

JAMES J CRAFT

***FROM BOYS TO
BRIDESMAIDS***

THE STEPMOTHER SERIES: BOOK 1

**“Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom”
by James J. Craft**

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ALWAYS A BRIDESMAID, NEVER A GROOM

Meeting a Lady

Caleb and Van were *perfectly normal* teenaged boys.

They both had thousand square-foot bedrooms that overlooked the Hollywood Hills outside of Los Angeles. Both had attended the finest schools that money could buy ... and been expelled from half. They partied with rock-stars

and slept with models, and spent more on clothes and shoes and hair-care products than most teenaged girls.

They were both, perfectly normal, spoiled, filthy-rotten, bratty, entitled, whiny rich teenaged boys.

Their father, Derrick, a self-made man who spent most of his time on the road, had married early – too early – and once the strain of parenthood set in, his first wife bailed on him and his two sons. That was years ago. The boys had practically never known a real mother.

Wives two-through-five didn't have any interest or experience in parenting his boys, and some even viewed the boys as a barrier to cashing in on Derrick's money. They were weary of what women could do to their family, and had developed quite a negative view of the fairer sex. This outlook on women would very likely lead them to be womanizers in their later lives, but in the short-term, it led them to not fully trust anyone but each other.

Derrick tried his best to raise his then-six-month-old and two year old sons, and by some measure, was a success. After all, they had never been arrested, which couldn't be said of all of Derricks' wealthy Hollywood neighbors.

Derrick's line of work had him criss-crossing the globe. He lived out of a suitcase most of the time, always looking to close the big deals he thrived on. A man like Derrick who lived for these big deals, and taking big risks needed big rewards for his troubles. That led to his many, many relationships with women. There wasn't a major city in the western world he didn't have a number to call for a quick and dirty liaison. One night, no questions, no remorse.

That sort of behavior can only go on for so long before a man has to make good on his promises, which led to wives two, three, four and five.

Then came wife-to-be number six. Lucy, or Lady Lucinda Anita LaCoeur as she often preferred to be referred to, was a staggeringly beautiful socialite from outside of New Orleans, whom Derrick had met in the 'Big Easy' one summer. He found Lady Lucinda Anita LaCoeur a fascinating woman, not only for her impressive physical beauty, but for her resourcefulness. It wasn't unusual for her to 'bump into' him around the country at different events, something that he took particularly keen notice of. Derrick couldn't be sure, but he had a feeling the woman was following him around.

And one day, he decided to see if she was as interested as he thought she was. And she was *definitely* interested in Derrick. She was "all in" as he quickly found out. He had very little chance, really, as Lady Lucinda Anita LaCoeur was a woman who *always* got what she wanted. Within months, they were engaged to be married.

It was then, just shortly before the wedding, that Derrick decided it was a good time to introduce his fiancé to his two sons. He invited Lucinda to move into his California home as they prepared for the wedding.

Caleb and Van were playing basketball in the courtyard when their father called for them. “Boys!” he yelled out the door, “Come inside for a moment please, there’s someone I’d like you to meet”

The two brothers rolled their eyes and kept playing. They knew that their Dad had gotten engaged again, and figured it was another gold-digging bubble-headed blonde, barely older than they were. So instead of honoring their father’s request, they ignored it. They’d been down this road before.

Derrick stood in the doorway, sighing. This kind of disrespect was common with them nowadays. He blamed himself, then called to them again, “Seriously guys! I want you to meet Lucinda ... It’ll only take a minute ... Please come inside”

Van sighed as he tossed the ball into the net, then looked over at his brother as he trudged in the direction of his father’s voice. Caleb sighed too, as he grabbed the ball out of the air, “Fine” he muttered as he followed his brother towards the house.

The two brothers found their father in the front hall surrounded with suitcases and trunks, in the shadow of an imposing feminine figure.

The boys stood silent for a moment as they watched the figure instructing their Dad on which piece of luggage was to go where. Her voice was deep and husky, but unmistakably feminine as she ordered Derrick around, “Derrick,” she said, “How many times must I tell you ... Please be careful ... that case contains priceless family heirlooms.”

She must have been six feet tall, maybe more, and with her hair pulled back and up into massive pony tail, she easily appeared to be more than seven feet in height. She was wearing a skin-tight dress that ended in ruffles just above the knee and heels that looked nearly impossible to walk in. Her body was muscular but very rounded, with massive globe-like breasts, and a matching globe-like ass, accentuated by a ridiculously small waist.

Her ebony skin was made up with layers of cosmetics, including long feathery lashes set onto eyes that were carefully drawn out at the edges. Her lips looked twice the size of normal that pursed and pouted as she watched Derrick fumbling with her priceless artifacts.

“Dude” Van leaned over to Caleb with a hush tone, “She’s black...”

Caleb nudged his brother, knowing that his near-whisper would likely be overheard.

And sure enough, it was.

“Oh ... Boys!” Derrick beamed as he placed the suitcase gently down, “You’re here...”

The woman turned to see who was there, glancing over them with a curious expression.

“Lucy,” Derrick smiled, “these are my boys... Van...” he pointed at his eldest son, “And Caleb” he continued as he pointed to his youngest.

Lucy smiled, “Well?” she said in expectant tone.

The two brothers looked at each with baffled expressions.

“Boys,” their Father commanded as he turned back towards the suit cases, “come over and say hello to your future step-mom”



They moved forward under her deep gaze. She extended a gloved hand to Caleb, who, not knowing what to do, took it in his own and leaned forward to kiss the top. Lucy's expression remained one of curious wonder ... as if she was somehow fascinated by Derrick's two sons.

Van, still holding onto the basketball, rolled his eyes at the silly display. Until, that is, Lucy extended her hand to him.

Not wanting to make a scene, he repeated his brother's act, with far less grace, and quickly planted a peck on the surface of her smooth, sweet smelling hand.

