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Big Nothing:
A Story About Bicycles and the Girls Who Ride Them in the Heart of West Texas

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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Big Nothing:

A Story of Bicycles and the Girls Who Ride Them in the Heart of West Texas

The traffic parted and the smoke cleared to reveal a freight truck whose trailer had been stripped clean by the fire birthed by an overworked engine. Its metal frame arched toward the desert sky like the vulture-eaten ribs of a cattle's corpse. This was the reward for over two hours veritably parked on a six-mile strip of highway in some far-off nowhere in Arizona. The dashboard thermometer read 110°F and the air conditioning had taken to blowing a constant stream of what felt like human breath. Paisley's father had said a good handful of times that "there'd better be something real damn wild at the end to justify all this mess". When the smoldering truck revealed itself, all he had to say in response was "okay, sure."

Their one-way road trip had started the day before when they left their home in San Bernardino for the final time. Paisley had been anxious about having to pack all her belongings for months, thinking it an insurmountable undertaking for a fourteen-year-old to put everything she had ever known into a mass of boxes. She was somehow even more anxious when she learned that said undertaking would only wind up taking an hour or two, and that everything she had ever known fit in two average sized boxes and an oversized duffle bag. Everything, of course, except for her prized 1989 Schwinn Le Tour, which had its own reserved and highly secure space on the roof rack of her father's SUV. When she took inventory of her packaged belongings, scanning the house to make sure she hadn't overlooked a single valuable thing, she was sad to learn that she didn't really have much that she found value in. She felt that maybe she related less to the contents of the two boxes she had filled, and more to all the empty space of the countless boxes that would go unneeded. She placed a hand on her chest to feel the dull thudding

of her heartbeat to remind herself that life and energy flowed within her. Otherwise, she might feel like another empty box, without purpose.

Paisley was afraid of moving away from the city she grew up in, but not for the same reasons many children her age would be. Paisley wasn't especially known for having friends, and for her part she was content with that. She liked to spend her time alone, lost in her thoughts and fantasies. She would daydream until her feet felt like they were no longer touching the ground, and nothing made her sadder than having those moments of floating interrupted by the heavy reality that other people tried to keep her in. So, her social life wasn't her primary concern when it came time to abandon her home. Instead, she was afraid to leave San Bernardino because she had memorized all the perfect bike routes within a thirty-mile radius. On one hand, the thought of pointing her front wheel toward the unknown with the intent of riding through it until it became the extremely well-known got her so excited that she would sometimes catch herself tightly gripping her fists around imaginary handlebars. On the other, the fear that their new home would have insufficient routes and roads compared to San Bernardino made her heart bounce awkwardly in her chest like a deflated tire crawling along the blacktop. Where she lived, she knew where to go when she was overwhelmed and she wanted to feel like the only things in the Universe were herself, the night sky, and God. She knew all the best circuits to race on when she needed to train her muscles until they felt they had melted underneath her skin. She knew hills that felt like death to climb even at the lowest gear but would reward her with speeds approaching 50mph when she finally bombed them.

Her fear was that she might never know these places again. In San Bernardino and its surrounding areas, she was able to find ample races, sometimes even large events with racers that had corporate affiliations and, while she never got to race as an official athlete, they would

always let her run the course with the others. Her greatest source of pride came from catching the glimpses from coaches and team leaders, full of spite and fury as she blew past them. She had always hoped that someday, one of these races would net her the right kind of attention from an international level team and she could become a real athlete. She saw Texas, or at least the place they were moving, as the place that hope went to die. The closest things she found to a proper race during more than one anxiety-fueled late night internet search were small town community events that raised money for things like libraries or food banks, and while she was more than happy to kick up dust for something like that, it wasn't exactly the kind of event that would land her a sponsorship. She found one pro level team, Road Gods Pro, but their offices in Dallas may as well have been in Austria as far as she was concerned.

Paisley had two idols, both of whom she kept framed portraits of on her bedside table. The first was Prince, who was more or less forced upon her at birth by her mother who grew up in Minnesota and swore that "Raspberry Barret" was inspired by an outfit she wore at one of his concerts. She didn't always love Prince as much as she felt she was expected to, but learned to when his music became a way for her to connect to her mom after her parents got divorced and she moved back to the Midwest. The other was Marianne Martin, the first winner of the Tour de France Feminin. These two portraits were placed securely at the top of a box labeled 'Most Important'. Occasionally during the drive, Paisley would overcome her nerves by looking at the portrait of Martin and staying focused on her ambition. No matter where she was from, or where she wound up, Paisley would become the youngest winner of the Tour. And since the Feminin got replaced by the two day La Course, the women's event would no longer cut it. If it was ever going to happen, it had to be soon, while she was still young enough to pull off prepubescent-boy and scam her way into the men's competition. She knew, of course, that was a pipe dream,

something she would fantasize about while doodling in her notebook in math class. But it kept her moving, and Paisley was too short on motivation to let go of something like this.

The gentle weight of her father's hand nudging her shoulder woke Paisley up from what had been the most painful sleep of her life.

“We just hit El Paso. Should be in Tuluca Rock come about three hours or so” he said. Paisley peeled her face off of the window, sticky with a layer of hours-old sweat, and unwound herself from the horrible, twisted position she had fallen into and pulled the lever to bring the back of her seat back up vertical. She felt like her spine was trying to secede from the rest of her body, and one of her feet stayed numb for several minutes.

“Jesus, Dad. Have you stopped to sleep at all?” she asked. They had been driving since Vegas, where they had stayed with a family friend the night they left.

“Your old man is an internal combustion engine, Pais. I don't sleep 'till I'm done.” J Dilla played faintly underneath the hum of the engine. Her dad was young enough that most people didn't believe she was his daughter, and he stashed hundreds of hours-worth of old CDs in his SUV, claiming they kept his head sharp in situations like this one. “Anyway, figured you'd want to start getting to know your new home.” There were small fields of scattered light far off in the distance, but otherwise the landscape was completely engulfed by the darkness and even the road was mostly hidden but for the few feet the headlights would unveil at a given time. “Or at least, what you might be able to see of it.”

Frantz Thelemaque was an immigration lawyer, not big-time but certainly reputable. He made a name for himself back home for frequently helping struggling undocumented families free of charge. “You don't know how lucky we had it” he would often say to Paisley. “Your

grandparents were able to come here easy,” he would say in the mock-Haitian accent he would always put on when he talked about his parents. “But most of my friends were from immigrant families too, and I saw them deal with some business that would make your soul shatter. I am blessed every day to have only ever had to experience that pain second-hand.” He felt it was his calling from God to help other families try and circumnavigate that hurt. It was also God, according to him, that motivated this sudden move. He said that some places needed more help than others.

Paisley loved her father. He always called himself her hypeman, and in a lot of ways it was true. No one believed in her more than her dad did, and that included herself. Her mom was the one who instilled a love for riding bicycles in her, but it was her father that that pushed her to get better, to see it as more than just a hobby, but something that she could truly succeed at. She always saw this as a reflection of the different people her parents were. Her mother was a free-spirit, drifter type. Her dad was focused, always working hard even when it didn’t seem like he was. He made everything seem so easy and natural, like success just came to him. Her mom, on the other hand, sought a life without burden, a life where she could be pulled in whatever direction her heart told her to go. She always took Paisley on night rides and talked about the peacefulness of it.

“You get to see these places that are usually so full of people and cars, all stressed out and so focused on just moving and working. But you go there at night, on your bike, and it’s silent, peaceful, like nothing is moving at all. It’s just you and the open air, floating through the night like a ghost.” This was more than just a lesson that she learned from her mother, though the speech on how to make the most of your time alone came in handy for someone who spent most of her time that way.

It was also a mantra by which her mother lived her life. It was no secret to her that this is why her mother eventually left. Her father had grown roots where her mother could not. Her father also taught her to love more than just riding, but competing. He put on her an expectation to be great, reminded her every day that she was capable of incredible things as long as she stayed dedicated. And she knew that he believed it more than anything. In this way, he was right to call himself her hypeman.

The further into West Texas they drove, the less distinguishable anything became. The lights of small towns peppering the horizon had disappeared and Paisley had begun to daydream that the car had somehow lifted off the ground and started floating into the abyss of the night sky. She could feel the emptiness speaking to her somehow, acting as some omen, a distant voice resonating deep within her chest. She feared that this endless nothing was what would become of her life. That her future was left behind in their home in San Bernardino, the one thing she forgot to pack. Her father had tried to tell her that she could use this as a chance to reinvent herself too, but even this scared her. She felt that she had only just started to become someone after all these years, and now she had to start again. She tried not to think about it, but she couldn't stop imagining herself drifting aimlessly through the darkness. She looked out the window, her frenzied gaze met by a landscape completely unmarked by so much as a hill or a tree, not even a distant light from some sleepless farm home to offer relief from the impenetrable darkness. Even the moon seemed to taunt her, drifting from one point in the sky to another as the long road wound imperceptibly through the seemingly unchanging world around her. She slammed her head into the headrest and stared at the ceiling of the car, which was also featureless, but at least in a way that she recognized. She tried to calm herself by feeling the vibrations of the tires

spinning beneath her, reminding her that they were not drifting, but charging forward with intent, with control.

“This place is a big flock of fuckin’ nothing, Dad” she said.

“Hey!” he said, clearly stifling a chuckle. “The only thing I hate hearing come out of your mouth more than a curse is a lie.” He looked out his window, and then hers, finally fixing his gaze forward again. “But I guess you ain’t lying, huh?” The truth, which she was hesitant to ever admit even to herself, was that there were times when she resented her father. She watched the way that he worked, the way he dedicated himself to things, and it made her feel inadequate. No matter how hard she tried, she was never able to bring herself to his level. The most she ever did was just get by, in school, in friendships, in everything. She was constantly comparing herself to her father, and she was constantly feeling weaker and weaker the longer she did so. Cycling was the only thing that made her feel like she could match him. Sometimes she felt like she had her entire future invested in cycling, she would never feel complete until she had made a real name for herself in the saddle. She told her father that it was just because she loved cycling so much, but in reality, it was more than that. She knew she would never be able to shoulder the dedication to schoolwork and university grinding that lead her father down the path of success he followed, but she wanted to be more like him. The thought of a future in cycling being left behind in her old home, of not being able to find those opportunities in this empty seeming place, made her feel like the ground beneath her was crumbling. She wanted nothing more than to become the person her father believed she could be, except maybe to believe it herself. She believed that racing was her one shot, and she saw that shot getting further away with every mile that burned under the spinning wheels of the SUV they rode in. She gazed deeply into the darkness around her, trying to find patterns in the increasingly scattered lights from the illuminated porches and

windows of distant farmhouses like they were fallen stars. She wondered how she would ever find a way to showcase her talents to industry folk again in a place as barren and silent as this. She thought about making a wish before they, too, blinked out of existence.

Daylight had finally come to Texas as Frantz and Paisley rounded off the final few hours of their journey. With it, some shape had finally started to emerge out of the waste. A long stretch of road was walled in by miles of farmland, hidden by a thick veil of Bur Oaks. The trunks were evenly spaced apart in such a way that Paisley could tell it was artificial, but the way the wild mass of dark, green leaves merged together in an untamable cloud gave her hope for the first time that maybe this new world she had entered did have some life breathing through it. Every so often, men in pickup trucks with the barrels of shotguns poking out the open windows could be seen patrolling the grounds. These were people, she thought, who made something of the nothing around them. They were, so far, her only hint that she might be able to do the same.

Eventually, the plantations disappeared, and they found themselves in a small town, which appeared to both start and end at its main street. Buildings cropped up all around them, but just beyond them Paisley could still see the familiar expanse of empty dirt-lands. It felt like a movie set, something dropped in place to give the illusion of civilization. Some old timers sat on beaten down porches, the wood cracked with deep scars of age and faded gray, which Paisley noted could double as a description of the men's faces as well. She thought she could tell their type just by looking at them, the dim eyes, the clothes splotted with ancient stains and fraying at the seams. They were the type who had never known another life, who had lived in this town since they were babies and would spend death underneath it. These were men who had been living the exact same day for the last sixty-some years. Men who abandoned the idea of a future,

of a life bigger than the creaking porches and dusty saloons. Men who resigned themselves to slowly dying on a five mile stretch of land that they called the world. Men she was afraid that she might end up like herself. This was the future she truly saw herself living.

It was in this place that they stopped for lunch, passing by a small building that called itself a Cowboy Shoppe to eat at a diner. Somehow, its run-down, dusted 1950s veneer was the most modern feeling part of the whole town. She listened to the air conditioners churning out tepid air, their age making them sound like an animatronic pig letting out an endless whine. She felt like the heat of the building was pushing her body into the sticky vinyl seats at the booth they sat at. She ordered a Coca-Cola and held the cool glass to her forehead, letting the condensation run on her skin before taking a sip.

“So. We’re only about a half-hour away now. How you feeling?” her father asked.

“Ready to sleep in a bed, for one thing.”

“Who you think you’re telling?” he said. Paisley rolled her eyes and then dropped her head into her hand, supported by her elbow driven firmly into the table like a railroad spike. “Baby, I know this ain’t exactly ideal for you, but I promise you’re gonna be okay. God doesn’t lead you anywhere that doesn’t have opportunities for you.”

“Opportunities? Dad, have you seen this place? What opportunities are out here?” She tried to sound playful, but the sadness that she had yet to overcome warped her voice. She wondered why she couldn’t be like him, so confident that there was good in everything. It was yet another strength he had which he did not pass on to her, another reason she did not believe in herself.

“If I know you, Pais, you’ll get on that old bike of yours and find ‘em wherever they are.” Paisley furrowed her brow and dropped her jaw in exaggerated shock. She stole a french fry off his plate and pointed it at him menacingly.

“First of all, Wendy isn’t an *old bike*. She’s the most perfect 12-speed ever made, and you will not disrespect her!” She threw the fry in her mouth and crossed her arms, giving her father an intense squint-eyed stare, one which they both knew was just an act. Her father reached over the table and placed his massive hand on top of her head, shaking her hair around while she swatted at him.

The waitress came by and placed two slices of cherry pie on the table. Paisley was surprised by the sound of the plates clinking against the table and looked up at the waitress to see her smiling softly at them. She only looked a few years older than Paisley, and so she began trying to see herself in her, like a glimpse into her near future. The waitress’ skin was darker than her own, and she had patches of pale white skin on the back of her hand and underneath one eye. Paisley felt a small tinge of relief as she relaxed her shoulders. There was a brightness in the waitress’ eyes that seemed to say that she at the very least wasn’t hopeless. She seemed like a regular kid, just like any back home. If nothing else, Paisley thought that this dim place hadn’t beaten the life out of her. Yet, at least.

“I’m sorry, miss, we didn’t order these” Frantz said.

“I hope you’ll forgive me for overhearing, but it sounds to me like it’s the first day of your new lives here in Texas. Consider it a welcome gift.”

“Well that’s mighty kind of you, miss, we thank you!”

“Let me guess. Most people coming down this route are on their way to Austin. Am I right?”

“Not us. Tuluca Rock is the destination.” The smile quickly vanished from the waitress’ face and she began to abruptly gather the empty glasses and dirty plates from the table.

“Oh. Well. I’ll hope they’re kind to you up that way. I’ll bring you the check,” she said before rushing behind the counter. She wasn’t sure why, but Paisley could tell that something in the waitress’ voice had changed. The way the warmth and cheerfulness were replaced by short, mechanical delivery, and the way she had stopped looking at them, made Paisley uncomfortable. Like the booth had suddenly become just a little bit too hard, or like she just noticed the fullness in her stomach. The air conditioning units continued to sputter as they churned out lukewarm air, and the sound of silverware crashing against ceramic, knives scraping on the plates, were louder than before in the newfound stillness of the room. The way Paisley shifted in her seat must have telegraphed her unease to her father, because he offered her a simple shrug.

“She must’ve realized she had another order to bring out. Servers can’t stand around and talk forever, y’know?” Shortly after, the waitress came back with the check. Her smile had returned when she placed it down on the table.

“No rush. Stay safe on the rest of your journey, now!” Frantz put cash down, and the two left.

The empty spaces beyond town limits filled in more and more as they approached Tuluca Rock until finally the welcome sign signaled their arrival. It looked to Paisley not too unlike any California suburb she had known, but it was sparser and quieter in a way that suggested it was more like a post-fallout version. The lawns there were thicker with desert dirt and dotted with patches of scraggly, dried out grass with only the occasional tuft of long, green grass to bring color to it. The homes themselves looked a bit more aged, boxy and sun-worn. It was a fuller

looking place than she had expected, the emptiness that had plagued their trip to their new home was now hidden by rows of homes and winding roads which lead to even more homes or stores or utility buildings, but it was easy to tell that the emptiness was still there, waiting beyond the threshold of town like a predator. She couldn't shake that it felt like a place where opportunities, futures worth knowing, go to be buried under yellow dirt and marked with a single white cross. When the car slowly lurched into the driveway of their new home, which looked like a mass of oddly shaped soft-tan clay boxes, Paisley felt ready to sleep the rest of the night away, hoping that the light of morning would bring a little more life to the town and wash away her dread.

The sunlight that poured through Paisley's window the following morning was aggressively pooling on her face, painting the darkness behind her eyelids with a red haze that urgently tried to pull her from slumber. She scanned the room with one eye half-open and the other desperately closed, taking in her sleep-blurred surroundings slowly. For a moment, she had felt she had lost all sense of time or place. The only thing that grounded her in reality, betraying the sense that perhaps she was still locked in some dream world, was the awful taste in her mouth. The muscles in her shoulders felt like someone had affixed jumper cables to them, aching from a hard sleep on an air mattress. All their furniture was due to be delivered by the movers later that day, and so an actual comfortable sleep would have to wait. Even still, she had managed to sleep well into the morning. She noticed that the room was absent of any smell, save for a faint dustiness. It smelled nothing of the lavender candles and fresh laundry that she was used to lingering in her room. Somehow, she felt that this lack was the most repulsive scent she had ever known.

In the kitchen, her father was making huevos rancheros with an energy that seemed impossible for someone who had worked so hard and so frightfully long the day before. Not even the slightest hint of grogginess came from him as he dance-walked his way around the kitchen to the sound of *The Low End Theory* blasting from his phone speakers. Paisley stood in the doorway, as surprised and confused watching him as she had felt waking up in a new, unfamiliar space.

“Dad. How?”

“Internal combustion engine, baby. How many times do I gotta tell you?” Paisley inhaled deeply so that she could let out the most exaggerated sigh she could possibly manage. The heavy, acidic smell of roasting peppers hit her with an intensity that she felt matched the stiff heat of the house.

Her father set the table, two plates piled high with rice and beans, topped with five eggs each, and a separate plate stacked with fried tortillas. The smell of hot oil and spices would stay lingering throughout the house for hours. The thing that Paisley and her father shared most in common was their awe-inspiring ability to eat. Every meal in the Thelemaque household would look like some kind of perverse competition, a monument to gluttony, to the average onlooker. Paisley needed a copious amount of food to fuel the equally copious amount of riding she tended to squeeze into a day. Why and how Frantz was able to eat so much, however, was a mystery to her. He was a fairly tall man, but incredibly thin, sometimes appearing as if God had forgotten to put flesh to him. She was sometimes suspicious that maybe this is what he meant by his annoying combustion engine line, that all this eating was the secret to his constant state of energy and alertness.

“Dad, can you drive me to the schoolhouse later?” Her tongue was coated with the creamy taste of the egg yolk and tingling from the bite of the chili.

“Of course, baby. We can go once we finish eating.” She didn’t need to explain to him why she would want to go to school on a Sunday. She had asked this same request countless times before, any time she had taken interest in or required access to a new place. She had to get familiar with the road.

When the car pulled out of the driveway, Paisley began focusing intensely on the road ahead of them, turning the passenger seat into the saddle of her bicycle in her imagination. She analyzed every detail of the route, not only the directions, but the terrain, the level, the width of the space between the outer white line of the car lane and the dirt at the road’s edge. She looked for potholes, divots, and cracks, searching for anything that might serve as an obstacle. The road was mostly flat, and easy ride she imagined. She rested her hands on the dash to replicate holding her handlebars and imagined how hard she would have to pedal to hit top speed, leaning with the curves of the road and pretending to weave around anything that looks like it might get in her path. When they did approach a hill, she would mimic bringing her right hand down to the shifter lever by her knee and slowly pulling it toward her to change gears, trying to guess exactly where it would have to be to make the climb easier. Before long, they were idled in front of the schoolhouse.

“What’s the assessment, Pais?”

“Couldn’t be easier.”

The schoolhouse was bigger than she had imagined, though still nowhere near as large as the city school she was used to. It was relatively modern compared to most of the other buildings in town, lacking in that certain sun-beaten, dirt-crust quality that seemed to define the town. Still, without the crowd of students hustling through the campus, it was hard to feel any

differently about it than she had about most anything else. It was empty, kind of solemn and pathetic. She urgently hoped that her first day attending classes, seeing the place in full swing, would give her the energy she needed to feel confident. She also noticed that the bike racks in front were small, and so her second-most urgent hope was that not many of the other kids rode their bikes to school every day. She already had to play the part of new kid; she had no interest in magnifying that by having to do something like chain her bike to the flagpole.

“You know, baby, watching you move like that, get so lost in the moment, sometimes you remind me so much of your mom,” Frantz said. Paisley sunk a little bit in her seat and didn’t say anything. She knew that whenever he said this he meant it as a compliment, but she still hated when he did. Being like her mom was her biggest fear.

In times like this one, she often thought back to a riding trip they went on together. Her and her mother packed their bikes on the rack and drove out to Long Beach in the off season, the December night air made colder by the chill blowing in off the ocean. They rode along the boardwalk much slower than usual, calmly listening to the sound of the waves breaking on the shoreline like distant claps of thunder and the sizzling of a fading firework. They stayed out so late into the morning that the sky had started to turn silver before they even made it back to the car.

“How does that make you feel, Pais? The ocean?” This was the first thing her mother had said for hours.

“I don’t know. Small, I guess.”

“Right? It always makes me wonder what my purpose is.” She stopped and gazed out into the swirling black of the ocean, streaked with bright white cracks from the reflection of the moon. “Sometimes I think so long as I never stop moving, eventually I’ll find it. You and your

dad are lucky, you know? He found his a long time ago, and you have your whole life to figure yours out.” A week later, she would file for divorce.

She didn't know what her mother meant at the time, but now she did. She felt like she was constantly standing at the edge of that ocean, except now it was made of endless burning sands. She hated when her dad said she reminded him of her mom because she was afraid that he was right. She didn't want to spend the rest of her life wondering what it was that she was meant to be doing.

The next morning, Paisley launched out of her own bed with no need for an alarm to encourage her waking. That morning, she was alive with a determined spirit she hadn't felt in some time. She darted through her room with precision focus, no motion wasted. Physically, she took after her father, and she used her long legs to lunge from one side of the room to the other, seamlessly weaving one movement into another. It was the closest getting dressed for school had ever come to looking like art. She walked through the hallway without lifting her feet, socks sliding madly on the warm wooden floor, and sat at the kitchen table to devour the stack of pancakes Frantz had already prepared for her.

“Carb up, baby. Time to show the road who just came to town.”

Most kids would be nervous about their first day of school in a new town, and she knew that when she got there she probably would be too, but for the time-being, Paisley couldn't waste energy on that. She was instead latching onto the only emotion she had ever discovered that was stronger than her listless anxiety: the thrill that came with introducing old rubber to new pavement for the first time. She saddled onto her bicycle, making her feel like a soul which had finally found its body, and eased herself onto the road. She shifted gears until she was in her

favorite cruising position, high gear so that each pedal felt like she was trying to drive her foot straight through the crust of the Earth, a test of power that rewarded her with the speed of a roaring wind. Her uncanny skill for memorizing road features paid off, and as she leaned around various potholes and rough patches, she realized that she had been more-or-less spot on during her test run in the car. The only place where she had been wrong was one of the hills, which required a lower gear than she had anticipated to climb easily. By the time she realized her mistake, she was already pedaling too hard and too slow to shift gears again without running the risk of the derailleur slipping and the chain popping right off the gear. So instead, she wrestled with gravity and awkwardly grinded her way up the hill. She hadn't bailed on a hill since she was eight-years old, and her stubborn refusal to break that streak was enough to make her ignore the smoldering fatigue building in her thighs. She began to lift herself out of the saddle each time she went to pedal so that she could slam her entire bodyweight into each downward motion, maintaining a slow, inching speed that allowed her to manage her breathing, but was just fast enough to keep from toppling over. She hung her tongue out of her mouth so that she could taste the air with each desperate breath. Finally, her front tire broke over the crest of the hill, and the earth beneath her began to level out again. She continued to cruise slowly, passive pedals keeping her momentum going but not building any speed, to recuperate. She cursed under her hard breathing. She was already getting rusty, she thought. But she took some pride in knowing that she was able to pull through, to dig deep and be strong enough to overcome something difficult. Even rusty, she was still good.

The rest of the ride to the schoolhouse was simple, a route Paisley felt certain she would dominate the next time. The school felt more alive as the students poured out of their parents' cars and rushed up the small set of stairs that lead to the doors. A song of indecipherable

conversations carried through the air like crickets in a summer field. Paisley could sense somewhere in her that she should be nervous, that she would be in any other context. But she was still buzzing from the feeling of overcoming a challenge and could still feel some of the leftover energy that she didn't burn on her ride threatening to burst from within her. She tried to keep that fuel moving through her and carried some of that indomitability with her onto the campus, among the mass of strangers who would soon recognize her as someone unrecognized. She didn't even let this sudden blessing of confidence slip from her when she saw that the bike racks were, indeed, very full. Only one space appeared to be available, and Paisley worried that even this might be a fluke, that if she had gotten there even a moment later it too would have been taken. Most of the bikes chained up were BMX bikes, and Paisley couldn't help but scoff slightly at the thought that a space that should belong to her would be taken up by something so amateurish. But the childish BMX bikes completely left her mind when she saw the trio of beautiful road bikes huddled together at the far end of the rack. Two pristine bikes, a Cannondale and a Specialized, sandwiched a clearly more well-worn Panasonic that was adorned with stickers and marker graffiti that she couldn't quite make out from where she was. The open space was next to the Specialized, but when she wheeled her bike up to it, she realized that it wasn't quite as empty as she thought. A chain was tightly wrapped around the posts, blocking her bike from fitting into the space, and a note was attached to it that read, 'Park near us and we'll break your hands. DLM.' Slowly, she walked her bike away from the rack and across the green and, after taking a moment to close her eyes and feel her heart still beating hard and the last traces of adrenaline still surging through her, she chained her bike to the flagpole.

The metal of the door handle was hot when she flung it open, and the anticipation she had built for air-conditioned hallways was shattered when she walked into the school and realized that the heat of the outside world would be following her in. Paisley could feel her resolve shrinking, and she found it increasingly difficult to hold on to the confidence that she had initially carried with her onto the schoolyard. Still, she knew that this was her chance to go by unnoticed, and for now, that's all she really wanted. She thought that all the other kids were still too busy at their lockers, the cacophonous chatter only growing in volume within the halls. She became increasingly aware of everything about herself, taking great and nuanced measures to look as innocuous as possible. She stood up straight and walked briskly – fast enough to look like she knew what she was doing, but not so fast that it looked like there was some unknown cause for alarm – through the halls in pursuit of her classroom. She kept her eyes straight, avoiding eye contact at all costs, even when she could sense the occasional passing student studying her face a little too long. There was one benefit, she thought, of attending a school so small. It took mere minutes to traverse the building and find the classroom she belonged in. There was no great search involved, no rushing between floors like in her old school, and that meant no need to ask anyone for direction. No need to give herself away. On the other hand, she also knew this could only mean that word of the new kid would start spreading soon, and once it did it would be no time before the entire school knew. At least in her old school, she could feel certain that she would go unnoticed by a majority of the student body. Her city school boasted thousands of students, and in her mind that meant that only a small fraction of them could spend time trading stories and insults about weird loner Paisley. Here at Tuluca Rock High, she had read on the brochure that her father had received that there were fewer than 200 students. To her, this meant that if she didn't find some way to completely blend in, it was possible for the whole school to turn against

her. The thought of this made her want to hide under the desk, to leave an empty seat so that she might be represented as nobody and get to exist as such in the minds of her peers.

Tuluca Lake High had developed its own practice in which, instead of the students, it was the teachers who move from class to class each period. Ms. Amato, Paisley's History teacher, explained to her that this helped to keep their small hallways from getting too chaotic throughout the day. Amato could not have known what a gift she was giving her. Paisley felt as though she could bow before her when she told her this if doing so wouldn't draw so much attention to her. This meant that anyone who didn't notice her before wouldn't do so until someone from her class told them about the weird new girl he met that day, and so she was at least safe until the next day. And, she realized, this meant that to put that off, all she had to do was make these sixteen other students like her. No, not even like me, she thought, but just think that I'm normal. She glanced around the room to try and figure out who she was dealing with. Most of the other students were white kids, only one other black boy among the group. Across the room, she noticed another girl with light brown skin and thick, curly black hair which she adorned with two cactus flowers on either side of her head. More interesting to Paisley was the fact that the shirt she was wearing was a cycling jersey. Paisley noticed that between classes, when the chatter between students would pick back up, everyone would leave that girl alone. She felt that if this girl didn't stand out, didn't present herself to the others as a target for ridicule, maybe she really did stand a chance at simply blending in. She also felt herself hoping that maybe this was some kind of sign, like the universe was trying to make it extremely obvious to her who she should try to befriend. She saw the bike jersey as a sort of welcoming banner. It wouldn't be until school was over and she saw the girl stand up, saw her head on from the front for the first time, that she would notice the logo printed on the front of the jersey. It simply read "DLM."

Paisley was unchaining her bicycle when she heard the shuffling of feet rushing urgently through the grass. Whoever it was, whatever they wanted, they were coming right for her. Paisley slowly let all the breath out of her lungs until she felt a hollow pressure on her chest. She had almost made it through the day without being harassed, almost snuck her way through the halls without being identified, and it was now that she was finally caught. She turned to face a girl wearing her hair in a small, tight afro, large earrings in the shape of old Roman shields, and a baby pink cane. One of her feet hovered a quarter of an inch above the ground. She wore a black denim vest with patches for bands like Bad Brains and Despise You. Paisley immediately felt a weakness in her legs, horrified by the power she could sense in this girl and at the thought that she might have somehow made enemies with her.

“Nice Schwinn” she said. “Looks vintage. What year?”

“’89. All original parts” Paisley said. She allowed her lungs to fill up again, and let her tensed shoulders drop. She had been all wrong, she thought. Maybe she was actually about to make a friend.

“Damn, girl, okay! It might even still be a Panasonic build then. Love that! I fuck with Panasonics real heavy. I’m sure you saw mine.”

“Wait, like the one over there?” she said, gesturing at the rack. “It’s amazing! I wanted to take a closer look at it but, well, you know. The note.”

“Smart move. There’s no lies on that note. If I caught you getting too close to my baby, we woulda had more than just words. Come on, I’ll show you!” The girl turned to walk toward the bike rack. Paisley followed her close behind, her focus lost in the large patch that took up most of the back of her vest. It depicted Jesus pulling a man out of the mouth of a monster, one

of those old wood carvings from medieval days. Above it, in Olde English letters, it said “Nina Simone”.

“You listen to Nina? So does my dad. Says she was punk before punk.”

“You mean the patch? Yeah, I made it myself. Love her. Didn’t have much of a choice, I suppose. That’s who my folks named me after. Oh, guess I should tell you my name is Simone, by the way.” Simone unchained her Panasonic and wheeled it back, allowing Paisley to take in its full glory. Its bright red paint had a subtle sparkle to it that caught the bright midday sun perfectly, which Paisley noticed as an interesting contrast to all the scraped-up band stickers that Simone had plastered over it. The frame was decorated with the words “The Kids Are Fucked” in marker. It seemed to her to be mostly original parts, with slight rust on the derailleurs and considerable wear on the handlebars. There were two obvious modifications, which Paisley spotted right away. The first was that the spokes were chrome. The second was that one of the pedals was black, practically fresh and shining compared to its old, worn-out silver counterpart.

“It’s beautiful. You’ve obviously put a lot of love into it.”

“The only thing better than an old Panasonic is *my* old Panasonic. I want people to notice it immediately so it gets the respect it deserves.”

“Why the two different pedals, though?”

“Yeah, that’s more function than fashion. It’s for my leg. The new one is custom. It was made longer so I can actually reach the damn thing. Walking is one thing. But when it started to fuck with my riding? Forget about it. It was either that or get surgery. Figured the pedal was cooler.” Paisley felt a heat washing over her face, different from that of the sun beating down on it. This was from a sense of embarrassment, like she shouldn’t have asked. She figured this was

her shot at making someone as tough and scary as Simone a friend instead of an adversary, and the last thing she wanted to do was mess that up.

“Sorry if I, like...”

“Girl, don’t worry about it. Besides, you have bigger things to worry about.”

“What?” Paisley asked, and then quicker than she could even realize, Simone had ripped her backpack off of her and started to ride away. Paisley knew she had to move but felt like her feet were buried underneath the pavement. She needed what felt like entirely too much time to process that her belongings had just been stolen by the single most intimidating person she had ever seen, and now she had to either get it back, or let it be lost forever. The second option would mean facing her dad and telling him all her stuff was gone, and he was the other scariest person she had ever seen. So, she did her best to rush to her bike without letting the reluctancy weigh her down and started to give chase. Fortunately, she could still see Simone off in the distance, and she didn’t seem so far that she couldn’t catch up. She rode hard, her pedaling making a sound like some old, slumbering machine revving up. She tried to think of herself as that machine. When she started to catch up, Simone peered over her shoulder and then started riding faster. She weaved around the road wildly, taking sharp and sudden turns that Paisley couldn’t anticipate no matter how closely she watched her movements. She did her best to match her, to not slip up, but she could tell that her riding was shaky and uncertain. She was so busy trying to learn Simone’s patterns that she didn’t have time to get a sense of the road. Simone’s random, sporadic path had taken Paisley well off the road she had studied the day before and into brand new territory. The area was lightly wooded with oak trees and a blanket of wispy desert grass covered the sands. The trees made it harder for Paisley to know when another turn was coming up for Simone to exploit. Despite all the disadvantages she faced, however, Paisley never drifted

more than a few yards from Simone, and her ability to do even this well in such a tense situation started to build some of her confidence back, and she almost started to feel less like she was in a dire chase, and more like she was in a friendly race. She thought that she might even be having fun somewhere underneath the urgency of it all. Cars passed by only occasionally, and every once in a while Simone would cut through one's path at the last moment, causing it to screech to a stop. Paisley thought Simone must have known exactly how closely she was trying to mimic her movements, because she would have to stop herself from instinctually following her path when she would do this, throwing her out of her focus for a moment. She felt as though Simone was trying to tempt her into danger, and it took all her power to stop herself from giving in. Eventually, Simone made another sharp turn, this time not onto another side road, but into one of the driveways that cut into the line of trees. Paisley followed her in, and both girls finally came to a halt. Simone threw Paisley's backpack to her.

“What the fuck?” Paisley said. She was panting hard and could hear a wheezing in her lungs with each inhale.

“Sorry. Just had to see if you could actually ride the thing.”

The next day, upon entering her classroom, Paisley was greeted by the sight of the DLM-Jersey girl already making eye contact with her from her seat. Paisley could not make out any hints on her face as to what it was that she was thinking but couldn't help feeling like the girl could see inside her head. She felt her vision moving through her body, like every thought and fear she had was being criticized. Paisley just stood in the doorway, unable to move even as she felt her classmates shuffling past her. She wondered if Simone had said anything to this girl and, if so, what it was. She tried to fake a confident demeanor, using every slow breath she took to try and

keep from projecting her discomfort. If Simone had told her good things, she didn't want to do anything to betray that. If she told her bad things, though, then she didn't want to do anything to confirm them. The girl stayed unmoving, her eyes faintly squinted, for a moment longer before turning up the corner of her mouth and then looking down at her desk. She wouldn't look at her again for the rest of the day. When class got out, the girl simply left, just like the day before. Like suddenly she forgot that Paisley existed at all.

Paisley was getting her gear out of her locker when a boy approached her. She didn't recognize him from class, so she immediately became alert wondering what he could want with her. She felt a tingling in her heels, the same sensation she got when she looked down from too high up. The feeling that she was going to plummet even with the ground still solid beneath her feet. She instantly wanted to run away. Instead, she reminded herself that she needed to hide her strangeness from these new people for as long as possible and looked him in the eyes.

“You're that new girl, right?” he asked.

“Yeah. Paisley. What's your name?”

“My daddy says your old man is that new lawyer what just moved here. Bleeding heart motherfucker who helps the poor illegals. That true?” Paisley felt her knees become suddenly unable to support the weight of her body. The vile snarl in his words rang in her ears and she knew now that, whatever this interaction was, it couldn't possibly end well. She dropped her gaze to her feet. The sensation to run was gone. She now feared doing so would only get her hurt. Now, it was the desire to be saved from this that overcame her. She kept telling herself to be calm in her mind, but her thoughts were interrupted when the boy said, “You better not be

ignoring me.” She looked back up to him, taking in his ghastly appearance while she tried to put her thoughts in order. She saw the Confederate flag stitched into his salt crusted camo hat.

“Yes. Yes, my dad is a lawyer.” The words felt barbed and jagged, catching in her throat as she said them.

“I suggest you keep your heads down. Your people make enemies real fast around here.” Paisley was searching for the right words to say, a mild tremor running through her hands, when something loudly crashed into the locker near the boy. When she looked, she saw a bike helmet teetering on the ground. The locker had dented in its shape.

“Colson you best get your dumb racist ass away from that girl before we have bigger problems than we already got.” Paisley looked up startled to see Simone quickly shuffling over to them. She felt then that she had found her footing again, and a coolness ran through her body, relieving the hot tension that had been bubbling in her.

“Fuck you, Simone. This ain’t got anything to do with you.” Without a word, with a face that Paisley saw as calm and flat, Simone raised her cane and delivered a powerful blow directly to Colson’s knee. Paisley winced at the sound of the wood hitting the hard bone, and Colson let out a shriek that cut through the chatter in the halls. Everyone fell silent for a brief moment, and Paisley saw a few people glance at Simone before turning back to whoever they were talking to. She even heard someone whispering not to interfere if Simone was involved. “You fuckin’ bitch! I’m gonna tell my pa about this!” Colson said.

“While you’re at it, tell the prick we got a lot more waiting for him. He can fuck around my house and find out. We still owe your family one.” Colson limped away, clutching his knee with one hand and pushing people out of his way with the other. “You ok, girl?”

“I...feel like you saved me.”

“Oh, that coward wouldn’t have done nothing. He just acts hard because people are scared of his dad.”

“Who is he?”

“Leviticus LaGrange. The sheriff. The kid’s a fluffy little fuck, but Lev is a real mean bastard.” Simone nodded her head toward the door, and Paisley started walking with her to leave. Most of the crowd had thinned out by then, the heat of the building dissipating slightly in the absence of all the sweating bodies.

“You didn’t sound to scared of him” Paisley said. She had no doubt that Simone was tough, but she tried to imagine herself standing up to someone as powerful as the sheriff, and the thought alone sent a chill into the nape of her neck.

“Leviticus’ old man was the sheriff before him. Go figure. He murdered my granddaddy. Been bad blood between our families since.” Paisley felt like she should say something, offer some kind of apology, but the coolness that persisted on Simone’s face made it seem like she was speaking about some old story from someone and somewhere far off. Like none of it really mattered. “My dad was in school with Lev at the time. Broke his jaw the next day. Now he has it out for pops. Not that they got along before that. No shock that one racist prick raised another. And now the cycle continues for Colson, obviously. So he’s my responsibility. I’ll put him in the fuckin’ ground before he becomes a cop and tries any shit with us.” The sound of running footsteps erupted behind them, and a man’s voice called out for Simone. She turned to face him.

“Principal Melrose? How can I help you?”

“Well, young lady, help me fill in some blanks. One moment, I see you and this girl talking to Colson, who I know you’re just so fond of. I turn my back, and the next thing I see is him limping away. You wouldn’t have had something to do with that, now would you?” Paisley

felt wound up, like she was so eager to just walk away. It was her first week of school and she had already been faced with so much trouble, she wasn't sure if she could stand it. There was no way out of this, she thought. There were so many witnesses, and the principal himself saw almost everything.

“Me? Of course not, sir.” She turned to face the remaining people in the hall. “Hey, did any of y'all see me bust up Colson's knee just now, or did y'all see me minding my business?” The group of kids clustered together just murmured to one another until one broke the silence and said, “she didn't do anything, Principal Melrose.” Simone turned back to the principal and shrugged. “Well, there you have it.”

“What happened, Simone? You used to be such a good student.” He shook his head and retreated to his office. The girls continued making their way out of the building, pushing the doors open, hit with a harsh and unforgiving light that made Paisley reflexively close her eyes as tightly as she could. When she opened them, slowly to filter the light in at a pace that didn't feel like torture, she saw Simone walking over toward the bike rack.

