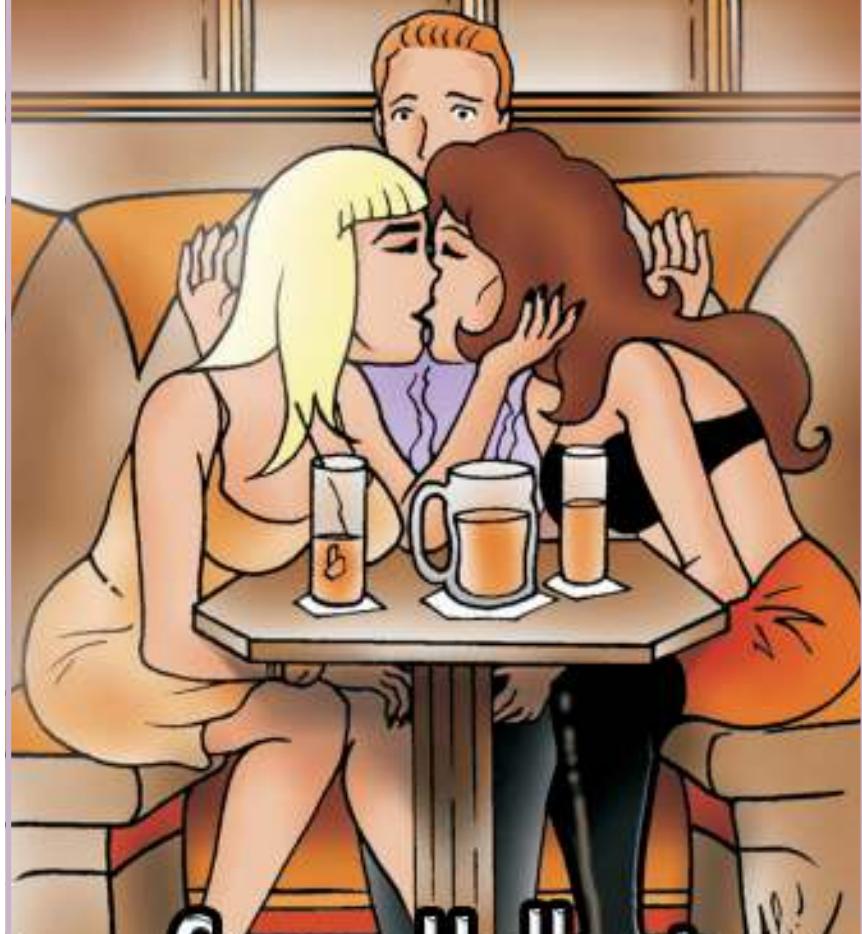


Escape From Stepmother



Susan Hulbert

A "Her TV" Novel

Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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Escape from Stepmother

by Susan Hulbert

We were both nervous as we were getting ready. We'd treated ourselves to new lingerie to go under our floor-length dresses. Oyster pearl silk bras and panties; garter belt to match and stockings, just to make us feel more feminine. Silk is always good when it's next to a girl's skin.

Our dresses didn't quite match deliberately. Both were made of that same dark oyster silk, strapless with lots of breast on show. They were tight to lower thigh and mine had a fishtail down almost to the floor.

Sally's was finished with a fabulous silk flared skirt. She was standing out front and she wanted it to move as she sang. Mine had to be out of the way as I used my feet on the pedals of the piano.

I left my hair long and loose. It was straight and moved like a curtain. It could fall artfully over my shoulders or some locks could fall in front down into

my cleavage when I played the keys hard and moved my head. I liked to flick it back occasionally. It made people watch me.

Sally's hair was loosely piled up. It wasn't as long as mine and she was much blonder. She loved being the palest of grey blondes that the hairdresser could create for her. Her dark lashes and red lips told everyone that she was playing a part in her own life.

Our stage makeup was specially designed, with dark eyes for us both, but my lips were always pale and shiny. I didn't like them too red.

We'd both been persuaded to have eyelash extensions for the occasion. The salon said it was something we could have if we wanted and as someone else was paying, we both went ahead.

We'd both spent the past week practising to walk elegantly in five-inch stiletto heels. It was fun and we giggled at each other as we got more proficient. I think Sally had the better wiggle but she said mine would stop traffic at fifty yards. I guess we were even. No one would ever think we were two boys dressed up with breasts a lot younger than we were.

The audience clapped as we stepped onto the small stage erected for the occasion in the small private ballroom. We held hands and bowed, then took our places. Sally went to the microphone stand. I went to the side and sat at the piano.

I sat and checked the distance to the pedals, then checked my earrings. They were long and dangled, sparkling in the light almost to my shoulders. Sally stood out front and took the applause, holding out her hand to me.

