

I HATE MOOBERLY

By M.p Temple

Episode One

Racer?

Tuesday. May 7th. 1996. 7:30 A.M.

Leonie slammed the truck door.

“We’ll talk about this more after school.” Her mother said before driving away. Her Jr firewatch summer job might not be happening.

She threw her blue book bag at the only street light at the bus stop. The post shook so hard from the impact that the globe shattered, sending broken glass pieces everywhere. She covered her head with her hands as the canopy and bulb crashed on the sidewalk. Sending the west

side of the small Missouri River town into the darkness.

She checked her bangs in the reflection of the broken glass, remembering the entire fight that had happened minutes before. They had stopped at Casey's station to use the payphone to get the final word from her father. Not only did he run out of quarters midway through their argument, but he had sided with her mother. Her father was away working at a cattle farm in Wyoming until the land around their ranch could be usable again. He didn't live there anymore, yet he could still tell her what to do?

She kicked the cement post. There was no way to change her parents' minds.

A 'D' was not a passing grade and not okay, even if it was her first year in high school. It wasn't fair. Her parents didn't understand what this meant to her. She needed to get away.

Even worse, the power had gone out at the ranch house. She was out of clean clothes and forced to wear faded overalls and a boring black T-shirt. Taken from the donation bin at Sundown Baptist church. Not at all how she wanted to start a school week. The rest of the students also relied on disaster relief for clothing and food. But her t-shirt was the wrong kind of faded to be cool. It was lame. And muggy out already.

What is this? She thought.

A raven cawed somewhere from the

cloudy sky above. The sound snapped her back from school blues. Her dream could still happen. Each summer at Golpher Canyon, they hire a student to work in a historic fire lookout tower. Unsupervised with check-ins with the park rangers. She could be a real Firewatch. The park was looking for someone with outdoor experience. As a rancher's kid, that's all she had going for her. She was made for the job. It was all she could think about. She had to find a way to pass the agriculture class. Or else she would be stuck in summer school. The thought curled her stomach.

The roaring of the diesel engine pulled her away from her thoughts. It was 1996. She had school. And Firewatch summer was not happening unless she

passed every class. Her father was firm on this. No pass, no Golpher Canyon grass. She had to find a way to make Coach Blinkensberg change a few of her grades.

The door of the half-painted yellow bus swung open. A short lady with dark curly hair sat in the driver's seat, motioning with her lips to the back of the bus. Leonie discovered as she walked through the crowd that only one seat remained. A girl sat wearing a white and pink cheerleader uniform layered over Ren and Stimpy pyjama pants. She smelled like coconut oil. Her sandy blond hair and round cheeks stood out to Leonie, as her features always did. In the same way that if some had been stung by bee's they know to take cover when they hear buzzing. She was watchful of those arctic blue eyes. If

you look too long at them, they reach out and steal you. Of course, the only open seat on the bus was next to the girl she used to steal chocolate milk from in Jr. High.

Fantastic. Leonie thought. *That's who I am trying to get away from.*

“Hi Cassie, I. Like. Your shoes.” Leonie said, trying to sound polite. Everyone in town wore the same shoes, also found in the donation bin.

Cassie put both feet across the seat. Leonie felt her knees buckle from the weight of her bookbag on her shoulders.

“I am not in the mood for this. Move over.” Leonie said.

“No. You have to ask the bookbag.”

Cassie yawned.

Leonie sighed. “Mr. Bookbag, can you and your entire ego go play free tag on the freeway or something? Move over.”

“No, you can’t sit on me!” Cassie said in a goofy voice, speaking for her bookbag. “No one is saving you a seat to Golper Canyon either.”

The bus driver spoke into the intercom. At first, the speakers played something that sounded like two teenage boys talking. A loud hiss rang from the speakers. The lady adjusted a setting on a panel by the shifter and spoke again.

“Girls. We all got stuff to do. Sit down so we can get out of here.”

“That fire lookout job is mine,”

Cassie said, smiling. Still taking up the seat.

Leonie threw her bag at Cassie. She then sat down on her lap, who screamed, flailed and kicked. Leonie forced her way into the seat next to her, taking back her bag and using it as a shield.

She put on her headphones and started listening to grunge to block out the sound of the girl's yelling.

“You’ll pay for this!”

Why does SHE want that job? Leonie thought. *I am not letting that stuck-up, mouldy carrot muffin take my summer away. That job is mine.*



Town school. 3:50 p.m

“I heard you kicked Cassie in the head.” Coach Blinkensberg said while snapping the cap back on a dry-erase marker. The bell had rung, and most of the students were jammed at the door trying to leave the tiny classroom for lunch. The building had been built in the 1920’s and hadn’t been updated since. The agriculture classroom Leonie stood in still had the wooden desks with the folding seats.

“I didn’t kick her,” Leonie said, adjusting the extra credit paper. Her agriculture teacher towered above her. He was a man in his thirties, a little heavier, with a great personality. He had a large nose, thick black glasses, a button-up dress shirt, and never a tie. All the kids

loved Coach Blinkensberg, which was why this was shocking to hear from the teacher who held the fate of her summer in his hands.

“What I heard was.” He said. “On the back of the bus? You smacked her across the head with a water bottle there after yelling, ‘I am the water queen?’”

Was this a set-up? Leonie realised Cassie must have made up a story to tell the other kids to increase her chances of getting that summer job. That little snicker doodle planned to go all.

“I am the water queen sounds like something someone would make up if they couldn’t think of anything else.”

“Could you not think of anything else?” He asked.

The stare coming from the usually charming man alarmed her. She stood straighter and set down the papers.

“I sat on her a little. To get her to move her feet.”

“Leonie, I knew you would be searching for extra credit, and I thought you could handle the assignment I had in mind. But now I hear this and I’m not so sure.”

“Ask everyone on the bus,” Leonie said, tightening her fist. This was an outrage. She was not that kind of person, she tried so hard around everyone.

“The only reason I am still entertaining this idea is because I have asked around.” He said. “Her story changed when one of the teachers asked.

But I see how your fists gets sometimes when you think no one is watching.”

Leonie tried to relax her hands. She looked down. Her black hair fell in her eyes, but she did not bother to brush her bangs aside.

“Is this really about the fight I had with Mooberly?” She asked, looking up frantically. No one could have seen that. That conversation was private, away from all ears. Far from the main school building, in a barn in a field that is far from the school.

“Why do you keep calling her Mooberly? The class cow doesn’t have a name.” He said almost in shame of having the say the words aloud. He leaned on the cluttered teacher’s desk. He looked tired

to the girl.

She gasped. “How did you...”

“That is not important.” He said. “I know about it. It is concerning when any student gets in verbal conflict with a creature that wants to cuddle you.”

“It’s true. I don’t get along with that prat Mooberly. That’s not a crime. Otherwise McDonald’s and Dairy Queen would need really good lawyers.” She said.

Coach Blinkensberg moaned as if hearing the worst joke ever told poorly. He handed her a flyer, made from cut-out magazine clippings that had been copied a dozen times. The flyer read:

Wanted. After school, cow caretaker.
Extra credit available.

Leonie mouthed a bad word. She hated that cow. The smell, the sound she made. The way its nose and lips turned up when it chewed on grass, everything. It's big brown spot and a white coat of smelly hair. Most of all, she hated how it reminded her that her father would be gone for most of the year. She found herself tearing up.

“I don't want to stay after school. I hate this place. No offence.”

The coach shrugged. “Do you want the Jr. Golpher Canyon Fire position? Or do you want to hang out all summer with me? Redoing Agriculture homework?”

“Oh my gawd no,” Leonie said. “Stop, I'll do it. When do I report in?”

Again, Coach Blinkensberg sighed.

“Show up after school at the barn by the football field. There’s a list of everything you need to do. Do that for two weeks straight, and I will even endorse you for the job. The school needs that cow as healthy come the fall. To show the pride of this town! And to make a lot of money.”

“If the town has so much pride, why won’t anyone say the name?” Leonie asked.

Coach Blinkensberg hesitated. “It’s um. You know why no one says the name, it was named in different times back then. Forget our horrible town name. I trust you more than the others. For right now. That can change. I’ll write Cassie a letter of recommendation if I need to. So act wisely. Don’t let anything bad happen to

the cow.”

“You have my word, Mooberly will live.” She said, “I need this extra credit. I will not fail you.”

He shook his head. “I’m not a Sith lord, and the cow doesn’t have a name. It’s a class cow. Don’t get attached. It is being sold to raise money for a new wrestling mat. Don’t take this from me and the kids. This is all we have! If I hear any more about you and Cassie fighting. It’s over for both of you. Got it?”

