

An Actor's Life For Me



Susan Hulbert

An "Adult TV" Novel



Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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An Actor's Life For Me

By Susan Hulbert

Hi-diddle-dee-dee
An actor's life for me
A high silk hat and a silver cane
A watch of gold with a diamond chain

Hi-diddle-day
An actor's life is gay
It's great to be a celebrity
An actor's life for me
(Written by, Oliver Wallace, Ned Washington & Leigh
Harline. From Disney's "Pinocchio" 1940.)

I always wanted to be an actor, but I didn't get the breaks. I was too short to be a leading man, too skinny to be a tough guy, and my soft features didn't help either.

Still I persisted. I joined the local amateur theatre as a junior but never got a featured part. I carried a spear in Shakespeare and a tray as the servant; I was given the odd walk-on part as a consolation for doing the props, the prompts, and the continuity. It was frustrating, but it was my passion.

Mom sympathized but steered me towards more practical qualifications. I graduated with a degree in accountancy.

“If you understand where the money goes, you’ll never be poor,” she said.

I’ve no idea where she got that from. In a way she was right. I went from the university into a job which paid me well.

All the time, the acting bug kept biting my ankle. I joined another amateur company. You can guess where that got me. In the community productions, I was the assistant stage manager again. The props and the prompts seemed to be the pinnacle of my theatrical career.

Now I’ve left the accounts behind. I’m more than comfortable with my life. It’s been a bumpy ride, but I got here in the end.

What fascinates me is the way people react; all the people, but mostly the guys. They see me and I really mean they *see* me; they look and stare. And I don’t blame them. I look amazing, although it’s vanity to say it myself.

I look after my body. I’m five-foot-seven, but my heels make me taller. If I’m honest and I might as well be now I’m writing this; there’s not a lot of me that remains as nature intended.

I’ve got eyelash extensions and acrylic nails. My hair is long and blonde; longer than you’d ever believe possible, but the length of my hair extensions is a secret known only to me and my salon. I love being blonde; expensively blonde.

I dress to get attention. Usually thin dangerously high heels, a shift dress, plain-colored, with a tight skirt down to my lower thigh. I prefer a tight bodice. The neckline is always cut low, my jewelry is always the best. I love it.

Yes, they talk to my breasts; eye contact is fleeting and distraction permanent. My breasts didn't grow this way naturally either. In fact, I never had any until a surgeon gave me them.

Did I mention I started out as a boy?

To start at the beginning, Mother had re-married whilst I was at the university after being on her own for as long as I could remember. My father had disappeared as soon as as he could, not wanting any responsibility for a family including me. Her new husband was a gentle widower and she soon fell into the role of stepmother to his adult children.

It seemed the right time to move out west and see what the world had to offer. I got a good job offer with an accounting firm, perhaps boring but well-paid. I rented a small apartment within walking distance of the office and as soon as I could, I joined the local community theatre.

You probably guessed what came next. I didn't get the parts in their productions. I was the assistant stage manager again. I think I'd accepted that the starring roles weren't going to come my way, but I attended the acting classes anyway.

It was a good friendship group I'd joined. There were parties in the fall and barbecues in the summer. I dated occasionally but none of these girls became a

regular partner. I think they preferred the leading men or for some, the ingenue.

It wasn't unusual to see one of the theatre's sponsors in the box specially reserved for them. It was really unusual to see the same person in the same box for one of the dress rehearsals a couple of weeks later. I noticed him primarily because he wasn't dressed like one of the arty types we usually saw.

He was tall and slim, perhaps past middle-aged, but wearing well. He was tanned and slim, looking like he kept himself in shape, wearing a business suit that looked like it would take me a year to pay off. His silver hair was full and carefully combed. I guess he looked like one of those European aristocratic types, with money to spare for the theatre and time to spare to come and watch.

I thought no more about it until a couple of weeks later.