I saw the wedding set on her left hand. She looked at me and I held up my left hand to show her the same on my ring finger. We weren't married but we liked the pretence. It was good sometimes to hold up the hand when a guy was coming on too strong.

I blew her a kiss and we swung into the first number.

“My but your Bernard’s such a lovely touch at the keyboard.” I overheard Aunt Effie and my stepmother talking as I folded away the music book I’d pretended to be playing from.

Effie had been christened Elfriede Faith; she hated that, hence Effie. She wasn’t really my Aunt; she was my stepmother’s cousin or something like that. They were really close until Effie and her husband moved to the coast where they had their restaurant.

“It’s such a pity that he’s useless at everything else.” That voice was Helen, my stepmother since I was eight; we tolerated each other.

I ignored them and went through to the kitchen for a drink. I’d been playing ever since I could remember. When the other kids needed to practise and learn to read music, I faked it. I couldn’t read the notation well; I really struggled with that.

Once I heard a piece, I could reproduce it. It was easy to absorb the composer’s style too. I could improvise something and tell them that it was Gershwin or even Bach and they’d believe me.

When it came to Lady Gaga or Adele, it was a piece of cake. I vamped it. They’d always say that they’d heard the tune, that it was one of their favourites, but they couldn’t remember the words. I’d faked it. There were no words but I didn’t tell them that. I said I liked the tune but couldn’t remember the words either.

It kept me out of trouble. I was like a performing flea when Helen had her friends round. It had been easier when Dad was around. He was like a buffer between me and Helen but he’d gone to Afghanistan and didn’t come back.

Don’t get me wrong. Life wasn’t bad; it just wasn’t the life I’d have wanted. We lived in a nice area. I went to a good school. Money was never a problem; Helen’s family simply “had money” without my ever knowing

where it came from. On top of this, there were the military pensions and benefit from Dad's service.

At seventeen, with my next birthday coming up, I was always the smallest in my class. I didn't get picked on much; the music shielded me from much of that. I didn't get the girls though. Sure, they crowded round the keyboard. Play this or that they'd say but when I'd finished, they'd drift away.

"He's eighteen when school ends," I heard Effie saying as I passed the lounge door on the way to my room. "He could come and play at Artie's restaurant."

Artie was her husband. I'd only met him a couple of times. He seemed a real shyster, to use a word from years ago. He didn't seem nasty but all the same, he didn't seem like a guy you'd lend your money to.

"That's not a bad idea," Helen said slowly. "Of course, he'd have to have somewhere to live; I know you don't have room."

"Since Artie expanded the business, we've been living over the shop," Effie replied. "It's small and we're cramped but with the restaurant doing so well, I hope we can move out in a year or two. Artie has some apartments on the block down from the restaurant. I'm sure Bernard could have one of those."

"He's quite able to look after himself," Helen continued. "Rachel could have his room too. She's been complaining about having the smaller one ever since we moved here."

Rachel was my stepsister. She was the same age as me. Dad had always been in my corner when he married Helen and we all moved in together, so I got the better room with its own bathroom.

She was nice in a way that admitted we had nothing in common and little to talk to each other about. She always had boys hanging around, waiting for her to get ready, and taking her to a movie here and then a party somewhere else. In contrast to my life, she was the popular one.

"I'll speak to Artie," Effie said. "He could come to us as soon as he finishes High School."

I didn't wait to hear any more. Helen would have me do whatever I was told. She always had. She didn't exactly threaten me but she made sure that I knew she was the only trustee of Dad's will and therefore my inheritance. It didn't release the funds to me until I was twenty-seven unless she agreed. We both knew she had that power; she didn't need to emphasise it.

But back then the idea that I could escape to play in Artie's restaurant seemed a great idea.

"I've arranged for you to go and play at Artie's restaurant," Helen informed me the day after. "You can go as soon as school finishes."

Effie hadn't spoken to me about it; there was no questions about me and whether I agreed. Helen simply announced a decision.

"But it's three hundred miles away, on the coast," I said.

"Don't exaggerate; it's only about two hundred and fifty."

"I'll lose touch with everyone."

"Is that the same everyone who never calls and never includes you in things?" she snapped back. "No one's going to notice you're not there. It's going to do you good to work for a while and look after yourself."

I didn't argue any more. I knew I had to get away or things were going to turn bad.

Things were cool for the next few days; even Rachel was super nice. It was only because she knew she was getting my room. I had mixed feelings about moving away. It would mean leaving everything I'd

known for most of my life behind. On the other hand, I would be free of Helen's control. It had been getting more irksome as the weeks passed.