Leonie swallowed hard. “Yes. I understand.”



School Barn. 5:25

After school, things didn't get much better. The water bucket clunked on the barn floor. Leonie cursed at her wet hands in frustration. The leaky pump always sprayed water in all directions, causing the handle to be wetter than she expected. The large cow munched on grass and "Moo" -ed from its straw-littered pen. Its tail swatted back and forth as if it were making up a drum part in the melody the cow was making up in its head. Dust particles floated in the air.

"Stuff it in a grocery bag, you future cheeseburger," Leonie shouted as she picked up the bucket.

She paused.

"Sorry Mooberly. I don't like messing up." She said. "Why do I have to use a

bucket anyway. Can't the school district afford a hose?"

The cow mooed.

"No one asked you." She sneered.

After walking fifty feet, she refilled the water container from a leaky pump at the opposite end of the barn, trying to ignore the smells of wet hay and rotten wood. Her knuckles and arms burned from carrying it to the cow's water trough so many times. She trudged past three empty stalls and a tractor parked inconveniently in the middle of the room. The cow stuck her head through the fence when she approached. With her large tongue began to lap up the liquid into her mouth. Making a face that looked ridiculous to Leonie.

Soft crunching of footsteps caused

Leonie to turn around. As she did, she felt a cold splash. From her left, she saw Cassie, still in a cheerleader uniform and PJ bottoms, with an empty bucket. She had missed the cow's water container and soaked Leonie's shirt and overalls.

The two girls glared at each other.

“What are you doing here?” Leonie asked her. “Don't you have cheer practice or something?”

“Who are we cheering for, the cafeteria ladies? We don't have any sports teams. They cancelled practice again. I'm here now because I know you are going to screw up.” Cassie said, walking to the water faucet in the back of the barn.

Leonie dashed towards Cassie and jabbed her with a sharp poke to the

shoulder. She dropped her bucket on her own feet and crossed her arms. Cassie did not back away. They faced each other like boxers waiting for the bell. Leonie stood firm. Cassie glared.

The cow mooed.

“Stay out of this Mooberly! Cassie, why do you have to be into everything I am? Can’t you get your own hobbies and interests? You’re popular enough you can do anything you want in school. Go do somewhere else.” Leonie pointed towards the big creature, still munching like nothing of interest was happening.

“What I heard when you said that is ‘can you stop existing please?’ and that’s like rude.” Cassie said.

“I want you to exist. Over there. Far

away from me with everyone else in... this town that we can't say the name of.”

“I’m a threat to your little world you like to hide in all day.” Cassie gawked. “I bet in your head, you got your own theme park with posters of yourself all over. Look, I’m not here to solve your problems. You don’t even let anyone ride the bumper cars in that world of yours. You’re too awesome apparently, to talk to anyone.” She poked Leonie in the shoulder. Who drew back with a widened-eyed shocked expression.

“Um. Time out.” Leonie made a T shape with her hands. “Where are my bumper cars at? Cause I have been living in my head a while, and there are no rides. No cotton candy machines. Just killer clowns and water fountains of crystal

Pepsi. No, when the street lights go off in here.” Leonie pointed to her head. “It is not a safe place to be. There’s like Vampire From Dusk Till Dawn type stuff happening in there. That’s why I need to be out there in the wild. And in this. Town.”

“Again, what I hear you talk is ‘I am pathetic and want to run away from all my problems,’” Cassie scoffed. She dropped her bucket. “You want that job to get away. I need that job to connect. I’m not going to stop existing cause we want the same thing. I’m sorry I lied about you kicking me. I was wrong. But I want this. It’s not fair that your parents do ranch stuff. Not all of us have that.”

“It’s not my job to solve your

problems,” Leonie said.

Cassie’s open hand struck Leonie’s cheek. Leonie shoved Cassie so hard that she landed on her backside. Standing over her, with a bright red mark on her face, she yelled.

“I was being nice to you!”

Cassie tossed a bucket at Leonie’s head. She ducked, then kicked Cassie. But she grabbed hold of Leonie’s overalls and dragged her down the barn floor. Like alligators engaged in a rolling contest, they scuffled. Punches flew as they wrestled around, shouting insults and name-calling at the top of their lungs.

Neither of them heard the commotion happening other side of the cow pen.

“Horse face!”

“Edward Scissorhands wanna be!”

They fought, releasing years of pent-up anger and hate towards each other. The fighting brought them to the back of the barn, where they began to push and shove into tall stacks of hay.

On the other side of the barn, the cow pen door creaked open. And the sound of a large engine revving.

A strong, cold breeze with the scent of rain swept through the room. They stopped and turned in the direction of the wind. A single straw floated towards them from the outside world. It came from where the cow had once been.

“I don’t hear Mooberly chewing,”

Leonie said in a panic.

Loenie ran around the tractor and climbed over the pen fence. A white pickup truck without a license plate pulling away with Mooberly in the back. The vehicle disappeared from her sight, travelling on a dirt road into a blooming dogwood forest.

Leonie exclaimed. “Someone cownap Mooberly!”



Agriculture Classroom 6:30

“I want an explanation. Right now. Starting with how you got that red mark.”

Leonie and Cassie sat in shock in front of

Coach Blinkensberg's desk in the agriculture classroom. He paced back and forth rapidly. They all looked ill. Leonie stared at her white light-up sneakers. The cow was gone. Everything was over.

Cassie shuffled.

“That cow cost two hundred and seventy-five dollars. We are never buying new Wrestling mats now. Those poor kids are going to keep getting ringworm. Why were both of you there? How did this happen?”

Leonie looked at Cassie, who also stared at her feet. Having been so fierce a few minutes ago, she now seemed different. Quiet. Withdrawn. It felt to her like looking in a mirror. You see yourself, but it's backwards somehow. Her dream had died too. Maybe she did suck as a person,

but maybe she was one of those people who have good intentions sometimes.

“I fell. On a door. Knob. I deserved it.” Leonie said, straightening up. “I. Didn’t want to go to the nurse and leave Mooberly all alone. So. Cassie came to help me when it happened. Someone stole Mooberly in the back of their truck. I saw them driving over the hill towards the other side of the tracks. This couldn’t have been prevented.”

Cassie’s eyes darted to Leonie. Like a lion spotting a gazelle. But she nodded in agreement.

“What did you do to Mooberly? ” Coach Blickensberg said, sitting at his desk, out of breath. “You hated her. You said so yourself. You two were the last to see her.”

“No!” Cassie cried. “I would never...”

“If you tell me where you took her, I won’t call the county police.” He said in a threatening tone.

“We didn’t cownap her,” Leonie said, looking him in the eyes.

“Until you have proof otherwise? Detention. Summer school. Now. I’m going to go lie down in my car. Go tell your parents what you did before I do. This isn’t over.”

He walked out of the room holding his stomach, leaving the two girls seated at the front. The door closed quietly. For a long while, they did not speak. It might have been the longest they had sat next to each other without throwing an insult around.

“You lied for me,” Cassie said.

Leonie crossed her arms. “Not for you. But. The only way either of us can get this junior firewatch gig? Is if we find that cow. And we need to do it together.”

Cassie crossed her arms. “I’d rather chug rotten yogurt.”

“It’s the only way one of us is getting that job. We don’t have much time.”

“Wait, are you serious. You want us to break curfew to go after whoever took Mooberly? My parents would murder me.” Cassie said.

“You said you wanted this,” Leonie stood up. “The adults in this city are worthless. So it has to be us. I bet if we go across the tracks, we can find some clue to where

they took her. We need to go find her. And bring her back. Weston and Boone from science class. Don't they live across the tracks? They'd know who'd take a cow."

Cassie stood and shook her head. "I don't think I have a choice. I have to. But don't forget I'm not on your side. I'm doing this for me. We need to find ride over there."

Leonie blinked. "Oh. We. Can. Take my dad's truck, I guess."

"... You have a license?" Cassie asked.

"Like. No one said anything about a license but I've been driving since I was 14. You don't drive anything? What do you haul hay with?" Leonie said.

"You are not normal," Cassie said.

"I told you there weren't any bumper cars.

Let's find out who took Mooberly. And why.
But first. I gotta find a payphone and call
my mom."

Episode Two

2 Slow 2 Curious Country Road. 7:15

“Girls, stop cussing at each other.”

Leonie and Cassie ignored Mrs. Gilbert while shouting in the back seat, which smelled like pine air freshener. Leonie’s mother kept looking into the review mirror at the girls. Engaged in the fieriest of debates.

