

It's A Job



Susan Hulbert

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It's a Job

By Susan Hulbert.

I loved my dress. It was low-cut, strapless, and sparkled all the way from my breasts to my ankles. It was tight too, and hugged every curve. I had the best curves that money could buy, and the way I could wiggle along on my silver stilettos with the super high heels had to be seen.

I sparkled too. My diamonds were an investment; at least that's what I told myself. Maybe it was an excuse for extravagance but does a girl need an excuse for spending on herself?

It was probably an inappropriate dress for the ceremony but I was going on afterwards. I'd been booked into a lovely hotel not far from the heart of the city. With all the attractions so close at hand, I intended to grab a bit of the action for myself.

But first I had to attend the ceremony. It was a private affair. They couldn't tell the public about the services I'd rendered to the nation. Half would proba-

bly not believe it and the other half would think it was something out of a spy movie.

I'd brought a jacket to wear to the ceremony. The nation's chief couldn't pin the medal to my bare shoulders. I'm sure he'd like to but his wife would have an apocalyptic fit, if she didn't kill him!

I'd come a long way but then we don't always end up where we thought we would. Let's go back to the start.

It was almost my dream job. I had my own cubicle at the far end of the lab. They left me alone as I worked on the micro-mathematical theories of miniaturisation, data storage and data capture.

Okay, it was all about difficult sums and impossible concepts. I'm not going to explain because you'd be bored unless you were a post-doc theoretical mathematician and computer scientist. I was one of those boring people who want to understand the meaning of life, the universe, and everything.

I worked away, day after day, long into the night and weekends too. Why leave work when it was so exciting? I lived alone in a box room on campus and never saw anyone anyway.

I liked it that way.

Numbers had been my life since I was introduced to them as an infant. I raced through the High School syllabus and then the undergraduate programme. My doctorate was complete when I was eighteen, but they wouldn't let me publish it. National Security, they said.

I had an interview with a rather stuffy old military type. They wouldn't tell me what I was being interviewed for but I guessed it was something to do with the government. They didn't want me and I wasn't surprised, or sorry.

I've never been the sort of person to join things and the military or the intelligence didn't seem to want people like me. I was small and skinny; people often mistook me for a fifteen-year-old. My hair was almost to my waist. It had become an obsession when I was young. I used to measure it every week.

My standard work uniform of jeans or shorts, a T-shirt from a band I'd never heard but liked their name, and tattered trainers wouldn't fit in with the sort of social life they expected. It didn't matter, I was happy.

Happy until I was called to see the big chief.

"He'll see you now." The secretary who'd ignored me for the past half hour stood and indicated that I should follow her through the big door.

"Ah, you're here at last, Weed, sit down." The General, Commandant, or whatever he was, beckoned me to a chair in front of his desk.

"It's Seed," I said and he looked at me as if I'd been impertinent. "My name is not Weed; it's Seed, Joshua Seed. I think some of my colleagues call me Weed because I'm small. It's my nickname."

"Whatever." He glared at me. "Tell me about this super miniaturised memory thing you've developed."

I started to explain but he held up his hand.

"I don't need the technical stuff; how small could this thing be?"

"There's no real limit. They could be smaller than the nail on your little finger," I replied. "With micro miniaturisation, the only problem would be reading and writing."

"I assume you can do both," he said without a trace of humour.

"No. I mean that there has to be a way of writing data to the memory, then reading it."

I didn't use any technical terms; I was sure he'd never understand anything like that. That's probably why he got to be in charge of the section.

"So could they be concealed anywhere?"

"They're very sensitive and not as robust as I would like." I kept it simple. "They can be designed to soak up data from any data source but they need to be kept in a Faraday cage to prevent corruption."

"This organisation is designed to weed out corruption at any level," he barked.

"What I mean is that if data has been taken up by the memory module, it can be adversely affected if it comes into contact with another data source. That could overwrite the data we wanted in the memory. The data could be corrupted."

"I'm glad we sorted that out," he snapped. "I will not tolerate any hint of corruption. So where does Faraday come into this? Is he one of your colleagues?"

“No sir, he died long ago, but his invention is important.”

“Is it still under patent? Do we need to buy his estate off?”

“No, everyone in this industry knows about it.”

I was losing patience. Explaining simple physics to this man was like discussing romantic poetry with the Internal Revenue.