So one sunny morning, she dropped me off at the train station for the first part of my journey. I'd squeezed all my possessions into a rucksack, not that there was anything special there, just a few clothes, toiletries and my music player. It was exciting; my first trip away on my own.

Effie called me as I sat watching through the observation car as the train hauled through the mountains.

"I'll be outside waiting when your train gets in," she said. "I'll be in a white F-150. I'll be in the lot next to the station; call me when you get in. Your super long hair will make you stand out, so I'll not be able to miss you."

I liked my hair. It was a light reddish sandy blonde. I'd refused to have it cut since I was about twelve and now it hung down, straight and heavy, almost to my waist.

I found her truck easily; she was standing beside it, waving to me across the lot. We tried to chat in the way that families do when they don't know each other well. Not that I was related to her; she was my stepmother's younger sister, that's all.

I got my first view of the ocean as we drove along the coast. I loved it at once; the sparkle of the water, the shades of blue across its surface and the sky, and the promise of being able to explore a little. Maybe I'd find a girlfriend too.

Perhaps that was hoping against hope but I didn't know that back then.

We drove down a strip facing the beach, then pulled into a side road which took us to a car park at the rear.

"Here we are," Effie announced, opening her door.

I grabbed my rucksack and followed her into a back door which was obviously the kitchen entrance to Artie's restaurant.

"I'll show you round here, then after dinner I'll take you to the apartment we have for you," Effie explained as we walked through into the public side of the place. "The piano's over on that stage if you want to try it."

I didn't notice much about the place as I walked across to test the piano. I could see that it was upscale and smelled fresh and clean. There was none of that stale cooking scent which lingers in some places.

Then there was the piano. It wasn't what I expected. This was a Yamaha keyboard; one with all the whistles and bells I could have wished for. It looked wonderful, all shiny and new, with all the features I'd read about but never dreamed I could afford. Well, I hadn't afforded this one but all the same, I was impressed. I'd been blown over when I'd tried its little sister in a music shop back home.

I switched it on and sat silently looking at it for a while, hardly daring to touch it in case it disappeared. Then my hands reached out and, without thinking, I started to play. My mind switched off as ragtime, boogie, and barrelhouse changed to Bach, then to Gershwin and Porter.

I improvised around familiar standards, imagining myself in the midst of elegant diners who appreciated the music. I swear I could even see Fred and Ginger gliding elegantly across the floor. I was so far away from reality as the time passed.

I tried a few effects from the piano's different voicings. This took me to improvise on Brubeck and Errol Garner, then entirely on my own building on popular show tunes. I was fascinated by what I could do with these fingers and this instrument.

"I think I'd better show you where you're going to stay." Effie tapped me on the shoulder; I hadn't noticed that she and Artie had come to stand behind me.

"Can I come back later?" I asked. In reality, I didn't want to leave. "I'd love to practise on this."

"Maybe not tonight; you need some stage clothes," Artie said. "You need to be dressed right and I'm guessing you don't have a tuxedo crumpled up in your rucksack."

"I never thought about that."

"Never mind, We'll get you fixed up. We'll have a quick dinner and then Artie's got to open up while I show you your place."

A couple of hours later, Effie and I walked two blocks south along the coast.

"I hope It's not too noisy for you here," she said, indicating a corner building. "We own the bar there. It's a bit livelier than the restaurant and closes later. Your place is on the second floor above."

I looked at the bar which was closed right then. The windows were opaque and the ornate pillars at the side had posters of scantily-clad showgirls beckoning people inside.

"It looks different," I said slowly.

"It was making a loss, so we got it cheaply," Effie replied. "It's picking up since we put in a new manager and a new style to attract people in."

By then we were at the side entrance and she led the way up the stairs; four flights and we arrived at

the second floor. She opened the door and I walked into my new home for the first time.

“It’s a bit girly,” I said as my eyes took in the pinks and pastels that hit my eyes.

“The previous tenants were a couple of girls,” Effie explained. “They decorated to their taste. It’s something we’ll get round to changing but for now it’s clean and fresh. We sent the cleaners from the restaurant to make up the bed and put a few things in the fridge for you.”

I stood and looked round. It wasn’t minimal and it wasn’t functional.

“You’ve two bedrooms through there so you can choose but the front one’s bigger and has a better bathroom. The kitchen through there has all you’ll need and as you can see, this is the lounge.”

“Thanks, Effie.” I decided to be grateful; it was clean and modern and I was free from Helen’s doleful influence.

“If you come to the restaurant about eleven in the morning, I’ll take you to get something to wear when you’re playing. You can rehearse or whatever you need to do after that.”

“What days do I play?” I asked.