“What was up with that?” Paisley asked.

“The principal? It was nothing. Don't worry about it.” Paisley sat in silence for a moment. She was so curious about Simone, she felt like she was wrapped in mystery and she wanted to learn more.

“Well, thank you for helping me with Colson anyway,” she said.

“Girl, don't worry about it. We protect our own.” Paisley realized that her uncertainty must have been given away somehow, maybe from the way that she tugged on her collar, because Simone rolled her eyes and sucked her teeth sharply. “Look, the freaks of Tuluca Rock need each other. And in this spineless Confederate fucking wasteland, just looking like us makes

us freaks by default. You can ride. So, I talked to the other girls, and they agreed you can join. If you want.”

“You mean DLM? I don’t even know what it is.”

“We’re a bike gang. Division of the Lilith Moon. Freaks on wheels, baby.” Paisley watched as Simone unlocked the chain from the otherwise vacant spot of the rack and moved it one space over. “You can lock your bike up here tomorrow.” Suddenly, Paisley was able to make sense of the Jersey girl staring her down. She paused for a moment, considering what the right thing to do was. Having Simone by her side would make her school life easier, she figured. She also thought that having a group of competitive riders to gang up with would push her riding around here. The chase that Simone had led her on the day prior was the closest thing to a proper race she imagined she would find in this place, and at the very least, she thought, riding with them might keep her sharp enough to stay competitive if she ever got to race in front of sponsors again. Maybe, she thought, joining with this so-called gang would be the next best thing?

“Ok,” she said. “I’m in.” She figured it would be foolish to not at least try. She could just opt out later if she wound up not getting along with the other girls.

“Well, wait just a minute. I invited you to join, but that’s not all it takes to get in. Don’t you know nothing about gangs?”

“Not really.”

“Well, you need to be initiated if you’re gonna be in. My house, Saturday. Early. I’ll text you the address.”

Paisley pulled up to Simone’s house just before 4am, met by the vague silhouettes of the other girls who had already convened in her front yard. She got off her bicycle and walked it up to the

group, slowly, out of fear that the squeaking of the shot bearings would somehow betray the perfect stillness of the dark. Simone's neighborhood was completely absent of streetlights, and the only sound Paisley could detect was a faint breeze which did little to alleviate the stiff warmth bearing down on her. The sky was an empty, flat silver kind of dark. It was nearly starless, and the thin crescent of the moon made it appear to Paisley as though it was trying to hide itself from sight. She felt like she understood this somehow. She was nervous about meeting the other girls, wishing that she, too, could do something to hide herself in the silent darkness.

"Is it always this hot in the morning?" she whispered, easing herself into the group. It was an unsettling introduction, all the girls obscuring their mouths with bandanas and shrouding their eyes with heavy black grease paint. Thick chains hung from their pockets, padlocks attached to their ends. Even though she was invited to this meeting as a friend, she couldn't stop thinking that she didn't belong there. She felt herself shrink when she saw their intimidating glares fall on her for the first time. She knew one of the girls must be the one from her class, which did nothing to set her at ease because she still didn't know what that girl thought of her. The other one, who could only be identified by her thin, short blonde hair and a stature that towered over the others, was a perfect stranger to her still.

"Trust me, it's gonna get a lot worse than this," Simone said. "Girls, this is Paisley, and today is her initiation." When Simone had said "bike gang" the day before, Paisley had figured the word was being used loosely, a tougher sounding word for a group or a squad, a cooler way of saying that there were friends who liked to ride their bikes around the neighborhood and maybe sometimes smoke pot in some empty plot of dirt somewhere. But now that she saw how seriously all the girls were taking this, she gave in to a creeping sense of dread for what the day held in store for her.

She thought of a restless night a few years ago when she felt like the air in her room was too heavy and the walls too close, and she had to go lose herself in the silence of night. It was the month after her mother had left, and she remembered the way her tears stung her eyes just before her father found her, searching for her in a panic, bathing her in bright headlights and yelling at her in a moth-eaten bathrobe. She remembered the way his voice changed when he saw that she was crying and how he sat next to her on the sidewalk and pulled her close. She remembered the feeling of her face being pressed into his chest. She remembered all of this because she almost wished that would happen again, that he would come looking for her in a panic and pull her out of this. She knew it was too late to turn back now.

“So, what are we doing?” she asked. She tried to sound as casual as possible, and almost winced at herself when she realized that she was unsuccessful in masking the quiver in her voice.

“Headed to Pecos. We’re gonna show you what being a Lilith is all about.” Paisley pushed her tongue a little too hard into her teeth while trying to find the right words to express that maybe she wasn’t as prepared as she thought she was.

“Isn’t that, like, far away? What are we riding three hours out of town for?” was what she settled on.

“Because all the pigs in this town already know who we are,” was Simone’s response.

“Simone, are you sure the girl is up to it? Seems kinda weak to me,” the girl from class said. Paisley was bewildered by the combination of shame and relief that she felt having finally received an answer to the mystery of what the Jersey Girl was thinking when she stared at her.

“I know she can ride. Today’s all about finding out all the rest. Remember how scared you were, Araceli? Have a little faith in me.” Something about the confidence Simone seemed to have in her made Paisley believe she had some responsibility not to let her down. Simone had

become the only thing that made her feel grounded since she had arrived in Texas, the only reason she had stopped feeling quite as lost as she had before. If that was gone, she feared she would be left floating in the nothing, like she was that night driving through El Paso.

“I’m good for it,” Paisley said, nails biting into her palms until the marks stung with sweat. She was finally feeling what she came her for. The prickling in the soles of her feet, the eagerness to hop in the saddle and drive them into her pedals as hard as she could. The need to prove herself to anyone who might doubt her that always accompanied a proper race. She was going to do everything she could to validate Simone’s trust in her and show Araceli what she could do.

The ride to Pecos was brutal, and with every hour that passed, the sun proved Simone right; the heat got so unbearable that Paisley could feel a layer of salt crusting on her skin from the rapid evaporation of her sweat. Alongside the discomfort from the arid air, she also struggled to find a natural stride on the bike she was given. Simone let her borrow one of her bikes, saying that Paisley needed terrain tires if she was going to “not get totally fucked by Twelve”. The uneven pedals Simone had installed, combined with their difference in heights, made it so Paisley had to stand occasionally to generate enough force to build momentum. It reminded her of riding BMX bikes as a child, an agonizingly sluggish experience that made her appreciate her old Schwinn even more.

“You’re gonna want to get rid of those road tires for the future, babe” said the blonde girl who called herself Bee. Her voice was oddly low, Paisley thinking that it sounded almost boyish, but Simone had already privately warned her against saying anything that even resembled such

sentiments, and so she pushed the thought out of her mind. “If you make it through today, that is.”

“You ever been in a fight, Paisley?” Araceli asked. Paisley could tell she wasn’t asking because this was her way of making small talk. The way the words hit her made her feel the exact way she did when Araceli’s eyes lingered heavily on her body in class. She was still being sized up. Paisley tried to fight the increasing unease by reminding herself that being sized up was, apparently, the entire point of their outing. She had to get used to it if she wanted to make it through. This raised the question in her mind of whether or not she even wanted to make it through.

“Not really, no,” she answered. Everything about the day so far had been so intense, from the way the girls spoke to her, to the exhausting ride and the insurmountable heat, and she realized that, even still, the real action hadn’t even started yet. Things were only going to get more intense from here, and she worried that she was well beyond the point of deciding if she was ready for that. Her chest tightened at just the thought of telling Simone that, after making it all this way, she wanted to turn back. Imagining the way Araceli would lay into her made her grip the handlebars so tightly that she feared she might bend them.

“Well, have you ever stolen from someone? Vandalized? Busted a window?” Paisley thought she heard the tone of her voice get more sinister on the last one, like she was telling some twisted joke.

“No. I mean, I’ve stolen some candy bars before. Does that count for anything?”

“Christ, Simone. Who the fuck is this girl?”

“Araceli you better shut the fuck up before I make you hold my padlock in your mouth. Let a bitch have some peace? It’s like you forget all you were doing before you linked up with us was chewing Addies. I made you hard.”

“Whatever. I just hope you can do the same for this one, or we’re wasting our time.” Paisley could have allowed herself to be shaken up by Araceli’s aggression. Instead, she chose to focus on the way Simone continued to defend and put her faith in her. She knew that her only option now was to go through with this initiation, whatever it may be, and hope that she impresses the others enough to earn a spot by their side. After it was all done, at least having these girls watching out for her in the hallways would mean that some good came from the terror she was putting herself through. She slowed her breathing and focused on her riding, pushing the thoughts as far out of her mind as she could. Her eye twitched just slightly.

Not far in the distance, Pecos started to show itself, promising something at least shaped like civilization to start filling out the empty spaces of the roads. It did not do quite as good a job hiding the vast desert valleys that surrounded them as Tuluca Rock did, the wastelands clearly visible beyond the buildings on the outskirts of the city. The city also lacked a certain liveliness, cars seldom passing them on the road, shops all appearing empty from the outside. Were it not for the occasional dogwalker or old man smoking a cigarette by some storefront, Paisley could have been talked into believing this was some Wild West style ghost town, a place only kept alive by history. Simone, at the lead of the pack, stopped her bike, planting one foot into the ground. Paisley rode up next to her and watched her scan the streets before them with narrowed eyes.

“So, what are we doing now that we’re here?” Paisley asked, her exhaustion evident in her voice.

“Finding our target,” Simone said.

Simone stopped the girls at the end of a road approaching a church. “Look at this. It’s perfect.” In front of the First Methodist Church, pulled into the dirt shoulder of the road, a cop car sat idly, probably doing speed patrol. “Girls, I trust y’all are ready? Here’s how it’ll work. Me in front, then Bee, then Paisley. Araceli, I want you to take up the rear. And give Paisley your mace.” Araceli took the padlocked chain out of her pocket and shoved it into Paisley’s hand. It was warm and wet from the sweat that must have soaked through Araceli’s pants. It was heavy in her hand, feeling similar to the weight that now pressed into Paisley’s chest as she realized that the time for action had come.

“What...am I supposed to do with this?” she asked, desperately trying to push the words past the nervous lump hanging in her throat.

“Just follow our lead, baby. It’ll be ok. We do this all the time,” Bee said. Her low voice brightened up a bit and carried a certain melody that Paisley found sweet and comforting. She felt that, despite her stature and her stern eyes, Bee was compassionate.

“Seriously, girl. We’ve been staking this place out for a while. We know all the good routes. All you gotta do to get through this thing is keep up. Remember the other day, when I stole your shit? Just do that again.” Paisley reminded herself that the only reason she was here is because she was a good rider. If that’s all it took to survive whatever mayhem she had been dragged into, then she knew she could do it. Still, the chain got even heavier as she held it. It was weighted with a preemptive guilt, the knowledge that she was about to do something wrong.

“I’m behind you, so if you see me pass you, that means you’re fucked. So just don’t let that happen,” Araceli said. Paisley sensed that, somehow, this was her way of trying to be

supportive. It reminded her of the few racers from back home who would recognize her and actually treat her like a friendly competitor instead of a random kid they sought to ignore. Araceli was less friendly, but Paisley got that same feeling that she was challenging her, and after years of racing in the circuit back home, the one thing Paisley felt truly confident in was her ability to beat a challenger.

Simone raised the hand that was gripping her chain into the air with three fingers extended toward the sky. She curled one, then another, then the last, until her fist wrapped around the chain, and she started swinging it in a circular motion. Bee started up with the same motion as the two girls began to ride down the road, quickly gaining speed. Paisley let instinct take over and started mimicking their movements, catching up with them quickly, but making sure to keep behind Bee. The girls reached impressive speeds as they approached the cop car, and when Simone was flush with the driver side door, she let the padlock at the end of the chain crash into the window. A sharp cracking sound shot through the air, and Paisley was so shocked that she thought it might have been coming from her bones, the impact of the moment hitting her with the same force as the metal on glass. She let out a soft gasp but caught herself before she started to show her horror too obviously. Bee followed up Simone's blow with one of her own, another crashing falling on Paisley's ears, louder this time as she was closer to the source.

"Your turn, baby! Fuckin' shatter it!" Bee yelled out, the excitement in her voice making a discordant harmony with the sound of the chain swinging in the air above her. Paisley felt her arm getting weaker, not from fatigue, but from the reluctance with which she was about to commit the heinous deed she was about to. Just before she became parallel with the door, she tightly shut her eyes and turned her face away from the vehicle, and limply let the chain fly to her side. A violent crashing sound filled her head as the glass rained onto the pavement, followed

by a gruff yelling coming from the car which was all but drowned out by the screams and hollers of the other girls. When Paisley opened her eyes, she saw Bee and Simone looking over their shoulders at her, extending a peace sign and a thumbs up her way respectively. They were cheering for her. She turned to look at Araceli, and even she had her fist raised in the air, letting out a celebratory scream.

“Turn the fuck around and ride!” Araceli said. So she did.

The girls kept formation as the tore through people’s yards, the car behind them crashing through old wooden fences to clear space and try to keep on their path. Though it wasn’t far behind, they were able to maneuver more gracefully around the sides of houses and between parked cars and maintain a favorable distance. Paisley couldn’t quite convince herself that they would get away and yet somehow, in that moment, she didn’t really think she cared. She knew it was wrong, but she also felt that sending that padlock through the window was the first time in her life she had ever taken action. That she had ever done something to stand out instead of stick to the background. The thrill of showing people, and herself, the strength and bravery she was capable of made her body feel light and the fatigue in her muscles almost disappear. Their speed made the air cool on her face, and for the first time all day she felt some relief from the heat. They cut clean across the road and into an RV park, Paisley feeling powerful as the thick tires churned up dirt beneath her. They ducked between staggered rows of parked RVs and big-rig trucks, Simone darting in seemingly random directions. Paisley heard the sirens getting further away and figured that the cop must have been forced to circle the park and hope that he can get a sense of where they are. When they broke through the final line of trucks, Paisley looked and saw that the car was a good distance away and facing the other direction. The cop must have

seen them in the rear-view though, she thought, because the car quickly turned around, kicking up a massive cloud of dust as it did.

“Keep going, we are going to break free. Girls, form a wall!” Simone yelled from the front. Bee and Araceli picked up their speed to ride side by side with Simone, so Paisley did the same. They blasted across a road and into the vast wastes, officially passing the outskirts of the city and returning to the uninhabited valley. The car behind them was quickly closing the distance, and Paisley’s heart dropped when she considered that this was the moment that they could all get caught. She was pedaling harder and faster than she ever had in her life, and the only thing she thought was worse than the burning that was building up in her legs was the thought of what her father would do if he saw her climbing out of the back of a cruiser. That thought kept her outrunning her fatigue, but she didn’t believe they were getting out of this safely. Then, she saw something coming up ahead of them. A wide, deep ditch opened up before them, its outer edge lined with small desert shrubs. When they were only a few feet away from the ditch, the cop was nearly on their tails.

“Break!” Simone yelled. Simone and Bee quickly broke to one direction, and Paisley followed Araceli in the other. They had lured the cop directly into the ditch, the success of their plan being signaled by the sound of the shocks squealing and the heavy metal crushing into the earth. The wheels spun hopelessly, dirt flying in streams underneath them. The girls reconvened and continued on their way through the wide-open West Texas nothing.

For the first few miles of their trip home, Paisley could only think of what she had just done. The dirt had stuck to her sweat-darkened clothing, and an exhaustion weighed down on her shoulders so that her entire upper body was arching forward as she pedaled through the sands. Never before had she done anything so senseless and violent, and yet at the same time, she

wondered how senseless it had actually been. The girls around her were alive with exuberant chatter, shouting jokes and laughing at one another. Paisley was too lost in her own mind to pay attention to what they were saying, except for occasional moments when she would let odd pieces of speech containing her name enter her consciousness and give a vague reply as to appear in the moment. But she could tell that these girls were happy, in a way that they didn't appear to be at school from what she had observed, and certainly in a way that she had not been since leaving California. She took stock of her surroundings, still in the midst of an expanse of dirt that stretched well over the horizon as to avoid the road for a few more miles. She imagined what she must look like, a girl clad head to toe in black on a glistening pink bicycle surrounded on all sides by veritable nothingness. But in this case, she was not a girl who harbored a nothingness within her as she had felt before. She was the girl who had caused chaos in the next town over, the girl who made noise that crashed through the perpetual silence of a still-life world. Through the violence that the girls enacted, she had brought a something to the nothing. She had made herself known as something more than another vague feature in the landscape, at least to herself. This was beyond anything she had ever felt from placing in a road race, in more than just the fact that it was so much harder than anything she had ever done. This was her setting herself apart from the pack. This was her carving her own path. In a way, it felt like a taste of the greatness she aspired to on her bicycle every day.

“Paisley, you ok?” Simone said. Paisley was pulled out of her introspection and realized that the girls had gotten quieter. Though she was only focused on Simone, she could feel the gaze of the other's resting on the back of her neck. “You're being quiet.”

“She's probably still scared of getting caught,” Araceli said.

“No. Well, I mean, I guess a little. You guys do stuff like this all the time?”

“Sweetie, you think you’re the only one who’s exhausted? I would rather die than do this regularly. This was just our special welcome to you,” Bee said.

“We can talk about this stuff more tomorrow, Paisley. For now, just make the most of this ride home and liven the fuck up, would you?” Simone said. The heat of the late afternoon was still heavy and dry, and Paisley’s mouth felt as though she had been swallowing the dust swirling around them, but she noticed as she allowed herself to slow down and stretch her body out that the tension of the day had faded. On their ride back to Tuluca Rock, doing her best to participate in the playful conversations of her fellow riders, she was able to focus more on the breeze than the sun.

The following Monday, Paisley crept through the house like a secret. In a way, she thought, she was a secret, a person who had changed under her father’s nose and was desperate to keep that change hidden. She did not feel shame for what she had done the day before. But knowing the pain it would cause her father if he found out had been enough for her to seek audience with God to beg for forgiveness. She hadn’t prayed much, and believed even less, since her mother left. She knew of her father’s faith, though, and sometimes brought matters concerning him to prayer, just in case.

Trying to maintain her composure under the weight of what she had done was not the only reason for her to tiptoe through the morning stagnancy of the house. She also tried to stay quiet because it was her father’s first day operating his new practice since they had settled in. He was unable to afford an office space, which he thinly disguised by saying he hadn’t found the right place yet, so he had dedicated a room in the back of his house to serve as his workspace for the time being. Though breakfast was still waiting for her on the table, she knew her father

would be in full work-mode, and so she silently glided her feet across the warmth of the floor to let him focus. The silence of the kitchen made her feel like she was taking up too much space. She was used to the music and energy of her father making the place feel alive. Without any of it, being alone, she felt that her presence was interfering with some sacred emptiness that the room had. She ate her breakfast in quiet discomfort, taking small, slow bites to avoid making too much noise. She tried to squirm into a comfortable position but could not shake the sense that she was imposing herself onto the stillness. She always felt like this when she had the house to herself. She usually tried to confine herself to her room, a space she felt could not reject her. But she knew her father would have been worried if she didn't eat. Outside, she heard the humming of a car, but paid it no mind. The outside wasn't much louder than the inside around here, she thought. Sounds carry further. Just as she was about to scrape some unfinished scraps into the trash, the doorbell rang. She froze in place, plate in hand tilted at an awkward angle toward the trash can, fork limp in her loosening grip. Her mouth opened slightly as she stared at the door, half expecting some entity to phase through it. A specter or haunting made about as much sense to her as a flesh-and-bone visitor. The doorbell rang again, reverberating slightly through the silence of the hallways. The door to Frantz's office creaked open.

“Pais, you gonna get that? I'm a little busy.” Paisley quickly finished her task, placing the plate in the sink, and shuffled over to the door. She turned the knob slowly, as though she were afraid that it would fall off in her hands and eased the door open. On their stoop stood a tall man in a tan uniform, crisp and clean. He almost blended in with the dried grass on their lawn. His face was obscured by dark, thick sunglasses. The way he filled the doorframe made Paisley feel suffocated. The man was obviously a police officer, and Paisley's face immediately went cold at

the realization that the cops had come to her door. She was horrified that they had identified her from the day before,

“Good morning, miss. Is this the Thelemaque household?” the man said. Her last name left his mouth as a mangled bastardization of the one that she knew. She was too stunned by anxiety to care. She felt like a soda can that had rolled down a flight of stairs.

“Yes sir,” she said. Behind her, the Frantz’s footsteps started beating down the hall.

“Ah, good morning sir! You must be Frantz. How are you today?”

“I’m well, sir. And you are?”

“Why, my name is Leviticus LaGrange. Sherriff Lev is what most people ‘round here call me, of course.”

“Is there a problem sir?” Frantz said. Paisley felt his hands fall gently on her shoulders and pull her in close to his body. She felt herself shaking against him. She figured he must have known she was afraid. Even in normal circumstances, Frantz had taught her to be cautious of the police. Especially given her proclivity for late night rides. He taught her that it was easy for her to unwittingly make herself suspicious to any jumpy cops that might see her, even if she wasn’t doing anything wrong. Little did he know, she was fighting through an additional wall of panic beyond the one he had helped her build. In any case, she thought, he would be proud of how carefully she was behaving in the tremendous presence of this man who she saw only as a threat.

“There sure is, sir! My son is one of your lovely daughter’s classmates, and he informed me that I haven’t done my job of welcoming you to our humble little town! I feel just awful, I must say. I hope that you are getting along well.” Paisley let a small relief wash over her at the realization that this had nothing to do with yesterday. But she did not let herself get too comfortable. Her meeting with his son hadn’t exactly been pleasant. Her knowledge of the

situation, paired with the strange tone with which the man spoke that made him sound unsettlingly insincere, made her remain vigilantly wary about his intentions. She felt her father's grip tighten around her shoulders. He must have sensed the tone to.

“It's no trouble at all, sir. We are doing just fine. Please, let me know if there's anything I can do as a member of your community.”

“Will do sir. And rest assured, I will be keeping an eye out for you. And your daughter. Don't worry about that.” His voice got drier and lower with every word until the words sounded like they were oozing out from behind his teeth. He placed one hand on his hip, just above his pistol, and nodded at them before turning away. Frantz gently closed the door. His hands lingered on her shoulders just a little while longer, their gentle squeeze communicating everything to her that she knew he wanted to say. She could sense in the silence that he wanted to say everything would be fine. She could feel in the restlessness of his fingers that he couldn't bring himself to lie.

This was the first time Paisley had ever kept anything from her father, and she didn't like it. A part of her wanted to believe that he might forgive her if he found out, or that he might even understand. But she knew that all he would really do is have his heart break. She didn't think he would ever be able to look at her the same way again if he knew what she had done, and the sheriff's presence at the door made her realize just how little control she had over whether or not her secret got out. If she kept riding with the DLM girls, and they kept doing stuff like that, it would only get harder to sweep the growing pile of secrets under the rug. And yet, when she considered whether or not she wanted to join, she couldn't even entertain not as an option. She truly believed that this was what she needed, a new level of high-stakes riding that would push her harder along the road to glory than any road race that had ever come before. She believed

that this was the opportunity that her father told her God were lead her to. She only hoped that, if he were to ever find out, he might someday be able to understand that.

On her way to class, Colson passed by her. He walked with a lame limp and gave her a look that was even more pathetic. Like he wanted to sneer at her but couldn't because Simone was right behind her. He must have known about his father's visit to her home, had wanted to say something threatening to ride the momentum of the morning. He must have also known that his daddy couldn't save him from losing a few teeth in the hallway. Watching him shrink away from her was Paisley's first brush with the power that came from being a member of the DLM. It gave her some unshakable urge to trip him as he walked by, to assert herself over him. Instead, she refused to make eye contact. She thought that somehow, that was even more vicious. To act like he didn't even exist.

When she got to her classroom, she found that a boy was sitting at her usual desk. Their eyes met for just an instant, but he quickly looked down at the papers scattered in front of him. When she scanned the room, she noticed the seat next to Araceli was open. That must have been the boy's old seat. She imagined her telling him to clear out, with all the stoic dryness of a tanned hide. That was a strange quality that Araceli had about her, Paisley had realized. Simone asserted herself by being loud and boisterous, unmistakably aggressive. Araceli, however, had such a stern matter-of-factness about her voice. Some poor fool could mistake Simone for being all talk, for putting on a front. No one would make that mistake about Araceli. Paisley started to consider how she might carry herself. She couldn't expect to really assert herself by simply standing behind girls that were stronger and tougher than she was. She had to prove to others that

she wasn't to be messed with either. Her posture slumped as her newfound confidence dented slightly. She supposed she first had to convince herself of the same.

“Hey, are you busy tonight?” Araceli said, not bothering to look up from her phone.

“I don't think so. Why?” Paisley was surprised that Araceli was showing any interest in her, and the nervous sort of excitement she felt caused her voice to break slightly as she rushed the words out. Even though she had done so well at her initiation, she could tell Araceli was still skeptical of her.

“Meet us at Bee's house tonight. I'll tell Simone. I guess we ought to get you into the fold.” For the rest of the day, Araceli didn't so much as glance at Paisley, or anyone else for that matter, and any speaking she did was between her and the teachers. Paisley had been having difficulty focusing, still shaken from the events of the morning and now slightly nauseous with the heavy odor of body sweat and overused deodorant that hung in the air of the classroom. The half-whispered conversations of the boys in the back of the class blended disharmoniously with the teachers' lectures. Paisley felt like whatever words she was hearing had been stripped from their meaning by the time they reached her ears, like they were dissolving in the air. This made her all the more fascinated by how sharply focused Araceli was on her work, the seemingly unbroken concentration that she displayed. She didn't even think she had seen her blink once all day. When class finished, Araceli hastily dumped all of her belongings into her bookbag and raced out the door. The urgency made Paisley feel as though she had to rush too, if only out of envy for how headstrong Araceli's every move seemed. When she got out to the bike rack, Simone and Bee were both arriving at the same time. Araceli's bike was long gone.

“Celi called a meeting at my house. Did she give you my address?” Bee said. She had not, so Bee put it into her phone.

Bee lived in what was technically the next town over, Skyview, which was too small to have its own school, so the children of the thirty-or-so families that lived there all went to Tuluca Rock. The ride to her home was beautiful, Skyview consisting mostly of a wide main road that was practically absent of cars. It ran parallel to a distant mountain range that was washed pink by the setting sun. It was an old oil town, so the dessert land around her was dotted with scattered pumpjacks, which Paisley thought almost looked like a herd of grazing animals rhythmically bobbing their heads into the dirt in search of food to harvest. The main road was adorned with small shops, and it branched into three side streets, each of them dead ends, which counted as the town's residential areas. When Paisley got to the road Bee's house was on, the last of the side streets, the welcome sign for the next town was already in view. She estimated that the whole town was about a five-minute ride from end to end.

Paisley pulled into Bee's driveway and parked her bike with the others, on a little plot of pavement that was partially hidden by a garden of overgrown weeds and dead flowers. She approached the door, but when it came time to ring the doorbell, she felt like her hands had been pinned to her sides. She had an aversion to entering peoples' homes, a feeling of being an intruder or a burden that she could never bring herself to overcome. She pressed the doorbell slowly, holding her breath as though she knew there was a 50-50 shot of it actually being the detonator to a bomb. She imagined the people inside hearing the chime resonate, huffing at the disturbance. She closed her eyes and listened intently for any sounds of rustling or footsteps that she could make out behind the door. But there were none. After a moment, her phone buzzed. A text from Bee read: *Just come in*. For her, this was even worse. It made a procession of anxious questions march through her head. Were Bee's parents here? If so, did they know she was

coming over? What would they think when she opened the door, walked in the house, and they were faced with this strange girl stumbling through their living room? The fear of being a burden crept back into her head, fueling these thoughts, and she considered replying to Bee and asking her to come get her at the door. She was almost amused by the realization that this, too, would be burdensome. There was no way to win. Somehow, she convinced herself to allow that sense of defeat to cancel everything else out. She opened the door.

She was surprised to find that the house appeared empty, save for the faint sound of music coming from down the hall. She peeked into the kitchen to see if she could find Bee's parents. Now that she was in their home, she didn't want to be rude by not introducing herself. But every room was filled only by stagnant silence. A note hung from the refrigerator. *Ben, be back this weekend – Mom.* Paisley followed the music into Bee's room.

The room was dark, the blinds drawn to block out the glow from the sunset, and everything was illuminated only by the soft blue glow emanating from Bee's two massive computer monitors. Bee was tapping away at her keyboard, but the sound was drowned out by the music playing from the small wall of speakers on either end of the computer desk. She had never heard the artist before but had a guess as to who it was when Bee swiveled her chair around, revealing her shirt which simply read *I Only Listen to The Mountain Goats*. The light from the screen reflected off of her thick rimmed glasses and, washed in the pale light, the shadows on her face made her jawline seem sharper and stronger than it had before. She felt like she was really seeing Bee for the first time. She usually wore a heavy sweater in school, which made Paisley feel like she was sweating more just by looking at her. In just a t-shirt, it was clear that she was somewhat broad and powerful.

“Welcome to my little cave. You ready?” Bee said.

“Sure. Ready for what?”

“Ain’t nothing, really,” Simone chimed in. “You’re just official now, so we figured it was time to let you know what’s what around here.”

“Yeah. If you’re gonna be one of us, you need to know how things operate,” Bee said.

“Alright. Lay it on me.”

“Ok, so obviously, as I’m sure you’ve figured out, I’m the leader,” Simone said. She was right. Even if she hadn’t been the one that took charge of bringing her into the gang and organizing the initiation, Paisley would have known she was the leader. Her confidence was so strong that sometimes Paisley thought she could feel it vibrating in her chest whenever Simone spoke. “Really, that just means I’m the toughest bitch here and nobody wants to fuck with me, so I stand in the front so people know to back up. And I deal with any...negotiations.”

“Negotiations? Like what?”

“Look, girl. Our first outing together was us smashing the fuck out of a cop car so it shouldn’t be a surprise that we mean this gang shit. Sure, most of it’s petty stuff. Vandalism, breaking stuff, maybe beating the piss out of some shitheads from school who forgot who the fuck we are every once in a while. But sometimes we dabble in more serious stuff. Which is what we have Bee here for.”

“Surprise, I’m a little bit into tech.” Bee motioned to the computers behind her as she spoke. Paisley felt most comfortable with Bee. She was sweet in a way that felt genuine, and it put Paisley’s nerves at ease. “I do all sorts of stuff from here. Forge documents. Keep an eye on police databases. I have a map of places I’ve spotted our enemies claiming turf, so we know where to be cautious. Things like that.”

“We have enemies?” Paisley said. She felt like she was constantly being overwhelmed by each new development, each new realization of how severe this thing that she had stumbled into was. She felt like every time she found her footing, that she thought she understood what was going on, the ground would suddenly give out underneath her and she would crash into some new thing to be afraid of. She was excited to have a group to ride with. She even surprised herself with how exhilarating she found the prospect of a life of petty crime, of gritty rebellion, to be. But now she had to grapple with the fact that she might be making a target of herself in the process. Did she really think she was ready for that?

“I mean look, we’re in the middle of Fuckall, Nothingsville so we aren’t exactly dealing with the El Chapos of the world. Most of the big crime around here is the trailer freaks cooking meth in their sinks or whatever. Most of our so-called enemies are just other fucked up teens doing the same dumb shit we do,” Simone said. “We aren’t doing much in the way of lucrative crime. Bee sells fake IDs sometimes, but that’s it. We step on all sorts of toes, but not the dangerous ones.” Paisley felt somewhat comforted by this, thinking that she at least didn’t need to worry about men with guns and neck tattoos breaking her door down.

“So, if these other gangs don’t like, steal business from us or something like that, then why are they our enemies?” Paisley said. She felt like somewhere on her freefall decent into the crash landing she had braced herself for, she started floating amidst the confusion of everything she was learning. She was left to wonder what the purpose of any of this was at all.

“Have you ever heard of Charles Bronson?” Bee said. “He’s a prisoner in England. He got arrested for robbing a post office, I think. Then, instead of being a good boy and serving his time, he started fighting everyone he could get his hands on. He’s been locked up for 46 years because he just kept committing crime after crime. You know why?” Paisley faintly shook her

head. Bee's voice was so smooth, with a subtle depth that made it sound rich and full. Whenever she spoke, Paisley felt like she was wading through a pool of honey, fully enveloped in everything she had to say. She was afraid to speak, or even move too much, out of fear that she would somehow disrupt the spell she held over her. Paisley was happy to relinquish all of her focus to Bee. She did so with the others, too, but it was different. When Paisley gave her undivided attention to Simone or Araceli, it was because she was afraid. With Bee, it was because she felt so drawn to her. She didn't feel any fear in her presence. She only felt a tingling in her fingers, and the soft, quickening beating of her heart. "It's because he simply wanted to be known. Crime was all he really had. So, he made it work."

"It's hard to be a 'somebody' in a place like this. The world doesn't exactly have its eyes on us," Araceli said. Paisley thought she sounded more somber than usual, like the sharp angst in her voice had been drowned out by something sadder. "But we've found a way to make people know who we are." Paisley understood this. She remembered the drive to Texas, and how she was plagued by the fear that she was being removed from the path toward making something of herself. She hadn't considered that the people around her might be just as desperate to feel like they have some kind of purpose in their lives.

"Problem is, if other bitches are doing the same shit as us, and if they're doing it more extreme? People stop caring about us," Simone said. "We need to be the toughest around, or our notoriety is meaningless. If someone is able to fuck with us, suddenly everyone is able to fuck with us." Paisley struggled to imagine any other group of kids their age being able to take on Simone, let alone the rest of the gang. She began imagining Amazonian women riding penny-farthings swarming the streets.

"So, who are our enemies?"

“Come to the school hockey game with us next week and you’ll see,” Simone said.

Paisley could tell by her voice that this wasn’t an optional outing.

The nearest adequate ice rink to Tuluca Rock was several towns over, but the demand for a hockey team from the student athletes at the high school was too overwhelming to ignore. So, the school started a street hockey team and, in time, the Tuluca Rock Boulder Rollers became the most popular high school sports team in the area. Or, at least, that’s the story as it was told by the principal that day at the season’s opening game. To the story’s credit, Paisley thought, she was surprised to see just how full the gymnasium was with people. There were more people in the stands than she would have assumed lived in the town. She was also more than slightly annoyed when she felt how cool the air in the gymnasium was. It turned out, all the school’s air conditioning was relegated to the gym to make people comfortable during games. Paisley thought about all the sweating she had done in the hallways, the stink of teenage bodies, and bounced her leg in aggravation, the arrhythmic pounding of her heel threatening to punch right through the floor. They were sitting in the very back row, as far away as they could get from the court floor. Each maintained postures and body language that suggested their displeasure as well, and Paisley wondered if they shared her annoyance with the air conditioning conspiracy, or if maybe they were trying to telegraph to anyone who might see them that they weren’t here for fun. The whole gym still smelled of fresh polish, and the aroma of the popcorn being cooked in the lobby was creeping through the doors. There was an undeniable sense of excitement and energy in the air. The people in the audience were all buzzing like a swarm of cicadas, every so often someone breaking up the drone with a whistle or a good-luck cheer to the Boulder Rollers. The boys who made up the team, meanwhile, were squirming in their skates, rough housing

with each other, clearly bursting with energy just waiting to be released in the heat of competition. In any other situation, Paisley likely would have let herself feed into the excitement, to join the people around her in their celebration. But, she thought, her gang obviously had a stern reputation to uphold, and far be it from her to be the one that ruins that.

Soon, an announcement was made that the opposing team's bus had arrived, and it was time to take positions so that the game could start when they entered. The boys quickly darted over to their side of the court floor, the sharp sound of their rollerblades smashing into the wood while the wheels rolled into a staggered buzzing filling the gym. It was amplified by the audience's sudden stillness, like they were all holding their breaths for what was about to happen. After a prolonged silence, a tense stillness in the stands, the doors flew open, and six girls entered on rollers-skates.

"Please welcome, the Marlon Point Mares!" the principal announced. The entire audience erupted in boos and hollers. Only a small contingent of people in the front of the stands clapped, likely the people who had made the trek from Marlon Point.

"That's them," Simone said, leaning close to Paisley's ear so she could cut through the shouting.

"They're letting girls play this game? Don't they have, like, separate leagues or whatever?" Paisley said.

"You should know by now our area isn't exactly brimming with people. Lots of boys here wanted a street hockey team. Well, lots of girls in Marlon Point did, too. But not a lot of boys. If the league weren't co-ed, there would be no league. Besides, there's not a high school jock within one-hundred miles that could fuck with a single one of those girls." Paisley watched the girls move, their powerful strides carrying them swiftly to their position on the court. Each

one of them held their sticks like they were battleaxes. Their uniforms were tank-top style jerseys, all black with a pink insignia of a rearing horse. These uniforms put their broad shoulders and muscular arms on full display. Some wore fishnet undershirts or fingerless gloves. One, Paisley could have sworn, even had a tattoo on her hand. “There’s layers to these bitches. So, they’re the Marlon Point hockey team, right? But actually that’s just because they’re a roller derby team by night, and the school asked them if they would be down to pick up some sticks. *But*, the roller derby thing is a cover for the fact that they’re a gang. I mean don’t get me wrong, they’re good at it, but they only do it so no one finds a group of girls raising hell on roller-skates suspicious. Paisley, these burly, hardass goth freaks you see before you are The Church of the Feral Mare. Our number one adversaries.”

When the game started, the Mares immediately dominated the court. The way they moved was strange and disconcerting to Paisley’s eye. Their stride was so graceful, so remarkably clean and precise, that they were almost soft and beautiful, but the upper half of their bodies were writhing with violent aggression. It was like they were completely unhinged, ready to break at any moment and cut a rampage through the gymnasium, and yet they remained in complete control. Every time they would body check an opponent, it was obvious that, regardless of how much control they had, they were no strangers to violence. The girls would routinely drive their shoulders furiously into the ribs of the opposing boys, sending them right to the floor where they would stay for several moments. Paisley watched some of the boys stand up only to double over and hold their stomachs like they were about to puke. The girls would often signal their blows by letting out a loud scream, deep and animalistic. It was so visceral and powerful that Paisley could sometimes feel herself bracing her body as though the blow was coming for her. The Boulder Rollers had backup players, but the Mares didn’t. At one point, three of the

girls had been given penalties and were forced off the court for several minutes. This left three of them on the court, versus the fully bodied Rollers. The Mares scored two goals during this period. Paisley hadn't noticed how her fists were clenched, how she was practically hovering over the edge of her seat in excitement, until she turned to face her friends and saw them all sitting cross armed and watching the game with a look of irritation. She simply could not help being enthralled by the prowess the Mares displayed on the court, the way she could almost feel their energy vibrating in the air. She had let the fact that she was a Lilith slip her mind for a moment. She had forgotten that these girls were her enemies. When this information returned to her mind, it came with a realization. This was one hell of a group of girls to be pitted against. Paisley had never had an enemy in her life, let alone one that could probably crush her skull with one hand. One of the perks of staying in the background. The tension in her fingers loosened, her hands remaining curled up into weaker fists as though she were moments away from letting go of whatever she had been gripping so tightly before. That excitement which she had only just felt now slipping from her grasp. A loud crack erupted in the gym as one of the Mares made a slapshot that hurled toward the goal with violent speed. Paisley felt it ripple through the back of her neck.

After the game concluded, the girls stomped down the stands and made their way toward the exist. The crowd thinned as they approached the door, and the sea of people parted to reveal Leviticus, plain clothed in tattered overalls and a dirt-stained button-down shirt, standing against the wall. His arm was around Colson's shoulder. Both of them were staring intently at Paisley, Leviticus with a coy looking smile, Colson with a pouty scowl. For a second, Paisley's heels dug themselves into the ground as though they were trying to pull the floorboards up. She felt like a cornered animal, like the hot breath of a predator was blowing on her face. They were clearly

waiting for her, for a purpose she did not dare imagine because she knew her imagination would immediately jump to the darkest possible conclusion. But then she felt Simone's hand grab hers and squeeze it slightly. In that instant, with only a small gesture, Paisley knew that Simone would lead her through whatever was coming. She let her pull her along.

"Ms. Thelemaque, I thought I saw you in the stands," Leviticus said. He pulled Colson in a little closer to him as he spoke. Paisley hated the condescending cheerfulness in his voice. She had no trouble deciphering how fake it was. "I'm glad you are taking part in our community pride. But what a shame it is to see that this is the company that you keep." He gave Simone a once-over as he said this before returning his gaze to Paisley. "I hope you won't let this hoodlum rub off on you too much. I would hate for things to turn sour between me and your family."

"Maybe you should try worrying about your own shithead son before you worry about other people's families, LaGrange," Simone said. "By the way, Colson, how's your knee?" Colson jolted forward, causing Paisley to jump, but Leviticus pulled him back in.

"Now, now Colson. Don't let this wretch cause you to act out of turn. It's your duty to act superior."

