



*Lie Down  
in the Ashes*

KATY L. WOOD

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Summary: When five friends go camping before the start of their senior year, they're expecting a fun night of relaxing in the woods they've grown up in, but after months of dangerous drought the forest is tinder dry. One member of the group doesn't care, though, and lights a campfire anyway. A single gust of wind is all it takes for the fire to spiral out of control. Up at the nearby mine, the miners witness the start of the fire and debate what to do with the old retired fire equipment they use, but two of them decide not to wait for a decision from the others and steal the trucks.

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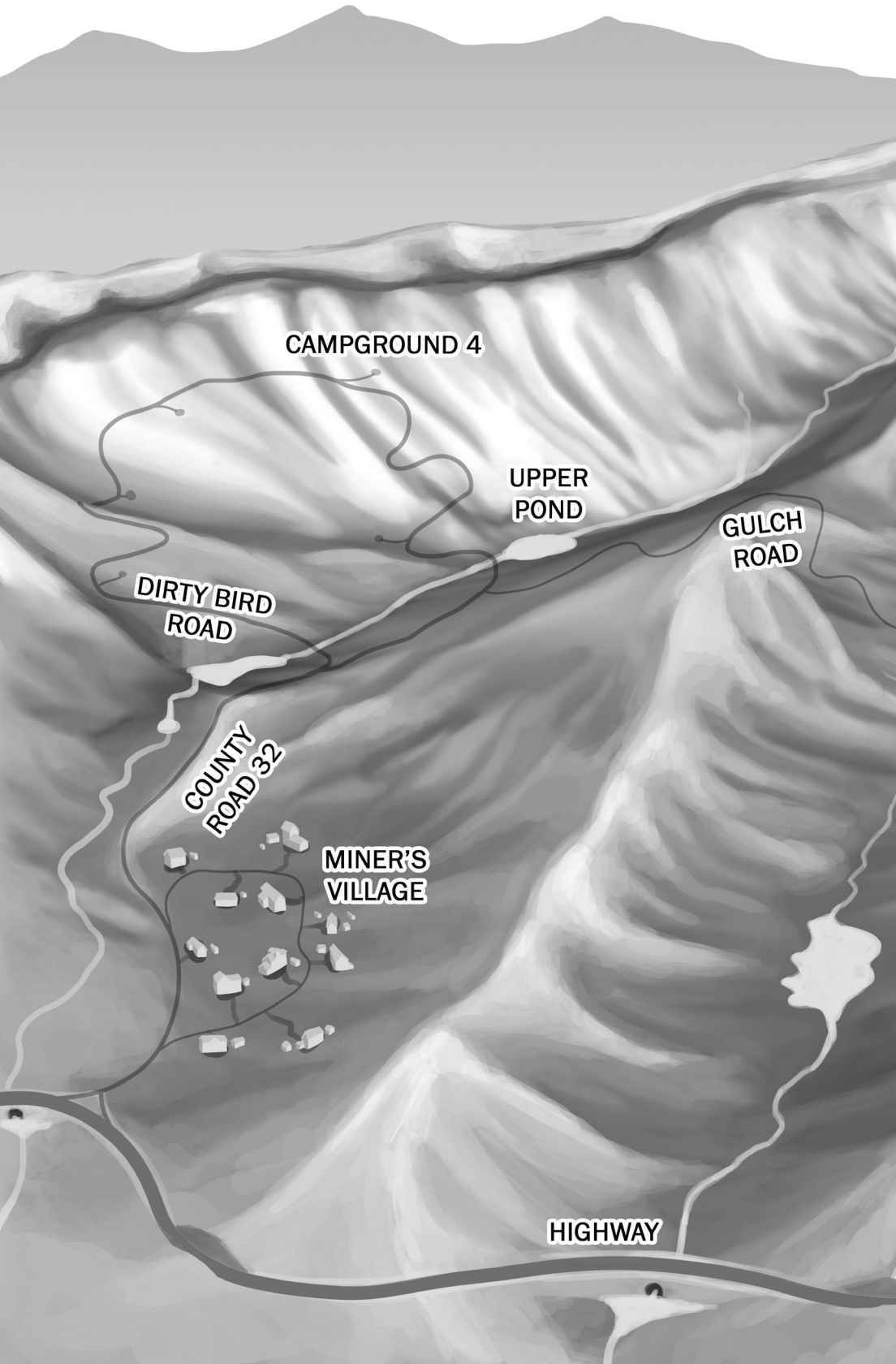
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LIE DOWN  
IN THE ASHES





