

# Inheritance



# Susan Hulbert



A "Her TV" Novel



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For information address  
Reluctant Press  
P.O. Box 5829  
Sherman Oaks, CA 91413  
USA

Call toll free (800) 359-2116

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**By Susan Hulbert**

“Oh, you’re a boy today.” Cousin Jamie breezed into the lounge. “You really need to put your foot down. That mother of yours seems to change your sex whenever she wants.”

“She can’t change my sex,” I replied.

“Sure, but you’ve the hair, legs, and slender figure of a girl.”

“I’m a boy. I have the plumbing and the hormones to prove it.”

“Maybe, but they’ve always been well hidden whenever your mother decides it’s time for a change.”

“I don’t mind.” I felt it was important to defend my lifestyle, and my mother too for that matter. “I love being a girl. It’s wonderful to be able to see the world from two sides.”

“It may have been when you were younger, but it’s time for career, for being serious about life and, let’s face it, growing up.”

“I have qualifications,” I replied. “I have a degree in accountancy and business.”

“Is that as a girl or a boy?” Jamie asked.

“It says ‘Madison’ on the certificate. There’s no indication of sex anywhere.”

“It would have been better if you’d gone away from home to study.” Jamie had always said this. “If you’d lived with lots of other students, you wouldn’t have been able to switch between boy and girl so easily. It would have grounded you.”

“I had the choice,” I replied. “I didn’t want to give up switching.”

“Your mother didn’t want to give up turning you into a girl whenever she wanted,” Jamie said. “Ever since you were born, she’s been confusing you.”

“I don’t feel confused.”

“That’s not the point,” Jamie snapped. “What about relationships?”

“I’ve had some lovely relationships,” I said. “Remember Hazel; you really liked her. And there was Kellie too, but she was too loud and pushy. I can’t really remember the others.”

“I remember them well,” Jamie replied. “But then what about Robert and Carl? Where did they fit in?”

“They wanted more that I could give,” I said coyly. “I’m not that kind of girl.”

“You’re not that kind of girl because you’re not any kind of girl,” Jamie replied. “You were stringing them along because you could; to prove a point.”

“That’s unfair,” I protested. “I got tired of them. They were all about sports and beer, leering at the girls regardless of whether I was watching or not. Girls are nicer by a long way, but they’re not attracted to someone like me.”

“I can understand that,” Jamie said. “You’d be wearing better makeup, higher heels and acting much more feminine than they were. What’s not for them to like?”

“I never tried to stand out. You’re being unfair.”

“I’m being realistic,” Jamie countered. “Look what happened when you tried to introduce your alter ego to a girlfriend. I can’t remember her name, but you’d be about sixteen.”

“That was a horrible mistake.” I remembered it well. “She had hysterics. I never saw her again, and I really liked her.”

“Come on; admit it, you were too much for her,” Jamie said. “She wanted a boyfriend, not some kind of junior drag queen.”

“I was never a drag queen,” I snapped.

“No, you weren’t,” Jamie replied. “You were always elegant and credible as a girl. Maybe that was the real trouble. Maybe we’d better change the subject. Are you working now?”

“I’m mother’s accountant,” I replied. “It pays well and I work from home. We’re making a decent living from her properties, and adding slowly to the portfolio.”

“So you don’t get out much?”

“Maybe not a lot. Most of the work is by email and phone.”

“So are you a girl one day and a boy the next?”

“Don’t be silly.”

“So which are you?”

“I’m probably a girl most of the time,” I replied. “It reminds me to speak softly and be more charming when I have to do something on the phone.”

“This is where we started,” Jamie said. “I’ve only got your best interests at heart. This living-as-a-girl habit is bound to get you into trouble.”

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“You never met my Aunt Esther, did you?” Mother looked up from the letter she was reading as I came into the kitchen. “I’ve a letter here from her attorneys. She died two years ago, and they’ve been tidying up her affairs.”

“I remember you telling me she’d died,” I said. “I think she had her business where they speak Spanish most of the time.”

“She liked to be where it was warm,” Mother replied. “She said it was far too cold up here, and she spoke the language like a native.”

“She was always this exotic figure on the fringe of the family. I often wished I could have met her.”

“She always remembered your birthday.”

“She did,” I laughed. “She always sent the most amazing presents too, even though they may have been a bit out of order.”

“A bit out of order hardly describes them,” Mother snorted.

“I think she may have got the wrong impression from you,” I said. “You dressed me up as a girl at every opportunity. I bet you sent her family photographs with your daughter.”

