

((Chapters 6-10 EARLY DRAFT))

"In the future...only skinny people will be taken seriously 🌀☁️🌸)f "

SECOND DRAFT OPEN CHAPTERS [1 - 5]

Chapter 6. "We're about to graduate!"

June – 2026 | Day 2 | Monday Afternoon.

Charlton Illinois -- Route 5

[2.0]

Several minutes passed in silence. **Tree branches had been torn from their trunks and traffic cones marked flooded roads.** As the truck approached the outskirts of town, Molly noticed something intriguing.

"Have you seen any other cars?"

"Huh?"

"I haven't seen anyone else on the road."

"I don't know. Hey, why didn't we drive to school like this every day? Holy shit. Molly, we're about to graduate!"

Molly gazed out the window **at the passing litters of storm debris covering the fields.** Graduation had always seemed elusive. Rodge had never graduated; neither had her father as far as she knew. Now, she wasn't sure she would either. Interrupting Molly's thoughts was a bright orange sign. [LOCKZONE A64: CHECKPOINT AHEAD: ALL CITIZENS...] She whirled around, but the sign had passed. A moment later, the truck's windshield HUD flashed an unknown error calling for road caution and manual driving.

A small blockade came into focus through the heat mirage ahead.

"Slow up," Molly whispered.

Janette let her foot off the pedal as the two rolled toward the blockade. Several military vehicles parked on the sides of the road. Barbed wire and wooden barricades blocked the road's shoulders. Armed officers in fractal camouflage stood beside **a sign with an indeterminate government seal that read, "A-64 : ALL STOP".**

The pickup rolled to a stop. Immediately, a dark-skinned officer with a shaved head approached the window.

"What do I do?" Janette whispered. "This is nothing like the last roadblock."

"Keep the windows up."

The officer tapped on the glass with a shock-stick. "Ma'am, you're going to have to turn around."

"Let me do the talking," Molly whispered. She tracked another officer in the sideview mirror as he swept the undercarriage of their truck with a pole-mirror.

"Sir, we have our finals today. We need to get to—"

"Ma'am, this road is closed. You're going to have to turn back and remain in your designated zone."

Molly leaned over across her seat. "Do you have a ranking officer we can speak to?"

"Ma'am, if you don't turn around, you'll be detained here and your vehicle impounded."

"Hey! Is there an officer? We need to get to school," Molly repeated.

"Ma'am, this is your last warning," the officer said, taking a step back and signaling with his hand to the other officers. In the side-view mirror, Molly caught a glimpse of the other officer unholstering his taser.

"Do it," Molly said under her breath.

Janette bit her lip. "What?"

Molly narrowed her eyes and tried to see into the distance past the heat mirage. "Turn around and go."

Janette looked confused.

Molly slowed her speech and pronounced each word clearly. "Janette, put the truck in reverse."

Janette looked uncomfortable, but obeyed. When the truck was several yards away, she made a three-point turn.

"What should we do?"

"Throw a molotov," Molly mumbled.

"What?"

"I said we shouldn't have gone."

"Yeah, but..." Janette said, and looked in the rearview mirror. "How will we get to our finals?"

Molly sighed. "We're not going to our finals today."

"But--"

"It's fine. We'll make them up," Molly lied.

"You sure?"

Molly glared at her.

"All right," Janette said, looking back in the rearview again. Not a moment later, Janette's demeanor shifted. "Hey, wanna go to Cookie Cutter Quarry?"

"Now?"

"Fuck yes, now!"

Molly stared out the window. "I don't have my bathing suit."

"Skinny dip, bitch! We've got towels."

Molly thought for a moment. The quarry pond wouldn't be a terrible place to think after a fresh rain. "Yeah, all right," Molly said, reaching into the back seat to check her backpack. "I've got sunblock and--"

A group of four blue and black SUVs, with abstract high-tech apparatuses attached to their reinforced frames and bumpers raced past their truck, bumper to bumper. Closely following was a camouflaged urban assault vehicle with three sets of large off-road tires and thick metal plating. Molly whirled around as the convoy tore across the pavement like a single cohesive unit and disappeared over the horizon ahead of them just as quickly as they'd appeared.

"What the hell was all that?"

"A waste of taxpayer money. They call that a BearCat II, urban assault vehicle. It's equipped with seventy thousand--"

“Yo, Molly.”

“Hmm?”

“No fucks given.”

Chapter 7. "Put a Shirt On."

June – 2026 | Day 2 | Monday Afternoon.

Charlton Illinois -- Cookie Cutter Quarry

[entire chapter about to get cuuuuuut

I'm dead serious, I'm probably cutting everything here or at least 90% of the stalling garbage. This chapter was never intended to be part of the story, I don't know how this happened oh god i am sorry.]

“Last one in the pond is a fatass!” Janette shouted as she jumped from the truck.

Molly leaned over and untethered Janette's PND from the ignition. She lowered her sunglasses just in time to see Janette's panties hit the rock shelf and her sandals fly aside before she dove from the cliff.