CAMPGROUND 4

UPPER  
POND

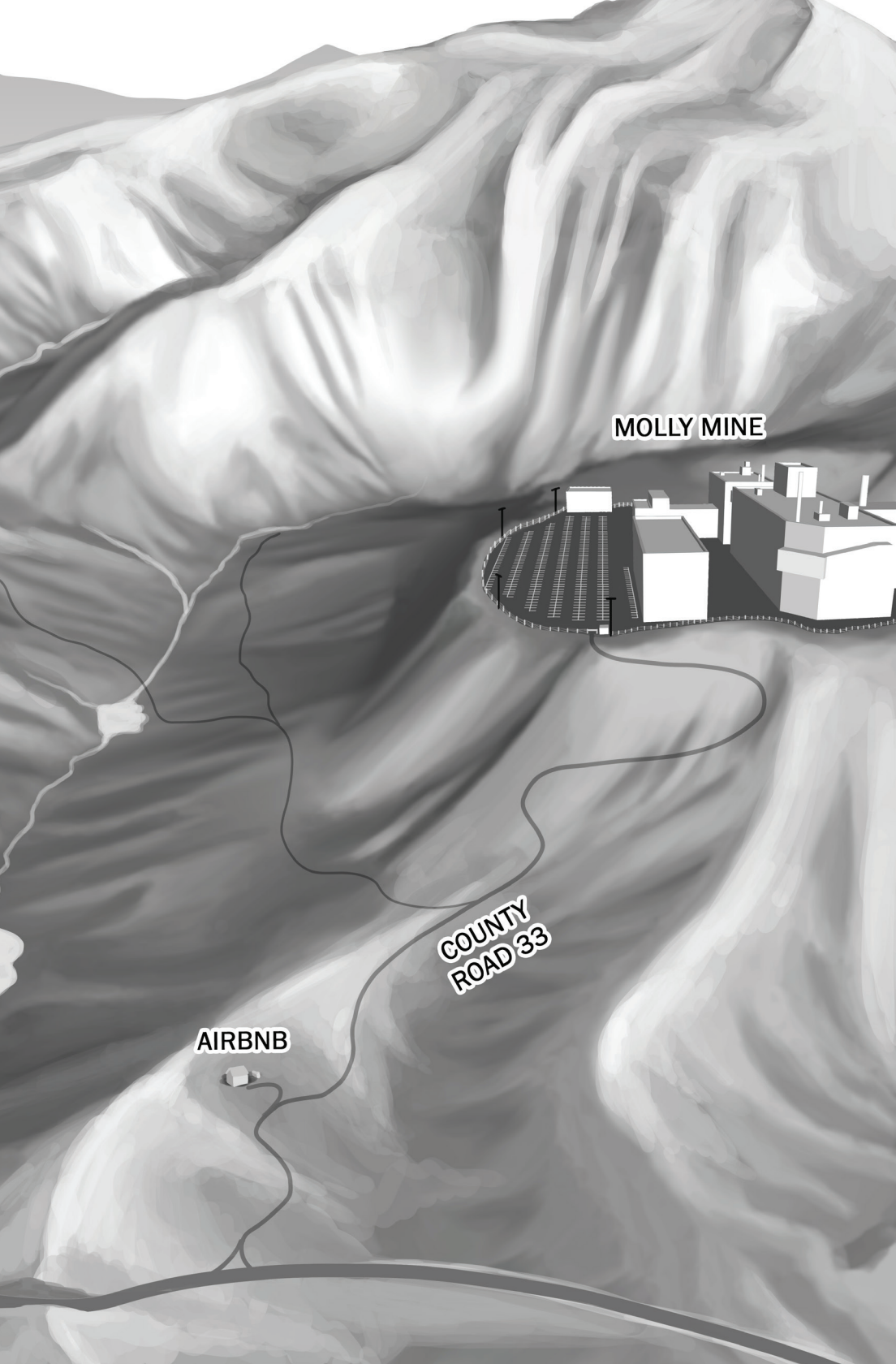
GULCH  
ROAD

DIRTY BIRD  
ROAD

COUNTY  
ROAD 32

MINER'S  
VILLAGE

HIGHWAY



MOLLY MINE

COUNTY  
ROAD 33

AIRBNB

*For the helpers.*

**AUGUST 2019**

## CHAPTER 1: CAMPOUT

### River

After a long morning and a good portion of the afternoon under the baking August sun, our garage smelled heavily of warm dirt, oil, and hot metal. It was almost pleasant, the heat and scents all soaking into my senses as I stared out at the view from the open door, mountains stretching from horizon to horizon. Or it would have been pleasant, had I not been running so far behind.