“We’re open Wednesday through Sunday. Sunday’s mainly lunchtime trade and we close early. I guess that Artie will want you each evening but you’ll have to talk about hours with him.”

She hesitated at the door. “I nearly forgot. Here’s your employee card.” She handed me a mauve plastic card. “With that, you can get served in the restaurant or the bar downstairs. All you have to do is sign the tab.”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to afford to do that.”

“Son’t worry. Your bill’s going to be taken care of as part of your pay.” She smiled. “Make sure you don’t

overindulge. I don't want to see an ounce of fat on that lovely slim figure of yours."

"One other thing I almost forgot." She paused at the door. "If you do go downstairs, remember it's a drag bar."

"What, like the Ru Paul thing?"

"It can be something like that but they're not all so flamboyant."

"I'm sure I'll be able to tell which is which," I said confidently.

"Don't be so sure," Effie laughed.

"And I need to know this why?"

"You are naïve." Effie smiled. "Some of them are drop-dead gorgeous, but it means if you're trying to pick up a girl in there, remember she may have a schlong in her panties."

"A what?" I started but then her grin said it all and I knew what she meant.

With that, she was gone. I picked up my rucksack and guessed which the bigger bedroom was. I opened the door and was met with a cloud of perfume which I guessed was lingering from the previous tenants. It was also very pink.

I didn't care; I was tired from the journey and the newness of it all. I checked the bathroom and found it well stocked with all I needed, most of it probably left over from the last occupants. I showered and then, after a drink, I fell into bed and was asleep within moments.

If the bar was noisy, I never heard a thing.

Next morning, I was up bright and early with the sun shining through the window and the scent of the coast in the air. As soon as it seemed a decent time, I set off for the restaurant.

As I came out of my door onto the street, a girl was sweeping out from the bar downstairs and I could hear someone playing the piano badly inside.

“You must be our new neighbour.” She waved to me and smiled. “I’m Angie. I’m the manager.”

She held out her hand and I shook it carefully; I didn’t want to injure myself on her bright blue dagger-like fingernails.

Her hands weren’t small and feminine, perhaps from all the hard work there. I had a second thought and wondered if she was for real or if she was the first one that I might not have spotted at a casual glance. All this was very new to me back then.

“I’m Bernard,” I said, smiling back. “I’m going to be the piano player in the restaurant down the block.”

“I know; Effie asked me to keep an eye out for you,” Angie said. “I have to keep you out of trouble.”

“Do I need to be kept out of trouble?”

“Some of our girls can be a little forward.” She smiled, and nodded towards the interior where the right notes were being played but not necessarily in the right order. “If you’ve any spare time, we could use your help.”

“It sounds like it,” I agreed.

“Why don’t you come in and look around? They won’t be open down the block for another hour or so.”

I followed her inside, blinking as my eyes got accustomed to the darker interior. It was all chrome and modern, with a stage to the rear where the piano player was pounding away. A girl, I assumed it was a

girl, was looking from the music sheet to her hands. Her lips were pursed in concentration as she tried to get the rhythm right.

I was unable to help myself and walked across, stepped onto the stage, and watched. I must have made her uncomfortable. She stopped and stared at me, waiting for me to speak.

"It's not a bad piece but if you like, I could show you some fingering that might help." I said watching as her face hardened as if I was her most horrible teacher. "You're doing really well. I'm not being critical but if you run the bass line you can ignore the difficult bits on your left hand and it will sound as good."

She stood and waved me to the piano stool. I sat and pretended to look at the music as if I could read it. My hands fell into place and I did it slowly, letting her watch. I repeated it, extending into the turnaround and then into the middle eight.

"Let me try." She suddenly smiled and seemed to understand.

We exchanged places and soon she grasped what I'd been doing. She played it a few times, getting it better each time, despite a little fumbling at first.

"You're not an amateur," she said, looking up from the keys and smiling. "I'm Cherie when I'm here."

"I'm going to play at the restaurant down the block," I said, introducing myself and taking the hand she proffered as she stood and leaned in to a hug and to give me an air kiss as if we were old friends. Her perfume was fresh and flowery.

If she was a boy, nothing gave it away. That thought made me think again. Did these guys go about in daylight?

"I have to go and sort out some stage clothes," I said, blushing as I stood back from her hug.

“You should come and play here.” Cherie sat down at the keyboard again. “I do my best, but I’m nowhere near your league.”

“I may do that,” I said in a non-committed sort of way as I made for the door.

“You’ll never escape now,” Angie joked as I passed her on the way out.

I never thought to wonder if she was joking.

I spent the next few days taking in my surroundings. I rehearsed a little and researched some tunes to expand my repertoire. No one really took any notice of me and I was left pretty much to my own devices.

