Wicked Stepmother

by andlat

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The Costume Box
2023

Chapter 1

Wicked Stepmother

Ash sat on his bed, unable to get his nervousness under control. His dad had been dating this woman for the last six months and he had never met her. That is, until tonight. She was coming over to meet him and, as his dad put it, 'hang out' while he and this woman's son Dylan went to a movie. He knew she was his babysitter for the night, even though he had not had one for years. Dad had said it was something about swapping kids so each of them could get to know their future stepson. To Ash, that was the worst part. He did not even know her name, but the wedding was set for a month from now.

"Ash, they'll be here in just a minute." His dad called, knocking on the door.

"Kay, dad." Ash called back, getting off of his bed and straightening out his shorts. He had refused to dress up for this, not that his dad had asked him to. He shook his head as he looked at himself in the mirror, trying to make his hair as messy as it could be. If there was one thing Ashley loved about his dad, it was that he had let him grow his hair out so it was good and shaggy. Dad told him he had to cut it before the wedding next month since he would be the Best Man, but until then... he'd keep it a mop

That made Ash feel rebellious, even if he always did his homework and never stayed out past curfew. He was

responsible, so he did not understand why he could not just stay home alone while Dad was out with whatever the other guy's name was.

"My new stepbrother." Ash muttered. He knew next to nothing about him either. He was apparently younger than Ash and the last thing Ash wanted was a dorky little brother.

"Ash! They're pulling in the driveway."

"Coming!" He yelled. He checked his blond shaggy mop one last time before heading out to meet this strange stepmother and her son.

Meredith pulled the car into James's driveway. She was beyond excited to meet her new stepson, even if she had only recently learned that he was a boy. Every photo James had shown her, Ashley had been androgynous with his blond hair and delicate features. She still remembered a photo of him in a sky blue t-shirt, laughing with a bunch of girls. If James had not pointed to his son, she would have been sure they were all girls. And that name! Who named their son Ashley in this day and age? She smiled to herself.

She still was not sure which had surprised her more. When James had told her that he had a son and not a daughter or when he had revealed that he was 3 years older than her son. Dylan was tall, strong, taking after his father even now in fifth grade. Ashley, by comparison, looked like he would not be out of place in third or even second grade, despite being set to begin his freshman year at Van Buren High in the fall. She knew that boys grew more slowly than girls, but it

mystified her that there was a cherub of an eighth grader walking around. She had happened to mention to James that Ashley was almost too pretty to be a boy and he had simply chuckled and said 'yeah, he's something alright'.

"We're here, Dylan." She tapped her son on the shoulder so that he pulled his earbuds out. He nodded. "Now, remember what I told you. Try not to stare at Ashley. He's very different from you, but he'll still be part of our family next month."

"I know, mom." Dylan said.

"He's not into sports like you, but that's what James is for." She laughed to herself. "Ashley and I will be having bunches of fun here." Dylan nodded, used to his mom's eccentricity.

Ash stood by the door, waiting for them to approach so he could greet them. He stared as he saw Dylan emerge from the car. No way was that a fifth grader! He quickly hid his shock and opened the door.

“Hello!” Meredith exclaimed, hugging him at once, right there in the door. She smiled down at him. “Let me get a good look at you. You must be Ashley!”

“Ash.” He corrected. She smiled and tapped his nose.

“Of course. Well, you and I are going to be best buds by the end of the night, I bet. Hmm?”

“Uh, I guess?” He felt a little overwhelmed by her sheer personality. He wanted to ask her name, but she seemed to just bowl over him.

“And this is my son, Dylan. You and him are going to be stepbrothers.” Ash took Dylan’s hand, amazed by how it dwarfed his. He shook it as Dylan rumbled a hello. His voice was so much deeper than Ash’s! How on earth was that a fifth grader? He was a giant! “And of course, my fiancé!” Meredith exclaimed, walking into the room. She embraced Ash’s dad and planted a kiss on his cheek.

“Hello, Mr. Andersen.” Dylan said.

“Please, call me James.” He shook Dylan’s hand. “We’d better get going. Leave Ash and your mom to get acquainted.” Ash’s dad patted Dylan on the shoulder and then came over to him. “Be a perfect gentleman tonight, okay? I’ve told her all sorts of good things about you and I wouldn’t want her to realize they’re all lies.” Ash nodded even as everyone chuckled. His dad smiled and tousled his hair. “And if she tells you to do something, remember that she’ll be your stepmom in a month, so you better listen!”

“Kay.” Ash said.

“We’ll be back late.” James said to his fiancée. “Don’t let Ash torment you too much.”

“Oh, we’ll have fun, I bet.” Meredith replied, kissing him one last time. “You boys stay out of trouble now.” They both grinned cheekily and left. She turned and looked at Ash with a warm smile.