Should I have changed the oil in my truck anytime other than an hour before my camping trip? Yes. Had I? No. Four friends to pick up all over our little town of Sadie's Hill and yet here I was, slamming down a concoction of coffee and Redbull, tossing my hair up into a bun, and hoping to break some oil change records. Cursing my poor planning, I crawled under my ancient red Ford with a wrench and a bucket to catch the old oil. I had to go in a bit sideways to avoid the winch on the bumper, wiggling my shoulders and dragging the oil tray along until I was in position. A long blond hair greeted me, tickling against my face from where it was caught on the old oil filter. What an intrepid little strand, clinging on down here since I'd last changed the oil. I knew I'd bottomed the truck out at least twice since my last change, yet there it was.

"River?" My dad's voice said from somewhere near my feet.

"Hang on, don't make me drop oil on my face," I responded, pulling my arm up and into position to loosen the drain plug. Oil splashed out, a few drops splattering onto my face before I made it out of the way.



“You coulda asked me, sweetheart,” my dad said as I started to wiggle my way back out.

“Your truck, your responsibility,” I parroted. “That was what you said when I bought this instead of the newer Subaru you wanted me to get.”

He sighed dramatically. “It was a nice Subaru, baby girl.”

I rolled my eyes, giving him a playful shove with my shoulder as I went to peruse our rack of car fluids for a jug of my oil and a new filter. Probably should’ve done that first. If I was this scatterbrained now, school in a week would be a nightmare.

“It was green,” my dad continued.

“Green is your favorite color, not mine.” I pawed through the jugs, finally locating two of the right brand way at the back. One was full, the other not quite. I shook it, listening to the fluid slosh around inside. Meh. Enough for the weekend. I could get more when I got paid next week and top it off. “Besides, the Subaru sat too low. It would’ve gotten caught in snow drifts.” Snow drifts were the least of my worries when it came to going over things I shouldn’t. “And it didn’t have a winch.” A bit more pawing revealed a filter.

“Do you even *use* the winch?”

Yes. More than he ever needed to know. It was very useful for hauling friends out of the ditch at three a.m. before the cops arrived to chew us out for drag racing down the two-mile, mostly straight stretch of two-lane highway on the east side of town. Or for hauling myself out of the same situation. I never won, not in my old tank, but plenty of the farm kids had trucks that were just as old or older. Winning at least felt like a possibility until the shift into fourth gear when things started making alarming grinding noises. I really needed to get that checked. It was beyond my meager mechanicing abilities.

“Where you kids headed this time?” my dad asked.

“Up to Lost Hen,” I told him, plopping back onto the concrete to retrieve the tray of old oil, change the filter, and close everything up. “Not sure which campground we’ll stop at.”

“Well, be safe. Don’t park on the dry grass, and remember there’s still a full fire ban.”

You'd never know I'd been born and raised here the way he talked. It was dry, though. "I know, I know."

"Bring your safety matches."

"Yes, sir."

"And plenty of water."

"Always."

"There's supposed to be some wind tonight, too."

"Got it."



The town fire station shimmered in the heat when I pulled up to the curb. Half the crew was lazing outside in shady spots with their lunches, enjoying the weather. Our tiny station in our equally tiny town averaged a grand total of one call every two days—most of them for traffic accidents—and *maybe* one serious one every month. As for actual fires, they tended to only see a handful every year, up until recently. Still, it was usually just someone's kitchen or a single tree that had been hit by lightning and smoldered for a few days before someone noticed. This made for a lot of very skilled firefighters who had almost nothing to do but train and show off their trucks to the local kids. One of my best friends, Dante, was more than happy to use this to his advantage, sneaking in as much training as he could before he turned eighteen and could officially join. He was there now, light brown skin turned even warmer over the summer and with a smile just as warm as he talked with several of the crew members.

"Suck uuuupppp," I called, dangling out my driver's side window.