“You want to fight me over everything! Stop!” Cassie shouted.

“I didn’t even want you here!” Leonie shouted back.

The truck pulled up to the ranch, now stripped of all the trees that used to surround the property. Now, most of the land is red clay and sand instead of usable soil. Cassie turned as soon as the sight of their house came into view. The lower levels were still boarded, and the garage lay bare without a proper door.

Leonie saw her father's truck, right where he left it months ago. The Gilberts had bought it from a farm auction before the flood changed everything, as a project car. It ran well enough back when they had cattle to feed.

"Cassie, did you even bring clothes to sleep in?" Mrs. Gilbert asked, with a strong hint of annoyance in her voice.

"I don't sleep. I trance." She said.

Mrs. Gilbert parked outside the house in front of the garage. She stopped the engine, which sputtered to a grinding stop.

“Girls, what’s this about. Cause if this is a sleepover, it’s going to be one of those that ends up on Nightline. I don’t want a Ted Koppel interview. Do I need take Cassie home?”

Leonie wondered why her mother was acting so strangely. She didn’t care what she did. Not that she ever brought friends over. Especially with the house still a mess from the water damage.

“We told you, we are best friends now and want to study together,” Leonie said.

“Stop looking at me, I don’t like it,” Cassie said grumbling.

The girls heard a loud click from the passenger side panel. Leonie tried to exit the vehicle, but the door didn't open.

"Ya both think I didn't pull shady things when I was your age?" Mrs. Gilbert said.

"What are you two doing? And how illegal are we talking? I have plans tonight, I can not cancel and can not deal with this right now."

"Wait, you did shady stuff as a kid, Mom? Like what?"

"Don't change the subject." Mrs. Gilbert said, looking down and away.

"No, you opened that door, you can't close it down. You're going to tell me you were out stealing cars or something? You get upset if you get too much change back."

“You both are lame,” Cassie said. “And this is kidnapping, Mrs. Gilbert.”

“Tell me what is happening, or we all sit in this truck until the end of time.” Mrs. Gilbert said.

“Someone took the class cow,” Leonie said. “We are trying to figure out who did it. It’s. A whodunit slumber party.”

“People who steal cattle drive straight to sell them. If they don’t butcher them first, and sell them on the side of the road. You’re not going to find the cow, or who did it. Even if you did. I bet you would want nothing to do with that. You understand? You should be finding a way to pass that class; that is what you should be doing.”

“I am,” Leonie said. “Why else would I

have Cassie here? I'd rather hang out with Charles Mason."

"He'd like that." Her mom said, rolling her eyes. "Why do you feel the need to lie to me then? About you being friends?"

"I have rights, Mrs. Gilbert." Cassie complained.

"That's an illusion. Leonie, why don't you feel comfortable telling me the truth? What do you know?"

Leonie drew back from hearing this. "You're acting weird, Mom."

Mrs. Gilbert pressed the child lock button that let out a click.

"Stay in the house. If there's an emergency, drive to a payphone and call 911. I won't be back til late. Do not leave

under any other circumstances,” She said.
“Get out of the truck now. Move it. I have places to be, baby girl.”

They did as she asked and exited the vehicle.

“Your farm sucks,” Cassie said. “Like your face. Get your keys, We got to get to Weston’s place.”



Across the Tracks. 7:45 p.m.

It had taken a few minutes to locate the keys, but in time, no they were on their way to the backroads. Leonie brake checked the truck again, smiling as Cassie held tighter to the overhead handles. The white truck didn’t need to stop, but sliding

on the dirt road was too fun to pass up. That and Cassie flipping out. Wide-eyed at how obstructive the windshield was from all the back country dirt amused her. They had passed the tracks and were on the other side of the rolling hills. The dull headlight lit up the entire distance of barren farm land in the night. The yellow light illuminated the red clay and sand as far as the eye could see. This was part of why Leonie did not mind the obstruction in her view. The view hurt too much.

“If you do that one more time,” Cassie said. “I am going to tie you up, leave you in the back and drive it myself.”

Leonie pointed. A large cart sat on the side of the road, wooden with a metal roof fastened to the top. It once might have

sold fruit, but its shelves sat covered. Two figures stepped out from behind the cart and walked onto the road. They approached the the head lights.

It was two kids. A shorter kid who wore a starter cap sideways, wore a number 14 Carolina Panthers jersey. A taller, thicker kid with a buzz cut, looking like a lineman, wore a red shirt that said “Tell me about the Rabbits.”

Leonie slowed down and came to a smooth stop. Cassie smacked the back of her seat.

“You could do that this entire time!” Cassie shouted, shaking her fist.

“Hush. It’s Weston and Boone.” Leonie said. “What are they doing on the road?”

Weston walked to the driver’s side of the

truck and knocked. Leonie rolled down the window.

“Dude. Look who got lost. A future serial killer and a burnout waiting to happen.” Weston laughed.

“Bro.” Boone chuckled in his deep, hollow voice. “They’d better get back to playing dolls.”

“Dude,” Weston called out. “Sick burn.”

Cassie rolled down the passenger side window and made a rude gesture towards Boone.

“How about these rabbits?” She said. “We are here for information nerds. Someone took the class cow. We saw them heading this way.”

Weston stood taller, as if trying to make

himself look bigger than he was. “I don’t know nothing about nothing. Hey Dude. You know something?”

“Nope, I’m a big dumb country boy. I’m a product of my environment, Bro.” Boone said, crossing to the passenger side, giving the cheerleader the stink eye.

“Stop the vaudeville act, dude bros,” Leonie said. “Who might be desperate enough to steal a cow?”

“You know who’s desperate, Bro?” Boone said. “Leonie’s Mom.”

Weston burst out in laughter. Leonie exited the truck, shoving Weston out of the way. She marched to the boy, who backed away as soon as he saw Cassie get out to join her. Weston ran to the fruit stand and started covering its shelves with an old,

faded bed sheet. Boone walked backwards
“I was joking.” He said.

“I’m not.” She picked up a handful of clay from the side of the road and flung it at him, smacking him in the chest. “Who took Mooberly today at 4:35? Out in the ag building.”

Weston wedged himself in front of Leonie and Boone. Cassie crossed her arms and stood closer to Leonie, whose fists clenched.

Weston poked Leonie in the arm. “What we know is our business. You’d better back up before something bad happens.”

Leonie kicked the boy’s ankle with a sweeping blow. He let out a cry as he struck the side of the cart. “My wrist! Oh

no! I got to race! My Wrist!” He yelled over and over. Boone lifted him up to his feet.

“Touch me and bad things happen,” Leonie shouted. Cassie dragged her back to the truck. She still was trying to get back to Weston.

“Get back in”, Cassie said. “We can’t find the cow like this.”

Cassie threw her in the passenger seat and shut the door.

“You are in for it now!” Boone yelled. “We ain’t letting this one go.”

Cassie took the wheel and began to drive away past the cart. Leonie leaned out the window, spotting an old-time microphone hanging out of one of the shelves. It must have become dislodged in the fight. The

mic's large silver diaphragm spun hanging from a wire. Leonie thought she recognised it from photos she'd seen of people creating radio shows. What would Weston and Boone be doing with something like that?

“Nah. We'll be back for you. Next time, you'd better start talking about how you're able to afford a starter cap. While the rest of the town is searching in Casey's station's dumpster for pizza slices.”

The truck drove off.



Backroads. 8:10 p.m.

They had driven to the top of a hill at Leonie's insistence. There, Cassie rested on a lone stump that once had been a large tree. She kept shaking her head. Leonie rolled her eyes at this. She sat in the driver's seat, fiddling with the radio, switching channels.

"If you keep beating everyone, no one is going to talk to us," Cassie said. "You need to get it together. We are not the LAPD."

You hurt a real person back there. Even if he is a dude bro.”

“No one is going to say anything unless...”

“Let me do the talking.” She said. “Since you’re dragging me into this, I can at least keep you from picking a fight with everyone you come across. Those two are not going to ever tell us anything, and you know who they are related to.”

Leonie turned a knob, until the radio's sharp static became the sound of a familiar voice.

“I knew it.” She said. “That was them we heard on the bus this morning.”

A deep, hollow voice bellowed from the speakers. “Again, listeners, this is a call for help. Some punks looking for trouble

have injured a very key rider in tonight's events. If you are willing to help us, meet us in the valley beyond the tracks. You'll see the glow from the event. Inquire about "Police Academy. And now here are some tunes to get you ready for tonight's event."

The station cut to soft piano music.

