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# WHAT'S YOUR TALE, NIGHTINGALE?

Story by Lauren Bliss  
Art by DreamLN



**CROSSED**  
TV/CD  
**FICTION**



**L A U R E N   B L I S S**

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**A Crossed Fiction story**



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Illustrations by [DreamLN](#)

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## WHAT'S YOUR TALE, NIGHTINGALE?

It was a warm spring day in early March, when a moving truck pulled into the driveway of the long abandoned house, on that quiet little corner in the sleepy suburb, just north of Los Angeles, California. It was a private community with fences, yards, dogs, cats, trampolines, elderly power walkers, and children playing with their friends; nothing out of the ordinary. In contrast to the rather dull backdrop, the bold prints, heavy gloss of the furniture, and numerous garment racks being carried into the house couldn't help but be noticed. William Knox certainly couldn't help it.

One wouldn't normally call Will Knox nosey. He was a very quiet boy. His garbage was always disposed of in the correct container, and placed on the curb at the correct time. His yard was maintained by a service every week. His sprinkler use was perfectly within regulation during drought times. In fact, if someone didn't know better, and the same light wasn't left on in the upstairs bedroom every night, they might think nobody lived there. Yes, Will was a very private person, with very little interest in the outside world, but something about these new neighbors had caught his attention.

He worked from home normally. Sitting at his computer desk, he tried to focus on his job, but it seemed like every item the two burley moving men transported into the residence, begged for his attention. The record collection, the vintage jukebox, the plethora of garments, and even the giant plastic chair shaped like a high heeled pump; they all begged the question, "Just who are these people?"

After a couple of days anxiously pacing around the house, Will finally worked up the courage to go meet his new neighbors. His grandmother had always told him never to show up both uninvited and empty handed, so as the sun was setting, armed with a tray of fresh baked cookies, he skittishly made his way across the street. It took him a few minutes to gain his composure, but eventually he rang the doorbell. Much to his surprise, two young women answered the door, dressed in a manner that he found strangely anachronistic, but familiar. "Well, hello there!" said the brunette, with a slight southern drawl. "What do we have here?"

"I do believe we're being welcomed to the neighborhood," said the redhead sweetly, as she pushed up her white horn-rimmed glasses and smiled. "Come on in Sugar. We were just about to have some drinks. Won't you join us? I'm Molly and this is my roommate Ruby."

"He... hello... I'm umm... Will. Nice to meet you." Try as he might, the youth was petrified. "Thank you for the offer, but I must be going." He turned to walk away briskly, but was quickly stopped by the well manicured hand on his shoulder.



"We insist, you must come in," said Molly, guiding him through the threshold. "We don't bite... I promise."

"At least not hard," chuckled Ruby. To say that Will was overwhelmed by the two beauties leading him to the sofa and taking a seat on either side of him, was an understatement. Both were wearing daisy dukes, showing off their thick thighs and wide hips. Ruby was wearing a red tube top showing off her ample cleavage, and glowing honey skin. Her makeup was simple enough, with just bold eyeliner, and thick mascara being the only stand outs. Her long dark curly hair was piled high on her head with a navy bandana tied at the top of her hair-line. Will could only assume that what little bit of skin that was hidden by clothing was just as covered in tattoos as the rest of her. From her sleeves to her back and neck they all just seemed to blend together, but the one that stuck out the most was her chest piece. It was a large heart with wings. It was hard to miss. Will tried not to gawk, but found it difficult when he could barely find any naked skin all the way down to her bare feet.

Contrastingly, Molly's appearance was on the softer side. Her natural red hair was pulled back into a small twist that spilled over the top and cascaded in a wave of loose curls down the back of her neck, accented by a little green bow pinned to the side of her coiffure. She wore a matching green top that was off the shoulder, with the neckline decorated in scalloped lace. Her makeup was soft and simple, letting her freckles show through, with only a bold red lip making any kind of a statement. She wasn't dripping in ink like her roommate, but she had a few tattoos here and there; flowers and the like. She took a cookie from Will's tray, and tasted it. Her face lit up. "This is delicious!" she nearly shouted, with her hand over her mouth, trying to maintain some level of grace. "Where did you get them?"

Will meekly responded, "I made them myself. My grandmother taught me to cook, and I try to bake something at least once a week."





“Aww, don’t blush sugar,” said Ruby, as Will’s cheeks began to turn crimson. She took a nibble for herself, and was equally impressed. You’ve got nothing to be ashamed about. These are delicious.” The two girls thought he was embarrassed by his domestic prowess, but in reality his grandmother had drilled into his head that pride always comes before the fall.

A brief moment of awkward silence was all Molly could handle before every impulse she had started her on a long and rambling story of how they came to be his neighbors. “Well, we wouldn’t be good neighbors unless we told you something about ourselves,” she began.

Ruby and Molly met at a convention called Viva Las Vegas in the titular city about five years ago when they were both twenty, Ruby coming from North Carolina, and Molly coming from Minnesota. Both girls were active in their local rockabilly music and dance scenes, and like many others, both had driven across the country in classic cars with their boyfriends to model at the car show. They just happened to be set up in the lot spaces next to each other, and while their partners were on the ground answering questions, and talking proudly



about their hot rods, the two girls discovered they had a similar sense of humor. They joked back and forth while suffering through the heat in their vintage dresses and hairdos. Later that afternoon, in the hotel bathroom, they found more camaraderie as Molly shared the secret of makeup setting spray to save from so many touch ups under the beating down sun, and then Ruby reciprocated by sharing her extra parasol with Molly.

That evening they just happened to run into each other at the dance. Ruby joked it must be fate, and the two wound up sitting and talking all night, much to the annoyance of their neglected boyfriends. They both bought the same makeup. They both shopped on the same websites. They both followed the same instagram accounts. They both listened to the same records. It was as though fate had brought them together. After the convention, they video chatted at least once a week, and there wasn't a detail that they didn't share.