"Paul Albright wants to see you." Louise the theatre administrator collared me one evening as I was packing away the props carefully for the next production.

"Who's he?" I asked.

"You may have noticed him," she explained. "He was in the sponsor's box recently. The man with the silver hair and the suit that looked like he could afford to buy the theater."

"I never said anything to him," I replied. "Why would he want to see *me*?"

"I've no idea, but his office called to set it up. You'd better be nice to him. If he pulls his sponsorship out, then our next productions are going to go dark."

"I've to call him with your schedule. When are you free one evening next week?"

"Any night when I'm not needed here," I replied.

"I'll tell him you agree to the meet and get back to you when I hear back from his office," she replied. "We're depending on you. Don't upset him and try to get him to donate more."

"Louise, I don't know anything about what he gives," I replied. "I may be the accountant in this company, but I'm not *your* accountant."

"That's probably a blessing. It gives me nightmares each month."

I thought no more about it, despite the unusual request for a meeting. Maybe he wanted some inside dirt about how the company was being run; how the money was being spent. I had no idea. I did ask about him in the office at work.

"He's big in property," I was told by Charmaine, my manager.. We don't have his business. He probably has his own accounts department."

"I guessed he'd be wealthy. He sponsors my theatre."

"It's probably a tax write off." Charmaine hit her computer keyboard and then turned the screen to me. "Here he is. He and his wife are big sponsors. There's a photo her of them both but it's a few years old. They don't seem to be pictured anywhere on the recent socials; just him."

He's the one I've seen." The photo was the same man on a company website. "I don't know why he wants to see me."

"I can't help you there." Charmaine turned the screen back. "He seems more respectable than most of the businessmen in this town. I can't see him mentioned anywhere else; no scandals, no investigations of his business affairs."

"It's a mystery, but it's probably a free dinner." I laughed at my own joke. "Maybe he's mistaken me for someone else."

"It's always a possibility. Make sure it's a good dinner."

"Mr Albright says he'll send a car for you next Friday. Be outside your building at seven. His invitation says dress casual," Louise told me a couple of days later. "You've nothing on that week unless there's a hot date that you haven't told me about."

"Sadly there's nothing like that in my diary."

"You must have something?"

"Chance would be a fine thing," I replied. "And he's probably guessed that I don't have a suit to match his in some smart restaurant."

"I can't think why he wants to see you, but let me know if there's anything I should know." Louise turned to leave. "Enjoy your dinner."

The invitation to dress casual took me to a couple of stores. I bought new chinos and a shirt far smarter than my usual wardrobe. Then I added a new jacket and shoes. This was costing me more than any date I'd had in the past months. I hoped that it would be worth it.

As the appointed time for the car to arrive approached, I stood outside my building watching the parade go by; people strolling, hurrying, loitering. Groups chattering loudly, couples clinging to each other as if afraid to let go; it was Friday night, after all. I watched the traffic too, suddenly aware that I was waiting for a car to pick me up, but I had no idea what sort of car it would be.

"Are you waiting for Mr. Albright's car, sir?" A distinguished looking man towered over me, wearing a black formal suit, with a white shirt and a red tie; not casual at all. I nodded assent. "Come with me."

I followed him to the side of the building where an illegally parked town car waited, with a parking attendant standing beside the passenger door. It wasn't what I expected. The attendant opened the rear door for me, stepped back and almost saluted the driver as he got back in.

The rear of the car was spacious, unlike anything I'd ever traveled in before. A partition between the driver and my compartment effectively prevented any conversation. Soon we were heading into the countryside and into areas that I'd never explored as I hadn't been in the city for long and had no car.

"Mr Albright asks that you help yourself to a drink. The cabinet is below the partition." The driver's voice came through a speaker. "He apologized for not greeting you in person, but he was detained at his office."

Err... thanks," I mumbled. "Is he going to meet me?"

"He asks me to assure you that he won't be late."