“Well,” this strange woman said as Ash sized her up. “The boys didn’t waste any time getting out of our hair, did they?”

She smiled at Ash. “Speaking of” she reached out and touched his hair. "My goodness! Your hair's so long!"

"Yeah, I like it like this, but Dad says I have to get it cut before the wedding since I'm the Best Man." She smiled and nodded knowingly.

"Tell you what, I'll talk to Daddy about letting you keep your hair just like this, okay?"

"Really?"

"Of course! I'm going to be your stepmom, but that doesn't make me evil like in the princess movies."

“Well, duh.” He said under his breath. “So, um… I didn’t catch your name.” She smiled.

“Oh, I suppose we’re going to start off with the interrogation. I should’ve known.” Sitting, she looked at him. “Let’s be fair about this. You ask me a question, I get to ask you one. Seem fair?”

“Yeah.” She nodded, patting the couch beside her.

“Come sit.” Ash stayed exactly where he was. “Or stand, whatever works.” She smiled and patted her lap. “Alright, well, Dylan calls me mom.” She feigned thinking. “But you can call me mommy or whatever makes you feel comfortable.”

“You’re dodging the question.”

“It’s my turn to ask. What’s your most favorite color in all the

world?” Ash stared at her. That was her first question?

“I dunno. Blue? Green?” She nodded. “Why don’t you tell me your name?”

“I don’t think you need to be that worried about it.”She said with a shrug. “Like I said, you’ll just be calling me stepmom or mommy or” she gestured in the air as if trying to grab another option. “Hmm… what time’s your bedtime?”

“I don’t have a bedtime.” He saw her eyebrows rise, but she did not say anything. “How old is Dylan, really?”

“He’s ten.” She said at once. “I know it’s hard to believe, but he is. I was there when he was born.” She laughed. “You must be the shortest one in your class, hmm?” He blushed and fell silent. “Yes or no?”

“Yeah.” He mumbled before finding his nerve again. “That counts as your question!” She nodded her agreement and he launched into his next question. “If Dylan’s ten, what grade is he in?”

“He’s in fifth grade at South Terrace Elementary. How often do you take baths?”

“I showered yesterday. Dad makes sure I shower at least three times a week.”

“But no baths?”

“Nope.” She smiled. “When was Dylan born?”

“You are persistent, aren’t you? Ten years ago, April 4th.

He’s big for his age, just like you’re small for your age, hmm?” she smiled at him as he looked away. “Not to embarrass you more, but you’re asking me personal questions, so” she laughed to herself. “How about... how often do you wet the bed?”

“I don’t!” He realized how defensive it sounded and quickly volunteered more information. “I did until I was eight, but I’ve been dry since.” He realized he was running out of questions, so he circled back. “What letter does your name start with?”

“M” she watched him, wondering if he would think it was a trick. Before he could work it out, she asked her next question. “Do you have a favorite stuffed friend?”

“You know I’m fourteen, right?” She nodded.

“I do. That counts as your question, which means it’s my turn again. Who is your favorite princess?”

“I don’t have one. What’s your”

“Uh-uh, Ashley. You have to answer the question to ask one.”

“I did.”

“It wasn’t a true answer, Ashley. Everyone has a favorite princess. Mine is Ariel. You’re not allowed to ask another question until you tell me your favorite princess.”

“But”

“You wanted to play this question game, so I don’t know why

you’re trying to break the rules.”

“Fine. My favorite princess is” he thought for a second until one popped into his head. “Cinderella. What’s the last letter of your name?”

“Y.” She replied playfully. “Starts with M, ends with Y.” She wondered if he had realized her trick. “Why’s Cinderella your favorite?”

“But”

“Follow-up questions are allowed, Ashley. You know what? How about this? Your Daddy tells me you like homework, so you’ll go sit over at the table and write me a list of your five reasons why Cinderella is your favorite princess. You’ll have the whole time while I’m making us dinner, okay?”

“But”

“No buts. That’s your assignment. You can find a pen and paper, I’m sure. Put right at the top ‘Five Reasons Why Cinderella is Ashley’s Favorite Princess’. If it’s good, we’ll put it on the fridge.” She stood up and walked toward him. “C’mon, Ashley.” Enough was enough for him.

“Quit calling me Ashley.” She looked at him curiously.

“But that’s your name.”

“I go by Ash.”

“Which is short for?” He stayed silently petulant. “Which is short for what?”

“Ashley.”

“Precisely. That is your name and I will call you your name, just like you’ll call me my name, which is mommy.”

“That’s not your name!”

“And Ash isn’t really yours, is it?”

“It’s short for my name.”