The next year at the convention, which they attended almost solely for the purpose of seeing each other again, they noticed the rich guys who came with dozens of cars had multiple models for each vehicle. Realizing that there was no way that some of those skeezy old creeps were on good terms with that many girls their age, they asked the models how that was possible. Turns out there was a lot of money to be made for "alternative models," suicide girls and the like, especially on the west coast.

Then and there, the two hatched their plan. Modeling in the alternative retro car scene was going to be their path to fame and fortune. Once they were back home, after an awkward and heartbreaking conversation with their boyfriends, they liquidated nearly everything they owned — barring clothes, grooming products, laptops, and Ruby's sewing machine. They packed up their respective cars, and made their way to sunny Los Angeles, California. For the first couple of weeks they slept in their cars, and fortunately, just as Molly's car died, they found an affordable studio in West Hollywood. As affordable as SoCal could be anyway. Ruby set to work on a business plan, and started acting as their agent, getting the duo booked for every classic car show she could find, from the Mojave Desert, all the way up to San Francisco. Through hard work and perseverance, they eventually found a two bedroom apartment that was within their price range, and just in time too, since Ruby was at her wit's end with all the random furniture, clothing, and nonsense that Molly would drag in from the thrift store on a seemingly daily basis. This process repeated itself through a few more apartments, until they finally had enough money to get themselves this nice house in the suburbs.

While babbling on and on, Molly deftly rolled a joint. Ruby had snuck to the kitchen, and returned with a pitcher of strawberry daiquiris, just as Molly was wrapping up. All the while, Will sat firmly in place with his hands on his knees, trying not to die from the anxiety. He hadn't said more than a few words to another human being for over a year. He was desperate to leave, but couldn't find a window in Molly's flurry of verbiage to excuse himself. He was too polite, and



thus found himself tied to that very spot. Before he knew it, he was holding a tall glass of daiquiri with a long pink straw and cute umbrella resting on top, and this gorgeous redhead was lighting a joint next to him. He'd never even smelled cannabis before. Imprisoned by his good manners, he took a sip of the daiquiri, and was surprised to find that it wasn't that bad.

Previously, in his somewhat sheltered life, he had only ever had whiskey, and that wasn't really his choice. Some of the older boys from high school poured some down his throat in a bit of hazing during an overnight field trip. He spent most of that night puking in the toilet. By comparison, this drink was pleasant. Ignorant to how much alcohol he'd just consumed he accepted another without hesitation, and tried to act just as nonchalant once the joint was offered to him. The first puff he took, he didn't inhale. Unsure of why the girls were snickering, he asked, "Am I doing it wrong?"

Ruby chuckled and took it from his hands, playfully admonishing him, and showing him how to be a proper delinquent. She then took the joint and placed it in her mouth backwards, holding it in place with her teeth. Floored by this feat, Will sat dumbfounded with his mouth hanging open. Before he realized it, she had put her face right up to his, and was blowing a shotgun right through his lips. He choked and gagged, and the two girls couldn't help but let out a giggle. Once Will regained his composure, he quickly stood up, embarrassed, and tried to leave. It was only then that it hit him just how intoxicated he had become. He was powerless when Molly took his hand, and while profusely apologizing for their little joke, sat him down on the floor between her legs.

Will melted into place while Molly ran her fingers through his long blonde hair. She was amazed by how soft and well cared for it was. She had certainly never seen hair like this on a boy before. It spilled over his shoulders beautifully, and the only flaw she could find were the split ends that all rested down at the small of his back. It had obviously been a while since he'd gotten a haircut.

He answered a series of get-to-know-you questions Ruby asked, while Molly had begun pulling a brush through his long locks. He relaxed even further, as he found all the tugging, pulling and twisting very pleasant. Though his responses were concise, they were able to gather just a little bit of information about this boy. He was nineteen, he lived in the large pink house across the street, and he worked, doing something on the internet. Beyond that, they couldn't get much else out of the youth, other than he thought the drink was delicious, and that he was sleepy.



It was around five in the morning when Will woke up, covered by a blue and yellow afghan, with his head on a couch cushion. The room was dimly lit by a small nightlight, plugged into an outlet by the door, but his head was pounding

so hard that even that seemed a bit too bright. He struggled to find his way to his feet, and began the short but arduous walk down the street and back to his bed. Almost as soon as his head hit the pillow, he passed out again, not even managing to get the covers over his body, other than a small corner he pulled tightly around his torso.

Precisely at ten Will was again awoken, this time by the sound of his doorbell being rung repeatedly. He was quite surprised to hear the chime echo through his house a second time. By the fifth time, he managed to coax his lithe figure out of the bed and down the stairs to his front door. He was even more surprised to find the two ladies who he had spent the previous evening with standing in his doorway.

"Took you long enough," Ruby said dryly, tapping her foot impatiently on the pavement.

"Don't mind her," Molly said. "I told her it was rude to knock before ten, and wouldn't you know it, we've been standing outside with her staring at the clock on her phone since nine fifty-five. It's hard to get Ruby to focus on anything else, once something has her interest."

"That may be true, but that's also why we have a thriving business," countered Ruby, playfully sticking out her tongue. "So are you going to invite us in or what?" Not waiting for an answer she stepped into his foyer and started snooping around.

"Why have I got your interest?" Will murmured, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"You're not gonna murder us, and use our bodies to make some kind of home decor, are you?" Ruby asked, pushing up her sunglasses.

"What?... No!" Will shouted, confused as ever.

