him to keep to himself when he so clearly wished to do so.

After a few weeks, I felt things were going so well that I was superfluous. The accountants were doing the jobs which I used to do, and Morgan had everything else under control. The lady he had chosen to manage the big room was quite wonderful, so calm and competent. Even the demands of the most eccentric booking failed to ruffle her calm, and I'm sure she enjoyed dealing with some of the more outrageous demands.

With all this going so well, I decided to go traveling for a few weeks. Morgan was more than happy to be left alone to manage things; he showed no desire to take time off and positively encouraged me to go. And so it was that I set off, with no great object in mind, to see what travel could do for me. I'm not going to go into details of my journey. I traveled extensively, but found little to detain me. I telephoned Morgan several times, and was secretly disappointed to find how well everything was going without me.

Eventually, I decided to take a look at the more bohemian entertainment in the nearby cities. I had this vague idea of an avant-garde festival, and used that as an excuse to wander around various clubs and bars, theaters and the like, with an excuse for doing so. It was when I ventured into one bar that I made a discovery.

The entertainment was provided by an exceptionally striking transvestite, no great beauty, but with a musical talent to amaze. “She” sat at a piano in the center of the bar, and played and sang. It was not where I had intended to be but, as I walked round, I saw to my surprise that he had a small rose tattoo on the top of his left arm. I recognized it at once as being identical to the one on Morgan’s arm. There was a mystery here, I thought, but dismissed the idea as quickly as it came. I left and thought no more about it for a few days.

As I headed back home, I took the opportunity to call on some of the agents who had been supplying my entertainment in the big bar. I intended to pass a little time just talking to them, to see what was new, what would attract my customers. It was in one agency, while I was sitting in the reception area, waiting for my lunch time appointment, that I saw something which made me sit up and pay attention. In the agency prospectus, there was an entry for an all-transvestite cabaret revue. There were pictures of the “girls” together, but what took my attention was a close-up of the star performer—and the rose tattoo plainly visible on the upper left arm.

I thought back to the day Morgan had come for work. Things came back to me and if only I had not been curious about the coincidences, my fate may have been different.

My mind went back to that day, the marks on his pierced ears, the gaps in the sun tan on his fingers, and the rose, that delicate mark indelibly drawn there. There must be *some* connection, I thought. Having so little to occupy my mind, I resolved to find out what the case was. I should have left it alone.

I noted the agency reference on the page, and continued through the prospectus. I turned the pages, but my mind was pondering over the meaning of the rose. When I came to another picture of a beautiful blonde, a pianist and singer, with the same rose tattoo visible, I almost shouted in surprise. I read the entry, and sure enough, this was yet another female impersonator. Again, I noted the agency reference, and had little time to read further before the door opened and my host for lunch appeared.

I was entertained quite wonderfully. I was surprised, but then thought of the money I was able to control now. Not only that, but my place was attracting a better clientele, people with access to the media and the world of entertainment from the cities nearby. As we got to the end of the wine and were being served our second coffees, I asked my host about the two references I had found in the agency prospectus.

“They're great acts,” he said. “Your customers wouldn't be disappointed by them. We can get them on the same bill if you want.”

“I'll think about that,” I said. “But what caught my eye was the rose tattoo. There was a transvestite singer in a bar I went into the other day, and he had the same tattoo. Is there some significance, or is it just a fashion?”

“I've no idea,” my host replied, “I've had them on my books for a while now, and never noticed that. I've seen the acts though, and they're really good value. If you're interested, I'll ask and let you know.”

“It's just curiosity,” I stressed, “I've seen the mark once before, and thought nothing of it until this last few days. It's just the coincidence that makes me curious. Don't think you've sold me a booking already.”

With that, I got up to leave. We parted after a few pleasantries, and my host promised to contact me if there was anything he could find to tell me. I walked away and put the conversation in the back of my mind as I turned my thoughts to returning home the next day. If ever there had been a portentous conversation, it had been this one, yet I promptly dismissed it from my mind as having no great significance.