Molly collected both their towels from the back seat and made her way down the steep footpath between jagged rocks and thorny flowers.

“Are you coming or what?” Janette yelled from the water.

Molly turned in a circle and scanned the horizon. When she was satisfied they were alone, she stripped down and waded into the murky water.

Molly dove under through a small cold patch and resurfaced on the other end. She wiped her eyes and looked around for Janette. Something slimy brushed against Molly's inner thigh. A moment later, Janette's head popped above the surface beside her.

“I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry!” Janette hacked. “Did I make you scream?”

Molly rolled her eyes. “No. I don't scare that easy.”

Janette continued to laugh and cough out scummy pond water.

Molly splashed her in the eyes and kicked away. The two paddled and dunked around for several minutes before Janette paused.

“Yo. What's that?” she asked, pointing into the sky.

Molly shielded her eyes from the sun and squinted up. She caught a glimpse of something reflective, like a slow moving object in the shape of a cross with an elongated bulb on the front.

“I think it's a UAV. MQ series.”

“A what?”

"A military drone."

"Holy shit. Who do you think it's trying to kill?"

Molly began to paddle back to the muddy shore. "It's a surveillance drone."

"Wait—like to spy on us naked? That's so cool!" Janette stumbled out of the pond onto her towel beside Molly.

"The military isn't going to waste drones to see you naked, Janette."

"Says you! I'll bet you ten bucks it flies over at least twice more just to catch a glimpse of these sweet, sweet double Ds."

"Double Ds? You don't have—"

"Oh, shit! Hey, Molly, isn't that Jimmy's truck on the ridge up there?"

"Who? Where?" Molly sat up and wrapped her towel around her chest.

Janette broke out into a fit of laughter. "I'm just tipping your scale! No one's ever up there. Besides, you know exactly who I mean. You sucked his dick last month at Hopper's graduation part—"

Molly's glare cut Janette short.

"Relax. He probably gets head from all the girls."

Molly narrowed her eyes and clenched her fist.

"Okay, I don't know why that'd make you feel better about it, but the point is—"

"Shut up!"

"Okay."

Molly turned over onto her stomach to give her back some sun, but, more importantly, so she wouldn't have to deal with Janette. ■■■

Molly's mind drifted into memories of a childhood picnic. Her brother had fallen and gashed his knee on an old tree stump. Molly was fascinated by the blood, whilst her mother had screamed and driven him to the hospital for stitches.

"Hey, Moll?" Janette said, just as Molly began to dream.

Molly scrunched her eyes shut tighter. She'd been enjoying her catnap in the soft breeze.

"Do you think we'll graduate?"

Molly groaned.

"I mean, do you think school is over? Like, forever?"

"What?"

"I've been thinking about what you said the other night, about Marshal's law—"

"Martial law."

"Yeah, that guy's. Do you really think that's what's happening? If that's the case, wouldn't school be canceled, like, forever?"

"I don't know." Molly took a deep breath.

"So, if I understand right, the military now controls the government. Right?"

"Basically."

"So, why haven't they told us anything and why can't we stream news or--"

"If I knew, Janette, I'd tell you."

"Well, it's just that a lot of strange shit has been happening around here, you know?"

"Yes."

"Like, besides the storm. I mean with the military and net access and all, yeah?"

“Yeah...”

“And it just feels like it’s getting worse, doesn’t it?”

“I guess.”

“Yeah. Real skinny, I’m going to fucking burn out here if I don’t get some sunblock.”

Molly opened an eye. Reluctantly, she rolled over and sat up. “Look, I don’t know what’s going on. You heard Pooky. Rumors are that the riots have spread to Chicago now. Whatever’s going on, I’m sure the stream will be back on and let us know soon. We’re in a safe area, we’ll be okay.”

“No, like...I really need sunblock,” Janette said and scampered off towards the truck.

Molly tucked her arms around her thighs and sighed. She tumbled Janette’s question about net access around her mind. One thought kept repeating—something her brother had said the last time he’d visited: “The quickest way to contain a panic is to cut off information to those not already aware of the panic. Like a fire, choking its oxygen stops the flame.”

A few minutes later, Janette returned, wearing just her basketball shorts.

“Oh, Molly, ravish me!” Janette squeezed a thick jet of sunblock out onto her breasts and rubbed them seductively as she walked.

“Can’t you be serious for more than two secon--”

“Can’t you be serious for...” Janette mocked as she plopped down beside Molly.

Molly stood up and started off around the rim of the pond. The sharp reeds and mud were unpleasant, but no more unpleasant than Janette’s nonsense.

“Yo. The fuck?” Janette shouted after her. “All right, fuck you too!”

Across the pond from Janette, small fish nibbled at the surface. The summer breeze soothed Molly’s skin, and the sweet smell of flowers was a welcome relief to her rattled nerves.

She glanced up towards the sky and caught another glimpse of the drone. It was lower, and seemed to be circling overhead. She wondered if it was the same type of drone her brother worked with.