Molly, stifling a chortle, stepped through the threshold and interjected, "What I think she's trying to say is, it's rather strange for a teenage boy to show up unannounced with cookies for the new neighbors... At least in this day and age. We barely learned anything about you before you passed out last night, and then you were gone this morning."

"I'm only a teen for another couple of months," Will fumed, only to realize how childish it sounded, after the words exited his lips.

"I gotta say, all of this furniture covered in plastic vibe, isn't really doing a lot to help with the whole serial killer thing." Ruby said, poking her head through the living room door.

"My grandma always said the living room was for hosting, and that the furniture should remain covered so it's ready for when you plan to do so."

"Does your grandma live here?" Molly asked.

The boy's face dropped, and he sullenly said, "No, she passed away last year."

"Oh, I'm so sorry for your loss," Molly said, gently placing her hand on his arm. "What about your parents?"

"Well, I never knew my dad, and my mom left when I was four years old. I lived with my grandma for my entire life, and she left me the house, and her estate. I mean it wasn't like a billion dollars or anything, but the house is paid for, so it's not a lot to keep up with really. I'll have full access to the trust on my twenty-first birthday, so with my current budget it's not like anything will change that drastically. I mean, I mostly just play video games, and watch tv. I do like to cook too, I guess..." He paused for a moment. "That's way more information than you asked for. Sorry, I babble when I get nervous," he said, his voice starting to well up, and his eyes showing the faintest hint of tears.

"That's okay sweetie!" Molly said, pulling Will in tightly for a hug. "You don't have anything to apologize for."

"Well, if you're not a psycho, I'd suggest doing something about the whole sterile vibe. It's pretty creepy," Ruby said, awkwardly patting him on the back.

"Anyway..." Molly started, shooting a glare at Ruby, before returning her attention to the quivering youth. "We're still unpacking, but why don't you come over, and hang out while we work. I'd like to get to know my new neighbor without him falling asleep within the hour."

Ruby added, "Fair warning though, if you pass out again, this time we're gonna add some curls to your 'do."

Will went to anxiously run his fingers through his hair, and noticed that it felt like it was tied in knots. "What's this?" he asked, turning to look in a nearby mirror door. It was then that he realized his hair was plaited tight against his head down both sides, and then tied off with pink hair ribbons, tied into bows, and spilling out into two loose pigtails down his back. It was the exact same style as that worn by Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. "I can't believe you let me walk around like this!"

"I can't believe it took you so long to notice," chuckled Ruby.

"Yeah, at first I was trying to stifle my laughter, but you wear it so well that for a moment, I completely forgot that anything was out of the ordinary," said Molly through a cheshire grin. "When you fell asleep last night in my lap, you were just so cute, and I couldn't help myself. You really didn't notice anything strange?"

"My head has felt pretty weird since the first time I woke up at your house this morning. I've never really drank like that before. I've never even really drank at all before if I'm being honest, now can you please tell me what you've done, so I can undo it?" Will replied, fumbling with his hair gracelessly.

"I'll help you take it down," Molly said, before suggesting, "You might want to brush your teeth first though."



After cleaning himself up a little, Will found himself sitting at the coffee table on a plastic covered armchair while Molly sorted his hair out, and Ruby, not so subtly, gave him the third degree. Ruby grilled, “So, what possessed you to darken our doorstep yesterday, Will... if that is in fact your real name? That’s a pretty weird thing for a little boy to do, bringing cookies and all.”

“Maybe you can tell me what’s normal for old ladies to do then, because I guess I just didn’t know,” Will replied snarkily, causing Molly to fumble with the ribbon in Will’s hair, while she let out an involuntary chortle. The sarcasm in Will’s tone surprised even him, and it showed in his aghast expression. Turn-

ing his gaze back to the wood grained surface in front of him, he mumbled, “I mean, if it was so weird, then why did you welcome me in so readily?”

“Well for starters, cookies, but also, we were pretty fucked up, and you just looked so pathetic, it was hard to be scared of you.”

“Ruby, be nice!” Molly admonished, while running a brush through Will’s recently freed locks. “I didn’t think you looked pathetic. Just cute and harmless.” She didn’t realize this wasn’t as much of a comfort to Will as she was intending. “Anyway, your hair is back to normal. A little more wave, perhaps, but still pretty normal.” She looked around the high ceilings of the old house. “How about the dime tour?”

Will led them around the house starting in the living room. The furniture underneath all the plastic was mid-century modern, composed mostly of dark, shiny glossed woods, with little patches of upholstery decorated with buttons and tassels. There was a plethora of different pieces, from tables to chairs, to stools — none of which looked particularly comfortable. They were all arranged in a circle, around the coffee table, which Will’s grandmother thought was best suited for conversation. Every surface was topped by several magazines, ashtrays, and vintage table lighters. On a side table sat an antique wooden radio, and what looked like a vintage record player, which Molly had guessed was probably from the seventies. Underneath the side table, were a couple of crates, stuffed with old records. In the back corner there was an in-house bar, with two low backed, upholstered bar stools tucked in front under the ledge of the countertop. Behind it was a series of mirror-backed shelves and cabinets, stocked with several different varieties of fine spirits, and cocktail glasses for every occasion. “My grandma used to host her book club here,” Will said, generally gesturing clumsily toward the room.

“Well, I can see you’ve never had a career in real estate,” Ruby joked. She walked over to the table, reaching under the plastic, and lit the little silver oil lamp shaped lighter. She then used it to light the Virginia Slim she’d placed between her lips.

“Ruby! I can’t believe you, you should ask first before lighting up in someone else’s house!” admonished Molly, in a rare display, crossing her arms and fuming.