"Well next time that superior prick fucks with me or my girls, I'll send him home crawling instead of just limping."

"And what about your little faggot boyfriend, Simone? Does he need your protectin' too?" Colson said. Paisley felt a sudden surge of confusion, as though she were snatched out of the moment and everything around her had briefly paused. She knew it was a silly thing to be hung up on amidst the hostility of the interaction, but she was stunned that Simone had a boyfriend. She didn't have long to ponder this before she felt someone bump into her from

behind, and when she looked up she saw Bee rushing for the door. Simone called for her, but before she finished, Bee was already gone.

“If your father weren’t here, I would fucking gut you. Watch your ass in the halls, LaGrange. I know exactly how soft you are when daddy ain’t around.”

Outside, the light breaking through the glass gymnasium doors reflected off a thin mist that had gathered from warm rain. Ahead, Bee was in what appeared to be a confrontation with two girls. One of them, Paisley noticed, had a scratchy looking tattoo on the back of her hand. They must have been Mares, she thought. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves as she followed Simone and Araceli, who were both storming urgently toward the two girls. She inhaled slowly and deliberately, paying close attention to the way the air filled her lungs and gently pushed her ribcage outward. She went until the back of her throat got cold. The air smelled like wet pavement and the distant odor of freshly smoked pot. The sound of gravel turning underneath their furious footsteps alerted the Mares to their approach. Bee stood in front of them, with her arms clung around her body like she was trying to give herself a hug. Her head was bowed.

“Well, if it isn’t Simone. You and the illegal have a new friend I see?” the girl with the hand tattoo said.

“You’re already missing one tooth from the last time you put mi abuela’s name in your mouth, Marigold. You really wanna go down that road again?” Araceli said.

“Let me guess, you fuckups are rushing to the rescue of poor Benny Boy here?”

“Don’t call me that,” Bee said, whimpering slightly.

“Or what? Don’t you know it’s rude for boys to hit girls?” At first, Paisley had been afraid of the impending confrontation. But hearing Marigold speak with such hostility to Bee

filled her with a fast-boiling rage the likes of which she couldn't recall having ever felt before. Her jaw stiffened up, teeth clenched like they were wired shut. She grabbed herself by the wrist and kept squeezing and releasing in a rapid pulse, feeling like she needed to do something with her hands in order to stave off their newfound hunger for this girl's blood. She was almost afraid of herself. She might have even been confused by what she was feeling if she had room in her thoughts for anything other than a hatred so visceral it made her vision get fuzzy.

"You know, bitch, you got a lot of fucking nerve coming to my neighborhood and fucking with my girl. Y'all better get back on your little bus and hide in your prissy gated community like the cowards that you are before I remind you who exactly you're dealing with," Simone said.

"You know, Benny Boy here must be so embarrassed by having to be saved by you all the time, Simone."

"Call her that one more time and I'll fucking kill you," Paisley said. The words felt foreign coming out of her mouth, like they were being spoken by some spirit that had taken control of her body. As soon as she realized what she said, a prickly kind of coldness washed over her face and her tongue curled up in her mouth. In an instant, she had turned herself from someone who was merely present for the conflict, to someone who was actively engaged in it. She threw herself onto the battlefield without a moment's thought or hesitation. She wasn't sure if she should be mortified by what she had done, or proud.

"Fuck you, bloodmeat. I don't even know who you are."

"Only thing you need to know is that I've seen her smash a cop's window, and she'll do the same to your face," Simone said. Marigold started to say something, but the sound of the gymnasium door being forcefully flung open interrupted her.

“Hey! I know you miscreants aren’t getting into any trouble in my presence, now are you?” Leviticus shouted across the parking lot.

“Great, Marigold. See what you’ve done now? You couldn’t just fuck off and now you got good ol’ Rustic Justice involved,” Simone said.

“This isn’t finished,” said Marigold.

“Won’t be until you’re in the dirt.” Then the girls split, the Mares getting on their school bus, and the Liliths on their bicycles, riding into the hazy moonlit streets.

“Way to step up there, Pais. Your execution needs some work. ‘I’ll kill you’ is a little blasé, everyone sees it coming. You gotta keep ‘em on their toes if you really wanna shake ‘em. But not bad. You’re finally showing some guts,” Simone said.

“Yeah, you’re almost starting to prove me wrong,” Araceli said. Bee remained silent.

“Thanks,” was all Paisley could muster. She was still in shock from what she had done, still wrapping her head around the fact that she actually faced danger head-on. She felt like she had changed, like this was the first step toward becoming someone new. She was trying to figure out if she liked where this path might lead or not.

The girls went back to Bee’s house to help her settle in and unwind after their hectic outing. The room was still dark, a cold blue light painting the girls in shadows. Bee was sat at the edge of the bed with her head nestled in the crook of Simone’s neck. She was quietly sobbing. Simone ran her fingers through Bee’s hair and gently whispered unheard words to her. Paisley felt stiff and awkward, afraid to make even the slightest move out of fear of breaking Simone’s efforts to comfort Bee. As though the slightest shifting of weight or creaking of the mattress could make Bee spiral into a greater sorrow. More than anything, though, she was desperate to know what it

was that had Bee so upset. She understood that Marigold had said incredibly rude things to her, but she knew Bee to be tough and resolute. She was surprised that those words had gotten to her so easily.

After a while, Bee's sobs had subsided, or at least became gentle enough as to not be noticed. Then she broke the silence.

"Paisley, there's something I guess you ought to know about me. And I know it's a lot but please just bear with me." She sounded nervous, like a weakness crept into her voice. Paisley had found comfort in the warmth of Bee's voice for as long as she had known her. It pained her to hear it now cracking and shaking, made her desperate to do anything to fix whatever was happening in Bee's heart.

"Anything. You can trust me, Bee," she said.

"You best mean that, girl. This is serious. Be real careful with how you react," Simone said. Even the usual fire in her voice was dulled. She never took her eyes off Bee while speaking. Her threats weren't her typical toughness or arrogance. In her softer, more solemn voice, they sounded like nothing more than gentle reminders.

"Ok. Paisley, I'm trans." Bee stared into Paisley's eyes, as though she were waiting for a reaction. Paisley's body felt heavy, like the tepid air and the stiff silence of the room were pressing down on her. The only audible noise was the faint whirring of the fan in Bee's computer. Paisley sat still, trying not to make any gesture or face out of fear that some involuntary reaction would be misread. She only vaguely understood what Bee had meant but wanted to make sure Bee knew she was on her side. She was afraid that Bee would assume the opposite if she spoke or acted too soon. So, she sat with the discomfort, allowing the tension of

the room to move through her body until she too had tensed up, her fingers gripping tightly into her thighs.

“I’m sorry if I say this wrong. So like, that means that you were a boy once?”

“When I was born, the doctor called me a boy. My parents raised me as a boy and gave me a boy’s name. But I’m a girl, and I always was. My body is just different from yours.”

“So that note I saw, for Ben. I assumed maybe you had a brother or something, but...”

“No. Ben is me. Or at least, what they call me. My parents know, and they see it, but they refuse to have the conversation. Every time I try to talk about it, they just silence me.” Paisley thought about her relationship with her father, how important it was to her to know that she could always rely on him. She imagined how lost and afraid she would constantly be if she didn’t have him. Her eyes began to sting with the welling of tears, deeply saddened for Bee knowing that she did not have that.

“Bee, I’m so sorry. That’s awful.”

“The scariest part is that I know it could be worse. Sure, maybe they don’t accept me, but they never kicked me out. They’ve never threatened me. They don’t stop me from dressing like a girl. They just ignore me. That’s more than a lot of other trans girls I know can say.” Paisley felt herself getting more drawn to Bee, felt their connection getting stronger. Bee trusted her with something so important, and that made Paisley feel like she was truly finding her place in the group. She felt a kind of sisterhood finally presenting itself to her, like she was no longer simply following along with them but actually becoming a fully integrated member of the gang. But there was something between her and Bee specifically that was confusing to Paisley. It was stronger than the connection she felt with Araceli, or even Simone. It was different.

“That explains why you were so upset earlier. Bee, I’m so sorry those girls were harassing you like that.”

“I can handle being made fun of, sweetie. It’s been happening long enough that I’m over it. To tell you the truth, I was only so upset because I didn’t want this to be how you found out. I was going to tell you eventually, when the time was right. But I got scared that hearing them say all that, and finding out the truth, would scare you away from us.” Something about knowing Bee had faith in her, knowing that Bee actively wanted her to be part of her life, made Paisley’s skin flush with a dull heat. She felt like something was squirming around in her chest, something warm and soft. Then, as she sat and meditated on what the Mares had done, that confusing feeling slowly metamorphosized into rage. That soft, warm thing now felt like it was pulsing wildly throughout her arms and hands, pushing her right up to the edge of thrashing her limbs about to release some of that energy. She hated those girls. She was angry before, but now it was pure and deep hatred that she felt. The vision of Marigold’s gnarled, mocking face swirled in her mind and she could feel the blood rushing harder through her veins, the dull pressure building in her head threatening to explode.

“Fuck them. I’m not going run away from you. Those girls are assholes.” Paisley was breathing heavier than usual. She noticed Bee let a smile crack, then the faintest of laughs that only sounded as air blowing out of her nose. “What? What’s funny.”

“Nothing, darling. It’s just cute when you get angry.” The faint heat returned to Paisley’s face. The soft, warm thing slammed into her ribs. For one glorious and alarming minute, she felt her body free of tension, as though she were a candle softening in the presence of a flame. But the hatred was still there, quieter but still raging at her core.

“Why don’t we do something?” Paisley said.

“Like what? Like go out? It’s late,” Araceli chimed in.

“No. Like something about those girls. They’re our enemies, right? They showed up on our turf, made Bee cry, and then just left? They bested us. We’re just gonna let them win?”

“We aren’t really at battle with them right now though, it wasn’t a real fight,” Araceli said.

“Hold on a minute. Paisley ain’t wrong. They did make us look like chumps. And they hurt Bee. Since when do we gotta be at war with someone to fuck with them?” Simone said.

“Bee, what do you think?” Paisley said.

“Well, I do feel kind of like a coward for not standing up for myself. I suppose I wouldn’t turn away a little payback.”

“It’s settled then. All who are willing, let’s screw to Marlon and fuck with some Mares,” Simone said.

The girls hoisted themselves over the fence that surrounded the residential area of Marlon Point. Paisley struggled to find her footing on the stone base, holding herself stable by the metal pickets which were hot to the touch. The heavy backpacks that they each wore threw her off her balance slightly as she swung her legs over the fence. The lawns in this neighborhood looked nothing like the ones back in Tuluca Rock. The wispy, dry grass that populated her yard was replaced here by thick, luscious green grass. Sprinklers sounded in the distance, hydrating what must have been a virtually unquenchable thirst for the grass trying to survive in the desert. It was disjuncting, Paisley thought, to look ahead of her and see all this beautiful, healthy green, and then look behind her to be once again greeted by the dry, dense dirt of the desert floor. She wanted to be envious of the people who lived there for having carved out a little slice of

suburban idealism amidst the surrounding wastes. But even she, who still silently resented being brought to this place, could not deny the uncanny artificiality of Marlon Point. She felt like she had stumbled onto a movie set, a place where people lived in a fantasy instead of accepting the actual world around them.

“Jesus, look at this shit. All of these houses look the same, Simone, how the hell are we gonna know where to go?” Araceli said.

“Marigold’s dad drives an Audi, silver, I know the license plate. Should be easy,” Bee said.

“You’re such a fuckin’ freak,” Simone said.

“And the only reason you babes know what you’re doing half the time,” Bee chided back.

The roads in Marlon Point were all flat and perfectly paved. Paisley fantasized about how smoothly her bike would ride around this neighborhood, how easy it would be to tear through the town and cause mayhem. But they left their bikes on the other side of the fence, afraid that having to hurl them over it would impede their escape if things escalated too aggressively. So the girls were left to traverse the blacktop on foot. The roads were well lit, the streetlights beaming with the stagnant, unnatural white of powerful fluorescent bulbs. The girls snaked themselves through yards and behind trees, sometimes darting into the middle of the road, following an invented, winding path of shadow to avoid being seen by any nosy neighbors. They crept as silently as they could, Paisley having decided to leave her shoes with her bike to soften her steps. Even still, she was walking on her toes, just to be safe. The only discernable noise they made, besides the occasional dragging of one of the more graceless girl’s feet, was the rustling of their backpacks behind them.

“Bee, you see the car yet?” Simone whispered.

“No. This place is like some labyrinthian rich people hell. I feel like we’re in Bourgeois Burkittsville.”

“We’ve already seen like six Audis dude, this sucks. We should just start thrashing all of them,” Araceli said. She started punching the air in front of her. Paisley could sense how fired up Araceli was, like she was a bag of popcorn seconds from bursting at its seams. She was speaking quickly, barely able to maintain a whisper. Paisley had never seen her so excited. It was almost frightening, yet she couldn’t help but feel her own excitement beginning to amplify just by being near her. She started to see every house around her as a potential target and had to talk herself back to sense.

“No, we need to make sure Marigold is the one that we get. This message is for her,” she said. This mission was her own design, her first real contribution to the gang. She wanted to make sure it got followed through correctly. This was her first chance to show the girls that she could not only act but lead as well. She didn’t want to disappoint.

As they continued to creep through the streets, the sounds of sprinklers migrated from one side of town to the other, and the emerging drone of cicadas chirping into the night filled the air around them. Paisley started to hear these noises as a soft and gentle constant, like a faint wind one would barely feel on their skin. They were almost meditative and hypnotic. This is why, she figured, that when the smallest sound of metal jangling broke the pattern, she heard it as though it were being broadcast through a loudspeaker. It was followed by a pattering on the concrete coming from down the road around the corner from where they stood.

“Guys, do you hear that?” she said. “I think something is coming.” She put her back to a nearby fence and slowly peered her head around the corner, straining her eyes as though she were trying to push them out of her head and use them like periscopes. Walking down the

sidewalk, bathed in the glow of the streetlights, was an old lady draped in fine silken nightwear with her tiny dog in tow. It wore a diamond studded collar and miniature shoes which tapped lightly on the concrete as it walked its rapid scamper. Paisley quickly backstepped with a long stride and turned urgently to the others. “Shit! Someone is coming! Some old woman.”

“What do we do? There’s no way she won’t know we’re not from here,” Bee said.

“Let’s just tell her to fuckin’ pound sand. Since when are we afraid of some Faberge-egg-ass bitch?” Araceli said, her words rapid and sharp, piercing through the silence.

“Shut your loud ass up, Celi. Only one of us is white, for fucks sake, you know in a place like this that lady will have the cops here faster than shit if we so much as breathe wrong around her. Get serious,” Simone said. The footsteps grew ever closer as the sprinklers cut out briefly and moved to yet another new position.

“She’s going to be here any second, guys, we need to do something,” Bee said. Paisley felt like her thoughts were trapped in a blender, swirling anxiously from one thing to the next for too long to possibly focus on any given idea. In an instant, she had already dreamt up a detailed fantasy involving her getting arrested and having to watch her father break down in tears picking her up from jail. She considered their options and weighed their pros and cons all at once in a dizzying, frantic desperation: Should we run? No, that’s too suspicious. Should we hide? But where? Should we simply walk right past her, trying our best to ignore her and pray that she doesn’t think anything of us? But Bee must be right, in a place like this everyone is probably on edge by the sight of even the most innocent looking stranger. As the footsteps approached the corner, signaling to Paisley that the lady was about to round the corner, something snapped into place in Paisley’s head, and suddenly it felt like her racing thoughts had been replaced by a calm and certain silence. She pulled out her cellphone and pointed it at the girls. “Quick. Pose for the

‘Gram.’ She watched Simone flash her a baffled looking glare before quickly wearing a smile and throwing up a peace sign. Araceli put prayer hands in front of her face, and Bee dropped to one knee and placed her fist to her mouth. Paisley took a photo, the flash flickering in the darkness and casting their shadows on the wooden fence behind them. The woman rounded the corner at the same moment.

“Oh my! You girls scared me! I didn’t expect anyone else to be out so late. What are you doing out here?”

“Oh, sorry! Me and my friends are just visiting my uncle in town and he fell asleep so we thought we might walk around and explore.” While she spoke, she opened up her maps app and scrolled the page to the other side of the neighborhood, taking note of the first street name she saw. “I must admit, it’s easy to get lost around here. Do you know how we might get back to Katydid Ave?”

“I sure do. Take a right here, go about three blocks, and you’ll be on the corner.”

“Thank you, miss! You have such a cute dog, by the way!”

“What a sweet girl! Get home safe.” The girls went the way they were told, with a casual pace at first, breaking into a jovial kind of energetic run when the woman was far enough behind them.

“Ok, Ms. Nyong’o, damn! Didn’t know we have a bitch who does improv on our hands,” Simone said. “All prim and proper, too. You’re quick, Pais. Not bad.” They continued to wander through the neighborhood, no real sense of direction, but with newfound levity. Some of the edge and tension of the evening had been lifted by the excitement of their close call. Paisley’s mood lifted, some of the anger that birthed the revenge plot they were embarking on being replaced by a serene kind of happiness. It made her remember that underneath all the talk of being a gang,

these girls were also just her friends. It may have been a strange kind of girl's night out, but here antisocial tendencies didn't give her much else to compare it to. As far as she knew, this is what it was like to be a normal girl.

“Maybe it's in a garage or something, guys. I don't know,” Bee said. Paisley couldn't help but sense the tone of defeat in her voice and let it echo in her chest, sharing the feeling. She was getting tired, her steps slowing and legs getting weaker. Her head hung slightly as she walked, her focus softening on the slight silhouette of herself on the sidewalk. She heard something behind her, but didn't really register the noise, just accepting it as part of the background that she felt her consciousness fading into. She was ready to suggest turning it in and formulating a new plan, losing hope that her plan would get fulfilled even after all the effort they put in to get this far. Then she noticed that the faint silver light of the nearby streetlights was getting sharper and whiter, brightening gradually as the noise grew. She watched her shadow grow as the light got closer before she realized a car was speeding down the road past them. She turned to look and she saw an Audi convertible whip by, girls hanging over the door with their hair flowing in the wind. They were hollering into the sky, seeming to celebrate nothing in particular. Nothing but simply being there, alive in the night.

“Holy fuck guys. That's it,” Bee said.

“No shit?” Simone said.

“Fuckin' gun it, bitches!” Araceli said, then took off running toward the car. The other girls followed suit, Paisley stumbling over her own feet as she tried to awkwardly transition from her sullen defeatism to the urgent dedication she knew she now needed to exhibit. They turned the corner that the car had sped around, and though it was much further ahead than they were, it

was still visible in the distance screeching into a driveway. The lights glowed in the dark like a beacon and indiscernible hip hop music buzzed through the speakers like a deeply resonant murmur. The girls sprinted down the road in its direction, reducing their speed the closer they got so that they could keep their cover. They ducked behind the bushes of the adjacent house's yard, hiding from the sight of the girls in the car who still had not killed the engine and gone inside.

“God damn, what are they doing? This is taking forever. I’m so sick of waiting!” Araceli said.

“How many times am I going to have to tell you to shut up tonight, girl? I hate when you’re like this,” Simone said.

“Quiet. The music stopped,” Paisley said. The car doors thudded shut in an uneven rhythm, the cackling of the girls in the car following them up the steps of the house. Paisley peered over the bushes and saw the girls, all older than them, likely mid-twenties. They wore fashionable dresses with gaudy handbags, all of them with perfectly groomed hair that seemed to shimmer slightly in the moonlight. The pure opposite of the girls who made up the Mares.

“Must be her sisters or something,” Bee posited. The slurred chatter and piercing laughter was cut abruptly by the slamming of a door, and silence returned but for the sprinklers, which now sounded closer than ever before.

“Now? Please say now,” Araceli said, the closest to a whisper she had managed all night.

“Not yet,” Paisley said. They stay in the silence for a while. Paisley watched lights turn on, then off, moving from room to room within the house, until finally they stopped. After everything had been still for long enough, Paisley took off her backpack. “Now.” Each of the girls removed their bags and, with a surprising synchronicity that Paisley couldn’t help but appreciate, unzipped them. Paisley rummaged her hands through its contents, looking for the

perfect stone to cast, thinking there should be something ceremonious about the first one. She removed a particularly large one. It was cool and smooth in her palm. She rubbed her thumb along its curve gently, appreciating the slight grit in one spot, and tossed it gently up and down, feeling the weight sink into her palm as she caught it. Then, standing up from behind the cover of the bush, she wound up and hurled it through the massive front window of the home. All the other girls hurled theirs, and they each quickly snatched stone after stone from their bags. Paisley tossed them almost carelessly, concerning herself less with which targets she hit, but how many. Some rocks met windows, and the sound of glass shattering rung through the air like a cacophony of car crashes. Some hit the vinyl siding, letting off a satisfying cracking sound. But whatever sounds were being made at any given moment, they were ceaseless, the chaos consuming the night. One rock went right into the side mirror of the Audi, with more following it to dent the body. The car alarm blared like a cry for help to the entire town. Behind the sound of crashing glass, shrieks could be heard coming from inside the house, and a man yelling indecipherable profanities through one of the newly broken windows tried to issue what sounded like some warning or threat to the girls. When their ammunition depleted, Paisley stopped to soak in the scene, and take stock of the sounds. Distant dogs were barking, a scattered choir of yelps and howls all aimed at an unknown threat. A man who now stood in the doorway was shouting, “the police are on their way!” Someone was crying inside the house. Doors of nearby houses slammed shut as concerned neighbors rushed to their porches in bathrobes and nightgowns. The cicadas continued to sing their desperate song, aggressively indifferent to the chaos. There were no sprinklers. Then, there were. Right in the yard in which they stood, gurgling slightly and then firing off in a pulsating hiss, the sprinklers around them awakened. The water was cold, and Paisley’s clothes became heavy as they got soaked through. The chills

ran through her and she stiffened her arms hanging tensely at her sides. She curled her toes up involuntarily, feeling one of her long toenails bending slightly when it pressed into the insole of her shoe. There, in that warm and stagnant desert night, it was refreshing. She felt rejuvenated. Cleansed. She felt like little jolt of lightning was shooting up her arms. She felt herself smiling, not on purpose, not with intent. Uncontrollably just doing it. She looked over at Bee, and she was too. That's all she could have wanted for that moment to be perfect.

“We gotta get the fuck out of here!” Simone yelled over the shrieking of the other girls. Despite her desire to turn this moment into a living snapshot that she could sit in forever, unimpeded by the marching of time, Paisley knew that she was right. In a neighborhood like this, the cops come quick, and they had to be quicker if they wanted to get back safely. Still screaming, the girls started sprinting through yards as they cut as close to a straight line as possible through the neighborhood. They replaced the soft stealthy steps that brought them here with frantic feet pounding rapidly into the earth, trampling rose bushes and propelling them over short fences and hedges. Porch lights blinked on as they ran past the motion sensors, illuminating their path forward and announcing to anyone paying attention that the Division of the Lilith Moon was here to rule their streets for the night.

On the edge of town, sirens started swarming. As they continued running, they got louder. The girls made a hard turn, hoping to put some distance between themselves and the direct path that would lead to Marigold's house. Between houses, they saw as three cop cars sped by barely over a block from where they stood. They turned their path back toward the direction of the gate, maintaining their distance in case more cruisers followed the last crop. Soon, the fence came into view, and Paisley noticed that the black steel pickets were dancing in a wash of blue and red light.

“Guys, cop at the gate” she yelled out, fighting through the burning in her lungs. When she spoke, it felt like her sides were cramping up.

“How the hell are we gonna get over the fence without the pig noticing us?” Araceli said. When they were finally close enough to the gate itself to see it, Paisley saw that the cop had parked his care sideways in front of the gate, which was closed behind him. She thought that, unless it closed automatically and they didn’t think to prop it back open, the cops must have closed it intentionally to try and trap them in the neighborhood. Their mission, her mission, was so close to being completed that suddenly it felt like all the fatigue in her legs and her shoulders disappeared. She was so singularly focused on getting out of Marlon Point that she could feel nothing but the irresistible impulse to keep sprinting, like something was hooked into her chest and pulling her along an invisible line forward.

“We have to think of something, guys. This is our last hurdle,” Bee said. Paisley only felt that drive get stronger knowing that Bee shared her motivation. This was, after all, for her. As long as she hadn’t given up hope, Paisley knew she had to keep working to succeed. She let Bee’s words roll around in her mind, trying to savor the tone of her voice.

“Wait a minute,” she said. “Hurdle? That’s perfect. Maybe we don’t need to sneak passed the pig at all.”

“Girl, what are you saying?” Simone said.

“Watch.” Paisley picked up her pace, her long legs propelling her over great distance with each stride. She felt the summer breeze whisking through her wet clothes, her socks squishing underneath her feet in a way that would disgust her if she weren’t so focused on the car ahead of her. She was sprinting head on toward the front of the car. She watched as the cop inside turned his gaze from the driver side window to the windshield, making eye contact with

Paisley. She held that eye contact, never breaking as she continued to speed toward him. Before he could open the door, she leapt up, planting one foot on the hood of the car and swinging up to the roof. The flashing lights nearly blinded her when she landed, but she pivoted toward the gate. She felt the metal depressing underneath her as she took a quick step forward, squatted down and launched herself in the air, clearing the spiked pickets of the fence and crashing into the ground. She scrambled over to her bicycle, listening to the sounds of her friends following her lead, their feet stomping first into metal and then into earth. She thought she heard the sound of glass cracking but didn't want to look back to see. She was too focused on getting out of there as fast as she could. She pivoted onto her bike and pedaled as hard as she could, pushing through the initial resistance of high gear with an ease that she had never achieved before. She could tell that she was getting stronger. For a moment, she feared that she might have been leaving her friends behind, that she was abandoning them in her desperation to get away from the scene. But she told herself that they would have called out to her if they were falling behind, or if they had been caught by the cop. She had faith that the girls could pull it off. Behind her, she could hear the low mechanical whirring of the gate slowly opening. They had to disappear into the night before the cop could chase after them. Soon, one by one, the girls caught up with her, riding in a v-formation through the wastes, further and further from the main road. Simone made no effort to take Paisley's place at the front of the pack.

“Is he following us?” she called out behind her.

“The pig?” Simone said. “Fuck no. Don't worry about him. I smashed up his windshield. No way he can see through it well enough to drive. He probably radioed the others, but they must already be at Marigold's house by now. We'll be long gone before 12 catches up.”

“Then I guess I can finally say mission accomplished?” Paisley said.

“You’re goddamn right! I could do this all night!” Aracelli said.

“Yeah, or you could stop tweaking you goddamn maniac,” Simone said.

“For real, though, Paisley. This was awesome. Thanks,” Bee said.

Paisley imagined the scene behind her, letting herself get carried away in the thrill of it all, the adrenaline still coursing through her supercharging her fantasies. She imagined a swarm of cop cars pouring through the gate like a pack of mechanized dogs. Their spotlights flooded the desert sands that hugged the main road, searching urgently for Paisley unaware that she had already slipped deep into the night to be seen from the road. She imagined what would happen when the cops in the cruisers realized this. Maybe they would call backup, maybe a special unit on dirtbikes would be called in to storm the desert in pursuit of them. She thought of the monstrous roaring of all their engines revving up at once, the smell of gasoline leaking into the air, the horrible wall of dust that would surely follow them as they sped through the sands. She pondered for a moment what a cop squad’s dirtbike helmets would look like. Probably that stupid black flag with the blue line in the middle, she thought. She pictured them, riding slowly after finding tire tracks in the sands, hunting the girls like snakes. It all made her feel like some kind of superhero. All this, she thought, just to fail at catching me. Me, the fastest girl alive. Me, the Ghost of West Texas. She had never been more certain than she was in that moment that she was unstoppable when she was in the saddle.

Paisley spent the weekend at Simone’s house. Though she had grown accustomed to the gang lifestyle she had found herself thrown in, one thing she still couldn’t do was face her father, to lie to him about where she had been and what she was doing. She figured if she put a few days

between her and their assault on Marlon Point, it would be easier to avoid. On Monday morning, they rode to school together. They arrived a little earlier than usual and, walking into the hallway, were greeted by Principal Melrose.

“Ah, good morning, ladies. I see you’ve settled in nicely and found yourself a group of friends, Paisley. I’m glad you’re rapidly adjusting to your new life here,” he said. He wore a tight, small-mouthed smile while he spoke to her. Then he turned to Simone. “Still, Simone, I hope you aren’t dragging this innocent girl down to your level. I would hate to see her follow in your footsteps.” Simone said nothing, just pushing passed him, and Paisley followed in tow. She remembered the last interaction she had with the principal, and it seemed to her that he had it out for Simone in particular. She wondered if he was aware of Simone’s gang activities, and if he would start associating her with the gang too if she spent too much time around her. What if he called and warned her dad that she might be up to no good?

“Simone, what’s up with that?”

“Up with what, Pais?”

“The principal, like, clearly has a thing against you. Why? Like, does he know you’re in a gang?” She whispered the word gang, mindful of who might be around her. “Does he know that I am too?”

“Baby, chill. Melrose doesn’t know shit.”

“Then what is he talking about, Simone? I’m freaking out. What if he says something to my dad?”

“Look, Pais. I get it. Just chill. I’ll tell you. He doesn’t know anything about DLM, I promise. His beef is with me specifically. I used to be a top-of-my-class type student. I mean, I’m sure you noticed I’m smart as fuck,” she said, winking. “But for real. I got good grades.

Then I started tanking. He thinks some newfound degenerate lifestyle ruined my academic potential or something.”

“Well, I mean...did it?”

“Bitch, no. I was in DLM back when I was a so-called good student too, the fuck?”

“Well then what happened? You just decided to start fucking up, like, for fun?”

“Alright, alright, I’ll tell you, you persistent ass bitch. You just gotta know everything, huh?”

“Sorry, I get paranoid easy. Ambiguity freaks me out I guess.”

“Yeah, yeah. Look, you know I’m nineteen years old, right? My ass shoulda been graduated by now. And you best believe I woulda been up there on that stage with the gold tassels or whatever the fuck it is Honors kids wear. But then Bee came along.” Paisley felt flush at the mention of Bee’s name, and then felt confused. She wondered what Bee could have had to do with it. Surely Bee wasn’t the bad influence on Simone. She felt tension gather in her brow, involuntarily frowning it. “Bee is two grades under me. I met her when she was a freshman, and that was before she was Bee, you know what I mean? She didn’t call herself Bee yet, she didn’t look how she does now, she didn’t call herself a girl yet. She still walked around like a boy. Toward the end of the year, she started growing her hair out, and the summer between her freshman and sophomore year is when she started to fully transition.” Paisley, for a brief moment, tried to imagine what Bee would look like as a boy, as Ben. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t see her without the wispy golden hair shrouding her face, she couldn’t picture the soft pink of her lips on a boy’s face. “So day one of the new year, in walks this lanky awkward girl that everyone knew as a boy the year before. And look I mean she’s basically perfected her look now, but back then it was a little rough around the edges. Not that it matters, she wasn’t any less

of a girl just because her makeup was bad and shit. Anyway, at first, the other kids picked on her. Just like you saw the Mares do. They did that every day.” Some of that anger from the night after the hockey game returned briefly. If it weren’t for the ever-persistent stench of human sweat in the hallway, which seemed to be ever shifting so one could never truly get used to it, she swore she would be able to smell the summer rain. That rage, and the moment it was encapsulated in, was still so vividly engraved in her mind. “I was always friendly toward Bee, but she wasn’t one of us yet, so we weren’t close. Get this, it’s a riot - she wasn’t allowed in before because she was a boy. But I always liked her, and I always knew she was a good rider, so when she came to school as a girl, and I saw her getting picked on, I extended an invitation to her. She took it. Suddenly, everyone knows she’s one of us, everyone knows old Simone has her back, everyone leaves her the fuck alone. Only problem is, I was set to graduate that year, and after I’m out, I can’t very well hang out in the halls and make sure she’s safe. And Bee, well, she isn’t exactly a scrapper. So, I started tanking my grades, got held back on purpose. I promised Bee I would graduate with her. So here we are.”

Paisley felt that the more she knew about Simone, the more honored she was to have her as a friend. Simone presented herself as some violent freak, and in part that was true. But people who never really knew her would only see her as that. Paisley knew that all of her edge came from a place of kindness, of caring for her friends. Paisley believed that it was a privilege to know that about her firsthand. And then, Paisley couldn’t stop thinking about Bee. She couldn’t stop thinking about that warm, squirming thing in her chest and stomach whenever she was around, or how Bee was able to bring her to the extremes of her emotions in a way she had never experienced before. Paisley stopped walking, feeling the burden of what she was thinking weighing so heavily on her shoulders that she couldn’t move. She had a realization that at once

scared her and filled her with excitement, like she couldn't breathe. She felt that warm, squirming thing trying to break out of her, and the only way she could get it out was to speak.

“Simone, I have a question.”

“Jesus, Pais, you seem freaked the fuck out. Yeah, shoot, you can trust me with anything.”

“If I have a crush on Bee, does that mean I'm gay?” She had her eyes closed when she said it. The stale silence caused her to open her eyes, afraid of what Simone might be thinking. She was met with Simone's eyes widened, and a big, mischievous grin cracking her face. It was all teeth.

“Well. That depends. Do you really see Bee as a girl? Or do you see her as a boy who you just call a girl to be polite?” She thought about this for a moment. She thought about the difficulty she had mere moments ago trying to so much as picture Bee as a boy. To call her one felt immediately wrong. She pictured Bee's body, only briefly, and only to recognize that it didn't look like hers did, a justification she told herself over and over again to stave off the feelings of embarrassment and perversion that already brought heat to her cheeks.

“I've only ever known her as a girl. I have no real reason to feel otherwise, right? I've never thought of her as a boy, even after she said she used to be called one. So, yeah, I see her as a girl.”

“Then yes, baby. That's gay.”

So, she thought, now I know that this warm squirming thing has a name. It was a crush. It was what other people might call butterflies, but she always hated that term because she thought it sounded gross. Now, she thought, I realize that's kind of apt. It is a little gross. She always thought the butterflies were all about the soft fluttering feeling. She never knew that the anxiety

and dread underneath it all was also a part of it. There's a fear that comes with getting happiness from something you don't actually have yet. The fear of trying to make it a reality and being met with rejection. Where does that happiness go then, she wondered? If a crush can make you feel this warm and light before the other person even returns those feeling, then what happens when she said no? What happens when the warm, squirming thing shrivels up? What happens when the butterflies die?

“Pais, let me give you some advice. You're gonna want to give Bee some more time. You scored hella points with that Marlon caper for sure, but she has a lot of defenses up all the time. Getting close to her is one thing. But her letting people in? That doesn't happen fast. Just keep doing what you're doing. You'll know when the time is right. And if you don't, I will, so I'll tell your dumb ass.” She felt like she had just gotten a mother's approval. Somehow, Simone validating her feelings made her feel more at ease with them.

It also made her wonder about her actual mom. She knew she would inevitably have to have a ‘hey I'm in love with a girl which means that I'm at least kinda gay’ conversation with her dad, but what about mom? Should she write her a letter? Her mom used to send her letters regularly back in San Bernardino, saying it just felt nicer than texts. But ever since moving to Tuluca Rock, she hadn't received a single one. She supposed that maybe she just didn't know the new address, but then, she could always text and ask. Even if it doesn't feel as nice. Her lamenting was interrupted by the ringing of the bell resonating in the near empty hallway. Paisley thanked Simone and ducked into her classroom.

After the final bell sounded and the horde of bodies began stampeding through the hallway, Paisley heard Araceli's voice calling out her name behind her. “Wait up,” she said. Paisley stood with her back firmly against a locker, its padlock digging into her hip, to let the

swarming students pass by her as Araceli caught up. She walked with a slouch, her steps slowly plodding along as she got closer, and Paisley could see heavy shadows under her eyes.

“Jesus. Are you okay? You look miserable.”

“Huh?” She said, her head still hung down a little bit. She cocked it up and looked at Paisley with squinted eyes. Paisley thought she looked as though she were still processing her words. “Oh, yeah I’m fine. Just didn’t really sleep well these last few days.” Even her speech was slow. “Look, I wanted to ask you something.”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“It’s about mi abuela. I didn’t come to you earlier because I still didn’t really know who you were. But you proved yourself big the other day. She needs help. And I know who your dad is. What he does.”

“You mean immi-” she started to say.

“Hey, I’m being coy for a fuckin’ reason,” Araceli said, interrupting her. Some of the normal bite was back in her voice, but it was still dulled by the fatigue she was clearly working through. “But yes. That. I can tell you more when we aren’t, you know, here. That prick Colson and his dumbass dad are enemies numero uno y dos. Don’t need them hearing shit.”

“My bad.”

“De nada. Just tell me if your dad would talk to her or not.”

“He’s working today, but he hasn’t had any face-to-face clients since we moved. I’m sure he’d be thrilled. Go get her. I’ll let him know you’re coming.”

When Paisley arrived home, she noticed that Frantz had been hard at work since receiving her text in preparation for Araceli and her grandmother. The kitchen was almost as clean as it had

been the day they moved in, the sink emptied of the piled-up dishes they had grown accustomed to, and grease stains from countless massive breakfasts wiped off the counters. His laptop had been dusted, resting on one edge of the kitchen tables, and a neatly arranged folder with forms and documents laid open next to it.

“My first client that’s not online. Finally I have cause to actually wear slacks during a conference.” He turned off the speakers that blared out his housework music and placed Sonny Rollins’ *Saxophone Colossus* on the record player in its stead. “You know, more sophisticated or whatever.”

A knock on the door signaled the arrival of Araceli and her grandmother, who introduced herself as Patli. Frantz sat at his end of the table, with Araceli and Patli sitting beside one another on the opposite end. Paisley, having no real involvement, did not sit at the table, but still stayed in the kitchen nearby Araceli, partly out of curiosity and partly to make her friend feel more comfortable being in their home. Patli was draped in an elegant turquoise shawl which hid her skeletal frame, all but the thin arms which poked out from underneath. Her elbows dug into the tables, and Paisley noted the way her fingers curled too tensely into her palms. Her arms were lined with thin, black veins, coiled and clustered like the tails of a rat king. She wore earrings in the shape of an axolotl with amethyst stones for eyes, and on her neck, Paisley could see thick raised scars filled with black ink, forming an intricate tattoo of an image she could not recognize. It looked like some sort of face, stony and devilish.

After formal introductions, Frantz opened their business the way he always had, by asking her to tell her story. Araceli said that she was largely there to help Patli with anything she couldn’t find the words for, but she spoke elegantly, with a soft calmness in her voice that made

Paisley wonder how Araceli could possibly be from the same family. “I was born in Guatemala, raised in the Mayan ways. For years, I sang songs to the gods, I worked with my family and my village to keep our customs living. But we were poor, and as I grew older, I longed for a richer life. So I move north, to Ciudad de México, and become Flamenco singer. I still sing to the gods, but in the new way, a way that makes me money.” She paused and extended an arm toward Frantz, slowly caressing it with her hands, running her still-curved fingers over small black pools in her skin. “But, my friend, Flamenco is a very sad art. Many of us create our songs from so much pain. And many of us deal with that pain the same way. Chapopote.”

“Heroin,” Araceli said. She looked uncomfortable saying the word. Ashamed, somehow. Paisley watched her subtly distance herself slightly from Patli. Was she embarrassed of her grandmother?

“I had a daughter very young, and she too got pregnant in her youth. The money, the drugs, I knew many bad people. Gangs, cartels, whatever you might call them. I work for them. And they expect more and more from me. Use my daughter to hurt me. When she got pregnant, I got afraid. Afraid they would try to hurt her baby. I could not take anymore, so I ran to here. Araceli is born here, she is a citizen. Her mother fled back to the Ciudad to try and bring Araceli’s father. The gangs, they find her, and they send me a final message. She never got to be a citizen.” Paisley felt her eyes get cold and things became blurry as faint tears pooled up and started trailing down her cheeks. She never realized that Araceli had such a horrifying past. She felt like she understood why she would be so hesitant to trust people. Her family line was plagued by people aiming to hurt them. She must have been aware from a young age that people might try to use her to get at her grandmother, on top of living in fear that the police would take Patli away from her. Paisley had to sit on the counter. The weight of the sadness she felt made it

too difficult to stand. “When I get to America, I am still on drugs. I felt like I would die trying to stop, but I did for her. But still, I was too much of a mess to try and get my citizenship. I had run out of money buying out small home. I could not do any real work. I was sick from the drugs. I felt like I had no hope. For years, I have been hiding. I stay inside almost all times. Sometimes I must leave mi nieta and hide in friends’ homes so the police do not find me and send me back home. I am too old now for this. And it is hurting Araceli. She is doing things that make me scared. Please, I need help.” Paisley watched Araceli sink even further into her seat. She wondered what it was that Patli meant. Did she know about their gang? She suddenly felt her breath speed up, anxiety taking over the sadness she had previously felt. What if she did know about the gang? Did she know that Paisley was a part of it? What if she said something to her father?