It had been months since they’d spoken. Normal Air Force protocol was strict, but not to the point where communication between family was cut. **Rodge had always been consistent in keeping touch, even overseas.** Molly checked the time on Janette’s watch and sighed. She looked back towards Janette and felt a pit grow in stomach. She didn’t want to apologize, but felt guilty for leaving her.

“Put a shirt on,” Molly said, picking up her PND as she sat back down beside Janette.

“I can’t hear you. I’m asleep,” Janette said, lying on her back, using her arms as pillows.

Molly rolled her eyes. “So, are you a pornstar now, or was that just the plan after graduation?”

Janette’s eyes popped open. “Real skinny, do you think I could?” **Janette sat up and snatched Molly’s PND, then held it out to take pictures of herself.** “Hmm... Yours is a piece of shit. It’s not responding at all.”

“Give me that,” Molly said and snatched it back.

Janette laughed. “Admit it, you’d love to have--”

Three sharp, buzzing sirens cut through the air in quick succession, followed closely by a deep voice from a megaphone. “Homeland Security. Remain where you are.”

Molly covered herself in a towel and rolled around to face the ridge. Two black and blue SUVs had parked beside their white pickup.

"Where did they come from?" Janette whispered.

Two militarized officers in black uniforms and sunglasses stomped their way down the footpath. "Homeland Security. Please remain where you are," one of the officers said, holding a hand up in a disarming wave. His other hand rested on an M4 assault rifle, hung around his shoulder and chest. "Let me see your ID."

"No," Molly said. "Is there some type of problem?"

"Ma'am, you are in violation of federal mandate."

"This is federal land?"

"Hold still, ma'am," the second officer said, pointing his PND camera at her. "Ms. Park, you'll need to return home immediately. This zone is off-limits to civilians."

Molly's heart climbed into her throat.

Janette scoffed. "But we always tan here."

"Ms. Rorche, this isn't a negotiation. If you don't vacate, you'll be placed in custody."

Molly shook her head. "Wait, why? Officer, are we being detain--"

"You're trespassing. If you don't leave, you'll be placed in custody," the officer said.

Out of the corner of her eye, Molly saw the other officer unbuckle his taser and handcuffs.

"No, no. We're leaving," Molly said, grabbing Janette's wrist.

"Your designated zone is A64. You will need to remain there until further notice."

"Yes, sir," Molly said, marching Janette up the hill ahead of the two officers. "Sorry for the trouble, officers." She helped Janette collect her clothing from beside the cliff. "We'll be on our way. Thank you for the information. We didn't know."

"All right," the officer said, escorting them to the truck. "But if we see you back here, you'll be arrested."

"Won't happen. Sorry again for the trouble! We really didn't know," Molly said, as she hopped into the passenger seat with a smile. "Roll the windows up," she whispered to Janette as she shut the door.

"But it's hot. Why are they making us leave? We're not doing anythi--"

"Roll the fucking windows up, Janette." Molly smiled and waved at the two officers.

"Voice start. Janette, alpha-five bubblegum," Janette said into her PND, starting the engine.

"Manual driving."

"Federal mandates? Guess laws mean nothing now. Using a drone to spy on tanning girls? Really appropriate. Fascists," Molly said.

"I thought they were nice. The taller one was cute," Janette said, looking in the rearview dash display. "Oh, you owe me ten bucks, by the way."

Molly bit her nail and glared at the display. The sheriff she could forgive--hell, even a truancy officer or the state police. But not militarized feds. Not claiming jurisdiction over her home town with such vague assertions as "federal mandates."

"What's your problem?" Janette asked.

"They just fucking facial hexxed us, without probable cause."

"Well, yeah. They needed to know who we are."

"That's not how it works, Janette. They have to have a reason. Those were federal agents."

"Uh, duh. They said it was a federal mandate."

"That's not a law. This isn't federal land."

“Seriously, you owe me ten bucks. You know, because they were looking at my tits...with the drone.” Janette’s smile faded. “Hey, you okay? Molly?”

“Just drive.”

Chapter 8. "Your Makeup is Running."

June – 2026 | Day 2 | Monday Night

Charlton Illinois -- Church

“Shit, it’s already 10:45.” Pooky jumped from the pickup and rushed towards the church’s side entrance.

“Hey, do you think Mrs. Femawitz will be there? I want to ask her when we can make up our finals,” Janette said, following behind Pooky.

“I told you to just park on the grass,” Molly said, looking at the overfilled parking lot. Sure enough, half the town had shown up for the meeting.

Inside the church, hundreds of people were packed into every corner. Molly couldn’t see much through the sea of cowboy hats and plaid jackets, but made out the familiar face of Sheriff [NAME2] standing at the altar.

“All right, thank you, Agent Kovin,” Sheriff [NAME2] said. “Up next, we have--”

“What the hell is the FBI doing on my property?” a man shouted, prompting whispers of agreement from the crowd. “Y’all can’t jus’ roll on into this town like y’all own this place!”

The agent did his best to ==-ss the crowd. “Sir, the FBI has nothing to do with that. We’re coordinating the--”

“Damned went and broke my fence!” another shouted.