Will quickly jumped in to diffuse the situation, “No she’s totally okay. My grandma smoked like a freight train. They did an appraisal when she passed, to settle the estate, and they told me I’d have to fumigate, replace all the wallpaper, replace all the floorboards, and re-popcorn the ceiling if I was ever going to sell the place. Otherwise, I’d never get rid of the smoke smell, and nicotine stains.”

“Still though...” Molly trailed off, shooting daggers with her eyes at Ruby one more time, before continuing “... It’s a lovely room.”

The dining room was much the same in decor — and amount of plastic coverage — with just a china cabinet containing a vintage Noritake pattern standing tall in the back by the window. However, off to its side, the kitchen was the first room in the house that showed signs of being alive and well. There was no dust to be found, and all the tile was freshly cleaned and wiped down, with the hand-washed pots sitting in the dish drainer being the only thing that even looked remotely out of place. The large block cutting board sitting on the kitchen island showed signs of rigorous use, but was well maintained, and oiled regularly. On top of it sat a knife, and off to its side was a home assistant speaker screen. The cabinets and tile floors all looked like something straight out of a nineteen-fifties issue of *Home and Bazaar*, but all of the appliances were relatively new. Will said, “My grandma and I used to cook meals together every night. I still cook for myself, but I find it’s hard to just prepare a meal for just one person, and not wind up throwing away a lot. I thought about trying those meal delivery kits, but I’m afraid her ghost would rise from the grave, and terrorize me for the next fifty years.”

“Oh my god! Is this yours?” squealed ruby, lifting a white waist apron from its hook in the front of the pantry. It had lace accents around the seam, and a large pocket to the side with a little pink bow.

“No, I just left it there... in umm... in memory of my grandma.” Will stammered, while his face began to flush crimson. “I don’t even really wear an apron when I cook.”

“I’m sure,” Ruby replied, through a tight grin. “And this fresh ketchup stain is here because of some kind of quantum tunneling situation, I’m guessing...” she taunted.

“Okay fine, you got me,” Will said, before swinging the pantry door open, revealing a laundry basket full of kitchen towels, aprons, and dozens of cloth dinner napkins. “I use every apron in the house to death before I wash them... I mean I really, really, really hate doing laundry.”

Looking into the basket, both girls couldn’t help but guffaw at the sight before them. Even Molly was cracking up, her hand over her mouth, which did little to hide the obvious glee in her expression. She noticed Will’s embarrassment, and quickly tried to comfort him. “It’s cute though,” she said, but the damage had been done. Mortified, but trying to salvage any scrap of dignity he could manage, Will found a seat at the small kitchen table in front of the bay window that looked out over the back yard. Gazing upon the scene Molly thought, “This place is almost a Norman Rockwell painting.” After regaining their composure, the trio made their way up the stairs.

The next room was the master bedroom. It was much larger than the girls expected, and both couldn’t help but fantasize about what they’d do with it if they ever found themselves in possession of such a suite. The room itself was quite large, with a large oak bed in the middle of the back wall. On the opposite side

of the room from the door was a sitting area around a small coffee table, all around a small turn dial box tv on the floor. The only somewhat modern piece of technology in the room was the adapter box, so her antennae could pick up digital signals, and convert them into something the ancient machine could understand.

Right by the entryway was a vanity filled with so many perfumes and powders of such fine quality, it would have made Solomon blush, as well as enough vintage hair care equipment to fully arm a midcentury beauty salon. To the right of the vanity was a small hallway that housed his and hers sinks complete with brass faucets, and parlor mirrors. On the opposite side from them was a large walk-in closet with mirror doors, packed to the gills with the entirety of his grandpa's garments, and some of his grandmother's as well.

Finally, at the end of the small hallway was the bathing area. There was a commode with some old magazines on the back right by the door, a glass-doored shower against the wall, but the star of the show was right in the middle of the floor. The sunken jacuzzi bathtub was easily the most expensive fixture in the house. Large enough to fit four people, it was the nicest tub either of the girls have ever seen. "I'll be right back with my bubble bath," joked Molly, while Ruby stood by with her chin nearly on the floor. "This must be your favorite part of the house."

"Actually, I've never used it. My grandma was set in her ways, and didn't like it when people messed with her things."

Will then lead him back out into the hallway with Ruby closely following behind. They came to the next room, which was supposed to be Will's grandma's sewing room, but perhaps a more accurate name for it was a second walk in closet. There were racks and racks of vintage dresses, skirts, and blouses in various styles, ranging from the forties, all the way up to the early seventies. In the corner was an antique sewing machine, and an adjustable dress form across from a large table covered in various fabrics, zippers, buttons, scissors, and the like.

The room smelled somewhat of mothballs, but that did nothing to detour the two young ladies from rummaging through the racks, garment to garment, squealing at the absolute buffet of vintage pieces before them. It didn't take too long before Ruby hung her head and cried, "Your grandma was one of those tiny bitches from back in the day! Women back then were always starvin' themselves, and they were all so much shorter. That's why it's hard for curvy girls like me, and tall girls like Molly to buy actual vintage pieces, instead of just reproductions. Most women back then were closer to your size..." she said before realizing she might have hit a sore spot with the short boy in front of her, "... but you're still growing, I'm sure... Oooh! This sewing machine is wonderful!" She quickly turned her attention to the hand crafted piece of machinery.



It was one of the older models that folded up into the table, and in lieu of an engine, had a pedal mechanism to manually power the device.

While that captured all of Ruby's attention, Molly found herself entranced by a large black and white photo of a woman hanging on the wall. Her hair was in an updo, fronted by two asymmetrical victory rolls, and her makeup was immaculate. She was wearing black pumps, and a short silk slip, covered strategically by a fur coat in just the right places to send the intended signals. Molly read the bottom of the photo before asking, "Who is Billie Jean Monroe?"