"My name is Lady Lucinda Anita LaCoeur of St. Bernard Parish," she said with a slight smile, "and it's a great privilege to meet you both. I look forward to getting to know you both quite well in the days ahead. And, I'm sure, you me."

"LaCoeur..." Derrick called from behind them, "Is a French word meaning 'heart' ... and ... lets just say that Lucy's stolen mine"

She smiled at Derrick, "Oh Derrick, you say the loveliest things," then turned back to the boys with a devilish glint in her eye. "And I do hope I'll be able to capture y'all's heart too," she let her near perfect English slip into a Louisiana drawl for a moment and winked at the brothers before continuing, "Perhaps you'd like to help your father with my lovely luggage and then you'll show me around your little place here."

Not knowing how to respond, Van and Caleb looked at each other again, before going over to their father to assist with 'Lady Lucinda's lovely luggage'.

Caleb grabbed two suitcases, while Van pushed the trolley, from which dozens of shrink-wrapped outfits hung. Van scrunched up his face as he pondered the situation. Instead of some bubble headed blonde bimbo, his Father had fallen for an Amazonian debutant.

He wasn't sure it was an improvement.

As they entered Derrick's palatial master suite, Lucinda began to order the boys on how to unpack her belongings and where. "Now Van dear," she began, "Carefully remove the shrink-wrap and hang those in the closet will you?"

Van just stared blankly at her, then turned his gaze to his Dad.

"And Caleb," she turned to Van's seventeen-and-a half year old brother, "If you would kindly unpack that suitcase. I'm hoping that your father made room in his closet as I requested..."

She turned to gaze to Derrick who had headed to the door of the walk-in closet in his room with an obedient smile, "Yep," he grinned as he through open the door, "All empty – just like you asked for"

Van and Caleb gasped. Their Dad was a notorious clothes horse, and prided himself on having an extensive wardrobe. To see his custom built closet devoid of all clothing was an absolute shock that neither boy could have foreseen.

“Excellent Derrick!” Lady Lucinda beamed, “Now Boys ... if you’d be so kind as to help me unpack...”

Each of the brothers sent their father a disapproving glance.

“Dad ... isn’t this something that the maid can do?” Van finally vocalized what his expression was trying to say.

“Nonsense!” Lucy interrupted before Derrick could respond, “There’s no reason why the two of you can’t help out ... from what I’ve been told ... you two don’t do *nearly* enough around here to begin with. Its high time that you started to earn your keep, if only just a little”

Van, and Caleb, ignored their Step-mom-to-be, and continued to plead with their Dad, “Dad ... seriously?”

“Come on now boys,” Derrick nervously forced a smile, “Let’s all just help Lucy get her stuff unpacked. There’s no harm in working together as a family ... right?”

Van and Caleb looked at each other in disbelief. *Their* dad – who had been absent for most of their growing up years – *now* wanted to ‘play’ family?

“Forget this,” Van scoffed as he threw a ball of used shrink-wrap to the floor and headed out of the room.

He glared at his father as he made his way past Derrick’s fiancé, and averted his eyes from her disapproving gaze. However, the sharp pain in his shoulder that followed made him stop in his tracks immediately. He turned to see that Lucinda had grabbed his left collar bone with her long slender fingers, and applied just the right amount of pressure to just the right place – like that old-dude from that star-trek show used to do – and paralyzed him where he stood.

“Apparently I haven’t made myself clear,” Lucinda spoke in a deep, powerful and unwavering voice, “You *will* help unload my things, and you *will* be more helpful around this house. You aren’t the first young men that I’ve been in charge of, and in time you *will* learn to appreciate me more, though I am certain now you must be wishing me away. But let me be clear...” she narrowed her deep brown eyes as she glared at Van, “I am *not* going *anywhere*. So you...” she turned quickly to Caleb, “*and* you ... had *better* get used to it.”

Van tried to reply, but all he could do was whimper in pain, “ah-ah-ah” he cried.

Lucinda relaxed her tone, and her grip on the nineteen-year-old’s shoulder and smiled, “There ... now wasn’t that easy?” She looked at Caleb, who was practically cowering in fear after watching his big brother be manhandled by his Dad’s gigantic girlfriend, then at Derrick, who hung his head, partly in shame ... partly in obedience to his lady.

The rest of that afternoon was spent unpacking Lucinda’s massive wardrobe. By the time the three Rogers boys were done, the walk-in closet was full and

they were exhausted. Van and Caleb had never seen so many frilly, girly things as they had seen in the past three hours, and were quite happy to finish their task and leave it all behind them.

Lucinda had taken them on a self-guided tour of the expansive house and remained unnervingly quiet as the boys showed them their rooms, followed by the pool, den, lounge, and home theatre.

When the tour was completed, she smiled and said, “Well ... I can see that I’ve got my work cut out for me here.”

No one – not Van, not Caleb, nor Derrick – had ‘balls’ to ask what she meant. But they would find out soon enough.

The First Changes

In the week that followed the arrival of Lady Lucinda, she took it upon herself to make a few changes around the McBride home.

First, Lucinda ordered Derrick to release the maid. She reasoned that Van and Caleb should be doing more to earn their keep around the house, since they didn't have jobs and weren't really doing anything else that was useful.

Second, she locked the keys to their sports cars up until they cleaned their rooms to her satisfaction, which of course was impossible.

Van tried pleading with his Dad, but Derrick was not about to contradict his new wife-to-be. "Listen, just clean your room up and then you'll get your keys back. It's not that hard. Lucy's right, you guys have had it too easy for too long."

"Dad, this is f'ing ridiculous," Van whined, "There was never a problem before, and now you're totally throwing us under the bus. We're your blood, she's just after your money – and when she's gone, it'll just be us again."

Derrick sighed, "Van," he put his hand on his eldest son's shoulder, "There isn't much money left to get. In fact, Lucy has *far* more money that we have. So if anyone will benefit from our being together, its you and Caleb."

