

The Sleeper



Jessica Matthews



A "New Woman" Novel



Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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The Sleeper

By Jessica Matthews

There are so many things I love about being a girl. In fact, I don't think there's anything I *don't* love about being a girl.

So there!

Okay, these are the notes that no one's ever supposed to read. They're the preface to the story that I'm asked to write for posterity; if posterity ever decides that this story can be released. I'm sure that there'll be a thick file somewhere, or it could all be stored electronically now.

I'm sure you're aware that I didn't start out as a girl. I never thought of becoming one until fate intervened. Fate turned out to be the Colonel (I never did get a last name for him) and Lauren who turned out to be the best girlfriend a girl ever had. They recruited me. I can guess that I must have fitted some profile, but how they found out remains a mystery too.

It's not as if I could tell you who I was really working for. I assumed my employer was some un-named quasi-governmental body. They had lots of funds and didn't mind paying me really well to live an extrava-

gant lifestyle as some kind of blonde bimbo and to have sex with a man I came to love. Not that there was much of the bimbo about me.

It was a good act though. I always pretended not to understand things which flitted across my attention. The main thing I didn't understand was why I was being paid to do this and who was paying.

Someone will work it all out one day.

"Don't worry, but there's one of the big guns from the regulators office coming." My boss Hester colared me as soon as I reported for work that Friday so long ago.

"Why should that worry me?" I asked.

"For some reason I don't understand it's you that he's coming to see," she said, looking at me accusingly. "What have you been up to?"

"I've not done anything that should bother the regulator." I blushed and saw that she registered that I was blushing.

I knew that some parts of my life weren't entirely respectable, but that was outside work and shouldn't bother anyone. Not in the twenty-first century anyway.

"I'll send him up to your section, shall I?" she asked. "He's due about five."

"That's not good," I replied. "I was hoping to leave at four. I've an appointment."

"You have to see him. I've strict instructions from above and you're not going to get me into trouble by ducking out." She smiled sweetly.

"But it's important to me."

“Let me guess; hair and nails for the weekend?” Another sweet smile followed that remark.

I ignored her and walked through to my section. I dealt in statistics; boring statistics but the kind that finance houses use to cast the runes or whatever they do to predict profits and avoid losses.

I racked my brains to think what transgression could have caused the regulator to come down on me. I concluded there was nothing unless I was deluding myself. I cancelled my appointment and waited as the time ticked by so slowly.

“He’s here.” Hester put her head round the door. “He wants the meeting to be private so I’ve put him in the boss’s office. He says to be there in ten minutes.”

“Does he look fierce or angry?” I was feeling paranoid.

“No, he seems as if this sort of thing is routine.”

“Some routine if he’s chasing low-ranking people this late on a Friday afternoon,” I said bitterly. “Doesn’t he do weekends?”

“You can ask him.” She waved as she left. “Be there in ten minutes; you can tell me about it on Monday.”

With increasing feelings of nerves, I knocked on that door exactly ten minutes later. When I thought I heard a reply, I turned the handle and entered.

He was a big man, dapper without being over-dressed. He stood and I got the impression of a retired senior officer from some branch of the service.

“You must be Patterdale.” He extended his hand.

“It’s Patterson actually; Peter Patterson,” I corrected him nervously as I received a very firm handshake.

“Patterdale, Patterson; it matters not.” He smiled as a monkey anticipating a particularly toothsome banana might do. “I’m pleased to see you look exactly as you were described.”

“I like to be clean and tidy,” I replied, not quite understanding why I’d been described to him.

I was slim; skinny really. Okay, I was the archetypal puny weakling, but I had clear skin and long mousey hair usually tied back into a low pony tail. I had earrings too, a discrete tiny stud for the office and others for other times. I liked big hoops but he didn’t need to know that. I wasn’t tall enough to be average height, but that didn’t matter.

I was an instinctive auditor with a nose for wrong figures and a natural affinity with the latest technology. That would have surprised my college tutors but at the university, I’d switched from anthropology to math and computing and then surprised myself by how easy I found it to graduate with top honours.

“There’s nothing to worry about; just a few questions,” he said. “You can all me the Colonel if you wish. I’m long retired from the service but some things stick.”