“Fence? Those [INSERT SOUTHERN INSULT] ruined my entire crop, using it as a landing site for their fancy double helicopters. I ain’t even allowed back in my own home--been staying with Dr. Barber.” The crowd’s tone began to grow increasingly hostile as several people shouted profanities at the young FBI agent.

He ran a hand over his shaved head then gestured for silence. “Folks, if everyone would--”

“I haven’t been able to update a stream or access the net in a few days,” a woman shouted. “How can I work without net--”

“Again, ma’am, that’s out of my control. The FBI is coordinating a joint--”

“Whut the fuck’s the National Guard doing setting up a chain-link fence right through my cattle field?” another angry farmer said, followed by more shouts of agreement.

“Psst, Molly,” Janette said, poking Molly’s lower back. “I think that’s Damion Price. The one from my English class. He’s so fucking gorgeous, I think--”

“Shut the fuck up,” Molly hissed, trying to tip-toe high enough to see the others on the altar

stage.

"I got fifteen tents I seen just sent up on the far side of my **cattle fields**. Big ones. I can't get close enough to ask questions without a damned military convoy try'n to run me down, tell'n me I'm being trespassed off my own crickwash," a woman yelled from somewhere closeby. **Molly thought she recognized the voice as Mrs. [NAME4], the owner of Cookie Cutter Quarry.**

"My gas ain't worked right neither since the storm and I can't call nobody to come fix it."

"Yeah, what's the Guard doing about that? How--"

A sharp air horn blast silenced the crowd. The Sheriff called for order. "Calm down for three seconds, y'all! We're all upset, the FBI included. He can't answer questions he doesn't have answers to. Now, up next we have Congressmen Kiser. I think y'all will want to hear what he has to say."

A tall man in a cowboy vest stood up from his seat and took the mic. "Good evening. As some of you might know, I grew up here in Charlton. My name is Franklin Kiser, one of your congressional representatives on the U.S House floor. I've served six years in the United States Army, and I am--"

"Git on with it!"

The congressman paused and took a deep breath. "As most of you already know, due to the nature of the threat, Illinois has declared a state of emergency. At approximately 10:00PM local time Friday, a new type of cyber-weapon crippled much of the nation's infrastructure, including Chicago's traffic systems and several water filtration systems. As I'm sure Agent Kovin can attest, this cyber-weapon was discharged with the sole intent of causing the greatest damage possible to our nation."

The congressman pulled out an older model PND and held it up to display a recording of the hijacked broadcast. "As you've all seen, a domestic terrorist referring to himself simply as 'Phoenix' hijacked almost every major stream simultaneously. His motives are unclear at this time, but the general message seems to be that of an insurrectionist. It was at that time I was evacuated from D.C. From there, I--"

"Hey, Molly, what's insurrectionist mean? Is it like--"

"Shh!"

"Let me assure you, I am working closely with The National Guard and Homeland Security in these exigent times to restore order and keep the good hardworking citizens of Charlton safe. This is a great nation and I believe we will persevere. Although several public disturbances have been reported in Chicago, the National Guard has been mobilized effectively and decisively and these incidents appear to be isolated and contained. Some of--"

"Bullshit!" Pooky yelled. Half the crowd turned to face him. "I was up that way not twelve hours ago, seen hundreds, maybe thousands, of refugees making their way up [HIGHWAY NAME] by foot. Traffic broke down almost entirely moving further east. Whole damned highway is packed full. Few of 'em even tried to hitch a ride with me, said the whole city was flames and shattered glass!"

An eager silence hung in the air for several seconds. "Now, folks, it's imperative that we keep our wits about us. The National Guard is now following orders from the Joint Chiefs directly and I assure you they--"

"The National Guard? For public disturbances? That's martial law," Molly yelled out. Several people turned and stared at her. A sharp sense of self awareness flushed through her. She sunk back towards the door, and removed her PND from her pocket. To her surprise, she found it totally unresponsive.

"I seen a burning vehicle on the net before the net went down--that ain't no disturbance, that's

a damned riot!” another man shouted.

“Folks, I can’t claim to know the circumstances, but I do know that Homeland Security has **been called in to assist local authorities**. Apprehending and containing seditious militants is of top priority. I understand this might cause some concern, but--”

“You just assured us that things were under control. Now you don’t know the circumstances?” The familiar voice of Molly’s programming teacher came from somewhere to her right. “Do you take us for fools, congressman? Who put you up to this? These ain’t your words. **Why the hell you came all this way just to speak with us stupid farm folk has got me wondering**. Reckon, you’re out of a job already. I’ve been on the cryptonet and it ain’t no terrorist blocking our communications. Hell, my PND worked just fine ‘til y’all showed up with your trucks, guns, and dogs.”

“I assure you, the designated lock-zones are being set up for everyone’s best--”

The same buzzing sirens from the quarry cut the congressmen off, followed by a warning from a megaphone outside. “Attention, citizens. A curfew is in effect. Please return to your vehicles and disperse from the area immediately.”