Van looked dumbfounded. Was his father serious? Were they broke? Was *he* just marrying for money after having been taken advantage of himself so many times in the same way?

"It's not *that* bad," Derrick tried to reassure his son after reading his expression, "I'm just trying to tell you that it's not what you think it might be. I *adore* Lucinda – and she me – and I am certain that you will adore her too." He paused for a moment to collect his thoughts, "She just might take some ... getting used to."

"Getting used to?" Van spat, "She's a fucking Nazi, Dad! Look what she's done to you already. Taken over your closet, your room, your house – she's fucking taking over your life! Don't you see?"

His father's face turned very stern. It was an angry expression that he had not seen since he was a child.

"Lucy warned me that this might happen," he growled, "But you leave me no choice Van. This is still *my* house, and while you live in it you will live by *my* rules. And *my* rules are that you will treat Lucinda with the respect and do as she asks you to do or you will have to find yourself another place to *live*"

He turned to walk away, as if to make his point that his word was the final word.



“Fine,” Van called back to him, “You want to choose her over me, your *son*,” Van spat the words as angrily as he could, “then *fine*. You can *have* her – ‘cuz I’m fucking done!”

Derrick stopped in his tracks and turned back around, “You watch you language in *my* house young man,” he said.

“You can shove your house up your ass!” Van retorted, then, like his father had done seconds previously, Van turned and stormed away, leaving a flabbergasted Derrick standing in the hall.

Caleb came out of the adjacent room moments later, after hearing the commotion in the hall. He watched as his older brother, hastily packed duffle bag in hand, marched past.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m outta here man,” Van replied, “I can’t take this shit.”

“But where are you going to go?” Caleb asked in a worried tone. He always looked to his brother to lead the way. And for him to lead the way by leaving, worried him.

“I don’t know,” Van said as he headed for the front door, “But its not going to be here!”

With that, he opened the door and walked out, leaving a befuddled Caleb standing by himself.

“What happened?” he would ask his father a few minutes later in the kitchen.

Derrick sighed, “He’s just having a hard time adjusting, that’s all. I’m sure he’ll be back soon.”

Van flipped his cell phone out of his pocket and called up his girlfriend. Or, more accurately, the girl he had banged the most recently. “Hey, Tiff,” he said. “I need a place to crash. I’m comin’ over.” He walked on down the long driveway and through the automatic gates and down the road.

Caleb watched from the window, like a lost puppy. He felt like he should follow. But he didn’t want to cause any more trouble. The house was at least quiet for the moment, so Caleb decided it best to venture back to his room. Without Van there, Caleb felt a little lost. So to pass the time, he decided to tidy up a little. Not because he wanted to make Lucinda happy ... but because it was a little bit messy.

Just a little.

He was so busy cleaning that he didn’t see nor hear his step-mom to be enter his room, “You’re making great progress dear,” Caleb jumped with surprise as hearing her voice in his room.

“Oh ... ah ... sure,” he stammered as he tried to regain his composure and not look foolish.

“I have a sense that you and I will get along just fine you know,” she smiled at him.

Caleb couldn’t help but blush a little. Lucinda was absolutely gorgeous, with a smile that could melt ice. It made him wonder if all of his brothers shouting and stomping had really been necessary. Maybe she wasn’t so bad after all.

“Thanks,” he finally said, “I’d...” he paused for moment, contemplating the words he was about to use, “I’d like that.”

Lucinda’s smile grew even more radiant, “I’d like that too Callie.”

Caleb scratched his head, *what had she just called him?* It was hard to tell, from the way she pronounced the word. She might just be dropping the “B” from the end of his name. A lot of people did. But her English was usually so perfect.

He shrugged it off and continued to clean. A little while later, Lucinda added to his list of chores. Not only had Lucinda instructed him to clean his own room up, but to also clean his brother's room. Something that Caleb wasn't happy to have to have do, but did regardless.

He felt like he was selling out on Van by tidying up his things and picking up his dirty clothes, but on the other hand – there was something about the woman that would soon be his step-mom, something authoritative, that made him automatically say, “Okay – I'll do it.”

Maybe it was the foot or so of height she had on him.

As the sun started to set that night, it only then occurred to Caleb that Van was nowhere to be seen. This was not the first time he'd marched out on him and his dad, but this was certainly the longest he'd been away. Both Caleb and Derrick assumed that Van would return by the end of the day, but much to their disappointment, he didn't.

He didn't reply to their phone calls, text messages or emails either.

And by the passing of the third day, both father and younger brother were growing quite concerned.

“Don't fret dear,” Lucinda reassured them, “He'll return when he's good and ready. He knows that his will be a major change for him to deal with, and he shouldn't be rushed in preparing for it. As we all know, the older we get, the harder it is to change us.”

She smiled at Derrick lovingly, then glanced at Caleb, “and when we're young and wonderful like you dear Callie,” she smiled, “We adapt to the changes much more readily, don't we?”

Caleb nodded, still unsure of his new Step-Mother-in-training's way of pronouncing his name, and even more unsure of what a wimp he'd become since his big-brother had bailed on him. He felt conflicted about the whole thing. It was clear to him that his brother had a lot of influence over how he acted, and that without him around, he was far more comfortable being himself. Being himself, though, seemed to mean being the kind of person who was weak around strong people, and a little obedient, and that didn't exactly appeal to him.

He wasn't particularly proud that he had become such a wimp in his brother's absence, but it was true. Without Van there, Caleb was a bit of jellyfish.

There was no clearer example of this, than the next morning that he came downstairs for breakfast – a chore he had to actually do himself now that the help had been let go – to find that the eggs and bacon had been removed from the fridge.

“*Where's the fucking bacon?*” he shouted out loud in frustration.

“Young man!” a voice rang out behind him, startling him. He turned to see Lucinda glaring at him, “First off, that’s no way for a proper young man to speak!” she growled, “And secondly, I’ve disposed of your vile fatty meats and artery clogging eggs in the trash. There’ll be no more of those kinds of foods in this house. From now on, its only things that will aid in your good health that I will allow.”