"That was my grandmother," said Will, matter of factly. "That's actually the real reason I introduced myself to you guys. It was the first time I'd ever seen any other real life human person with a similar style to hers. I guess she was a model when she was young."

Ruby peered over her shoulder, caught sight of the photo, and said, "Bullshit. Your grandma was a pin-up."

"What's the difference?" Will asked.

"There isn't much of one," answered Molly, her attention still rapt on the photo. Every other photo of this woman in the house showed a person who maybe dressed in an outmoded though stylish fashion, but looked nothing like the vampish beauty that was on display in this picture.

"I'm sorry if it's weird, but I've just been kind of lonely since she's been gone, and you just felt weirdly approachable. I really wasn't trying to be creepy or anything."

Molly's instinct to nurture kicked in again, and she pulled him in tightly and said, "Not creepy at all darling."

After a few more moments, Ruby broke the silence, and said, "I feel like we must have seen this whole house already, and we still haven't seen your room. Do you live under the stairs like Harry Potter or something?"

Will replied, "No, but my room is pretty boring. There's not a lot to it." He led the two towards the last door in the hallway, and opened it. To say the room was small was an understatement. His grandma's wardrobe wouldn't have fit in there. There was a bed, a dresser, and a desk with a computer. That was it. The walls were bare. The floor was bare. Everything was bare.

"I'd say 'boring' is an understatement," Ruby joked while she and Molly took in the whole situation. There were some jeans balled up on the floor, and the room didn't have the layer of dust that seemed to permeate the rest of the house. Molly wasn't one hundred percent apprised of the entire situation here, but she knew this was no way for a person to live.

She asked, "So you have this entire house to yourself, and you spend all of your time in this room or the kitchen?"

"I mean, I use the hall bathroom too," Will joked back, trying to diffuse the awkwardness that suddenly filled the room.

Ruby chortled, then commented, "Seriously though, I don't know how you do it. If I was your age, and had a house like this, my friends would be over all the time, and this place would be trashed. I'm surprised this isn't *the* hangout spot for the neighborhood."

Will answered solemnly, "I don't really have friends. I never really have."

"That's surely not true," said Molly in disbelief. "You're just so sweet."

Will had to think for a moment before opening up. "I mean, it makes a certain amount of sense. Being raised by my grandma, I guess she didn't really have any friends with kids, and on the rare occasion one of her book club, or tea time companions would drop by with a grandchild, they were usually mean, or indifferent, or whatever, and we didn't really play together." The young man sighed. "She also insisted on homeschooling me through elementary school because she didn't want to haul me across town every day. I begged to go to public middle school and she finally relented, though I regretted it when the day finally came." Will smirked, wryly. "At that point, I found it hard to connect with the other kids. The boys were all pretty mean, and they made fun of me for being so small. They would regularly use an F word I found repugnant. Before it was all over, I didn't really want to know any of them anyway."

He paused for a moment, with an introspective expression before continuing. "A few girls on the other hand were more tolerant, and I think they tried to include me with their group at first, but they just kept going on and on about whatever kpop trend, makeup trend, or whatever was in, and by high school, we'd just stopped talking altogether. Like, I didn't even know a quarter of the bands they brought up. My favorite musicians are Wanda Jackson, and Johnny Burnette."

"No way!" exclaimed Ruby, "Wanda Jackson is my favorite too!" She threw her hand up for a high-five, and Will unskillfully complied. You could tell he had not given many in his nineteen years.

Molly's heart swelled for this child. She knew she wasn't that much older than him, but he was so naive and inexperienced, and she could tell he'd been taken care of for all his life. She didn't ask, but at this point assumed his grandma was the one to cut his hair, and that's why it was in its current unkempt state. He was eating enough, and he was clean, but outside of that, this kid was hanging on by a thread. Once again she wrapped her arms around the boy, hugging him firmly from behind, before saying "You can't say you haven't got friends anymore, because you have two right here."

Ruby was less convinced of the purity of the youth before them, but held her tongue. "I'm curious, what is it that you do again? I asked you last night, but by that point you were pretty sloshed, and I didn't understand a word you said. Something about computers?"

"Oh, I'm a social media manager," Will said, much to both of their surprise. "I also dabble in graphic design. I mostly create banners, and icons. Occasionally I do a thumbnail for a youtube video, but a lot of the time those are just still frames. Other than that, I schedule posts, type up video summaries, respond to DMs, and handle all of the other minutiae that comes with having a social media presence."

"I gotta say, I did not see that coming," said a shocked Ruby.

"I might not have a ton of experience with people on a personal level, but I have spent a ton of time on the internet. I guess I have enough talent for understanding the aesthetic and language that my clients are trying to curate, and how to fold that into the cultural zeitgeist that's happening on the internet. That plus google analytics usually gets me at least some increase in my clients social media traffic."

"That's so interesting. Do you make a lot of money?" asked Molly.

"Not a ton," he said, pausing to figure out how to respond. His grandma had always drilled in that antiquated idea of not talking about money because it was gauche. He continued, "I mean I don't have a ton of clients. Mostly streamers, but I am managing all the social media accounts for a small online thrift store based out of Oregon. The house is paid for already, the bills get paid, I get my groceries delivered, I pay for my internet and streaming services, and every now and then I can afford to buy a new game, or upgrade my PC. It's not perfect, but I'm getting by."

"That's pretty impressive for someone your age. You're kind of making me feel bad about myself," joked Molly.

Standing, Ruby said, "Seriously though, we could probably use some help in that department. We've mostly grown our business by word of mouth, but maybe we could do more with social media. We can talk about it tomorrow when we come over, and take you out to lunch. You definitely need to get out of this house more. For today however, we must sadly take our leave. We've got a gig up in Los Feliz, and we need to get going."