"Do you know where we're meeting?" I mentally kicked myself as I asked the question; of course he knew where we were going, but answer came there none.

I wondered where on earth we were going as the journey continued.

"I'm so sorry for the subterfuge," Mr. Albright apologized as he welcomed me to the private dining room at his country club.. "I hope my reasons will become apparent to you."

He held out his hand to me, holding a little longer than I expected, but his eyes were warm and his smile reassuring.

"I know nothing about why you should want to see me," I replied nervously. "I'm not really important in the theatre."

"This isn't about the theatre, it's about your ability to perform a role."

"I don't understand," I replied.

"Perhaps we'd better go through to the dining room and I'll explain." He smiled again; once more, a genuine smile, not one of those which pretends sincerity but doesn't mean it.

"May I get you anything?" he asked as we were seated in an alcove at the side of the dining room. "The aperitifs here are divine."

"Perhaps you'd better order for me." I was out of my depth and I knew it.

The service in the restaurant was superb. Although I wasn't used to eating in places like this, Mr. Albright was the perfect host, gently pointing me towards the best choices from the menu. I'd let him choose the wine. I would have been lost with a wine list like the one the waiter brought.

The waiting staff bustled round with quiet efficiency. I was surprised by how relaxed I felt there. Perhaps it was their skills and my host's genial manner which added to the experience. He beckoned to the waiter who was hovering nearby, pointed to the menu, and smiled as the waiter took it from him.

"I'm fine with that, and thanks for the recommendation," I said as the waiter slipped away silently.

I sipped my aperitif; the flavors enticed my tongue. "That's amazing."

"This is really delicious," he said, as he watched me sip again. I thought I'd better be careful; I wasn't treated to fine dining very often.

"I agree; it's lovely, but I've still no idea why you wanted to see me. I'm nothing special in the theatre and if you want their secrets, maybe you should have asked Louise."

"There's no mistake, my dear," he replied. "It's you I want to see. You have something that they don't have."

"I've no idea what that might be."

"Let's enjoy our drinks and then after we've eaten, I'll show you some photographs which may explain why you're so important."

"I'm not going to pretend," I said. "I'm out of my depth here. I've no idea why I'm here."

"All in good time," he replied. "May I recommend the wonderful seafood platter they serve here?"

Our meals arrived and, as promised, they were really special; like something I'd never tasted before.

"I think you should tell me why I'm here," I said, taking a small forkful of my platter.

"I've some photos to show you," he replied. "I know you've studied to be an actor. How good could you be if you were asked to absorb a role; really to live it and stay on character?"

"I think I'm pretty good," I replied. "I know I don't have the physical requirements to be a great actor."

"What if I told you that you were the ideal person for a role which I have in mind."

"I'd say you've found a play so obscure that I never heard of it."

"What if it's not a play, but a real life role?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I came here, doubting that you might be right, but as we're talking I see you could be the right person."

"That's even more mysterious," I replied. "Does Louise know you're offering me something like this."

"It's nothing to do with Louise," he replied. "Let's enjoy our meal and then we can adjourn to the lounge and I'll explain more."

"I wish you would," I replied. "I think I'm being auditioned for something but I've no idea what."

"I'm not talking theatre here," he replied. "Wait until we're finished."

Leaving the dining room, he led the way to a more secluded area of the lounge, overlooking the gardens. I sat where he indicated, relatively close to him, with a view over the gardens. It was all so perfect, but I wondered what was to come.

Digestifs arrived on the low table beside our chairs and a moment later a waiter brought a document wallet. It was tooled leather and shouted that it probably cost more than I earned in a week. He leaned towards me as he took the case, thumbed the combination lock and pulled out a folder.

"I want you to look at these photos. I don't want you to say anything until you've fully absorbed them all."

I looked at the photos. There was a wedding photo, with Mr. Albright looking much as he did today, although his hair may have been a little darker. The woman standing next to him in her voluminous white dress was stunningly pretty and clearly a lot younger.