Caleb gasped. No more bacon and eggs? It was his all-time favorite. He had been eating bacon and eggs since he was old enough to consume solid food. This was an outrage!

“Dad!” he called, but there would be no answer.

“Your father is at a business meeting this morning,” she continued in her authoritative tone, “but I can assure you that when he returns, the answer he will give will be *quite* the same as the one I’m giving you now. No more fatty foods, understood?”

Caleb looked blankly at her. He could see the serious tone in her body language. Arguing was obviously pointless.

“Fine” he sighed, “then what *can* I have?”

“Some yogurt, fresh fruit and granola makes a *delightful* start to the day,” she turned her scowl into a smile, “and don’t forget your vitamin supplement for good health,” she pointed at an unmarked jar. Caleb unscrewed the lid and looked inside.

“Take two,” she smiled, “Twice a day, to start off with.”

He picked up the two large pink pills, and with a half glass of water, swallowed them down.

“Excellent,” Lucinda smiled, “Now while you’re making some breakfast for yourself, perhaps you’d be considerate enough to make some for me.”

Caleb could tell by the tone of her voice that she wasn’t asking him – she was *telling* him.

So went the rest of the day, with Lucinda’s seemingly never-ending ‘suggestions’. *Perhaps* Caleb would vacuum the carpets, *perhaps* he could cut the grass, *perhaps* he should do his laundry. All the while, the young man kept hoping for the return of either his father, or his brother, to bail him out of this hopeless situation.

But nether came.

It wasn’t until the next day that Caleb saw his father again. It was in the kitchen, after he had prepared himself a wholesome breakfast of yogurt and granola, and some for Lucinda as well – another of her ‘suggestions.’

“I’ve got some news” Derrick beamed, “I’ve got a big business deal in the middle east that could be worth millions – but it requires that I leave immediately.”

“Oh my,” Lucinda exclaimed, her wide painted eyes growing even wider, “But Derrick darling, you were just working on a big deal at your office for the past two days...”

“Preliminary work my dear,” he soothed, “preliminary work. It was all laying the foundation for this trip. And now that I’ve been selected as one of the top three contenders, it’s off to Dubai I go.”

“But Dad,” Caleb looked worried, he knew the reality of his Dad leaving him alone with his Step-Mom-to-be wasn’t going to be a rosy time, he grasped at straws to get his Dad to stay, “they, uh, um ... the Middle East isn’t safe. They *kill* American’s for *no reason* over there.”

“Ah,” Derrick smiled, “That’s my boy, concerned about your old man’s well-being.” He patted Caleb on the back, “That’s why I was so late last night. I had my lawyer draw up a temporary custody order, giving my lovely bride-to-be here guardianship over you and your brother while I’m gone. And in the event that something *did* happen, she would oversee the execution of my will and make sure that you boys were looked after.”

Caleb’s eyes grew as wide as his bowl of yogurt and grain, “What?”

Lucinda just smiled.

“I know it’s a bit of a shock to you,” Derrick continued, “But we really think it’s for the best.”

“But Dad...” Caleb whined, “I’m almost eighteen years old! I don’t need anyone to be my frickin’ guardian! And Van is nineteen!”

Lucinda interrupted the conversation, “Yes, he is – and in the real world both he and you would be fine to look after yourselves. But after what I have witnessed here in the last few days, I convinced your father that there is no way that *either* of you two are even remotely close to being able to care for yourselves.”

Caleb shot his father a betrayed expression, but the worst was yet to come.

“I know you might be upset now Caleb,” Derrick began, “and I’m pretty sure your brother will be furious, but one day I am certain that you both will thank me and Lucy.”

“Thank you for *what* Dad?” Caleb scoffed, “For being a prick?”

Caleb didn’t hear Lucinda move – nor did he see her open hand – but when it struck his chin, slapping him across his face, he certainly *felt* it.

“Ahhh!” he recoiled, holding his face.

“That is *no way* to address your father, young man,” Lucinda growled in her low voice, “I am appalled at your attitude ... and it just further validates that fact you are not equipped to live independently until you are twenty.”

“Twenty?” Tears from the pain of being slapped, from the pain of his father’s betrayal and of his own disoriented confusion of what had actually been done, were welling up in his eyes.

“I called in a favor with a judge that I know,” Derrick tried to take a reassuring tone, “and had custodial rights extended on both and your brother.”

“Until I’m twenty?” Caleb flashed the angriest, most hurtful look that he could muster at his Dad, then stormed away to his room.

He flopped onto his bed, unable to stop himself from becoming a little emotional. His hard resolve, a carefully developed trait he had built up for years was crumbling without the threat of his brother around to make fun of him. Caleb planted his thickest pillow in his face to muffle his uncontrollable sobbing. He was able to keep it quiet enough to overhear the loud voices of his Father and Lucinda, obviously disagreeing, until he heard a door slam. Then, only silence echoed through the house.

Figuring that the evil step-monster had been banished, he slowly opened his door, and made his way back to the kitchen, in hopes of seeking some kind of change of heart from his father.

But his Dad wasn’t there.

“Your father had a plane to catch,” he heard Lucinda’s sinister voice behind him, “If you hadn’t behaved like such a child, you would have had the opportunity to wish him well. But now, instead, you’ll have to wait to see him for a *very* long time.”

Caleb turned to face her. She was still in heels, forcing him to look up at her imposing stature. In her right hand, a port glass, half filled with red liquid he assumed was wine. He gazed at her as she slowly drew a long sip. As much as he wanted to despise her, there was something truly mesmerizing about her. She even smelled intoxicating. He breathed in her sweet sent, then sighed.

“What do you want?” he said, finally.

“Moi?” Lucinda replied.

“What’s your game?” he changed the question.