“That’s fine,” I mumbled, “But why have I attracted the attention of the regulator’s office?”

“You haven’t.” He smiled again. “That was a fiction for the benefit of your supervisors.”

“Then who are you from?”

“Never mind about that; all will become clear in due course, or maybe not if you’re not the chap we expect.”

“Forgive me, I don’t understand. Why the need for the cloak and dagger approach?”

“It’s not that at all. Now it will be quicker if we go through a list of questions.”

“Okay, let’s carry on. You must know that I’m feeling very nervous right now.” I swallowed hard.

“Let’s do the basics first then, shall we?” He smiled again and picked up a folder from which a bundle of papers were withdrawn. “You’re a single man and live alone in a rented apartment?”

“That’s correct, although to call my bedsit an apartment is a little too kind.”

“Your mother is in Australia, I believe.”

“No, she was in New Zealand the last time I heard from her. She married and had me when she was very young. When she divorced my father, she left me with my grandmother and went to Australia first. She has a new family with her second husband. I don’t know much about them apart from a couple of lines on a Christmas card.”

“And your father...”

“I have no idea,” I replied. “I think I last saw him when I was two.”

“That’s sad,” he said, turning a page over. “You’ve no other family contact, have you?”

“No, my grandmother dies last year. I think there may be some cousins somewhere, but I don’t know them.”

“And I think you’ve been in government service since you graduated.”

“Yes, I’ve been here for three years now.”

He shuffled some more papers and then put them back in the folder. “And how do you regard your work.”

“It’s interesting and I think it may be more so if I can advance in the department,” I replied honestly.

“But there are restrictions on your private life,” he said and I started to get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. “How do you feel about the rules on disclosure and confidentiality?”

“I think they’re very necessary,” I replied. “I have no trouble with them and of course, I don’t know anyone who’d be interested in what I do.”

“And if there was someone who was interested, what would you do?” His smile became more affable. “If I were to ask you for some confidential information, say about the next quarter’s financial prospects, what would you say?”

“I’d have to say nothing at all,” I replied. “I’ve no idea where you’ve come from or if you’ve a right to any information from me.”

“I take it that you can keep a secret.” He nodded.

“Of course; security and confidence are essential.”

“Good, good.” He reached for his folder again, and put a photograph in front of me. “Do you know this man?”

“Not personally, but I know him by sight,” I replied. “He’s Ivan Tupelos. He runs that fashionable club in the city where I couldn’t afford to go.”

“But you’ve been there once?”

“Yes, how did you know?” I stammered in amazement. “I was a guest of a friend, Paul Mason. He’s now a professor in some Australian university. We’ve lost touch though. Is it important?”

“Not really but did you meet Mister Tupelos.”

“No, but he spilled a drink on my...” I hesitated; I was going to say ‘dress’ but I stopped myself in time.

“And what do you know about this girl?” Another photo was placed in front of me, but face down.

I turned it over; one glance was enough.

“How did you get this?”

“Never mind. Do you recognise her?”

“Yes, it’s me.” I hung my head, afraid to meet his gaze. “I’m Ruth when I’m dressed, and it was my dress that he spilled his drink over.”

“Good, I like an honest answer,” he replied. “You make a very attractive woman, if I may say so.”

“Does that mean you need my resignation?” I blushed yet again.

“Whatever gave you that idea? Think nothing of it.” He smiled and stood to shake my hand again. “I have to report back, but it won’t be to your office. This is all very confidential. Keep calm and expect to hear from me in the next few weeks.”

I was shaking as I left the building, wondering what was in store.

I stayed home alone that weekend and the next. Work went on as normal. Hester asked once how the meeting went and I made up a reply. I said that it was about something which had been highlighted through to a separate section and they wanted my sources. That seemed to satisfy her.

In the middle of the third week, she called me through to her office.

“Good news; you’ve been upgraded.” She handed me an envelope.

“Goodness, I’ve been promoted three grades.” I think my mouth hung open with shock.

“Someone must like you.”

“I wonder who.” I didn’t say anything more when she looked at me with a question in her eyes.

“I think this is a call for a celebration.”

“I’ll bring wine and cakes for the office this afternoon,” I said, and went to telephone an order for delivery.

