

Foxes & Bunnies



Jessica Matthews



An "Adult TV" Novel



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by Jessica Matthews

“We need a family conference,” Mother’s text announced. “Please make sure you’re both at dinner on Sunday. Don’t invite anyone.”

It sounded serious. Howard wondered what was going to be said. His sister, Laurel, had won a place in college to study to be a dentist. This was her life’s ambition, and she was struggling to work out how she could afford the tuition fees and all the equipment she would have to buy.

He knew that all the courses she would have to take would cost far more than the maximum student loans she could get, and even with the bursaries available, things seemed impossible. The training was long and arduous; she wouldn’t be able to earn anywhere near enough to bridge the gap, especially with the cost of accommodation on campus.

“I’m never going to be able to fund it all,” she stated as they sat in their yard after mother’s dinner. “I’ve got a bar job for the weekends, but all that’s going to do is pay for living expenses.”

“Are you sure you can manage a job as well as studying?” Mother asked.

“There’s no choice,” Laurel replied. “It’s either that or I’ll have to give up on the idea of studying altogether.”

“Don’t say that,” Howard replied. “I love it that you’re so determined to get there. I really admire you for it.”

“That’s really kind,” Mother said. “I’m so pleased that you two get on with each other so well. It’s not been easy getting you through school on my own, but you both make me proud.”

“She’s the brains of the family though.” Howard pointed at his sister. “I never had any ambition like that.”

“Not everyone can be an academic,” Mother replied. “You’re doing so well in the computer shop.”

“That’s easy,” Howard replied. “I can programme and do tweaks like the best. It’s something I seem to be able to do by instinct, and it’s just the day job. I don’t have anything to carry over into the weekends.”

“But you don’t do anything then.” Laurel butted in. “When was the last time you went on a date or had some fun?”

“I don’t need that stuff,” Howard said. “Girls are too complicated anyway.”

“And computers are so simple?” Laurel jibed.

“They don’t get upset if you don’t notice they’ve changed their hair,” Howard replied.

“You used to be dating a different girl every month,” Laurel chided.

“I got fed up with meeting Miss Wrong all the time,” Howard replied.

“Surely you could find someone steady. You’re young, slim and handsome, well-paid if lacking ambition, maybe not tall enough, but girls these days don’t mind being the taller one in a couple. They get to show off.”

“Have I any other faults you’d care to name?” Howard hit back.

“You could do something with your hair. It hangs over your shoulders, so thick and glossy. It shouts that it hasn’t seen a hairdresser in years,” Laurel said. “And how about a moustache? They’re fashionable in some circles.”

“I like my hair,” Howard almost shouted back. “And you know I couldn’t grow a beard or a moustache if I tried. I don’t seem to have inherited the gene for whiskers, unlike some of the girls round here.”

“I’m sorry, Howard,” Laurel soothed. “We’re getting into an argument for no reason.”

“I’m sorry too.” Howard held up his hand in a peace sign. “The girls always want to change me. They want me to be someone else, like their friend’s boyfriends. I’m not like that.”

“I wouldn’t take bets on it.” Laurel nodded meaningfully with a wink.

Howard blushed. He’d not been dating. He didn’t find that the girls he met excited him in that special way. There was never a spark to take things further.

“So let’s get to the purpose of getting you both here, and stop bickering.” Mother held up her hand to silence them. “I want to propose that Laurel registers for her courses.”

“I’ll second that,” Howard replied. “I’ll pay my share and whatever I can. Then she’ll know why I’m not dating. I won’t be able to afford it.”

“Stop being silly,” Mother interrupted. “We’re not going back to bickering. This is serious.”

“But how do we pay for it all?” Laurel asked.

“I have extra hours working for Mr. Antrobus and I’ve told him that I’m available through weekends and for working away from home.” Mother said. “The real estate business looked like it was quiet, but the other side of the business in supplying serviced office space has really taken off.”

“You’ve always resisted working the weekends and being away from home.” Laurel took her mother’s hand. “Are you sure it won’t be too much.”

"I resisted because you kids needed me at home, but now you need my help in another way." Mother looked from one to the other. "The extra money can go to your fees."