Lucinda chuckled softly. “Tsk, tsk Callie. There *is* no game. As I said before, darling, I do hope that we will we grow very close. I think I have a lot that I can offer you – and, provided that you can be an obedient soul, you can become someone that *I* would be very proud to call my own. She paused for a moment and sipped from her glass, “*That is all that I want dear boy*”

Caleb sighed. Perhaps he had overreacted. Perhaps Lucinda wasn't quite as bad as he, or Van, had perceived. That afternoon, Caleb decided that he would have to give her a chance.

And Lucinda knew it.

Caleb Crumbles

Without his brother to bolster him, or his father there to offer some kind of false hope, Caleb quickly fell under Lucinda's bewitching spell.

It started out with minor suggestions. Not even suggestions really, they were more like hints. Lucinda raved about a new shampoo she had bought downtown, one that she said was better than anything she had ever used before. "Everyone should try it," she said. "Let me know how it worked for you," she said to Caleb, pressing a bottle into his hands. How was he supposed to refuse it?

After using it just one time, and finding it smelled like six pounds of ripe cherries rubbed into his scalp, he put it aside. Until, that is, Lucinda noted the absence of cherry fragrance the next day. From then on, it was the only shampoo he used. His old bottles of dandruff-control blue stuff fell to the side, ultimately disappearing without notice.

The days passed slowly. Caleb spent most of his time thinking of things to do, then rejecting the idea because he needed his brother to do it with. Basketball? No. Go drive up and down Rodeo in the car? No car, no brother. Maybe he could go watch a movie. Alone? No. Caleb just kept running into the same problem. He was totally dependent on Van for everything.

Fortunately, Lucinda was there to help fill the time. She had dozens of ideas for him. She had a whole list of things that needed attention. He could mow the lawn, wash the car, trim the hedges, clean the basement, redecorate his room, or scrub the toilets. It was no surprise that Caleb leapt at doing the one thing that didn't involve heavy labor. He thought he was pretty clever, choosing to redecorate his room.

Lucinda had declared the boys rooms "disaster areas" and was adamant that they be decorated "for normal people" and not like "an insane asylum run by Arnold Schwarzenegger." Caleb did admit to himself that the stuff he kept in his room did look a bit over-done and intensely macho. Movie posters from action films, a life-size cardboard cut out of a bikini girl from some movie that ran years ago. There were basketballs, footballs, helmets, bats, skateboards and everything a young boy could want.

"Don't you think it's time to grow up?" Lucinda asked finally.

Caleb didn't agree with her out loud, because he wasn't about to give this woman the pleasure. But inside, he was already way ahead of her. It was well beyond time to get rid of all these kids' things. He was becoming an adult, anyway. Maybe if he cleaned things up, and proved his maturity, he could even convince his father to take back that custody order.

He spent days trying to figure out what he wanted to do. After looking through the dozens of print and online catalogues, Caleb's head was spinning. He couldn't make decision. Beds, lamps, chairs, windows, drapes, duvets, pillows, carpeting. There was no end to it. Finally, he just gave it over to Lucinda, who never seemed to be without suggestions. She ordered him new furniture and carpet, and hired decorators to redo his room. And even though lace-edged pillows and pastel satin sheets confounded him, he merely grinned and accepted her insight that pinks and purples were 'modern' colors that most young men his age were eagerly embracing.

Of course, after the decorators had destroyed any trace of his old room, did he discover that most of his clothes had left in the process. His dressers had been tossed in the back of a truck and driven away. His closets emptied and the location of their contents unknown.

"A true oversight," Lucinda admitted when a very unhappy Caleb inquired about the whereabouts of his clothing, "Rest assured," she smiled, "I shall admonish those who were responsible on your behalf. But what's done is done. So I suggest that we move on."

Move on? Caleb wondered to himself, *What was that supposed to mean?* His answer came swiftly, for as to make up for this grievous injustice, Lucinda immediately set about ordering fresh, new replacements for Caleb's wardrobe. She soon presented him with new 'updated' sets of clothes, including some pants, tops, shoes and underwear. All of it was quite different than what he was used to. The shirts were *similar* to what he wore before, but with a slightly different, slimmer cut. "It seems I should have asked your size," Lucinda explained with a peculiar chuckle. Many of them had cute screened printings and graphics on them, like kittens and flowers – not exactly something that a guy like Caleb would have selected for himself. "Some of my best friends are the top designers in fashion. They sent these *just* for you Callie. I do hope that such expensive and fine items will not go to waste," Lucinda mentioned, off-handedly after reading Caleb's facial expressions. He paused for a moment, and was about to object, when Lucinda insisted that he try them on. "I don't have a single dress in my closet that costs as much as one of the designer shirts," she said. "I simply *must* see them on you." She looked at him with a disarmingly expectant expression. The steely glare he was used to shifted effortlessly into a feminine vulnerability that he was not prepared for.

He swallowed his objections and wore them.

The pants, like the shirts, were also very close to his old clothes, but cut differently to hug closely to Caleb's body. In some cases, *very* closely. With many of the so-called pants cut just below the knee, he wasn't sure if they were meant to be shorts or pants – or both.

Lucinda called them ‘capri’ pants, whatever that meant. He figured they were just like the board shorts he had been wearing for years. Just, tighter. Much, much, tighter.

Upon wearing the new pants and shirts that she had procured for him, with some strange new “European” T-strap sandals that Lucinda had recently introduced, The tall, imposing woman laid on the praise, and laid it on thick. She extolled the virtues of him being a trend-setter, instead of a trend-follower, like most people were. As she did, she found out something she had suspected about Caleb. He was a little needy. Just like he needed his brother for guidance, he was now looking to her for the same. All she needed to do was praise him and his new, sophisticated, mature and evolved sense of style.

And Caleb loved being praised. All he needed was a little approval.

