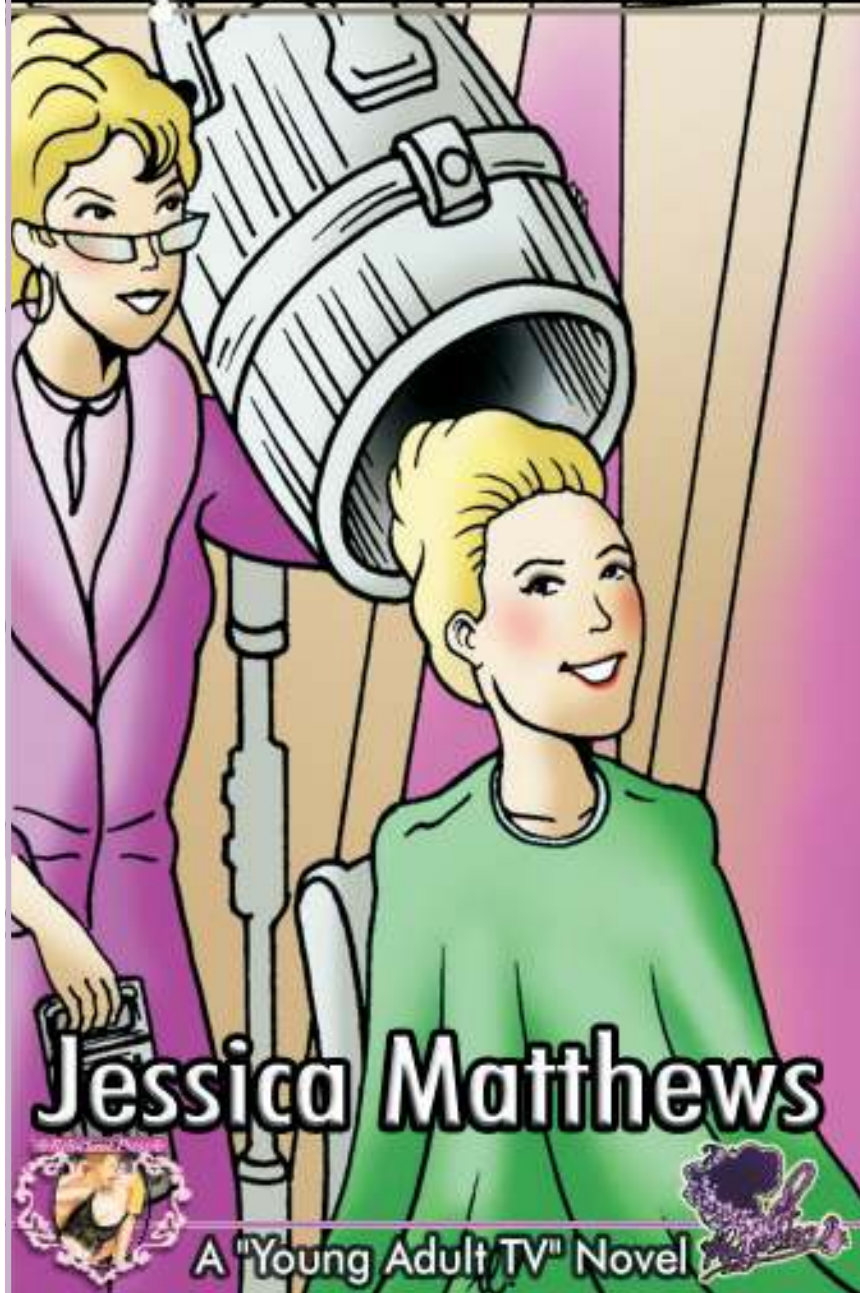


Stepmother's Solution



Jessica Matthews

A "Young Adult TV" Novel

Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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Stepmother's Solution

By Jessica Matthews

“The dirty, cheating, lying, rat,’ she said slowly.

Emma couldn’t believe what she was looking at. The photograph from the plain envelope that had come in the morning’s post was its own evidence.

“Stuart, how could you?” she cried, wanting to throw the image away, but to do so would be to deny the evidence before her. “And with Serena too; she used to be my best friend. They’re holding hands and smiling for the camera without a care in the world.”