“Patli, I am more than happy to help you. It will be tricky. Araceli is not eligible to petition for your residency, so we can’t go that route. We will have to work together to figure out what your best, and most importantly fastest, choice is. Right now, my guess is to try and get you asylum. But whatever it takes, I will do everything possible to help you. I promise.”

“Thank you so much, my friend.”

“Mr. Thelemaque, there’s just the one issue,” Araceli said. “I know my grandmother will be embarrassed to bring it up, but we must.” This must have been what Celi meant when she said she was here to help her grandmother express what she couldn’t on her own, Paisley thought. Not that which she could not articulate because of a language barrier, but instead a barrier of dignity, of pride.

“What is it?” Frantz said.

“Well. It’s as I say. I buy our house, I am still able to pay for it with what I saved, and Araceli works sometimes too to help me. But we have no money for anything else. I don’t know how to pay.”

“Oh. Well, that’s the easiest part,” Frantz said with a beaming smile. Paisley had seen her father strike his pro-bono deal many times before, and she had reaped its benefits at countless breakfasts ever since. She began salivating just slightly at the thought of it. “All you need to do is teach me how to make your most special family recipe, and your debt is paid.”

The girls accompanied Frantz to the market, Araceli armed with the shopping list her grandmother had written out for the ingredients for her pozole recipe. She elected to stay and wait at the Telemeque home, stating that she only feels safe making occasional trips to a Spanish market an hour out of town.

“It is too far to ask you to drive all the way there for me. But you never know who you will see at the town market,” she said. When Paisley looked at this woman, she first saw a kind of elegance and beauty. Her bright clothes and striking jewelry showed that she was a woman who had developed eccentric tastes in her younger years, and she presented herself so boldly it was hard to not be taken aback. But when she looked at her eyes, which were sunk deep into her face and appeared colorless by contrast, she saw an overwhelming sadness. A sadness that echoed inside of her when she considered the reality of Patli’s life. She had spent her life on the stage, a public figure in her community who used her art to connect with others who wrestled with the darkness of the world and speak to their souls. Music for the gods, what she called sounds of healing. But years of cruelty had forced her to become a recluse, to keep herself hidden from the public eye, consumed by fear. It seemed to Paisley that the reason she held on to

the bold aesthetics of her youth was to make the most of the rare occasions in which she was actually seen. She didn't want to be perceived as the sad, scared old woman she had been forced to be. She wanted to be seen authentically. It made Paisley wonder if anyone had ever really seen her authentically. Or if, for that matter, she even knew who she really was.

“So is this why you're with DLM?” Paisley asked in a text to Araceli so that her father wouldn't hear the question. As they texted back and forth, they maintained conversation about school, moving, and living in Tuluca Rock with Frantz. Paisley wasn't quite as proficient in the art of maintaining two conversations as Araceli was, sometimes stumbling over her response to her father while thinking of what to say to Araceli, but she found the challenge kind of amusing. She imagined herself as a master of espionage, deep undercover on the enemy base.

“You guessed it. Having a crew makes it easier to boost shit. Flip it, get cash, boom. Grandma still has a roof over her head.”

“But couldn't you just get a real job? Not put yourself at risk like this?”

“In this fuckin' dust bowl? Have you ever been to Val-You Market? When we get there, look in the eyes of any of the poor bastards behind the counters. Tell me the fuckin' seven bucks or whatever they're making is worth that deep, deep worthlessness.”

“I'm sorry. I can't imagine how stressful it is.”

“Don't fool yourself into thinking we're the only criminal minded baddies in town. I don't know if you noticed, but most of our neighbors are dirt poor. People around here gave up on their dreams a long time ago. Some are defeated, and they toil away at their miserable jobs just to keep their heads slightly above water. Some of us are bitter. The bitter get their money through other means. Money they feel they deserve. And if you ask me, they're right.”

“What does your grandma think you do for that money?”

“She’s seen it all. She’s too wise to trick. She doesn’t know who I roll with or anything, so don’t worry about that. But she knows I’m doing dumb shit. Thing is though, she’s just as afraid as any of us. All us criminals, we come off hard, mean, tough, whatever. But look in their hearts, you’ll see someone so afraid they’re on the verge of tears. They know that the money they’re jacking, the televisions they’re boosting, the drugs they’re selling, all that shit is the difference between a home and the concrete.”

In the Val-You Mart, Paisley felt like she had been transported to the last remnant of civilization in an apocalyptic landscape. She envisioned her and her companions as survivors looking to pilfer whatever salvageable goods they could find post-fallout. Dimmed fluorescent lights flickered overhead, their faint white glow doing little to mask the unintended yellow of the walls which seemed stained by age. Nothing about the store appeared to have been renovated since it was opened. The squeaking of the metal wheels of carts that couldn’t have possibly been updated or replaced since the late 70s slowly moaned through the store like a tortured spirit trying to break through the ether. The tiles, which were a mosaic of faded maroon and white patterns, were scuffed up with the grey of countless years of dragging feet and sticking wheels. All the patrons, of which there were few, and employees, of which there were even fewer, visibly beaded with sweat. Fruit flies took domain over the produce section, hovering over peaches that squished just a little too much when Paisley picked one up. At odd intervals, a nearby employee would stroll by and aimlessly spray water over the fruit in an attempt to ward off the flies. Paisley could tell by watching him that he knew from experience this task was hopeless and would achieve nothing, but that he had no choice but to do it anyway. Within minutes of their arrival, Paisley knew that Araceli was right about what she had said. Some of the workers were

clearly just kids earning pocket money, but Paisley could see a difference in the way single moms or kids her age working to support their families carried themselves. A difference in their eyes. The place was soulless. She couldn't explain it, but Paisley swore that she could smell the desperation in the air.

Halfway through their shopping trip, as they deliberated loudly over which bag of tortilla chips to add to their cart, Paisley noticed a figure approaching them from the other end of the aisle. She nudged Araceli's arm, who looked up and joined her in making nervous eye contact with Leviticus. Paisley worked to control her breath, holding it briefly on each inhale to keep her from gasping too frantically. Not only was she terrified because she had begun to notice that an encounter with a member of the LaGrange clan has only ever led to some conflict or vague threat, but also because she once again found herself paranoid that Leviticus might have been able to figure out that she was involved in various crimes. Her initiation in Pecos was so far from home that she had finally accepted that she would likely never be suspected for that. But their outing in Marlon Point was so grand, so violent, so close to home, that she wondered how much of a stretch it would be to suspect her and her friends. Especially since Leviticus was at the hockey game that very night. Oh fuck, Paisley thought. He saw us fighting with the Mares. He must have heard about what happened. Of course he thinks it us. Suddenly, she was forgetting to hold her breath. Suddenly, she was open mouth breathing, so quickly that the air barely even entered her lungs before she expelled it once again. She tried to listen to her heartbeat, to meditate on the sound like a metronome and keep herself distracted from the cycling thoughts stampeding through her head, but the more she listened the more it started to sound like her feet pounding into the roof of the cop car.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the Thelamaque folks.” When he finally spoke, it caused Paisley to scrunch up her face, like she was in a kind of pain she could only feel in her mind. His voice was somehow too loud to her ears. It sounded like amplifier feedback. Her last name was again a butchered distortion of itself. This time he exaggerated all the mispronunciations, drawing them out like he was calling explicit attention to them. Paisley wondered if he did, in fact, know he was mocking them, if he was doing it intentionally. “And who have we here? I didn’t know y’all were friends with Araceli, here.” Leviticus bent over slightly with his hands on his knees, sticking his face alarmingly close to Araceli’s. He was so uncomfortably close that it made Paisley herself feel like she needed to take a step back, the same way she feels like she needs to clear her throat when she can hear the phlegm in someone else’s voice. “Tell me, miss. How’s your grandmother doing?” Paisley watched Araceli lower her brow, watched anger swell in her eyes. She had seen this from her before. Paisley knew Araceli enough to fear what she might say. She wanted to warn Araceli to stay calm, could practically feel the words being shouted from inside her chest, but she didn’t want to further give away that they might have something to hide. Still, if Araceli was in anywhere near the state she was that night in Marlon Point, she was liable to do something disastrous.

“I don’t know. Haven’t seen her. Still hoping you’ll let me know when you find her. I sure would like to know she’s safe.” Araceli had never sounded sweeter in her life. So much so that anyone who knew her worth a damn, Paisley thought, would know how condescending she was being. Leviticus smirked and then straightened himself out, turning his gaze then to Frantz.

“Come to think of it, ain’t it true that you work with immigrant, mister? Now I see your daughter has become fast friends with the granddaughter of an alien we’ve been trying to track down for some time. I don’t suppose you might have seen her, now would you’ve?”

“With all due respect, sir, am I correct in assuming based on your casual attire that you are off duty right now?”

“Yessir, even the Lord needed a day to rest,” he said, punctuated by the fakest chuckle Paisley had ever heard.

“Then I can safely assume that I’m not under questioning right now?”

“Course not, sir. Just talking as friends. As sheriff, it is always my duty to be active in the community.” No matter what he said, Paisley felt her body trying to retreat from the sound of his voice. He spoke in such a calculated tone that everything sounded sinister, like it was shrouding a threat.

“Then get the fuck out of my face and let my family shop.”

“I’m quite sorry to have disturbed you, Frantz. We’ll just chalk up your hostile words to you having a rough morning, shall we?” Leviticus picked his basket up off the ground, tipped his hat toward Frantz, and walked away. Before he turned the corner, he turned around and faced them once more. “Don’t worry none, folks. I’ll always be around. If you need me, that is.” Then he finally disappeared beyond the shelves of the aisle. Frantz grabbed the closest bag of tortilla chips, swiftly resolving the interrupted debate, and rushed over to the checkout. When they got back into the car, Frantz opened a small memo pad he kept in the glovebox and scrawled down their home phone number.

“Araceli, call our phone. Even if your grandma doesn’t pick up, she’ll be able to hear you leave a message. Tell her she needs to get the hell out of there and get to her safest hiding place. I don’t want to run no risks. She’ll have to show us how to cook all this some other day.”

Paisley was in the middle of writing an essay when she received a phone call from Simone. She knew enough to know that calling instead of just texting meant that this was something that couldn't be ignored, and her instincts were right. She saddled onto her bike and rushed over to Bee's house to meet the girls for an emergency meeting. She had been to Bee's enough times now to walk in somewhat confidently, with only a trace fear of being seen as an intruder into their space that she wasn't sure she could ever fully let go of. Even still, it was late enough that if her parents were indeed home, they were likely in bed. In fact, from the outside, the house seemed silent. Only the faint halo of pale blue light that escaped from behind Bee's curtains gave any hint that the house contained waking life.

Bee's bedroom was impossibly hot, an unnatural sort of electric heat from the overpowered machines. There were three fans in the room, but all of them were arranged in a semi-circle around the computer tower, blowing directly on it.

"Nights this hot, the built-in fan just doesn't do the trick."

"Bitch, turn on the A.C. then, goddamn," Simone said. Her shirt looked like a Rorschach test of dark sweat stains.

"Yuck. I hate air conditioners. If you wanted to control the climate, you should have had us meet up at your place."

"Paisley is here now so can we please stop arguing about the fuckin' air and get to the point so we can escape Bee's sadistic torture chamber?" Araceli said. She was laid out on the bed like a rag doll, trying her best to air herself out as much as possible. Simone dug into her back pocket and threw envelope on the computer desk. It was devoid of any mailing address but had a drawing of a black horse head on its face.

“Mares left this in my mailbox. Surprised they didn’t send it in a more violent way, really. As you can see, I ain’t read it yet. I wanted y’all to be here for it. But after our hijinks last week, I can’t imagine it’s a fucking peace treaty.”

“Well, shit, open it up then,” Araceli said. Simone tugged at the seal gently, like she was afraid that something sinister might begin to ooze out in some kind of trap. Actually, Paisley thought, with the number of times Simone has called the Mares “freaky little witch hoes”, that could very well be exactly what she did fear. Or she could just be doing it for the drama of the moment, which wouldn’t be wholly unlike her either. Paisley couldn’t decide which one was more likely. Simone read it silently, and then passed the letter over to Araceli. Ok, Paisley thought, definitely for the drama. Finally, the letter got to her. It read:

We know that it was you. We can no longer let this petty battle rage on. It has gone too far. We are officially at war. I hope you are prepared to bid farewell to your pathetic dreams of ever controlling Big Nothing. It will become the official Church of the Feral Mare. – Marigold,
Marisol, Marybeth, Mariko.

“We should have expected this. We definitely pushed them over the edge.”

“I’m sorry, is this my fault? Did I fuck up by pushing you guys onto that plan?” Paisley was afraid that her attempts to fight for Bee’s dignity may have done nothing but make matters worse. She felt dizzy from the confusion, not being entirely sure what the letter was referencing, but worried still that it somehow meant that they were in danger.

“No. This was inevitable. This is the culmination of months of beefing. It was always going to happen. Honestly, it’s a good thing that you incited this. Everyone was too afraid to make the first move,” Bee said.

“Yeah. Big Nothing been on the horizon. But it means stepping up this gang shit. We’ve been doing petty nonsense for months. Vandalism, stealing, all that shit. Big Nothing? This is gonna be the real deal. At Big Nothing, there’s gonna be blood,” Araceli said.

“Beef is beef. War? I’m not afraid to say that everyone, us and the Mares, have been to pussy to push it that far. We like to do dumb shit. And girl you know I’ll whip an out of line motherfucker from time to time. But now we’re talking true violence,” Simone said.

“I gotta ask. What in the world is Big Nothing?”

“You’ll find out,” Simone said. “Girls, I know it’s sudden, but we are cutting class tomorrow and headed right to Big Nothing in the morning.”

“Hold up, you’re trynna go to war fuckin’ tomorrow?” Araceli said.

“We have to scope out the scene,” Bee said before Simone could snap back. Paisley could sense the tension in the room, everyone being pushed by the combination of the heat and the anxiety of the new development. She figured Bee could sense it, too. She was always more level-headed, calmer than the rest. It was better for her to speak. “We’ve been there before, yes, but never truly with battle in mind. If we’re gonna do this, we can’t go in blind. Tomorrow is recon. Learn the landscape, figure out our strategy. All that. Right, Simone?”

“Yeah. Mares still gotta wait for our response. They ain’t gonna just post up at Big Nothing day in day out waiting to catch us rolling up. We’ll peep it out, make a plan, and tell the Mares that it’s on.”

In the morning, the girls rode on for hours. Paisley was thankful that it had been the most mild-temperature day she had experienced since moving to Texas. It was still hot, but not so much in a way that felt like it was actively pressing down on her body. They were approaching the Autumn

months, and the morning had given her hope that her new home wasn't a world of unbearable, oppressive air year-round. Still, the ride was brutal, with the most hills she had ever encountered in the usually flat landscape, and the sheer length of the journey. It was enough to make her start reminiscing on their earlier ride to Pecos as a pleasant cruise, even with the dramatic difference in heat that day. The longer they rode, the footprints of civilization began to get more and more spaced out from one another. At first, they saw small towns a few miles apart from one another, each usually swallowing the main road that they followed, the girls cruising by the carbon copy buildings and the occasional wayward pedestrian as they passed through along their path. Then, the towns started getting further away from the main road, Paisley only being able to see hints of them on the horizon. Weathered, narrow concrete paths branched off the main road, carved through the desert floor like deep, old scars to give access to the distant towns. They were completely absent of signs to indicate what where it was that they lead to. In a place like this, Paisley thought, the only people going to these towns must be people who already know where they are. No one here has any use for directions. No one is looking for these places who isn't already there. The girls had travelled countless miles without seeing so much as a car on the road, let alone another human being. If she felt removed from the world in Tuluca Rock, she thought, she ought to be thankful that her father didn't bring her to one of these places. At least Tuluca Rock had the girls. She struggled to believe she would have met anyone in a place like this.

Eventually, nearing midday, Simone led the pack onto a dirt road that Paisley wouldn't have even noticed if she weren't being brought to it. After following it for a couple of miles, they finally stopped in front of a single building. It was adorned with a weathered, faded sign above its door which read "Only Post Office". The steps were covered in dust blown in from the desert

around them, the white paint of the façade chipped to reveal the dingy greyed wood beneath. The red door, which was faded from the sunlight, had a hole where the knob once must have been.

“Welcome to the town of Only,” Simone said.

“Town? What the fuck do you mean town? It’s a building,” Paisley said. She couldn’t hide the fact that she was somewhat irate, having gone on this hours-long journey just to see an abandoned building.

“Yup. Bee, give her a history lesson, please.”

“In 1903, some dude got sick of riding his horse dozens of miles to the nearest post office to send letters, so he came out to this empty plot of land, which he reasoned to be relatively equidistant to the nearby underserviced settlements and built this post office with his own hands. He volunteered to be its sole employee. Because a post office needs to be tied to a specific place, and it wasn’t close enough to any other settlement to warrant jurisdiction, the government let him establish it as its own town. So he named it Only because, as he quipped, it would be the ‘Town of Only a Blasted Post Office’. So, yeah. The town of Only.”

“Place is abandoned now because, you know with cars and shit, it got easier to set up a network of post offices in those small towns, so people around here wouldn’t have to leave their homes to get their mail. And we all know motherfuckers in places like this love to never step foot outside their weird little circles for whatever reason. So, Only Post Office kind of lost its meaning. But the town still exists. Not a soul living anywhere near it.”

“Okay. So...why is it exactly that this is the great war we are waging with the Mares? Why do either of us care about this?”

“Because it’s a whole ass property just up for the taking. We could do whatever the fuck we want out here, fool. Selling fake IDs and shit out of Bee’s house works fine and all, but with

old nosey fucking Lev constantly watching us, it's risky. But if we use this spot as like, a drop point or whatever, we could totally elevate our game. Start doing bigger shit." Paisley could tell that Araceli thought a lot about this place. She had that same bite in her voice that she did the night of the raid at Marlon Point, speaking just a bit faster than her tongue could handle. Paisley still didn't quite see the point, but it was obvious that the other girls were serious about it and she didn't want to be the voice of dissent. She had to assume, after everything she had seen with these girls, that they knew what they were talking about. If it was important to them, there must be some value in it somewhere. She was still skeptical, but she listened. She let herself believe she would understand if they kept talking.

"Yeah, think about it, Paisley. There's not a witness, or even a cop, for that matter, for miles and miles. We could straight up execute someone here and nobody could possibly see it, not even from the road. We might want to think about coming here by car, I guess. But this is a much better base of operations than my bedroom." Bee had a way of making anything sensible. Her lack of aggression, the way she spoke all calmly and deliberate like honey slowly dripping in a cup of warm tea, made it hard for Paisley to not trust her. It would take more than Bee's soothing tone and carefully chosen words to convince Paisley of the post office's merit, but it reminded her of why she wanted to try. Paisley felt a tingling in her legs when Bee turned to face her. She bent her hips slightly to bring herself down to Paisley's eyelevel, their faces mere inches apart. Paisley's cheeks were instantly washed in a rush of heat much greater than that which she had already felt from the Sun. "Besides, wouldn't it be nice to have something that belongs to us?" It felt like they were the only two people in the world, like the other girls had disappeared.

"Well, I guess I wouldn't mind taking a look inside."

The wooden steps creaked loudly as they walked up them, Paisley noticing how they would bend in the center under the weight of her foot. Simone hooked two fingers through the hole in the door and tugged it, but the door didn't move.

"What the fuck? It's locked."

"Do you think someone's been here?" Bee asked.

"Fuckin' hope not. I don't want to have to fight off two gangs for the spot." Araceli slipped her slender hand through the hole and fumbled the lock open from the inside. The lobby was dim, with nothing more than shafts of light peeking through the blinders barely hanging from the windows. It smelled strongly of dust, but a vaguely chemical scent lingered behind it. Paisley scrunched up her nose, grossed out by the wafting scent that reminded her of an air-conditioned room, that nauseating smell of freon that always made her so lightheaded. Only this was even worse, coupled by a stale, musty note of something Paisley thought to be a little bit like piss. The desk had a handful of yellowed papers scattered about it, and behind it was a wall of small, square cubbies, mostly empty save for some cobwebs and the occasional unretrieved newspaper. As much as the annoyance that she still felt from the ride here made her want to remain skeptical, Paisley did start to catch herself imagining redecorating the place. She imagined couches up against the walls, a minifridge behind the counter to serve as a makeshift bar. A place she could go to disappear if she ever needed to.

"I guess it wouldn't be the worst to have this place as home base. Could be kind of cool."

"Trust me, bitch, I've had plans for this place for some time. We'll make it cool as hell."

"We gotta do something about that smell, though," Paisley said.

"Yeah, what the fuck is that, it ain't smelled like piss the last time we were here, did it?"

Araceli said.

“Definitely not. Do you think it’s, like, squatters or something?” Bee asked.

“Guess I’ll look around,” Simone said. She slowly stepped into one of the small rooms behind the counter, poking her head around the corner, before turning back and heading into the other. The sound of her walking down a set of stairs echoed through the building.

“Fuck, guys, come here,” she shouted, her voice washed in tinny reverb as it bounced off the walls. The stale chemical smell got stronger as they went into the room, which was much larger than Paisley would have assumed from the outside and headed down the stairs. A hazy, orange light hanging from the ceiling barely illuminated the basement. A few cans of paint lined up against the wall at the foot of the stairs, unopened and, judging by the thick coat of dust on the lids, untouched for some years. Whoever had last made plans to renovate the place, Paisley thought, must have given up. On a table against the far wall, a series of soda bottles browned from the inside and rubber tubes were littered about. A small hotplate was plugged into an extension cord that snaked across the floor. The stench was overbearing.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Araceli said.

“What is it?” Paisley asked.

“Oh, you sweet, innocent dear,” Bee said.

“Fucking tweakers,” Simone said under her breath.

“Fucking tweakers!” Araceli said, echoing her sentiments for the rest to hear.

“Fucking...tweakers?” Paisley said. She wanted to share in their excitable outrage almost as much as she wanted to share in their enthusiasm over the post office in the first place, but she yet again felt as though she was missing a crucial piece of information.

“It’s a meth lab, baby,” Bee said. Paisley’s eyes widened, stinging against the damp air. To her, meth had always been some kind of myth, something so horrifying that a part of her

couldn't believe that there were actually people in the world who used it. To be in the presence of a cook site made her hold her breath, as though she were too afraid to so much as inhale the residual vapors that might be lingering in the air. She envisioned a set of teeth slowly dissolving into dust.

"I can't believe fucking cookers nabbed Big Nothing while we were fucking around sitting on our thumbs," Araceli said. She was speaking even quicker, more frantically, than she had already been. Her voice had an uncharacteristic shrillness to it, as though speaking with such urgency was putting strain on every word.

"What do we do?" Paisley said. She didn't want her unease over the whole situation to keep her from appearing invested.

"Well, it don't exactly make a wealth of sense to invite the Mare's here for a war over the joint while it's still being used as a fuckin' cook site. Plus, if we don't clean this bullshit out now, that smell will never go away in time, and I ain't about to have our kick-ass fort smelling like someone pissed the fuckin' bed. So I say we drive 'em out," Simone said.

"Wait a minute, you're talking about not being ready to do war with the Mare's yet, but you're suggesting we bring the fight to a meth cartel?" Paisley said. She had a very specific vision of the kinds of people who ran operations like this, and an arsenal of firearms played a major role in her fantasy.

"Paisley, you're so adorable. A couple two-liters of soda and some cough tablets does not a cartel make," Bee said. "If this was a serious lab, I'd say we have some really dangerous people on our hands, but..."

"If this was a serious lab it wouldn't be in the basement of a run-down post office," Simone interjected. "Worst case scenario, we probably got some stained-shirt wearing small time

degens who lift from their bumfuck town's pharmacy and try to gouge a quick buck out of desperate poor folks."

"Lowlife fucking scum. Preying on poverty with this sickening shit," Araceli said. "I say we nail them to the fucking wall." Paisley could hear a frightening fury in her voice. Something about this seemed personal to her.

"Bee, is there a store close by?"

"Let's see. There's one about twenty miles away. I suppose that passes for close in a place like this."

"Looks like we need to stock up."

After riding into the nearest town, a small enclave of tightly packed homes surrounded roads of seemingly ancient cracked pavement that led to a gas station and a general store, the girl's returned back to Big Nothing with their supplies. They sported long yellow rubber gloves that reminded Paisley of the housewives in black-and-white sitcoms her father used to watch and started throwing all of the loose components of the meth lab into trash bags, including the hot plate. They poured a layer of liquid soap, its chemical-lemon scent almost overpowering the lab's smell for a moment, into a bucket and filled the rest with the drinking water they had purchased. Bee scrubbed the table the meth had been cooked on, while Paisley and the others scrubbed the walls, hoping only to wash out any traces of the urine-like smell that may have soaked into them. After a long couple hours labor, with Paisley's fingers managing to prune through the gloves from the scrubbing, the room looked as though no one had ever been there. The new dominating fragrance still had heavy chemical overtones, still making Paisley a faint bit

lightheaded, but it was decidedly more pleasant than the meth smell, which still leaked through the trash bag as though it were trying to remind the girls of the value of their efforts.

“Well, I’ll tell you what. Now we have no choice but to whoop the Mares’ asses when it comes time. Otherwise, we just did all this work for them,” Bee said.

“Work ain’t done yet. Lab’s gone, but the tweakers will be back,” Simone said.

“Maybe they’ll be so freaked out that someone tore down their lab that they’ll be too scared to set up again? Like, they’ll think the cops are onto them or something,” Paisley said. The afternoon’s work, getting her hands dirty working to improve the place, did make her feel slightly more attached to Big Nothing than she was at first. But she was certain that she didn’t want to wage two wars over the place, especially not against an unknown and potentially sinister group of meth fiends.

“Maybe. But we should nudge them in the right direction, just in case,” Araceli said. Her eyes were glassy, and her face was almost expressionless, staring forward with such intensity that she looked as though she were trying to burn a hole in the wall with her mind. She tore a sheet of paper out from a notebook that they had purchased and scrawled a note, leaving it on the desk where the lab had been set up.

Dear Skids,

You don’t know us, and it’s in your best interest that you keep it that way. This place is about to come under new management, and there’s no room for you here. I suggest you find a new place to cook your bullshit, or just stop ruining poor people’s lives. If we find so much as a hint that you’ve cooked here again, we will hunt you down, and I will personally tear however many teeth you have left in your rotting gums before driving a blade in your gut. Don’t think this is a fucking joke. Love, DLM.

“There. If they’re smart, they’ll listen and we can avoid a fight. If they’re not, we use them as practice for the Mares. Either way, we win.”

The next day, Paisley awoke to an unusually bright bedroom, the late-noon Sun blasting through her window. Paisley closed one eye tightly and squinted the other, trying to avoid some of the stinging that plagued them as they adjusted from the deep black of sleep. Her body buzzed with a sharp aching from the exhaustion of yesterday’s ride, her abs so sore that even emptying her belly of breath caused them to burn slightly. Despite sleeping in so late, she still felt as though she had only just finished the long ride. She swung her legs over the side of the bed, feeling heavier than they ever had in her life. The moment she planted her feet on the warm floor, she felt a cold, tearing pain in her calves that grew more and more excruciating as she slowly put pressure on them to stand up. Her knees made a grotesque crinkling sound, like someone was opening a bag of chips in another room. She wanted nothing more than to just lay back down and not even attempt to move for the rest of the day. But working through this kind of muscle fatigue was exactly what she would need to be prepared for if she was truly going to race the Tour de France, she thought. Besides, the smell of food filling the house was too alluring to deny.

In the kitchen, Frantz stood over the stove hip-to-hip with a hunched over Patli. Steam bellowed from a huge metal pot, and the deep, rich smell of peppers and fish filled the room. Frantz had put on a Rosalía record to accompany their cooking.

“Sorry I don’t have any traditional flamenco,” he said.

“Maybe one day, I will feel good enough to sing for you,” Patli said. Paisley sat at the table, where Araceli had her face buried in her hands.

“How you feeling?” Paisley said.

“Like my fucking brain is on fire.” Her voice was weak and pained. It slowly croaked out of her like she had a throat full of gravel.

“Yeah, same. I haven’t had a ride that painful in years.”

“Huh? Oh, right. Sorry, I’m totally out of it.” She still had not even risen to meet Paisley’s gaze, still shielding her eyes and face. “I need to run to the bathroom, excuse me.” She clumsily, slowly stood up as though she were fighting against some invisible weight. Her eyes were only half opened, seeming to droop down in her face. Her mouth hinged slightly open, like keeping it shut took too much energy. Paisley caught herself wondering if she had looked nearly that bad. She felt like hell, but Araceli looked like she was marching to her grave. Paisley wondered exactly how seasoned a rider Araceli was if she was still this fatigued. Araceli walked to the bathroom, cup half filled with water still in her hand. Paisley caught a glimpse of Patli watching Araceli’s movements, absentmindedly stirring the soup pot while she did. After a heavy few seconds, she shook her head slightly, returning her focus to the bubbling pozole.

Paisley, Frantz and Patli sat at the table with steaming bowls of pozole in front of them, waiting for Araceli to return from the bathroom before eating out of politeness. The smell of the chilis, the gaping maw of clam shells flooded with broth just waiting to be slurped out with the soft meat inside, and the weight of the spoon bouncing between her thumb and finger made Paisley’s stomach cry out to be filled. She was about ready to kick the bathroom door in and drag Araceli out when she finally came out of her own accord. She had livened up a bit, walking with more energy, face seeming brighter and more awake.

“Sorry. Just needed to splash some water on my face. Not feeling my best today,” She said.

“All good, little homie! Now that we’re all present, let’s dig in while we discuss business,” Frantz said. Paisley sucked the broth out of a clam before hunting down chunks of fish like a ravenous bear. The spice and warmth of the soup radiated out from her stomach and soothed her aching core, feeling some of the fatigue melt off of her shoulders as she continued to eat. “So, at present, the biggest challenge we face seems to be getting all of the paperwork in order. Unfortunately, the sort of drifter role your grandmother has been forced into has made it difficult for her to keep hold of some of the things we need.”

“Is there any way I can help?” Araceli said.

“We can get new documents. We’ll start working on that asap. But unfortunately, to be frank, a lot of this stuff is a bullshit waiting game. Your grandmother is going to be vulnerable for a little while. I’m going to have to bring her into the public eye a little bit more than she might otherwise like to take care of these gaps. The absolute most important thing you can do is keep her safe in the meantime. It’s obvious the sheriff has his eyes on us.” Paisley didn’t often get to see her father work. It was a side of him that she was unfamiliar with. To her, he was always this goofy, loose, charismatic friend. She had always been jealous of these qualities, wondering why she didn’t inherit them. But here, he was like a general in a war room. He had transformed before her eyes into a stern, commanding leader. He spoke with authority, assuredness. She found herself envying this side of him, too. She felt like a shadow.

Paisley drove with Araceli to drop her grandmother back at their house and they headed to Bee’s after. Simone had called a meeting, saying that it was time for them to plan for their battle with the Mares. Paisley could see through the windows that the lights in the living room were on. Had she been by herself, Paisley would have knocked on the door, uncomfortable with the idea of

inviting herself into their home knowing that her parents were actually present for once. But Araceli did not give her the chance, throwing the front door open and marching in with one swift motion. Paisley timidly followed behind her, walking on the balls of her feet because it made her feel like her presence was somehow less intrusive, like by never planting her feet firmly on the ground, she was never fully committing to being in their home. Bee, instead of being holed up in her room, was waiting for them in the hallway.

“Don’t worry, Pais. I’ve come to introduce you,” she said. Paisley had never opened up about the discomfort she felt entering people’s homes, but she wasn’t surprised to learn that someone like Bee was able to figure it out on her own. She was aware of the way that the anxiety curled and mangled her body, how she tried to pull her shoulders toward one another in an effort to make herself narrower, to reduce the amount of physical space that she inhabited. She always feared that it did nothing but make her seem stranger, ruder, more undesired, but all that fear did was make her want to twist her body into even more wretched, shrunken forms. But Bee was there to help her push through the moment, to help her feel welcomed into the space. Bee recognized Paisley’s anxiety for what it was, she realized. Not standoffishness or a desire not to be there, but a simple desire to believe that being there was okay. Being seen and silently understood by someone alone was enough to help her ease some of the tension that she felt. She put the heels of her feet on the ground. Bee walked Paisley into the living room. Her parents shifted their gaze from the television onto her, and Paisley fought the urge to turn her head and stare into a corner of the room. Instead, she employed a technique she had subconsciously developed for times when she had to make eye contact. She met their gaze, but she unfocused her eyes so that everything went blurry. That way, her anxiety fueled paranoia wouldn’t be able to force her to overanalyze every little expression on the other person’s face.

“Hey, this is my friend Paisley. She’s been here a few times, but y’all always miss each other so I haven’t been able to introduce you guys until now.” While she spoke, Bee placed a hand on Paisley’s back, between her shoulders. At her touch, she felt the tightness in her muscles slowly melt away. It was like Bee was drawing the unease out of her, taking it into her palm to cast it aside. She felt her posture straighten, her shoulders ease back. Her vision softly focused, the room around her becoming clear again. It wasn’t that the fear was gone, Paisley thought. It was more that Bee kept her anchored in the reality that the fear would pass. It was the tender belief that someone cared enough to help her. The realization that someone wanted her to belong that made her believe she could.

“Oh, you must be Benny’s friend from California! He’s told us about you. It’s nice to finally meet you.” Paisley knew that she had to say something, but felt the words being choked back into a lump in her throat. For a moment, she almost didn’t understand what they said, who it was that they were talking about. It felt like she had walked into the middle of a conversation, and it was about someone she had never met. But then she remembered that this name she did not recognize was being forced upon someone that she did. It was the only time she had heard anyone call Bee by that name aside from that night with the Mares, and in some way, despite the warmth and friendliness of their voices, it sounded just as harsh, just as pointed and cruel.

Paisley, in spite of whatever confidence she may have gained from Bee being at her side, lost all momentum that might have compelled her to speak. She became afraid that by answering, that by agreeing to talk about Bee as if she were a boy, she was betraying her friend. Her heart pounded in the silence as she wrestled with what to say, feeling like her ribcage was being used in a tug-of-war match between two opposing fears. Does she say nothing and ruin Bee’s parents first impressions of her by seeming rude, or does she respond as though nothing is wrong, thus

treating Bee like a boy directly in her presence? She wished that she could correct them but knew that it wasn't her place. Her tongue writhed in her mouth, pushing into the back of her teeth like she was trying to loosen one of them. She felt the silence crawling towards the edge of reason, threatening to plummet into irrevocable awkwardness. More than anything, she wished that she could ask Bee for help. That was when she realized that she had gotten so comfortable with thinking of Bee as a helper that she failed to even consider that this situation was probably hard for her, too. Bee had sacrificed a part of her own comfort to alleviate Paisley's. Bee had mentioned before that her parents refused to acknowledge her as a girl. She must have known that this would happen.

"You as well, I can't believe this is the first time we've been face to face! Thanks for letting me into your home." Paisley decided that the best thing she could do was to cast those warring fears to the side for just a moment, put on her kindest voice, and put an end to the situation as fast as possible. The rest, the muddy questions of what she should have done, if she should have denied Bee's being a boy, could be talked about in private where it would be easier for Bee to deal with.

Bee had a satellite image of the post office blown up on the computer. Simone and Araceli were bent over, leaning up against the desk, staring intently at the screen and mumbling back and forth to one another. They seemed to not even notice that the door had opened.

"Come up with anything?" Bee said, announcing their presence in the room. Araceli turned her head over her shoulder abruptly.

"Bitch, took you long enough. Get over here." Her fingers were curled, practically clawing into the desk. Bee took her place in her seat. Paisley stood behind her, leaning up against the chair's back. She looked at the image on the screen, but wasn't entirely sure what the intent was, what she should be looking for.

“Okay, so here’s what we’re thinking,” Simone started. “We have an upper hand over the Mares because they can’t really do shit outside. Their skates are worthless in the dirt. As long as we’re outside, they’re like little foot soldiers, and we’re the fuckin’ cavalry.”

“But,” Araceli said, “the minute they go inside, that’s when things change. We’ve seen inside. It’s tight in there. Those Mares are tough bitches, and they do an awful lot more grounded fighting than we do. So if they duck in there, we could be fucked.” Paisley tried to imagine herself going toe-to-toe with Marisol, and as much as she would have liked to imagine her holding her own, she didn’t see it ending with anything other than a tattooed hand breaking her nose.

“Yeah, I’d like to avoid that, personally,” she said. “It looks like there’s only one entrance though, right?” Bee played with the angles of the image, circling the building.

“Looks that way,” she said.

“So, we make sure we always stay near it. Maybe we circle them, so one of us is always passing it by. Block them off.”

“I agree,” Simone said.

“Okay, but like what if they do break free? We can’t just pretend it’s impossible for them to get inside. We need a plan,” Araceli said. She spoke calmly and plainly, the way she usually did when she wasn’t having one of her weird outbursts. But Paisley could hear that there was something else to it, like some of her frantic energy was bubbling under the surface and she was trying to keep it from breaking through. There was a pause, a moment of silence in which everyone just stared at the screen. Paisley closed her eyes and tried to force an answer to come to her, but she felt like she was trying to remember a word she had never heard or a face she had never seen. She was painfully aware that this was well outside her expertise. She could

successfully plan a sneaky covert operation because staying hidden and avoiding other people was something she had become proficient in. But asserting yourself over another person was still new to her.

“Hear me out,” Bee eventually said. “I know this is going to sound ridiculous. But what if we trap the place.”

“What the fuck do you mean trap?” Simone said.

“You know, like, I don’t know, fucking Home Alone or something. Trap it.”

“Bitch, I thought Celi was nuts, but you are on some entirely other shit right now.”

“Dude I know, but just think about it. We at least kind of know what the inside is like. We know where they might duck for cover. We can use that to our advantage. Take them by surprise.” Paisley watched Simone’s face metamorphosize as she silently pondered the idea. Her expressions shifted so wildly it was impossible for her to keep track of what she might be thinking.

“I mean I still don’t know how the fuck you plan to do that, but you the smart bitch here. If you think you can do some Temple of Doom shit to the post office, I ain’t gonna stop you.”

“I got some ideas,” Bee said.

“Well, you and Paisley can take a nice day trip together and see if you can set it up then. Little sneaky ass bitches.” Simone looked up from the screen to make eye contact with Paisley and winked quickly before looking back at the computer. Paisley realized instantly what it was for. She had forgotten until then that she had told her about her crush. She’s trying to get me alone with Bee, she thought. She didn’t think that Bee’s room could possibly get any hotter, but suddenly it did.

“We’ll cut class tomorrow and go prep the place,” Bee said.

“Tomorrow? I’m still sore from the last ride,” Paisley said.

“Relax, just sleep over tonight. I promise, this room gets cooler when the computer is off. I’ll tell my folks your bike is at home. They’ll let me take the car.”

“You cool with that, Paisley? You cool with sleeping over?” Simone said. Her voice was wrestling a laugh, but she made no effort to keep a straight face. Paisley felt herself get even hotter when that embarrassment started to mix with rage, and she could feel her hands raising to swat at Simone’s shoulder. She knew that reacting would only draw more attention to the hidden meaning of Simone’s jest, though, and she wanted desperately for Bee to not even realize what she said. She interlocked her fingers and transferred pressure from one hand to the other, back and forth, cracking knuckles in the process.

“Yeah, Simone. Of course I’m fine with that,” she said, but in a way that really meant “if you don’t stop, I’m going to explode.”

“It’s settled then,” Bee said.

“The element of surprise is good,” Araceli said. “I wish the place weren’t so fucking empty. It would be nice to ambush them somehow right from the jump. Secure a lead.”

“Maybe we could hide inside, then spring out when they show up?” Bee said.

“Fuck that,” Simone said. “Then what, scramble to our bikes before they get in, too? We need to be on our bikes right from the beginning or they’ll slip passed us in no time.” Paisley knew that this could be her time to shine. No one was better at disappearing in plain sight than she was. She asked Bee to circle the camera around the building, looking for any kind of outcropping or wall that they could use.

“Wait a minute. Look behind the sign,” she said. The large sign was held up on the roof by three thick wooden beams, sloping downward from the top of the sign.

“Oh, fuck,” Simone said. “I could totally hit that.”

“We just need to get you up on the roof.”

Bee drove fast with all the windows rolled down, saying she preferred the wind to the air conditioning. Paisley liked the way the warmth still cut through the whipping wind, allowing her to still feel some of the Sun’s glow on her skin without having to suffer for it. Despite it being mid-Autumn, mild temperature days were few and far between, and this had not been one of them. The sound of the air tearing through the open windows all but drowned out the music that Bee had put on. Despite this, she still turned the radio down before speaking, the harsh synthesizer swells becoming just another ambient noise along with the moaning of the engine and the tires underneath.

“So, Paisley, I feel like this is the first time we’ve been together that doesn’t somehow involve broken windows.”