She had also praised him for piercing his ears, like his brother had already done a few years ago. It was something that Caleb had wanted to do ever since, but for one reason or another, hadn’t. But now, as he examined the freshly pierced studs in each ear, the effect wasn’t exactly what Caleb had thought it would be. Whereas Van’s pierced ears with looked manly and cool, with tribal designs etched into gunmetal grey rings, Caleb thought that *his* ears looked somehow softer, with sparkly diamonds and yellow 14K gold.

“Oh don’t be silly,” Lucinda dismissed his concerns the next morning as they sat in the kitchen for their now-ritual yogurt and green tea breakfast. The two of them had settled into a fairly friendly routine, of breakfast, chores (well, at least Caleb was doing the chores) followed by a light lunch, some lounging by the pool, then an evening spent watching cable network shows about women choosing their brides dresses, debutant celebrities, extravagant wedding planners, celebrity news, and more wedding shows.

Lucinda would occasionally brag about knowing *this* celebrity or *that* one, and how wonderful it was going to be to plan her dream wedding with Caleb’s father.

“And the best thing of all, Callie darling,” she smiled one night, “is that you’re going to be standing right up there beside me.” Caleb wanted to tell her that if he was going to be roped into the ceremony, he would be with his dad. But as Lucinda looked longingly at the extravagant weddings on the TV, for a moment, it appeared as if a tiny tear was forming in her eye, which led Caleb to refrain from trying to correct her.

Standing beside us, he said inside his head, referring to his assumption that he would be standing to Lucinda’s right during the ceremony, behind his Dad, as a groomsman.

Suddenly she clapped her hands together, causing Caleb to jump with fright.

“I know!” she exclaimed with gleeful eagerness, “Let’s have a spa day tomorrow, just you and I. It’ll be exactly what we need!”

Caleb looked unsure, “Oh ... I ... I don’t...”

“Oh, nonsense dear,” she dismissed his apprehensive look, “it’ll be a to-do, you’ll see.”

“A to-do?”

“What do you Californians say? It’s will be a *blast*. A blast we will have!”

And a blast it was. Caleb had never experienced anything so relaxing as he experienced. He and Lucinda were massaged, waxed (perhaps not so relaxing, but his skin *did* feel very smooth afterwards), manicured, pedicured, facial peeled, hot tubbed and enjoyed a tasty light lunch. All the while, Lucinda remained nice and easy going, almost friendly and warm – though still very much in charge.

It was very much the kind of Mother and Son bonding time that he expected that all sons and mothers’ experienced.

All sons and mothers, that is, except him and Van. They had been robbed of that their birth mother, something he realized that he and his brother had resented in all the other women that their father had brought home. Maybe until now.

He looked over as his future Step-Mom and smiled. Lucinda, though a little rough around the edges, was different. Lucinda smiled back, with a warm motherly expression. Lucinda, might, maybe, possibly, could finally be the Mother that he never had.

The thought bounced around in his head on the drive all the way home. The idea was appealing, and filled him with a sense of belonging he’d never really had before. That faint, but definite sense of belonging kept his mind buzzing – that is, until he and Lucinda returned home to meet a very tired looking Van, waiting by the gate to the house.

Caleb’s back stood straight when he saw his brother. He looked down at his hairless body, manicured nails and new clothes and realized that he had let Lucinda influence him in ways that Van would not understand. He kept his window up as the gate opened knowing that the tinted glass would hide him.

“Your father removed his passcode from the security system,” Lucinda said in a hushed tone to Caleb, “You never can tell with men like him Callie. A young angry man like him is capable of doing a lot of violent harm...” she glanced over at a fearful looking Caleb, “to himself ... and to the ones he loves, my dear.”

Van took the shortcut through the front courtyard, and headed straight for the house, bypassing any drama with Lucinda. He was inside by the time the car turned into the cul-de-sac that lead to the main entrance.

The driver opened the door and helped Lady Lucinda from the car and into the house. Caleb followed Lucinda sheepishly, as they set aside their spa-bought bags of lotion and perfume on the coffee table in the living room. It was



space and acting to defend Caleb. “You will *not* use that kind of language while this house young man – is that understood?”

“Fuck you!” he cussed at her, “Where the fuck’s my Da...”

The slap from Lucinda’s delicately manicured but large hand cut him off in mid-sentence, “I said,” she growled, stepping closer to him, narrowing her eyes as she glared down at him, “You will *not* use that kind of language in this house – Is. That. Understood?”

quiet for only a minute, then he heard his brother’s voice, “*What the fuck?*”

Van came storming from his bedroom, “Where did all my fucking stuff go?” he yelled down the hall as he approached his younger brother and step-mom to be. As he caught up to them, he was about to repeat himself, when he suddenly got a good look at his sibling.

“Wha...” he coughed, then smiled, then laughed, “*What the fuck* is going on here?”

Caleb was wearing a pair of tight-fitting capri pants with an oversized three-quarter length tee on top. His hair had been shaped to ‘fluff out’ over his ears, and his bangs had been cut drastically short. His skin all looked smooth, and appeared, from what Van could see, to be devoid of any body hair. He tried to hide his hands, so as not to allow his brother to see his French manicure, complete with quarter-inch nail extensions, something he felt that Lucinda had tricked him into.

“*What the fuck* happened to you?” he asked his brother. He sniffed the air. “And what smells like fucking cherries?”

Van’s expression turned to anger as he moved towards his brother, but Lucinda moved forward, crowding his

Van looked stunned. He didn't know how to react to her assault, "Where's my..."

"*Is dat understood?*" she yelled into his face, once again letting her New Orleans dialect show. Caleb thought he saw Van's hair rustle from the force of her voice. No-one had ever talked to them like that. Not their Dad, not a teacher, not even a cop.

"Is it?" she boomed again.

"Ye ... yeah," Van tried to act cool, but was visibly shaken by Lucinda's pre-emptive violent outburst. "Yeah, sure okay, whatever."

She stomped one high-heeled foot to continue to command his attention, "Yeah? Sure?" she repeated back to him in a mocking tone.