"That is Boone." Cassie drew closer, eyeing the dashboard as if it were a demon. "That is a real broadcast. Has to be illegal."

"That's something we can use against them," Leonie said. "What event? Nothing goes on in this city except chicken fried steak day at Neoshou's diner. Weston and Boone are taking a major risk by making a pirate radio station."

“Weston is not going to talk to you. Not after you did what you did.”

“We’ll see,” Leonie said. “I have a plan. We are going to ask about Police Academy. As long as we don’t have to watch them all, because there are so many. I bet you there will be a white truck there. We find that, and we find Mooberly.”

“Everyone drives a white truck.” Cassie crossed to the passenger seat.

“Not everyone,” Leonie said. “I have a feeling that the truck will be what leads us to finding her. And me. Enjoying looking for smoke in a tower in the mists of the Ozarks.”



Field. 8:50

A half hour later, Leonie screamed into her hands. In front of them were about twenty-five white pickup trucks, all about the same make and model. Cassie , smirking, gestured in the direction where people gathered around make-shift stalls. Beyond them were cones set out in a long line. Loud gas generators powered stadium-like lights, creating a festive

atmosphere. Folks seemingly had travelled there from around the state. More people than Leonie had seen in town.

“Told you so.” Cassie sneered. “We’ve got nothing. Bet you wish you were nicer to the dude bros now, uh?”

Leonie refused to answer. The two stopped cold in their tracks, hearing something from nearby. They heard a multitude of moo’s. Not one or two cows, but a chorus of angry sounds. From the stalls and bonfire, they heard things like “Get your corn dogs!” and “Place your bets here!”

To this last cry, a man yelled, “500 on Police Academy!” He handed over his money to a lady sitting at a desk with a banged-up money box. Half his shirt was untucked, and his suit pants crinkled.

People around him murmured.

“Have faith. I do.” He said.

“Hey.” Leonie pointed to a man. “That’s Pastor Branson! Is he... betting? On what? Why are there so many cows here? What the flip is this Cassie! This is an underground cow wrestling ring!”

The girl in the cheer uniform shrugged her shoulders at hearing this. Her face scrunched.

“That. Is where your mind went to. I. Don’t have a word for you.” She said.

They turned at the sound of the gates creaking. Six cows thundered out and across the distance of the long race way. Waving in and out of the cones and into the spectators who laughed and cheered.

When the cows had run the full track, handlers gathered them back into the pens.

“They aren’t wrestling cows.” Cassie said.
“They are racing them.”

“... well, Cow Wrestling is cooler. Hey! Pastor!” Leonie shouted.

The man froze, with a corn dog still in his mouth. He took a large bite, leaving only the stick.

They met around the fire. Surrounded by people selling everything from cow pins to VHS movies, to fried hot dogs in a real deep fryer. Its smell of onions and mustard was strong. It seemed like most of the state was present.

“You have some nerve showing up here

after hurting my rider.” Branson tossed the stick into the bonfire. “Weston’s wrist is so sprained he can’t even hold onto the reins. You ought to be ashamed of yourself for harming someone.”

“Wait, people. Ride. Cows. That is what this is. This is literally a cow race?” She said.

Cassie came to stand next to her, with a corn dog with ketchup in one hand and a plate of funnel cakes in the other. “Yes. Keep up, please. The town is struggling so bad everyone has resorted to cow racing.” She said.

“Yes.” The preacher nodded. “So bad that Weston’s family might get their land taken by the bank if he doesn’t win this race.” The preacher said. He lowered his voice so

that only they could hear. “And now he can’t do it. We can’t find anyone. I spent good money on this racer and you have flushed it all down the drain.”

“Where did you get the cow?” Leonie asked. “Cause you should be ashamed if you stole it.”

The preacher spit away from the girls in total disgust. “I am not a bank. I do not steal.” He said.

“Weston could have arranged to take Mooberly for this. He has a motive” Leonie said to Cassie.

“I’ve owned Police Academy for months. Best racing cow there is.” The preacher put his hands in his pockets and looked down. He noticed his shirt. He tucked it in nervously. “It has done a lot of good things

with our cut of the winnings. No one rides like Weston neither.”

Leonie walked towards the mooing in the pens. She paced, wrapping her hands around her back in thought. “Do you know anyone who was sniffing around for a racer. Someone who with a white truck who was in town around four o’clock.”

A sour look took over the preacher’s facial expression. “Maybe. But after you sabotaged me? Why would I help you?”

Leonie stepped back towards him and Cassie. She motioned with her head towards the cow pens.

Cassie nudged her. She took Leonie aside with a stern look. “What are you going to do? Kick the preachers butt? This isn’t going to work.”

Leonie kicked at the dirt. Sending sand into the roaring fires in front of them. There had to be a way. But she only knew of one, and that had not given her any answers. No. She had to try something different. And she had one choice.

“You need a rider?” She said to Branson. “I’m your huckleberry.”

Cassie covered her face with her hand. “I am so embarrassed I have to be around you.”

“Then leave,” Leonie said.

“I’m not giving you the Golpher Canyon Jr. Lookout position,” she said.

As the girl argued, the preacher looked out at the people around him. He appeared to be searching.

“She’s a rancher’s daughter,” Cassie said, staring at Leonie. “She can figure out how to do it. And it’s better than not having anyone.”

“Hardly.” The preacher said. “Fine. Go to the pen. I’ll tell you what I know. If you win.”



Race Track. 9:00 p.m.

The next thing Leonie knew was she was on the saddle of a large calf, in one of six corrals. None of them being Mooberly. Her cow breathed heavily, cause of all the excitement in the air. That would be an unsettling feeling for a cow, the girl felt. It

was for her as well. How had she gotten in this situation, now wearing a bike helmet, lined up for five other cow racers? People gathered around the distance of the track, with food and beverages as if it were a town picnic. Her legs were not used to riding, as she had not even had horses on the ranch since she was a little girl. She leaned forward and tapped the reins, excited to move forward. She had not expected this thrill.

The cow did nothing. How was she going to steer a stubborn cow.

The voice of Boone rang across the outdoor PA. “Riders. Get your racers ready. It’s time!”

She could feel the beast shift beneath her. Like she knew what to do. How many

times had this creature done this? Cows are not known for being good learners, of course, but she seemed to know the routine.

“Good luck baby girl.” She heard a woman rider nearby shout. “I’d said you are grounded, but I got nothing to say about that.”

Leonie could not find words to express her shock at who she saw on the cow next to her.

“Mom?!” She cried.

There she was. Wearing bright yellow sunglasses and an extra-large helmet. Looking like she was planning on biking through California. In the most distasteful way.

“I didn’t want this life for you. But cow racing? It has a way of seeking is. Don’t tell your father.” Mrs. Gilbert yelled over the crowd, who now chanted “Let’s go!” With each repetition, their voices grew louder with more excitement.

“Mom, no. This is embarrassing.” Leonie exclaimed from the top of her lungs.

“GO!” A voice cried over the PA.

The gates swung open. Leonie’s cow tried to run past her mother’s racer, but the calf bulldozed its way ahead.

“See you at the finish line, baby girl!” Her cow began to buck. It broke into a brisk gallop past a brown cow, who had stopped to eat a kid’s corn dog. Another racer spun its rider in circles. The crowd began a wild chant of “Moooooo!” Her mom’s cow

wandered into first place.

“Come on Police Academy!” Leonie leaned forward in her saddle and kicked her heels into the creature. It dashed forward, at a slow but amusing speed past 3 racers.

Boone, with a sense of excitement, called the race from the PA.

“Naked Gun has been passed by Police Academy, which is now coming alongside Jaws 3Ds. Police Academy is neck and neck with Rocky! This is unbelievable, ladies and gentlemen, Police Academy has come from behind to.. Yes! Rocky has veered onto the other side of the track, It is now PA, and the cow is in the lead, Schumacher Batman! Hold my corn holders! This is going to be close! Police Academy is close to beating the legendary K.C Gilbert!”

Leonie's cow stretched forwards as it tried to gain speed. The creature would not stay in a straight line, causing Schumacher Batman to gain speed. She could see the finish line in front of her. Her cow was faster, she could beat her own mother in her first race. And do something good for Weston. She had to find a way to get control of her racer.

She turned the reins, causing the creature to dash ahead.

Boone beamed from the P.A "Schumacher Batman is being overtaken by Police Academy! It's going to be a photo finish!"

She could see her mother's face for only a moment before her racer inched ahead. Each pace the other seemed to gain, then lose step. Each rider was tense, letting out

a verbal cry, trying to get their creature to move a little bit faster.