“That’s not the same. Your name is Ashley, my name is mommy.” She touched his head. “Think of it this way, when we’re all living together, we’ll need to know who’s calling me. Dylan will say mom and you’ll say mommy, so there won’t be any confusion.”

“But mommy is babyish.”

“My brother called our mom mommy until he was in his 20s. He’s about six and a half feet tall. Do you want to tell him he’s a baby?” Ash shook his head. “Now, I think Ashley’s a much prettier name than Ash.”

“Prettier?”

“Nicer then. It’s a much nicer name, so I’d like to call you that.”

“But”

“It’s your name. It’ll be your name for the rest of your life. I’m going to call you Ashley and you just need to get used to that. Understand?” She could tell he was upset. “How about this? Go stand in the corner and think it over.”

“Huh?”

“You’re in time out. You’ve been raising your voice and arguing with mommy, so I think it’s past time for Ashley to go to time out.”

“But”

“Now.” She swatted his rump. He shuffled over to the corner. “I should be able to see you there from the kitchen. When you’re ready to get out, you will call me over by saying mommy, understand?” He simply grunted as he stared at the corner. “You’ll then apologize and reintroduce yourself to me. With your proper name. Understand?” He grunted again. “Grunt one more time and you can spend your time out with a sore little tushie, Ashley. Understand?” Wisely, he simply nodded. “It’s very important for you to understand that I am your parent and you are a child, understand?” He nodded again. “Alright, I’m going to go make us some dinner. When you’re ready to apologize and tell me your name politely, call for mommy.”

She wondered how long it would be before he at least tried to leave the corner, but whether through genuine remorse or just stubbornness, he remained there as she started dinner. She smiled as an idea occurred to her.

“Tell you what, Ashley.” She said, walking over. “No, leave your nose in the corner. Since you didn’t want to write that list for me, I’m going to write your apology slash introduction for you. The longer you spend in time out, the more you’ll have to read. Word for word.” She touched his

shoulder, feeling him stiffen from the contact. “Unless you're ready to apologize right now, Ashley?” To his credit, he did not grunt, though he remained silent. With a slight shrug, Meredith walked to the kitchen to make them some diner.

Ash stood there, nose in the corner, listening to the sounds of this invader making dinner. He had to tell Dad! Tell him what, he wondered? That she had teased him and put him in timeout? He ran through everything that had happened. Was any of it really that mean-spirited or was she just playfully teasing? He could not tell for sure. The favorite princess stuff was a little weird, but it was not like this was the first time he had been mistaken for a girl. Dad had even told him that he ran that risk when he put his foot down and demanded to be allowed to grow his hair out.

“You ready?” He heard her call from the kitchen. Why was she so opposed to telling him her name? That was so weird! Maybe she was secretly a wanted criminal? Ash immediately dismissed the thought. That was just dumb. He remained silent, even as she walked over to him. “Dinner will be ready soon, Ashley. I expect you to apologize by then, understand?” She gave his bottom a swat. “I don’t want you to go to bed hungry.” Ash scoffed. He would just sneak downstairs to eat after she left. Besides, he was certain Dad would be home before he went to bed. How late could the game go? “I’ll be back after dinner’s ready. I expect you to give me one doozy of an apology, Ashley.”

True to her word, Meredith came walking back over once she had finished making the two of them dinner. She held a piece

of paper in her hand.

“Ashley, are you ready to apologize?” He remained silent. “Whether you are or not, dinner is ready so you can either apologize yourself or read what I wrote you.” He turned and looked at her.

“I guess I’ll read what you wrote.” He said, unaware of just how much he would regret that. He looked it over and looked up at her. “Really?”

“Read that and we can move on.” She said. “Don’t and I’ll have to call your daddy.” Ash liked the idea of her admitting defeat, but he knew that his dad would be furious if he found out how disobedient Ash had been.

“Okay.”

“Read it word for word. I won’t hesitate to make you go back and start over if you get anything wrong.” Ash nodded, suddenly aware of how much she towered over him. Why was everyone so tall and he was so… he did not even want to think the word. He took a deep breath.

"Hello, my name is” he paused and sighed. “Ashley. I'm sorry for being so naughty and yelling at you.” He felt his voice tremble as he saw what came next. “I promise to do what Daddy told me and listen to what Mommy says. I'll do what Mommy tells me to and call her Mommy. Mommy, please call me Ashley because, you're right, that's my name. I hope we can move past this and I can try to be the best little girl that I can be." He looked at her in confusion. “Little girl?”

“Oopsie, did I write that? Change it to little one and re-read the last line. Go on, Ashley.” He sighed. “Or I can make you re-read the whole thing?”

“I hope we can move past this and I can try to be the best little one that I can be.”