“We still have a whole day ahead of us, don’t count it out yet,” she said. She had hoped to sound playful but was so focused on keeping the quiet shyness that fuzzed up her throat from shaking her voice that it came out dull and neutral.

“Too true. But for now, I’m still so curious about you, Paisley. How did you start riding?”

“It was something my mom was really into. She always took me out for rides even when I was really little. We would coast along the Santa Ana River every day and she would watch races with me and stuff.” Paisley stuck her hand out the window to feel the force of the air pushing against her. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine the sound was the rushing waters of the river, to see herself when she was small. “She got me obsessed with the Tour de France and I

always told her I was going to be the youngest winner. We both knew that would obviously never happen, but it was fun to pretend. After my folks split, I got really serious about racing though. I guess it made me feel closer to her when she was gone.” As she was speaking, Paisley realized she had not spoken to her mother in a long time. She thought that maybe she should send her a letter.

“Why do you say it could never happen? I mean I know those dudes are, like, elite. But you’re a seriously killer rider.”

“The proper Tour de France is for men only. They have the Femme, but it’s not the same. Just like the WNBA, nobody gives a care if it’s not men doing it for some reason.”

“Well, if you ask really nicely, I could help you with that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Baby, I don’t know if you noticed, but I’m something of an expert in changing genders. It’s the only thing I’m better at than forging documents. And it sounds like you could benefit from both of my skillsets.”

Inside the post office, Paisley was pleased to be greeted by the smell of stagnant dust and absolutely nothing else. She was relieved to learn that all the hard work they did had, so far at least, not gone to waste. Bee threw her tote bag on the counter, a puff of dust erupting from underneath it as it made impact, catching in the narrow beams of light that broke through. She began pulling out spools of fishing line and lengths of rope.

“I have to ask, what is our plan here,” Paisley said.

“To be honest, I’m kind of winging it. But I got some ideas. In movies and stuff, a lot of traps use trip wire to activate them. I’m thinking for the most part we should take the name

literally. Just set up this stuff so they fall down whenever they try to run and bust their asses.”

Paisley watched as Bee walked up to the cubby shelving case and gently tugged it along the top lip. It budged slightly, coming away from the wall. “Good, I was afraid this might be fixed.” She hammered a hook anchor into the wood along the top and tied a rope to it, running it over the desk and across the room. Paisley took one of the rolls of fishing line and a handful of small drywall anchors and began rigging trips at the top of the stairs that lead to the basement while Bee did the same for the space behind the desk. In the back of her mind, Paisley had doubts about how helpful what they were doing would really be, but she didn’t really care. In fact, she thought, it was even more worthwhile if she convinced herself it was nothing more than her goofing around with her friend, and she was grateful to be doing it with Bee. She caught herself imagining them escaping to this place, which was well furnished and decorated in her fantasy, so they could lay around and gaze at the sunset through the windows together, removed as much as possible from the rest of the world. She was suddenly coming to like the idea of turning this place into their own secret hideout.

Her thoughts were violently slammed back into reality when the sound of the door pounding against the wall resonated through the empty rooms.

“Hey, what the fuck is going on,” a man’s voice called out, nasal but distorted by gruff.

“Pais! Get in here, quick,” Bee cried out. The panic in her voice filled Paisley with an urgency that made her feel like she was moving from outside her own body. She didn’t have time to acknowledge any fear that was trying to command her senses from deep within. She cared only for making sure Bee was safe. When she entered the main room, she saw Bee ducking behind the desk, and two men standing in the doorway. They both wore white, dirt-stained tank-tops. One sported a greasy, black rat-tail while the other hid his head beneath an army hat

adorned with ridges of salt that traced the borders of places where pools of sweat once soaked through its canvas.

“Who are you?” Paisley asked.

“Who are we? Just who’n the fuck are you? Are you them bitches what left that note for us downstairs?” Rat-Tail said.

“Fucking Araceli,” Bee groaned.

“Y’all are gonna be reimbursing us for all our shit you threw away, right? That’s what y’all came back here for, yeah?” Paisley’s eyes traced the path of his wild hands as he spoke and noticed a knife at his hip. The fear she tried to bury down got a little louder, but she tensed the muscles in her shoulders to keep herself from moving, from reacting. She didn’t want him to know that she had noticed. She wanted to keep things calm while she tried to formulate a plan. She wished Simone were there. Then she realized that this is what she wanted, time alone with Bee, and if that’s what she was going to have, she was going to have to find it within herself to step up, to be the leader in Simone’s absence. It was the nature of their relationship, who they were, the kinds of things her chosen company got themselves into, that sometimes danger would kick in their door. If she wanted to spend more time alone with Bee, she couldn’t rely on others to scare that danger away all the time. Sometimes she had to be the one to light the fire and ward off the stray dogs that lurk in the dark. Paisley scanned the area around her for anything she could use. Underneath the desk, a collection of toppled beer bottles littered the floor, probably left littered from some bender the tweakers threw. She leaned one arm up against the counter resting her head in the hand, the rest of her body slouching down.

“Maybe that was us, maybe it wasn’t. I’ll tell you for sure we aren’t paying for a thing, though.” From their side, she hoped, she looked like she was taking a casual, relaxed stance that

only served to make her words even more condescending. But in reality, she was trying to subtly put one of the bottles within arm's reach without alerting to them that she was picking something up. She wrapped her fingers around the warm, smooth glass of the neck, feeling a spot where some of the alcohol had dried up into a sticky pool, and lifted the bottle off the ground. She held the neck tightly in her fist, some of the leftover beer inside spilling on her shoes as she tipped it upside-down.

“You arrogant little bitch,” the man in the hat hollered out. He shoved Rat-Tail, who stumbled forward a bit before regaining composure and stomping his way toward Paisley, hand on his hip. She squeezed the neck of the bottle even tighter, palm itching from the slippery friction between glass and sweaty skin. When he drew near, and just before he could draw his blade, Paisley swung her arm in wide, sweeping arch, bringing the bottle crashing down on his head. The glass shattered, some of it falling onto the floor, some of it getting caught in the wild, matted snarls of his hair. Blood leaked from under his hairline, slowly, like rainwater flooding the soil. When Rat-Tail raised his hand up to hold his head, Paisley snatched the knife from its sheath and pushed him away from her with her foot on his chest. He fell backwards, breaking his landing with his hand which streaked the floor in his blood, and he crawled back to the door like a crab whose shell was about to be crushed under boot. Paisley outstretched her arm, pointing the tip of the knife at the man in the hat's throat from across the room.

“We left that note. And we meant what we said. If we ever see you again, there will be more of us, and your throat will be mine.” The man in the hat snatched Rat-Tail by his hair and dragged him as he fled the post office. The sound of a truck engine turning over before erupting into a diesel-gargling roar ripped through the air, and eventually the only evidence the tweakers were ever there was the cloud of dust they had kicked up.

“Jesus, Paisley. That was wild,” Bee said, still sitting on the floor.

“I know, what the hell was that?” she said. Everything from her hands, to her legs, to even her voice was shaking. It was an odd sensation that she was feeling, like a release of fearful energy she no longer had to hide, but that had nowhere to manifest. The threat was gone, the fear now unwarranted, but it still longed to be felt. So instead of it taking over, she felt it as violent tremors loosening up her tensed-up muscles as it searched for an escape from her body.

“Paisley, you were hard as fuck. I wish Simone could have seen that. She’s gonna freak when we tell her. She would have been so proud.”

“Yeah right,” she said. “If Simone had been here, she would have been the one doing the tough stuff, not me.”

“Well, she wasn’t, was she?” Paisley wondered what Simone would have done differently. She probably would have been more confident. But she could not deny that her ability to not crumble under the pressure impressed even herself. Maybe she would have jabbed at Rat-Tail with the freshly broken bottle. She was kind of happy she didn’t take things that far. “Anyway, who could have predicted Araceli would have made them so angry, huh? She’s nothing but trouble when she gets like that.”

“Yeah, I’ve been meaning to ask, actually. What’s with her? She’s usually so cold and focused, but every once in a while she, like, scares me.”

“Oh, that’s right baby. I keep forgetting that you are but a little lamb. I guess I’m not sure it’s really my place to tell you this, and maybe I shouldn’t until Simone hears about this and decides what we should do about it, but she’s getting faster and looser with it, so I suppose there’s no harm. Our dear Araceli is, shall we say, a budding little pill head.”

“Wait, you mean like all those times she was wilding, it’s because she was high or something?”

“Yeah. Adderall. Basically, diet meth. Hence, I reckon, the anger in her note.” Paisley felt dizzy from the racing thoughts. She imagined this information as a mold that was growing on her old memories, changing them into something new, something with a shiny veneer of sludge under its surface. She supposed that she shouldn’t be all-too surprised. It was hard for her to remember that she too had become a criminal of some caliber, and that the girls she called her friends were not only criminals but had been for much longer. She knew that one of them doing drugs wasn’t out of left field. And yet, she hadn’t seen any of them so much as drink. Paisley admitted to herself that Bee was right to call her a lamb. Paisley had smoked pot once or twice during one of the rare occasions in her life where she actually attempted to fit in, but it made her uncomfortable to be around. Anything beyond that, including booze, downright scared her. The thought that she had been around it the whole time brought some of that anxiety on.

“Shit,” was all she said. She figured that her previously pleasant day with Bee had soured enough already. She didn’t want to push things too much further over the edge by letting Bee see her panic.

“Look, we ought to clean up here and then report back to Simone. Did you finish the trip line by the stairs?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“Then let’s get out of here. There’s no use worrying too much about it right now, Paisley. This will all be sorted out, I promise.” So, Paisley thought, Bee saw right through her attempts to hide her unease. Figures.

The inside of the car, left basking in the sweltering, heavy heat of a sun at its zenith, was unbearable. Bee and Paisley kept their doors open as they situated themselves within, treating the hot air outside like it was a source of relief compared to the stiff, suffocating metal hearth the cabin had become. Paisley carefully avoided the metal clip of the seatbelt as she fastened it, the warm strap pressing into her clothes which had become moistened by a layer of sweat. The feeling of her damp, warm clothes sticking to her wet body was like wading through a mess lakeweed in a hot tub. She tugged the fabric from her skin, but this just made it sag down and feel heavier. Paisley leaned forward in her seat, not wanting to feel her shirt press into her back. She began hoping the oven-heat of the car might actually dry her off. When Bee started driving, all the windows fully rolled down, the wind cooled the wet of her face and clothes.

Paisley finally allowed herself to sink into her seat, and she felt like she had gotten over the final hurdle of a long day. She was relieved, letting out a long breath to let go of some of the anxious tension in her core. Bee, however, still seemed uneasy. Something about the way she sat too stiffly in her seat, about the way she gripped the wheel. About the blank look on her face. About the way she hadn't put any music on. She couldn't tell what it was, but she knew it was wrong.

“You're probably wondering what I'm thinking about, huh?” she said.

“Bee, the depths of your perception are just, absolutely ridiculous. But, yes.” There was a momentary pause. Paisley watched Bee loosen her grip around the wheel.

“It's just that, I mean, imagine if Simone had sent me to do this by myself, right? Like, say she needed you for something or whatever. Say I was by myself and those guys showed up. I would have been fuck, Pais. I mean totally screwed. I couldn't have done what you did. And it's like, what would they have done? Would I be in a hospital right now? Would I be fucking

bleeding out shriveling in the sun? Who knows?" The fear in Bee's voice hit Paisley like someone had cast a stone to her chest.

"But it's done now, Bee. We got those dudes, and if they ever come back, the next time we'll all be there. You don't have anything to worry about."

"No, see, it's not the fact that I could have died that scares me, really. It's who I would have died as. What would they call me at my funeral? What would it say on my grave? It made me realize that I haven't fully become the person that I want to be yet." Paisley had wondered from the moment that she realized her feelings for Bee if a perfect moment would ever present itself for her to confess them to her. Something about this moment, and the overwhelming desire which she felt within it to do exactly that, told her the answer. The answer, she realized, was no. She realized that perfect moments don't exist, but sometimes right moments do. Sitting in a car that was still too hot for her comfort, feeling the sting of salt from the dried out sweat burning the corners of her eyes, listening to her friend have an identity crisis the likes of which she couldn't possibly comprehend, all immediately after having to fight off two meth heads in a post office, she thought, couldn't be further from perfect. And yet somehow, it was right. Somehow, she felt certain that part of consoling Bee in this moment would mean being forthcoming about her feelings. She knew that it wasn't perfect because she was scared. But this is also how she knew she was right.

"Well, if it's worth anything, I think the person you are is fucking awesome." Paisley felt the words groaning out of her slowly like air from a punctured tire. Her nerves gripped her throat, made the breath that swelled her chest tight and shallow, like her body was trying to force the words back down as she spoke them, but she wouldn't let it. No part of her was really prepared for this. She wished she had thought harder about what to say, but she couldn't have

possibly come up with the right words for this situation in any of the soft, hazy fantasies she had dreamt up about her and Bee. So she instead decided to think as little as possible, to let them come out as naturally as possible. She located that writhing thing that squirmed in her ribcage, the thing that only fools called butterflies, and she told it to be free. “I think you’re the best, Bee. I’m so glad that I know you, and that I know you as *you*. Do you know how jealous I am that you have such a strong sense of self? That you really know who you are? I mean, I know right now maybe you don’t feel like you do, but that’s bullshit, you know?” She could hear her voice getting higher as she spoke, felt the nerves loosen as the fear of speaking gave way to the anxious relief of finally not hiding anymore. She lost sight of what she was saying, could no longer keep up with her thoughts and nearly stopped trying to even listen to herself out of fear that her tongue might trip over any attempt to catch itself. “You are so sure of who you are that you demanded other people change who they know you as entirely, just so you could actually be yourself. You’re like the living, breathing opposite of doing things just to fit in. You’re the queen of authentic living, and you inspire me. And maybe some people don’t get it or they don’t accept it or whatever, but, like, fuck them, Bee. That’s their problem, not yours. That just means they are choosing to miss out on knowing my favorite person, and that’s fucking stupid.” Paisley stopped speaking for a moment to catch her breath, letting everything that she had been saying and thinking wash over her. She craned her head back, pushing it harder into the headrest, and closed her eyes. She imagined Simone winking at her back in Bee’s bedroom. Then, she imagined what her face might look like if she was there with them, sitting in the back seat. She sighed. “I don’t know, Bee. I like you. I mean, a lot, I guess. And if you weren’t you, then I wouldn’t get to. So if there’s something that can make you feel even better about yourself, I say do it, because then I can like an even cooler, even stronger Bee. And if I can help somehow, you

know, let me know.” Paisley kept her eyes closed, just living in the momentary silence between them, hypnotized by the droning of the road humming underneath. She was unable to hear the shifting in Bee’s seat, and unable to prepare for what might come of it, when Bee reached out and placed her hand on top of Paisley’s. Paisley felt her hand twitch underneath, as if it were going to try and escape, but she wouldn’t let it. Bee’s hand was cool and soothing, which countered the shy heat that rose to Paisley’s cheeks, and it weighed heavy on top of hers.

“Thank you, Paisley,” she said. “I’m glad you’re one of the ones who knows me.”

The Sun had started setting by the time they pulled into Bee’s driveway, her house bathing in a faint pink glow.

“I’m sure you’re exhausted,” Bee said, “but Simone is going to be here soon. She wants a status report. That’s seriously what she called it. I promise I’ll drive you right home after.”

Paisley wanted to tell her that she was in no rush to stop spending time with her, especially now that it was time in the comfort of her own home, but she didn’t want to say too much too soon.

“Yeah, I can’t wait to pass out in my bed,” she offered instead.

When they opened the door, the sound of the television and the mumbled conversation of Bee’s parents that it nearly drowned out crept into the hallway. Bee started leading the way straight for her bedroom.

“Wait up!”, her father’s voice called from the living room. Bee stopped and walked backwards into the doorway.

“Yeah?”

“Just checking up. You guys are home pretty late, huh? What did you two get up to, Benny-Boy? Anything exciting?” Paisley watched Bee’s hands tighten up, her neck stiffen.

Paisley had already been ducking behind Bee, attempting to straddle the line between being seen and having disappeared, but she felt herself shrinking more and more out of view. She sat in the awkward silence, trying to imagine if Bee was dealing with the tension in the same way. She thought she was trying to think up some clever lie, but too lost in the fright and excitement of the truth to stop thinking about it, just like she was. But then she realized what was really happening. They had called her Ben.

“Don’t call me that,” she said. She spoke slowly. Her head stayed cocked down, her eyes fixed to the floor. All that time back in the care, Paisley realized, Bee had been talking about her parents. They were the ones who didn’t know her. She had assumed she was talking about the Mares, reflecting on the night after the hockey game, the bullies who made fun of her for being trans. She failed to consider what it must be like to live in a home where you have to silently pretend to be something you’re not. Paisley thought about the shamefulness she felt lying to her dad, about hiding the things she had been doing since they moved to Texas from him. She thought about the stress that it caused her to hide like that and imagined how much worse it must be for Bee. Paisley knew that what she was doing was just a phase. Bee was letting her entire self be hidden, or worse, ignored, even in her own home.

“I’m sorry?”, her father said.

“Ben. Don’t call me that. I hate it when you call me that.”

“But it’s your name, son. What do you propose we call you instead?”

“Jesus Christ, Dad. Look at me,” she said. Her voice cracked with pain, with a desperate, weeping sort of anger. Paisley felt her voice tingling up her back, sharp and cold and hopeless. “How long are you going to ignore me? How long are you going to just pretend to not see who I am? Look I get that maybe it’s all confusing for you. It was for me, too. But how much do I need

to dress and act like a girl before it becomes easier for you to just call me your daughter instead of pretend you even think of me as a man?"

"Ben, I don't understand. What kind of nonsense are you on about?" Bee's hand pounded into the doorframe, a dull thud erupting from under it.

"Fuck. Let me make it absolutely clear. I am a girl. No matter what you think. You might not like it, and you might not even believe it, but I don't care. I am transgender, I am a girl, and my name is Beatrice. My friends call me Bee. You can call me whatever you like, but from now on, I will not be answering to Ben. There isn't a Ben here. You're talking to a ghost."

"Maybe we can talk more about this when you've calmed down," her father said.

"No. We can talk more about it when you're actually ready to listen." Bee turned and violently marched toward the front door. Paisley silently followed, still shrinking into herself, still hugging the wall.

"Looks like I'm driving you home now," Bee said when they got in the car. "Fuck. I'm so sorry Paisley. I'm so sorry you had to be there for that. I didn't know that was going to happen. He called me that name and I just fucking snapped." Paisley could hear the tears being choked back in her voice.

"Bee. It's okay. You needed to. That was really brave. Really strong. I'm sure you're scared and, like, who knows what's going to happen next. But you've done it.

"At least now if they still refuse to accept who I am, it will be they're bigots, not because I hid forever. Look, is it okay if Simone meets us at your place? I just can't be here right now."

"Of course. I'll text my dad and let him know."

Bee and Paisley sat in the car in Paisley's driveway, waiting for Simone to meet up with them. The display on the radio read "Daughters", and Paisley found herself drifting into the fog of a sudden exhaustion as her focus faded into the hypnotic, dissonant wailing of the song that was playing. She almost thought she could feel her heart beating more slowly, and her arms felt so heavy she thought they might fall off at the elbow. Her mouth tasted like the end of a long day. Then, like a sounding alarm, a knock on the window pulled her focus back from her sunken body and into the world around her, where Simone was waiting for them to go inside.

Paisley introduced Bee and Simone to her father, who stayed dancing to jazz and cooking paella while making idle chit chat with the girls. Paisley caught glimpse of a warm, soft smile cracking Bee's face, and she allowed her focus to soften on her mouth, thinking only of how nice it was to see her lost in a moment of joy. Frantz put a lid on the pot and turned the music down.

"Alright, girls, I'm sure you got stuff you're trynna get to. But keep in mind this is gonna be ready in like half an hour, so if y'all feel like you need a big fat bowl of goodness, don't hesitate to load up."

"Yes, sir, you don't gotta tell me twice," Simone said.

Holding the meeting in her own bedroom felt strange to Paisley. The relative sparsity of her room, the simplicity of her style, stood out dramatically compared to the standard set by Bee's. Hers, with all its mechanical buzzing and pervasive shadowy qualities, felt like a perfect cinematic spy headquarters. It was easy to imagine it as a war room, or like the Batcave. Paisley's room, in contrast, felt lacking. Truthfully, that's how she liked it most times. She'd never put much stock in her room as being anything more than a place for her to work or sleep, and anything beyond the minimalist simplicities she adorned it with felt like a distraction from that purpose. For Bee, it seemed that her room doubled as a place to escape reality. For Paisley,

that place was a darkened road. But in this moment, Paisley was embarrassed by its lacking, and it made her worry that the room might be read as a reflection of herself.

“Alright, so lay it on me. How’s Big Nothing?” Simone said.

“Rigged and ready to go, Cap,” Bee said. “It’s nothing special, but at the very least, the Mares should find themselves having a hard time should they bust in.”

“Right on. Sounds like we’re good to go then, yeah?”

“More or less. There’s just one thing we might want to worry about.”

“Oh Jesus. Did something go down?”

“Yeah. Guess who didn’t take too kindly to Araceli’s note?”

“Oh, fucks sake. Were the tweakers back?”

“Sure were,” Paisley said. She thought it might be ample opportunity to counterbalance the banality of their meeting spot by telling Simone how she handled herself at the post office.

“They showed up while we were finishing, gave us a hard time. I gave them a harder one.”

“Yeah, Paisley kicked their asses, it was sick. But that’s a different point entirely. I’m worried about Araceli, man. She’s gotten too out of control. I’m afraid she’s gonna get one of us, or herself, into some serious trouble if she doesn’t cut the shit.”

“Alright, I hear you. One thing at a time. First, we need to squash shit with the Mares once and for all. When Big Nothing is ours, we can have, like, a fucking intervention for Celi or whatever. Deal?”

“Deal,” Bee said.

“Deal,” Paisley said.

“Word. I’ll initiate shit with Marisol and work out a game plan in the meantime. Now if I need to keep smelling all this goddamn shrimp my stomach is about to be louder than my

mouth's ever been, and y'all know that's about loud as fuck, so can we please get to eating some of that paella or what?"

Simone sent out a mass text the following day. The battle for Big Nothing would take place at high noon the following week, and in the meantime, all of the girls were expected to train rigorously on their bikes. Paisley could not ignore the fear she felt for the impending fight, the way she obsessed over the thought of messing up what her friends had worked so long for. But for her, the training ironically served as a relief for this anxiety. Every day on her way to school, Paisley would ride against her previous day's time, striving to shave seconds off her commute every day. By the third day, her muscles were in a constant state of fatigue, a sharp resistance tearing through her legs at the mere act of getting out of bed. But every day, she worked to fight through that fatigue, and to ride faster and harder in spite of it. There were days that she thought for certain the pain would overcome her. There were days that she arrived at school with tears stinging her eyes. There were no days where she was slower than the last. For her, this was more than just preparing for the battle. This was a painful but necessary reminder of the kind of hell she would have to suffer through if she were ever going to survive the twenty-one-day gauntlet of the Tour de France.

At night, she had devised a different training regimen for herself. It was late enough in the year now that the night air was finally cool enough to offer a consistent relief to the still-swelting days. Underneath a lid of brightly glowing stars, which seemed to be burning even stronger in the perfectly penetrable absence of light pollution, Paisley took her bike to a patch of desert on the outskirts of town and trained in the dirt. She knew that, impressive as her riding undoubtably was on pavement, her skills still fell behind where off-road riding was concerned,

and Big Nothing was surrounded by miles of dirt on all sides. So, she would take to the desert floor and do sprints, feeling the way her tires dug into the dirt and slugged along, and feeling the way her legs had to drive down harder when they reached the top of the pedal's rotation. Even with the mountain bike tires, the dirt floor was so loosely packed, so soft, that the tires would sink deeply as they dug their way forward. She spent her nights first learning that pattern, the subtle balance of conserving momentum as the pedal came up, and striking through the barrier of resistance at the top at just the right moment. She worked until her breathing got too hard, mouth hanging loosely open to suck in as much breath as possible, tasting dirt on her tongue as it flew in with the air. At first, she was frustrated by a latency that plagued her stride, a hiccup that slowed her pace. By the end of the week, she had gotten rid of it, and riding through the dirt, no matter how thick, no matter how deep into it the tires tore, felt as smooth and natural as the pavement.

Then, after sprints, she would practice riding in circles. She started with wide, flowing rings, tightening up the circle more and more every few minutes. She felt a burning in her core and in her butt from trying to maintain balance while shifting so much of her weight to one side. She knew this burning, and her ability to work through it, was the strength she would need to keep the circle going without breaking, to stay spinning around the Mares like a hyena waiting to pounce. If they were going to break through them, she didn't want it to be her fault. She shifted her focus from the tightly tensed pillar of aching, contracting muscles that was her weight bearing leg, to the leg which floated freely above the ground, which leaned with the inside of the bike as it became more and more level with the earth. She felt the way it glided, loose and free, the soft wind of the speed breathing through the pores in her bike shoes. She would occasionally lower it, allowing it to skid along the ground, feeling the way it would gently caress a puff of dirt

into the air, watching as the previously grounded debris would fly into the air and dance in the breeze. She thought of this as liberation, liberation from her soles being anchored to the earth.

The reason she ever sat in the saddle in the first place.

After her so-called crash course in battle-bike training had been completed, Paisley sat on the stoop of her home, staring into the deep black of the world around her. She let the calm night air cool her skin, chill the sweat that got trapped in her riding gear. As she sat, she watched an ethereal cloak of steam slowly rise from her body and cling to her in a shroud as her body heat clashed with the air. She thought about riding, and the purpose that it had taken on. She thought about how it had transformed for her into something new. What started as a means of meditating in isolation, of distancing herself from a world she believed she did not belong in, had become a way for her to help people that she cared about. She was no longer riding her bike to escape the grip of the social world, but to instead provide for people who have come to depend on her. To make others happy. Whenever she straddled the frame of her bicycle, she found that she drove it forward with a newfound sense of happiness, of purpose. Maybe, she realized, this was what racing was all about for her. She had never put much stock into why she wanted to race in the Tour de France, other than that it would be nice to be famous, to be recognized for her talents. But maybe this was her real purpose. To win the race and prove to others who are like her, no-ones from nowhere, kids in a world where nothing seems to be available to them, that they too are capable of living the lives they desire. That they can find meaning in the things that they do have. That nothingness is an opportunity to create.

The morning of the battle for Big Nothing, Paisley tip-toed into the kitchen to find Frantz at the table with a bowl of cold soba, sifting through papers. The only light in the room was the faint

silver-blue of a morning sky whose Sun was still hugging the horizon. Freshly roasted coffee wafted through the air which was enough to brighten up her still-sleeping senses, and drops of water colliding into the empty steel basin of the sink punctuated the silence. Paisley placed both of her hands on her forehead and massaged it with her palms in tight, forceful circles, as if she believes she could squeeze the tired out like juice from an orange. She was not nearly as ready for the day as she needed to be, but she did not have time to dawdle.

“What’s up, Pais. You’re up early,” Frantz said without looking up from the papers.

“Yeah, well, so are you,” she said.

“I, unlike you, am always up early. The trials and tribulations of the combustion engine lifestyle. Besides, I need to get this file all straightened up for Araceli’s grandma, you know. Her paperwork is still a mess. What about you? What’s the occasion that brought my normally-sleeping beauty out into the morning world?”

“Me and the girls have a big bike tripped planned,” she said, not exactly lying.

“Right on. I like those friends of yours, Pais. Simone kinda reminds me of me when I was y’all’s age. And that Bee seems sweet, too.” Paisley couldn’t help but feel a soft warmth swell in her chest when he said that. She wasn’t sure now was the best time to tell him why, but it filled her with a tingling joy to hear that he liked Bee.

“Yeah, they’re really good friends. They’ve helped me a lot,” she said. She felt less like she was saying it to him, but simply articulating it, out loud, this thing that she had yet to take the time to put into real, spoken words. She thought that she should make sure they get to hear her say it eventually, too.

“Well, I’m glad to hear it, baby. What did I tell you? Remember how scared you were when we first got here? I told you everything would be ok.”

“Yeah, yeah, you were right, Dad.”

“Uh-uh, you said it wrong, baby. You were supposed to say, ‘you’re *always* right, Dad,’” he said, pumping his fist up and down to a beat only he could hear in his head, like a kid signaling to a passing trucker to blare his horn.

“Oh my god, you’re so annoying.”

“Hey, look at that, sometimes you’re even right, too!”

Outside, Paisley saw Bee sitting next to her bike at the end of the driveway, glowing in the halo of orange that had finally started to burn into the sky that she stared at. Paisley thought that if anyone were to ever make a postcard for their town, this should be the picture. ‘Tuluca Rock: Nothing Much But Pretty Girls And a Good Sunrise’. She wanted to hang it on her mirror. She was so smitten by the serenity of it that she hadn’t even had a moment to realize that she was also confused, as she hadn’t been expecting Bee, who made no plans for them to meet up.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” she hollered out as she closed the door behind her. She clicked the button drilled under the doorbell, and the whirring of the garage opening started sounding through the air. The garage door shook and shuddered like it, too, was being pulled out of a slumber and into the morning.

“Oh, hey. Sorry, I was gonna text you, but I sorta forgot. I couldn’t really sleep last night. Too excited. Or nervous. I don’t know, I guess. Anyway, I couldn’t sit around the house anymore, so I came over here. Figured we could both use the company on the ride up.”

“I’m not gonna say no,” Paisley said, wheeling her bike out of the garage. She laid it down on the ground outside the door, hit the button inside the garage, and ran back out, taking

big, exaggerated steps over the invisible laser that would make the door go back up again. She picked the bike up and straddled it. Behind her, she heard a window being opened.

“Hey, Bee! Good morning! Thought I heard your voice,” Frantz called out from inside.

“Oh, good morning Mr. Thelemaque!” Her pronunciation was perfect, fluid. “Hope I didn’t wake you.”

“Don’t even get him started,” Paisley said.

“Pais, I forgot to tell you, when you see Araceli, will you tell her we need to meet up soon, please? Grandma’s interview is coming up. Big stuff.”

“Yes sir,” she said.

“Alright, girls. Have fun.” If only he knew what kind of supposed fun they would be having, she thought.

The heat rose higher and higher the longer they were on the road, betraying the chill of the darker hours. Paisley began to wonder if she would ever live through a properly cool day again in her life, or if she were going to have to retire her favorite hoodies for good. Still, compared to previous rides, the weather was a dream, warm enough to soothe her skin and melt some of the aching in her joints. If she closed her eyes and listened to the soft sound of Bee’s tires ceaselessly whirring on the road, she could pretend she was on the beach. They rode slow and easy, sometimes even taking the time to get off their bikes and walk up inclines if they seemed too arduous. This was partly, at first, because the energy drinks they had chugged in front of the corner store before departing had yet to kick in. But mostly it was simply to maintain their energy for when they would really need it. Far be it from them to let the Mares take Big Nothing because they arrived at the scene winded.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” Bee said when they got off their bikes to walk up a small hill. Her voice was peppered with subtle breathlessness.

“Of course,” she said slowly.

“Well, okay, I only ask because, like, I do this thing sometimes where I kind of just assume things and then later I’m like, oh crap, what if I was wrong, you know? So anyway, last week, you know, in the car, when you said all that stuff. Did that mean, like, what I thought it meant?” Paisley knew what Bee meant about assuming things that weren’t really said. She knew because she had done the same thing when Bee put her hand over her own.

“Oh. You’re going to make me say it, huh? I thought I got away with not having to.” She tried to make it obvious that she was being playful, but there was some truth in what she had said. Despite everything that had developed between them after that moment, there was still a nervous hesitation within her to actually say her feelings out loud, like the words were too big for her mouth and they had gotten stuck inside her. She took a loud gulp of air, and then let it all slowly escape out her nose until she could feel the tension on her chest. “Yeah, it means I have a crush on you. That’s what you thought...right?”

“Yeah,” Bee said. “Cool. I agree with that crush.” Paisley was realizing how much heavier words felt when they were actually said. She had always feared how hard things like rejection would hit her if they were spoken, which is why she had for so long avoided speaking altogether. She had failed to consider until now the opposite. She never knew how warm and electrifying it could be to have one’s hopes and desires made real by nothing more than a few spoken words. She felt a buzzing in her fingertips as her hands started to flutter so fast, she thought she might start flying. She felt like she already was.

When they arrived at Big Nothing, Araceli was already there, sitting on the porch with her bike leaned up along the wall. Her car was parked haphazardly behind the building. They all would have driven in together, were it not for lack of space on the bike rack. The three of them sat together, making idle chit chat as a means to disguise the nervousness they all collectively shared over what was about to happen. They knew that all they could do was wait for the Mares to show up, but Paisley expressed how she wished they could have done more to prepare.

“We’re going to be okay. Fighting bitches is nothing new, right? Just stay on your bike and wail on them like their faces are cop car windows, you feel?” Paisley couldn’t believe she even cared. She felt an urge to get up and simply ride away, like a voice in her brain getting louder and louder, nagging her about how dumb it was to put herself at risk like this for a stupid empty building. But she could tell by the sounds of her friends’ voices, by the way they had a hard time keeping eye contact with anything but their feet, by the anxious cracking of knuckles and twiddling of thumbs, that whatever it was that made them think this place mattered was real to them. In that way, it was real to her, too. Her hands shook. Simultaneously, she longed to both shove them in her pockets in retreat, and to swing her padlock mace around wildly until it crashed in the skull of a Mare. She wasn’t sure what it was she really wanted to do, but whatever it was, she wanted it to happen soon. The anticipation was like a static that got louder and louder in her ears, like a brushfire spreading uncontrollably through her ribs. Her feet ached with a desire to simply move.

Finally, with tensions mounting so high that Araceli had started aggressively pacing the length of the building’s façade, the horizon birthed the image of a vehicle coming down the dirt road. Thick clouds of dust like a swarm of locusts followed the yellow half-sized school bus marked with the words “MARLON POINT HIGH SCHOOL” on the side. Paisley felt like she may as

well be watching an armored chariot march down the road and started worrying that masses of black-clad goth warriors would pour out of the bus like a militarized Cure concert. The shocks squeaked as the bus lurched into a hard stop, and the doors hissed open. The four Mares climbed out, roller skates knotted together at the laces and draped around their necks, with hockey sticks in hand. Paisley and the others grabbed their bikes, not yet straddling them, but readying them for when the fighting broke up. Araceli strategically positioned herself in front of the porch steps to make sure the Mares couldn't make a break for the inside, as they had agreed.

“Looks like you're one short,” Marigold said. “Where's the Queen Freak herself?”

“You guys are early,” Araceli said. “She'll be here soon.”

“I guess it's only fair we wait, then,” Marisol said. “We wouldn't want to make it too easy for us, right Marigold?”

“Agreed. Plus, I'm looking forward to watching Simone's smug face leak blood,” she said.

“Let me ask you something,” Bee said, “while we wait.”

“Go for it, Benny-Boy,” Marisol said. Paisley felt her fists tighten, like her hands had finally made up their minds about whether she was more interested in fight or flight.

“Your gang doesn't even fucking do anything. You just shoplift and beat people up. What the fuck do you even want with this place? What do you need, like, a base for?”

“It could be cool to have shows here,” Mariko said.

“Plus, we found out how excited you guys were when you learned about this place. How bad you wanted to move in. It made us want it, too. Just to keep it from you, really,” Marigold said.

“Don’t you gated community, yuppie, silver spoon choking fuckheads have enough? What, it’s not good enough for you to have regular fucking families and a trust fund, you gotta keep the hicks down while you’re at it? Is that it?” Araceli said. Paisley couldn’t tell how much of the edge in her voice came from the pills she had undoubtedly swallowed, and how much of it was pure hatred. To her credit, she had been relatively calm up until this moment. If it was raw fury that drove her to the brink, Paisley couldn’t blame her. “I’m gonna kick the absolute shit out of you, you bitch. I’m gonna fuck you up so bad, you’ll need to use daddy’s money for plastic surgery so you can graduate with a fucking face.” They all stood across from each other like a shootout in an old western movie, waiting for the bell to chime. The Sun had climbed higher in the sky, and the heat even started to creep into the shade under the awning of the post office. Sweat beaded on Paisley’s brow, but she was too nervous to raise a hand to wipe it off. She was afraid that any sudden movement might signal an attack now that things had gotten so hostile.

“At least my grandma will be at my graduation instead of hiding in a hole somewhere.”

“You’re dead,” Araceli shrieked.

“We can go right now if you don’t want to wait for your shithead leader anymore,” Marisol said.

“Oh, don’t worry. Simone will be here soon,” she said, speaking significantly louder than she had been until this point. “In fact, she’ll be here in three. Two. One.” The sound of buckling wood creaked and groaned from the roof of the post office, quickly followed by the sight of Simone on her bike, flying up from over the sign and through the sky. Paisley watched Simone’s shadow crawl on the ground and swallow Marigold’s feet as Simone descended in the air. Paisley watched as Marigold finally broke from an apparent shock-induced stupor and try to jump backwards, but it was too late. The rear tire of Simone’s bike crashed squarely into

Marigold's face, knocking her on her back as Simone landed sideways behind her, stumbling a bit before bringing her bike upright.

Suddenly, the frenzy had started. The Mares began scrambling, the sound of their feet shuffling through the dirt singling their attempt to make a mad dash for the door, but Araceli hopped on her bike and rode straight for them, swinging her padlock mace. Paisley took this as her sign to get on her bike, joining Bee and Simone in the defensive circle as Araceli drove the Mares away from the building. The Mares stood back-to-back, clutching their hockey sticks close to their chests. Paisley watches the other girls, making sure to keep time with their stride, and noting as Simone or Araceli would occasionally swerve up to the Mares swinging their padlock maces before weaving back out, and started following suit. She swung her mace at Mariko, who held her stick up to block the attack. The momentum of the lock caused the chain to coil around the stick, and as she weaved her way back into the circle formation, Paisley pulled the chain, which yanked the stick out of her hands and sent Mariko falling face first into the dirt. She glanced behind her and watched Araceli kick at her shoulders as she passed by. Paisley took note of her breathing, trying to keep it slow so that she would feel more relaxed. She wanted to keep her judgement clear, being afraid that too much anxiety might cause her to slip up and give the Mares an opening. She found it difficult to keep up with bouncing her focus between her gang, making sure to move in tandem with them, and the Mares, trying to anticipate any sudden moves that they might telegraph and stop them before they broke free.

Marigold let out a loud grunt, which caught Paisley's attention just in time to watch as she jammed the handle of her hockey stick between Simone's spokes, causing her to launch over the handlebars. Simone broke her fall and quickly jumped back up to her feet, but Marigold had already escaped the confines of the circle and started running toward the bus. Paisley watched as

she climbed up to the roof and took the roller-skates from around her neck and undid the laces. Marigold cocked her arm back and, just as Simone had started running toward the bus, threw them at her, clocking her in the side of the head. She then wound up the second pitch, launching the roller-skate this time at Paisley, who instinctually threw her hands up to guard her face and jerked her body away from the flying skate as she was in the middle of a tight turn. She felt the bike wobbling between her legs and tried to shift her weight to keep it from toppling over, but it was too late. She spilled onto the ground, feeling the hot dirt scraping up against the side of her thigh. She eased herself up back to her feet and saw the remaining Mares run for the door, but Araceli jumped off her bike and stood on the steps, wielding Mariko's fallen hockey stick like a samurai sword.

“Hurry the fuck up and come help me keep these bitches back, guys!” Simone turned her back to Marigold, sprinting toward the door. She ran up behind Marisol and kicked her in the back of the leg, taking her to the ground where she straddled her and held her down. Paisley was about to make her way to the door, too, but then she saw Bee riding her bike directly toward the school bus. At top speed, she stood up, carefully and gracefully shifting her feet from the pedals to the saddle and, as she was about to crash into the bus, she leapt from the saddle onto its hood. Paisley watched as Marigold raised her hockey stick to bring it down on Bee, so she swung her padlock around and slung it at Marigold. She felt the links of the chain slipping from her grasp and knew that the throw was straight and powerful, watching it as it flew through the air and pegged Marigold in the ribs. It wasn't much, but it was enough for her to drop her stick down. Bee climbed onto the roof and, with her chain wrapped around her wrist and the padlock held firmly in her palm, smashed Marigold in the face. Her nose bled, streaking along the dirty, black

mark from Simone's tire that ran down her face. Then Bee hit her again, and again, before pushing her off the roof of the bus.

"That's for calling me Benny-Boy, you fucking wretch," she said before jumping off bus. Marigold crawled on the ground, blood leaking from her face and pooling in the dirt. Paisley felt a pride spark inside her, a pride that she knew was perverse and wrong but couldn't stop herself from feeling anyway. She nearly tuned out the war that was erupting behind her, running up to Bee and tackling her into a hug.