The cows raced across the line.

“Schumacher Batman wins.” A distressed Boone called out.



Moments after the race, when prize money had been collected, people gathered their things. Some kid picked up all the cones along the long track, vendors tossed their wares in the back of their white pickup trucks. Leonie and Cassie ran to meet Branson, who packed church flyers in his vehicle.

“That’s not right, preacher, I tried to help. I almost won. How was I supposed to know I’d be racing my Mom? You’ve got to tell us who was looking for a cow tonight.”

“Our deal,” The preacher said, placing the last box in the back. “Was that if you’d won I’d tell you what you wanted. You lost. You made me some money getting second, we are thankful for that after only having the cow for a couple of days. But

that was not what was agreed to.”

Leonie drew back. “A couple of days? You said a couple of months earlier.”

The preacher started the engine and waved the girls off. “I have nothing more to say to either of you two. Either way, you didn’t find that cow tonight. Someone else must of took her. And not as a racer. Good night.”

The preacher’s truck lined up with the others travelling back in the direction of town. Leonie stood, watching the tail lights fade in the distance.

“I’m going to ride back with my parents,” Cassie said, joining her gaze, standing as one of the few people left. It looked like no race had even taken place. “I found them at the cake stand. I’m grounded, but

I can even the playing field. Since they voted against the riverboat gambling bill but were betting on Naked Gun. Tomorrow we are doing things my way. And we are going to decide who gets the job. You better agree with me.”

“Fine,” Leonie said. “I’ll see what I can do to get us more time tomorrow away from school. After I yell at my mom for being an underground racer. We should stop by Sundown Baptist church and press Branson.”

Cassie shook her head and walked away to her waiting parents and their white pickup truck.

“No.” She said. “Our first stop tomorrow is the gas station. While you were out there losing, I had a chat with Lexy. She

graduated a few years ago, works at the gas station. Weston and Boone gave her the shakedown a few nights ago, looking for cattle to buy. That's a bird we can get to sing louder. She'd know who's stopped in. No way anyone is leaving a town in the middle of no where on an empty tank."

Leonie followed after her. "Wait a minute, preacher Branson is hiding something. And Weston is dressing well for someone whose family is about to lose land."

Cassie waved as her parents uncrossed their arms and motioned for her to hurry up.

"We are doing things my way." She reminded her. "And I bet you are right. All roads seem to lead back to the church. I'll see you in school."

Leonie was left standing alone in the empty field. When her eyes adjusted to the lack of light, she could see the stars above her come out. She traced the Big Dipper to the North Star and watched it twinkle for a while.

Her mom. Was a cow racer. For a long time, she thought about how lame that was. And how the entire town was far worse off than she thought.

Episode Three

Brick

6:30 a.m. May 8th. 1996 Gilbert Ranch House. Town name redacted.

“Mom. We are not pretending we both weren’t cow racing last night.”

“Okay. We won’t. No pancake syrup for you. Syrup is for winners in this house.” Leonie’s mother grabbed the large plastic bottle from the middle of the table.

The kitchen ceiling fan made a cranking sound as it swirled overhead in the awkward silence.

She’s not doing this, this is a joke. Leonie thought. Seated with a flannel button-

down shirt tied around her waist.

She ate her plain thing pancakes at the breakfast table. She had not touched her glass of milk, nor the butter that morning.

“Don’t avoid the question, Mom. I heard Weston and Boone snooping around, looking for a racer. How big of players are they in the game? What do you know about this world?”

Mrs. Gilbert downed an entire glass of orange juice. “Chunk change. What’s what they are. Them and their family are like buzzards in this town. You see them everywhere, but they don’t own anything. You need to stay clear of this. This business brings in a lot of money for people who need help. We rely on that to put food on this table,” She said.

“That buzzard rides Police Academy? And has their own pirate radio station? And has a starter cap? He has to be making that money from somewhere, Mom. What’s easier than grabbing a clueless cow from a school yard pen? Sell it to someone wanting to make a few bucks at the races.”

Her mother stood, taking her plate to the sink. Clanking the dishes. It became clear that her mother would not be answering. But why?

“Do you know who took our class cow?” Leonie said. “There was a lot of air freshener in the truck yesterday. Like you cleaned extra hard for some reason.”

“I’m your Mom, I don’t answer to you.” Mrs. Gilbert said, wiping off her plate and

placing it on the drainer. Mrs. Gilbert turned off the tap and closed her eyes.

It was the same answer she always gave when Leonie asked when her Dad was coming back.

Someone knocked at the door. Leonie glared at her mother, who did not reply as the knocking grew louder.

Mrs. Gilbert sighed. “Finding the cow isn’t going to make anything better, baby girl. You find one, but it’s not enough. So you go looking for another cow. And another. And next thing you know? That’s been your entire life.”

Leonie slammed her seat into the table and went to answer the door to silence the nonstop knocking. She left her mother, standing at the sink, lost in thought.

When Leonie opened the door, Cassie stepped in. She entered the entry way, wearing a jean jacket, blue t-shirt with black tights and yellow shorts. Her hair was set in two uneven buns.

“We are in trouble,” Cassie said.

She handed Leonie a brick. Fayette had come to Cassie’s place at 6 a.m. in a panic after she woke from the sound of shattering glass. Fayette told her that Weston and Boone are ticked cause she had talked to the girls about the missing cattle.

Leonie leaned out the door and spotted a concerned Fayette in a white pickup truck in front of their house. The thin girl at the steering wheel motioned for them to get in. Looking eager to get on the road .

At hearing this, still standing in the kitchen, Mrs. Gilbert shrugged. “Told you so, baby girl. They are Buzzards. And they are coming to pick at you next. Don’t forget your lunch. I packed you a tuna sandwich and a handful of walnuts.”



Rest Stop. 7 A.M.

“I bought a racer from Weston and Boone. That calf spun in circles for minutes. She didn’t even get across the track last night. I lost everything on that cow. I’m stuck working at that stupid gas station.”

Leonie watched as Fayette tried to light the end of a carrot. She put two quarters into the soda machine near the bathrooms,

that sounded with a thunk, dispensing a green and yellow soda can. Leonie walked over and handed it to the woman, taking the lighter from her.

“Smoking carrots is not healthy for you. Here, have some surge.” Leonie said. She slammed it on the outdoor picnic table.

Cassie coughed.

Leonie remembered that Cassie was the one taking charge. Since her aggression had made everything worse. She felt so close to getting answers. But now, she felt helpless as Cassie talk her way out of a paper bag.

Ask her where the boys get the livestock from. She thought. With the land so trashed keeping cattle had to be expensive. Hay cost a hundred and

seventy-two dollars a bale.

Cassie didn't ask those things. Instead, she asked about what Fayette had lost in the flood. Fayette refused.

"I don't want to deal with the past. Right now, is hard enough. You two ruined Weston, he is out to return the favour," Fayette said. She looked at her watch and cursed. "My shift is about to start at the station. We've got to get going."

Cassie looked at her nails. "We need to know who gassed up yesterday. I'm talking full tank, has to go out of town type fill-ups."

Fayette looked like she had been caught off guard by this. Even Leonie felt the question was abrupt.

“Most of the regulars. Pastor Branson, of course, since he lives technically out of the county. He’s always running back and forth from Sundown Baptist to his house. Um. K.C. Gilbert. Weston’s uncle. I even saw Coach Blinkensberg. Twice. I only see him once every few months.”

“Coach? He lives in town.” Leonie scratched her head while in thought. Where is he going where he’d need that much fuel?”

“I think we should ask him,” Cassie said.



School Hallway. 8:20 A.M.

“You can’t be here. Neither of you. Both of you are expelled. I won’t answer

any of your crazy baseless questions.” Coach Blinkenberg led girls down the long hallway to the front double doors of the old brick schoolhouse. Leonie and Cassie watched the oak doors swing shut. They stood next to one of the tall pillars, with a plaque with the name of the town scratched out.

“He didn’t even answer you,” Leonie said, pounding on the door. “Great going, Cassie. You are doing such a great job of uncovering information. Coach isn’t going to tell us why he got so much gas yesterday.”

With thoughtful eyes, Cassie turned in the direction of the school barn, the place the cow had been taken. Surrounded by fresh-cut grass and dandy lions. From the

view from the cracked marble steps of the schoolhouse they could see through the front entrance to the back. Where the cow had once been. From there, they could see the leaky faucet spraying water into the air.

“I want another look at the cow pen. We missed something.” Cassie said. “Since we got time on our hands. My parents are at work.”