Dante rolled his eyes, flipping me off with a smile. His black cargo pants were soaked, a casualty of washing the engines as part of his helping out at the station. Engine 41 sat there, gleaming brightly, sunlight sparking off the chrome detailing. Dante had done a good job, I'd give him that.

Waving goodbye to the several firefighters milling around, he retrieved his pack from inside and tossed it into the bed of my truck before climbing in the backseat.

“See you Monday?” one of the firefighters, Peter, called.

“Yep! In the afternoon, after practice. See ya, Peter!” Dante answered.

“See ya.” Peter waved. Even as a lesbian I couldn’t help but marvel at his well-defined arms.

I grinned at Dante in the rearview mirror. “Question, are you really volunteering because you want to join up, or just for the access to a lot of nice, muscled men?”

Dante grinned back. “There are many benefits to being a firefighter.”

Cackling, I pulled us back onto the road to pick up the rest of our friends, heading to Iris’s place first. She lived with her parents and brother behind her father’s mechanic shop and was waiting on her porch when I pulled up. Her little brother, six years younger than her, was there too, laughing at something she’d said. She gave him a sloppy kiss on the cheek that made him scrunch up his face in annoyance that I knew was just pretend.

Dante got out to help Iris with her stuff, giving her brother a fistbump before taking the cooler she indicated and putting it in the bed. Iris added a tent and a bag full of other gear. She and Dante slid into the backseat, Iris cramming her ever-present, excessively large, and over-stickered water bottle under the seat. Once settled, she gave Dante a kiss, snuggling into his side. Dante looked at her with a stupidly happy little grin that brought out the dimple on his left cheek. They looked good together, him in his comfortably worn flannel and her in her self-embroidered denim overalls and wonderfully horrible paisley t-shirt, both of them glowing with summer tans, though she was still much paler than his warm brown.

Last stop was Toby and Natalie who, conveniently, lived right across the street from one another on the outskirts of town. Their houses couldn’t be more different, though. Natalie lived in a rundown little ranch house that was only about a thousand square feet. It sat on two acres, though, giving her plenty of room to garden and keep some chickens and goats for 4H. Toby, on the other hand, lived in a custom built six-thousand square foot,

sprawling log home. The whole thing looked like it had popped out of a catalog, kitschy moose and pinecone decor and all. No one was quite sure where his family's money came from, but they had a lot of it and there were plenty of rumors despite his family living in town for over fifteen years now. The more down to earth rumors involved things like inheritances and stocks. The wilder ones involved drug smuggling and espionage, and tended to only come up when people were drunk and bored. Toby always blew the questions off, though, insisting he was just like everyone else and money didn't matter, so why talk about it? An easy thing to say when you were the one with the money.

Natalie and Toby were waiting together, sitting with their gear on an artfully mossy stone wall that marked the entrance to Toby's driveway. At least once a month the landscapers were out there with spray bottles of blended up moss water to keep the effect in place. Natalie had one daypack next to her, covered in patches from local parks and a few sewn-up rips. Toby had what looked like half an REI store. A huge tent bag, two coolers, a big camp chair, a sixty-liter backpacking bag—complete overkill for a trip that would require zero hiking—massive sleeping bag, two pillows, and an additional duffle bag.

More and more lately, I'd been getting annoyed at Toby's inability to not wave his wealth around in people's faces. When we were kids, he'd just been the guy with all the cool toys. Now he was the teenager spending the money himself, and acting like that made him important.

Tamping down my annoyance, I pulled up in front of him and Natalie. He was like a brother to her, after all. I could put up with him for the weekend.

Toby jumped up, throwing his arms wide. "Finally!"

"Oh hush," I said as the truck rolled to a stop. "It's only sixish, we've got plenty of daylight left."

"Yeah but I wanna goooo," Toby said, tossing his shiny gear haphazardly into the bed before jumping into the remaining backseat.

Natalie smiled and shook her head, tucking her gear into the bed and making sure it was secure, as well as securing Toby's,

before sliding into the passenger seat.

“Hi, baby.” I grinned.

“Hi, baby.” Natalie grinned back.

We leaned over the center console and I tangled a hand into her hair to pull her in for a kiss.

“Come oooooonnnn,” Toby said from the backseat, bouncing up and down enough to make the truck shake. Dante reached around Iris and swatted at him, but Toby dodged out of the way with a laugh.