I drove back to the “Traveler's Rest” next day, and was immediately impressed by how good the whole place looked. I stood outside and stared at the facade before I went inside, wondering at the good fortune which had made me choose the place. As I walked through the bars and the kitchens, everything looked perfect and orderly. The staff greeted me more than politely and seemed genuinely pleased to see me. I walked through, feeling really good with myself, as I looked at all that I had achieved since purchasing the place, and knocked on the door of the office which Morgan had taken over.

I don't know why I knocked on the door, I guess it was simple politeness which made me do it, but it was a habit I had gotten into since the place expanded. Hearing a shout from inside, I entered. Things had changed while I had been away. There were now a couple of clerks, several new computer terminals, and an air of purpose which

impressed me. Morgan was in a partitioned section of the office. Seeing me, he rose to greet me.

"I've had to make a few changes here," he said, "the old office was too small, and I think we're soon going to have to allocate more space to administration."

He handed me a sheet which had a list of figures in neat columns. I knew how to read a cash flow and balance sheet. The figures were impressive.

"Why don't we use some of the first floor?" I asked.

"That's too valuable. We need to rent some cheap space, or build some," Morgan replied, "What would be really good, would be to use your apartment for administration. We could build over the terrace to make new office space, and let these ground floor rooms make money as well." The idea threw me for a few moments. If space was at such a premium, then it made sense to do as he suggested, but where would I live? I only remembered afterwards that he had a room in the staff part of the first floor. Even if I had thought of it earlier, I would have been forced to admit that it was necessary for some staff to live on the premises, although it was no longer sensible for me to do likewise.

"Give me a few days to think about that," I said. "You've done so well, I don't know how to disagree, but I'll need time."

"Sure," he replied, and then speaking quietly, "I'm concerned about some of the acts suggested by the agency. Can I speak to you privately about them?"

"Yes, come up to the apartment after lunch," I replied, surprised at this reaction to our normally reliable agents. "Perhaps you'd better give me a list and I'll take a look at it before you come."

Armed with this list, I went upstairs. I was surprised to be asked to intervene in this area. After all, the agents had been perfectly reliable thus far. I'd been leaving things more and more to them as a result. I dropped the list on my kitchen table as I put the coffee percolator to boil. Then I wandered 'round the apartment, and decided to move out as soon as I could find somewhere else. I was preoccupied with this thought, and only remembered the list a couple of hours later. I looked at it quickly. There was the usual mix of cabaret, and music, mainly acts which were familiar to me. The only new items seemed to be a couple of acts featuring female impersonators. The agent seemed to have taken my questions about them as interest in booking the acts. This had not been my intention, but I could see no harm in their appearing. I could not remember the names, but from the descriptions, both the pianist and the cabaret troupe were on the list.

When Morgan knocked at the door, I was still puzzled as to what his objection might be. The connection with the tattoo crossed my mind, but only in the vaguest sense, and I was unprepared for the force of his objection.

"We don't want this kind of act here," he said, pointing to the female impersonators on the list, "Once we have them, we'll attract a special audience, and drive away all our normal customers."

I could not see the logic of this. One or two acts, mixed in with our normal bookings, would hardly make any difference that I could see, and I told him so. He seemed to accept my view, backing off from making specific objections to either act, but made it clear that he did not like the idea at all. I thought of his tattoo, but refrained from mentioning it. If there was a mystery here, I thought it was better to approach it carefully rather than head-on. The first of the acts was the pianist I had seen in the city. She, or perhaps I should say *he*, was booked for only one night, a Saturday, some two weeks hence. I gave no more thought to the appearance, as the day approached. I had decided to take Morgan's advice and move out of my apartment to allow extra office space on the premises, and to build over the terrace. Thus I was busy both with architects and builders, and preoccupied with looking for somewhere else to live.

I hadn't really intended to be in the bar on that particular Saturday night, but I went. Morgan had been acting diffidently since the act was confirmed and I had the feeling I should be there just to see that every thing went off all right. I need not have worried. The performance was superb. He looked the part to perfection, and I wondered how he had managed to make the impersonation so complete. He wore a little black dress which, on a real woman, would have left little to the imagination. On *him*, it left very little to the imagination, but left room for a lot of conjecture.