"I'll help all I can. I don't mind not having a vibrant social life. I wouldn't know what to do anyway," Howard said. "You can count on me."

"Can we make it?" Laurel asked. "It's a big sacrifice for you both and I can't say I don't want it, but..."

"There are serviced offices all over the state and beyond now," Mother interrupted. "If they continue to expand, I may get promotions. I'm excited to try."

"If you're doing that, I've the offer of some private work too," Howard said. "It's not much, but I think I can build it up. I'll chip in as much as I can too."

"I don't know what to say." Laurel had tears in her eyes. "Thank you both. I really love you, and I'll not let you down. When I'm a rich dentist with my own practice, I'll look after both of you."

"You don't have to promise that, sis," Howard replied. "There's nothing wrong with my teeth anyway."

"That's not what I meant. I want to help when I can, and meantime I'll get some bar work to help out."

"No you won't," Mother interrupted. "If your brother and I are going to be working so hard, you have to study hard with no distractions. I don't want you to be too tired to succeed."

"I never thought we'd make it, but we did," Mother confided to her son. "Laurel called me this morning to say she's passed her first set of exams."

"That's great." Howard was as excited as she was.

"I only have to send her five hundred dollars and then she can get her certificate to register for next semester."

"I'm cleaned out," Howard said with a worried look on his face.

"So am I." Mother replied. "But we have a few days. Something will turn up."

"But we have to pay the advance on next year's fees soon." Howard was scanning through some of the papers in their accounts file.

"How long have we got?"

"It says that half the fees have to be paid by the beginning of the semester."

"I have no idea how we're going to do that, but we must. Laurel's done so well, and she's got an internship with Advance Dental through the vacation." Mother tucked her hair back and looked seriously at Howard. "We mustn't let her know that we're struggling."

"Okay Mom, I'll say nothing. I know she's applied for all kinds of grants and bursaries but even if she wins them all, we're still going to have to find a lot of money."

"And I don't know if we can do it."

"We'll make it, Mom, have faith." Howard looked into the distance. "Something will turn up."

"I hope so."

"I'll try and bring some work forward." Howard hoped that he could. In truth, he had nothing pending.

"I'll ask Mr. Antrobus," Mother said.

"You can't ask him for money," Howard replied. "It's not as if he's family."

"We don't have family like other folks," Mother said. "I wasn't going to ask him for money anyway. I was going to ask if there was any work going for you. He's got computers all over the office and I heard him grumbling about their network supplier."

"That would be good," Howard replied. "I can do networks easily, unless he's got remote sites that you haven't mentioned."

"I don't know," Mother replied. "I just use the office network; I don't really know what it is, or what it does beyond my work on it, and we can access it wherever we are."

"When will you know?"

"I'll ask tomorrow," she said. "I'm working through the weekend. There's a trade show, Mr. Antrobus is taking a team. I'm the admin support person."

"Mr. Antrobus has come up trumps. There's a job for you," Mother announced at dinner a couple of days later. "He wants you to go into the offices on a Saturday evening when the network is not likely to be used, and you can work on Sunday as well if you need to."

"Did he say what he wanted me to do?" Howard asked.

"Not really," Mother replied. "He's sending a specification sheet which the last contractors were asked to sort out. It's always had a few glitches, and they've never been able to get rid of them."

"I guess I might be able to do something," Howard's forehead creased in a frown. "I don't really know how your network is supposed to be configured."

"I'd guess that will be in the information he's sending," Mother stated the obvious.

"What's he paying?"

"I didn't discuss that. I guess it depends on what you find and how long it takes you to deal with the problem. The work stations freeze intermittently and no one seems able to fix it."

"It sounds like something I can fix, but I'm not really sure," Howard replied. "I'm hoping it's a system I know."

"But you'll try?"

“I’ll try, Mom,” Howard replied. “I’ll not make it any worse, that’s for sure.”

“I have the office keys so I’ll be able to let you in and show you where things are kept.” Mother held up a huge bunch of keys.