Eating at the restaurant whenever I could didn’t seem like the best idea. Don’t get me wrong; their menus were spectacularly good but it wouldn’t do for me to become the fattest pianist on the block.

I lived quite healthily. I ran each morning. I got to like the way I could get away from the roads and run along the grassy edge where the beach met the land. Sometimes I ran along the edge of the surf but the sand was softer there and I didn’t want to turn an ankle.

I’d laze around after the run, trying to convince myself that I wasn’t halfway to becoming a beach bum working on my tan. I’d get back home late in the afternoon and take a long shower. I’d busy myself for a couple of hours, then head down to the bar where I could get an omelette or a tuna salad, something healthy and far lighter than anything available at the restaurant.

I couldn’t sit at the bar as they got busier and Angie didn’t have time to chat so I started to use a booth at the back and out of the way. There I could eat, read, or make notes. I could hear the music of

the beach in my head and I wanted to write my ideas down before they faded.

“I’m curious.” A girl stood beside me and put her hand on my shoulder. “I’ve seen you here a couple of times and you’re so intent. What are you writing? Are you like Hemingway or J.K. Rowling, writing your next blockbuster in a bar?”

“It’s nothing so grand,” I said, looking at her for the first time; her skimpy black top left little to the imagination and her auburn hair hung straight down, tickling my arm. “I’m jotting a few ideas down for my music.”

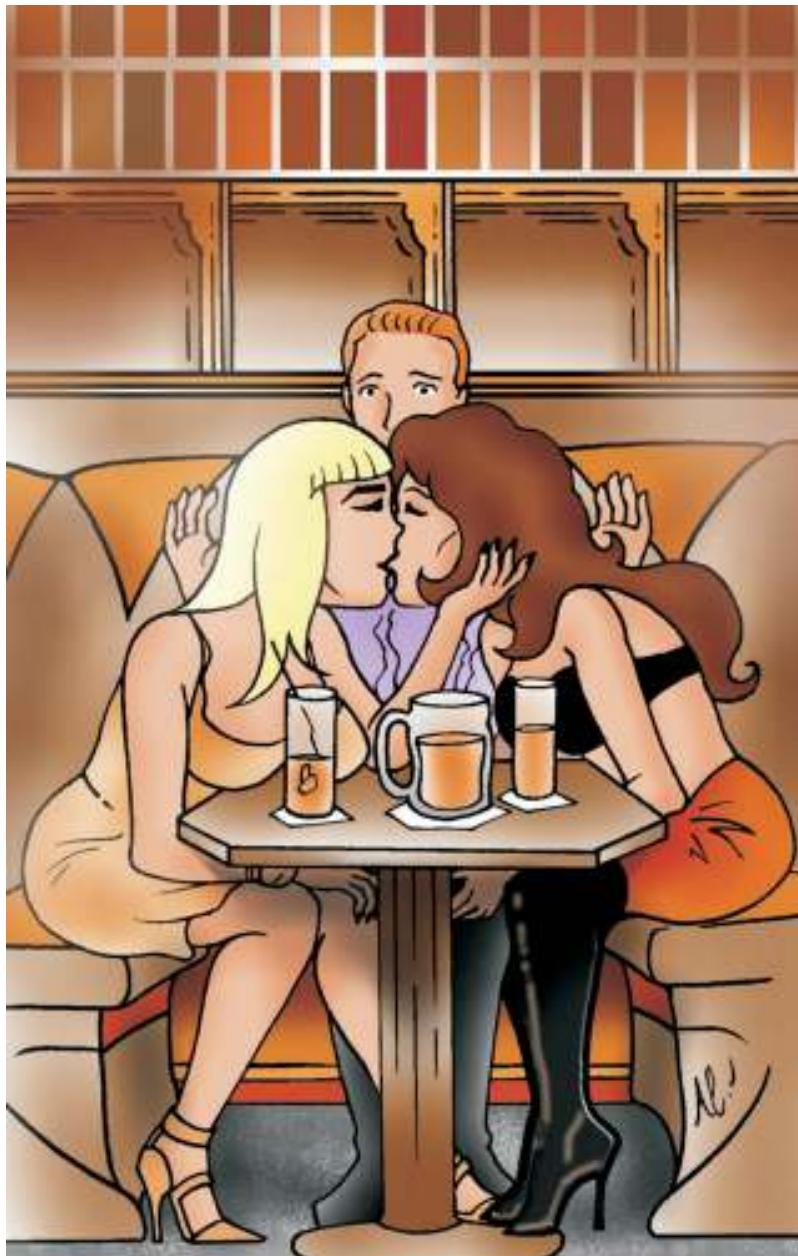
“That’s exciting. I’m Mandy by the way.” She squeezed onto the seat beside me so that I could feel the swell of her breasts against my side and take in the scent of her perfume, a mix of wet grass and citrus. “Have you written any big hits?”