Whispers and screams, profanity and confused murmurs rippled through the crowd.

“You have five minutes to vacate the area. Those remaining will be arrested.”

“You’ll have to drag me dead! I ain’t going nowhere ‘til I get some answers,” a man bellowed.

The crowd began to move in a panic, jostling each other as some sought to flee and others to remain.

Molly was shoved by a larger man, who forced his way through the door. Molly slipped out after him to see what was outside. A blinding spotlight clicked on. She squinted through it and staggered away from the entrance.

“Return to your vehicles. A curfew is in effect.” Two SUVs with flashing lights and reinforced bumpers skidded in beside a third, parked diagonally across an adjacent field.

Suddenly, a flood of people began to pour out from the church, forcing Molly to back up into the church’s mulch garden to avoid being trampled. Some fled to their vehicles, others lingered and pointed angry fingers and shouted obscenities at the officers.

“Where’s Pooky?”

Molly was relieved to hear Janette’s voice beside her. She scanned the crowd, but found no sign of him. “I don’t know, but we need to leave.”

“Not without Pook--”

“Janette, let’s go!” Molly began to pull Janette’s arm, just as an officer grabbed an unruly man beside them and brought him to the floor where he was zip-cuffed by another officer.

“Return to your vehicles. This is a violation of curfew,” the megaphone blared.

“You fucking Nazis!” someone screamed. Two shots of gunfire rang out.

[two sentences of the crowd flipping the fuck out]

“Where’s Pooky?” Janette shouted, tugging on Molly’s shirt. It was unclear who had fired first, or at what, but several officers responded by opening fire into the crowd.

“Run!” Molly shrieked, and ducked between two parked cars. She rolled under the nearest truck to avoid the gunfire and looked out. Her sense of panic dissipated slightly as a rubber bullet rolled in front of the bumper. Molly reached to her pocket for her PND to unlock the truck remotely, **but found it**

unresponsive.

“Molly, where’s Pooky? We need to find--”

A sharp sound unlike anything Molly had heard before split the air. Molly covered her ears, but found no relief. Her vision began to blur. Her scream was lost in the sharp tone. After several seconds, the burst stopped. Sirens, screams, and barking dogs replaced the vicious noise. Molly looked at Janette, who stared back with a confused and panicked look. Molly mouthed, “Follow me,” then rolled out from under the truck.

“My PND isn’t working,” Janette said.

Molly sprinted toward their pickup, with Janette close on her heels.

Janette held her thumb against the door to unlock it. Molly shoved her aside and hopped into the driver’s seat. Molly’s PND would not tether.

“Fucking thing. Tether!” The car remained dormant. “Start!” Molly slammed her hands on the steering wheel, and looked over her shoulder to find another SUV maneuvering to block the parking lot exit.

“Return to your vehicles and vacate the area. All remaining will be placed custody, this is your last warning,” a megaphone blared.

“Where’s Pooky?” Tears began to pour from Janette’s eyes.

Molly whirled around to see several rowdy members of the crowd being tackled to the asphalt after throwing stones at the SUVs. Another sonic LRAD burst crippled the spawning riot. Molly winced, and slammed the driver’s door shut. It was loud, but not deafening, as before.

A woman to Molly’s right staggered past into her vehicle, holding her hand to a bloody welt above her eye. A fourth SUV swooped in and blocked the remaining exit.

“All citizens remain seated. On the ground, cross your feet.”

“Janette, I need you to focus,” Molly said.

Janette continued to sob in the passenger seat, her head swiveling back and forth in search of Pooky.

“Janette!”

Janette flinched, then looked at Molly with tear-filled eyes and a trembling lip.

“I need you to start the truck.”

“What?”

“Voice authenticate!”

Janette blinked at Molly.

“Janette!”

Janette’s jaw trembled, but she choked the words out and held her thumb against the scanner. “Voice start. Janette, alpha-five bubblegum.” The truck’s high-beams flicked on and the engine started.

Without checking the rear-view, Molly flung the truck into reverse. With her foot to the floor, she gunned it forward into a storm gully and up into a field. The truck rocked and swayed its way over the field, then bumped violently onto the main road. Molly killed the lights and looked back at the sirens and chaos fading into the distance.

“Pooky...” Janette sobbed.

“He’s fine.” Molly glanced at rear-view. “He’ll be fine.”

Janette’s lip continued to quiver.

“Hey, Jan?”

Janette looked at Molly with scared puppy eyes.
"Your makeup is running."

Chapter 9. "How about Seventy-Two?"

June – 2026 | Day 3 | Tuesday Afternoon.

Charlton Illinois -- Downtown Charlton.

[This chapter largely failed and is also up for chopping to be condensed into another. it dissipates too much energy]

Janette slammed her palms down on the jailhouse counter. "I know you're lying! We already checked Westerhouse. He wasn't there. You guys arrested him. Here, in Charlton, at the church, last night. Period."

"No, ma'am. I've told you three times now: if he was arrested, it wasn't by us. No one by the name of Paul Rorche was processed through any of the jails we operate, nor was he charged under any criminal statute in the last twenty-four hours anywhere in this state."