“We’ve seen it. There’s nothing to learn there. You are taking us in the wrong direction,” Leonie said.

“And you ticked off the Dude Bro’s enough to start throwing bricks. You can’t stand not being in control of everything. We don’t need to do everything together. I’ll check the barn, you. Go to whatever.

Beat a confession out of someone.”

“Go do a handstand over a pitchfork.” Leonie shouted.

“Least I can do is one, vampire girl. You know the Golpher Canyon job requires you to lift 50 pounds, right?” Cassie shouted, tromping across to the football field, with patchy brown turf with a bunny logo painted in the centre.

Great. Leonie thought as she walked into the parking lot. Tiny flowers bloomed out of the cracks between the parked white trucks. On one of them, she recognised the flyer that the coach had handed her the day before lying on the dashboard.

At a closer distance, she realised the windows of the truck were left cracked

open. Not enough for someone to reach inside to unlock the door. In the seats were piles of candy wrappers and junk food boxes, with a blanket and a pillow in the back.

He looks like he sleeps in here. She thought. He has a house on 3rd Street. Why would he do that? Like, I know he's a teacher, but that's excessive.

Trying the handle, she looked around. Near a trash bin that lead to a path from the parking lot to the football field, she spotted a pile of rocks. More than likely left over from weighing the trash can from the high winds that happen during tornado season.

She looked to the glass of the window, then back at the rock. How easy

it would be.

No. I'm not Weston and Boone. She thought. Cassie is right. But I'm not telling her that.

A squirrel appeared from the tall grass behind the bleachers. With its grey fur and tiny legs it crawled up to the trash can. It rummaged, running along the rim as it searched.

Leonie watched the squirrel pack away some Cheez-It for a rainy day. She looked back at the truck. From her bookbag, she took the lunch her mom had prepared. At the bottom of the brown paper bag ontop of the Tuna sandwich, sliced in triangles, were six walnuts. The squirrel's head rose at hearing Leonie shake the bag.

Carefully, with the critter watching her every move, she dropped the walnut. It fell onto the brown and tan pleated seat cover

Leonie cursed and unwrapped her sandwich. As she chewed, she took another nut and tried again. Being more careful to slowly release it so that it came to rest on the latch.

The squirrel approached the truck. Leonie backed away, letting the creature climb the tires. It used the handle as a footstep and propelled itself through the crack in the window. Landing in the centre console.

Loenie finishing her lunch.

The squirrel climbed up and took the nut in its claws, flipping and turning it.

The creature chewed, breaking little bits with its teeth, spinning in circles. The shell broke open. The long-tailed grey animal stuffed it's new found treasure into its mouth and climbed onto the latch. It propelled itself up and out of the car.

The truck unlocked. Leonie threw up her hands in triumph. After opening the door, she checked the glovebox. Apart from the truck registration, she found several sheets of paper. And several rolls of cash. On each small note, written in red in coaches hand handwriting, were the names like "The English Patient" and "Tom Cruise"

That's not nice. Leonie said. *I like Tom Cruise. He's a good actor and a good person.* What has the coach been doing

after school hours?

When she saw “Jefferson Blinkensberg.” written at the bottom, she realised they were receipts.

He is selling cows. But are they stolen cattle? She thought. But why would he steal his own cow?

She found a slip with the name ‘Police Academy’ on top. Sold to one Pastor Branson for 500 dollars.

A voice called out. She placed the papers back in the glove box and locked the door. Cassie appeared from the path.

“You have fun wasting your time?”
Leonie asked.

Cassie held up a videotape. “Does this look like a waste of time?”

The label of the tape read ‘May 7th
5- 8 o’clock.’



Radio Shack 9:20 A.M.

“That’s how coach knew I fought with Moo-
berly” Leonie lifted a box of transistors for
a moment. Cassie searched the back row

of the store.

“Coach is selling cattle racers.” Cassie said. “He wants to coach something so bad he’s dealing cows.”

“Can we agree to call them all Moo-sters? Like roadsters?” Leonie asked.

“No.”

Cassie inserted the tape into the grey and brown VHS player in one of the display televisions. The machine clunked and began to play. They saw Leonie on the screen from the camera’s raised view. She carried water back and forth to the pen. Cassie splashed water on Leonie. People strode by the girls watching the tape, looking at the electronics and markdowns.

“You didn’t even try to hit the trough.”

Leonie sneered, pressing the fast-forward button.”

Cassie pointed to the screen. The barn door opened. They could see themselves fighting, but the tractor blocked their view of the thief. All the girls could see was the barn door opening. For a brief moment, they could see a person. But since the videotape was recorded on 4-hour mode the quality made it impossible to tell who it was. They couldn’t even make out the license plate number on the truck as it drove away.

“This has to tell us something.” Cassie said. “That cow wasn’t only for the class if coach was keeping an eye on the barn with camera’s. That’s some serious dough what I saw rigged up. There’s no way coach is as

strapped for cash as he says he is.”

Cassie put the tape back into the VHS player and hit “rewind.”

Leonie rolled her eyes. “Coach is who all these people are getting cows from. That’s why he kept having to fill up his tank. But why would he steal his own cow? That’s at least 500 from the papers I saw and he said the betting was going to get intense.”

Cassie got her tape and they both walked past the counter and outside the store. The clouds now dark with the scent of rain hanging in the air.

“This doesn’t add up.” Cassie leaned against the brick wall of the radio shack, looking up deep in thought. “Why was there only one tape in the loft? And what for even?”

Leonie shrugged. “Maybe someone took the rest of them. It could be that he makes his transactions on videotape. That way, he has dirt on people if he needs it.”

“Why leave the tape? Why only that one?”

Leonie’s eyes darted to the school building in the distance. “So we would find it. This is a warning.” She said. “This has to be Weston and Boone’s work. His uncle filled up at the station...”

Cassie held out her hand. “Police Academy is one of the better racers it looked like. There’s no way they would have wanted to switch for an inexperienced cow.”

“How do we know that Moo-berly isn’t trained? Someone wanted her for a reason.” Leonie said.

A drop fell from the sky onto Leonie's forehead. At this they both walked to a covered bus stop, one that had been out of order since the town no longer had a bus. Or a need to transport anyone who couldn't get a ride with Sundown Baptist church. There they sat, and rain began to pour. They listened to the rapid thuds hit on the sidewalk next to them.

"I hate rain," Leonie admitted. "It brings back so many awful memories."

Cassie nodded. "Least we found one thing we can agree on. It's hard not to start panicking. I. Think we all have a lot of pain still from '93."

"I know I do," Leonie said. "Where next. Cause I'm out of ideas. Since you are in charge. We aren't getting anything more

out of the coach here. Not while school is going on.”

“We aren’t going anywhere til the rain stops,” Cassie said.

“You got any money? For food or something.” Leonie said. “I spend all mine on that can of Surge.”

“No,” Cassie said. “But Neosho’s Diner will start a tab. Come on, it’s down the street. We can wait there.



Neosho Dinner Noon.

Leonie could not get over how gross apple pie looked with a sunny-side-up egg, its yolk dripping into the crunchy crust and

baked apples. They had sat for hours, trying to make small talk until the rain passed.

“I’m going to offer you another bite to see the look on your face again.” Cassie said, reaching out to give her a try.

Of course, Leonie drew back at this. “Stop.”

The song changed on the jukebox. The little dinner was quiet, as it usually was. An older man ran the place, always standing in front of a grill taking orders and delivered food himself. Since business had gotten so bad over the years, he had to let his staff go. Like everyone in town.

A bell chimed. Two boys walked into the restaurant. On sight, the cook stopped what he was doing and started cooking

four hamburger patties on top of a bed of white onion. It sizzled as Weston and Boone walked over and took a seat with the girls.

“Bro. Look who we found in our burger spot,” Boone said

“Dude.” Weston pointed to Leonie with his wrist now in a cast. “It’s the ones who lost me a lot of money last night.”

“Look who it is Cassie,” Leonie said. “The numbskulls throwing bricks into peoples houses. That’s illegal, you know.”

Weston and Boone looked at each other.

“Nope. We’ve never done anything wrong Bro.” Boone said. “We are always above the law on everything. That wasn’t us. That’s not our style.”

Leonie narrowed her eyes. “You’ve lied to us before.”

Cassie finished the last bite of her pie. She said. “Like your radio show, uh?”

“Bro, that’s how they found us last night,” Boone said. “They found our channel. Then she tanked your chances against her own mother.”

The cook brought over two double cheeseburgers and sodas for the boys. They thanked him and leaned back.