“If it helps, I have developed a small version, based on graphene, which can cover one of the memory modules and protect it from overwriting.”

I didn’t want to baffle him by saying that it would protect it from data corruption. That seemed like a step too far.

“So these things could go anywhere?”

“In theory they could, provided that the operator knew how to use them and how to protect them.”

“And how many operators do we have trained and ready to go?”

“That’s difficult to answer,” I replied, feeling my face colouring up. “At the moment, it seems to be only me.”

“That’s going to be a problem.”

He pressed a button on his desk, the door opened, and I was obviously and unceremoniously dismissed.

I went back to my cubicle and continued to work on my miniaturisation project. I was really excited; I

thought it was a breakthrough. Sadly the supervisors on my team didn't seem to understand.

I'd configured it so that the chip's power source came from my own finger. The minuscule charge came from my body chemistry and because it was attuned to me and me alone, it was tamper proof. No one else could get information from it, unless they matched my body's individual chemistry.

I found that I could get it to be more stable but the need to protect it within a Faraday cage was becoming a bigger problem. Graphene seemed to be the answer and eventually I succeeded.

I say that I succeeded, but it was really sensitive. I tried it by going round the office. I took off the shield when I was beside one computer and replaced it before I moved on. That seemed to work.

It wasn't that I was spying on my colleagues but capturing their private messages proved it was working. I still couldn't solve the problem of interference. If I didn't get the shield installed in time, the next computer's data would be captured. The most recent data capture overwrote the first.

I hadn't really thought of an application for my research but the problem was absorbing. I filed weekly progress reports expecting that no one would read them other than the finance department who had to sign off on my research costs.

I was wrong. Someone was reading them and thinking of applications.

"Come in, Weed." This was the second time I'd seen the General and the first time I'd seen him in uniform; he wasn't alone.

“It’s Seed, sir; my name is Seed.”

“Okay, as you wish.”

He kept his head down reading some papers on his desk. After what seemed like a long silence, he looked up and frowned.

“This is Agent Wallace.” He indicated a thick set man, with a grey crew cut and the look of an archetypical government man. “He thinks that there’s an application for your invention so I’m assigning you to co-operate with him in every way.”

“Yes sir,” I replied, wondering how I was going to get on with Agent Wallace who held out a hand which crushed mine as we shook.

“Don’t hang around, go and get on with it.” The General dismissed us both with a look that said this wasn’t his idea but he had to do it anyway.

We must have looked a strange sight as Agent Wallace steered me to the coffee shop outside the office. I was on the scrawny side of slim and short. He was muscled, fit and almost a foot taller. I guessed he was about ten years older too. We sat with coffee at a table to the side.

“So how does this thing work?” he asked bluntly.

“If I explained, you’d probably have to pretend to understand.” I replied.

“So I can’t fool you.” He had a nice smile as he shook his head.

“I can’t really explain it all to myself,” I replied honestly. “I was experimenting with a string of data and built a circuit with a high end processor and micro

solid state storage. It did more than I expected. So I refined it, miniaturised it, scrapped it, and re-designed it.”

“You haven’t said what it does.”

“I’m coming to that but I think a demonstration might be better.”

“So what do you need?”

“You’ll have to come to my work station and bring your laptop, tablet or whatever you use.”

“You’re not going to fry it?”

“I promise there’ll be no damage.” I tried to make my smile enigmatic. “I hope you’ve got a strong password.”

“I have and it needs my thumbprint as well.”

I waited while Agent Wallace went back to his car for the laptop, then we went to my cubicle in the main office. It was a squeeze to fit both of us in there.

“Now watch this,” I said as my screen came to life. “Don’t switch your laptop on and leave it over there.” I gestured towards an empty chair two rows away. “Watch the screen.”

I took my device from the faraday cage I carried it in and touched the side of the laptop. Immediately my own screen flashed into life.

“Hey, that’s my home screen,” he said with surprise in his voice.

I walked back to him and proceeded to scan through his files and emails, flashing them before his eyes so that he could see that I'd accessed everything.

"You didn't need a password," he observed.

"That's one of the properties of my device," I said. "It's able to open any type of computer and relay it seamlessly to my base machine."

"Does that mean you have to monitor it all the time?"

"No, once it's opened, it stays open so if you log on to any network. I'll be able to follow, either in real time, or by looking through what's stored automatically here."