She looked again, more carefully this time.

“That’s Stuart, there’s no doubt about that. He’s wearing the gold watch that I bought for our second anniversary so it can’t have been taken that long ago.”

She took the picture through to the big family room and went to the kitchen window to get more light on the image.

"That looks like the Adelphi Club logo. The club he said we couldn't get in because the membership was closed. I know Serena couldn't be a member, not with those fees."

She turned the picture over and took a deep breath. Her therapist had taught her the technique. Count to six as you breathe in, hold it for four, then count six again as you breathe out, then another four before you breathe in.

"If that's supposed to stop me from getting stressed, it isn't working."

She looked at the picture once more. It showed Stuart and Serena, their hands clasped together looking into each other's eyes, flowers and wine-glasses on the crisp white linen of their table.

"She's wearing a wedding set." Emma stared at Serena's left hand, surprised that she hadn't noticed that before. "That makes it certain that they shared a room."

She couldn't bear to look any more and put the picture back into the envelope. There was nothing else inside and no marks except for their delivery address and a local postmark from the day before.

"Somebody sure doesn't like him," she mused and half-heartedly began the tasks of her day.

"Maybe it's someone who doesn't like me?" Unable to resist, she took the picture out again.

A paper she'd missed before fluttered onto the floor. She picked it up. "I thought you should know," it said.

She looked at the note. It was printed on plain paper in a really big font, the kind of paper that litters every office in the land. There was no way to tell who'd sent it. She looked at the photo again. It looked like it could have come from the same printer.

"I guess everyone has a camera on their mobile phone," she thought and looked yet again. "It looks like it was taken recently, maybe early spring. I wonder where he was supposed to be then."

She walked through to Stuart's den and flipped open his desk calendar; the one he kept at home so that she would know when not to book anything because he might be away on company business.

"That's the only time it could be." She saw four days blocked out in April with the word "conference" scrawled across them all. "And I trusted the bastard with everything I had."

A tear ran down her cheek. She rubbed it away and saw the black marks on her hand. Now it had ruined her mascara. It wasn't a good start to her day.

"Don't get angry, get even," she told herself.

Emma had been one of the computer operators in the actuary's office. Stuart had been one of those self-proclaimed Masters Of The Universe who appeared from time to time to demand some obscure documentation or statistics. She'd been very good at finding whatever it was he wanted.

When his wife decided that life would be better with her tennis instructor and left Stuart with his son Casey, who was ten at the time, she'd stepped in. Collecting him from school turned to baby-sitting as Stuart went from date to date.

When he was promoted again, she started working from his home, filling in between her own career which was stalled because of him, and the responsibilities of a part-time mother/ confessor. When another of his flings turned sour, she was the one he turned to.

"I don't think this could work," Emma told him bluntly but he persisted.

Dates were few and far between but they'd take Casey here and there together. The boy wasn't keen on ball games or fishing, which was as well because Emma had no interest there either. He started ice skating and started to compete in figure skating and then ice dancing with a partner his own age.

It all came to an end badly. An accident on the ice; a collision with another competing couple which might have been careless or deliberate, no one knew. His knee was shattered badly and had to be reconstructed over several operations and painful physiotherapy to get it strong and working again.

"I think your days as a competitive skater are over," the surgeon's verdict was final.

It really affected Casey but Emma was always there for him, encouraging him in his exercises, making him follow a routine, and never skimping no matter how painful or boring it was.

Eventually, after a chance meeting with an old school friend, she got him interested in dancing. He couldn't have the ice but he could have the ballroom

floor. The leg strengthened as he danced but it was soon clear that the competitive ballroom styles were far too demanding for the fragile knee.

He had to settle for being part of a team in sequence and formation dancing.

"It keeps me off the streets," he joked. "And I get to meet all the prettiest girls first."

"So how come you don't bring any home?" his father asked.

"They soon discover that they prefer the jocks," he replied.

"Is Emma going to be my new mom?" Casey asked his father one afternoon as they returned home from a trip to the lake.