“I did,” Mother said. “But she knew you were a boy underneath all that.”

“I wonder,” I said. “I remember being dressed in pink gingham before I remember jeans.”

“Don’t be silly,” Mother snapped. “Quite what she expected you to do with spa days and makeover treats, I don’t know.”

“She meant well,” I replied. “And I enjoyed the spa day, even though they didn’t know what to do with me when I turned up.”

“I was amazed that they gave you the makeover that she’d arranged.” Mother laughed at the memory. “I think I was more amazed that you wanted to go.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have given me a name which could be gender neutral.”

“Madison was always a boy’s name when we were growing up. It was your grandfather’s name after all, and your aunt was his stepdaughter.”

“She was always this exotic character when I was growing up. At every family gathering, they’d talk about her latest bit of eccentricity,” I remembered. “There was a little amazement and a lot of tutting.”



“She never did anything that could be expected,” Mother handed me the letter. “It seems that you’ve inherited quite a bit of property from her.”

“I wonder what it could be.” I read the letter twice. “This doesn’t say anything other than they want me to make an appointment to see a lawyer in the city.”

“To learn something to your advantage,” Mother mimicked a serious tone.

“I think it’s exciting,” I replied. “Maybe it’s my chance to be eccentric and cause a scandal in the family.”

“You’ve always been able to do that,” Mother said. “You used to love to dress up and pretend to be someone else. Remember that time when you changed places with your cousin Katherine? You had everyone fooled for the whole day.”

“And Katherine had to hide in the laundry room or it would have given the game away,” I remembered. “And her high heels killed my feet.”

“I think I remember your best impersonation,” Mother said. “You did a very convincing Marilyn Monroe at New Year a couple of years ago. Everyone thought you were really a female Marilyn impersonator.”

“I only got away with that because you bleached my hair.” I remembered loving that impersonation. “If I’d used a wig, they’d have guessed that I wasn’t a girl. It was all your idea.”

“But you used your dressing up to your own advantage too,” Mother said. “It wasn’t only when I helped you to dress up.”

“You were usually the cause.” I replied. “You used to love dressing me up. When I agreed, I could usually get my own way. I was like a substitute doll for you.”

“And you still are, darling.”

“Not so much now, I hope.”

“I’m sure I could persuade you,” she replied. “You love swishing around in a nice dress and heels.”

“I don’t do that anymore,” I said blushing. “It was only a bit of fun when I was younger. It’s normal behaviour for children.”

“Turning up in a dress and full makeup for your interview at the military academy hardly counts as normal behaviour.”

“I heard how much Father hated it. Have you heard from him in the past few years?”

“Not a thing. He still pays alimony and child support.”

“How did you manage to get that out of him?”

“I threatened to send pictures of you in your interview dress to all his influential friends.”

“I couldn’t convince Father that I didn’t want to go,” I replied. “I thought I’d make sure they rejected me.”

“You certainly did that,” Mother sighed.

“Ant that crusty old general asked me for a date when I was leaving,” I laughed. “I bet that wasn’t expected either.”

"I never knew that." Mother was shocked. "Please tell me you turned him down."

"Of course I did. The dress was merely a means to an end, and it worked. No military academy would have me, and I got to study script writing and editing instead, as well as basic accountancy."

"Sadly the demand for script writers and editors hasn't reached as far as your skills yet," Mother replied. "Still, the accountancy has been useful."

"Okay, so I haven't got the ideal job yet." I was tired of defending my choices. "Something will turn up."

"Probably not, whilst you're working as third assistant understudy director for amateur theatre groups in this backwater."

"Maybe not, but its good experience and its fun."

And it's probably not a good thing that your grandfather's trust fund keeps you away from the need to be more ambitious."

Oh, stop it, Mother," I laughed. "You live off the same fund too, and it's never stopped you from doing exactly as you wish."

"Anyway, I guess I'd better go and call these lawyers and find out what mysteries lie ahead."

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"Madison Steele." The lawyer's secretary repeated my name. "He really needs to see you in person. We have to verify your identity and get some signatures and then we can transfer your late aunt's property to you."

I made arrangements to see them and turned up by appointment a few days later. The lawyer rattled through the formalities and handed me a sheaf of papers.

“I must say that you weren’t what we were expecting, Mr. Steele,” he said. “Your aunt was quite specific how her property was to be divided and we rather expected someone different.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You have title to a chain of beauty shops and hairdressers; ladies hairdressers, several online suppliers of ladies clothing and accessories, a theatrical costumier’s which supplies film and television all over the country and most strangely of all, a wig manufacturer.”