There followed the usual type of wedding album; the rings, the ceremony, and the first kiss. As I continued to look through the photographs, I couldn't help admire her; always stylish and even when dressed casually, she never looked less than careful with her makeup and hair.

"Your wife looks very pretty. Will I meet her too?" I passed the album back to him and waited for him to tell me more. He didn't speak but held out another folder.

"Sadly, this is what happened." He looked very sad. "We had seven really good years, then she fell ill."

I opened the second folder to see a single picture. It was horrible. The lady was obviously the same one; I could recognize her in a hospital gown even though her hair was now flat and gray. She was in a single room, the detritus of a hospital all around her. Incongruously, there was a bouquet of fresh flowers, vibrant and colorful against the drabness of the room.

"This must be difficult for you." I felt a tear in my eye and looked up to see him wiping one from his eye.

"It's been hard." He paused to collect himself. "Helen was everything to me. She'd been married before, but I had never married. She came into my life like a chorus of angels were blessing em. I loved her, and fortunately she loved me."

"Is she getting better?" I asked, guessing the answer would not be good.

"She'll never get better." He sighed. "A brain hemorrhage of some kind took her. One night we went to bed together; the next morning she was lying next to me, completely unresponsive. The doctors tell me she'll never recover and it's a matter of time before she goes. I know I've lost her."

"I don't know what to say." I looked at him and he looked away.

It seemed as if he was struggling to say anything more. I could see emotions running through him as his face showed something between concentration and a collecting of his thoughts.

“It’s a sad conclusion to a happy period in my life,” he said finally.

“I understand, at least I hope I do,” I replied feeling at a loss for words. “I still don’t understand why you’re telling me this.”

“Give me time.” He wiped his eyes again. “This is difficult for me.”

“Take your time,” I replied, finishing my drink more for something to do while he struggled to speak.

He waved to the waiter who promptly came to replenish our drinks. I sipped again, grateful for something to do; something to avoid me having to speak again.

“Please look at the photos again; the wedding ones, not the clinic.” He handed me the album again. “Tell me what do you really see?”

“She’s very pretty. She’s the kind of girl I’d like to think of as my girlfriend.” I mumbled nervously, thinking my words were coming out wrong.

“Would you really like her if you met her?”

“Yes, I really think I would.”

“Would you like to *be* her?”

Those words brought our conversation to a halt. I couldn't believe my ears. Had he really said that?

"I think she must have been very happy with you." I paused to think, but there was no diplomatic way of saying what I wanted to say next. "I don't know why you're asking me that. I'm nothing like her."

"But if you could be, would you *like* to be her?"

"That's too deep an existential question. Would I like to be someone else." I took a deep breath, then another sip of my drink. "Are you asking me if I'd like to be your wife?"

"I'm being clumsy." He took my hand gently. "I'm asking if you could play the part of my wife; it's an acting role, but a long-term one."

"I don't understand why."

"My business affairs are complicated. My wife is a trustee of some funds and a director of others. Without her, I'm in danger of losing out heavily. I need her back. Clearly she isn't coming back."

"So where do I fit in?"

"You're the right size and shape. You're healthy and with no close ties. No one's going to notice if you disappear for a year or longer."

"You're asking me to become your wife." It suddenly dawned on me.

"I'm asking if you could act in the role of my wife until I can sort out the business affairs."

"I'm not gay; maybe you need a real girl or some gay boy; a female impersonator."

"I'm not gay either," he said. "I've thought of other people but there's always some drawback, something that would make it too risky."

"I'd be just as risky." I think I laughed there at the thought of it all.

"Another woman would have ties, friends, maybe old boyfriends, who knows, and women can be so indiscreet." He shook his head. "As for a gay boy or a female impersonator, I ruled them out immediately as far too risky."

"I can't understand why you're telling me this."