Her brown eyes were wide open, staring into mine as if nothing so fascinating had ever happened to her. I could see the pout of her lips and the lipstick glistening; her lashes were black and heavy with mascara.

“If you’re asking if I can take you out of this in my big Mercedes, then no. I’ve nothing published.” I moved back but she followed me, getting even closer. “I’m more of a soft jazz improviser than a hit song writer.”

“That’s still exciting.” Her eyes seemed wider and then she looked across the room and waved. “Look, there’s Lisa.”

A short blonde girl smiled and waved back and then started across the bar. She had a real wiggle on her heels, a tight waist and breasts that seemed to move on their own under her low-cut dress. She had an obviously bleached blonde look, with straight hair at shoulder length framing her face. She slid into the booth at the other side of me and leaned across to share a kiss with Mandy.



As she did so, her breasts, under her dress, were squeezed against my face and that same perfume came on strongly. She sat at my side, as closely as Mandy was at the other.

"He's a songwriter," Mandy announced, not giving any hint that she'd listened to what I'd said.

She leaned over to make herself heard over the increasing noise in the bar. Her hair fell heavily over me and as she moved back, I felt her tongue lick my ear. It put a shiver through me.

She exchanged a look with Mandy and then with me, as if to say that she was amused by what she'd seen. I felt a hand on my thigh and turned to look at Mandy and as I did so, a tongue licked my other ear. I turned to look at Lisa and the hand moved further up my thigh.

I was still looking at Lisa and some shock must have registered on my face. The next moment, Lisa twisted round in her seat and kissed me full on the lips. I could feel her deep red lipstick smearing across my mouth as her tongue probed at my teeth.

I came up for air as quickly as I could and then Mandy did the same thing. As she kissed me, Lisa's hand started its journey up my thigh. Their hands met over my penis.

I'm not saying I was resisting anything, don't get me wrong. I was shocked, surprised, amazed, all these things, but it was an exciting feeling. I'd never known anything like this. Their hands seemed to work in concert together and I could feel my penis rapidly responding.

I tried to reach down and push them away but not really seriously. As I pushed one hand, another took over. I started to speak several times but as soon as I did, one of them would kiss me again and hold their tongue in a wrestling game with mine. I could feel my excitement bursting. Then then the inevitable result came.

I could feel my penis stiffening again, then the first pulse. It was too late to stop anything and I saw the girls looking at each other with a not-so-secret smile as I climaxed and pumped away into my shorts. I could feel it trickling into the space at the top of my thighs.

“You were really pleased to meet us.” Mandy’s tongue flicked over her lips, moistening them into a shine.

“We’re pleased to meet you.” Lisa didn’t look at me but looked at Mandy like there was a secret they weren’t sharing.

“Think of it as Boy Power.”

They laughed as if it was the best joke of the week, then untangled themselves from me and blew kisses to me as they walked away hand-in-hand.

I sat back. “Did that really happen?” I thought as I reached out for my book. I sat quietly running it all through in my mind, still not understanding.

“Snap out of it!” Angie appeared, wiping the table in front of me. “I see Mandy and Lisa did their trick.”

“They did their trick?” I repeated dumbly.

“They like teasing.” Angie nodded towards my trousers where a wet stain was spreading you know where.

“Oh, that...” I started, not knowing what to say next.

“I did warn you that things aren’t always what they seem.” Angie glanced towards the door where Mandy and Lisa waved to me before they went out. “You’d never believe those two are boys like you.”

“I wouldn’t.” I replied, slowly realising what I’d been thinking wasn’t right.

“But there’s no harm done and your clothes will wash.” Angie walked away with a huge smile on her face.

I had a lot to think about as I went up to my apartment.

“There you are. Didn’t you hear your cell phone ringing?” Effie was waiting for me as I arrived at the restaurant.

“I think I left it on the nightstand.” I realised that I’d forgotten it in the excitement of being somewhere new.

“Never mind. You’re here now and we’ve got to get you a stage suit.” She took my arm and propelled me to the back and into her truck. “Artie wants you in something that really stands out.”

“That doesn’t sound like my style,” I replied.

“It’s Artie’s idea,” she said. “I know it’s not what you’re used to and I’ll try and tone it down. He suggested a jump suit but I reminded him that Elvis was two generations ago.”

“I remember the video,” I replied. “I couldn’t imagine what he was thinking wearing things like that.”

“I’ve asked for a couple of possible outfits to be put aside.” Effie turned into another parking garage.