He was the perfect blonde, not a natural blonde. That was obvious to anyone. It was equally apparent that this was his own hair, not a wig, and that his ears were pierced several times. His makeup was more Marilyn Monroe than subtle. He wore the tallest and thinnest of high heels, and had some cleavage showing in the top of the black dress, which was tight, short, and strapless. I was left wondering just how much his body was altered, he looked so feminine. Of course, the rose tattoo was visible for all to see.

I spoke to him briefly after the performance, a simple congratulation for a really professional set. His speaking voice was deeper, more male, than the one which he used to sing. He asked if I minded if he and his crew had a drink in the bar before they left. As his crew seemed to be just two girls, I arranged for them to have something to eat on the house. It was only when they were seated in the bar that I realized they all had the same tattoo. Did that mean that they were *all* really male?

Impulsively, I walked across to their table. I had no idea what I was going to say, but my curiosity took over and I heard myself asking if they had enjoyed their meal. As we exchanged a few words, of the sort you can imagine in these awkward circumstances, I listened carefully. I concluded that they were indeed boys rather than girls, despite their incredibly feminine appearance. What was the significance of the tattoo, and why did Morgan have one?

Before I had too much time to ponder on this question, events again conspired to overtake me (not that things happened quickly). No, the changes began in a subtle way and I did not notice them at first. I bought a big country house on large grounds about ten miles from the "Traveler's Rest". The place was far too big for me, but I had an idea that it could be developed in time into a second business. The house had been built for a one-time starlet by the studio boss who "looked after her" and she lived there long after her career ended, long after her lover had died.

The place only came on the market after her death, sold by executors with all its contents, on behalf of distant trustees. The beneficiaries took no interest in the place, or their benefactor. They were the kind who just wanted the money quickly. I bought quickly, too, taking advantage of their impatience. What I got was not just the house and the land, but all the contents too, just as she had left them, before she was taken to the hospital to die.

It was spooky to walk round the empty rooms. They were all clean and tidy, but so personal to someone else. The agents had been anxious for me to complete the sale quickly, and not to argue about the contents, but the contents were far more than just the furniture. There were no cups left to be cleared and washed, but I found half-used toiletries and cosmetics in the bathroom. In the main bedroom, I found the bed made as if waiting for its former occupant to return. The wardrobes and drawers were full of clothes, all clean and tidy, but all very feminine, and personal to the previous occupant. It was a strange experience. I was afraid to disturb anything at first. It didn't seem to belong to me.

I ended up using a small guest bedroom. I had roughed it in the "Traveler's Rest" when I first took over there, and it was no hardship to use just one room in this big house. I thought by moving in gently like this, I would get the place used to me, just as much as I would get used to it, before I made any changes, or disturbed my predecessor's personal property.

As I moved into the house, I was spending less and less time elsewhere. I did not notice certain events taking place at the "Traveler's Rest". If I had been there, I wonder if I would have noticed anyway; perhaps I would have been able to effect developments instead of being engulfed by them. As it was, I was talking with Morgan more on the telephone than face-to-face, and the accounts were just faxed to me each day. The place needed so little of my attention, that I became content to leave everything for him to run.

I went to see the performance by the transvestite cabaret revue group. Their show was called "Dressed for the Occasion" for which they had arranged their own advance publicity. This in turn had attracted a full house for their show. I confess it was more than curiosity which drew me there that evening, and that I was quite excited to see how feminine they could be as an ensemble. I arrived later than I expected and the group were already into their act. I went to the side of the stage to watch and was immediately impressed.

There were five of them, and they had worked on their image very carefully. Every type of woman was represented on that stage. There was a range of images represented, from the blatantly sexy, to the demure. They looked totally feminine, and I found myself staring to see if I could detect any incongruity, but I could not. I could see nothing masculine, except the way they occasionally allowed their voices to fall into a male register, deliberately reminding the audience that they were men underneath the dresses and makeup.