I pulled away enough for only Natalie to see me roll my eyes. She made a guilty but amused face and shrugged.

Sighing, I gave her another quick kiss, then sat back in my seat. “Let the camping weekend commence!”



“It is just cruel to start school when the world is still this lovely outside,” Natalie said. She had one arm dangling out the window of my truck, rolling her pale, freckled hand up and down through the wind. Blue sky spread out above us, not a cloud to be seen. The scents of sage and pine were almost overwhelming. Everything was just starting to take on the burnished gold quality that meant fall would be coming soon.

I smiled, taking my hand off the gearshift for a moment to reach over and tuck a stray strand of chestnut hair behind her ear. “Last year, at least.”

“Speak for yourselves. Lucky senior bastards,” Iris piped up from the backseat. She was practically seated on Dante’s lap, and it made me smile. I was glad Iris managed to find someone who cared about her as much as Dante did. The dating pool in our small mountain town was hardly a deep one even if you weren’t queer. As far as I knew, we were the only queer people at all in our school, which was a big part of why we stuck together, even as Toby grew more and more obnoxious with age.

“I, for one, am looking forward to our return to the halls of education,” Toby said. He too had his arm dangling out an open window, but rather than rolling it through the wind he was tapping the flaking red door along with the beat of the bluegrass



song that was crackling over the old radio.

“You’re just looking forward to pulling senior pranks!” Dante laughed. “How long is your list of plans now?”

“Forty-two objectives,” Toby grinned. “Stage one involves goats.”

“You are not using my goats, Toby!” Natalie said.

“Or mine!” I added. Neil and Sally were my babies. They were meant to be 4H goats a few years ago, except they’d never sold because Neil was born with a deformed back leg and Sally was blind, and they didn’t have a single braincell between them. Cliff? Walk off it. Glass? Walk into it. Food trough moved a foot to the right? Didn’t exist anymore. Sun went down? World ended, better scream about it.

“Ladies, ladies, the goats will be fine! Principal Davidson’s office, on the other hand....”

“No, Toby!” Everyone said at once before dissolving into fits of laughter.

Half-an-hour after leaving town, we swung north onto the turnoff for County Road 32, trundling past Miner’s Village. It was just a smattering of a dozen houses between two ridges, more a neighborhood than anything, but everyone called it Miner’s Village since it was mostly occupied by people who worked at the mine on the next ridge to the east. At least three of the houses had been converted into bunk houses with a dozen or more miners staying in each. The legalities of this were mostly treated as a don’t ask, don’t tell situation by the county.

A group of kids on their bikes raced into our dust trail, waving at us as they did. Iris twisted around and slid open the back window, hanging out it to wave back and make faces at them.

This felt good. A last camping weekend with the gang before school set in and stole away all our time. Sure, we’d probably get back together for a hunting season or two, but it would be hard to coordinate all five of us being in one place at once. I had only drawn a doe license for the second rifle season this year, and I didn’t know what the others had, or what over-the-counter licenses might be available. Dante would be all over the county,

the state even, playing football, volunteer work eating up the rest of his time. Iris had her doctor appointments in the city. Natalie was still flying all over the country to visit colleges. Toby was a wild card, as likely to be home as he was to be jetting off to Jamaica or some other far-flung destination. It made me ache a bit to think about the different paths all our lives were on. Even Toby, as much as he annoyed me, was still a friend, and had been part of my life for as long as I could remember. Hopefully, this would only be the last camping trip of the summer, not our last camping trip ever.

“Here,” Natalie said, pulling a hair tie off the collection on her wrist and handing it back to Iris, who was struggling with keeping her hair from blowing into her face now that she was seated again.

“Thanks,” Iris said, pulling her shoulder-length black curls back into a messy, semi-functional ponytail. A lot of strands didn’t quite make it, though, so she groaned and tried again. “I’m not used to having long hair yet, and I never knew it would be so *curly*. Being a girl is so much unexpected work.”

Natalie reached back over the center console and patted Iris’s knee. “Yes, yes it is. Welcome to the club. We’ll have a hair care lesson when we get home. Get you some good conditioner and satin pillowcases.”

Dante took the hair tie and began gently finger-combing Iris’s curls into submission for her.

“Satin?” Iris said, face scrunched in confusion.

“Yeah, curly hair is fragile,” I said. “You have to baby it.”