“That’s fine,” Howard said. “Can we go in early, and then I can have a full day undisturbed. You don’t have to stay once I’m there and you can lock me in. I’ll call you when I’m finished and you can pick me up.”

“You’re a good boy, Howard,” Mother smiled. “I’m sure you’re a great brother too. I’m really proud of you for trying so hard.”

“You’re Howard?” The man seemed to creep into the office whilst he was absorbed in the intricacies of the network.

“Yes,” Howard said, shocked at the intrusion whilst he was absorbed in his work.

He jumped to his feet in surprise and knocked his notepad, pens and phone off the desk.

“I got it,” said the man.

He grabbed Howard’s laptop before it too fell to the floor and placed it safely on the desk as Howard gathered everything else.

“I’m sorry if I startled you, I’d forgotten anyone would be here. You’re Howard, right?”

“Yes, I’m sorry if I’m not supposed to be here.”

“No, that’s fine. The fault is mine for startling you. I’m Larry Antrobus.”

He held out his hand for Howard to shake, then seemed to hold it a little longer than necessary as he looked deeply into Howard’s eyes.

“I’m pleased you were able to look at the problem for me,” he said as if snapping back to reality and breaking his gaze.

"I think I'm finding the glitch," Howard said, launching into a technical explanation. "The drive wasn't configured..."

He looked up to see that Mr. Antrobus wasn't paying attention, but was looking him up and down.

"Your mother works for me," Larry said, as if stuck for something to say.

"She's happy working here." Howard stumbled over his words. "We're financing my sister through dental college, so I was so happy to get this extra work from you."

"That must be really expensive."

"It is, but we're all contributing, that's why these jobs count so much," Howard said. "I'm sorry it wasn't more complicated, and then I could have charged you more."

"You could be too honest," Mr. Antrobus laughed. "I have no idea about these technical things. I pay people to use them. Are you sure it's fixed?"

"I think so. I can't make it freeze again today."

"Fine, I'm happy to take your word for it all. Send me your bill and I'll see that it's settled." He held Howard's eye contact again, and looked him up and down again.

"I think I'd rather wait a week or two and make sure that the problem is fixed." Howard blushed to be under such scrutiny. "I mean, I think I've found the problem, but it really needs to run with all the users are in work to make sure that it's stable."

"Come in again next week and see if you can freeze it again." Mr. Antrobus sat and looked again at him.

"I really don't need..." Howard wondered why Mr. Antrobus was looking at him so keenly.

He ran his hand through his hair. The scrunchie fell out, allowing his hair to fall loose around his shoulders. He picked it up, gathered his hair, twisted it and secured it in his usual low pony tail.

"Send your mother in with the first bill next week, then when you come in again, you can send another

bill.” Mr. Antrobus walked round the desk towards the exit. “I’ll leave you to finish off, and maybe I’ll see you next week. I’d like a personal report on what you find.”

“You didn’t tell me that you met Mr. Antrobus.” Howard sat across the table from his mother as she served dinner later in the week. “I don’t know what you did, but you really impressed him. He asked me to let him know when you’d be in the office again. The computers seem to be working okay, but they’re a bit slow at times.”

“I’ll go in on Saturday afternoon after the computer shop closes if that’s okay,” Howard replied. “I’ll take my test rigs and I’ve got a programme to run that might show up any errors in your system.”

“How long will that take?”

“It depends on what I find,” Howard said. “If there’s anything to do, I’ll work through the night and get it sorted.”

Howard gathered his laptop on Saturday afternoon and unplugged his outboard hard drive from the workstation he had been using at work. He’d downloaded all kinds of software to have ready for the afternoon’s work

Using his mother’s keys, he let himself into the offices and soon became immersed in his work. It was both hot and dusty around the huge servers as Howard checked physical pathways as well as electronic ones. By evening, he could smell himself. His once clean shirt and trousers were grubby and creased.

He loosened his hair and ran his hands through it, feeling the unpleasant sweat at his scalp and the nape of his neck. It was at that moment that Mr. Antrobus arrived, looking dapper and fresh.

“You startled me,” Howard stuttered. “I’m sorry... dirty work at the back of the server cabinet...”