“Much better.” She hugged him. “Thank you very much for your apology. It’s very nice to finally properly meet you, Ashley.”

“Nice to meet you too.”

“And what’s my name?”

“Mommy.” She smiled and kissed his cheek.

“There. All that unpleasantness is behind us, we can enjoy a nice dinner.” She nudged him toward the table. “Now, I’m going to hold you to your word, Ashley. If either of the boys call you Ash, I want you to correct them, okay?” All he could do was nod. “Alright, let’s enjoy our dinner.”

Rather than sit on opposite sides of the table, Meredith sat them right next to each other on adjoining sides of the table. She set a plate in front of Ashley, smiling at him. Ashley had never been a particularly picky eater, but when he saw the meal that Meredith had made for them, he considered becoming one. His plate had a heaping pile of spinach and a small piece of fish, almost as if she had conspired to make him pick at his plate. Given how the last hour or so had gone, maybe she had. While the fish itself was not that bad, the ratio between that and the mountain of spinach meant that he

had to alternate bites unless he wanted to end up with an overabundance of spinach to eat all at once. He knew all too well that she would never let him go without finishing his plate. He remembered his friend Ethan telling him about one visit to his grandma's where he had not finished his dinner only to find the cold leftovers waiting for him at breakfast. Ashley could not be sure if his soon-to-be stepmother would do something like that, but she seemed more than capable of it.

"Daddy told me that you ran into his room in the middle of the night a couple weeks ago, Ashley." Meredith said. "Did the storm scare you?" Ashley wished his face did not turn as red as it did.

"No," he said, trying to remain calm. "I was sleepwalking and wandered in and Dad woke me up." Meredith reached over and stroked his cheek, the boy stiffening nervously.

““I know it's important to you to appear all tough, but you really don't need to put up walls when you’re with me, okay? I'm here to be your loving, caring parent. Your mommy.” Unsure of how to respond, Ashley simply nodded. “Alright, so you were sleepwalking, hmm?”

“Yeah.”

"That's not quite the way Daddy explained it to me." Meredith said with a smile. "He said you were scared, standing there in just your jammies."

"He startled me when he woke me up. Wait, jammies? I don't

wear pajamas." Meredith nodded.

“You sleep in the nude?”

“No, I wear my boxers.” Ashley said, confused.

"I see." She said, clearly surprised by this news. "You know, Ashley, it's not just going to be you and Daddy around here soon. We can't have you running around like that once Mommy and Dylan move in. We don't want you to be seen by your stepbrother in just your undies, do we, Ashley?" Ash did not think Dylan would care. They probably wore the same boxers or similar at least. At least that made it sound like they would have separate bedrooms. "We'll have to get you some pajamas, won't we, Ashley?"

"Does Dylan wear pajamas?" Ash asked, genuinely curious. "I've been sleeping in my underwear since I was, I dunno, five?"

"Don't worry your sweet blond head, Ashley." Meredith said with a warm smile. "I wanted to bring you a present and it just so happens to be some new pajamas! But" she reached over and tapped his nose. "It's much too early to worry about bedtime things, don't you think?" He simply shrugged, unsure of what to say. Meredith was more than happy to continue driving the conversation. “After dinner, I think it might be time for your bath.”

“Bath? But I take showers.”

“When I was your age, I loved relaxing in a bath. Be honest, have you ever tried it?”

“No”

“It’s settled then. After dinner, Ashley’s relaxing in a bubble bath.”

“Bubble bath?”

“Is there an echo in here? Yes, bubble bath. Since this is our first mommy-Ashley night and we don’t have the boys here, why not make an evening of it?”

“I’m a boy too, you know.”

“Did i say you weren’t?” She asked curiously.

“You keep saying” Ashley knew how silly it sounded. “You keep referring to them as ‘the boys’ as if”

“They’re both boys, aren’t they? Far as I know, at least.” She smirked. “And I’m the only one here who’s seen them both naked.” Ashley blushed. “Finish eating.” Ashley complied and Meredith cleared the table. “Alright,” she said, leaning in the doorway that led into the kitchen. “That was a very good dinner, wasn’t it?” Ash nodded. “So, what now? You could write that list you promised me or we could do something else.” She looked at him expectantly.

“Something else?” He said with a shrug, not too eager to write a list about Cinderella.

“Alright, let’s get you a proper bath then.”

“Right now?”

“I think so, yes. No point procrastinating. My baths take a bit

longer than I bet it takes you to take a shower."

"But"

"Ashley, you promised to do what I say and I said it's time for your bath. Now march." She gave Ashley's bottom a light swat and he walked toward the bathroom. "Go to your room and get undressed. You have two minutes before I come looking for you, Ashley, and I don't think I need to tell you that I won't be happy if I have to come looking, understand?"

"Ok."