"I don't know," Stuart looked at Emma and Emma looked back at Stuart.

"I don't know either," Emma said, hugging Casey to her.

"I'd sure like it to be," he said.

"He's fourteen going on thirty," Stuart joked.

"He's a good kid; you should be really proud of him," Emma said. "You could try spending some more time with him. Boys need their fathers."

"I know, but it's not that easy," Stuart said lamely. "There's always work and more work."

"That's an excuse," Emma replied. "If he were into ball games you'd be there, beer in hand, chanting

and cheering with the other dads. He can't do that sort of sport and he's very conscious of it. He thinks he's letting you down."

"He's not and I hope you tell him so."

"I can tell him but it's some sort of demonstration from you that he needs."

"Dancing's not my thing."

"But it's *his* thing now," Emma almost shouted. "It takes a lot of discipline, practice, and determination just like any other sport."

"It's as well that he has you to support him." Stuart turned away, aware that he was losing the argument.

"You know you should do more for him," Emma tried again.

"I think he needs his mother more than ever."

It started unpromisingly. Stuart and Emma started dating occasionally, then regularly. Stuart liked that she wasn't as high maintenance and demanding as the girls he'd been seeing. Maybe she wasn't as glamorous but Casey liked her and that counted for a lot back then.

The ring was a surprise at Christmas. Emma accepted and Casey beamed his happiness all through the holidays. She moved in almost at once. She was so afraid. Could she bond with this damaged child who'd been injured and abandoned by his own mother?

They married in the Spring and Emma gave up her career to be a full-time mom to Casey and set about doing her best for her new husband. His shirts were always ironed, his shoes polished, and his suits dry cleaned and pressed regularly. She even cleaned his golf clubs.

As it turned out, it was easy. Casey made it so, treating her as if she was always the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night in his life. Casey was her delight, especially when her wishes to have a child of her own seemed to be difficult and complicated.

It was also too good to last as the anonymous photo showed.

“Could my infertility be the reason for Stuart seeing Serena?” she asked herself. “I can’t deal with this now.”

She carried the envelope around the house as if wanting to hide it and forget the contents. She knew she couldn’t but she didn’t want to think about it, didn’t want to look at it again right now.

“I know,” she decided. “I’ll put it in my dressing room. Stuart never goes in there.”

She cleared a space in her lingerie drawer and laid the envelope on the bottom. She covered it with silks and satins, as if to expunge its contents.

“And I thought that this marriage would last more than a couple of years.” Emma closed the drawer but she couldn’t close the image which stayed in her mind.

She may have hidden the picture but it lived on in her mind.

Casey arrived home from school. She heard him opening the garage where he stored his cycle.

"I must compose myself. It's not Casey's fault and I don't want him to feel that there's anything wrong," she told herself.

She looked in the mirror, checking that her face showed nothing of her upset as she waited for him to come through to the family room.

"Hi Emma," he called as he dropped his bag on the floor. "Only a few days to go, then it's the summer vacation."

"It seemed such a long way off and now suddenly we're here." Emma smiled and rubbed her hand through his tangled hair. "Your hair needs some attention. It's lovely when it's so long but the tangles are awful."

"That's only the wind when I was riding home," he replied. "I use your shampoo and conditioner most days in the shower."

"I can see that now." Emma looked more closely. "There are no split ends and it all looks good, just in need of a brush through. Have you thought about what you're going to do over the summer?"

"Dad said he'd be away for the first couple of weeks. Some course or other that he has to attend."

"I didn't know." Emma thought she knew why she didn't know but didn't say anything. "Maybe we could do something?"

“That would be good.” Casey smiled up at her. “I’ve applied to work at the local theatre when the summer season starts but that’s not until the third week of the summer break.”

“What would you be doing?”

“Anything they’ll let me do,” Casey replied. “I could be a waiter, an usher, a ticket seller, even a cleaner. I really just want to be around the place.”

“I’ve met Melanie Baxter; she’s in my book club and we have coffee occasionally,” Emma said. “I think she’s the artistic director of the theatre. Maybe I could put in a word.”

“That would be great,” Casey replied. “She was the one who revived the place. Remember that production of ‘Charlie’s Aunt’ a couple of seasons ago?”