"Yes. Yes, okay, I won't swear."

"Yes, okay I won't swear ... *what?*" she growled.

Van sighed, "Uh ... Yes I won't swear again ... Lucinda."

"That's *Lady* Lucinda ... or Ma'am to you, you insolent little worm!"

Van was clearly unable to fight back, "Yes, okay ... *Lady* Lucinda ... Ma'am ... I get it ... no swearing ... okay I'm sorry." He slumped down, defeated, and then shot a glance over at his younger brother, as if to say "what?"

"I hear the words my dear," Lucinda lowered her tone to a more moderate pitch, "But I doubt the sincerity of them."

Van sighed again, still at a loss for words.

"But I am certain that you will learn to be more sincere..." she snarled, "Now go bathe! You smell like you haven't washed in weeks."

He hung his head and turned back towards his room, "I just wanted to know where my stuff went ... Where my Dad is..." He muttered as he trudged down the corridor.

"Your *stuff* has been packed away," she called after him, "As you forfeited your rights of ownership, when you left!"

Van paused mid-stride. Caleb knew that he was fighting the urge to yell and scream at his Father's fiancé, and was thankful for it.

"And your father," she continued, "Is on an important business trip to the Middle East. So I am afraid that it is just you me and your darling brother Caleb for a few weeks."

Van mouthed the words 'weeks?' but remained silent, then proceeded to continue to his room.

Things had gotten very strange ... very fast. And Van wasn't certain how he was going to handle it. Five minutes back in the house and he had already lost his first argument. He was determined not to let it happen again.

Van's Vanity Vanquished

In the weeks that followed, Van and Lucinda would have several more confrontations, and each time, the Amazon-like woman would stand her ground and grind the arrogant young McBride boy down into a fine powder with her words, tone and presence.

The first blow up happened the next day, when he learned that his belongings were very truly *gone*. This included his furniture and prized possessions, including his clothes. Even the ones that he had been wearing the day before had been removed from the house.

“If you had indicated that you had any intention of returning,” Lucinda scolded him, “Than perhaps we would have considered saving your things. But you made it quite clear that was not going to be the case!”

“But what the hell am I going to wear?” he pleaded.

“You’ll have to share your brother’s wardrobe until alternate arrangements can be made” she simply smiled.

Much to Van’s chagrin, the wardrobe that had been there when he left was vastly different from the wardrobe that was there now. Gone were the boxers and baggy jeans, replaced instead by capri pants and dainty briefs.

Van’s face turned red with rage, but he wasn’t about to make a scene – again – as it was one that he would likely lose. Instead he rummaged through his brother’s clothes to find the least outlandish underwear and tight fitting flared jeans that he could.

A second altercation with Lucinda occurred when he discovered, as his younger brother had done weeks prior, that bacon, beef and other fatty foods, were banned substances in the house now, and that he was required to take a strange multivitamin or two, twice daily with his meals.

Again, in his mind, it was something that he could live with until his dad got back.

But the third such confrontation that occurred was very big. It happened some days later, when it came up that Van and Caleb’s father (in consultation with Lucinda) had petitioned the court to obtain power of attorney over him, and extending their guardianship over Caleb, after having them deemed ‘unfit’ to look after themselves. Further, he learned that this power of attorney had subsequently been passed to Lucinda in his Father’s absence. Van was absolutely livid – and in fact walked out the front door to leave again. But as he approached the gate, he was reminded of the fact that he had not fared very well the last time he left. His so-called friends had bailed on him, and his money had run out quickly. He sighed and turned back towards the house, and re-

solved that he could make it through a couple of weeks, until his father returned, then reason with him to get rid of the domineering bitch that he wanted to marry.

But Lucinda wasn't sure that she wanted him back, and stood in the doorway, blocking his return as he made his way back towards the front stairs.

"What?" he growled.

"Are you absolutely certain that you *want* to stay here?" she asked, "I do not think your poor dear brother can handle the stress of another one of your 'outbursts.'"

"My brother and I are *just fine*," he recoiled, "And once we get rid of *you* we'll go back to being ourselves and..." he paused, realizing his anger was building up again ... but he didn't care, "and you won't be able to keep turning us into a couple of fags!"

"*That kind of language will not be tolerated!*" she erupted, grabbing Van by the ear she lead him into the house, down the hall and into his bathroom, while he whined the whole way. She tossed him into the shower stall and marched away, returning a minute later with a can of foam in her hand.

"You will soon learn what it means to be ridiculed by others," she snarled, "once you've rinsed, lather this over your entire body, wait a few moments until the substance starts to burn, then rinse it off. Call me when you're done."

She shut the shower door and stomped away.

A battered Van begrudgingly complied, and emerged a few minutes later having denuded all of the body hair from his person, with the exception of that which was on his head.

She then tossed him a pair of skimpy bikini briefs, capri pants and wide neck top to put on. "No way," he said initially, "there's no way that I'm wearing this."

But moments later he was sliding his feet into a pair of wedge heeled sandals as he waited for his brother in the hall, fully dressed exactly as she had directed him.

Caleb, was wearing a pair of leggings with a wide belt over his hips. The white leggings ended in ballet slippers. A cropped wide-neck-tee was clearly visible under a short sleeved jacket, that was purely ornamental.

"Are we ready to go?" Lucinda asked as she turned to the door. Caleb and Van hung their heads in shame as she followed her passed the chauffeur and into the waiting car.

It was going to be a long ride.

Upon arrival, Lucinda quietly gave very specific and very private directions to the salon staff as to what they were to do. The salon beauticians smiled and nodded as they turned to look at the boys.

“Follow me please,” one of them said to Van. “This way,” the other smiled at Caleb. Van wasn’t crazy about the idea of letting his little brother out of his sight, but knew that he had little choice, as Caleb disappeared behind a curtain.