"Well, what about forty-eight hours? Hell, how about seventy-two? Did you fucking check those?"

Molly covered her eyes with her palm.

Janette swiped the picture from her PND onto the counter's display screen and twisted it around to face the woman. "You see? You fucking see this man right here?"

"Yes, ma'am, I've seen your picture. Again, we've only processed two arrests in the last twenty-four hours. Homeland Security has been given provisional jurisdic—"

"Then where the hell is he?" Janette screamed. "You people can't just kidnap and lose track—"

"Is there any way we can use your stream access?" Molly asked. "Both of our PND's are displaying the same error and the Sheriff wasn't at Westerhouse either. We haven't seen any news or been able to contact anyone in the last few days. What's going on? I'm expecting an important call from my brother."

The receptionist paused. Her tone shifted to one of genuine empathy. "Yeah, I'm afraid our streams are down too. Our internal network is acting haywire. Some of our local comm channels are also acting up." She looked over her shoulder, then lowered her voice. "Homeland Security informed us that the stream would be restored soon, but to be honest, even we don't know what's going on. You're not the first to come in today asking about arrests we have no records of. The truth is, I haven't heard from Sheriff [NAME2] since the incident."

Molly shook her head and stepped away from the counter, leaving Janette to further berate the receptionist over her alleged "Crimes against humanity's nature." The video streams on the walls displayed a blend of recycled footage and generic propaganda. However, one portion displayed a message with Homeland Security's logo and a color-tag QR-code labeled "STATE OF EMERGENCY :: ZONES A50-A70 :: INFORMATION".

Molly activated her PND's camera function and pointed it at the QR-code pattern. A flood of information jumped onto her screen. She scrolled through several sections: Safety & Security, Mandates

& Curfews, Checkpoint Locations, Contraband, Municipal Guidance, Identification Protocol, Emergency Service Contact.

She glanced back at the receptionist, presently engaged in a futile battle of logic versus thickheadedness. There was no use trying to interrupt again until a victor emerged. Sitting down at a lobby table beside the wall-sized window, Molly stared out down the sleek marble entry steps.

On the road outside, a black DHS SUV rolled up to the intersection behind a green pickup truck. A tarp loosely covered a massive stockpile of supplies in its truck bed. Just as the pickup began to roll forward, the SUV flipped its siren lights on.

Molly shook her head and looked back over her shoulder. The receptionist had finally thrown in the towel and excused herself to the bathroom. Janette stomped her way over beside Molly and stood with her hands on her hips.

"Can you believe that fat cunt? If I wasn't so sure that short-haired bitch would shoot me, I'd fucking smack that whore in her stupid—"

"Check this out," Molly said, offering her PND.

Janette looked over her shoulder, then snatched it. "Yeah, so?"

"This emergency services thing. It's got stream access. Check the permissions."

Janette raised an eyebrow. "**What do you think** that means?"

"Emergency channels are working just fine, so clearly the normal streams are being dammed artificially. It means the storm has nothing to do with the damage. If I had to guess, I'd say the military or Homeland Security were block—"

"Whatever, I'm hungry. Let's go get some sandwiches. You sure Pooky's okay?"

"We'll find him."

"Yeah... All right. He better pay us back when we bail his sorry ass out after we eat and maybe key that whore's car!" Janette yelled the last few words over her shoulder as they stepped out into the muggy streets.

"Well, so much for sandwiches," Janette grumbled, staring at her PND's crypto wallet. "Guess money is worthless now too, huh? Why were they even open if they weren't accepting normal crypto?"

"**They were still taking cash. I guess enough people around here still use it.** Besides, what else is there to do?" Molly said, looking around at the nearly empty streets. The unusual calmness of downtown Charlton gave her goose bumps. Several stores, some open, most not, had broken windows--others had been obvious targets of looting. The gun shop's shelves were entirely vacant. The supermarket was boarded up with a spray painted sign that read "CLOSED!!" in red and "Joel 3:10-16" haphazardly tagged in black.

In the time it had taken them to walk to the 2nd Street deli and back, a second SUV had pulled up beside the green pickup truck. One DHS officer frisked a handcuffed young man, as the other two unloaded various supplies from the truck bed and rummaged through it.

"Fascists," Molly mumbled as they passed on the sidewalk.

"Real skinny, do you think Pooky got arrested last night, or what? I mean, without stream access, even that ugly bitch can't be sure he's not in another jail, right?" Janette said, nodding back at the police station.

"I'm not sure."

"How are you not sure? You either saw him get arrested, or you didn't. You saw more than I did last night."

"That's true, because I wasn't crying like a child."

Janette paused on the sidewalk with a hurt and confused look. "I thought he was dead, Molly."

Molly raised an eyebrow. "You saw what I saw. Don't know what else to tell you."

"I was high," Janette said, shaking her head slowly with a look of disgust. "You're fucked up, you know that?"

Molly sighed and stared blankly at Janette for several moments. "We need to make one more stop."