They were good. The customers enjoyed their act and applauded them to an encore. As I watched them taking their final bows, I saw what I expected to see. The rose tattoo was plainly on view on their upper arms, at least on the four who had that part of their

anatomy exposed. Was this a sign of a secret society, a badge of office, or perhaps an initiation ritual, or a sign of commitment? If it was any of these things, why did Morgan wear the same mark? As I thought about this last question, I hesitated. Was it worth asking Morgan? How would he take it, and would I make him leave my employment by being curious?

I had little time to think more about these questions. The curtains closed and they left the stage. One of the waitresses asked me if I could go backstage to their dressing room. I went and knocked on the door. Hearing a voice from inside, I entered, and introduced myself.

“We just want to thank you for the booking. We've heard such good reports about the venue, and we were really happy here. You have a good crowd to play to, and it was fun,” said the one who had taken the least part on stage.

“Thank you,” I replied, “I think they had their first female impersonator a few weeks ago, and she was so good. That set the audience up for you. I have to admit, you are good, too. It was a great performance, and I'd live to invite you to take a table in the bar for the remainder of the evening, as my guests.”

I thought it would be a good advertisement if they sat in the bar. I remembered how closely I had looked at them for clues as to their real sexual identity. The audience would be as curious as I was. I knew they would.

“That's very kind. We'd love to be out there, your audience was great,” came the reply.

As they were leaving the dressing room, the one who had spoken, hung back, and said, “We hope you'll book some of our friends as well. It's not always easy getting bookings outside a limited circuit for acts like ours. I know we're the second act you've had, and as you've seen, we're good. I'll send you details of some of our friends. They're not with any mainstream agency, but they should be.”

I did not know how to reply. I did not want to get a reputation for only one kind of entertainment, yet I knew they had gone down well with the audience. I agreed to look at whatever they sent.

“They'll audition for you if you want. We have our own agency. I run it. I'm Shannon, by the way, and the agency's called that, too. Obviously, at the moment, it's more for self-help than profit, but I want it to be my full-time agency.”

“That's fine,” I said, “I'm not tied to any agency, but I want quality, and variety.”

“We want to get more acts with the big agencies, and better bookings,” Shannon replied, “but it's difficult. If you'll support us, perhaps book another act, it will help. The rates will be attractive, I promise. It's the bookings we need.”

“Then I promise to think about it,” I replied, and then I returned to the bar.

I stood at the back and watched as they sat at a table. They were conscious of all the curiosity they were causing amongst the other customers, and I was really pleased to see how they accepted it. They went to the bar and talked to people. They split up and generally socialized with my customers. Whatever they had paid, the audience

members were getting their money's worth tonight. The atmosphere felt easy, and the night was showing no sign of tailing off.

I left the bar, and went through to the office. Morgan was there, head deep into lists and receipts, as he fed information into the computer. I tried to talk to him about the show, but he was totally incommunicative. He cut off every avenue of conversation I tried to open. I eventually gave up and left. He was not happy with the choice of act, he had said that before, and he was not going to discuss it now.

I went home that night, and promptly forgot about the conversation I had with the performers. The next weeks were spent on building, and making arrangements for improvements and alterations at the "Traveler's Rest" at the same time as we moved all the offices upstairs. I tried to be as democratic as possible in the plans, accepting every suggestion which came from the staff. In reality, I was giving Morgan a free hand, which he seemed to relish.

The reopening went without a hitch, and at the staff party a few days later, I gave Morgan a public appreciation, and privately told him he was on a percentage of the profits from now on. He was gracious, but I could tell he would have preferred to have remained in the background. I was afraid if I did not reward his efforts he would go elsewhere. Afterwards, I thought if I rewarded him too much, he would go just to keep his privacy. I resolved to be more careful in the future.

I withdrew from the day-to-day running of the "Traveler's Rest" as the next few weeks went by. I was called upon to approve decisions which had already been made: hiring and firing, promotions in the staff, advertising and the like, but I kept control of the general style of the place. It was not going to go down-market at all, quite the opposite in fact. To this end, I was particular that the entertainment, service, and food should improve in quality all the time.