The beauticians primped and polish, trimmed, coifed and colored for what felt like several hours. All-the-while, both brothers were faced intentionally *away* from any mirror. The ‘not-knowing’ what was happening to them was making both boys feel very powerless, and subdued.

Especially Caleb. He was already wrestling the voices in his head that were accepting of the changes that Lucinda had made – while quieter voices protested that that it was *wrong wrong wrong!*

The McBride brothers would be reunited in the salon lobby, where they were placed before a large mirror and told to open their eyes.

Van and Caleb gasped as they stared at their modified reflections for the first time.

Caleb’s hair had been straightened, and lengthened to fall just shy of his chin, while his bangs were kept super short. His skin had been powdered to pale matte beige, with a trace of color on his lips and cheeks, and thin liner around his eyes.

Van’s already scruffy cut had been tussled, teased and styled into marginally androgynous hairdo. His face was also dusted and his features lightly high-lighted, including a very shiny clear gloss on his lips, but it was not nearly to the degree of what they had done to his little brother.

Both brothers’ fingernails had been lengthened with acrylic tips, shaped and filed to delicate ovals and painted with pink polish.

Lucinda watched quietly from behind the double-sided mirror at the boy’s reactions, smiling widely.

While Caleb was surprised, he spent more time worried about his brother than what was being done to him, while Van seemed to be in a state of total awe, as if unable to comprehend what Lucinda had done to him. But what followed next was even more unbelievable.

She marched them out of the salon, where both boys noticed that their car was *not* parked. “Follow me boys,” she commanded, “We’re going for a little walk.”

She paraded the effeminate boys through the busy sidewalks around Rodeo Drive. People would stop and stare, point and whisper or even laugh out loud at the two brothers, who kept their eyes low to the ground as their faces burned with humiliation.

Caleb was still watching his brother intently. He knew that there had to be some sort of eruption of swearing and anger about to blow. He could see the veins on Van’s temples throb and the muscles in his jaw so tight he could chew



through a chain link fence. Caleb could see the stares and glances of everyone they were walking past. Yes, it was Beverly Hills, and a flamboyant man was not worth batting an eyelash at. But no matter where you go, a freak is a freak, and they looked like a couple of true freaks.

Van tried to look away as people walked past, but Lucinda would take her hand and turn his head back forward, so he could see the shocked and amused expressions of the people looking at him. He could also hear the vague mumblings and giggles of people who weren't quite out of earshot. His face radiated an intense, red-hot heat of shame.

The torturous journey finally ended at an exclusive bridal wear store, which Lucinda hurried the boys into.

Inside, she was greeted by store attendants, who seemed to already have known who she was, and what she was looking for. Not to mention who would be accompanying her. Two of the attendants whisked her away to a back room, while two more escorted the confused boys to the side, where they were measured and recorded. For what? Neither knew. Neither wanted to open their mouths and ask.

What seemed like an eternity passed, with the McBride boys, effeminately dressed, trying to avoid making eye contact with the various staff members and clients that came and went in the busy store.

That is, until Lucinda returned, guided by two her two helpers.

“Well boys?” Lucinda beamed as she walked slowly down the staircase.

Both of the McBride Brothers were dumbfounded. Since meeting Lucinda they had only seen her in tight fitting pencil skirts and form-fitting tops. The bridal gown that she had been carefully dressed in was neither.

It was a mass of lace and ruffled, with diamond-jeweled hearts, her trademark symbol, sewn here and there as accent pieces. The gown’s lacy train was carefully guided by the two store attendants, who must have stood almost five feet behind her.

“Wow!” Caleb said finally. He was worried about the fact that he was in total agreement that the gown was lovely, and that his father would absolutely love it!

These probably aren’t the thoughts that a nineteen year old boy should be having, he warned himself.

Van just stared.

“I knew I could count on my darling Callie to be supportive of me,” Lucinda smiled, “But I can see from your expression Van, dear, that you too are impressed by what you see. Which makes me hopeful that we might one day have the same special bond that your darling little brother has with me.”

She smiled once more then turned to motion to the attendants to assist her back upstairs.

Van turned to Caleb with an angry gaze. Caleb blushed and looked away, not wanting the confrontation with his older brother.

“Callie?” Van spat, “Special Bond? What the fu ... er, what the heck Caleb?”

“She’s a very nice person, Van. Give her a chance.”

“Are you shi...” he censored himself, not wanting to get the backside of Lucinda’s hand again, “...Kidding me?” Van spat back, in a hushed but angry

tone. “She’s got you and dad eating out of her hand! Grow a pair and stand up to her!”

Caleb pursed his lips for a moment, building up inside. “You hate women!” he spat at Van.

“What?” Van replied.

“You hate women and you certainly can’t handle a strong woman!”

“Aw, for Christ’s sake,” Van rolled his eyes.

“Lucinda been very thoughtful, very warm, very nice to me.”

“Look, you and I both know that she’ll be out of here as soon as she gets a settlement in a few months. She’s just like all the rest. You just let me tell you what to do, you got it, Bro? She’s not worth it.”

“She’s ... She’s...” Caleb was searching for the words. “She’s not like all the rest! She’s special!”

“*Special?*” Van mocked. He chuckled. “She just marched us down the street dressed like sissies!”

“That was your fault!”

“Whatever. Listen, it’s easy. You can listen to me or her, okay? Who’s your friend, here?”

Caleb remained silent, which forced Van to do the same as they awaited Lucinda’s return. The silence killed him. It was almost like he had lost Caleb. Every moment he didn’t speak to him was worrying him more and more. This was crazy. Van’s head was racing, but all he had to do was hang in until his Dad was back home, then all of this would go away.

Wouldn’t it?

The car ride home was a quiet one, for Van. He glared over at his brother, sitting next to Lucinda. The two were recounting the experience at the salon, and Caleb, though Van was certain he was faking ... appeared to be enjoying it.

Surely he’s faking it, he told himself, no self-respecting guy would actually be interested in all this.

Would he?