“I’m going to finish early on Friday,” I said as we sipped wine later. “I guess I don’t have to ask now that I’ve been re-graded.”

“Let me guess; hair and nails for the weekend?” she said.

“I am going to a party,” I replied. “But it’s nothing like that. I don’t need to get the diamonds from the bank vault.”

“Well, have a good times” she replied. “Your mystery man called to ask if you were going to be available next week. They’re going to arrange transport for you to have another interview. You must be getting important.”

“Yes, I must, but I can’t think why,” I replied, remembering those remarks about confidentiality.

“Maybe they want you for higher office?”

“I’m sure that’s it.” I shrugged it off with a smile and turned to accept congratulations from a girl who worked in an adjoining office.

I turned to talk to her, glad to get away from Hester who was brimming with curiosity which I wasn’t going to satisfy. She was strikingly pretty, but over made-up for the office, with laughing eyes and huge lashes. I steered her away towards another drink from the table at the side.

“Your eye lashes look amazing,” I said.

“I think so too.” She smiled at the compliment. “I didn’t think men noticed these things. They’re extensions of course. My real ones are nothing like this.”

“You look ready to go to dinner,” I said, not really knowing what to say.

“If that’s an invitation, I have a boyfriend already.” She smiled. “But with these lashes, I look a bit dowdy without makeup, and they cost such a lot. I have to make them last.”

“Does that mean they’re there permanently?”

“I wish they were but they fall out and need to be re-done regularly.”

“Well, I’m impressed and I hope the boyfriend is too.”

What I meant was that Ruth had only used the glue on false lashes. Now I could see these huge lashes close up, I knew Ruth would be longing to try them. Of course, I couldn’t say that.

I slipped away as soon as I could. The thought of those lashes tempted me but with another interview coming in a few days, I knew temptation would have to wait.

I skipped out of the office early on Friday afternoon. I’d been bursting with anticipation for too long. It always felt good to transform into Ruth. The salon girls were used to me and I felt comfortable there.

I wondered if they had an issue with confidentiality. I always left a big tip as an unspoken assurance. I’d never wondered about this before. The salon was at the other side of town from my office but the interview and photo had unsettled me a little.

It hadn’t unsettled me enough to abandon Ruth.

I thought Ruth looked beautiful when she left the salon that evening. I’d changed into her clothes before they started on my makeover. With my new grading and pay raise, I’d been extravagant. I had new breast forms and the most beautiful matching bra

and panties all lacy in a lovely light lavender shade. I had hair extensions and nails like never before.

They did my makeup perfectly, with dark smoky eyes, sultry and seductive under false lashes, with a lip line which made them look far more kissable than they really were. I even asked them to fit me in for another makeover session on the Saturday. Ruth was having two evenings out.

I knew where to go and who I would meet. There'd be some fun flirting and maybe a kiss or two before I went home alone. I'd always been quite discreet. I think I was afraid of the infections which could follow casual sex, and I hadn't found a steady friend; er either boy or girl, but one who could accept Ruth changing back and forth.

It would be a shame to revert to my boring boy self on Sunday evening before another week at work, but it had to be.

I put that behind me and set off to enjoy the weekend. The first few times Ruth had been shopping I remembered as being fraught with that feeling of danger; of being found out. Now I knew I could pass wherever I went.

That confidence had been hard won. I was always forcing myself into situations. I watched how women walked and listened as they talked. I copied their speech patterns and inflections. I learned how to use my hands and carrying a purse always reminded me to concentrate, even when I thought it was second nature.

Buying dresses progressed to skirts and tops, jackets and outerwear. I even wore jeans and a leather jacket sometimes, always with heels and my hair loose. I had practised in heels until I could run in skyscrapers; my feet were quite used to them and my posture was as good as any girls.

I went out on Friday evening. I danced with a couple of girls whom I knew casually from seeing them in

the same clubs. They all knew me as Ruth and I have no idea if they knew I wasn't really a girl. Saturday was the same but I ended up in a passionate clinch with a guy who'd had too much to drink.

It was always a hazard. Fortunately another guy who knew me intervened and I made a quick escape. If I was going to be found out, I wanted it to be a romantic revelation, not the result of a drunken grope.