“Hey, I didn’t mean to startle you,” Mr. Antrobus replied. “I saw the lights as I drove past and thought I’d look in on you.”

“I’m working real hard,” Howard explained.

“I wasn’t checking up on you.” Mr. Antrobus stood back and looked at him, then he reached out and touched Howard’s hair.

“If you get cleaned up, I’d like to take you to dinner to say thanks,” he said.

“There’s no need..”

“I’d like to. You’d be doing me a big favour too.” Mr. Antrobus held his eyes. “I got stood up, and I don’t like to eat alone.”

“You could always order in,” Howard stammered.

“It’s Saturday evening.” Mr. Antrobus put his arm round Howard’s shoulder and stepped a few paces to the office window. “Look out here. Lots of people are out there, all with somewhere to go, and somewhere to have fun. It’s not something to do on your own.”

“I don’t know. I should be working.”

“You don’t have to clock off. Call it your supper break if you like.”

“I’m not dressed.”

“It doesn’t matter. You can shower in my private bathroom, and I’ll lend you some clothes. I always keep something in the office.”

“Okay,” said Howard. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” Mr. Antrobus took him by the hand and pulled him through the office to a door which he unlocked with a key from his pocket. “There’s everything you need in there,” he said, indicating another door. “If you throw your clothes out, I’ll check the sizes and see what I have here.”

It all happened so fast. One minute Howard was thinking how he could get out of this, the next he was undressing in a modern shower room, throwing his clothes through the door.

“These must have cost a fortune,” he muttered as he looked at the array of toiletries arranged in the cabinet. “I recognise some of these names from Laurel’s magazines, but I bet even she never saw them before.”

He took an array of bottles into the shower stall with him. Seeing a razor on the shelf, he took that with some shaving foam too. He didn’t need to shave much, but the opportunity to do so with the very best products was too much to resist.

“This feels good,” he said to himself as he stood under the shower, allowing warm water to fall all over him like gentle warm rain. A soft perfume seemed to come with the water, calming and relaxing him, as he watched the last of the bubbles swirling away.

“This towel is huge,” Howard thought as he quickly dried himself and then wrapped it round his waist. “It’s too long as well,” he laughed as he tripped over the ends and re-wrapped it just under his arms.

He lost track of time when he noticed a hair drier on a shelf beside a mirror which remarkably remained clear of steam. He opened a drawer and found a hairbrush. He looked at it, pulled away a few long dark hairs which clung to the bristles and then brushed gently through his hair. It tangled and pulled.

He looked again through the cosmetics and found something which said it left hair soft and free. He applied it liberally and began again to pull the brush through his hair. It fell softly and untangled itself to the touch.

He aimed the drier and, remembering his mother and sister, began to pull the brush through his hair as he dried it. It was quite mesmerising, watching the damp lank locks become smooth and shiny. Finished, he shook his head from left to right, feeling the hair swing and brush across his shoulders as he did so.

He quite forgot where he was until there was a knock on the door.

“Try these.” He opened the door slightly, quite self-consciously, and reached out an arm. He tried to hide the towel wrapped around him but was sure that Mr. Antrobus saw it as he took the clothes from him and retreated into the dressing room again.

“These are way too big.” Howard knew at once that the clothes would smother him. “I’d look a clown if I dressed in these.”

He opened the door and stood, wondering what to do. He coughed to attract attention.

“I can’t wear these,” he said when Mr. Antrobus returned. “They’re way too big. I’d better get my own stuff back and forget about dinner. I could do with my own shorts too.”

“No, I can’t allow that, we’re doing dinner, I promised,” Mr. Antrobus replied quite forcefully.