"I don't believe it. This can't be possible."

"Why don't you log on to something that I can't possibly know about and I'll show you what it can do."

He looked at me suspiciously and hid the screen with his body.

"This would be better if you went to the coffee shop, or better still, go to another one a few blocks away." I grinned; I knew what I could do. "Surf the web, scan a private something or other and come back in half an hour."

It took about forty-five minutes for him to return. I noticed that he wasn't carrying his laptop any more. My screen was dark and I made a show of switching the terminal on as he watched.

“You’re kidding me; this can’t be real. I deleted my entire computer’s history.” He gasped as his screen appeared in front of us.

“You went into your bureau’s secure server.” I pointed to the icon and clicked on it.

A screen opened and I flipped through, then I entered my own search term.

“I’ve never searched for that,” he said.

“You have now.” I opened the screen and the documents downloaded to my computer.

“You’re not supposed to be able to do any of that.” He gasped. “I’ll have to tell my superiors. I think I should be speaking to the head of the service. Who knows about this?”

“Well, I do and now you do,” I said. “Then there’s the General, although when we say he knows, you have to understand that for him to know about anything here is purely by chance. And he’d never be able to explain anything.”

“No one else knows?”

“I don’t think so,” I replied, wondering why he was being so insistent with these questions. “The purchasing and inventory might know I have some parts, but other bits I brought from home.”

“How many of these units do you have?”

“Only this one, but I’m working on an even smaller version.”

“You can get it smaller?” Agent Wallace asked.

“I think I can get it down to the size of my fingernail,” I said, but then there’s the problem of shielding it to consider. I’m working on it; graphene looks promising.”

“Let me get this right.” His face screwed in concentration. “Once you’re into my computer, you can go in again.”

“It will work anytime, anywhere,” I agreed.

“You mean it’s going to work no matter where I am?”

“No matter where you are or even if it’s switched off.”

“That can’t be real.” He shook his head.

“Is your laptop switched off now?” I asked. Not waiting for an answer, I turned to my screen, tapped a few commands and his email popped up. “You’ve got an email from Candy waiting. Shall we open it?”

“Not right now.” His face coloured.

I tried getting other people to use my device but there must have been something that prevented their success. I think it was attuned somehow to my body chemistry and I didn’t understand that either.

I didn’t hear from Agent Wallace for a few weeks. I was beginning to think he’d been assigned to something more exciting, but then he called.

“Listen Weed.” I listened. I’d gotten tired of telling people that I wasn’t called that. “There’s this guy in a black sedan. He’s going to pick you up outside in ten.”

“In ten what?” I said.

“Ten minutes, you sap head,” he snarled. “The agency doesn’t want your invention but my associate would like to meet you.”

“Who’s your associate?” I asked.

“You don’t want to know.”

“But I do if he’s picking me up.”

“Just be there.” He ended the call.

I hesitated for a few moments. My employers didn’t seem to care about me. Agent Wallace hadn’t got any interest from his agency, whoever they were, so why not go with whoever wanted it?

It didn’t take me long to work that out. I was pleased with it as an academic exercise. I was more pleased with it if it was going to make me some real money. So I was there waiting.

The black sedan pulled up and I walked to it. The driver lowered the window.

“I’m not going to come and open the door for you, princess,” he snarled.

I got in and the car set off. My windows blackened and I couldn’t see anything as we drove. A screen lifted, separating me from the driver. I knocked on it, but he ignored me.

It was like a bad scene from the “Man From Uncle” movie but I’m too young to remember the first run of that series.

The car turned and climbed. I couldn't see a thing but I could tell that much. The road noise changed too, making me think that we'd left the town behind. Finally it slowed, turned and started along a rough road; stones rattled against the underside of the car.

"You can get out now," the driver growled after the car came to a halt.

I opened the door and found that I was standing in front of a mansion. The lawns to the front were manicured and the grounds disappeared into woodland. I was still looking when the car pulled away, leaving me there and no wiser as to what I should do, let alone why I was here.

"Would you like to come inside, Mr Weed?" The girl was really tall and dressed in an all-black figure hugging outfit, with long, impossibly black hair hanging straight and heavy over her shoulder.

I was getting so tired of this name business and didn't bother to correct it again this time. I walked towards the door where she stood waiting.

"We're so glad you decided to accept our offer to work for us," she said as she shook my hand.