"Who am I, Ashley?"

"Mommy…" She smiled and kissed the top of his head.

"Yuck. We'll need to give your hair quite the wash, I think." She patted his back. "Go get undressed and meet me in the bathroom. You have two minutes."

"Do I have to be naked?" Ashley asked.

"You may wear your undies if you'd like, but that's only for tonight. Moving forward, you'll have no secrets from Mommy, okay?" She lifted his face to meet hers. "Say yes, mommy."

"Yes, mommy." He mumbled.

"No secrets?"

"No secrets." She kissed his nose.

"That's my Ashley. Now go on. Scamper off to your room

and get all set for your bath."

Ashley stood in his room, trying to think of some way out of this. Could he climb out the window and run away to Ethan's house? No, his dad would know that he went there. It was too predictable, plus he would be grounded for an eternity if he tried something like that. He had to escape though.

Then again, it was just a bath. What was so bad about water and being clean? If he was trying to prove that he was not the little boy she kept treating him as, hiding from a bath was not the right approach. He would just insist that she left the room. Why would she refuse? Then again, she was clearly insane and thought he was some sort of little kid. He knew it was probably because of his height, but that did not make it any better.

"Ashley? Are you coming?" Cussing under his breath, he stripped to his boxers, refusing to take them off. He would not pull them off until she agreed to leave him alone to bathe in peace. That was that.

He trod to the bathroom, frowning as he saw the tub full of pink bubbles. There was no way he was getting in that!

"Alright, looks like it's all set." He ignored her disapproving gaze as she took in the sight of his boxers.

"Just missing an Ashley."

"I'll get in after you leave." He tried to sound as reasonable as possible. She looked at him, puzzled.

“How am I supposed to bathe you if I’m not in here?”

“I can bathe myself.” He said through gritted teeth. Of course she wanted to bathe him, but he would not stand for it. He refused.

“It’ll be much more effective to have me bathe you. I can reach all the places you can’t reach yourself.”

“I don’t need your help. I’m too old”

"I gave Dylan baths until he was 9, so you're not too old, Ashley."

“I’m older” She cut him off.

“Then you should be able to follow directions and get into the tub. Now, Ashley.” He growled. “Remove your undies or I’ll remove them for you.” Infuriated, he complied. “Besides, you’re much smaller than Dylan was when he was nine.” Ash fumed, but climbed into the tub.
"Were Dylan's baths also full of pink bubbles?" He muttered as he sank into the water.

"No, silly. Dylan's a boy!" Ashley froze. Had she just said what he thought she had said? No, he must have heard wrong.
“How about we make a deal?” She said, ignoring his shocked expression. “You can wash your, shall we say, special areas, as long as you don’t squirm and let me bathe you?”

“Ok.” He muttered.

“We need to work on your communication skills, Ashley. You might have to give a speech at the wedding after all.”

“A speech?”

“Mhm.” She touched his shoulder. “Sit up so I can get your hair wet. I think we’ll need to do two shampooings before we move on to conditioner. Did you forget to wash your hair the last, well, couple times you showered?”

“No.” Ashley said softly, grateful for the water she poured over his head.

“Keep your eyes closed. This shampoo’s filled with chemicals to help your hair, but it’s not very good for your pretty hazel eyes.”

“They’re not pretty.”

“I can’t be the first one to call you pretty, Ashley.” She massaged shampoo into his hair. “Just relax and enjoy the nice warm hug of your bubble bath.”

Trying as he might to remain on guard, Ashley found himself relaxing as she massaged his scalp before rinsing the shampoo out and doing it again.

“Alright, I think we’ve got you almost presentable. I doubt your hair’s been this clean for years.” She smiled at the boy who was still keeping his eyes shut. “Let’s do your conditioner now and then I can get to work getting the rest of you as clean as your hair.” Ashley opened his eyes as he heard a plastic sound.

“What’s that?” He asked.

“Now you’ll need to wear this so that the conditioner can do

what it needs to." She held up a blue shower cap, which Ashley eyed suspiciously.

"Conditioner? Yeah, right. You're dying my hair or, or something." She sighed.

"I promise you, all it is is conditioner. It's going to make your hair softer than it probably has ever been, at least since you were a baby. That's a long time, isn't it, Ashley?" She tickled his stomach before slipping the shower cap over his head. "It's a very powerful conditioner, so it needs to be on your hair for about ten minutes. Tell me if it starts itching or burning, okay?"

"Is it going to?"

"It shouldn't, but if you have some sort of scalp issue, it might." She wet a washcloth. "Now, sit still while Mommy gives her little Ashley the best bath of her life." Ashley squirmed at the thought of this woman bathing him, but he knew he had little choice. Besides, she had agreed to let him wash his privates, hadn't she? "Just relax. I'll be very gentle." Taking one of his arms, she set to work. "Isn't the bath so lovely and warm? And doesn't it smell good?"