"Yeah, and where's that?" Janette reluctantly caught up beside her.

"The gardening store. Guns and ammo might be sold out and looters might have taken advantage of the chaos, but I'll bet you anything the gardening store still has—"

"Yeah, whatever. We'll get your bullshit garden crap. But then I'm finding Pooky, with or without you." Janette broke into a brisk walk toward the parking lot ahead.

Chapter 10. "Ripped Garbage Bags"

June – 2026 | Day 3 | (11:50 PM)

Charlton Illinois

"You're not serious."

"I'm dead serious."

"Tonight? Molly, you can't go tonight!"

"I'm going, tonight."

"Can't we just drive over tomorrow or at sunup? He'll probably be back before then, right? Or we'll try the sheriff's station again and—"

"We checked all day. He's not in jail."

"Yeah, but why do we have to go tonight? At the garden store, you said you were sure he was okay and might even be home."

Molly continued to dress. She tucked her black pant legs into her black socks. *And you believed me?* she thought. "I'm going, tonight."

"If you're going, I'm going."

"No."

"Try to fucking stop me, Molly. He's my uncle!"

Molly tongued the roof of her mouth and glared at Janette.

"I *am* going with you."

Molly took a deep breath and lifted her boot onto her bed to lace it. "You slow me down, even for a second, and I'll leave you behind."

Janette paused, as if anticipating further resistance, then turned and dashed up the stairs to her bedroom.

Molly considered leaving, but figured Janette would just cause more trouble trying to follow her. She dug through her closet for her old bird watching binoculars and shoved them into her bag beside her water bottle and rescue inhaler. Staring at her wall mirror, she adjusted the rest of her dark clothing to cover bright spots.

Molly sat down on her bed and stared out the bedroom window. Would her plan work? What would she find? Would she be caught? What would she say? Would it matter? The sound of Janette careening back down the stairs brought her mind back to focus.

"Ready," Janette said. She wore black yoga pants and a thick camouflage jacket five sizes too large with matching hunting boots that barely stayed on her feet. "I look badass, right?" She had smeared eye shadow under her eyes like a football player.

Molly shook her head. "This isn't a game."

"No shit, Sherlock. Anything else I should bring?"

Molly bit her lip. "Get a pen and notebook. Leave your PND here."

"What? Why?"

Molly cracked her neck. The sun was almost down beyond the horizon. "It's two miles after we drop the bikes at that new checkpoint. We'll need to stay off the roads and cut through the field. If you slow me down, I'm not—"

"Yeah, yeah. I got it." Janette dashed back out of the room.

"And change those boots!" Molly shouted after her. Molly's mind turned back to preparation. If her suspicions held true, she'd find answers just past Cookie Cutter Quarry. It was something Mrs. [NAME4] had said about her crickwash. Big tents. Chain fences. Trespassed off her own land. Particularly disconcerting was something Molly had read in her lawbook chapter about World War II. The sheriff was missing and *Korematsu v US* was fresh on Molly's mind.

All of this, together with the checkpoints, their run-in with Homeland, the drone, and something the jailhouse receptionist had said led Molly to believe something [ADJECTIVE] was going on.

"Ready," Janette said, leaning back against Molly's doorframe.

"Are you seriously out of breath already?"

"We don't all run track, okay? Besides, I'm lighter than you. I'll keep up fine."

Molly flicked open Rodge's military knife and took a deep breath. "All right," she said and flipped it shut. "Let's go."

{CONSIDERING A CHAPTER BREAK and renaming the above "Try to fucking stop me."}

Flaky crabgrass scratched against Molly's neck. Cold mud soaked through her clothing as she belly-crawled through the storm gully towards the quarry's dirt road entrance. Butterflies tickled in her stomach at the sight of a newly installed chain-length fence.

Having timed three trucks entering through the sliding gate, Molly estimated a twenty-second gap where they'd be able to slip through ahead of the truck rounding the corner. The hazy glow of distant headlights was already visible on the windy dirt road behind them. Molly looked at Janette and whispered, "Once the gate opens, we start running again. Don't stop until I stop."

Janette looked terrified, but nodded.

The two lay for several moments, Molly eyeing the gate with determination and heightened adrenaline. The gate budged.

Molly stood up and ran out across the Quarry's front road entrance with Janette following closely behind. The two sprinted as fast as they could along the road, then dove into another [PILE] of tall grass just as a camouflage cargo truck rounded the corner behind them, illuminating their old hiding spot.

The rumble of tires drummed past inches beside Molly's head. When the truck had passed, she shifted her weight and knelt up over the tips of the grass. The dirt road ahead extended through several smaller foothills, each blocking Molly's view around the next.

Janette gasped for breath and spoke in a hushed whisper. "I don't—I don't know why we couldn't just bike this far or go around. Ditching them back at the road just makes us—"

Molly held a finger to her lips and pointed up at the bobbing beam of headlights. When crickets had replaced the engine's sound, Molly spoke. "They might have seen us on the bikes. You knew the plan."

"Do you—do you have any water?"

"Didn't you bring any?"