“I do remember it,” Emma replied. “Your dad took me to see it. I remember that I thought the title role was being played by a woman. It was only when I read the programme and looked at the pictures that I realised that it was a man after all.”

“I saw it too. I thought it was great to see real actors instead of a movie. I loved the way that guy could be such a lady.”

“That must have been a challenge for him.”

“Yes, but think what fun it would be too,” Casey said. “I wonder what it would be like to be somebody else.”

“I’ll call her and ask if she can see you.”

Emma was so pleased to see Casey enthusiastic about something. She had a feeling of dread at the thought of what was to come. She knew that she’d

have to have a serious talk with Stuart but she didn't want to do it where Casey could overhear.

Emma was thinking about their dinner when her mobile rang.

"Your dad's going to be working late and he may bunk down in the office," Emma said listlessly. "It's you and I for dinner again; we won't see him until after that conference."

This wasn't the first time that Stuart had sent this message. Now Emma had cause to wonder what was really going on. Her curiosity was steadily being overtaken by a desire for revenge. How dare he treat her like this when all she'd done was look after Casey and him? It was unfair and unreasonable.

"It's my fault," she thought. "I should have kept an eye on our finances. I never had to think about what he was spending and where he was spending it before."

She went back to the den and rifled through the drawers but there was nothing about finance there. A couple of flash drives took her eye and she pocketed them, intending to look at them later.

"It's probably all on the computer," she decided, then realised that while she had her laptop, she didn't know the password to the machine which Stuart used.

"I'm going round in circles," she decided. "I think it's time for dinner. I'll have to act like nothing's happened."

Casey chattered his way through dinner. "I'm really excited to maybe work in the theatre for the vacation. It beats fast food places hands down."

Emma nodded along, agreeing with him, and chipping in when it seemed an answer was required. She was really distracted so that when she pulled out a tissue from her jeans pocket, the flash drives fell to the floor.

"I remember those," Casey grabbed them. "I wondered where they'd gone."

"One of those looks like any other," Emma said.

"No, these are a special colour. They're from when Cousin Ruth and I were the kids from hell."

"I'm sure you weren't that bad."

"Of course not; it was only a silly name we gave ourselves." Casey switched on his laptop. "I really liked Ruth; she was such good fun."

"It's a pity her parents had to move east with his job." Emma remembered that Ruth and Casey had parted tearfully when she was just getting to know him.

"She's going to pre-med courses next year so she won't be able to come out for a visit." Casey flipped through the folders and clicked on one. "I don't know if I should show you these but here goes."

He turned the screen to Emma. A series of pictures of two girls doing things together, having fun, and posing for the camera with changes of hair, clothes, and makeup."

"I recognise Ruth but who's the other girl?" Emma took the laptop and flicked through more pictures.

"This is a striking portrait." She stopped at the next one; a close up of a really pretty girl in her mid-teens.

Casey looked at her as she looked from screen to him, a puzzled look on her face. "I thought I knew all your cousins but I've no idea who this is. She's really striking."

"It's me," Casey smiled.

"Really? That's you?" Emma looked again. "I can see it now but I wouldn't have guessed it was you. You're a boy after all."

"Would you let me show you some more? Promise that you won't tell Dad that I have them."

"I'd *love* to see some more." Emma came to lean over him.

Her breast nestled against his ear as he clicked from one photo to the next. She didn't realise at first but then noticed that he was slowly moving towards it, nestling his head almost into her cleavage.

"He's a breast man, just like his father." She filed the thought away for future reference.

"We used to try and look as identical as we could," Casey said, halting at a double portrait.

"You look really pretty and you're really believable as a girl." Emma really was impressed. "You look happy and confident too, or was that only for the picture?"

"No, I loved it." Casey admitted. "It was far better than being me."

"I bet the boys gathered like bees to honey."

“That was fun too.” Casey blushed even harder. “Ruth made me go on a date. I was really scared but I enjoyed playing the game.”

“You were lucky not to have been found out.”

“I told him that it was the wrong time of the month. Fortunately he had a sister so he knew what that meant. I had to kiss him when we sat in the back row at the movies.”