Working this way, I did not see all the staff whom I now employed. One day, when I came in for an early evening meal, I was surprised that no one who knew me was working. It amused me, as I stood and asked my own receptionist for Morgan to be called to approve my account. He was away for a couple of days they said, checking the quality of a new contractor to supply our restaurant, but answered his cell phone at once. He had not told me he would be away, and I was a little surprised, but I *had* asked him to use his skill and discretion to manage the place. I could not complain.

I went into the bar and was served at a quiet side table. The music was provided by a gentle-sounding jazz trio with an attractive girl singer. I relaxed easily as I ate, then went to the bar. Suddenly I was alert. There was something incongruous in the scene before me. I looked round quickly and saw nothing, but then turned again. I looked at the girl clearing the table where I had eaten; there was something about her, something different. I looked again, trying not to stare. Then, I realized what had taken my eye. She had the rose tattoo on her arm.

I looked away as soon as I realized what I had seen, then took a cautious look again in case she had seen me staring. She did not appear to have done so. I moved to the corner of the bar and sat there quietly, pretending to be more casual than I felt, to look absorbed in the entertainment, whereas I really was watching for the girl to reappear.

When she did so, it was at the far side of the room. I watched her as unobtrusively as I could.

In retrospect, it was perhaps foolish of me to think that I could sit at the corner of my own bar, and watch so intently without attracting some attention or comment. I should have been much more circumspect, but I was too surprised, even amazed, at my discovery, that I did not think. I just watched. Her job appeared to be nothing more than clearing and cleaning tables. When she came to deal with one just in front of me, I looked at her closely, still trying to be unobtrusive, but more probably, giving away my reason for lingering in my own bar.

As she came near, I heard her steps. When I judged she would be looking down at her table, I turned. The first thing I saw was the tattoo. It was identical to the others I had seen, of that I was convinced. I looked at her, wondering if this was really a girl. She was quite tall, but very slim and with a totally feminine shape inside her staff uniform. Her hair was tawny blonde, pulled back inside her waitress cap, but revealing enough to show that it would be quite long when untied. Her makeup was pretty, modest and understated, her hands were well-manicured. In short, there was nothing to suggest she was anything else than what she seemed to be, but why did she have that tattoo?

I forced myself to leave the bar that evening. I knew that the staff would have recognized that there was something unusual in my behavior, and I hoped they would not work out what it was. I reasoned that Morgan would hear of my being there as well; perhaps I could ask him some of the questions bubbling in my mind. I resolved to do so if the opportunity arose. As I drove home that night, my mind was turning over the strange coincidences of the tattoo. I felt that I had stumbled upon some mystery here, but what did the symbol stand for? Questions tumbled through my mind. Was it a gang, or a less sinister secret society? If so, was it a mark of initiation, or a mark of rank? Was the mark intended to set those bearing it apart from everyone else, or was it a sign by which they could recognize each other? Perhaps it was all of these things, differing only in degree depending upon who wore it. Whatever it was, why did Morgan bear the same mark when all the others were female impersonators? But then, I did not know for certain about all the others. What about my waitress, was “she” a he as well, and if so, what did it all mean? There were too many questions, and I did not know how to start asking them.

These questions kept breaking into my curiosity for the next few weeks while I became absorbed in thinking about my next move, and the redevelopment of my new home. The place was far too big for me, I knew that; after all, I was still living in one of the guest rooms. There were gardeners who came each week, and kept the grounds looking good, and a part-time housekeeper who kept my rooms clean and tidy, did my washing and whatever else needed doing there. I lived pretty simply, and made very little mess even on the rare occasions when I cooked for myself.

I spent no time at all at the “Traveler’s Rest”. I still had all the same questions in my mind that I had before; it was just that they receded in importance at that time. I was happy with the receipts at the place, happy with the way Morgan was running things, and was generally content to leave things alone. I felt like I had before I left the computer industry. I wanted some time away.