“No more bull,” Leonie said. “The threats stop here. Where were you two around 5:20 yesterday?”

Boone ate a fry and sipped on his soda. “We were on the air. At our broadcasting post. Like we are every weekday. You can

ask all our listeners. Now that you know what we do.”

Weston added, “Every morning at 7 and at 9 o’clock when we hold events, dude.”

The cook told Cassie that he could confirm that. As he always tuned into the show when there weren’t any customers in the place.

“Joe wouldn’t lie to us.” Cassie stated about the cook.

Boone continued. “We’ve heard you are running around playing detective. That’s not sitting right with us. You see, we are a part of something larger here. We need you to stop talking.”

“Help us find Mooberly.” Leonie snapped. “And we won’t have to talk to anyone.”

“You owe us,” Weston smirked while checking under his bun. “You’d best remember that. You took me out of the race. And we need someone again tonight. That someone is going to be you, Leonie. And you aren’t going to lose this time.”

“No way.” She said. “I can’t beat my mother.”

“Not with that attitude,” Boone said. “And tonight’s real special. With all the rain we are getting. You two are going to be there tonight. Our place. You win, all is forgiven. You lose. You pay. We tell the world what your mother does for a living. If our secret is going to be out in the open, so is yours.”

“That’s blackmail,” Leonie said.

“Duh, that’s the point.” Cassie scoffed. “You should do it. If they are doing this to

us, imagine why. Someone is putting pressure on them.”

“Branson,” Leonie said. “I saw the sale papers. What’s the preacher going to do to you if you don’t win?”

At the sound of this, the boys shifted in their seats. Weston finally ate his burger.

Cassie rose up from her seat. “He bailed Weston out. Is that what happened? He paid to save your land, now you have to repay him?”

Weston nodded.

“Double the loan, I bet.” Leonie said.

“No,” Boone said. “He’s not that type of man. We have no other information on who took Coach Blinkerbegs cow. Since we are now talking real straight with each other.

We will even tell you if we hear something. But you need to do this. And be ready to get drifting.”

“Deal,” Leonie said. “Drifting? You know what. I don’t want to know. Bring the cow around at 9. We’ll be ready to race.”

Weston and Boone nodded and left the cook a twenty-dollar bill. Both of them politely thanked the man for the meal on the way out of the dinner.

Cassie rose to block Leonie from exiting her side of the booth.

“Somethings up” Cassie said. “This is a trap.”

“Well Duh.” Leonie said. “But I’m going to walk into it anyways.”

Episode Four

Moo-ster Drift

1:30 pm Sundown Baptist Church. Town name redacted.

White paint dripped from Pastor Branson's paintbrush. He stood in front of what used to read "Sundown Baptist Church". A few blocks from where the town park used to be. After some sloppy, thrown-together work by someone who had used watercolours, perhaps. The girls stood near him by the sign in front of a yellow hexagon brick building with a bell tower on top.

Leonie felt it strange that he was painting

the sign, yet the sky overhead suggested a lot more rain to come that evening. There wouldn't be enough time for the paint to dry.

“Why didn't anyone tell me what ‘Sundown’ meant?” The preacher said. “I thought this was a sundown town, as in. Jesus is with his people from sunup to sundown.”

The preacher stepped back. In white letters on a red background, “Everyone Welcome Baptist Church.”

“Cassie asked you something. Where do they keep the moo-sters?” Leonie crossed her arms.

“We are not calling them moo-sters,” Cassie said. “Why did you lie about when you bought Police Academy? And yes,

where is the cow, as my classmate said, who is being all supportive?”

“Bite me.” Elonie snapped.

The Preacher looked around. He said. “There’s so much that I do in a day. I can’t even remember if I ate breakfast. And I am in no way putting any pressure on Weston and Boone. That is not what we are at su...”

He paused. “Everyone Baptist Church. What makes no sense to me, you two candles on a hill. If Weston and Boone were so scared of me, then why throw a brick through Fayette’s window? That’s what you told me they did anyway. Wouldn’t they be scared? I mean, they should be if some adult had been doing such awful things.”

“Fayette wouldn’t lie to me,” Cassie said. “She’s like a part of my family at this point. How many racers do you own, Preacher?”

“Four of ‘em.” He said. “Let’s end this real quick. How about you take a ride over to my property and check out my barns? That’s not something I usually stand for, but in this instant, it might be the best. And you can take Police Academy and Schumacher Batman to the race.”

“You own Schumacher Batman as well? My Mom’s racer?” Leonie said.

The preacher’s face grew pale. He shut the lid of the paint can with a snap. “I don’t think I should be talking about that. You should ask your Mom about that.”

“Who owns that cow, preacher?” Leonie

growled.

Cassie tapped on Leonie's nose. "Down girl. That isn't relevant. We should check out the barn, make sure our cow isn't there."

Leonie rolled her eyes, but nodded her head. Cassie stared in stunned amazement at her.

"Well. That's a knuckleball. Stop acting weird." Cassie scoffed.

"I got two of them you can ride back to the place." The preacher said. "And if you're hungry, look in the church fridge. Mrs. Stevenson brought some red herring casserole for anyone who wants it. See you girls tonight."

"There are two riders here? Where?"

Leonie asked.

“In the Baptistry.” The preacher said, “Taking a step towards the church's large wooden panel doors. “There’s a way in on the other side of the bell tower. That’s where I keep them if I have to keep one in town. Stay out of view of the main street and you should be fine. Most the town is in on the races anyways.”

“Why is this town so strange?” Cassie said.



4 pm. Branson’s Barn.

“Mooberly isn’t here either.” Leonie cursed. The two girls walked out of the barn, with six rows of cow pens behind them. She felt a trickle of rain from the

skies above.

Cassie adjusted her book bag, which Leonie had noticed her starting to do every few minutes. She felt like asking about why, but she didn't want to question it. Not having to rely on yourself didn't feel as bad as she thought it would feel. The two girls had seemed to learn a lot more than when she was trying to do everything. Even more so, they seemed to have a lot more in common than the two ever expected. So she let that strangeness pass.

Leonie paused. She saw two boys on cows from on top of the ridge in front of the preacher's property. They paced on the edge that led to grassy rolling hills. Below was a clay valley, void of plant life.

"Look who's come for a visit," Leonie said,

pointing out the riders to Cassie, their cattle sniffing at tall grass.

Cassie joined her by the fence where the Preacher had dropped them off at only thirty minutes before. “Glad Weston is feeling better.” She said. “They force you to race for them, yet here they are. Why?”

Weston and Boone on Cowback charged towards the barn.

Leonie pulled Cassie to the nearest cows in the barn. “I bet they bet on my Mother. Run. Meet up at the track if we get separated.”

Cassie seemed confused as Leonie grabbed a saddle and threw it over the closest racer.

“Go!” Leonie said.

“I... don’t know how to ride...”

Leonie guided her onto Police Acemedy and gave it a gentle slap on it’s massive hind legs.

“Too bad, cows can’t handle 2 people. Go!” She shouted.

As Leonie saddled another cow, Weston and Boon came charging in at the same time Cassie left the barn. They followed her.

Leonie screamed, “Giddup!”

But the cow did not move.

“Dang it, Schumacher, Batman, get going!”

It mooed in disagreement, but trodded a few paces forward. With a swift tap of the reins, the creature sped forward out of the

barn towards where Cassie had fled the dude bros.

They drifted down the steep hill towards the valley, the cow leaping in mid-air when reaching the bottom of each. Boone drew his racer along, said Cassie. He steered its head with the reins, drove his creature into hers.

Racing down towards her as fast as Schumacher Batman would go, Leonie pulled up alongside Boone. She removed her backpack from her back and launched it, striking him on the head. He fell. Cassie's cow took her to the bottom of the valley, while Weston changed course and headed towards Leonie.

Police Academy rammed Schumacher Batman, letting out a fierce battle cry.

Leonie drove Schumacher Batman back into Weston's racer, whose hooves hit deep into the soil-y clay. Before Leonie could react, she realised that Weston held the reins in one hand, but a bat in the other.

Weston from on his cow swung at her, missing her. The cattle racers fought back and forth, like sumo wrestlers on a treadmill. He swung hard, but Leonie grabbed the bat with her hands. She tried to force it away from him.

A black and white backpack came flying out of nowhere, hitting Weston on the side. It sent his cow tipping over sideways, helpless. He cried out as the cow flipped around like a turtle on its shell.

Leonie turned in the direction the bag had come from. Cassie had come back and was

smiling on Police Academy at her good aim. She stopped smiling when she noticed her bag and come open.