I was relieved to be home and settled down with a small nightcap. I watched a little television in my nightgown; I was a fan of extravagant nightgowns with lots of lace. Then when I couldn't prolong Ruth's time any longer, I went to bed.

I tried to forget about whatever might come for Peter next week.

"They want you all day Friday," Hester announced on Tuesday. The car will pick you up from here for you to have lunch with them... whoever they may be."

"That's fine; I'll be ready."

If she was fishing for more information, I wasn't going to give any. After all, I knew little about why they wanted me.

"Patterdale, it's good to see you again." The same old military style, a bit more avuncular this time. "I think you've had good news since we last met."

"It's Patterson," I corrected him. "You can call me Peter if you like as we're to have lunch."

"Yes, I can be a bit formal," he replied, shaking my hand. "I forget that I'm not in the officers' club sometimes. One of my colleagues will be joining us in the restaurant. Shall we go?"

It was a really high end place. I wasn't sure that I could enjoy a place like this myself. I figured that Ruth could, so I tried to overlay her confidence on my male self. I didn't feel it was working as we were shown to a table which, although not private, was far enough away so that we would not be overheard.

"Here she is now." He stood and I stood too, although we'd only just sat down.

"I'm not late, am I?" she apologised as if there was any need to.

She wasn't the sort of girl that anyone would want an apology from. They'd simply be grateful that she'd arrived. She was slim and effortlessly elegant in a grey silk dress with matching low heels. Her chestnut hair was loose and tumbled over her shoulder in shining waves.

"This is Lauren. Lauren this is Peter Patterdale about whom I was telling you."

"I'm Patterson actually," I stammered as I took her hand and looked into the most transcendent brown eyes I'd ever seen.

"I've heard so much about you and of course, I've seen the pictures of Ruth too." Lauren's eyes held no criticism of me as she spoke. "I think Ruth is very attractive; congratulations."

"Lauren's here to help us decide if you can go through the next stage of our project," the Colonel said.

"What project? I didn't know that there was a project."

"It's too soon to reveal all," he replied. "But trust us, all will be revealed if we decide that we can go ahead."

"I'd better not ask," I said as the waiter appeared at our table.

We ordered; he chose a steak but both Lauren and I ordered tuna salads. They each had wine, but I took spa water. I thought to keep my wits about me.

The conversation was light and easy. I didn't think I was being grilled or evaluated in any way. We chattered aimlessly and it was only afterwards when I thought about it that I grasped that all the talk had been what I could loosely call 'women's interests'. I commented on Lauren's hair and she said she wished that she had hair as long as mine.

"I had a disastrous colour job," she explained. "It went so ratty, you'd never believe that was three years ago."

"I'd love to go really blonde," I confessed. "That would cause some confusion in the office."

"Maybe it would be possible one day."

She and the Colonel exchanged glances. I thought they were humouring me at the time.

"Thank you for coming to lunch." The Colonel sat across his office from me. "I'll be in touch."

"You're not going to tell me what this is about?" I asked. "I can't believe you brought me all this way just to have a lovely lunch and to meet Lauren."

"You're perfectly correct." He smiled. "I'm not going to tell you anything at this stage. As you can guess, there was a reason for asking Lauren to come today, and I'll have to receive her views before I can take matters further."

"I'd better not ask anything more," I said.

"Don't take it badly; this isn't a competition we're running." He held out his hand for me to shake.

The car was waiting and took me back to my apartment block.

“I don’t know who you’ve been charming.” Hester came into my office a few days later. “You’ve been allocated a pool car with a dedicated fuel card for your personal use. It says day and night, seven days a week. I’ve never seen that before.”

“It pays to have friends in high places,” I said with a wink

“And your friends in high places want you there again next Friday.”

Hester looked at her computer screen. “You’re going to have to do some overtime to keep up.”

“I’ll manage,” I said. “This month’s figures are already on their way and I’ve an early finish again this Friday too.”

I couldn’t wait until Friday came. I had been working so hard and with that and wondering what the Colonel wanted of me, I was in need of some down time. Down time was Ruth’s time and as the hours and minutes counted down to my salon appointment, I wondered how far I dared to take it, but the salon was booked out. So Ruth left looking good, but looking like she usually did on Fridays.

It turned into a surreal Friday evening. I enjoyed it at the time, but afterwards I knew I’d taken a few too many risks.