"She's right," Molly said forlornly, before squeezing Will one last time, and then kissing him gently on the forehead. "We've got bills to pay too, but we will be back tomorrow. You're not getting rid of us that easily." As they walked away from the house, they waved their goodbyes, and Will returned inside with a skip in his step.



Over the next several weeks, Ruby, Molly, and Will found themselves hanging out more and more often until it was every day. The girls had made good on their promise to take him to lunch, and several times since the trio enjoyed a

meal together. With every outing, Will was finding it easier and easier to get out of the house. He'd started working on their social media presence as well, and engagement was up significantly. Since then there had been a noticeable uptick in requests for Ruby and Molly's services all across the state of California and beyond. Things were definitely on an upward trajectory for everyone involved.

The girls had learned a lot about Will. His grandmother had taught him many skills. Obviously, he was an excellent cook, but she'd also educated him in both ballroom, and jazz dancing with such vigor, that he was an expert at both leading and following. His grandmother said it was so he would have an understanding of what his partner was doing, and that way he could anticipate their needs as they moved across the dance floor.

She also taught him a lot about color pallets, and how to use them when dressing or decorating; a skill he found quite useful once he'd started dabbling in graphic design.

Through story after story, they started to see the whole picture, though. Will's grandma obviously loved her grandchild, and she wanted nothing but the best for him, but she'd failed in several ways.

One could assume it was due to her shortcomings in raising her daughter. Letting Will's mother grow up care-free, had taught her nothing about responsibility and had left her mother with another baby to raise; a child who couldn't help but shake a feeling of disposability, his whole life. Through constant micro-managing, Will's grandmother raised a person whose entire life was wrapped around hers.

His taste was her taste. His opinions were her opinions. She was his best friend, and he was hers. That was how, with the best of intentions, she'd left the poor child unable to function once she was gone. He didn't really know how to connect with his peers, and he struggled with making decisions for himself.

Eventually, Molly felt comfortable enough to encourage Will to move on with his life. She tried to gently nudge Will out of his comfort zone regularly, and every little bit was helping, though the two biggest contributors to loosening him up turned out to be Mary Jane and Jose Cuervo.



One afternoon, Will was sitting in the girls living room, smoking a bowl with newly acquired expertise. A few puffs later, Will went to pass the pipe, and he noticed his friends had both nodded off in their chairs. Ruby and Molly had been running themselves ragged for the previous few weeks since their bookings had gone up, and both of them were well on their way to dreamland. Deciding to let them rest, he stood up, and started to make his way towards the door, but just as he was leaving, he glanced over to the mess in front of their

washing machine, and noticed a colorful, floral patterned bundle of cloth on the floor. In his stupor, he picked it up to discover it was a pair of Molly's floral print panties. Molly had probably intended to wash them, but they never made it into the machine, and Will was all too aware of her scent as it lingered on the undergarment.

Molly saw Will as a cute little boy to be taken care of, but in reality, he was a young man, and the desires of a young man were present, even if he was far too meek to act on them. His infatuation with her had kept him coming back, but he'd probably never get the courage to do anything useful about it. His current inebriation however did plenty to tear down the impulse control that would have normally stopped him from sticking those panties in his pocket and sneaking quietly out of the door. If only he'd known that one of the four eyes he'd thought was closed was in fact, wide open.

That next morning, Will awoke to the very same knock that had startled him to consciousness that first morning after meeting the girls. He didn't even have time to say hello, before the five foot bulldozer named Ruby barged into his foyer uninvited. "We need to talk!" she stated firmly, marching into his living room and lighting a cigarette.

"Good morning to you too, Ruby," Will said groggily, before asking, "Where's Molly?"

"She's still asleep. I figured, for now, it'd be best if our conversation was one on one. Sit!" she said firmly, pointing at the armchair. Fearfully, he complied, though he was still pretty confused about what this was all about. "You know, I actually got to a point where I didn't think you were secretly a perv, but you had to go and prove me right. I told Molly that teenage boys are all only interested in one thing, but she didn't believe me, but here we are."

"What are you talking about, Ruby?" He asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Seriously, you're gonna pretend that you didn't slip Molly's unmentionables in your pocket before you snuck out last night?"

When this interaction had started, Will truly didn't recall much of the final hours of the previous evening, but as soon as the words escaped Ruby's lips, he knew what he'd done. "Oh my god Ruby, I'm so sorry!" he cried, hanging his head in shame. "I don't know what came over me. I swear, I've never done anything like this before. Please don't tell Molly." Tears poured down his face through sloppy sobs to the point that Ruby couldn't help but feel a little pity for him.

"Don't worry, I ain't telling her shit," she spit back, still glaring down at him. "Now, pull yourself together. I believe you. I sincerely doubt you've been running some scheme to get to know your neighbors just to steal their underpants. If that was the case, I doubt you'd be so fucking terrible at it. Also, honestly, we've been making a lot of extra money since you've started handling our socials, and I'm not trying to fuck that up either. Molly is too emotional to prop-

erly separate business from everything else. If I'm being honest, I don't think you're the vile scum of the earth, but I also truly believe that if I don't step in here, you're gonna wind up as another one of those incel weirdos who shoots up a shopping mall, and I'm not fucking having it."

That was a lot to unload on the poor boy, and all he could do was just to ask the most obvious question. "So what now?"

"Well, you for sure need to know that this was fucked up, and you're gonna have to pay some kind of price, so you learn your lesson."

"I promise I'll never do it again, Ruby. I'll do anything." Will truly did feel sorry, but was also terrified at the thought of being so completely and totally alone again. When he said anything he meant it.