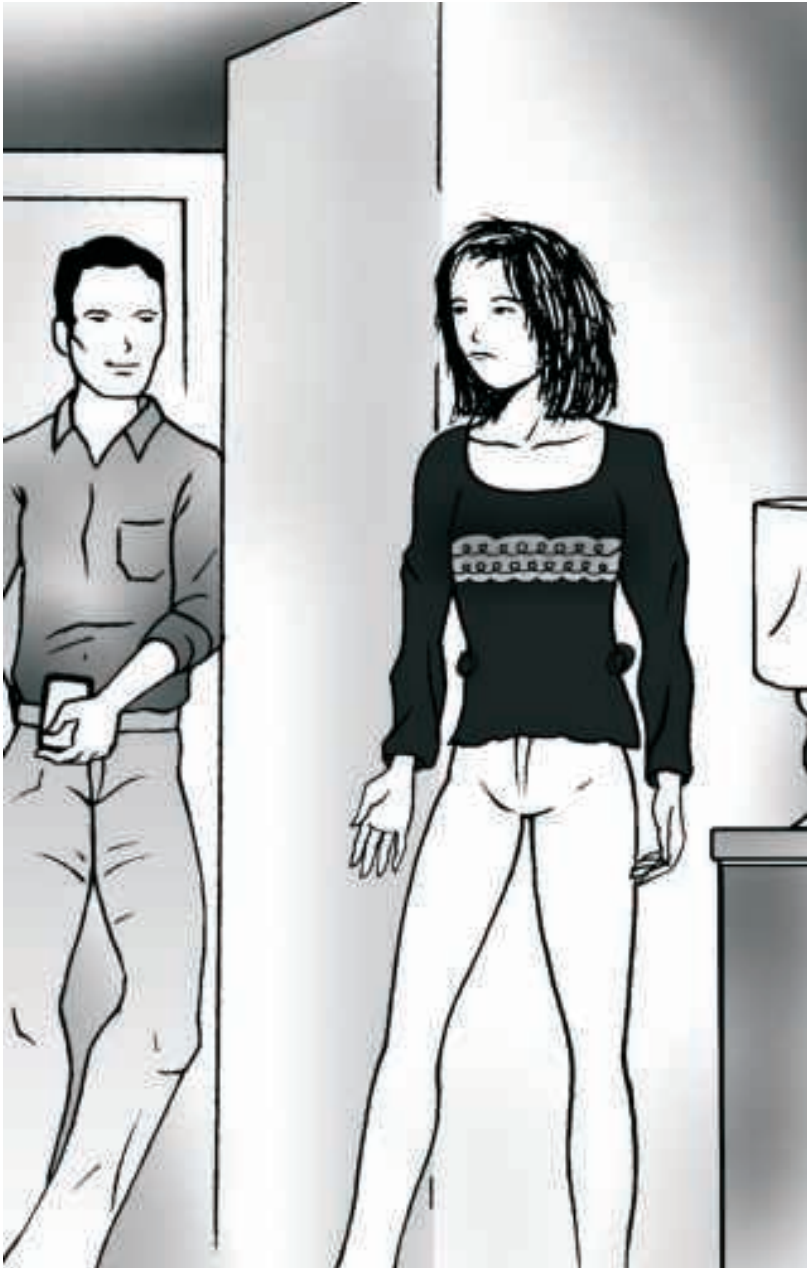
“It was only an offer, not a promise,” Howard replied. “It’s not something you have to do.”

“No, I insist. I’ll find something. Stay there.”

Howard stood, painfully aware that he had no alternative but to stay there, dressed as he was in a large towel and nothing else. He stood for a few moments, alone in a rather comfortable office, which was clearly both office and lounge space.

Nothing happened. He walked into the room and looked around, feeling a little more self-conscious. There was no sign of his clothes anywhere. He sighed. Reasoning that there was not much he could do, he sat, sank down into one of the easy chairs and leaned back.

“I found these.” Mr. Antrobus returned with some clothes hangers held over his arm, and a pink hold-all. He gave them to Howard who took them without really looking at what he was given. He retreated quickly to the dressing room.



He looked through the holdall and found it to contain underwear in soft material. He pulled it out and was surprised to find a tangle of bra and panties, stocking and garter belt. Some flat shoes with sling backs fell out from the bottom.

“Oh no,” he gasped. “This can’t be real.”

He looked at the clothes on the hangers. There were black trousers and a black shirt which felt like silk.

“That’s better,” He thought. “I can do without this underwear.”