“That was brave.”

“Not really, I was acting the part. It seemed natural at the time. He was gentle and I think he really liked me. He never found out.”

“What a time you must have had.”

Emma thought about all she was hearing. It could be useful for the future, especially now that Casey was opening up to her and letting her into his secret world.

If anyone ever saw photographs his son pretending to be a girl, Stuart would probably be so embarrassed that he couldn't cope with it.

“Ruth used to do my makeup and hair. We bought clothes from thrift shops and pretended we were sisters. We went everywhere, shopping, to the movies, the beach... Everywhere.”

“Who allowed you to do that?” Emma was horrified. “Where were your parents?”

“They didn't know until we slipped up.”

“What did you do?”

"I wore earrings and forgot to take them out." Casey looked up at her. "Wasn't that so stupid?"

"Okay, I interrupted; you tell the story your way. I can't believe that there's much more to tell."

"We did more than that. Sometimes we were punks and goths, even though we didn't really know what that meant. We copied pictures from magazines and tried to copy their look. People looked at us and then looked away quickly in case we were infectious."

"I always thought they were a waste of good makeup."

"Me too; I much preferred being pretty."

"Didn't your parents notice anything before?"

"It was when Dad was working long hours and Mom was working on her tennis," he said without irony. "They were happy to leave Ruth to look after me until, stupidly, someone let Mom see that picture. We both got into big trouble over that."

"I can imagine..." Emma looked again as Casey pointed out what she'd missed.

"You've spotted it," Casey giggled. "Ruth took me to get my ears pierced but I insisted and got them double pierced instead. They didn't notice for ages until I had those two big dangling earrings, then they actually noticed. You should have heard the row."

"I'm not surprised."

"They never spotted that I had my belly button pierced as well."

"You didn't!"

"I did and it's still open." Casey pulled up his shirt. "See, there's a tiny gold keeper there, keeping it clean and open. I keep the ear piercings open and clean too but Dad would go ape if I wore earrings in public."

"I really didn't know." Emma looked at his ears. "I see the holes now. They are clean and neat. You must show me your earrings. I'd love to see you wearing them, or maybe you'd like to try some of mine."

Casey's smile told her that she'd struck a chord with him. They were co-conspirators.

"I'd love that. You have such tasteful jewellery."

"I've your Dad to thank for most of that."

A thought was building at the back of her mind. If Stuart hated Casey's earrings, maybe she could get the boy into wearing them. That would be a bit of revenge. But surely there was more she could do if she really thought about it.

"Maybe I'd better not try your earrings, much as I'd love to," Casey said. "I don't want to get you into trouble. Dad's talking about sending me to a military cadet school next year. I'd have to live in a barracks and being even slightly different would get me bullied."

"Military cadet school?" Emma repeated. "I've never heard him talking about that before."

"Surely he told you. He says I need toughening up."

"Do you want to go to a school like that?"

"What do you think? I can't think of anything worse. I don't expect he'll give me a choice though."

"Surely your knee isn't strong enough."

"You know that, I know that and they'll probably know that when I do my physical, but for a donation from Dad they'll ignore it and decide that I'm the ideal cadet."

"That's awful. I can't believe he'd be so cruel."

"They'll shave my head, put me in a uniform and I'll probably end up killing myself if I can't get away."

"That's not going to happen," Emma said. "Never. You hear me? We'll think of a way out of it."

An idea was already forming in her mind but it would take some planning and Casey would need some persuading. Would he really, though? He'd exposed a few thoughts and past experiences.

Stuart would never forgive her but she could live with that!

Next day, Emma had some plans in her mind. They weren't fully formed and she knew that persuasion was better than force.

It was a long shot but Casey seemed to be half way there. Emma wondered if with a little persuasion and a lot of help, the girl who was so obviously lurking somewhere inside Casey could be liberated.

Stuart would hate it. He'd probably want to leave town. Emma was already thinking divorce and settlement. The more Stuart fought, the more she could push Casey inner female to the fore. She may even be able to make it look like Stuart was rejecting them because of his own son's lifestyle.