"Who's the goddamn badass now? Bee, that was *sick*. That was like some cirque de soleil shit!"

"We all gotta get our hands dirty eventually, I guess," she said. "Come on, we need to help the others."

They marched back to the rest of the gang, Paisley dragging Marigold behind her by the hair. Paisley felt Marigold's hand swatting at her wrists and could tell by her weakness that she was still dazed, but she didn't want to leave her behind and give her the opportunity to spring on them while they were distracted. Plus, she felt like some kind of ancient warrior, bringing their enemy's slain commander to their feet as a warning to the rest of them. Still, the tussle at the porch steps was chaos, Paisley straining herself to make sense of who each flailing limb belonged to. Araceli was pinned under the knee of Marybeth, bench-pressing the hockey stick that she was trying to push into her throat. Simone was attempting to hold off both Mariko and Marisol, but even she was getting overpowered by quick jabs to the ribs that pushed her ever closer to being pinned against the wall. The Mares were fast on their feet, and when Paisley thought about what it might feel like to have one of their powerful arms drilling into her

stomach, could feel her knees stiffen as though her body were trying to lock up her stride and keep her far away from them.

Paisley let go of Marigold's hair, feeling thin pulled-out strands of it still wrapping around her fingers, and dropped her face into the dirt. She and Bee split up, Bee running over to Simone's aid while Paisley ran up behind Marybeth, mounting her back and wrapping her arms around her neck before throwing the weight of her body back. She felt the shifting of the weight on top of her as she fell further back, stopped by one of the steps of the porch digging between her shoulder blades, and she used her knees to launch Marybeth off of her, catapulted by the momentum of Paisley's fall. She wanted nothing more than to stay laying there, even with the dull, hard edge of the step pushing a burning ache into her bones. Her body was tired, and having her limbs stretched out, her body sprawling out in so many different directions, offered a relief not unlike crashing into a mattress on a day too long lived. But she knew, despite the resistance her weakened, wobbling muscles offered to the mere idea of it, that she had to get up. Araceli had already begun exacting her revenge on Marybeth, having leapt over the prone Paisley to reach her, and Simone was handling Mariko fine enough on her own, so she started rushing over to Bee, who looked to be losing a grappling match with Marisol. Before she could reach her, she was alerted to the sound of screaming behind her, and when she turned around, she caught an eyeful of Marigold's shoulder seconds before colliding into her chest and tackling her to the ground. She felt the breath shoot straight out of her lungs, replaced with what felt like fire that only burned hotter when she tried to desperately gasp some of the air back into them.

Marigold's knees clung tight like a bear trap around her hips, pinning her to the ground. Behind her, the sun burned around her head like a halo, her backlit silhouette betrayed only by the glimmering of light reflecting off the still-wet blood on her hands as she lifted a loose fist

into the hair. Paisley covered her face with her hands just before that fist came crashing down, driving into her palms. Paisley felt her own knuckles pressing into her eyes, her cheekbones, and her nose with every punch, which just kept coming and coming, slowly, and what she assumed was weaker than they would have been had Marigold not already been worn out some, but heavy nonetheless. She could already feel the bruising, the blood rushing underneath her eye to inevitably swallow it in a deep, swollen pool of black. She thought only of two things – how she was going to get out of this, and how she was going to lie to her father this time. Each pound was like a nail being driven deeper and deeper into her skull, sending a splitting, pulsing pain through her head. She tried to wriggle her hips out from the death grip of Marigold's thighs, but she did not budge. She tried to grab Marigold's wrists to keep her from cocking another punch, but her limp grip could not contain her might. From between the gaps in her fingers, she could see light a little too brightly, the blue of the sky and the yellow of the dirt fading into a hazy white as her vision started to drift away with the consciousness that was being beaten out of her skull. She felt that she was only moments away from blacking out underneath Marigold's fists when she heard a loud cracking sound like snapping bone, and when she opened her eyes again, she saw Simone standing over her with a hockey stick whose sickle-like edge was painted with a fresh wash of blood. Simone flicked some of the blood off before slipping the blade of the stick under her armpit, using it as a crutch, her own cane being stuck somewhere in the dirt. Marigold's face looked like it had been split in two, the recently clogged up wounds in her nose and mouth reopening with the impact so that now a deep river of blood flowed all the way from under her eye to just above her chin. Her legs loosened their grasp on Paisley's body as she shuffled backwards, scrambling to her feet.

“Girls! Regroup, get inside,” she screamed, trying to mask the pain in her voice.

Marigold sprinted to the steps, Marisol and Mariko close behind her. Marisol threw Araceli off of Marybeth, and the four of them reached the door to Big Nothing. Paisley and the others rushed after them, Paisley and Bee knowing what was about to happen, Araceli and Simone being none the wiser. Marigold shouldered the door open, and when she did, she was greeted by a thick, black waterfall pouring from the doorframe above her. The sound of metal clanging against the hardwood floor punctuated the spectacle of paint coating her and splattering all over the other Mares, the now-empty bucked twirling in a half circle before toddling to a stop. Bee and Paisley high-fived one another. “Are you fucking kidding me?” Marigold yelled, throwing her arms up, which only splashed more paint on the other Mares.

“It ain’t much,” Bee said, “but it sure is funny.”

“You really did mean some Home Alone shit, huh?” Simone said. The Mares packed into the post office, leaving a trail of overlapping black footprints behind them, and Paisley and the girls treaded behind them. Simone began to stride through the building to catch up as the Mares made their way behind the counter, but Bee put her arm out to stop her. They all watched as Marisol tripped over the wire and fell face first, disappearing behind the counter. When the others stepped over the wire, Bee grabbed the rope they had affixed to the filing shelves, pulling it down from the wall and sending it crashing into the counter. The sound of some of the wood splitting was like a mini eruption to orchestrate the plume of dust that rose from the shelves. The shelving created a barrier between the Mares, who were up against the wall now, and any escape they might have tried to make. Bee and Paisley made their way to the corner of the room, where they had set up a makeshift armory of the tweakers’ beer bottles, and the others followed suit, each of them arming themselves with a bottle and throwing it the Mares, who stood packed

together like bowling pins waiting to be knocked over. Paisley could smell the stale beer on her hands, or in the air, she couldn't really tell. A rain of broken glass pattered off the counter, brown shards glimmering as they skipped through the cracks of light that broke through the dim room. Paisley watched the shifting expressions of pain, shock, and fear warping the faces of the Mares, taking it all as a sign that her and Bee's hard work setting up their elaborate mare trap and the trials born from it were all worthwhile. When she had thrown her last bottle had been thrown, Simone rushed over to the other side of the fallen shelves, the plinking noise of the stick which burdened her weight forward reverberating dryly off the walls. Two of the Mares had made their way into the small backroom to shield themselves from the showering glass, but Araceli and Bee had already leapt the counter to corner them in there. Paisley held a final bottle still, but withheld from throwing it, fearing that she might accidentally hit one of her compatriots in the crossfire. Grunting and the dull sounds of hard fists colliding with soft flesh droned on from the backroom, leaving Paisley to wonder which bodies were making the more painful noises. Marigold was attempting to crawl underneath the shelves, but Simone kept stabbing her stick at her hands whenever they crossed the threshold as if they were the plastic pawns in a game of whack-a-mole. One of her jabs missed, and Marigold grabbed the stick, yanking it toward her and forcing Simone to slam face-firsts into the sharp angle of the shelves. Marigold slipped underneath them and broke for the basement. Paisley gave chase after her, closing the distance just quickly enough to witness Marigold tripping over the wire at the mouth of the stairwell. She counted six hard, jagged crashes before she surmised that Marigold had reached the bottom. Paisley sprinted after her. She hurdled the wire and hastily descended the stairs about halfway before she leapt the remaining steps in a single bound, landing directly over Marigold. She felt a sharp jolt of pain shoot through her foot and up into her ankle, the landing sticking more harshly than she had

anticipated and causing her to roll her foot over in her shoe, but she paid it no mind. She smashed the beer bottle against the floor, and then held its horrible, angular teeth against Marigold's neck. Her hand was shaking, which caused her to occasionally come a little closer to actually puncturing the skin than she intended. She wasn't afraid so much of what might happen next if Marigold tried to overpower her. She was afraid, instead, of the knowledge that she was willing to do whatever it was. She wasn't afraid to draw blood from Marigold's neck, and it was this realization that truly scared her.

"Jesus Christ," Marigold said with a pained mix of horror and disbelief. "You would kill me over some fucking abandoned shack in the middle of nowhere?" Paisley thought hard about this question. Would she kill Marigold for the sake of Big Nothing?

"That depends entirely on you," she said. Her actual answer would have been "not likely", she decided. There was a lot of middle ground between shedding blood and taking a life that she wasn't ready to explore in the name of an old post office. But she didn't see much sense in saying so in the moment. She figured it better to let Marigold sweat.

"Fuck this. You psychopaths win," she spat out. Paisley thought it sounded like she was trying to mask her disappointment with disdain. She thought Marigold might have actually been a little bit sad. "White flags up, girls," she hollered up the stairs. "We're done." Paisley pulled Marigold up off the ground and lead her up the stairs with the bottle pressed into the small of her back. The rest of the Mares sat on the floor, panting and wiping the sweat and blood from their wounds. Beneath the pain on their face was an expression of relief. Paisley understood this. She, too, was relieved for the fighting to be done. Whatever she might have been willing to do, she didn't want to hurt anyone anymore. "I, Marigold O'Malley, on behalf of the Church of the Feral

Mare, hereby relinquish the Big Nothing turf to you, the Division of the Lilith Moon. May you all have an absolute blast fucking off in this barren wasteland.”

“That ain’t all, Marigold,” Simone spoke. “Y’all are also gonna stay the fuck out of the Tuluca Rock turf, too. I don’t wanna see none y’all stank ass faces in our neighborhood again. If you must come to the school for hockey, you are to find myself or my girl Paisley here, you are to thank us for allowing you in our home, and you are to kiss our motherfucking boots. And if you think I’m playing, I cordially invite you to fuck around and find out.”

“Fuck you, Simone,” Marigold said.

“For Christ’s sake, Marigold, give it a rest,” Marisol said. “Yes, Simone, I promise we won’t bother you lot again. We’re sorry.”

“Finally. One of y’all said some shit that makes sense.”

After the school bus disappeared over the horizon, the girls all took part in cleaning the wreckage of the war. Simone dug her cane out of the dirt and then staked the dark-stained hockey stick into the ground next to the steps as though it were a signpost, the blood acting as writing in a long-forgotten language that nonetheless translated in everyone’s mind to “Beware”. They swept the glass into a pile, shells of ammunition scattered about the battlefield. They sopped up any blood that had not yet dried and resolved to get something to take care of that which had as part of their future renovations. And then, when all was as clean as could be, or at least that’s what Paisley told herself when the last little bit of energy was squeezed out of her desperate muscles, they went out into the cooling evening and stood in the shadow of Big Nothing. The sky behind it burned all orange and pink, taming the bright dirt and bringing color to the faded wooden façade of the building, making it look younger and more remarkable. Thin clouds streaked through the

sky like rivers of mist as though they were trying to offer features to the scenery where there were none. The four girls and the one big building which they yearned to fill with new life were the only things that gave shape to the landscape surrounding them, and for one glorious moment, Paisley felt like they were the most powerful things on Earth.

“We did it,” Simone said.

“After all this time, we finally won,” Bee said.

“Does this mean our beef with the Mares is over?” Araceli said.

“Might do,” Simone said.

“Okay,” Paisley said. “So we won the turf. Now what do we do with it?”

“Who cares,” Bee said. “It’s ours.”

Over the following weeks, the girls spent most of their free weekend hours trekking to and from Big Nothing, urgently trying to shape it into the place that had lived so long in their collective fantasies. In the days immediately following the battle, Paisley stayed at Bee’s house, hoping that the wounds of war would have faded enough for her dad to not notice with time. But on the third day, when she caught a glimpse of her still darkened eye and crusted lip in the bathroom mirror, she knew it would take too long. She had devised a lie about the air leaking out of one of her tires and the rim bending when she went to take a turn, spitting her face first into the rear bumper of a car. This prompted Frantz to buy her a slightly more portable-friendly bike pump.

Over time, Big Nothing started to truly shape into the kind of gathering spot Paisley reckoned most kids her age would dream about. They packed it full of furniture, mini fridges, a television, stereo equipment, all of which had either been in one of the girl’s basements ripe to be relocated or had, as Araceli put it, fallen off a truck. Bee brought some of her old compute

equipment to set up a less impressive but still functional workstation for herself. Paisley and Simone had even taken to restoring the vibrancy of the wood-panel walls with stain and finish, tearing the boards from the empty windows so that they wouldn't suffocate on the chemical fumes. Paisley was amazed watching the vision of her friends come to life, watching Big Nothing metamorphosize from the dried-up carapace of a desert-eaten stranger to a place that felt like it breathed with color, energy and spirit. A place that felt like it could be a home if it needed to be.

The work carried them well through the remainder of Autumn and into the heart of Winter as well, even consuming most of their holiday break. It had become a new year by the time Big Nothing finally started to fully match the girls' vision of it. Paisley was relieved to finally live through days released from the constant looming heat that persisted well through fall, the afternoon hours becoming mild and comfortable, and nights plummeting into actual, God's honest cold. She had never been so happy to wear a jacket in her life as she was riding her bike home from Bee's house Sunday nights, feeling the cold wind bite at her cheeks until they tingled for want of her well-warmed home.

Every day that they met up at Big Nothing, Araceli's eyes got a little more intense. She was growing more and more visibly restless, more frantic and alarming. It was clear to Paisley that the workload was weighing down on her. Paisley felt this too, felt her own movements start to be propelled by a furious sort of energy the closer they got to crossing the finish line. But with Araceli, it was scary. She wondered how many days it had been since she had last been sober. How many pills she had swallowed since the day of the battle, and how many more her body could handle. On the worst day, her cheeks sagged underneath her eyes, making her look like she

hadn't slept in days, and she moved as if she were being pulled on strings, fast but shaky, lurching motions. Her body seemed hollow, like it was shrinking and folding in on itself.

"Araceli," Simone said, "what the fuck is going on with you?" She must have noticed it too, Paisley thought. Though on second thought, she realized it would be hard not to. Paisley could tell that the question wasn't begging any real answer. Everyone already knew what was happening to Araceli.

"What do you mean?" Araceli said.

"Look at you, baby. You're like a feral animal. You look like shit."

"I haven't been sleeping well," she said. Her voice sounded like it was stripped entirely of its humanity, dry and flat, like the words didn't mean anything to her as they loosely escaped her jaws.

"No shit, Cel. How many addies you been chewing daily?" Araceli shot a quick glance at Simone, her sunken, bloodshot eyes looking like fire.

"That's none of your business," she said, a little more human in her voice this time, and a pissed off one at that Paisley thought.

"Used to be that that was true," Simone said. "Used to be that it didn't bother nobody. Even used to be that I even kinda liked it sometimes when you would go too far. It would make doing dumb shit more fun. But now? It is my business."

"We're worried about you, Cel," Paisley said, wanting to be a more compassionate voice to undercut the severity of Simone.

"You shut up," Araceli barked back. "I don't need to be lectured by you."

“You’re not only hurting yourself anymore. You’re putting us all at risk. You almost fucked up that whole Marlon Point mission with your out-of-control ass. And did they tell you what happened with that drug-addled threat you left for the tweakers?”

“Now wait a goddamn minute, that was way bigger than...”

“Bee could have fucking died, Araceli. The tweakers came back looking for blood and they woulda found it if not for Paisley. And it’s your fault. You need to clean your fucking act up.” Paisley felt like her name was being used as a weapon, and it made her skin feel fuzzy, but she knew Simone was right. She looked over at Bee, who was staring directly at her own feet. She could tell they shared their discomfort.

“Fuck you, Simone,” she said, the most alive she had sounded all day. Araceli stormed out, slamming the door behind her, and drove off. The girls finished up their work, free of the anxious energy that Araceli had added to the atmosphere, but not free of anxiety itself. The room was still tense, the air still heavy, but this time with what felt like a collective fear for their friend. Paisley moved more slowly, dabbing the final few brush strokes to make the wood shine. She hoped this could be just the first in a series of newer, cleaner things. When they finished, Simone hitched a ride in Bee’s car, and they all quietly sped back into town.

The school bell rang to signal the end of class, and Araceli’s desk screeched under the force with which she launched herself from the seat, pushing it hard behind her. Black skids marked the floor to show where the chair’s feet had dragged. Despite being on the opposite side of the room as the door, she was the first one out of the classroom. She still hadn’t spoken a word to Paisley or any of the others since the confrontation at Big Nothing. Not even so much as a returned text. With the way she left, it seemed that even being in the same room with one of them was a pain

she couldn't bear, couldn't wait to be relived from. Paisley wondered how much of the resentment that burned inside of her was natural, and how much of it was the drugs that she was very much still sailing on. There was no mistaking the look in her eyes, the way she shifted in her seat, the way she wore down the soft wood of her desktop under the ballpoint of the pen that she spent all day carving into it. She was in a bad way.

Paisley merged herself with the raging mass of bodies in the hallway and started drifting toward the door, pushed along by the shoulders of the bigger and faster students plowing their way past her, where she could see Bee and Simone waiting for her. Before she made it to the door, in the hallway erupted a noise from the students around them, a many-voiced groan that was part shock, part celebration. The telltale choir that always scored a nearby fight. Paisley had a nauseous, sinking feeling in her stomach. She felt that she knew who was involved without having to look, but a dim burning hope that she was wrong motivated her to push through the mob of gathered students to be sure. Simone and Bee met her at her side just in time to part their way through and see Araceli sitting on Colson LaGrange's chest and driving her fists into his leaking mouth.

"Speak on her again," she kept screaming over and over, each repetition getting a little less intelligible. Rising above the overlapping chatter of the onlooking students, the principal could be heard calling for order. Simone lifted her off Colson by the armpits and wrapped her arm around her shoulders, hugging her close.

"Come on, we need to get the fuck out of here," she said to everyone, but to Araceli in particular, and they rushed their way to the door. Paisley fumbled with her bike lock, her hands trembling too greatly to dial in the combination precisely. The others had already taken off by the time she undid the lock and mounted her bike. They rode furiously to Bee's house, silent

except for the occasional pained scream from Araceli. They did not want to shout their conversation for anyone to hear, especially in a place like Tuluca Rock where the empty would carry their voices further and more greatly than they dared risk.

“Now just what in the absolute hell was that shit all about?” Simone said the moment Bee’s bedroom door shut, sounding as if the words had been pressing on the back of her teeth for hours and she had to spit them out to get any relief.

“He was talking bad about mi abuelita and I fucking lost it. I couldn’t even see. Everything was bright white, my brain shut off. It was like I was in a tunnel of light or something,” Araceli said. Her eyes were wide and her voice shook. She looked like she was afraid of her own words.

“Araceli, listen to yourself,” Paisley said. “You’re losing control of yourself. You need help. I’m right here. We all are. We can help you.” Paisley had no idea what it was like to be on pills, and certainly no idea what it felt like to be addicted to something. But she had seen her fair share of addiction in the past, something that had plagued a good few of her father’s clients through the years. She recalled a number of stern and somber conversations he had had with her over the horrors of drugs, and couldn’t help but think that she was now seeing everything he had said in Araceli. She could tell that the sober part of Araceli’s mind, the part that hid underneath the static of the amphetamine buzz, was filled with fear. Paisley looked at the withering husk of her friend and felt completely overwhelmed by the inexhaustible terror that she was looking at a body mere shades from a corpse. She thought that, maybe from finally passing the threshold where even she couldn’t ignore that she went too far, or maybe seeing herself in the reflection of Paisley’s wet, tear-stung eyes, Araceli was finally starting to see herself this way too.

“You should have found us. You should have at least let us step in for you,” Simone said. “Leviticus already has it out for your grandma. Even more so than my daddy, and that’s a fucking lot. Now you’ve gone and plastered his kid? Lev ain’t too big to use grandma as a way to fuck your life up if that’s what he wants, Cel.”

“Fuck, fuck I know. I don’t know what to do,” Araceli said. Her face was streaked with dried tears and her breathing was like Morse code, short, sobbing gasps of air choking her words. “I don’t know what to do, and I thought I could control myself, but I was wrong. I was wrong, but I don’t know how to stop.” She spoke with the speed of the pills in her system. Paisley thought that if someone didn’t step in, she would talk her jaw off repeating the same desperate phrases to herself.

“Listen to me, Araceli,” she said. “You need to just get rid of them. Throw the pills away and stop.”

“You don’t get it, Paisley. They help. I need them,” she said.

“Baby, that’s the addiction talking,” Bee said. “They’re hurting you. They don’t help.”

“You don’t know what it’s like, guys. You don’t. I wake up every day with the pressure of making a future for myself crushing me down. I need to succeed, or else everything mi abuelita did was for nothing. She sacrificed everything. She has spent years of her life living in fear, hiding from the world, running from fucking ICE, living like a goddamn ghost, all so that I could live a better life than her. If I don’t, then she wasted all that pain.” The tears were wet again. Paisley could hear the shame in her voice, and it cut right into her bones, made her skin feel cold.

“But then why the drugs, Cel?” Simone said. “Ain’t that the shit that got the old lady’s life all fucked up in the first place?”

“This is different. This helped me work, helped me in school. I couldn’t keep up, my grades were slipping, all that shit. You remember that Senior kid I was kinda friends with? Well, when he went to college, he told me that all his friends did Adderall to write their papers, you know? Said it helped them cram all their work into all-nighters. So he brought me home some over break, and he was right. It’s helping me get my shit done, helping me keep my grades up. It’s helping me make a better future for myself, guys.”

“Maybe it was,” Paisley said, “but it’s clearly not anymore.”

“No, it’s not the drugs, it can’t be, it’s me. I know it’s me. I’m just a fucking mess. The drugs help, Paisley. I can’t even get out of bed in the morning without them anymore. I need them.”

“That’s not healthy” Paisley said. “Think about your grandma. Think about the things she did. The heroin. You don’t think she felt the same way you do now? You don’t think she needed it just to get out of bed? She was an addict. That’s what happens to addicts. That’s what you are, and you know it.” The desperation she felt inside of her was turning into anger, her voice getting loud and bitter. She felt like she was talking to a different person, trying to scare away some imposter so that she could reach the real friend she was trying to help. She wasn’t sure she had ever yelled at someone in her life. She was surprised how deep and mean her voice could get.

“That’s not true,” Araceli said in a way that sounded like it hurt, like it scraped her throat as it came up. Like she was trying to convince herself, Paisley thought.

“Then why were you so angry at the meth cooks that day at Big Nothing?”

“Because those are the same types of bastards who preyed on mi abuelita. They prey on the poor and the hurt.”

“But not the people who sell you the pills? They don’t do the same thing?”

“No, they get their shit from, like, doctors, you know? It’s legit, not made in some fuckin basement. It’s medicine. It helps people.” Paisley could feel just how bad Araceli wanted her to believe what she was saying. She realized in that moment that it wasn’t because Araceli truly believed it herself. She knew there was a piece of her somewhere locked away underneath the haze that the pills washed her brain in that knew what she was saying was not true. Paisley realized that Araceli was, above all else, desperate for validation. She was desperate for other people to believe her, because if they did, maybe she could start believing it, too. The anger, the violence, the defensiveness. It was all to protect herself from having to acknowledge the reality. Paisley couldn’t stand by and enable her friend, to allow her to live under the weight of this fear she must be feeling, a fear and a pain that she could not imagine, but that in turn hurt her just to witness. She wished she could hold her tight enough to squeeze the hurt right out of her, to absorb some of it into herself.

“Cel, if you really believe that, then why are you too ashamed to even look your grandmother in the eyes?” Paisley did not wish to say this. She felt that it was the equivalent to punching her squarely in the jaw. But she wondered if that’s exactly what she needed. She wondered just how harsh the truth needed to get before she could no longer hide from it. Judging by the way Araceli’s eyes went dead, by the way her expression became distant and cold, that she had hit her mark. The tears didn’t even have time to pool at the bottom of her eyes, abruptly erupting in thick, heavy streams that converged with a trail of snot that leaked out from her nose. She transformed before everyone’s eyes into a blubbering mess with a soiled, twisted visage that looked much more real than the put-on face of denial that she was wearing before. It was the face of someone who had come out of the shadows and stepped into a burning light that lit the path toward truth. Araceli could not speak through the sobbing, but Paisley took her slow nods as her

attempt to communicate that she understood. Paisley took her hand and eased her up onto her feet, and together they followed that path straight down the hall and into the bathroom. Paisley softly rubbed between Araceli's shoulders as she dug the orange pill bottle from her book bag and fumbled with the childproof cap before turning it upright and dumping the remaining pills into the toilet. Araceli fell to her knees, caving under the force of her heaving breaths. It was Paisley who plunged the handle and washed them down the drain.

Back in Bee's room, the girls sat largely in silence. The sounds of occasional cars passing by creeping through the window and the creaking of the home as it adjusted to the rapidly descending temperature of the coming night only served as a reminder for how quiet and still the room had become. They were letting Araceli calm down and regain composure before they tackled the next big issue they had to work with. She didn't want to overwhelm her, but they all knew that what had been said earlier was true. Araceli very well may have marked her family in Leviticus' eyes, Paisley thought, and they needed to really consider what that might mean.

"We're so close," Paisley said. "Her and my dad have made tons of progress. He says all the time how well the meetings have been going with all the officials. I feel like everything is going to be in order so soon, and then we won't need to worry at all."

"Isn't she allowed to be here while they wait for the asylum decision anyway?" Bee said.

"And what?" Simone interjected. "You think that corrupt motherfucker won't do some shady shit to screw her over? A bullshit arrest would get her application denied real fast. Fuck, he's a cop, he'll just kill her if he wants. No way he's just letting her slip through his crooked little fingers."

"You're right. No sense in playing it safe. She hasn't come this far by not being overly cautious," Araceli said through the phlegm in her throat. "She would want to hide, same as she

has been. I just hate that I've made it so that she needs to hide herself even deeper. I can't wait until this is over. She must be so tired."

"Well, I mean, y'all already have places she can stay lined up, just take her to one of them ASAP," Simone said.

"Yeah, I don't know. What if he has a lead, you know? This shit's been going on years now. If he even suspects some of the places she's been ducking in, then it's too much of a risk."

"Well, there's one obvious answer," Bee said. "Throw an air mattress in the basement of Big Nothing and have her squat there until the coast is clear."

"Would you guys be cool with that? Her living in our space?" Araceli said.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Simone said. "Shit like this is exactly what we fought so damn hard for the place for, ain't it?"

The girls piled into Bee's parents' car, leaving their bikes toppled over and sprawled across the front yard, rushing to the home that Patli had been living in for the last handful of weeks. She did not have much in the way of personal belongings to bring with her to her new hiding place, but all the girls wanted to be present to make things move as quickly as possible. If Araceli was right, if Leviticus had happened to so much as see Araceli drop by this hiding home at some point, they couldn't rule out the possibility of him knocking on the door eventually. They wanted to get her out quick so that if he did, not even a scent of her would linger for that dog to follow.

When they arrived, Araceli took to explaining to the family friend the situation while the others haphazardly shoved Patli's clothing into her travel bag. Simone, Paisley and Araceli crammed themselves into the back seat of the car, tightly packed together so that Patli could take the front seat. Though Paisley had taken to riding up front alongside Bee, she decided she would

subject herself to elbows in the ribs so that Patli's frail frame could be spared on the ride ahead. The girls held plastic shopping bags full of canned foods and fruit that they had pillaged from Bee's kitchen. There was no true way of knowing when it would be safe for Patli to leave Big Nothing, and they wanted to limit their trips up to visit her to keep Leviticus off the trail, so they stocked her up for a few weeks between the food they packed and what was already in the fridge they packed for themselves in their hideout.

There was an unease haunting Paisley and making the fear in her mind build, slowly getting heavier and heavier like snowfall on a flat roof. She felt like she was constantly trying to see something just outside her vision, something that would move when she turned to face it. It was the uncertainty of their situation that scared her the most. The knowledge that Leviticus could be around any corner, the spotlight mounted on his cruiser shining and scanning like the eye of God. She longed for them to break free from the small, narrow streets of their town and onto the West Texas highway, because the speed limit they were obligated to adhere to as to not attract any attention to themselves felt so slow that Paisley thought for sure she could feel her heart slowing to a stop along with it. Her paranoia became more justified when Paisley's cell phone vibrated in her pocket. It was a phone call from her dad.

"Pais. Are you with Araceli?" he said, abruptly cutting off her greeting.

"Yeah, she's here. What's up?"

"The sheriff just came by, and he came with a mouth full of mean, baby. Said he was looking for you guys. Are you okay?"

"Fuck," she spit under her breath. It was the second time in her life she had ever knowingly sworn within earshot of her father. "Yeah, we're okay. I can't really get into it right

now, but things got messed up. We are taking her grandma somewhere safe. I'm sorry, I know I'm being vague and weird but please just trust me."

"You got it baby girl. Be good. Her interview went well. I think we're gonna get the decision we are hoping for, but that's still likely a few weeks out. Just keep her away from that devil. Do whatever you gotta. We'll talk another time." Paisley was haunted now by two sorrows. That which came from now knowing for sure that a threat was somewhere on their heels, and that of being reminded just how much she had been hiding from her father. She wondered how much longer she could keep the act up. She wondered how fast he would be to trust her if she had known the things she had done in the months since their big move. More than anything, so wondered how he would ultimately find out the truth. It was in this moment that she realized the naivete of hoping it would all remain a secret forever. She had to embrace the fact that he would more than likely find out eventually, no matter how much the thought of it clenched her throat with fear. In her mind, there were only two ways it could happen. She could either tell him, deal with his shame up close and personal, force the stories of all that she and her friends had done through the tremors that would undoubtedly seize her body. Or he could find out by watching her get shoved into the back of a cop car, finally being punished for the crimes she had committed, and have to watch the pain and shame twist his face through the glass. She knew right away which was worse.

"Yeah, we will. I promise. I love you."

"I love you too, Pais. No matter what." She allowed herself to believe the last words.

In the following weeks, the girls of DLM tried to maintain an artificial distance. They tried to present to any closely watching eyes as though they were living the most mundane teenage lives

possible. The exact kind of lives expected to be lived in a place like Tuluca Rock. They would leave school staggered apart instead of in a group, with Paisley and Bee leaving together like an average couple, and Simone and Araceli leaving several minutes after one another. They did everything possible to give Leviticus no excuses to pry into their lives. Surely the sudden separation of the group would be even more suspicious to him than if they stayed riding as a pack throughout town, but it was a suspicion he could not act on. For once, their power did not lie in broken windows and shattered jaws. Their ultimate expression of lawlessness, of anarchy, of stripping power from their enemy, was complete and unadulterated normalcy. Paisley felt that this was the very first time in all her life she had ever been just like everyone else. She found it liberating in a way, like she wasn't wearing herself down trying so hard anymore. Neither trying to fit in nor fade into the background. Simply existing. She had to refrain from buying into her own ruse too much. She knew that it could not last.

“I have a surprise for you,” Bee said one day after school. They were in her room on the coldest day of winter so far, the grey sky shining a silver light through the windows. Paisley hunched next to Bee at the computer where she was seated, the glow illuminating her face in a way that made her features seem softer and smoother than they already did, like she was looking at a version of her that existed in a memory. Bee opened Photoshop and Paisley watched the little wheel of the cursor spin until suddenly an image of her popped up, a picture that Bee must have taken of her candidly one day at Big Nothing, wood stain splotched on an old moth-eaten white t-shirt. Or at least, Paisley thought, it should have been her, but it was at once someone different. Her hair was done in a tight fade that blossomed at the top into a thick garden of faux locks, and her jaw line seemed stronger, sharper. She knew that it was her, could see herself in this person's eyes, but couldn't ignore the distant feeling that it was a person she had never met before in her

life. “This is just a quick shop job, obviously, but I’ve been tinkering with how I could turn you into a boy. You know, for France. I don’t know how serious you were about it. There’s a lot that could go seriously, horrifyingly wrong with Mulaning this shit. But it’s worth seeing anyway.”

Paisley didn’t know what to feel. Looking into this familiar stranger’s face, Paisley saw a gateway into a dream that she had always assumed would be just that. For her whole life, the idea of racing in the Tour was something that kept her motivated, yearning, constantly trying to improve her riding. But in her heart, she always knew that it couldn’t be a reality. But Bee was showing her something at least shaped like a chance. A way to deceive the rules that kept her out of the race and make good on a foolhardy promise she made herself as a child. What was she supposed to feel? Relief that all of her training could actually be put to its true intended use? Elation at such a massive door opening itself for her? Or horror? Should she feel horror that now she actually had to step up or risk betraying herself? If she said no, if she told Bee that she did not want to try and do what was needed to con her way into the race, then she was abandoning her lifelong dream. But what if the buffer of impossibility that it had around it was the only thing that kept her confident that she was truly good enough? Even more, what happens if she says yes and gets crushed in the race? She was grappling now with the fact that this was not only a potential pathway for her dream coming true. It was also an opportunity for her dream to go up in flames.

“Jesus, Bee. This is wild,” she said, still trying to figure out which of the several emotions that were vying for power inside of her take charge. “You could do something like this?”

“I could make you a convincing, let’s say, fourteen-year-old boy. If you wanted, of course.”

“Fuck. I mean, there’s so much I would have to do. I would need to find a team, I would need to compete with them, I would need...”

“Trust me,” Bee interrupted. “There’s a way. If there’s a way to work around the fucking gender rule, there’s definitely something we can do with the team thing. A little research and a lot of work will get us somewhere. If we get ahead of this thing, we can get you in that race before you even graduate.” Paisley wasn’t sure she could believe in herself. She thought that if she were left to her own devices, she would give up and walk away. If she had stumbled upon this door on her own somehow, she would never have the brave to open it. But Bee championing for her by her side made it feel impossible to turn down. She could disappoint herself. She was less comfortable with letting down another.

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

After a few hours of searching for any viable national-level races they could even dream of making the trip to participate in, Paisley suddenly remembered the Road Gods Pro, the team she had discovered online before they even moved out of California. The Road Gods, according to their website, were a UCI-recognized team of cyclists who competed internationally. Fate continued to shine on her when she read the news that they were celebrating their third consecutive year being named a UCI WorldTeam by holding a local competition in the Spring to find a new member to join their ranks. Or that’s how the official statement put it anyway. According to various cycling forums that Paisley belonged to, it was actually part of a hopeful team rebranding after one of their star racers got involved in a doping conspiracy and had to be silently and unceremoniously kicked out. Although they had plenty of elite racers from around the world who had entered the fold over the years, Road Gods Pro was looking for, in their own words, a proud Texan to represent them at the helm. Paisley wasn’t so sure she was prepared to

call herself a proud Texan just yet, but she figured that if she could pretend to be a boy, she could pretend to be that, too.

“Are you kidding? Spring? That’s more than enough time to make a man out of you, both in the streets and in the saddle. You’ll whip ass at that race, Pais.”

Bee rode her home the next day. The midday air was brisk and sometimes, if she was panting hard enough at the top of a hill, she could even see a wisp of her own breath catch the light. As much as she was glad to have a rest from the brutality of the warmer months for a little while, riding in the cold was beginning to wear on her. She hated the way the chilled air felt like it was tearing up her lungs, especially after the fast rides she had been pushing herself to keep up with which always left her lungs aching enough as it was. She could feel the cold on her teeth and in her knees, which throbbed with a sharp, pulsating pain. She knew that to the standards of many, the high-40s was mild, but she had always been privileged by the warm grace of the Sun her whole life and the desert, she was learning, carried with it a unique kind of cold. It was a cold that slithered into your ribs through a false sense of security. The Sun still beat down on the yellow dirt which glowed in its light, the terrain reflecting what looked like rays of warmth and comfort. This deception only made the cold bite deeper.

When they reached the heart of Tuluca Rock proper, they were forced to a stop by the whooping sound of a siren behind them. Paisley turned to face Leviticus LaGrange as he emerged from his still-running cruiser, the smoke and steam billowing from his exhaust pipe filling the air like it was his own personal cloud of hellfire. The wool tufts that lined his collar and padded his brown hide winter jacket made him look bigger than he really was, and all the more menacing for it.

“Well howdy, girls. Bit cold for biking now, don’t ya think?” he said all wrapped in faux country charm.

“We don’t exactly have many other options, now do we, sir?” Bee said. “Tuluca isn’t exactly famous for its booming public transit system.”

“Real clever. My, you two have become awful close now ain’t ya? Where’s the rest of the posse?” Every word felt like it was trying to pry something from Paisley’s chest. Every time they crossed paths, she could feel her patience for his invented kindness wearing thinner and thinner, could feel just how badly she wanted him to shut up through the ever-tightening clenching of her teeth. She thought he was like a principal trying too hard to be friends with the students. But he wasn’t some well-intentioned dope. He was sinister. His mask of kindness was translucent, and behind it was clearly a man who intended to destroy. She knew he was just hoping they would make it easier.

“Dunno. Probably minding their own business,” she said.

“I especially haven’t seen that old Araceli girl lately. Have you, by chance?” She wished he would just come out and say what he meant, that he would take his tongue out of its silver sheath and let it just be wicked. She would rather he were an honest kind of evil.

“Not outside class I haven’t,” she said. It wasn’t even a lie. She had seen Simone a handful of times since they started their band-breaks-up charade, but not Araceli. She was living not unlike her grandmother for the past weeks, almost entirely hiding herself away when possible. Paisley felt honor-bound to help her preserve this, and so did not attempt to infiltrate her temporary walls.

“Pity. I’m just lookin’ to have a word with her, but she seems to keep slipping by me. Oh well. I’ll just have to keep my eyes peeled.” That was the closest he had ever sounded, Paisley thought, to spitting out a direct threat.

Paisley came into the kitchen to get ready for school one day to find her father pacing around in a bathrobe talking on his cellphone, repeating a string of yes-sirs and sounds-goods into the transmitter. She grabbed her backpack and began putting her shoes on as Frantz wrapped up the conversation.

“Hey, hold up. Where you going?” he hollered as she reached for the door handle.

“Do you even know what day it is? I’m going to school,” she said.

“Nah, it’s you who doesn’t know what day it is baby, forget school. Yeah, I said what I said, I said you ain’t going to school. What you’re gonna do is call Araceli and tell her ass we’re on our way to get her. Guess what?”

“What?”

“They’re reached their decision. The asylum people. We need to get Patli and go to the office and get her decision. That’s what in the hell today is, baby. I can feel it. They’re gonna say yes, I can fuckin’ feel it. Today is the day Patli gets to walk this fine land legally.” Suddenly, Paisley felt her legs become animated with the same energy that propelled her father’s pacing, feeling so light that she would have thought she might not even be walking on the ground were it not for the sound of her sneakers clomping on the floor. She sent the news in the mass text instead of just to Araceli. She knew the rest of the gang would want to be there when Araceli’s grandmother earned her first taste of freedom.

They pulled into a driveway and were greeted with a visibly shaking Araceli standing in the lawn being propped up by Bee and Simone. At first, Paisley was afraid that she might have been back on the pills, but she quickly realized that this was not likely the case. Instead, she almost swore she could feel an aura of nervousness radiating off of Araceli, clearly worried that they were making a long trip toward rejection. She knew Araceli well enough to know that she likely did not share her father's optimism. She could hear Bee and Simone trying to psyche her up from inside the SUV. Paisley slid the doors open and the girls filed in.

"Araceli, sweetie, I know you're probably nervous, but listen to me, okay? Your grandma did amazing in all her interviews. I've seen this process a hundred times. Everything is gonna be fine."

"Listen to the man, dammit, ain't that what I been trynna say this whole time?" Simone said like she was Frantz's hypeman.

"Okay, okay. I'll try and trust you," Araceli said.

"Now, where in the hell am I going?" Frantz said.

"A ways," Simone said.

"Yeah, you know, just go straight for like, oh, two hours or so," Paisley said.

"What? Why is she so far away?"

"Because it's a safe place, now let's kick that old combustion engine into high gear before Araceli has a stroke, Dad."

They drove in relative calm. The girls joked around with each other, trying to keep Araceli in a state of at least partial composure. It was a long drive with a lot of opportunity for the anticipation to become overwhelming. Paisley even started to feel it gripping her the longer it

went, which only made her want to distract Araceli even more, fearing just how bad it could possibly get for her. Frantz put a Toots and the Maytals album into the CD player, citing it as the least stressful music he could possibly conjure up for them, but even he wore a wrinkle of anxiety on his brow. Not out of fear of the decision that the asylum officials would hand down to them, Paisley knew his confidence was sound and true. His eyes had been lingering in the rear-view mirror for several miles and he, who had become more paranoid than he cared to admit after so many years working with people who were labeled as criminals merely for living on their side of an imaginary line, had muttered about a tan car that had been behind them for a suspicious amount of time. However, when he pulled into a roadside gas station for the express purpose of seeing if the car was truly following them, it cruised right by them without so much as a hiccup in its pace. Frantz admitted that he was just overthinking things, but he still waited in the gas station lot a little longer before pulling back out onto the road.