A VHS tape dated May 8th 8 o'clock to noon. At the same time that Cassie had ventured to the barn to take a second look. Why was Cassie carrying that tape?

“What is that?” Leonie said. “You said you only found one VHS recording of the barn.”

Cassie did not answer. She closed her eyes and hung her head. She tapped the side of the cow to get her to turn back towards the valley, and in the direction of the tracks.

“Cassie! What did you do?” Leonie shouted into the rolling hills.

She did not answer back.



5 P.M Secret Cow Tracks

Leonie found herself searching the rest of Cassie's bag as Schumacher Batman drank from a bucket in her makeshift pen. Other townspeople set up booths and started the oil fryers and grills under covered awnings. The little sprinkle of rain had not stopped in some time. Thunder cracked far in the distance.

She found something that made her coil back in disgust. In a pocket on the outside flap of the bag, she found a pin-striped shirt.

“Oh my lands,” Leonie said, unfolding and examining the shirt. “She's a Yankees fan.”

Instantly, she dropped the shirt and wiped her hands off on her pants. No way a New York fan would understand the outdoors at Golpher Canyon. How could she lie about wanting to connect to nature? And why did it hurt so much learning that Cassie had kept the discovery of the tape secret? They had shared everything to that point, the cold-hearted effort it took sickened Leonie. Even worse, she realised there could be only one reason to lie about the recordings' existence. One person among all the other suspects she had not considered.

“Why do you have Schumacher Batman? You better not be going around taking other people’s things. And where is your new friend?” She heard a familiar voice say. Her mother approached. Leonie

scoffed at the sight of her matching flannel shirt and jeans.

Leonie took out the tape and waved it in front of her mom's face. They stared at each other for a moment.

"What's that?" Her mom said.

"You know what it is Mom," Leonie said. "If I found a tape player, I bet you this footage would show Cassie running into you at the school barn yesterday. Cassie talked to you, found out about the camera's and took the most recent one to hide that you spoke."

"I ain't talking without a lawyer present." Mrs. Gilbert said, patting her racer who moo-ed in delight.

"I can watch and find out. You can make

this easier on yourself. What did you and Cassie talk about? And why did you tell her to keep it from me?”

“I didn’t tell her anything.” Mrs. Gilbert said. “Why do you have my racer? You would have had to take her from Sundown to here.”

“It’s everyone welcome Baptist now.” Leonie said, joining her Mom around the cow. She broke off some hay from a stack and offered it to the creature. “And I brought her here. I know that Schumacher Batman lives out with the preacher. Does he own the racer?”

“Don’t be silly.” Her mother said. “I own Schumacher Batman. Bought it from your coach after your Dad left. I rent out space on Branson’s land to keep her when she’s

not racing.

Leonie drew closer to her Mom. “What are you hiding from me? Are you in with Cassie, trying to get her the summer job? All you had to do was help her out, cow-napping my cow. Causing me to fail and her to get the gig. Why did you do it?”

Mrs. Gilbert shook her head. “You are being ridiculous. Have you considered I did have a conversation with her in the cow barn, that maybe she lied about it to protect you?”

Leonie put her hand on her chest. That didn’t make sense. Cassie didn’t even like her. The idea was too absurd to be real.

“Why would she do that Mom?” She asked.
“No. That’s not what happened.”

Mrs. Gilbert's shoulders slumped. "I got to get ready for the race. You got your own checklist. I hear you're racing again tonight. And Weston and Boone have bet heavily against you."

Leonie desperately wanted to yell, to cry to find out what secret she was hiding. But she knew that it would be no use. Her mother would answer no other questions. Reluctantly she headed in the direction of her own racer.



5:20 pm Outside the secret Cow tracks

The cotton candy had looked too good to pass up, even with the rain. Leonie looked out through the mists that had formed

around the tracks. She took a bite. Standing at the gate by the fruit cart.

At least I get free food here because of my Mom. Leonie thought. That's cool. I guess.

She found herself hoping that Cassie was not lost out there, and she had found her way to cover from the storm. Even if she felt mad about what she did.

I guess I wanted things to stay the same. She thought. Maybe. I've liked being her friend. Maybe that's why this sucks so much. Do I even care about the summer job? I'm not sure.

She tossed the empty roll into a nearby trash can, which rumbled with each raindrop that fell on it.

A white pickup truck approached. Coach Blinkensberg sat behind the driver's seat. He rolled down the window as the vehicle came to a stop next to Leonie.

“You again. I’m starting to believe maybe you didn’t steal my cow.” He said. “I think I’m paranoid. I even thought a squirrel broke into my truck yesterday.”

Leonie looked down and away. She grabbed Cassie’s bag and threw it around her back. “You haven’t seen Cassie anywhere, have you?” She asked.

The coach cut the engine. “Why aren’t you asking me 50 questions? Like about the camera’s I have in the barn at the school? Or you must have figured out that I sell cattle, right? Only legit.”

“Yes.” Leonie said. “I don’t care about

that right now. I haven't seen her and I'm worried she's out there lost."

The coach sighed. "Okay. Get it."

"Before I do," Leonie said, backing away slowly. "Tell me why. Why this cow?"

The man started the engine once again and turned on the radio. They could hear Boone giving updates about the betting odds for the night's race.

"That cow is the smartest cow anyone has ever seen. We think we can train her to race. She could be unstoppable. That's why I have the camera set up. But someone took her anyways. I took you did it because of your mom. But it looks like you had no idea about that."

Leonie climbed into the truck and closed

the door. “I don’t think you stole your cow. You have no reason to. I think I know who did it. But I’m afraid.”

The coach drove off-road and turned on his brights. They drove over the land, searching for Cassie and the lost racer.

“Why are you scared?”

“Because I think I might be right. If so. I don’t know what that means.” She said.



5:45 Outskirts of town

A pair of flashing lights had caused Coach to pull over. They found Cassie and her cow through the heavy rain only because of her light-up sneakers. The girls did not

Speak to one another on the trip back to the secret cow tracks. Even though Leonie wanted to know what she was finding, she could not find it within her to ask. She had attempted to say something, expecting shouting. But words would not come out. No, she felt Cassie needed to ask her. As some confirmation that this could not be happening.

Coach and some cattle handlers gathered around the racer in the truck bed to lead her to her pen. The race track was nearly flooded. Several canopy tents were being set up along the edges to shield spectators from the weather.

“Did you watch the tape?” Cassie unbuckled her belt.

“I didn’t need to.” Leonie hung her head.

“I should have seen it. You. We’re working with my mom to kidnap Mooberly.”

Cassie shook her head, sending water from her hair dripping to the floorboard. She shivered. “It wasn’t supposed to happen this way. How did you know? Why aren’t you mad?”

Leonie opened Cassie’s book bag and handed her the Yankees’ jersey. Cassie put it on. But she looked surprised by the lack of reaction.

“My mom got weird when you were around. The amount of air freshener in our truck was another reason. I bet that is who you found at the barn on that tape. My mom. You couldn’t risk my hearing that you two had agreed to help each other by taking the cow. Forcing me to be stuck in

this dump all summer. How did you even know each other?”

“Because I was supposed to go to the World Series in October,” Cassie said, buttoning up the pinstripe jersey. “Yankees vs Braves. We had three tickets to game 6. Then our water heater went out. We had to sell them. Your mom knew some people. She sold them for our family. I watched that game on TV. I missed the best game ever played. I cried for an entire night and was depressed all week. But it hit me. Everyone around me has lost so much. Their farms. In some cases. Their Families.”

Cassie covered her eyes with her hands. She continued. “How dare I get so sad over something that means so little. I felt that I

had lost touch. With everything. And I feel that way even more now. That's why I needed to connect with the summer fire lookout job. So when your mom came to me with. This. Job. I said yes. But that's not why I don't want you to watch the tape."

"What do you know?" Leonie asked. "What did you and my mom talk about when you saw her at the barn? Before you took the tape."

Cassie got out of the vehicle. Leonie followed her out the same door, carrying her book bag.

"I said something. About you." Cassie said as they ducked into a canopy.

"Where is Mooberly?" Leonie asked.

“That’s the thing, I don’t know. I asked, but she didn’t answer. I was only supposed to stall you. I am so sorry. I was wrong. I thought we were going to find the cow, so I wanted to ask the questions, so I didn’t have to tell you. I never wanted the cow to be hurt, and I’m worried.”

“I should have figured.” Leonie took off towards the racer pens.

“Where are you going?” Cassie shouted at her.

“To confront my mom!”

Episode Five