"You're damn right you'll do anything," Ruby said, tapping her foot on the floor with her arms crossed tightly. "First off you're going to be helping us around the house for the next while. We still have a lot of work left to do before our pad is set up, and an extra set of hands could help us get caught up a lot quicker. You better get used to doing that laundry you hate doing so much, because you're going to be doing quite a bit. Most of our costumes are hand-wash only. In fact, to pour some salt on that wound, you're gonna be wearing one of those pretty aprons you've got stashed away while we do it, capiche?" Will just nodded his head silently, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Another person might have stopped there, seeing the genuine remorse on the young man's face, but she had been working herself up into red-hot rage, and wasn't going to stop. "Also, for the next few months, you're going to graciously wave your fee, because, as far as Molly is concerned, you really want to help us get our business going strong. As far as the rest, I'm not sure yet, but mark my words, you're gonna wish you hadn't played the perverted panty thief. Do you understand?"

Will nodded his head, tearfully. "I need to hear you say it, darlin'," Ruby added coldly, without an ounce of sympathy.

"I understand," he squeaked.

"Good. Now if you can get through your probation, we can go back to how things were, and we're good. Molly will be none the wiser, and you and I will be great friends, who can let bygones be bygones, but if you screw up, and act on your pervy impulses again, I'll come back over here, and I'll take one of your balls." She let that statement sink in for a beat. "After that, I'll tell Molly. She may be unreasonably sweet, but I guarantee you, once she hears about all this, she'll be back over here to take the other. Now go get her undies so I can sneak them back into her laundry before she wakes up." Shamefully, Will scurried off to comply with her orders, mortified at the thought of Ruby's threats. From there on out the humiliated boy was definitely going to be on his best behavior.



One day, about a month later, Will was making lunch for everyone. He was doing this not at Ruby's request, but because he genuinely enjoyed feeding people. The inevitable praise was one of the few things he'd ever really allow himself to be prideful of. Still, he was wearing his frilliest bib apron while he handled his veggie prep since he didn't want to give Ruby any reason to come down on him. Things had been going well lately, and he was getting the feeling that he was very close to being out of the doghouse.

Meanwhile, the girls sat at the kitchen table, scrolling away on their phones. "Holy shit!" screamed Ruby, with her eyes locked firmly on her device. "Reverend Horton Heat is playing a secret show tonight at some club in the hills."

"I don't know Ruby... that sounds like bullshit." Molly said flatly, pulling herself up from the table and looking over Ruby's shoulder.

"I know, I know... that was my first thought, but this information came through on our business' facebook page, and the message is coming from their official account as well."

"No shit! Why? How?... I mean, what time?" Molly was flummoxed. She could still barely believe the good news. "What exactly does the message say?"

"Tonight, starting at nine, Reverend Horton Heat will be playing a secret show at Alley Cats, just outside Beverly Hills. They're playing a small venue, because they're shooting a music video, and they want to get footage of people dancing, drinking, and carrying on." It's a free show to anyone in the know, but to make sure they get the aesthetic they're going for, they're inviting a bunch of models, like us. They're saying every girl we bring will get one hundred dollars in cash for their trouble."

"That's amazing!" squealed Molly, jumping up and down, before continuing, "We should reach out to everyone in our contacts. It's always good for women to help each other out, and maybe they'll think of us in the future."

Will continued to work quietly, glancing back and forth at the two young women, typing in a flurry on their smartphones. He was amazed that they could display such skill, even in those long artificial nails they wore. A few minutes later, Molly set down her phone, and then looked up, as though suddenly struck with an epiphany. "We need to figure out what we're wearing," she said, standing up and approaching the nearby dress rack stood next to Ruby's sewing station.

"None of those, now." Ruby scolded. "Most of those still need fitting. They're for Vegas in a few days, Honey. We've got plenty of outfits."

"Oh, all right." Molly replied, stomping her foot in a playful manner. "Well, we've got all day until we need to start getting ready..." she started, before turning her attention to Will and continuing, "... so how about that french





onion soup?"



An hour later, the group was seated at the kitchen table enjoying their soup cups, and some cold-cut sandwiches, when Molly asked, "So what are you gonna wear tonight, Will?"

"Wear to what?" Will replied, confused.

"To the show... You *are* coming aren't you? I know you mostly listen to the classics, but this should be right up your alley. I guarantee you'll – at the very least — enjoy the music."

Ruby nodded, swallowing her last bite quickly, before jumping in, "Yeah, psychobilly is fucking awesome and you're not gonna see us for like, a whole week. We're booked at Viva Las Vegas this weekend and we're leaving Thursday morning. You'll need to get your fill of us before we're gone."

"... and you might make some friends besides me and Ruby. That's always a good thing. I mean, you're definitely coming." Molly said, sweetly, but firmly.

"I don't know, guys. I'm probably not even old enough to get in anyway," Will peeped.

"Nonsense!" said Ruby, placing her hands on her hips. "I seriously doubt this is that kind of show — and what are you so scared of, anyway? You've been out with us several times since we've met, and you've been doing just fine. This is just the next step in becoming a fully fledged human being. Besides, we're not gonna know anybody, except a few of the other models, and some of our friends. We'll totally be there to support you."

Will paused for a minute, staring at his plate, before saying meekly, "I mean, I guess it wouldn't be that big of a deal, but I don't have a clue what I'd wear. I pretty much just own like four of the same outfit." He wasn't exaggerating. It couldn't exactly be called a uniform, but his current attire of a pair of khaki trousers, and a white polo shirt weren't exactly what one would call distinct.

Molly patted him gently on top of the head, before saying, "What are you talking about? You've got all that stuff of your grandpa's in the closet. In fact, that's exactly the kind of outfit you should wear to this thing." She glanced at Ruby, her eyes lit up, and asked, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Ruby's face at first, bore a confused gaze, until her face shifted slowly to match the excitement of her friend's, and suddenly the duo exclaimed in unison, "Makeover!"