"What is it supposed to smell like?" To Ashley's nose, it had both fruit and floral scents, but he could not quite place it.

"It smells like clean little Ashleys to me."

"That's not a good"

"Shh, relax, Ashley. You're in your bath and your new

Mommy won't let anything happen to you." She kissed his forehead. "Just relax. Relax." She cooed, loving how much nicer his hair looked already. It would only look better once it was dried and brushed. She lifted his arm, glad that her instinct had been right and he did not even have peach fuzz under there. She had still brought depilatory cream, just in case, but it was not necessary.

As she moved down his body, she kept cooing and whispering soothing words to him, marveling at how docile he had become. The lavender scent that hung in the air, both from the bubble bath itself and from the lavender she had spritzed in the air before he came on, was working wonders on putting him at ease.

"Let's get Ashley's little feet all clean." She cooed, lifting one of his legs out of the bath. She held his foot in her hand. "My goodness, little feet might have been an exaggeration." She mused to herself. "I think Dylan had bigger feet in kindergarten." She resisted the urge to play This Little Piggy with his toes. She would do that after she had him all dressed for beddy byes. "You still awake, Ashley?" She teased, looking up at the boy's closed eyes.

"Yes."

"Alright, well, it's time for you to take over bathing. Do everywhere your undies cover and get nice and clean, okay?"

"You didn't really bathe Dylan until he was nine, did you?" Meredith smiled. The oddest things stuck with Ashley.

“It was around there.” She said. “I mostly supervised near the end, but he did not seem to mind it all that much.”

“Did you dress him too?” Ashley asked with a snort.

“Are we playing the question game again?” Meredith asked. “Maybe we should circle back to the reasons why Cinderella is your favorite princess. I bet it’s because you two are both blonde, hmm?”

“She’s not my favorite.”

“Oh, that’s right. You say you don’t have a favorite.” Meredith shrugged. “I guess we’ll have to plan a princess movie marathon, hmm?” She smiled at his indigance. “But not tonight. It’s getting late. What time does Daddy usually put his little Ashley to bed?”

“He doesn’t.”

“Oh, you get ready for bed all by yourself. How impressive!” She saw Ashley roll his eyes. “Alright, let’s get this cap off your head. Then you can dry off while I brush your rat’s nest into hair.”

“It better not be dyed.”

“Why would I dye it? Your hair is such a beautiful shade as it is. Now sit up.” He complied and she pulled the cap off of his head. “Eyes closed, it’s about to downpour!” She dumped water all over his head, draining the tub at the same time. She watched the pink suds go down the drain, but smiled, knowing that some aspects of the bath would stay behind.

Grabbing a towel, she wrapped him in it, patting him dry rather than rubbing him vigorously. She had to be gentle with her little Ashley after all. She smiled at him and showed him his arms.

“Oh, no! The bath dyed you pink, Ashley!” She teased. “Oh, my mistake. You’re just scrubbed squeaky clean like a little one should be.” She kissed his cheek, delighting in how the bubble bath’s scent clung to his skin. Ashley had noticed it too.

"I smell like a girl!"

"No, you smell clean. Hold still while I brush your hair.” She had made sure that the mirror fogged over so that Ashley could not see his appearance until she was done brushing his hair. It was long for a boy, but she hoped that another month would make it long enough for what she had planned for the wedding. She smiled as she remembered his irritation when he had said that his dad expected him to get a haircut before the wedding. If only Ashley knew what the real plans were.

Once his hair had been suitably brushed, she brought him in front of the mirror. Ashley’s eyes widened as he saw what awaited him.

“What, what happened to my hair?”

“I washed it and gave it a good brushing.” Meredith replied mildly.

“I look like, like” Ash could not bring himself to say it.

“With such long hair and delicate features, you look just the way you’re supposed to, Ashley.” His stomach dropped. She was turning him into a girl!

“No.” He pulled away from her, holding the towel tightly around his shoulders.. “No! I won’t let you do this!”

“Do what?”

“Turn me into a girl!”

“Ashley”

“No! My name is Ash. I am a boy!” Meredith looked at him calmly. She had known that this was bound to happen. She knew enough to just let him speak his piece and then his anger would burn out. “I let you give me a bath and you did this to me! You keep talking to me like I’m a little kid and I’m not. I’m in high school! Just leave me alone, okay?” To his surprise, she hugged him.

“I know, I know.” She whispered. “This is a lot to take in all at once, but trust me. It’s for your own good.”

“What?” She held him to her, rubbing his back soothingly.