"Work for you..." I was mystified.

"Mr Wallace recommended you."

"But I'm working for..."

"Not anymore; your contract has been transferred to us." She obviously expected me to follow as she walked through another set of doors and into an office. She sat and I stood in front of her desk.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“You can call me Sylvia,” she said.

“No, I meant who are you, the people who think I’m going to work for them?”

“You could call us a quasi-autonomous, non-governmental organisation and you’re right, by the way. The General didn’t have a clue what you were doing.”

“And you do?”

“That’s why you’re here. Your device may be of national importance. That’s why it’s now on the top secret list.” Sylvia handed me a sheet of paper and a pen. “You need to sign this. It’s a strict confidentiality agreement.”

“I signed without really reading it. She took the paper from me and looked at my signature. I suppose she wanted to check that I hadn’t signed as Mickey Mouse.

“What have I signed?” I suddenly thought I should have read it carefully.

“It means that if you talk about your work outside this place, you’ll be locked away so far from the world, you won’t ever have to worry about stealing a key to get out.”

“How do you know about me?”

“Mr Wallace is paid to pass on information.” She put the paper deliberately into a drawer and locked it. “He referred you to us. We’ve pulled all the files and records, all the papers and experimental models you made so no one else sees it.”

“I didn’t think it was special,” I said.

“You’re too modest,” she replied. “We hope that it’s going to be a major tool in the fight against crime and corruption.”

“But you’re not the police.”

“No, we’re nothing. As far as anyone knows, we don’t exist, but we feed information to people who do exist.”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.” I sat in the only other chair at the side of the room.

“You don’t need to know much more,” Sylvia said. “You’ll be working with me on a few projects. I hope your device will be as valuable as it seems to be.”

“It all seems very James Bond.”

“I suppose it does but perhaps it would be helpful if you were to think of me as James and you’re my glamorous assistant.”

“I’m not at all glamorous.” I laughed at that, but she didn’t join in. “Where do I report in the morning?”

“Why, you’re already here of course,” she replied. “Your room’s ready and I’ll show you to it when I’ve made a couple of calls. You may wait outside.”

With that, I was dismissed. I went to look at the pictures in the hall, then sat on the bottom of the stairs waiting.

“This is your bedroom, and workroom combined.” I’d followed Sylvia up the staircase. “I’m sorry it’s so small.”

“It’s bigger than my apartment.” I looked round what looked like a sitting room with plush furniture.

“You don’t have an apartment.”

“I’m sure I had one; I’ve lived there for a couple of years.”

“That’s been dealt with. Your laptop is on the desk through there and the contents of your desk and files are in the drawers.” She pointed to a door to my left. “And your experimental models should be packed into the flight case beside the desk.”

“Does that mean I’m not going home?” I asked.

“It means you’re never going home and hopefully by now, every trace and every record of you will have been obliterated.”

“But what about my friends? Won’t they miss me?”

“You don’t really have any and those people who do remember you will soon have forgotten you were ever there.”

“I guess my life was really small,” I said. “I love my work too much.”

“For our purposes that’s good.” Sylvia smiled for the first time. “You can freshen up and then find your way to the kitchen for dinner.”

“Here’s your new identification documents; driving licence, social security number, bank and credit cards.”

Sylvia handed me a small wallet as we sat to dinner courtesy of a local pizza delivery.

“But these are for Madeleine Duval. That’s not me.”

“It is now.” She smiled. “It’s for your security.”

“But I’m not female.”

“You’re going to appear to be, then no one will recognise you.”

“I won’t agree to that.”

“We thought of male disguises but you’re so small it was easier to make you over into a female. That way you’re average.”

“Gee, thanks. I always wanted to be average.”

“Sorry. I think you’ll be a real looker; what I meant was average height and build for a girl.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Listen, we need your co-operation,” she said. “Either that or your project gets shelved or you become unemployable anywhere outside of waiting tables.”

“You certainly have a way of appealing to new employees.”

“Take my advice and go with it,” she said, her voice quiet and serious. “We’re good at what we do; we won’t turn you into a monster and you may enjoy it more than you think.”

“It’s not something on my to-do list. Can you imagine if it was; visit Machu Picchu, then see the pyramids along the Nile, watch sunrise on a tropic isle.”