Or so I was told by Natalie. My hair was stick straight and dirty blond. Natalie, with her bouncy curls, said this was a gift when it came to maintenance.

Iris groaned and slumped back against Dante who wrapped his arms around her shoulders and kissed the top of her head. He’d had much better luck with her ponytail.

“Do I even want to know what annoying experiences boobs are going to bring when the hormones kick in enough for me to get them?” Iris asked.

“Spending all your money on bras,” Natalie said.

“Backaches,” I said.

Conversation ceased when I turned up Dirty Bird Road, which had gotten rather sloppy over the summer even though it hadn't rained in two months. It was more of a hunter's road than anything, though, so it didn't warrant county maintenance. The only thing allowing it to keep the status of being a road was that people kept stubbornly driving over it despite the pits and ruts.

The truck bounced and jostled along, used to this rough treatment. Maybe a piece or two would fall off, but they wouldn't be the first nor the last. As long as all our stuff stayed in the bed we were good. I upshifted and downshifted, rolling the wheel back and forth beneath my other palm, as we went over one rise, down another, and up again on the next one, steadily gaining altitude the whole way. The truck skidded to a stop at the edge of a clearing near the top of the ridge, the dust catching up and billowing around the cab before blowing away on the breeze. Tall, thin pines loomed up around us, swaying and sending their shadows dancing over the camp spot I'd picked.

“We have arrived,” I declared, putting the truck into park.

Toby whooped and threw himself out of the car, skipping around the clearing, kicking away fallen sticks and pinecones as he did. Dante and Iris joined him, helping clean up the campsite in a much less chaotic manner.

“He is not borrowing any of our goats,” Natalie said, watching Toby through the windshield.

“Not a chance,” I agreed, tangling my fingers with Natalie's. Her skin was warm and soft beneath mine, the freckles thick from a summer of working outside in her garden.

“You send in your application for Western yet?” Natalie asked.

I shook my head. I wasn't worried, though. I still wasn't even sure I wanted to go to college. Western just seemed like a good option because, at least if I decided I hated the classes, there were tons of adventure programs offered through the college to keep me busy. Ice climbing and kayaking and spelunking among plenty of others.

The engine ticked away its heat in front of us and I caught

snatches of Iris laughing at something Toby said. Her hair was loose again, the sunlight picking out all the subtle brown tone shifts amongst the black.

“You’ve got your pensive face on,” Natalie said.

I shrugged, watching our friends. Objectively, Dante was growing up to be quite attractive. High cheekbones, eyes and a smile that could convince you to share secrets. Poor Iris was essentially going through a second puberty now that she was on estrogen, but it was starting to soften her face in a lovely way and, as much as her curly hair annoyed her, it suited the oval shape of her face. Toby was still stuck in an awkward, gangly state and no amount of money seemed to be able to tame his mop of brown hair, but I was sure with another few years he’d grow into himself better. Maybe by then he’d get his attitude in check too, but I doubted it.

And Natalie. God, I loved Natalie. Her laugh, the secret little tattoo of a star on her hip, the freckles along her shoulders, the devotion she showed Ben, her brother who had cerebral palsy. Everything about Natalie just *fit* for me. It didn’t even sting that Natalie wanted to leave the state for college; I always knew that was coming. She’d decided she would study the stars when she was three and hadn’t changed her mind since. We’d find a way to make it work as soon as we knew for sure where she was going.

“Whaaat?” Natalie said, leaning over to rest her chin on my shoulder.

“Just thinking about the future,” I replied.

“That isn’t allowed this weekend,” Natalie said. “This weekend is for now.”

“Are you two coming or what?!” Toby shouted at us.

“‘For now’ is an interesting way to put it,” I replied to Natalie. “Bit of a double entendre.”

Natalie shrugged, giving me a peck on the cheek. “Come on, before Toby drags us out of here.”

With that she slid out of the truck, making the cab jostle, and went around to start pulling gear out of the bed. I tossed the keys onto the dashboard so they wouldn’t get lost and followed.

Pausing a moment at my tailgate, I looked out at the view

between the trees. Our patchily forested ridge slipped away down into a little gulch, the bottom filled with sage and scrub before the land rose again to form the next forest-covered ridge to the east. Just beyond that was the mine, but only a sliver of the tallest building and a bunch of antennas could be seen from here, the rest obscured by spindly pines. I took a deep breath, letting the scent of nature fill my lungs. At least if this was going to be our last camping trip, it would be a good one.