After another hour that felt like it was slowly sprawling itself over an entire day, they finally arrived at Big Nothing. Simone nearly forgot to signal the turn onto the virtually invisible road that led to their home base, nearly leaping out of her seat and standing right next to Frantz stammering and pointing out the windshield to warn him at the last possible moment. They had all become hypnotized by the road, falling completely silent, but the time had finally come to shuttle this long and arduous journey to its conclusion with Patli in tow. Paisley watched her father's face twist as Big Nothing came in to view, and when they got out of the SUV, he stood in its shadow with his hands on his hips silently staring at it.

“What is this place?” he finally said.

“Welcome to Big Nothing, pops,” Paisley said.

“It's an old post office,” Bee added.

“How did you even think to hide her here?”

“Duh, because it’s ours,” Simone said. She was just as arrogant and crass with him as she was with anyone else but changed her language as though to respect the fact that she was talking to an adult.

“Dad, remember when I told you there was a long story that I promise you I will tell eventually? This is part of it.”

“Come on, let’s get grandma,” Simone said before leading the pack inside. Opening the door felt like stepping through some kind of portal, the modernity and hominess of the interior completely clashing with the still weathered and tattered outside. She couldn’t help but forgive, and even appreciate somewhat, the growing confusion on her father’s face as he scanned the inside. She took it as a sign that all the work they put into it was a success.

“What the fuck, do y’all live here? This is some crazy business, whatever I’m done asking questions. Araceli, go get your grandma, please, so I can get out of this PeeWee’s Playhouse foolishness. Thank you.”

Araceli headed to the stairs and shouted something in Spanish before heading down into the basement, and after some distant chattering faded, she reemerged with Patli by her side. Her eyes widened when they met Frantz’s.

“It is really time?” she whispered, weak and weary.

“Yes, my dear. It’s time.” There was an unmistakable sense of elation that filled the room, that washed over Paisley like a faint vibration, like the hum of music from another room leaking through the walls. Patli was not nervous, Paisley could see it in the way she weaved her fingers around one another and rubbed her palms together. It was not nervousness, but excitement. It was hard for Paisley not to share that with her.

“Let this be the last time I must crawl out from some hole,” she said, the tenacity in her voice heavy and gravely. Paisley looked at Araceli who had started to cry, but the tears sank into the upturned corners of a smile.

The joy hissed out of the room like air from a punctured tire in just the time it took for them to open the door and step outside. As they approached the SUV, they all froze as they saw a storm of dust and dirt whipping through the air like a phantom, and it wasn't until it came closer that they could actually see the tan car camouflaged by the swirling sand coming up the path.

“Motherfucker,” Frantz muttered, stepping forward to put everyone else behind him, standing directly in front of Patli. The car stopped aggressively, kicking up one more plume of dirt like smoke from a dragon's maw and, slowly, the door opened. Paisley watched one boot plant itself in the dirt, followed by another, and then the rest of Leviticus' lanky body unfolded from the car. His shadow was long and looming. He was not in uniform, and not in his cruiser. Paisley assumed that he was off duty, which confused her even more. Why was he here if not for police business? He really was following them the whole time, she thought, but for what?

“Alright now folks,” he hollered, sounding like he had a lung full of cigarette smoke and a mouth full of venom. “The jig is up. Now, unless y'all wanna be taken in for harboring an illegal alien, I suggest you hand the woman over now.”

“Sir, she has filed for asylum and is on her way to the office now to receive her verdict. She is protected during this time. You have no grounds to arrest her here.”

“Y'all have been hiding this woman from me for well longer than she's been protected, and you knew good and goddamn well I was looking for her. I'm ready to take all of you down if I have to.”

“With the exceptionally little due respect, sir, I am not moving from this spot. If you want her, you’ll have to get through me first.” Leviticus took his revolver from its holster and raised it to Frantz.

“That ain’t gonna be no problem, boy,” he said. Paisley Could feel her heart slowing to a crawl, her chest swollen with a deep, gasping breath that she couldn’t let go of. She felt like she had suddenly frozen, like her body shut off, like only her mind was still functioning and even that was only hanging on by a thread. Leviticus was in uniform, he realized. It just wasn’t a cop’s uniform. He wasn’t here as a cop. In his thick, heavy flannel jacket and mud-stained jeans, he was here as a hunter. He was here to bag his trophy, a woman he saw as nothing more than an animal, and he was ready to kill any other vile creature that dared stand in his way. She didn’t want to move. She was afraid that even the slightest twitch would make him pull the trigger. She had seen plenty of stories over the years to know exactly what happens to people like her father in situations like this one. The silence got so heavy that she could hear each slow, thudding heartbeat pounding in her head. No cicadas to drone their endless choir. No sounds of cars to offer the promise of a witness for whatever might happen. Not even the wind stirred enough to whisper in their ears. It was like the entire world had stopped moving. Like the Sun was a spotlight beaming only on them and the rest of existence was a blackened stage. Whatever god was their audience, it held its breath.

“Please. It is okay. I will go with him,” Patli said, finally punching a hole in the quiet. She sounded like she knew all along that this would happen. Solemnly resigned to her miserable fate.

“No, abuela. This is my fault. He’s mad at me. Take it out on me, Lev. Take me in, or fucking shoot me, or do whatever. Just please let my grandma have her life. Please.” If she

hadn't been shouting, she would have been inaudible under the choking over her crying. Even still, some of the vowels of her words were swallowed as she heaved desperate breaths into her lungs.

"I cannot. All of this has been for you, Araceli. You need to live for it to have been worth it. I will go."

"Fuck that," she screamed. "Abuela, you've done enough for me. You haven't lived on real day in your entire fucking life. You deserve better than this. Please."

"Leviticus, just put the gun down. No one needs to get hurt today."

"You people come into my town, you break my rules right under my nose. You insult me. You harm my family. And you expect me to just let you get away with it? Retribution is coming to one of you animals, so make a fucking choice. Is the woman getting deported peacefully, or is it going to happen after you get a bullet in the chest?"

"Grandma ain't going anywhere you dumb, racist fucking monster," Simone barked. Then, she started marching toward Leviticus.

"No!" Paisley shrieked with all the breath she had been hoarding in her lungs, but it was too late. Leviticus pointed the revolver at her and pulled the trigger. He did so an instant too soon, the bullet barely missing Simone and hitting the ground behind her, marked by a puff of dirt bursting into the air. Simone raised her cane into the air and cracked it swiftly over Leviticus's head. He pulled the trigger once again, this time hitting Simone directly in the chest. Paisley's body jerked back as though it were her who had been shot. She clasped her hand around her mouth so tightly, she felt its ridge conform with the curve of her upper jaw. The explosions were so loud, so terrible, Paisley swore they were erupting from within her skull. Simone staggered back, swaying a little bit as she leaned into her short leg which slammed into

the ground, trying to stop herself from falling over. Then, she raised her cane again, hitting him once in the wrist, the gun falling from his grip and crashing gracelessly into the ground, then beating him over and over about the head and face. She drove the tip of the cane into his chest as blood leaked out of the hole in hers and pushed him to the ground, mounting him before driving the cane's point into his face over and over like a pumpjack digging for thick, crimson oil. His flailing, writhing hands grasped urgently at the dirt around him, carrying fistfuls up and throwing them in spasms. He looked like he was trying to grab hold of something, to pull himself out from under Simone's fury, but there was nothing. Nothing for miles. The blood which flowed out of Simone's chest dripped onto his face and merged with that which oozed out of Leviticus's nose and mouth and other orifices that the cane had invented. Soon, the flailing of his limbs diminished into an odd twitching, the grunting and yelling which came from his chest transforming into a weak, pathetic, gurgling wheeze. Sheriff Leviticus LaGrange was dead.

Simone slowly raised off of him and carried herself over to the SUV, then crashed against it and slid to the ground. Paisley watched her friend stumbling through the expanse, marking her trail with drops of blood that plummeted into the dirt like a grotesque rain, but for a moment she felt that she didn't see any of it. Or if she did, it was like she was observing from outside her own body. For a moment, there was nothing at all. She saw nothing but a blur of yellow and brown and blue all swirling and merging into a nauseating haze of vomit and rot. She heard nothing, not the heavy panting and groaning of her wounded friend that she knew, somewhere deep within her, were happening but simply could not process, like her mind was trying to reject all of it. For a moment, all she could do was taste. She could taste the back of her teeth, the foul film of stale saliva and mucus that plagued her unbrushed mouth. She thought it tasted like a grave. Then, all of her senses slowly came back to her. The staggered moaning like a distant, ancient song

became louder and louder until she had to accept that they were real. The colors untwisted themselves, took their respective places in the Sun and dirt and sky and returned to their roles of serving as backdrop to the unforgivably real scene that she had tried to deny, the image of Simone leaking life from her chest. She felt everything too much. Every sensation burned from within her. Her flesh had become an iron maiden. How terrible it is, she thought, to have to feel at all. She wished she never returned from that state of nothingness. She wished she had stayed outside herself, floating above reality and melding with the wind to disappear.

She rushed over to the SUV along with every else and collapsed by Simone's side, knowing that there was pain in her knees colliding with the ground but not caring enough to feel it, and squeezed Simone's hand. Frantz was already on the phone calling for an ambulance, pleading in a way that was more like threatening for them to send an ambulance faster than was even really possible. Simone, for all the pained noises she was making, was just as cool, just as strong, just as undaunting and fearless as she had always been. Blood filled the space between her fingers, her hand limply covering her wound.

"What the fuck did you do that for?" Paisley cried to her.

"Ain't no Johnston and LaGrange can know each other without there being blood, baby. It had to happen eventually. That's how feuds around here work. Ain't you seen the movies?" She didn't sound one bit weaker, Paisley thought.

"You should have let me handle it," Araceli screamed. "This was my mess." She sounded so defeated, so wrapped in guilt and pain.

"You? Shit, if you took charge, we all woulda caught bullets, the fuck you mean? Besides, thing is, both you and grandma were right. All this shit y'all have been through for your

whole fuckin' lives was about to be thrown away, and for what? So Sheriff Power Trip could keep being king fucking snake? So that fuck could win again? As if."

"But that doesn't mean you had to throw yourself on the fire. Not for me."

"I know. I ain't had to do shit. I just do what I do." She closed her eyes for a moment, taking long and slow breaths. When she opened them, they were staring deeply into Paisley's. "Pais, girl, listen to me, okay. If this is, you know, it..."

"It's not Simone, it isn't. You're going to be okay," Paisley said. Hearing Simone say it was like a hammer to the gut.

"I know, I know, but if it is, okay? If it is, you're in charge. Now I know if I look over at Araceli right now, I'm gonna see her ass fuming because I'm giving the title to the new girl and not her. But you're it, okay? You're the best rider and the sharpest thinker. It has to be you."

"Well then now I really need you to pull through, because I can't fill your shoes. I'm not nearly as hard as you."

"No, you're goddamn right you ain't. But maybe that's a good thing. Maybe that means you'll never be in a situation like this."

While they waited for the ambulance, Paisley sat huddled up against Simone, holding her, feeling her body get heavier as she got slowly weaker. She didn't speak anymore, her voice having turned into a faint wheeze. Frantz told her to save her energy. The other girls worked together to lift Leviticus' body and carry it into Big Nothing, then moved his car out around the back of the building so the ambulance wouldn't see it when they came. They weren't sure what they were going to do with his body in the long term, if they were going to cover up what had happened here or not. But they collectively decided that the best time to make a decision wouldn't be when the paramedics came. They would need more time. When the ambulance

came, the paramedics rushed Simone onto the stretcher and into the back. Frantz caught them just in time to ask how long it would be before she was getting taken care of. The paramedic said it was an hour drive to the nearest adequate hospital if they were fast enough, but they would do everything they could to keep her stable in the meantime.

Paisley would learn later that day that she was pronounced dead on arrival.

The day after Simone's death, Frantz and Paisley both agreed that now was the best time for them to have the long-needed conversation, for Paisley to tell him the truth of everything she had been hiding from him since they moved to Tuluca Rock. She felt perverse and heinous even thinking it, but part of her was almost glad that this was the catalyst to bringing on the conversation. She had always dreaded it from the moment she knew she had something to confess, but she found that now, with the weight of Simone's death still completely overwhelming her, she didn't have the capacity to be scared. Everything poured out of her with no hesitation, no embellishment. She told him that her friends were more than just friends, but that they considered themselves a gang. She told him that, if it made him feel any better, he had witnessed far and away the worst thing that they had ever done. But even still, she told him about the vandalism, the destruction of the cop car in Pecos, the assault on Marigold's home, and of course the battle for Big Nothing.

"Wait, so you mean you fought a bunch of hockey girls in the desert to lay claim to that post office?"

"Yessir. I know it's dumb, but it meant something to us I guess."

"Pais, as your father I have to say that everything you've just told me is about dumb as hell. And don't think for one second I'm not mad at you. But, as a cool dude who knows cool

shit when he hears it, that's some truly cold shit. My little girl is a badass. A badass who is in some serious fucking trouble, but a badass."

"So what are you gonna do? Like, how do you punish me for all this."

"I don't know, baby. I've run through a lot of different parenting situations. I figured out what I was gonna do if I caught you drinking, you know? But I guess I never considered what I would do if you waged war on rich people and cops. Never crossed my mind. But we'll worry about that after, you know, all this. I'm not gonna tell you that you can't ride around with your friends. Even knowing all the dumb shit they've gotten you into, I still think they're good girls. But please, stop all this nonsense. For me?" Paisley assured him that this wouldn't be a problem. Her first move as leader was to tell the girls that she thought DLM should chill out a little bit, and they unanimously agreed. Now that they had seen what could happen, it all seemed less fun. They had decided that they were going to use their forces strictly to patrol their school, to protect their fellow downtrodden freaks from the bullies and the bigots. This meant, of course, that the violence wasn't completely behind them. With Simone gone and Paisley in her place, she had to prove to the masses of Tuluca Rock High that she wasn't to be messed with, to preserve the reputation of fear and power that DLM had earned under Simone's aggression, and that meant cracking more than one jock's jaw.

"I guess I might as well tell you now too that Bee is my girlfriend."

"Good for you. She's sweet. You two are nice together."

"And one more thing. We decided what we want to do with the post office. But we need your help."

Simone's wake was held the following Friday night and to Paisley's surprise, the majority of Tuluca Rock High showed up to pay their respects. Many told stories to the girls and her family about times that Simone had helped them.

"That's the kind of person your daughter was, Mr. Johnston. I hope you know that," Bee said. "She was tough and she was stern, but beneath all of that was a person ready to sacrifice anything to help you." Bee knew this better than anyone. She had spent the previous evening crying on Paisley's shoulder, feeling an inescapable guilt that she was partly to blame for her still being wrapped up in their affairs at all. "If it weren't for me, she would have graduated by now. She would have gone to a good college, would be living a good life right now. She wouldn't be riding bikes with fucking kids. She wouldn't have been there at all."

Paisley did what she could to comfort her, but it was hard to do. In truth, they all felt guilty. Paisley didn't know what she could have done to prevent it, and not for lack of trying to come up with ideas. But whatever it was that she could have done, she felt guilty for not having done it. Especially if it was nothing. She didn't want to believe that there was nothing at all that she could have done. The worst guilt she could imagine was the not being a someone who could have done something. It made her want to be a different person altogether. She spent every night replaying the moment over and over again in her head, but in all of the different versions of the event, she did the same thing every time. Nothing. Even in her fantasies, even in her most desperate dreaming, she just stood there, watching.

When the visitors at the wake finally thinned out, the girls left ahead of the family. They wanted to give Simone's folks some space and time to be alone with their daughter before tomorrow's funeral. Outside, streetlights shimmered off of puddles of fresh rainwater pooled in the potholes of the parking lot. The air smelled like cold metal, the dewy moisture still hanging

in the air. Bathed in the artificial orange glow of the streetlights, huddled together in front of the stoop of the funeral home, stood the Mares. All of them save for Marigold, that is. They donned all black attire, which wasn't unusual for the gang of goth miscreants, but they lacked the jarring punk edge. The chains and piercings and metal studs they usually wore as a passive threat were replaced by lace and floral print, small white flowers speckled on black blouses like a full night sky. Mariko wore a deep black rose behind her ear.

“Jesus Christ. What are you freaks doing here? We so do not have the energy for this shit,” Araceli said.

“Relax,” Marisol said. “We come in peace. Seriously. We're here to say sorry.”

“For what?” Bee said.

“For a lot,” Marybeth said.

“Yeah,” Mariko said. She drew the black rose from behind her ear and extended it toward the girls. It hung limply between them for an awkward moment before Paisley slowly reached out and accepted it, dragging the tip of her thumb along the point of one of the thorns. “I mean, first of all, we're sorry about Simone. It's fucking awful. I can't imagine how hard this must be for you guys.”

“What do you give a shit?” Araceli said. “I mean, appreciate it I guess, but you guys fucking hated her.”

“Well, that's the other thing, I guess,” Marisol said. “We have said a lot, and done a lot, in the past that we don't feel great about. Especially to you, Bee.” Paisley watched as Bee cocked her head, her eyes shifting into a suspicious gaze, narrowing as she met Marisol's. “It doesn't make anything right but, we were all just kind of going with Marigold.”

“But after we lost Big Nothing, she freaked the fuck out,” Marybeth said. “Got real out of control, scary. We couldn’t take it anymore. She’s a piece of shit, she’s a bigot, all that stuff. It’s fucked up that we followed her act for so long and we are seriously, seriously sorry. We don’t think like her, we swear.”

“Why?” Paisley said. “Why would you just follow along like that if you think it’s wrong?”

“I know you guys think we have it easy because of where we live, because our families have money,” Mariko said. “And, like, you’re not wrong. But there’s a lot that we share in common, too. Like how we don’t share much in common with everyone else. Money doesn’t mean we fit in. Marigold made us feel like we belonged to something. For a while, it was scarier to abandon something like that than it was to stoop to Marigold’s level.” As much as Paisley was hesitant to forgive them for all the awful things they had said in the past, she couldn’t pretend that she didn’t understand what they were saying. That same desperation to belong, to preserve your standing in a tribe, was that which motivated her to put that padlock through the cop car window all those months ago. It motivated a great number of things she never would have done on her own, things she thought she might have regretted if they hadn’t found some odd way to shape her into a stronger person. She wondered if somehow the vile things they had said, and their realization of how wrong they were to do so, would do the same for them. She would have preferred to believe that they could still yet become better, stronger people too.

“Well, thanks I guess,” Bee said. “Look, we have a lot to deal with right now. This is a bit much to add to the plate, so forgive us if we’re not as receptive as you were hoping. But maybe down the road there’s room for us to put these things behind us.”

“Yeah. Hopefully. Take care, guys.”

Paisley returned home with Bee, deciding to spend the night so that they could keep one another's spirits up as much as possible. They knew that they had an early morning ahead of them and that they should sleep soon, but both of them felt restless. Bee laid in her arms, both of them laying silently, eyes open and glued to the ceiling. Paisley felt her fingertips itch and tingle, going dead from Bee cutting off her circulation, all her blood pooling in her elbow which throbbed.

"Take it you can't sleep either, huh?" she said.

"Nope."

"You know what I think we should do?"

"What's that?"

"Cut my hair. I want to look sharp for the funeral, you know?" Paisley said that as a half-hearted attempt at a joke, but a part of her was serious too. She thought that if Simone's spirit might be watching over them tomorrow, she would know what she was trying to say with her hair cut short, with her hair styled like a boy's. It would be her way of saying that she wasn't going to squander the strength Simone had instilled in her. If she took the first step toward actually racing in the Summer, she hoped that Simone would know that meant everything she had done wouldn't go to waste. So, Bee cut her hair, the buzzing of the clippers vibrating in her skull, the fallen strands gathering at her feet. She thought it felt like what she imagined a baptism felt like, to be new and pure. Simone snapped her photo, told her not to smile, not that she was doing much of that anyway. Then they went to bed.

The funeral home was packed with Simone's extended family, aunts and cousins who made the trip from places like New Orleans and Oklahoma City to celebrate her life. The room was

pungent with the scent of roses which seemed to be blooming in abundance from every corner of the room, a cloud of fragrant buds and baby's breath surrounding the dark wood coffin like they were going to float it away to heaven. Prayers were spoken by her uncle, a pastor who had flown in from Denver.

After the sermon, which was interjected from time to time by various hymns and gospel songs, the eulogies began. Her father started them but lost control of himself midway through, his speech being swallowed by his sobbing until he had to bow out, raising his hand and making the sign of the cross before rushing back to his seat. Bee followed him, reiterating her speech about Simone's dedication to her friends that she had delivered to her father the night before, this time being accompanied by a chorus of sniffing and muffled weeping. Her voice shook as she neared the end, and she barely made out the raspy, breathy thank you that closed it out. Paisley's eyes were stinging and throat nearly closing shut from trying to keep her tears in. She was hoping to buy herself a few extra seconds of clear speech, not wanting to look like a disaster before it was her turn to take the pulpit. She figured she could let it all out when she was done. Walking up the narrow steps, it felt like the air itself was somehow resisting her. Each step felt like her heels were sticking to the ground, like walking through a tar pit. She felt like a piece of her was still trying to hold on to the idea that all of this was a dream, and she knew that that piece would have to finally let go the moment she began speaking. She felt that this would be the moment where everything became finally and completely real. She felt something like a deep hunger in her soul, a horrible yearning to not have to let go.

"I wish nothing more than for this to not be the circumstance in which I met all of you, Simone's vibrant and lovely family." She felt the tears coming already, her voice dropping an octave on the last word as her lungs involuntarily sucked in a heavy breath. She paused. She

wasn't ready to shatter quite yet. "I wish that this wasn't how I got to tell you all about how incredible Simone was. When we met, I was nobody. I was the new girl at school, a perfect stranger, someone she could have so easily ignore. But she saw that I needed help, that I was scared and uncomfortable, and she rushed to my side. She came to me like she knew me my whole life. She did this because it's what she felt she had to do. To look out for others, for people more vulnerable than herself." She didn't even notice until she stopped to take a breath that her cheeks were wet. She supposed it was inevitable, that the tears couldn't be held back forever. She ignored her crying and instead took pride in how clear and powerful her voice was. She felt that this pride wasn't her own, but the pride she knew Simone would feel for her staying so strong. "As Bee said before me, Simone always went out of her way to put others above herself. She was a shepherd for us, her friends, her fellow freaks and outcasts as she would say. I don't know where or who I would be if I didn't meet her. I would probably be a scared girl still hiding her head in the dirt, trying to stay a stranger to this town. But instead, I stand here as a better person, a stronger person. And I want you all to know that it is because of Simone. May God guide her spirit to a peace she deserves above all else. Thank you." The weeping from the gathering was no longer muffled, and along with everyone else, she allowed herself to finally let go. To feel the tears burst, to sob so deep and heavily as she walked back to her seat that she could feel her legs shaking and her ribs cramping. She finally felt that she had said a real goodbye.

When the eulogies were completed, her family took the stage and joined the band to perform a rendition of "Sinnerman", Simone's favorite song. Her aunts belted out some much-needed laughs as they stumbled their way through an awkward attempt at recreating the stilted clapping section, but real soul and pain regained control as the aunt who was a trained gospel

singer crooned through the powerful ending. Her voice cracked on the line “don’t you know that I need you, Lord”, but it only made it all the more beautiful. Paisley tried to imagine what Simone would have said. She heard her voice sarcastically chiding them, “hey that was pretty good, but Nina was on some god level shit with that song, it was foolish for y’all to even try and touch her.” Then, silently like a specter drifting out of the shadows, Patli rose from the back of the pews. She wore a long, flowing black silk dress, heavy onyx earrings stretching her earlobes down so they looked like pendulums which swung slowly with her steps. Her footsteps were impossibly soft, but she was unmissable in her powerful elegance. She stood behind the pulpit, presenting herself for the first time publicly and without fear to the people of Tuluca Rock.

“I am able to be here today only because of what Simone has done for me. Today, if you all will let me, I would like to sing a song for your dear Simone. I pray that God will let her hear it.” The room felt so quiet that Paisley thought she would have been able to hear one of the roses bloom if she listened close enough. Patli used her own body to provide the music, stomping her foot on the floor heavy and cumbersome, the elegant, sharp heel of her shoe pounding with such force that it sounded like it might pierce right through the wood. She set a slow, driving tempo like her body was weighted with some great burden. The trim of her flowing black dress danced around her feet with every rise and fall like a ghost trying to be seen. Like Simone had descended to join her in her song. The veins in her shriveled hands bulged as she clasped them together, holding them at her hip and clapping to accompany her stomps. And then she started to sing. Painful, wailing words that sounded like they were being scraped from her chest. Her voice was loud and deep, vicious and mournful, shaking with tremendous power like a wounded wolf howling at a waning moon. Paisley could not understand the words, thought she might have made out the Spanish words for angel, for heart, for love, the rest being a winding river of

sounds she could not have any hope of deciphering, yet she could feel that she understood them. Not in her mind, perhaps, but deep within her body, she felt them. The way Patli's voice made her body ache to be held, the yearning she felt screaming from within her chest as though she just discovered that her body was empty, everything lost, and was longing to be filled back up. Patli held decades of suffering within herself, and her voice took its form. Paisley wondered what she sounded like when she was young. There was beauty and grace hidden underneath the roughness. Maybe not hidden, Paisley realized. Maybe hidden was the wrong word. Perhaps made stronger. Perhaps the fact that it could be heard at all meant that it lived in spite of the pain. Sometimes she would string so many words together it sounded like three people talking over each other. Other times she would hold one word for so long, morphing its shape and its sounds with a vibrato that sounded like weeping as it hung in the air, it was like it was trying to come to life and force them all to reckon with it. In all cases, she understood. It was a suffering that they all felt, a suffering that could not be contained merely in words. It was a suffering that was carried on the waves of Patli's wretched, horrible, unbearably beautiful melodies. A beauty which never should have had cause to be born.

In the months that followed, the months that carried them from Winter to Spring, it was rare that DLM would ride together. Paisley and Bee still spent time with one another, though even they did so less. Either of them seeing Araceli outside of school almost never happened. For one thing, she was spending most of her free time with her grandmother. She had told them they were going out as often as possible, relishing in how good it felt to simply exist in the outside world without any fear. They were making up for lost time, doing all the living they had felt was kept from them for so long. This was on top of what they had all agreed on, which was that

riding together, at least for now, hurt too much. It still felt wrong to take the town without Simone at the front of the formation. Araceli had even stopped riding to school, opting instead to be driven by her grandmother. She said it was because Patli liked to be able to show her face at the school, but Paisley could tell that it was more than just that.

Bee and Paisley still rode often. Especially in the weeks before the Road Gods Spring Exhibition race. Bee had taken on the role of coach, and together they trained brutally every day. Neither of them knew anything about how the real pros trained, but they did what worked for them. During the weekends, they would go on long distance rides with Bee following behind Paisley in her parents' car, forcing her to maintain a certain speed. They would ride for miles and miles, Paisley fighting through the awful burning of her legs and lungs, trying to outride her fleeting breath to reach their target without breaking speed. Every day, Paisley found it more and more difficult even just to walk. Some days, her toes would remain frozen in a curl, the muscles in her calves and feet refusing to relax for hours after her rides. She had also taken to eat meals of such tremendous size that even her father was baffled by their proportions.

“Jesus Lord, Paisley, what on earth are you getting into?” he said one night after catching his breath from the outburst of laughter that followed him walking into the kitchen to see Paisley sitting with her feet submerged into a bucket of ice water while nestling an entire pot of pasta in her lap. She rolled the legs of her sweatpants up to her knees and covered the rest of her body in heavy blankets and sweatshirts, the deep cold of the ice bath making the mild Spring night feel unbearably chilled. The warmth from the bottom of the pot soothed her jittering legs.

“Big race coming up. Out in Dallas. Bee is gonna drive me.”

“Oh, hell yeah! You used to do races all the time back in Cali. Nothing closer than Dallas though, huh?”

“Nothing this big. It’s for a pro team. They’re going to France this year. They’re basically looking for a team mascot, some badass racer from Texas to show off their home pride or whatever. I figure it may as well be me.”

“Damn. That’s one hell of an opportunity. I mean, get after it for sure. You deserve to go pro. But they’re not gonna let you race in the Tour, are they?”

“Don’t get mad, but me and Bee are doing just one last crime as DLM to make this happen. As far as anyone will know, I’m a boy named Romulus. She’s making fake papers.”

“So that’s why you’ve been doing your hair like that, huh?” was all he said. Paisley knew what the tone of his voice meant. It meant he wanted to tell her off, to tell her that it was unacceptable, inappropriate, dangerous. But it also meant that he already knew she was aware of this. It meant he knew that nothing he said was going to stop her from doing this. Paisley was glad he took this route. She always wanted to do well by her father. She hated making trouble, and she typically trusted him to know what was best. But, especially now, this was one of the rare situations where she was willing to do anything, including defy him.

“I promise. It’s over after this.”

“Of course it is,” he said. “After this, you’re gonna be too famous to be fuckin’ around.”

Bee and Paisley drove to the race site in near silence, hardly speaking a word to each other in the hours it took to get to Dallas. She was so anxious that she thought she might be vibrating. She knew that Bee was anxious, too. How badly Bee wanted this for Paisley was how she knew she really cared for her. They hadn’t used the word yet, but Paisley truly believed they were in love. Bee chose to play a series of Scott Walker records on their trip, which only served to amplify Paisley’s anxiety. She thought the songs sounded like her own head when it struggles to focus on

a single thought, or the fluttering of her hands when she is truly scared. She got the sense, though, that somehow it eased Bee's nerves. There was no doubt that she was a strange girl, Paisley thought. And she was happy this was true. She knew it took a special kind of weird to make all this happen. She knew she was lucky to have found such a person.

The race site was crowded with almost as many cyclists as there were spectators. Paisley could tell just by looking that some of them knew they had no hope of winning, that they were just here for the thrill of the ride. Some might have been delusional enough to think they would win, the types who thought that having a uniform was enough to make them a serious rider despite the junker bikes they saddled being barely a step above some clunky BMX. Though she imagined that this must be what she looks like to the handful of real pros at the scene. She wondered if maybe she should have dressed more to the part. It was the warmest day of Spring thus far, and Paisley wore black cutoff shorts and a Power Trip shirt cut into a tank-top that Bee had loaned her, calling it the closest thing to Texas pride she could muster. She wanted to let her limbs breathe, to feel comfortable out on the road, but now she felt wrong. Maybe she should have dug out her riding shorts from her closet, she thought. She suddenly found herself staring at her own feet, trying to avoid the scanning eyes of pros who might be casting judgement upon her. There was a small part of her, an old cowardly Paisley that still hid somewhere deep in her heart, that to give up. Told her that she was foolish for thinking that she was capable of holding her own against these pros. She almost listened; she could feel her body being drawn back to the car. She felt her tongue growing heavy with the weight of the words she would have to use to tell Bee that she wanted to leave. But when she turned to look at Bee, she remembered everything that they had done together. All of the things that that old, cowardly Paisley would never believe that she could do. She realized, as though she were seeing her true self reflected in Bee's eyes,

that she was no longer that person. She was stronger, braver, better. She did not have to look any way. She didn't need the racing uniform, or the newest, shiniest bike. She needed to win. And she had already won so many battles before this. Why should today be any different, she wondered. She went up to the sign in desk, got her number, and pinned it to her Prince t-shirt before taking her position behind the starting line.

Chatter among eager racers died down when the man who introduced himself as the team head of Road Goads took to the stage. He made a short, canned speech about how today would be the day that they found the racer who would represent the great state of Texas in France this summer, that only the best of the best would cross that finish line and join their proud team. He wished all of them luck. He said ready, then raised a revolver into the sky. Paisley watched it glimmer in the sunlight like a beacon of hope. He said set and then cocked the hammer. Paisley couldn't hear the revolver click, but she could feel it in the way her hands tightened around the handlebars. He did not say go, he merely rung a single shot, a shot which Paisley definitely heard as well as felt, into the air. She felt as though the hammer had collided with her, propelled forward by a powerful force, jolting her body into action as she rocketed forward and weaved around the racers who were slower to start. Within in minutes, she had carved herself a position in the leading ten.

The course they had made of the city streets was easy, for her at least. It was relatively flat and, while some of the curves of the road may have proven a challenge for some of the other racers, her training preparing to run circles around the Mares made them a breeze. She felt the creeping fatigue in her muscles fade away, the confidence that was building in her as she whipped around corners and maintained her impressive speed overcoming any ache that she might have felt. When she looked to either side, she saw nobody. She turned to gaze over her

shoulder and saw that the nearest racer was a few yards behind her. She felt unstoppable, felt her legs propelling her faster and faster. She was obsessed with the speed, obsessed with putting more distance between her and second place. It felt to her like it had been years since she had any real competition in the saddle, and the thrill of crushing even the most serious riders in the race was so powerful that she could think of nothing else.

She came up to the first serious hill of the course and began climbing it. She was so lost in speed that she didn't even register that it was coming up, and by the time she realized that the gear she was in would make the climb a nightmare, she was already deep into the ascent. She felt the resistance in the pedals getting stronger, more difficult for her legs to drive through. A small voice told her that it was too late, that she just had to deal with it because shifting gears now would be a disaster, and she knew that this was true, but she could not shake the desire for speed. She didn't want to slow down. Her desire to feel the winds of speed lapping at her cheeks was that of an empty lung screaming for air. So she slipped her hand down to the shifter next to her knees and tried her best to pedal steady while she eased the lever back. She knew that her pedaling was too stuttered to transition smoothly, but she didn't care. Or she couldn't care. She hoped beyond everything she had known that it would simply work if she was careful enough, if she did it slowly and lightly enough. She bit her lip until it felt like it might split open. Then, the pedal beneath her feet lost all its resistance, like it had gone completely limp, swinging in a half arch before becoming stiff and unmovable. Paisley heard a grinding sound that made her body recoil like she had been struck by a hot iron. She knew exactly what it was, but she looked anyway, like she was pretending to hope she might be wrong. The chain hung loosely off the derailleur, dangling in a way that made Paisley feel like it was taunting her. Paisley could feel the sense of defeat overcoming her, that old urge to give up, and she knew she had to act faster

than it could grow. She leapt off of her bike and lifted it off the ground, holding it awkwardly against her hip while she sprinted up the rest of the hill. She felt the bar of the pedal digging into her skin, bouncing off slightly with the motion of her hips as she ran and then crashing back into her like a battering ram. When she made it to the top of the hill, the second-place rider passed her. She through her bike to the ground as the third place, then the fourth and fifth, passed her. She lost track of how many were passing her when she fell to her knees at the bike's side and scrambled to slip the chain back onto the gears. She had done it many times in the past, but her hands were shaking and she was moving so fast that her fingers weren't grasping tight enough before she went to pull it over the teeth of the gear, and so the chain kept slipping from her fingertips. By the time she did slip it back on, her hands were streaked with black grease. She didn't so much as wipe it on her pants before throwing herself back onto the saddle and riding as quickly as she could.

She found herself back in the top fifteen, and a course marker warned her that she had entered the final five kilometers of the race. She caught herself muttering a muted prayer under her breath that the lead rider hadn't already passed the finish line, that she still had time to catch up. She stared straight ahead, still obsessed with gaining speed and blasting passed the racers in front of her, but now trying to take stock of everything on the horizon. She said what she saw to herself out loud, muttering things like "rider on the right" or "sharp turn, lean now". She felt like a machine, like a computer that was processing data. She was no longer finding pleasure in the thrill of the race. She reduced herself to another mechanism of the bike itself. She counted people as she passed them, twelve passed. That was nine. Number five. She could see the final racers ahead of her, and the finish line crawling over the horizon. She tipped over the crest of a final decline, trying to keep up with the vicious speed the momentum of bombing down the hill built

so that she could maintain it when it leveled out and slingshot her way up the final climb, the finish line being placed just over the top of a hill. She shifted gears twice while she was still pedaling quickly and inched her way up to the rear of the lead racer. Before she knew it, she became flush with him, riding shoulder to shoulder as the finish line came closer and closer. Paisley lifted herself from the saddle, practically jumping off of the pedals and pushing the entire weight of her body through them to push through the resistance of the climb. Without realizing it, she was screaming. Her throat was raw, the corners of her eyes stinging with sweat, and her thighs were beginning to cramp up, feeling like something was sinking its teeth deep within her muscles. But she stopped for nothing. She crossed the finish line one tire length ahead of second place. She didn't feel that she had any control left over her body when she jumped out of the saddle, grabbed the bike by its frame, and threw it in front of her. She collapsed to the ground, screaming in some feral combination of pain and joy. She was crying, but she didn't know it until she could taste the tears. Bee had to swoop in and remove her from the road before another racer crashed into her. Paisley didn't process any of it happening around her. She barely knew where she was. She could hardly feel her legs underneath her, probably wouldn't were it not for their quivering. She knew she had won, but it was like her body didn't. Like it was overcome with this compulsion to keep driving forward, but there was nowhere to go. Nowhere but the stands, where she was to be named the victor.

In the stands, confetti showered around her while the spectators cheered, but all of this was a blur of color and noise to her. Everything was bright and she felt like she was looking through broken binoculars, her vision fuzzy and tunneled. She felt her hand being jerked up, her arm being suspended in the tight and victorious grip of the man named Johan Bellahue who she knew to be the head of the Road God company from his previous introduction. She grounded

herself through the weight of his hand, the way hers felt small in its palm. She closed her eyes, trying to block out the bright colors that blinded her, trying to ignore the sound of the crowd. All these things just fed that urge to burst, to keep plowing forward. She focused on the tight grip around her hand, the way it got cold from the lack of blood flow as a result of being held straight up in the air for too long. She didn't mind. The rest of her body was hot and balmy, like it was wrapped in steamed rags. She focused on the sound of his voice barely cutting above the crowd despite practically being in her ears. She listened as his gruff, cigar-scented drawl pronounced a name that she still barely recognized but knew was supposed to be hers. She listened as he pronounced Romulus Johnston the new hometown representative of the Road Gods Pro Racing Syndicate, and knew that the name was really Paisley Thelemaque.

Things were much calmer in the tent in the park behind the race site that served as Mr. Bellahue's makeshift office. A plastic foldout table sat in the middle of the temporary room, metal foldable chairs on either side, and a small file cabinet on wheels sinking into the grass. Paisley thought that she could be convinced that this was the first time in her life that she had seen green grass. Her heart had finally calmed its pace, her jitters subsiding, when she sat in the chair across from Mr. Bellahue. There were only two seats, so Bee had to stand at her side. Bellahue had initially told her to wait outside, but Paisley pleaded that she wasn't feeling especially articulate from the exhaustion of the race and she might need help.

"Think of her as my agent," she said with an airy laugh that made her sound like she had gravel in her chest. Her lungs and throat still burned.

"Alright Mr. Johnston, please forgive the shoddy nature of all this. It all had to kind of come together quick, you'll understand. We're due in France in just a few months and our optics are shit, frankly. We've built our brand on being the proud American team, and that rat bastard's

doping scandal really biffed that up for us.” Bellahue sounded exhausted, like it was him who just finished the race. Paisley could see in the heavy bags under his eyes that this past season had taken a serious toll on him. “So, this is where you come in. Look, you did good out there. Real good. We were all impressed. But you obviously have a lot of proving yourself to do before you become our real star racer. In more than just title, I mean. In prestige. You don’t just get that overnight, you understand?” Paisley felt something sinking in her body like she had just swallowed food that was too hot, following a slow, searing pain as it descended into her gut.

“So I take it this means I’m not invited to France, then.”

“Oh, no you’re going to France. You’ll be in the races and all that. But you’re not really going to be the lead of the team. Think of yourself as PR. You compete, you hold your own. You’re not going to be the real leader of the team, that’ll probably be one of the Italians. They’ve been doing real well this season. But we’ll act like you’re the head. You’ll be handling the interviews and all that. The proud, badass American. We’re not counting on you to win. We’re counting on you to secure our brand and regain interest from sponsors. Then, you know, depending on how you do in next year’s internationals, we can start thinking about where you really stand in the team.” Paisley couldn’t help but note the irony of this, something she would laugh about with Bee later. The Road Gods planned on using her for their image, all without knowing that she too was simply using them as a means to trojan horse her way into the race.

“Understood, sir. I have no problems with that.”

“Good man. Just how old are you anyway, kid?”

“Fourteen, sir.” Her fifteenth birthday had passed months prior, but they decided she should knock a year off her age to sell her light voice as prepubescent and not feminine.

“Hot damn. You keep this up, I reckon you’ll be a proper star in just a few years.”

Everything between them was shrouded in some level of deception, but this comment made Paisley feel a burst of pride, like a warm light glowing inside her stomach. No matter who Bellahue thought she was, he knew she was young, and he knew she was good. Romulus or Paisley, it made no difference. The promise he said that he saw in her was possibly the only thing said in that tent that wasn’t marred with some kind of lie. It was fully real, fully true. After years of dedicating herself to the bicycle, Paisley was finally being recognized. She didn’t care what name it was under. And she knew that this was only the start. “Alright, well, we’ve made this real simple. We got some papers for you to sign. Read ‘em if you want, they essentially say what I’ve already told you. And I’ll need to take a picture of your passport for the files.”