“That sounds like a real mixture,” I gasped.

“Indeed.” The lawyer didn’t bat an eyelid. Maybe he was used to giving people news like this.

“It’s mostly down south, on the border.” I detected a little distaste as he said this.

“Is that a problem?” I asked.

“It could be if you don’t speak Spanish.”

“That’s okay,” I replied. “I don’t, but Mother’s pretty fluent.”

“You also inherit your aunt’s theatrical agency, and her mansion in the hills.” He looked up at me. “It’s a real shock to meet you after sorting out all the technicalities. In short, we expected Madison to be a lady.”

“I can guess why,” I replied. “I never met my aunt, and my name is a family tradition from my grandfather. It explains a lot. Maybe she thought I was a girl too.”

“I meant no insult, but I think she did. All her other enterprises, the engineering and development interests, went to your distant cousins.”

“Are they male?” I asked absently. “I never met them.”

“Yes rather aggressively so when I told them that your share was separate. I think you’ve inherited the more valuable real estate, but they have the higher value businesses. They thought it should all be theirs.”

“I wonder why she made her will as she did.”

“I think that she cherished the side she left to you.” The lawyer smiled apologetically. “I think she thought a woman’s hand would be better for her employees too.”

“I hope I don’t let her down,” I replied. “Apart from being the wrong sex.”

The lawyer bowed slightly as he shook my hand in farewell. “All these enterprises have managers and all appear to be thriving. When you’ve taken time to look over your portfolio, we may be of service.”

“Thanks,” I replied. “I’d better take some time to understand all this before I make any decisions.”

“Your aunt’s personal assistant, Charles Truman, is running things, and has been since she died. He tells us that all is satisfactory and he is at your disposal when and if you wish to explore your new properties.”

“I’d love to see it all,” I replied. “Even though it was probably meant for a girl, I’m sure there’s a lot to explore.”

“I’ll send you his contact details.”

I shook the lawyer’s hand and left. I sat in my car in their car park and looked through the folder he’d given to me. The names of the companies meant nothing to me, even though I’d been on the fringes of theatre for a few years at school and college. I didn’t speak any Spanish either.

I had no idea what to do next.

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The contact details arrived a couple of days later. I discussed it with Mother and then we planned our trip. Most of the businesses were situated on the coast. It seemed a great opportunity for us to take a break, and combine it with a tour of the businesses.

I emailed Mr. Truman to warn him that I was visiting with Mother and asked that he arrange for us to see the various business interests which I now owned. I think I went a bit overboard with my enthusiasm, because the reply promised a delightful experience.

“Do we drive all that way,” I asked, “or shall we fly and hire a car from the airport?”

“Let’s hire,” she decided. “I know we can’t carry much on the plane, so we can buy lots of new things as we go.”

“You can and will, I know,” I said knowing Mother’s shopping habits. “You’ll never get it onto the plane to come home.”

“But you’ve inherited your aunt’s mansion,” Mother remembered. “I won’t have to bring it all home.”

“But Mother,” I protested, “it’s my mansion. Don’t you think I’d like a little independence or privacy in my life?”

“Of course dear, but I never interfere. You’ll never notice I’m there.”

I left it there. It was no time to remind Mother that she’d been running my life even before I escaped the military school. And she provided the dress!

It took a couple of weeks to arrange everything, flights and car hires, someone to stand in for me at the theatre, Mother’s various groups and the like, and then we were off to the airport.

Does anyone enjoy airports? All the shuffling through security controls, the wait at the boarding gates, the noise of the announcements which are difficult if not impossible to understand.

It was an exhausting journey and I was happy to have landed for a night at the airport hotel before getting our car and travelling on to Aunt Esther’s mansion.

There was a message waiting from Mr. Truman telling us that he would be calling at the mansion the next evening, and that the keys had been concealed in a certain place. I had no idea what to expect.

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The mansion was something like a fairytale castle but on a smaller scale. There were turrets and attic windows, a drive ending in a small bridge over running water to get to the front door. A garage was set on the side, but we left the hire car on the drive.

The keys were concealed where we'd expected them to be and with a rising nervous excitement, I opened the front door.

The lights came on in the hallway as we entered. There was a note directing us to the kitchen and telling us what was in the fridge. I was directed to my aunt's rooms on the first floor. Mother was to occupy the guest wing which had its own entrance and facilities.