We went up in an elevator to a clothes store with what were, to my mind, some outlandish outfits in the window display. I followed dumbly as Effie spoke to the assistant who showed us into a changing room where several garment bags were hanging.

Effie unzipped the bags. “These are the kind of thing Artie said you had to wear.” She stood back to let me look.

“I couldn’t...” I said as she showed me a purple suit with satin lapels in a really luminous puce.

The red, then the blue and the pink, were just as awful but more subdued in a pastel sort of shade.

“You have to get one of them,” Effie said. “You’re not playing in your scruffy jeans.”

The last bag had a white suit. Well, not quite white, more of a cream colour with the same satin lapels. It was repellent but not quite as bad as the neon colours of the others.

“It’s got to be that one,” I said without enthusiasm.

“It is a stage costume,” Effie reminded me. “It’s not a lifestyle statement.”

“I know but those other colours are totally horrible.” I took the suit off the hanger. “I’d better try it if I have to wear one of these.”

“I’ll wait outside,” Effie said but I called her back.

“No need. I’m not that shy.”

I stripped to my shorts and then pulled on the trousers. “Do I have to use the waistcoat as well? It’s going to be awfully hot.”

“It goes with the suit,” Effie said. “I’m sure that with a nice shirt, you could take off the jacket as you’re playing.”

“Okay.” I pulled a face and tried on the jacket. “It’s a bit tight.”

“Could you play in it?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’ll take it,” Effie said. “You get dressed again. I’ll get some shirts and shoes to go with it. What sizes do you take?”

I told her and began to change back to my everyday jeans and T-shirt. I was pulling on my leather jacket when she returned.

“Try these.” She held a shoe box out to me. “They’re perfect.”

“You’re kidding,” I said as I looked at some Cuban heeled white boots. They were like cowboy boots in a bad spaghetti western.

“Try them,” she said. “Artie will love the effect.”

“*He* won’t have to walk in them.”

“Neither will you; well, apart from walking to the piano from your dressing room.”

I slipped my feet into them and stood. Apart from the higher heel which I was really unprepared for, they were comfortable and fit perfectly. I took a few steps forward and turned to walk back.

“They’re perfect,” Effie said, gathering up the suit as I sat to change back into my trainers. “I’ll get this packed and we’ll be on our way back. I’ve a lot to do before we open.”

“What about the shirts?” I asked.

“Son’t worry. I’ve got it sorted, with a fresh one for each day.”

I should have paid more attention but I didn’t know that back then.

“I hope you’re not too nervous,” Effie said as I arrived at the office to change for my first night.

“I’m only worried that I’ll look like something from a bad dream in this white suit.”

“It’s a stage suit.” Effie unzipped the garment bag and hung the suit over the door. “Now get changed.”

“Do I really have to wear this as well?” I caught sight of the pale pink shirt on the desk.

“No, You’ve a choice of the baby blue, the pale yellow, the ivory or the oyster one. I got you a different one for each day you’re playing.”

“That’s not much of a choice.” I looked more closely at the packet and took the shirt out. “It’s got frills.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“You’re dressing me up like some kind of juvenile Liberace,” I replied.

“Don’t worry about that; most of the customers won’t have any idea who Liberace was.”

“You know what I mean.” I tried to hide my amusement at that thought. I only knew who he was from some old records I got from the goodwill shop.

I realised that I wasn’t going to win this one so I decided to leave it for another day. I slipped my arms into the shirt and struggled to fasten it. The buttons were on the wrong side but that didn’t mean anything to me. Fortunately it was open collared. The trousers were tight to the waist and down the thigh. They flared a little over my white boots.

The waistcoat was quite low-cut and fastened tightly around my waist but only had three buttons, leaving a lot of the ruffles on the shirtfront exposed. I didn’t like it but quickly put the jacket over it and fastened the single button. It was then that I saw the figuring on the satin inserts of the lapels.

“I feel like I’m entering a fancy dress competition,” I complained.

“If you want fancy dress, you’re in the wrong place,” Effie retorted. “You live over the fancy dress place. You’ll soon forget what you’re wearing when you start to play.”

“And I’ll be sitting down so people won’t really see what I’m wearing.” I reached for the door handle on my way out.

“Wait, I’ve got to tie back your hair,” Effie said. “Artie asked me to do it and I nearly forgot.

"I was hoping to hide behind my hair," I said. "I usually play with my head down. I haven't got anything to tie it with anyway."

"That's okay. I have a scarf. Keep still and I'll tie it."

I turned my back to her and felt her pull my hair back.

"That's great, off you go."

I didn't look and that was another mistake. When I saw it later, she'd tied my hair back with a long silk scarf. It was tied in a big floppy bow and had a pattern of soft pink flowers.