“Oh, my passport? It...hasn’t come in yet.”

“Well, Mr. Johnston, we can’t very well onboard you if we don’t know for certain you can even enter the country, now can we?”

“Don’t worry,” Bee said, fumbling with her bag, “he has it.” She unzipped the front pocket and retrieved a little blue book, handing it open faced to Paisley. She saw her picture, the one Bee had taken of her the night before Simone’s funeral, her face all sunken and shiny from the exhaustion and the crying. It looked so real, the way the markings of the pages shimmered in the light, the smooth, rubbery feel of the binding. It was clean and crisp, it even smelled official. “It came in the mail the other day. I hid it from you so it would be a surprise when you won,” she said. Paisley believed that it was the most perfect gift she had ever received. She felt like she was holding a dream.

After the race, things carried on as they had been for months. Paisley, Bee and Araceli spent more time together during school hours, but Araceli still kept some distance in their free time. Paisley and Bee kept up their training, which was now done in addition to bi-monthly weekender training sessions she was obligated to attend in Dallas with the rest of the Road Gods Tour Team.

“We might not be expecting you to go out there and win the damn thing,” Bellahue said, “but we don’t want you shitting it out there. You still need to look good for the camera, mister.” The circuits she ran with the Road Gods were brutal, and she found herself at first struggling to keep up with the others. She learned quickly who the Italians Bellahue had referenced were, and he had been right. They were a dominating force on the road that made Paisley feel weak and small in her first outings. But the more she practiced, and the more she got comfortable being around these true pros, the less nervous she got, and the more her competitive spirit took over. It only took until her third meet to hold her own by their side. She knew that the rest of her competition in France would be at least this skilled, if not more so. She knew that anything short of treating her teammates like arch-rivals in these sessions would be failing herself in the actual race. On the day of their final team meet, when she was first to complete the course by a seven-second margin, she felt more ready than she had ever been.

There was one week left before France, the team taking a de-load week so they could hit the race even stronger. Paisley spent all of her time with Bee, knowing that it would be nearly a month before she would see her again. They didn’t ride together a single time, partly per the request of the Road Gods coach to stay out of the saddle until the Tour, and partly because all they wanted to do in their final week together was be in one another’s presence, calm and quiet, laying in a peaceful silence together. Paisley loved that she had found someone with whom she felt

comfortable not speaking, like she wasn't pressured to invent small talk out of fear that the other would become bored of her. Simply being near each other in her dimly lit room felt like floating in the air, and neither of them needed anything else.

"I'm gonna miss you," Paisley said, not because she felt like she should, but simply because it was true. She had spent most of the past few days wishing there were some way that Bee could come with her, but she was entering her Senior year and the race schedule intersected with the first couple weeks of school after summer break. Bee couldn't afford to miss them. Paisley understood this and said nothing more about it after Bee gave her answer, but she could not keep from thinking about how nervous she was going to be on the trip over, and how much easier it would be to stay calm if Bee were there to help her through.

"I will, too. But you're not going to be gone lone. You'll be back in a few weeks. Unless you become like, the world's biggest celebrity after you win and you tour around the world, in which case it was nice knowing you."

"Shut up," Paisley said. "I know it won't be long, but still. I feel kind of like I did when I first moved away from Cali. Except for one major difference."

"What's that?"

"This time it actually feels like I'm leaving something behind."

On the third to last day before she left, Frantz threw her bedroom door open, sending it slamming into the door so hard that the sound cut right through the music in Paisley's headphones. She ripped them out of her ears.

"Dad, what the hell?"

"It came. We got it."

“What?”

“The deed, baby. The place is ours.” Paisley texted Bee and Araceli and told them to meet up at Big Nothing.

They all gathered at the post office, the first time all the girls of DLM had been together outside school for as long as either of them could remember. Frantz passed the envelope containing the deed to Paisley who slowly opened it. It named Frantz and Paisley Thelemaque as the official owners of the property titled Only Post Office.

“Guys. We are not the literal and actually legal owners of Big Nothing.”

“Not Big Nothing,” Bee said. “Not anymore.” She went into her parents’ car and retrieved a wooden sign with hand painted letters from the back. The sign read Color In Your Cheeks Refugee Housing and Immigration Services: Dedicated to the Memory of Simone Johnston. Frantz took the old, dusty Only Post Office sign off of the little metal hooks on which it hung, and carefully slipped the new sign into its place. The young, dark wood and fresh, vibrant paint was the final piece that made the building finally feel like it had been given life once again.

“I’m finalizing all the paperwork, getting its non-profit status established and all that. Real soon the place will be up and running. You guys did big, big work in this place. This is an unbelievable thing you guys are doing.” Paisley knew that in the short year since she moved to Tuluca Rock, she had done a lot of things that weren’t so good. She felt like her shouldered cross got a little bit lighter knowing that it all lead to this. Knowing that she had done something to make a real difference in her world.

“Thanks for being here, guys,” she said. Her voice quivered slightly, threatening tears that would be the happiest she ever cried. “It means a lot. It’s nice to do something good with you all before I leave.”

“Hey,” Araceli said. “I know shit’s been weird, but I fuckin’ love you, okay? We ain’t going anywhere. You’re gonna kill them over there, and when you come back the Division of the Lilith Moon gets to boast about having the best goddam rider on the planet at the helm.”

Frantz loaded up the SUV and departed with Paisley to Dallas/Fort Worth Airport in the middle of the night. The team’s flight was early, and so they had to leave when West Texas was still completely covered in the deep black of night to make the six-hour drive in time. Paisley’s eyes itched with sleep, but she tried to stay awake for as much of the drive as possible so she could save all that sleep for the long flight ahead. She had never flown before, and she wasn’t certain she was going to love it. She leaned her face against the window, feeling the vibrations from the road in her skull.

“We’ve been here before, huh Pais?”

“Jesus, don’t remind me.” She looked up to the moon, the way it shined impossibly bright among the abyssal nothingness around her. It looked just like that first day that they crossed the border at El Paso, except this time she wasn’t afraid of it.

“I gotta tell you, babe. This whole plot you and Bee got worked out? It’s some of the wildest shit I ever heard of someone doing. You’re a complete madwoman. But still, I’m proud of you.”

“Yeah?”

“Hell yeah, girl. You had a dream that reality told you wasn’t possible and what did you do? You changed goddamn reality to fit your dream. That’s cold shit. That’s strong shit. You are a strong young woman. I hope you know that.”

“Yeah, well, now I need to win.”

“Would it be incredible if you won? Obviously. But don’t sell yourself short. You’re going to another country to race in the biggest competition in the world. Invite only shit, and you’re going to be there. Are you kidding? That’s amazing. Go out there and try to win, for sure. But in a way, you kind of already have.” Paisley thought that is she had been any less exhausted, she would have been misty eyed. She decided to lock those words away and reflect on them when her brain wasn’t floating in a heavy fuzz. She would see if she could bring herself to feel proud just yet. “And listen. This bit is serious. When you get home,” he said, staring straight ahead with a blank face and hanging on the heaviest pause Paisley had ever heard, “you’re grounded until you put my ass in a retiring home for all this dumb shit you’ve been doing, you hear me? I don’t give a shit if you’re the next Lance Armstrong, you ain’t leaving your goddamn room.”

Frantz gave Paisley a big, long, lingering bear hug before letting her run off and meet up with the rest of the Road Gods.

“Kill it, baby. I know you will,” he whispered into her ear.

“Thanks, Dad. See you soon.” She fell out of his arms and walked her bike over to Bellahue, who motioned over one of the assistants to take her bike and bring it to cargo.

“You ready, mister? Ready for the biggest adventure of your life?” Paisley thought about this. She wondered if, after all that she and her friends had been through, this trip would really be the biggest adventure of her life, or if it would merely be the end of it.

“Sure am,” she said.

“Good. Take your boarding pass, get your shit, and let’s all head through security, why don’t we?”

She stood behind the rest of her teammates in line waiting to go through the security line. She watched as each of them handed over their boarding pass and passport. She thought nothing at first, but after the third teammate went through, she began to notice that the security officer at the desk spent an awful lot of time looking over the passport. She lingered on it with her eyes, which darted between the picture and the real human face in front of her for uncomfortably long before scanning the passport under some kind of device. She fished her own out of her bag and opened it, looking at the identification page, staring deeply into her own eyes. It looked real to her, felt real to her, but still, her experience was limited. She had seen her father handle passports a few times, and that’s about as close as she got to them. She was so impressed with Bee’s handywork that she had failed to consider that it still had to fool people other than herself and Bellahue. This could be it, she realized. Not just the moment that the dream all came crashing down, but also the crime she finally got caught committing. Every step forward felt like one step closer to her heart bursting through her ribcage. Her mouth started filling with saliva, so nervous that she felt herself getting nauseous. She must have turned pale, because the teammate in front of her asked if she was okay. She blamed it on flight anxiety, but the words themselves felt like they were gurgling out of her. When it was her turn to approach the desk, she slowly handed over her passport, which was now slick wet with her palm sweat. The officer stared at it for a long time, then glanced at her. She watched the woman’s eyes work over her face slowly before returning to the page. Her mouth was curled at one corner, nose scrunched up, wearing a look of confusion or something similar. Fuck, Paisley thought, this is it. I’m fucked. She caught on.

“Romulus, huh? What kind of name is that?”

“Uh, I guess technically Roman?” The woman shot a look at her, staring into her eyes.

“You don’t look Roman to me.”

“Oh, no? Why not?” she said. She was hesitant to antagonize the woman, but she thought maybe this was an opportunity. If she made her uncomfortable, maybe she would rush through the rest of the screening process.

“Never mind,” she muttered under her breath, rolling her eyes. She scanned the passport under the light, and the little box beeped. “You’re all good to go. Next.” Paisley hurried past the security desk with hasty, clamoring steps like she was afraid the officer was about to realize she made a mistake at any moment. She bumped into the x-ray conveyor belt, failing to stop in front of it as the momentum from her frenzied walk shifted her bodyweight ahead of her planted feet and sent her stumbling trying to regain her footing. She fumbled with the plastic bins and threw her messenger bag into one of them. The jilted noise of the metal rods spinning as she pushed her luggage over them reminded her of the sound of the Mares’ roller blades tearing up the gymnasium floor. It was a harsh, scattered, clumsy noise that sounded like the anxiety in her head. She just wanted to get through this. She watched the little screen behind the desk like she was doing an audit of her own belongings. Her bag had very little in it. A few pairs of lounging clothes, some road essentials. Minimal and light, not unlike the boxes she loaded out of her California home the day that they moved. Except this time, she believed that she had everything she could need.

To her delight, Paisley was able to cash in all of her exhaustion and sleep for the majority of the flight. She stayed awake for the first hour, partly because she wanted to know what it felt like to

ascend into the sky for the first time, and partly because it took a lot of shifting and experimenting with awkward limb placements to find a position comfortable enough to sink into. She hated the feeling of takeoff, the way it felt like the air was getting heavy on her shoulders and how her guts revolted within her. She felt like she was trying to swallow her heart. It gave her a kind of headache she had never felt before, like her skull was trying to expand, or like her eyes were stuck rolling into the back of her head. It was almost like nausea, but more like the way nausea makes her mouth taste than the way it made her stomach feel. It smelled like cold nickels.

She awoke disoriented, like she was hanging by her feet from the ceiling and all the blood was swirling in her brain, and she was only certain of two things. The first was that she had a horrendous, pulsing kink in her neck from the inhumanly contorted position her head had been resting in. The second was that they had begun their descent into France, something she only knew because the rough, staticky voice over the intercom which said as much was what woke her. She listened to the buzzing of the turbines and the voices of passengers which stretched long and round along with their limbs, all of which sounded like it was being dampened by cotton stuffed up in her ear. Her head felt like it had been inflated with helium. She decided that she truly hated airplanes.

Upon landing in Paris, Paisley and her fellow teammates were rushed by the team managers onto a private bus. Paisley felt like she was stepping into a hotel, the walls of the bus lined with cots with yellow curtains shrouding their interior, tables and benches, and even a small kitchen area. She learned that she was not so far off, as Bellhue told them that instead of a proper hotel, this would be the team's living quarters for the duration of the tour. A small, private hotel which would follow the team from place to place along their route.

“The tour is like a nomad community, you see,” he explained to her. “Between all you riders, us folk in the background, reporters, news crews, on and on, we’re talking damn near eight-thousand people.”

“Christ,” she said. “I don’t know that there’s that many people within fifty miles of Tuluca Rock.”

“I reckon there ain’t, kid. So, as you can imagine, all them hotels get filled up quick, and let me tell you something. They stink like shit. I’m talking dastardly. All these sweaty Europeans fresh out the saddle eating fucking olives or whatever it is they do. Believe you me, you’ll be much happier just having to get used to your own team stink than everyone else all at once.”

Their final destination was a seven-hour trek to the southern coastline of France, to a city whose name sounded like a jumbled mess of people clearing their throats to her. She was wide awake from having slept so heavily on the plane, so sleeping through it was out of the question. She felt foolish for not having stolen a book off of her dad’s shelf or something, anything, to pass time, not having thought that she would have much in the way of time to pass. So, she sat at one of the tables and observed her fellow teammates. Pairs of riders all talking to one another in languages she did not recognize, much less know, the sound of all of them overlapping creating a strangely calming melody. She made a game out of trying to follow one pair of voices without getting lost in the stream of the others, trying to turn voices into static, to push them out of her mind. Then, when she got bored of that, she tried listening for as many words as she could possibly recognize, testing her almost entirely useless vocabulary of random, disjointed words she had picked up from her father’s various clients, words she knew the isolated meanings of but she could never use to communicate in any real way. She thought of it now as a mostly useless vocabulary because in this moment, it finally had a use. There was a part of her that felt that this

was like the first day of school. Surrounded by people who she was blend herself out of sight from. People who were not really interacting with her or paying her any mind. But she knew that this was different. She knew that this wasn't a case of her being someplace she didn't truly belong, didn't fit in. She was here because she earned it, because she proved herself. If any of the other riders wanted to demean her, they would have to first reconcile with the fact that she had beaten them all at the last practice. No, she thought, I'm not sitting here in my lonesome because I'm an outsider. Not here. I'm quiet because I like to be. That's okay, isn't it? "When I have nothing to say, my lips are sealed," she sung to herself under her breath. "Je me lance vers la gloire." She took comfort in the fact that the pairs rarely broke off from one another and intermingled, even the ones who spoke the same language as one another relegated themselves mostly to pairs. There must have been a lot of little partnerships within the team, she thought. Riders who work together more often than not. She was left out because she hadn't made those bonds yet, and frankly, she thought, she was okay with that. That's not what she was there for anyway. She was there for herself.

After her fellow riders tired out and the conversations dwindled, Paisley was forced to turn her attention out the bus window. Watching the landscape of France morph before her felt like being on a different planet after so many long months surrounded by the ever-gaping toothless maw of yellows and browns she had gotten used to. They traveled alongside luscious, green forests and mountains so tremendous that they looked like they were what contained the Earth and not the other way around. It was a place with shape and color, a place that looked alive. She wondered what girls like her were doing in the invisible towns hidden among the trees and mountains. She wondered if there were any girls out there right now throwing rocks through someone's window. She felt a yearning in her heart that made her want to jump out of the bus

and run deep into the forest, just to see what it felt like. But after a few hours, she got to wondering how much difference all this beauty really made in a person's day to day life. She wondered if people get used to places like this the same way she got used to Tuluca Rock. Or, she wondered, if maybe it even worked in the opposite. She went from seeing West Texas as the most hopeless place on Earth to finding value in all of its empty. She wondered if maybe so much time surrounded by beauty like this would eventually wear down into mundanity. She thought that maybe every place was just a different kind of empty. Maybe it was up to the people to create the value for themselves.

When they finally arrived at the site of the Grand Départ, Paisley had learned just how much travel it took a completely wipe a person out. It was the most exhaustion she figured she had ever felt just from doing nothing all day. Her joints were stiff, her neck and back feeling like someone was trying to bend her in half the wrong way. Fortunately for her, she was encouraged to act on this exhaustion by Bellahue.

“Alright, men. You've had a long day and you've got a longer one still waiting on you tomorrow. All of you who've been here before know that there ain't no day like the Départ to get cameras shoved in your faces, and what we do on the course out there today sets the tone for the rest of these twenty-three days. So rest up, because I expect great things out of each one of you tomorrow.” Paisley was waiting for the moment where Bellahue would pull Romulus aside and remind him that this expectation didn't include him, that how he raced wasn't as important as how he behaved on the cameras. But that moment never came. She wondered if maybe she had silently become a real racer to him. Or maybe he just thought she already knew the deal. She wanted to believe that it was the first one.

The day of the Grand Départ was a kind of energy Paisley had never felt before, and she wasn't entirely certain she ever wanted to. The very air itself felt like it was buzzing, and she could feel all of the talking, the footsteps, the news vans, all of the excited, bustling life around her moving through the ground and into her feet. She had felt earthquakes back in California that seemed weak in comparison. She felt that familiar urge to simply go, to move fast and far. She almost found it funny that she had to try to overcome this urge before the race started. In all the races she had ever been in, that urge was what carried her to the finish line before her opponents. But the Tour was different. Blowing all of her energy on the first leg would be a disaster if she was going to be on top for the long game. This, she thought, was a terrible time to need to calm down.

She got ample opportunity to take her mind off the race itself thanks to the number of interviews Bellahue had thrown her into. At first, this nervous, ferocious need to move flustered her, kept her from spitting out a straight answer without mashing up all the words she wanted to say into an incoherent string of sputtering noises before they left her mouth. She was already breathing like the first event was over.

"Come on, kid," Bellahue said after he pulled her away from the third reporter of the day. "Look, I know you're probably freaked, but you need to pull it together, okay? Look, you're an athlete, not a philosopher, right? None of these folks are expecting words of profound genius from you. Give 'em yes and no, say some stuff about the thrill of the ride, and talk a time or two about Texas. Nice and simple. Don't think too hard about it. Shit, don't think at all." Paisley wondered if Bee was watching at home. She didn't know what time it was back in Tuluca Rock. She barely knew what time it was in France. She knew her dad was watching, no matter what time it was. "You've got one more before you gotta join the peloton. I know you're good on the

road. Prove to me you can do your job here, too.” Paisley wanted to ask Bellahue if he really thought adding more pressure would be the trick that smoothed out her nerves, but she refrained. Instead, she thought about her dad.

“I got you, coach,” she said. He walked her over to the next reporter. She ignored the camera that hung in her face, deep black and obtrusive like a solid shadow. She looked the reporter square in the eyes, but she did not think about him. She listened to what he said, and she thought about her dad. She thought about speaking to him, about what it was she would want to say if it were him who was asking the questions that she heard. When the reporter asked how someone so young became motivated to ride professionally, she said “my mom was a rider, so she made me fall in love with it, but it was my dad who really pushed me and helped me become a serious athlete. He’s an unstoppable force, an internal combustion engine, and he always instilled that same mentality in me. I know that I can’t be stopped because I was raised by him, so I carry that with me.” She wondered why she was never able to say something like that to her father before. She had always felt it, even when he was at his most embarrassing. Then the reporter asked her if it was important for her to be representing Texas along with the Road Gods, she looked down at the lone star printed on her bright orange team jersey. “My dad brought me there, too. I didn’t want to move at first,” she said. Then she thought of Bee. “But Texas changed me. It made me find my strength.” She thought about that night when her clothes were soaked through from the water sprinklers, that chill that ran through her body and sparked a vibrancy, a liveliness that almost matched the energy that hung around the Départ. “It made me learn how to take charge. Texas challenged me, and I’m better for it.” She thought about the day Bee promised to help her with their scheme to get her oversees. “I can say with zero doubt that I

never would have gotten here if I didn't get to Tuluca Rock first." She hoped Bee was watching. She hoped that she knew that was for her.

After one final team huddle, the racers all took their positions in the peloton. Bellhue explained to them that the first day of racing was mostly a flat stage.

"It's gonna be nice and easy, you can all handle this," he said. "So remember, today is all about being patient, work together to stay in the slipstream, and when the chance for a good breakaway comes, strike like a fucking rattler, you understand?" Paisley rolled these words around in her head while she sat in her starting position and waited for the race to begin. There were announcements, some kind of speech kicking off the year's race, but Paisley didn't listen. She just wanted it to start, and listening to whoever the man speaking was ramble on about the race just made her more and more anxious. She wanted to take her mind as far from the race as she could until it was time for the wheels to move. Otherwise, she was afraid that that patience that Bellahue emphasized, and that she already barely had in the first place, would be much too thin to hold her back from breaking away right at the start. So instead of listening, she stared down at her bike. It was the first time in a long time that she had taken a good, long look at her prized Le Tour. She looked at the frame between her knees and she saw that some of the soft baby blue had worn down to the silver metal hiding beneath it, big scrapes like shining claw marks streaking through the paint. Parts of the tubing were worn down by all the dirt, others discolored and stained, caked in months of filth. Her bike had been beaten up, battered, wounded, and she felt that she knew it now better than she ever had. This was no longer the pristine, shining bike that associated the image of the Tour de France. But it was the bike that was going to win.

Learning the nuances of the peloton was a trial, something she had to adapt to in the moment. It was like fighting instinct, everything she was doing felt wrong. She spent most of the first race coasting in the slipstream of one of the Italians, who was going faster than much of the other racers but was still riding easy and slow. They had practiced riding slipstreams at their meets, but nothing could have prepared Paisley for the feeling of being surrounded on all sides by a mass of relatively slow-moving cyclists, like a phalanx with spokes instead of spears.

After some time, still stuck behind the Italian, she started to know his pace quickening. They were toward the front of the pack, and space between riders grew the further up they moved. She was going quicker too, her speed ramping along with his like she was being launched out of a bow. Then, she saw it. A big gap between him and the nearest rider. That same primal need to push hard and fast overtook, her whole body leaning forward as though to chase the desire, and she knew this was it. The chance for a breakaway. The time to strike. She started pedaling harder and flew past the Italian, who gave her a thumbs-up as she passed. He was the one she had beaten at the final pre-Tour meet.

“Gain us a lead,” he yelled after her. “I will see you up there.” As she passed by the others, she noticed more riders swerving around the cyclists around them. She had initiated an attack, and she knew that there were other eager racers with the same urge for speed as her who weren’t simply going to let her take the lead. She was being counterattacked, and she finally felt like the race was on. She pushed hard, trying to stay ahead of the other breakaway specialists, but she still restrained from going all out. She felt like she was caught in a tense balancing act, the grey area between giving into her desires but maintaining some control. She tightened her grip around the bars as a means of staying grounded, staying focused in the moment. She couldn’t let herself get carried away, even though she was practically drooling over the thought of hitting top

speed and riding out her momentum for as long as possible. She knew, in the part of her mind that wasn't blinded by the bliss of whipping winds and pumping blood, that as long as possible wouldn't be long enough to reach the stage's end without crashing and burning. So, she drove hard, satisfying that overwhelming urge, until she knew she had put a good fifteen minutes between her and the peloton. Aside from her and the Italian, eight other racers made up their small pack in the front. Two of them kept pushing even longer, and she instinctually wanted to chase them, but she stopped herself. Let them run out of steam, she thought. I'll smoke them later. She slowed her pace, still faster than what it had been when they were still with the peloton, but casual enough to recharge. The rest of the race was a waiting game, watching for the cyclists chasing from the peloton to become visible behind them before responding, dragging the chase out and staying ahead. Paisley and the Italian responded to the chase by blowing passed the other cyclists in their pack, and within several minutes they were passing the leading racers. Paisley quietly celebrated her instincts paying off. The lead racers were clearly exhausted, riding much too slow to have any hope of regaining their position in the front.

The final leg of the race came down to Paisley and the Italian, the rest of the riders behind them closing some of the distance, but not enough to make up for the fact that the stage's finish was in sight. Paisley put everything she had left into each stride, feeling her muscles drain their energy but not allowing herself to ease up on her push. She tasted salt in her mouth, which had gotten dry enough that the sweat dripping into it was almost refreshing. She had pushed the sweat wicking capabilities of her jersey well past the point of failure, turning a shade of orange so dark it was almost brown. She watched as the Italian drifted behind her. She looked over her shoulder and saw him getting in the way of one of the racers who had gained on them and keeping him at bay. As her legs finally started to give in under her, the act of pushing the pedal

down to the bottom of its arc beginning to feel like it might sooner blow up one of her knees than actually push the bike forward, she soared over the finish line, with the Italian passing a moment later. Paisley lacked the energy to even get off of her bike, coasting until she lost so much momentum that she had to choose between planting her feet in the ground or collapsing along with her bike. She almost chose the collapse. The Italian, also weak and limping, threw one of her arms over his shoulder, and Bellahue rushed over to take the other, dragging her bike along with them to the podium. In some town with a name she could not say along the coast of France, Paisley was handed a yellow jersey. The Road Gods finished the day with two racers in the front, and Paisley was officially the race lead.

The following races went mostly the same, Paisley and the Italian becoming the racers to watch. She didn't win all of them, but she maintained her lead position for several stages. The flat and hill stages went mostly in her favor, but the first mountain stage saw her finishing much further behind than she had until that point. Flats she dominated, most of them no more grueling than even the best day's ride to Big Nothing back home, and the much more favorable Summer climate of France made even the longer course seem easy by comparison. At least she didn't feel like the Sun was burning a hole through her the entire time, she thought. Hill stages she was fine with too, as she always made sure to seek them out and include them in her training, though this was harder to do since moving to Texas, and the first couple of them were an adjustment period, but once she got used to it, she stayed on top. Mountains was a new thing for her all together. The constant incline, the way the air felt thinner and thinner as she ascended to the top, it was something her body was not used to. It made her feel panicked, and her urge to break away was much harder to satisfy. Maintaining a lead required a kind of energy and strength that she wasn't

used to utilizing. Trying to learn all of the strategies and overcome all of the hurdles as they came made her feel weak. It was the first time all Tour that she felt like she didn't deserve to be there. On top of that, her placement put an impact on her overall score. She lost the yellow jersey after the first mountain stage, and she knew every day after had to be a profound effort to earn it back.

On the morning of the first day off, Paisley woke up feeling intense cramps in her calves, her glutes, and her abdomen. Any attempt to stretch out her legs was met with the muscles tightening with sharp pain that shivered up through her body. She felt heavy with fatigue, and the cramping made her feel like her legs wouldn't even be able to support her exhausted body without locking up in agony. She told Bellahue she was in pain, and his prescription was to join the rest of the team on a short ride.

“A ride? Are you fucking with me? Shouldn't I rest up for tomorrow?”

“You gotta work through them sore muscles, mister. I know it sounds crazy, but they all do it. There ain't a team in France right now what ain't riding, you can bet your daddy's house on it. Besides, it does a lot of good to just enjoy the ride for the day. Reminds you why you're here, for the love of the bike and all that goopy shit.” She winced at the mere thought of even climbing into the saddle, but she agreed to do it if it's what he thought was best. They drove the bus to a nearby city, one that wasn't involved in the course, and the Road Gods all rode together. They passed slowly and causally through the city streets in pursuit of the pleasant smells of salted meats and baking bread, stopping to sample food from various vendors who were eager to feed Tour athletes. Several of the men held up the ride to flirt with French women on the streets,

sometimes slipping from English to their native tongues, which the girls could not understand but seemed charmed by nonetheless.

“Romulus, we must find a young girl for you to flirt with. They love the athletes here. These women are much too old for you!” the Italian said. Though she didn’t feel excluded, this was the first time any of them had addressed her directly. She was so caught off guard that she almost reverted to her old instincts of shrinking away from them.

“Yes, there must be some girls for you in this city!” another teammate said, a Lebanese man. Her and the Italian had bonded, or at least as much as she could with someone whose name she never bothered to learn. They had become something of partners on the road, always taking the lead together and helping each other over the finish line. There was a certain kinship in being the team’s top riders. But the Lebanese man, she had never spoken to. For him to include her made her feel more confident, confident enough to ignore those old impulses.

“No need, guys. I have a girlfriend at home.”

“Ah, a young stud! I should have known so much,” the Italian said. The carried on with their ride, the spirit of camaraderie growing, and Paisley’s spirits lifting with every mile they burned. She had almost forgotten about her soreness, and to Bellahue’s credit, most of the cramping had subsided, except for that in her abdomen. They rode for another hour before turning in for the day and getting their proper rest. But not before swooping through a bakery and loading up on loaves of bread and pastries which were doomed to be discarded as they closed up shop. On the bus, Paisley ate with the team until her stomach felt like it had expanded threefold. Her mouth was rubbed raw from all the salt and sugar, but her body felt more powerful, like it was radiating with a warm energy she hoped she could carry into the next day.

When she awoke, her sleeping shorts were stained with dark blood. With sleep still fogging her brain, she swatted at her thighs, thinking in her delirium that maybe she had been injured somehow and did not know it. Her hands became wet and warm. Then she felt the cramps again, the ones in her stomach, and the realization of what it was shocked her right out of her groggy haze.

“Fuck,” she said too loudly. “Oh fuck.” She looked through her luggage, but she already knew there would be no tampons in them. She did not bring any out of fear that they would blow her cover with security at the airport, and she meant to get some at the duty-free shop before they took off, but the fear of getting caught and the urgency she felt to get on the flight must have pushed it out of her head. She had completely forgotten to get any. She took the shorts off and pulled her riding shorts out of her bag and quietly hopped out of her caught. She tiptoed her way briskly toward the bathroom, but before she made it, Bellahue poked his head out of his cot.

“Rom, you alright? I heard you cussing in there,” he said. She watched as his eyes drifted to the shorts in her hands, the blood still visibly wet. “Dear god, what...” he started to say, but stop. Paisley already had tears streaking down her face. She was trying hard not to breathe too loud, biting her bottom lip. “Oh. I see. Why don’t you head on in there and then meet me outside.” Paisley cleaned herself off and created a temporary fix out of toilet paper, but instead of heading outside, she just sat there in the bathroom. She knew that walking out that door was walking into her collapsing dream. Right in the middle of it, while she was living it in that very moment, it was not only going to crash down before her eyes, but all around her while she was still in the heart of the wreckage. She wanted to just live in her dream for a little while longer before she jerked the handle and forced herself back to reality.

Bellahue was sucking on a cigar outside, the scent of the smoke lingering sickeningly in the cool morning air. Paisley approached him, slouching so deeply under the weight of her sorrow that she looked half a foot shorter. She could feel the tears dry on her face.

“So. I take it your name isn’t Romulus.”

“No sir.”

“And you’re clearly not a boy. Or, I mean, unless...I don’t know much about these transgenders or what have you...”

“No, sir. I’m a girl. I’m a girl named Paisley.”

“Okay, girl name Paisley. So it would seem to me that in more way than one, you being here is illegal. Like, against the rules, and also literally a federal crime.”

“Seems that way, sir.” She wanted to get on with it. She didn’t know why he was dragging it out so much. She felt like every question was some sick attempt to rub her face in it.

“Well, let me ask you a question.”

“You sure don’t seem keen on stopping any time soon, so go ahead.”

“Funny. I like you better when you ain’t pretending. My question is, do you plan to keep on winning?” Paisley didn’t quite understand. She stared at him a while, trying to decipher some angle or trick to his words. “Well don’t just stare at me, Ms. Paisley, do you intend to keep winning these races?”

“Yes,” she stammered out. “Yes, sir. I didn’t do all of this shit to not take home the win. I’m not here for the Road Gods and I’m not here for Texas. I’m here to be the youngest person to ever win the Tour de France, I was just using you guys to get here.” Telling the truth felt like she had taken her first big gulp of air after being under water. She didn’t think all of that needed to

be said, but she wanted to counteract all of the lying she had been doing with radical truth telling. It felt pleasant, and it seemed fairer to Bellahue as well.

“Well, I don’t give a shit how selfish your intentions are as long as it’s us who win the damn thing this year. We need it after everything that happened. Guess I’m selfish too, I suppose. Okay. You can stay in the race. But there are three things I need you to keep in mind.”

“Whatever it takes.”

“One, you don’t say a fucking word to anyone. Bury those shorts. That ain’t no joke. I’ll get to a store and get you what you need so this don’t happen again. But not one word, not even in a goddamn prayer, you hear?”

“Naturally.”

“Two, if anyone does find out, I didn’t know shit. I ain’t getting dragged down with you, not any further than I will by association anyway.”

“It’s all on my shoulders. I’m the criminal here. Understood.”

“Three, and this is most important so listen close. Do better on the mountains, lady.” One good thing about Texas, she decided, is that people will do a lot for their pride.

Paisley made good on her promise, finishing first in the next mountain stage. The close call with being shunned from the race was like a second wind that turned her into an indomitable force. The interviews she held with press turned from painting her as the pride of Texas to the pride of the entire Tour. She was becoming a star, and all the exposure to the camera got her more comfortable with being seen. She started to embody her new role, speaking with confidence and power, just like she would when the Mares crossed a line except this time not crass or violent. Perhaps arrogant, but still wholesome enough to be the shining symbol of their brand the Road

Gods wanted her to be. And she backed up that arrogance with placements, very rarely failing to finish in the top five, and wearing the yellow vest more days than not. Unfortunately, some of her weaker placements earlier in the Tour put her close enough in overall score to some of the other racers that her victory was not certain.

Everything came down to the final race. The last stretch to Paris was a flat, so Paisley knew that she should be confident that she could do it, but the fatigue was starting to sit heavily on her. Some of this newfound energy pushed her to ignore her sensibility and ride harder than she should have in some of the recent stages, and she was starting to feel it dragging her down. She was worried that she might run out of steam, but she had to stay above the negative thoughts. That's what she kept telling herself as she waited for the start signal.

Everything in her told her to break away right at the start. She knew she had hours to go, but she wanted nothing more than for it to be over. She couldn't handle the dissonance between her forced confidence and nervous uncertainty, like her brain was in a spiral. She tried to cut through it with intense focus, and she eased her pace into the center of a peloton. She watched her fellow racers. They were all visibly tired as well. She thought that maybe everyone felt the way that she did, but all of these people knew what to expect. She did not. The lack of experience, the difficulty of every single day, the toll that it took on her body, was all peaking in this moment so that it felt like every fabric of her being, both her body and her soul, was begging for it all to end. She was afraid of what she might feel in an hour, in two hours, in six. In what awful ways her body might ache when the finish line finally came into sight. Everyone around her knew what to expect. The uncertainty, the unknown, was too much for her to take.

When the breakout started to happen, she did not join them. She held back with the peloton. She did not have the energy to break away yet, and she was beginning to lose hope that

she would find it in time for the chase. She dug deep enough to maintain a position at the front of the peloton, even eventually finding it within herself to do a mini-breakaway of her own. For a time, she rode in some vacant middle distance between the front pack far ahead of her, and the peloton several minutes behind her.

The flat gave way to a single hill, dauntingly high, which felt like it taunted Paisley for the entire climb. At the top, she could see a few miles ahead, and she saw that she was gaining on the pack that broke away. The chase from the peloton had not even begun yet, and yet the distance between them was closing rapidly. She was confused, but it only made her want to go faster, not only to seize this unexpected opportunity to catch up with them, but to see what was going on. The longer she looked, the more it looked like they weren't moving at all.

She did catch up with them a few minutes later, and when she did, she realized she was right. The pack had stopped moving, and the racers clumped together in the middle of the road. Behind her, the peloton gradually began catching up, but she was not focused on that. She was focused on what waited beyond the pack.

Five figures on beat up bicycles sat spaced apart in the middle of the road. Each of them wore black balaclavas. The skin around their eyes which peeked out from the holes in the mask was painted pink, and from a distance they looked like some kind of horrible, wretched locust. Their bodies were cloaked in heavy black dusters, and in their leather-gloved hands they wielded thick chains and blackjacks. Paisley felt horror trembling through her hands. Nobody moved, everyone seemingly gripped with the same terror and confusion that she felt, all of them frozen in place. Paisley looked in their eyes, lost in the pink clouds behind the masks. Were they disgraced riders, cyclists who had suffered some great injustice and turned terroristic in their vengeance? She didn't know. Their eyes seemed soft. Kind. But everything else about them felt

like she was standing before monsters. Then one of them made eye contact, directly with her, and held it. The pink-eyed terrorist did not so much as glance at another rider after they locked eyes. The figure was tall and slender, and Paisley felt something move deep within her that she could not explain as they continued to gaze at each other. Something like a comfort which only made her feel more confused amidst all the terror. She saw a single lock of yellow hair streak through the pink. The rider raised her hand in the sky, the chain hanging from her grip like a promise, and for the first time, Paisley realized that a padlock was affixed to its end. She looked at the rider's bike. An old, worn out street bike, the make name virtually illegible, but "The Kids Are Fucked" scrawled over its decrepit logo in black marker. One pedal slightly longer than the other. That's when Paisley knew that it had to be Bee.

"Fuck this," one of the racers yelled as he pushed forward, moving to swerve between Bee and one of the other masked riders. One of them had to be Araceli, but she couldn't be certain which. As he went to pass, Bee swung the padlock into his helmet, then hit him again in the face, knocking him off his bicycle. As soon as he dropped, all the other riders started pushing forward in a frenzy, and the masked riders pushed back, swinging their chains and blackjacks into the bodies and faces of every rider in sight, chasing and hunting those who got by them.

"Ride, for fucks sake, Pais!" Araceli shouted, and she did. She rode past them and Bee swung the chain way above her head.

"Sorry, but it can't look like we're leaving you alone, you know?" she yelled. Paisley swerved around the fallen bodies of her competitors, ducking under the telegraphed swings of the weapons, and broke free. Most of the other cyclists who did get passed them were not following the route anymore, veering off the side to remove themselves completely from the carnage. Those who did continue along the route seemed too distracted by the shock to focus on

technique, gassing themselves out and making it easy for even Paisley's worn body to blow past them. She heard the sounds of blackjacks cracking over helmets and bodies hitting the pavement behind her, and when she looked back, she saw only the Italian and the masked riders.

"Hey, sorry, I never learned your name," she cried out to the Italian.

"It's Rosano," he answered.

"Well, Rosano, leave the rest to me. I'll take this thing home. Tap out before they get you."

"Are you sure you can outrun them?"

"Trust me. I got this," she said. So, he drifted to the shoulder of the road, placed his bike on the ground, and put his hands up. The masked riders blew right passed him.

"Okay, babe. You need to fight back. Look like you took us out because you're such a badass," Bee said.

"Okay. Hey, who the fuck are the other riders?" One of them caught up to her with their blackjack raised above their head.

"It's us!" Mariko said. "Now, duck," and she swung her blackjack. Paisley leaned forward so it sailed over her head. "Okay, take me out, I'm ready." Paisley swerved her bike into Mariko's and then kicked her gently in the ribs. Mariko toppled over dramatically, sprawled out on the pavement. Marisol and Marybeth sandwiched around her, Marisol swinging her blackjack so that Paisley could grab it from her, throwing herself over the side of her bike when Paisley ripped it out of her hands. Then she swatted it at Marybeth.

"Congrats, killer," Araceli said when she caught up. "Nobody is ever gonna forget the year Paisley Thelemaque fought off some masked terrorists at the Tour de France." Araceli slowly swung her chain. Paisley raised her blackjack to block it, causing the chain to wrap

around it. She pulled Araceli off her bike, then unraveled the chain into her hand, dropping the blackjack behind her. Then it was just her and Bee.

“Whose idea was this,” Paisley said.

“Mine. Consider it repayment for Marlon Point.”

“Thanks,” Paisley said.

“No problem.”

“Hey. Is this a weird time to tell you I love you?”

“Not so long as it’s not a weird time for me to say I love you, too.”

“I don’t think it is.”

“Good. Now hit me. I’ll see you back home” Paisley did, Bee crashing into the pavement beneath her. She got up, back into the saddle, and rode off the road and disappeared among the buildings and the people of the town wish ushered them toward the end of the race.

Paisley rode entirely by herself for the final hour of the race, the city of Paris looming over the horizon. Around her, the world felt alive, a small but dense town which bustled with energy. There were luscious green trees surrounding them and mountains that reached up to heaven way off in the distance. The beauty was seemingly infinite. And yet, she could not help but miss the endless expanses of dirt and sky of her home, the devastating heat of a never sleeping Sun that hung above West Texas. She longed to be among the nothingness once again with the people that she loved. When she returned home, she would do so with the memories of living a dream that she felt for certain was going to die at the side of the West Texas highway and fester like the vulture-eaten ribs of a cattle’s corpse. She could finally bury this old obsession under the yellow dirt and mark it with a single white cross. When she returned home, she would be free to chase whatever new things waited for her in the desert, what they could find in the

glorious nothingness which gave them so much room to create. She wondered what these things might be as she crossed the finish line.