The next thing Will knew he was standing in front of the mirror door to his grandparent's closet. Ruby was brushing dust off the shoulders of the suit jacket, while Molly was tightening the tie before stepping back to take a look at the

whole picture. She started positively, "If I do say so myself, you look..." before trailing off.

"Terrible," Ruby said bluntly, pulling the jacket tight, and shaking the excess fabric. "This really doesn't suit you. It's way too big. I guess I didn't expect your grandpa to be this large. With your grandma having been so small, and you not being any bigger yourself, I guess I just assumed."

"That's okay guys," Will said, taking off the tie, and unbuttoning the much too large shirt. Holding up the much too large pants, he took a seat in the nearby vanity chair. It was the first time the girls noticed just how small his frame was. From what Ruby could tell, his ribcage was nowhere near as wide as hers, and his shoulders were barely any wider, almost totally even with his hips, which were somewhat wide for his size, but matched well with his plump, bubble butt. He continued, "It's too bad, I'm not a girl. I mean, my grandma and I were about the same size, and she left enough clothes in the house to dress the neighborhood."

Behind his back, both girls' eyes met, and mouthing half whispers to each other, they formed a mischievous plan. They had spoken privately about how pretty he was several times since they had met the youth, Molly often lamenting the waste of such wonderful eyelashes on a boy, and here he had just provided them with the perfect opportunity. Will saw Molly approaching from behind in the mirror, but was too slow to react. The next thing he knew, she had him trapped, furiously tickling him, leaving him with no chance to respond. Meanwhile, Ruby had found two pink chiffon scarves, and was tying his wrist firmly to the armrest. She then located a stretchy, wide belt, which she proceeded to affix around the back of the chair, and around his biceps, just under his shoulders, firmly pinning him to the seat. He was embarrassed at his predicament, but grateful that Molly had finally stopped torturing him. "Very funny, guys," he said. "You got me. Can you let me go now?"

Much to his surprise, Molly took a lipstick and mascara from the vanity, and straddled him, looking deep into his eye, and with a wicked grin, she said, "Nope. This is happening. You might as well not struggle," before uncapping the applicator, and drawing a perfectly overdrawn cupid's bow across hip plump lips. Next she took the mascara wand, and just as she proffered it to his eyes, he began compulsively blinking. She returned it to his container, and leaned in whispering in his ear, "Do you trust me?"

"That's a bold question to ask, when you've got me bound like this," he joked.

"Seriously, do you trust me? I promise, I will never hurt you... at least, not on purpose. So, again, do you trust me?"

He paused for a moment, thinking about the question, and everything it implied, and realized he did. He sat quietly, while she went back to work, coating his lashes in the thick black substance. Once finished, she stood up, and grabbed a hair brush. While she went to work, pulling all of his hair tightly on



top of the back of his head, Ruby came out of the closet, holding a strapless, baby blue dress that she could only assume was a bridesmaids dress. She slid the opening over Will's pants, and pulled it up to his torso. Molly, having gathered all the flyaways, wound a hair elastic from her wrist around the base of the newly created ponytail. Afterwards, she removed both chiffon scarves, tying one around the hair elastic, and tying the other, jauntily around his neck. After she undid the belt, Will let them finish zipping up the dress, and walked over with them to the mirror to see how their prank turned out.

"Is that me?" he asked no one in a voice befitting a mouse. With minimal effort, he had been transformed from a very young looking boy to a cute, albeit disheveled girl. The eyebrows were a mess, and the outfit was strange, but his face read only as female. At that very moment, as though the universe itself had a sense of humor, the oversized pants fell down beneath the hem of the tea length skirt. Ruby, and Molly were huddled together, laughing so hard, they were crying for five minutes straight. They'd regain their composure for just a second or two, and then someone would crack up again, pulling the other back in. All the while, Will was frantically reaching for the zipper behind his back, and hoping the floor would open up and swallow him whole. Finally, after it started to hurt, they pulled themselves together, and returned to observing Will in the mirror, though this time it was almost academic. Molly was cleaning her glasses in preparation, like a paleontologist, ready to examine a fossil for the first time.

It was Will who finally spoke first. "C'mon guys. Help me out of this getup. Enough is enough. I didn't think it would be so easy to make me look like a girl."

"I would've," Ruby said, sizing him up. Will's face betrayed a slightly bruised ego.

Molly, trying to defuse the situation, said, "What she means is, you're just so young. Your face hasn't had time to develop any masculine traits yet." It was true. Will's soft pale skin, his cute turned up nose, and his high cheekbones did little to convey a sense of masculinity. It would be safe to assume that the reason he was usually read as male, was solely because of how he carried himself. His voice was quite androgynous even, sounding something like a tomboy sidekick in a nineties kids movie. "Think about it this way," Molly said, putting her arm around his shoulder, and standing beside him gazing at their reflection, "In fifteen years when we're both old and ugly, you'll still be killing it."

"Yeah, I guess so," he said with a sigh, still mortified by his own reflection.

"I can't help but wonder how good you would have looked if I'd spent more than five minutes on your makeup," Molly said, fussing with his ponytail, still doing nothing to remove Will's dress.

Will's eyes met Ruby's in the mirror, where she was doing nothing to hide her mischievous grins. "No, no, no, absolutely not," he said, awkwardly giggling, while Molly continued to paw at him like a cat.

"Pretty pretty please," Molly begged sweetly, with mock sad eyes, looking up at him pleadingly, from behind her hands.

Ruby joined in, prodding, "C'mon darlin'. You've pretty much decided you're not going anywhere tonight, and as a matter of fact, you don't go anywhere without us anyway. Who's gonna see ya? We've got about five hours to burn before we gotta start getting ready. Let us have some fun... *pleeeeeeaaassse*."