Janette shook her head.

Molly sighed and retrieved her backpack.

"Look, we can't stop here long. You see the area over the ridge where the sky's lighter?"

Janette gulped down water, and followed Molly's gaze with a look of dread.

Molly snatched the bottle and re-bagged it. "That's where we're going." **The unmistakable glow of headlights crested around the embankment beside them. "We need to move. Now."**

She took off running up a dried stream path, using old roots to gain leverage.

Janette fumbled her way up behind, but lost footing just before the top of the ledge.

Molly pulled her by the thick coat collar just as another large military truck appeared from around the corner beneath them. Janette's face was a mix of agony and fear. Her palms were scraped raw and she gasped for air, clutching her sides.

"You okay?" Molly asked in an exasperated tone.

Janette winced and wiped her forehead to her sleeve. After a brief moment, she composed herself and nodded vigorously.

"Good. Let's move."

Janette groaned, but followed.

From the shadows of a tree line, atop the highest terrace of the quarry, Molly peered down through her binoculars. Towering flood lights lined the massive perimeter of a 20-foot tall chain-link fence.

"W-what is all this?" Janette whispered.

Molly adjusted the binocular focus. She couldn't see over or through the fence, but several large tents poked up above it. They reminded her of cotton and burlap versions of Native American long houses. Razor wire extended the perimeter of the fence, and armed guards sat in two mobile lookout towers mounted on top of a mobile lookout vehicle.

"What is it? Molly, what can you see?"

"Not much. I see...the train. They're unloading stuff."

"What stuff? Who? What else can you see? Lemme see!"

Molly bit her lip. "Not much," she passed the binoculars to Janette. "Not from here..."

"Holy shit. What do you think they're doing with those boxes? Whoa. Molly, do you see all those armored tank car things? ...Molly? Molly!"

Several medium sized stones cascaded past Molly's ankles as Janette scrambled down the steep embankment to catch up.

"What the fuck," Janette hissed. "Don't fucking leave me like—"

"Shh!" Molly snatched her binoculars back and disappeared into the cover of thick underbrush. Navigating by the ambient moon and floodlights, Molly trekked through the thin grove to the edge of the underbrush.

The loud hum of a generator buzzed through the night. What appeared to be the same material as black plastic garbage bags was tightly interwoven between the layers of chain-link fence. A thick spotlight swiveled overhead. Molly dashed from her hiding spot into the shadow of the fence itself.

Tracing the periphery, she stepped over soggy earth, following in what appeared to be gigantic tire-tracks paralleling the fence. The scent of disturbed earth mixed with the scent of gasoline and outhouse chemicals. A smorgasbord of sharp roots and machine mangled plant growth crunched beneath her boots.

Janette caught up behind Molly and whispered over her shoulder in a frantic tone. "What are you doing? What if they—"

"Shh!" Molly knelt down and inspected the fence. Loose clumps of fresh dirt cluttered its base. She withdrew Rodge's knife and carefully sliced an eyehole into the plastic.

A flat field of dirt and grass came into view. Illuminated haphazardly by portable construction lights, the field stretched out to a distant freight train. Beside the unloading operation, a small group of people congregated around what appeared to be a long plastic table, manned by men in camouflaged uniforms. It appeared to be a lunch line, feeding a queue of civilians.

There were also far more tents than Molly had originally assumed--several rows, each with a hanging lamp marking its entrance extended into the distance. She now estimated the number of tents to be closer to a hundred.

"Write this down," Molly said, pointing at the notebook in Janette's jacket pocket. She adjusted her position to see through from the other direction and began to describe what she saw. Two tiltrotors were parked in a dimly lit corner of the enclosure, beside thirty light tactical vehicles and dozens of crates and barrel stacks. Movement brought Molly's attention to the center of the makeshift compound, where two older model personnel carrier trucks had just parked. Not daring to make the eye hole any wider, Molly shifted her head back and forth to get a better view.

"You getting all this?"

Men in military uniforms jumped from the trucks, followed by shouting and barking. Molly's eyes

widened. A dozen plain clothed civilians, many of them children, were ousted from the back of the truck, clutching small bags and pillows to their chests.

"Molly," Janette whispered.

Molly's eye was drawn to a group of several non-uniformed girls about her own age being escorted between tents by an elder female officer.

"He's gotta be in there, Jan. I'm sure of it."

"Molly." Janette's whisper was stressed, almost a whimper.

"There's got to be a hundred--no, maybe a thousand civilians housed in these fields."

"Molly." Janette's voice was no longer a whisper.

"They've commandeered the train lines. It looks like--"

"Molly!" Janette screamed.

Molly whirled round, ready to smack Janette, but felt her stomach drop. She was met instead by two towering officers in exoskeleton suits standing on the ridge behind them. Their shoulder mounted spotlights clicked on, blinding her.

"Cancel that, Capricorn. We've got 'em."

[Part 2- M&R]

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MOMUTJZfPEJOI-WY88uST2E1xwPYCBTm0XE4XCgfHhc/edit?usp=sharing>