“You’re quoting ‘You Belong To Me’ which is a great song.” She laughed. “For our purposes, the title is all you need to remember.”

“Do you really go after the bad guys?” I asked after we’d eaten.

“In a way, we do,” she replied. “Most of our work is in discovering the secrets that people don’t want to be revealed. When we have something, it’s fed through to the authorities.”

“Does that mean you don’t do the dramatic arrests and spend weeks in court?”

“I am always completely anonymous,” Sylvia replied. “If I’m really successful, the mark makes no connection between me and their fate”

“Why me?” I asked. “I’m not spy material.”

“We need you to work this invention of yours.” Sylvia reached for a bottle of water and poured for us both. “It needs to be as small as possible and have the capacity to store a lot of data.”

“The storage isn’t a problem,” I told her. “I’ve perfected a way of sending it as soon as it’s collected. If you’re asking me how small and could it be undetectable, that’s what I’m working on.”

“Good morning Madeleine.” Sylvia burst into my room before I was awake.

“I’m not Madeleine,” I replied sleepily.

“You are now.” She pulled the covers off my bed. “If you were ever anyone else, all traces of that person have disappeared.”

“You really weren’t joking.” I looked at her hard. “You’re going to make me go through with whatever madcap scheme you’ve dreamed up.”

“It’s not me.” She opened the blinds and bright light made me blink. “It’s your new bosses who made the decision. All I have to do is help you.”

“I have no idea how you can do that.” I tried to pull the covers back over me but she held onto them.

“Get up. You’re due at the special effects lab in an hour.”

“Why am I going there?”

“Think about it.” She stood in front of me. “What does a girl need that you don’t have?”

“I’ve got something that girls don’t have.” I think I smirked at that remark.

“Clever boy, you must have been the top student in the biology class.” I think she was trying not to laugh. “They have breasts and hips in case you hadn’t noticed and another thing you have that they don’t is hair all over your body.”

“Are you saying they’re going to make me have breasts and...” I ran out of words as a panic took over.

“They’re going to make you look like a girl, yes,” she said. “And you’re going to co-operate.”

“Say I go along with this, what’s in it for me?”

“The everlasting gratitude of your country. Is that good enough for you?”

“If you put it like that, it might be fun in a masochistic way.”

“Is this Madeleine?” A white-coated woman peered at me through her glasses as if I was some kind of exhibit in a museum.

“She will be if you can do your magic,” Sylvia answered as if I wasn’t there too.

“Your department, whose name we cannot mention, seems to have sent me something we can do relatively easily. I think the physical work can be completed in a day but the behaviour training could take longer.”

“Don’t I get a say?” I interrupted.

“I can give a little discretion in the details.” She took her glasses off and peered at her iPad. “The specification I have says ‘reasonably attractive female’ and nothing more.”

“Does that mean I can’t be glamorous?” I asked.

“I suppose you could, within reason.” She smiled a little at the thought and looked at me directly for the first time. “I could like the idea of making your bosses sit up and take notice.”

“I don’t think...” Sylvia started to speak.

“This is about me, not you,” I interrupted. “I don’t want to look like a mousey librarian.” I looked at the lady with the glasses.

“I think we can understand each other.” Her eyes showed she was amused for the first time and maybe interested too. “I’m Elizabeth Devine and I run the

SFX department here in Vision Labs. You can call me Liz or Lizzy.”

“I’m pleased to meet you,” I said formally. “I’m the victim here so I want input into everything you plan to do.”

“I can live with that,” Lizzy replied. “You have to remember that not all things are possible though. If you want a monster, we can do anything. If you want a real-life person, then we have to work within the constraints of whatever we start with.”

“Can you put that in plain language, please?”

“We can make you pretty, but we can’t make you into a six-foot Nordic beauty.”

I think we all laughed at that and the ice was broken.

“Today is about measurements,” she said. “Come with me. Sylvia can wait for you.”

I went into another room where I was told to strip and wear some disposable pants. For the next hour or so, I was photographed from every angle, then I had to stand on a certain spot and keep still as a laser scanned and measured parts of me that I’d never have believed could be measured.

When all that was done, they took samples; hair, blood, urine, my breath. They even put adhesive tapes on my skin to take samples of my skin cells.

“It’s all to make sure we have a complete record of your metabolism,” Lizzy explained. “If we have to adjust certain balances, we need to know the starting point.”