Mother followed me up to my aunt's old rooms. I gasped as I walked in and saw how beautifully it was furnished. It was very clearly a room for a lady, with mirrors and luxurious chairs as well as a huge bed.

"Look at this," Mother gasped in awe, looking into a walk-in closet with racks of hanging clothes; dresses and skirts, trousers and ball gowns; shoes of all colours and styles. "They always said she was a fashion icon, even into her later years."

"Fabulous," I agreed, feeling the fine fabrics and silks hanging there. "But there's not much room left for my stuff. I'd better clear some of it out to the goodwill shops."

"You can't do that," Mother gasped. "Look at the labels. These are priceless."



“Okay, I promise not to do anything without asking you,” I said, and yawned. “Now, I’d like to go to bed.”

She looked at me as if I’d said the president had joined a silent order of monks. Then she understood. “Goodnight, I’m pooped too. I’ll find my way to the guest wing. See you in the morning.”

As soon as she left, I flopped down on the bed. It was so comfortable and such a relief after the journey. To tell the truth, it was a relief to be alone at last. Mother had prattled all the way, as if this inheritance was hers rather than mine.

I turned the sheets down and found an old-fashioned figured satin case. I opened it and onto the bed fell a nightgown, white, with embroidered yellow flowers. I held it up and a note fluttered to the floor.

“Madam Madison,” I read. “I am sorry not to greet you. I do not know what you have with you. I left this, your aunt’s favourite, for you to wear tonight. I will see you at breakfast.” It was signed by Rosalie, the housekeeper.

“She thinks I’m a girl too.” I said to myself as I held the gown and admired it.

I tossed it onto the bed and went to shower, using all the really expensive things that had presumably been left by my aunt. You may wonder if I didn’t feel anything strange in using her things, but the truth is that I didn’t. It felt as if she had deliberately left them for me to enjoy. I blessed her silently.

I dried roughly and stood in front of the mirror. My hair hung loosely and wet, dripping onto my chest. I towelled it again, and on a whim, sprayed it with lo-

tion which was on the dresser. I unhooked the drier and brushed through my hair as it blew dry.

I'd always kept my hair long. The military school interview had convinced me of the wisdom of doing so. It defied people's expectations and I liked it that way. Usually it was tied back in a low pony tail, much to Mother's annoyance. This time I blew it smooth and allowed it to hang long and sleek against my cheeks and down to my shoulders.

I went back to the bed and without hesitation, slipped into the nightdress. Immediately, I loved the way it slid down my body. If this was what Aunt Esther had meant me to find, then I loved it at once.

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The telephone ringing woke me up. I sort of heard this noise and it took me a while to come round and look for it.

"Madam, good morning, this is Rosalie." I heard the 'madam,' but wasn't awake enough to correct her. "Mr. Truman asked that I come this morning for breakfast and see if anything is wanting."

"I'll be down in a few minutes," I said.

I stood and stretched, ran a brush through my hair, and saw a dark red brocade robe laid across a chair. I thought about taking off the nightdress, but it felt so good against my skin. I slipped my arms into the robe, and fastened its cord belt.

I flipped my hair so that it hung down my back rather than inside the robe, which came down to my ankles, way below the hem of the nightdress. Some

backless mules with a tiny heel matched the robe and with these on my feet, I set off down the stairs.

In the kitchen, Rosalie greeted me with smiles and a hug, looked at me and smiled her approval. My robe slipped open and she caught sight of the nightdress.

“You like?” she asked, her accent aided by vigorous hand gestures. “Miss Esther, she always like the feel.”

“I like.” I said, wondering how I was going to get out of that one. First impressions stick.

Mother wandered in as I was drinking orange juice. I introduced her and Rosalie’s broken English with Mother’s broken Spanish seemed to give them some conversation. There was a nod in my direction and gestures which said that she approved of me already. At least, I thought that’s what they meant. They could have been approving the nightdress.

The latter thought was correct. Mother sat next to me, sipped her coffee, and then looked me over. She pulled back the neck of my robe and saw what I was wearing.

“Are you sure you want to play this game?” she asked. “If you do, I wholeheartedly approve.”

“I’d forgotten I was wearing it,” I hissed.

“How could you forget?” she smiled back. “It’s so elegant; you must take the robe off and give me the full effect.”

She pulled at the sleeves of the robe; the belt unravelled, and I was left exposed in a really feminine nightdress in front of Rosalie. I blushed. Mother smiled. What could I do? I smiled too and decided to brazen it out.