"I thought that would be plain. You're the same height and you're slim. You're an actor; sure you're not going to be the next James Bond, but Louise tells me you're a good mimic and have a range of accents and voices."

"She never gives me a good part," I shot back.

"Maybe the repertoire hasn't suited you."

"You're right, I shouldn't be so catty." I think I smiled then.

"With the right clothes and hair, I think you could do it," he said. "And before you ask, I haven't mentioned this to anyone, but I have had discrete inquiries made into your background."

"You've done what?" I was incredulous.

"Forgive me, but I wasn't going to ask someone who might have problems in their background," he replied. "And no one knows."

"This is too much." I sat back, feeling suddenly overwhelmed. "I can't take all this in. I think I'd better say thanks for a lovely meal and go home."

"My car will take you." He gestured to the waiter who nodded understanding. "Please think about what I've said. I am serious and if you take the role, you'll not regret it and I promise you'll be well rewarded."

He stood and held out a hand. He pulled me up gently. Stupidly I leaned in and hugged him, a short hug. I let go immediately but not before I caught his woody scent.

I realized that I shouldn't have done that and hurried out to the waiting car.

"What a mess," I said to myself as I walked round my tiny apartment. "I've no idea what I'm supposed to think."

The next day, I was still disturbed. My mind churned. What was I really being asked. Could I do it, and more importantly, did I *want* to do it.

I tried to put it all to the back of my mind and concentrate on work instead. That didn't help much, I wasn't being challenged at work, and it was slipping into drudgery. I scoured the web, looking for a better job, maybe somewhere far away from the circumstances which were distracting me. There was nothing there.

A week went by, then another. There was no contact from Mr. Albright. I saw Louise as we discussed the next production and the last dress rehearsal. It was all very businesslike. The week's performances went well and we played to packed houses.

"I want to thank everyone for their hard work. This show has been a great success and the theatre's funds are healthy again." Mr. Albright was making the speech at the beginning of the traditional party when the play's run had ended.

I drifted to the back of the room, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. I caught his eye a couple of times, but fortunately he was talking to the cast. When I thought it wouldn't seem wrong, I decided to leave before he could catch me.

I walked down the stairs and out of the stage door. His car was waiting at the roadside. The driver got out and handed me an envelope. I tried to avoid taking it, but he pushed it into my hand.

A single card inside asked me to call a number next Friday evening.

It was a slow week as the days crawled towards Friday. Maybe I should have decided not to call, but curiosity got the better of me. If I'm honest, there was a bit of me wondering if I could meet the challenge of acting in the way he suggested. I wondered what it would be like to be a girl... or someone who people thought was a girl.

I shouldn't have been feeling excited by the thought. I was a boy after all, even if the girls I tried to date didn't think I was much of one. Friday arrived,

the afternoon went slowly by until the appointed hour.

"I'm so glad you called." Mr. Albright's voice sounded please to hear me. "Would you come over if I sent the car? Please say that you will. I'd love to show you round my home."

"Is this the home you shared with your wife?" I asked.

"Yes, you can feel her presence in everything here. It's not oppressive, I promise you that. If you feel uncomfortable, we can go elsewhere." He hesitated. "I'd love you to get a sense of her."

"I think I'd really like to see her home," I replied, wondering where I'd got such positive feelings from.

I changed quickly into dark gray casual chinos and a black shirt. I left the top couple of buttons open and decided to wear my black leather jacket, even if it was a size too small. The intercom on my building buzzed when the car arrived.

It was getting dark as we arrived at Mr. Albright's home. It wasn't what I expected. I don't know why I expected something more palatial than the well-proportioned Neo-colonial mansion which lay before me after a short drive up a gated road.

The car pulled up outside the door. The driver indicated that I should get out so I did so, walked through the portico, and pushed the entry phone. The door opened and Mr. Albright was there, arms open to welcome me with a quick hug.

I hadn't expected that and as I caught his woody scent, I didn't know how I should react.