It all started when I got up to dance and this really dishy guy came and danced with me. Before I knew it, we were dancing closer and then with our arms around each other.

“I can feel that I’m turning you on,” I said, feeling the bulge pressing into me.

“You can take it out and inspect it,” he said brazenly; he hadn’t even given me his name.

“I might be tempted but only if you promise to do the same for mine,” I said.

He stopped and looked at me. He peered closely at my face, then turned and walked away without a word. I saw him go to a group of men standing at the side of the dance floor, drinks in hand. From the quick glance he gave me and the gesture, the others turned to glare in my direction.

I decided it was time to get out of there. I’d never had that feeling in there before. It wasn’t my usual hang out but I’d decided to shake myself out of the rut which led me to going to the same places every time Ruth went out. It was a good lesson to learn though. I should have been the one to walk away.

I gave up and went home. I closed my door and started to shake. All kinds of ‘what if’ questions surged through my brain. I resolved to be more careful.

Saturday was easier. I went shopping as Ruth. I lingered in the best mall in town and spent extravagantly. I bought a smart dress and heels to match, the sort to wear to the office as if I dared. I bought a new perfume; Coco Mademoiselle, which was ever so sexy and lighter than my usual scents.

I turned back towards the entrance when my eyes were drawn to a new piercing studio. I looked at the pictures on the window with increasing fascination. I couldn’t believe where some people got pierced.

“You know you want to.” A heavily tattooed man saw me looking and came to the doorway.

“Does it hurt?” I asked naively.

“I don’t feel a thing.” He tried to smile but the metal in his face made it into more of a grimace.

"I'm tempted to get another set of earrings," I said slowly, not quite convinced that I was being wise.

"It's painless and quick," he said as he touched my hair to expose an ear. "You must be one of the few ladies with only one earring. Come in, I dare you. I promise it won't hurt. If it does, I'll give you your money back."

"I only want tiny studs," I said, suddenly feeling bold. "Have you got some? They have to be gold because I react to base metal."

"Of course; come in and you'll be heading out with them in five minutes."

"Five minutes; you promise?"

"Trust me; on my word," he replied. "It only even takes that long because I have to get them right with your first piercing. They have to be at the same angle; otherwise, say, if you decided to wear two sets of hoops, they'd be at the wrong angle. You want them to be even and good looking."

Although he wasn't expressing it so well, I knew what he meant and decided to trust him. That's how I got my second ear piercing.

I bought some lovely hoops as well, and went out wearing them. I was ready to ignore the stares, but no one seemed to notice I was wearing them except me. I wore them all the time from then. Well, all the time except for working. Peter at work couldn't get away with such big hoops in his ears.

I thought I'd been really daring.

On Saturday evening, Ruth went out to one of her usual haunts. Some of the girls knew she wasn't quite one of them and some of the boys knew the same. They didn't seem to mind.



“Are you here to pick up a boyfriend or a girlfriend tonight?” Eileen, whom I knew quite well, asked lightheartedly as she saw me looking at the crowd standing near the bar.

“I’ll have one of each if it’s not being too greedy,” I replied.

“Looking like that, you could have either.” She took my arm and we walked through the crowd to the bar. “You could always come home with me later.”

“I’d love to but I think male company is what I’d prefer tonight.”

“I can pretend.” She pulled a hurt face and smiled immediately. “Don’t look now, but there’s a girl with long dark hair looking intently at you.”

I started to turn.

“Don’t turn round yet. She’s over by the corner of the bar, near where the dressing rooms used to be.”

There used to be entertainers here regularly, but now the crowd came to entertain each other.

I turned slowly and couldn’t see anyone I recognised at first. Then I did. Under a heavy layer of makeup and in the tiniest of short dresses, it was Lauren. Our eyes met and there was no pretence that I hadn’t seen her. She waved and started over.

“I’d bet that’s not what you were looking for,” Eileen said, moving out of the way.

“Hi, I *thought* I’d find Ruth here,” she said, leaning into me for a quick sisterly kiss.

“I never thought I’d find you here. What are you doing here anyway?”

“Think of it as research.” Lauren placed her arm around my waist and pulled me close. “Mmm, you smell wonderful.”