Morgan came to the house to get my approval for some ideas he wanted to implement. He seemed to be always in a hurry, and totally content with his job. He didn't want more money, or time off. I guessed his main reward was in the way he had handled the expansion of his job. He looked lithe and, as always, was well-tanned, and had taken to wearing a couple of heavy gold chains on his left wrist. I remember being surprised by the sweetness of the after-shave he was using. At least I assumed that's what it was.

After I agreed with his proposals, which as always were most sensible, the conversation turned to more general matters. We discussed the quality of the entertainment the agency was booking, and he seemed to accept that we were now having a female impersonator act on a regular basis. He made no objection any more. I knew that we were using Shannon's agency, and I just assumed that the acts we were getting were the good ones, and that they were not regular enough to affect our general reputation.

I decided to ask Morgan if he could manage everything for me for a couple of months, so that I could travel. He seemed delighted with the proposal, and I set about making my plans to go to Europe for the summer. I met Morgan every few days as my plans were being finalized. Suddenly, I realized that he was different. I saw him so regularly that I had not noticed things; the changes had taken place gradually.

He was still the Morgan that I had hired, but now he had begun to wear his long hair loose and it was tied back. He seemed to be more particular about his clothes, and I saw that he had started to wear some tiny studs in his pierced ears. I thought of asking him about the tattoo, but then I decided to leave it until my return.

On the day of my departure, Morgan came to see me with some papers to sign. I saw his car come up the drive, then watched him walk to the door. His walk seemed different in the few days since our last meeting. It was a hot day, and we sat outside at the back of the house as I went through the papers, but my mind was not really on the business. Instead, I watched Morgan as he sat opposite me. As he passed papers across the table, I was struck by how he was acting. His hair was loose, across his shoulders. He wore tight white jeans and his feet were bare in backless sandals. He had a loose top, cut with wide shoulder straps like an exercise vest, which almost left his shoulders bare. It was a deep peach color, which showed off his tan, and left his tattoo exposed for all to see.

Morgan's appearance was so different. It was fashionable, and really suitable for the weather. It was more flamboyant than I had ever seen before. As he held out his hand to take papers from me, I saw that his fingernails were really long. Why had I not noticed that in the past few days? I thought. Then I realized that Morgan's appearance was almost feminine. The thought hit me hard, and I forgot what I was saying. I made an excuse to go inside for a moment. I needed time to think about what I should do.

I decided quickly to do and say nothing; after all, I was leaving the next day. I would be away for some time, and to say something disruptive was not a good idea. I went back out and pretended that I had noticed nothing, that everything was normal.

At the end of the interview, I walked back with him, around the house rather than through it, and, as we came to where the car was parked, I knew that he had not come alone. He didn't drive, although I provided a car for his use. There was a girl in the driver's seat. I'd seen this girl with him a number of times recently. I relaxed; after all, if this was the explanation for his changed appearance and manner, who was I to interfere?

He got into the car. I bent down to say a final word before he left, glanced across to the driver, and saw that tattoo mark again. I stood up quickly, and turned away. I'd seen the girl with Morgan quite a lot, it never occurred to me that she might be...well, part of whatever the tattoo stood for.

I was so obvious in my behavior that it could not have gone unnoticed. I waved as I walked back inside. I did not know what I was leaving, but as I thought about things, I knew I had no reason to doubt that the business would be run as it had been before. Who was I to interfere in Morgan's private affairs? I consoled myself with this thought, as I set off for my trip.

I had been looking forward to this trip, so I wasn't going to let what I had seen interfere with my pleasure. Sure, it would stay in my mind, I thought as I drove to the airport, but there was nothing to suggest my interests would be damaged. If Morgan had found some pleasure in spending the salary I was paying him, it had not affected his work. If he was happy in his work, all would be well. It was these thoughts I took with me to France.

It was my intention to collect a rental car at the airport, then drive to Chartres, spend a few days there, then make my way through the countryside by road to Avignon, then head to Monaco. I planned to spend a few days in the wonderfully romantic resorts on the Cote d'Azur. Then, taking my time, I would slowly return to Paris, and when I was ready, fly home.

It was to be a lazy trip, so that I could think about what I wanted to do next. I was making more money than I expected. It all seemed so easy, but the urge to develop was troubling me again.