"So that's a good start for my image," I thought afterwards.

Once I sat at the keyboard, all my doubts and fears melted away. It was a wonderful instrument, so easy and responsive under my fingers. I ran through my favourites; old show tunes and songs from the musicals. I know I'm far too young and I have no real idea when they were popular but for a while I was in Heaven.

The tunes are such works of art. Mozart and Bach were both blessed with genius but so were Cole Porter and George Gershwin and lots of other guys who may only have one song in the collective memory.

I was playing on a raised dais rather than a proper stage. All the tables and the bar could see me and with the spotlights around me, I couldn't see much of them. A waitress appeared with a dish and handed me a couple of pieces of paper.

My first requests; it was a bit of a thrill. It showed that people were listening to me. I wasn't only the background. I tried to say a thank you for the requests. With the general noise around me, I knew that my voice wouldn't carry so I nodded and smiled as I played them.

The waitress re-appeared. This time she brought a glass of something pink with bubbles and put a note and a few coins in the dish. I finished my tune, stood and raised the glass to my audience. I bowed my head to all sides, raised the glass and took a sip, before retreating to the office for a break.

"What's in the glass?" I asked Effie when she came to ask how I was.

"They sent you a glass of their pink champagne," she said. "It's their anniversary and you played their special tune."

"That's good," I said, throwing off my jacket and wiping the sweat from my brow. "I could use a microphone. Then I could speak to them."

"I'll get them to fix that for tomorrow," she said. "I hope you're enjoying it because it looks to be going well. Some people have asked if you're going to be regular and have booked ahead just to hear you."

"Don't tell me that or I'll be asking for a pay raise."

"Did we talk about paying you?" Effie asked. "Being away from Helen should be reward enough."

I started to reply but when I looked at her face, I could tell she was joking.

"Artie's thinking of paying you a flat rate with a bonus if the number of covers in the restaurant increases."

She named a figure which was a surprise. I didn't know if it was good or bad; I had no comparison but it seemed a good offer. I kept my face straight before I replied.

"That seems fair enough as long as you don't expect me to pay for food and drink here, and you provide my stage clothes." And then a thought struck me. "And I keep all the tips without you counting them in my pay."

"That's what he was thinking too," Effie replied. "If he wasn't, he will be when I tell him."

I washed my hands, pulled on my jacket again, and set out for the second half of my performance. A few numbers in and I was feeling really hot out there. I stood and took off my jacket and draped it over a music stand which I never used.

When I sat back to play, I noticed how my shirt ballooned out at the front above the tight buttons of the waistcoat. There seemed to be a lot of spare material there. I thought to speak to Effie about having the shirts tailored for a better fit.

I took a final bow and waved to the audience as I walked back to change and go home. I was hot and tired after playing but I knew I'd played well and they'd listened.

"My suit's going to be quite sweaty before the weekend," I said to Effie as I hung it up. "Is there a lighter material or could I have a few changes in the week?"

"You are a bit whiffy." Ellie held the jacket near her nose and pulled a face. "If your fan wants to hug you on Saturday evening, they'll soon back off when they smell that."

"And we don't want to put off my fan." I used the singular as she had but I did it with a big grin.

"I'll order another one," she said. "You can't wear this all week. I think you should have a freshly-cleaned suit every time."

"Maybe I could leave off the waistcoat?"

"Oh no, That's part of the costume." Effie looked up at me. "It gives the audience something to look at. It's not everyday wear."

I handed her the scarf she'd used to tie back my hair.

"I liked that effect," she said. "I'm going to make you wear it that way every night."

As I walked back to my apartment, I could hear the piano from the drag bar. The tune I'd played over earlier was sounding into the street. It sounded better too. I must have done something useful.

I stood at the door, then stepped inside as I was in the way of people coming and going. I watched for a while and saw Angie behind the bar. She waved to me and mimed a drink. I nodded and wove my way through the throng and sat on a barstool.

"I hear that you played beautifully and everything went well," Angie said as she put a long drink in front of me.

"News travels fast." I smiled.

"Not really. I went to listen for a few moments after we opened. This place doesn't get busy until later. They need time to get ready."

"Thanks for showing Cherie how to play for me." I saw a hand with long red fingernails on my arm and turned to see a slim girl in a very white dress which left little to the imagination. "I'm supposed to be Celeste when I sing, although my friends call me Sally."

"I'm pleased to help out," I replied, taking in her long white blonde hair and generous red lips. "I've always loved that song myself."

"There's something about the standards that make me have goose bumps when I sing them," Sally said, looking me straight in the eye so I couldn't help but notice her artfully applied black eyeliner and huge eyelashes.