“I’ve always wanted a daughter and, well, finding out that James had a little one named Ashley with long, beautiful hair and a pretty face, I just assumed that you’d already be a little girly girl.”

“What?” She kissed his cheek.

“So, I guess I tried to push you a bit too much. I’m sorry for

that, but I promise you. Let me get you dressed and you'll see just how pretty you can be." To his shock, she lifted him up into her arms, towel and all. "I know you probably dress yourself, but I think it'll be easier if I do it for you tonight, hmm? I think all this excitement is tiring my little Ashley out."

"Stop talking like that!"

"Well, if the shoe fits" she smiled and laughed. "Look at that, another Cinderella parallel. You're blonde like her, you have a wicked stepmother like her" she kissed his cheek. "Do you think I'm wicked, Ashley?" He did not know how to answer that. After all, she seemed nicer that Cinderella's stepmother by far, but

Before he could even finish the thought, Meredith set him down on the couch. She grabbed a cloth bag and came over to him.

"Now, I'm sure you're going to fuss about this, Ashley, but I think it's time we make this very clear." She gently lifted his chin so that the fuming boy could look at her. "I wanted a daughter and you are my daughter. I know it's not official until the wedding, but that's the way it is. You can ask Daddy or even Dylan about it and they'll agree. You are my daughter, Daddy's daughter, and Dylan's little sister."

"But"

"Please don't interrupt me, young lady." Meredith said gently. "This is just the way it is and the sooner you accept that, the

better." Ashley glared at her. "I know it'll take an adjustment. I know you'll try desperately to prove that you aren't a little girl. In fact, I look forward to seeing just what you try, but eventually, you'll come to realize that it's a losing fight. Daddy has Dylan as a son now. All he's missing is his little princess, Ashley." She patted his thigh. "Now, let's get you into your new jammies." She dug around in the bag. "Now, I've got a fair amount of variety planned for your nightwear, Ashley, but we'll keep things simple tonight. Panties and a nightie." She ignored Ashley's inarticulate protests, pushing him onto his back on the couch and slipping a pair of white panties up his legs, even as he struggled. "Aren't they pretty? Don't you feel the lace tickling your thighs? Oh, and look, they even cover up your little doodle, don't they?" Ashley looked at her, eyes wide in fury. "Yes, I saw your little doodle, but that's okay. Once you see your nightie, I don't think anyone would ever suspect you're anything other than a sweet little girl." She blew a raspberry into his tummy, no small feat with him trying to kick her. "Let's get that nightie on. Can't have little Ashley sitting in the living room in just her panties."

Sitting him up, she kept one hand on his wrist as she fished the pink nightgown out of the bag. It was plain other than a lace frill around the hem and at the ends of the bubble sleeves. She did not consider it all that girly, but she knew to the eye of a teenage boy like Ashley, it was the girliest thing on earth.

"Good thing you're still a little girl." She said, emphasizing

the second to last word. “It’d be hard to dress you if you were your big brother’s size.” She stood Ashley up so that the nightgown fell down almost to his ankles. “Very pretty.” She praised.

“You can’t” Ashley mumbled. His rage had gone, replaced by cold disbelief.

“It’s an adjustment. It always is when a new family’s formed.” Meredith said. “But Mommy loves you very, very much. That’s why I’m doing this.”

“But”

“Trust me. I’m not the only one who wants this.”

“Dad can’t have approved this!” Ashley insisted. Meredith looked at him levelly.

“What have you got to lose then? You stay like this until he gets home and then he’s shocked and horrified and sends me away in tears, right?” Ashley could not think of a rebuttal. “Alright, let’s get up to your room now.”

“It’s not bedtime, is it?”

“No, of course not.” Meredith said. “Remember, you’re going to wait up until Daddy gets home so you can have me thrown out for turning his manly big boy into a dainty little princess?” Ashley glared at her. “But, since I know that Daddy’s going to be thrilled, there’s one other thing I want to do tonight.” Grabbing her cloth bag, she scooped the boy up and carried him to his bedroom.

Ashley felt a certain swell of pride in how masculine his bedroom was, but his tormentor and soon-to-be stepmother did not bat an eye.

“Less messy than I expected.” She said. “Do you usually make your bed?”

“Dad told me to since we have company.” Meredith nodded, setting him down on the bed. She made a beeline for his dresser and, spying a pair of boxers hanging out of one of the drawers, opened it.

“Oh, dear. Something must be done about your panties, Ashley. Most of these look like things Dylan would wear.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry. I only brought you the one nightie tonight, but I have plenty of panties for you.”

“No, stop!” Ashley ran toward her, but stumbled, unprepared for how the long nightie constricted his movement.