He tried on the trousers first. He pulled them up, feeling their comfortable tightness across his thighs. He groped for the fastener but there was none where he expected to find it. Feeling round, he felt a zipper on the side, with a button to fasten over his left hip. The trousers rode low, below his waist. They were snug over his hips and flared out as they fell towards his feet.

They fit but there was an unsightly bulge between his legs where the material was tight.

“What a mess,” he thought. “I’m sure Mr. Antrobus means well, but what do I do?”

He thought of going out and demanding his own clothes back and getting out of there. He wondered if Mr. Antrobus was testing him or playing a game with rules he didn’t understand.

He thought again. What if he did that? Would he get paid? Was he throwing away an opportunity to earn and support Laurel? What about Mother’s job? All these thoughts swirled round his head in an instant. A cold sweat broke out. He looked at himself again.

Suddenly thinking, he pulled off the trousers, and selected the tightest panties he could find amidst the lingerie from the holdall.

He pulled them up, and then the trousers again. He fastened them and looked in the mirror. There was still a bulge, but it was less unsightly, and less prominent. He turned left and right and decided that

he could get away with it, if they went somewhere that wasn't too brightly lit.

He tried the shoes. They were a little on the big side but then there was white flesh showing between the black trousers and the black shoes. That looked wrong even to Howard's untutored eye. He took the trousers off again.

"What am I doing this for?" he asked himself over and over again. "I'm doing it because I'm afraid of losing our jobs..." he paused. "It feels different. I wonder what he's playing at."

He turned again to the lingerie from the bag. There were no socks, only long black stockings. He knew at once that these were the kind that required a garter belt to hold them up, and he knew that there was one somewhere in the tangle.

Remembering his schoolboy days with magazines that they weren't supposed to see in the playground, he knew how they should be worn. He fastened the belt, twisted it so that the fastener was at the rear, and attached the four clasps to the tops of the black stockings which he pulled up his legs.

He stopped there. "What am I doing?" he thought again. "This was never planned."

He stopped to clear his head. Surely Mr. Antrobus must know what he'd been given. Maybe it really was a test or part of a plan. Maybe it was only a step on the way to dinner. He sighed and dressed again in the trousers, fastened them, and stepped into the shoes which now looked as if they belonged on the end of his legs.

He ran his fingers through his hair and looked once more into the mirror. It fell loosely and messily as it dried.

"Maybe it looks better if I leave it loose," he thought. "From the waist down, I look reasonable."

He took the black shirt from the hangar, and looked at it again. It wasn't a shirt with a button front. It was something to pull over the head. He put his arms into the sleeves and let the silky material settle down his body. It had a scooped neck and fell gently over his waist in a series of pleats. There was

decoration across the chest, which really made it clear that it wasn't made for a man. The sleeves billowed out and swung loose and wide over his wrists.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. "What am I doing? If I didn't know me, I'd think I was a flat-chested version of my sister, only less pretty."

The thought ran through his mind as there was an urgent knock on the door.

"Are you ready to go?" Mr. Antrobus called.

"Ready as I'll ever be," Howard answered, and stepped through the door. Mr. Antrobus stood a few paces away, looking him up and down. "...if you really want me to go like this?" Howard stood back to give him the full view.

"Yes, of course," Antrobus replied. "You scrub up rather well."

"I'm not sure what you want, but I look like a boy dressed up in his sister's clothes." Howard took a deep breath. "Is this what you intended?"

"I have no idea what you mean," Antrobus replied.

"Was it a test, do I pass?" Howard could feel a little panic as he realised that Mr. Antrobus intended them to go out. "I look wrong. They'll laugh at us."

"They will if you go round telling everyone that you're wearing your sister's clothes."

"These aren't my sister's clothes, and you know what I mean." Howard suppressed a feeling of anger. He remembered the jobs depending on Mr. Antrobus.

"Well, you could do something to make yourself a little less obvious."

"And how do you propose I should do that?" Howard snapped.

"Talk a little softer, use a bit of makeup, jewellery maybe, and no one will ever think twice."

"Look," Howard started. "I'm not a girl. I'm not a guy who dressed up like a girl, let alone one who does the things that girls do on a date..."

"Who said this was a date?"