“Careful. Little girls like you are delicate and bruise easily.” Meredith picked him up and kissed him. “All better.” She set him back on the bed. “Now, Ashley, you need to get used to the idea of panties. You’ll be wearing them from now on, from tonight” she smiled and patted his thigh. “Until next month when you’re my flower girl.” Ashley felt a chill run down his spine. Flower girl? No, no way.

“No, I’m going to be dad’s Best Man.”

“Dylan is the Best Man.”

“We both are.”

“Ashley, sweetie, the Best Man and all the groomsmen wear suits. You’d look awfully silly standing up there with them in the dress I’ve picked out for you.”

“Dress?” He felt like his heart might explode.

“Yes, sweet pea. Flower girls wear dresses as well as panties. You’re going to look so pretty! People might not even notice me!” She smiled at him. “Daddy and I have already decided. The wedding needs a flower girl and, well, it was either you or Dylan. You’ve seen Dylan and who do you think fits the role better? You or him?” Ashley remained silent. “I expect an answer, young lady, but the time I’m done putting all your new panties away. If you move off this bed to do anything other than telling me you’d love to be Mommy’s flower girl, you’ll find yourself put to bed right this instant.”

Returning to the dresser, she put every pair of Ashley’s boxers into a bag, even adding in a pair of blue briefs he had had in the very back for the last two years into the bag. In their place, she arranged at least two dozen pairs of panties: white, yellow, pink, each and every pair had at least a little lace or some floral embroidery on them. They all were undeniably the panties of a little girl. She smiled and reminded herself to pick Ashley up a pack of panties with princesses on them, to be awarded to him during the princess movie marathon.

“Still a pouty princess?” She asked. Ashley did not answer, so she picked him up, swatting his bottom as he squirmed.

“Let’s go downstairs. The boys should be home before too long, don’t you think?”

“I dunno.” Ashley mumbled, his head set against her shoulder. How on earth was he the flower girl? Dad had promised he would be Best Man, or at least co Best Man once he learned that Dylan would be involved too. Dad had even taken his measurements for his suit! He remembered that so clearly, standing in his dad’s bedroom while he measured him all over and… and texted the measurements to her! He looked at her accusingly, but she did not seem to notice as they returned to the living room. Out of her cavernous bag, the same one his underwear had apparently vanished into, she pulled out a fluffy pink throw blanket.

“Alright, let’s get all settled in to wait for Daddy and Dylan.”

“I’ll sit over here.”

“Nonsense.” She set the boy down on the couch, patting her lap as she sat. “Lay your head here on my lap. I’ll cover you with this blanket and you can doze while we wait. What if they stop somewhere to get snacks?” Ashley’s protests ignored, she eased him onto her lap and tucked the blanket around him. “Close your eyes. You’ve had a lot of excitement. All this fussing has probably tired you out, Ashley.” Defiant to the last, he told himself he would not fall asleep.

The next thing Ashley knew, the door opened and he heard two deep voices chatting away.

“Oh! Shh, Ashley’s right here and it looks like she’s sleeping.” His heart fell. That was his dad’s voice. His hopes crushed, he felt tears well up in his eyes.

“Oh, Ashley.” Meredith whispered. “I’m sure the boys didn’t mean to wake you up. Don’t cry, princess.” The memories washed over him and he sniffled as he realized this meant he was trapped as a girl, trapped as the flower girl for the wedding.

“Is it true, dad?” He asked. His dad lifted him up, blanket and all, and set him on his lap.

“Is what true, Ashley?”

“Am I really going to be” Ashley rubbed the tears from his eyes. “Am I really gonna have to be the flower girl?”

“Yes, princess.” The words cut through Ashley. “Mommy and I were talking and she said that she really wanted a flower girl, but she doesn’t really have any nieces or friends who have girls young enough.”

“But I’m… I’m a boy and fourteen!”

“I know, but you gotta admit that you’re, well, very special.” He chuckled. “Like, wow! Have you seen what Mommy’s done, Ashley? I almost didn’t even recognize you!” Ashley sniffled.

“But, but” he burst fully into tears. Meredith lifted him off of his dad’s lap.

“Alright, I think it’s time for overtired little girls to go to

bed.” She said. “I’ll get her tucked in and we can discuss it more in the morning.”She rubbed and patted Ashley’s back every step of the way, tugging back the covers and setting him down. “I know it’s a lot to take in, sweetheart.” She whispered. “But trust me, it’s for the best. We’ll go try on your dress next weekend and you’ll realize that you were meant to be the flower girl and that you’ll love being my daughter.” She smiled and kissed him. “Like I told Dylan earlier. You and I? We’re going to be best friends. Just mommy and daughter.” She tucked him in, draping the fluffy pink throw blanket over his blue and green checkered comforter, leaving the tired little boy to his thoughts and, eventually, his dreams.