“Mighty mountain woman!” Toby shouted, playfully flexing his arms in my direction as I carried two stacked coolers to the area next to the ring of rocks around the empty firepit. I rolled my eyes but wasn’t sure Toby caught it as my face was smashed against the top cooler.

Dante and Iris were busying themselves with their tent, trying to figure out the proper arrangement of the supporting rods. The tent was brand new, something Iris received for her birthday back at the beginning of summer. Every trip we’d taken so far, we’d just slept under the stars, so she hadn’t used it yet. Clearly, her and Dante wanted a little privacy if the tent was finally making an appearance.

Natalie went to help with the tent as I pulled camping chairs out of their bags and set them up around the coolers. Toby’s was indeed rather excessive, with a tall back that could be set at multiple angles, and a footrest that could be folded out. It looked like a throne compared to the ratty chairs the rest of us brought.

“No, I’m pretty sure it is supposed to be, like, an X but with this little rod connecting the two Vs,” Iris said, holding the rods aloft to examine them as they flopped around.

“It didn’t come with instructions?” Natalie asked.

“Of course it did, but that’s boring,” Dante replied.

Natalie shook her head and started in on our own tent, a simple red and black one with a regular X of support rods. It had just enough room for two people willing to get cozy, and we were more than willing to get cozy.

A loud clattering sound behind me made me jump and I spun on my heels to see Toby clapping wood shavings and dust



off his hands, a pile of wood in the firepit at his feet. It was all gray and baked bone dry; pine that had been on the ground for a couple years, at least.

Dante saw the sticks too and raced over.

“Nope, not a chance. No campfires,” he said.

“Oh come oooooon,” Toby whined. “Who camps without a campfire?”

“No,” Dante said firmly. “There’s a full fire ban for a reason.”

Toby rolled his eyes. “That’s just for the dumb flatlanders who don’t know what they’re doing and come up to the mountains for the weekend to coo at a bunch of mangy mule deer. We live up here, we know how to have a campfire.”

“No,” Dante repeated. “It hasn’t even sprinkled in months, and we haven’t had a good soaking rain since back in spring. No. Campfire.”

“Just because you want to be some hotshot smokejumper doesn’t mean you’re a firefighter yet,” Toby said. “Get off your high horse. I want a campfire.”

“Hotshots and Smokejumpers are two different things,” Dante said, arms crossing. “And it doesn’t even matter, because *we are not having a campfire.*”

“But—” Toby started.

“Toby,” I interrupted, putting on my best mom voice. I knew where I stood in this group of queer mountain kids. The first to come out to the world at large, the first to feel comfortable in their own skin. It somehow meant I was usually in charge, usually the arbitrator in disagreements. I was okay with that, and didn’t mind using it when needed. Especially with Toby.

Toby sighed and slouched off, kicking his sleeping bag towards his still unassembled tent.

“He’s going to pout for the rest of the night,” Dante muttered.

I shrugged. “Let him. He needs to get used to not always getting his way.”

“He won’t,” Dante replied. “Not with his kind of parents.”

“They have kind of spoiled him,” I said, casting my eyes sideways to make sure Toby couldn’t hear us.

“Kind of? River, they bought him a \$40,000 Jeep. And then

they got him another one when he wrecked the first one. \$40,000 is almost twice what my mom makes in a *year* working at the County Market, without even counting all the aftermarket crap he's bolted on."

I shrugged. It was nice to know Dante was on my side, but what was there to say? Toby being rich and spoiled was nothing new. Neither was the entitlement that sometimes came from that. He was still our friend.

"You're the one who dated him," I pointed out.

"Yeah, for, like, two months when we were twelve!" Dante said. "Relationships don't count until you're at least fifteen. Before that they're just puppy crushes. Besides, I just wanted to play with his Hot Wheels more. He had, like, five hundred and a whole playroom full of track."

I gave a dramatic gasp, clutching a hand to my chest. "Hot Wheel whore!"

"Hush," he said, swatting my shoulder with a smile.

I snickered and turned to watch Natalie who was leaning into our tent, arranging sleeping mats and bags. The slowly setting sun was turning her brown hair amber with little threads of gold, and I felt something stirring in my gut. I went over, leaning down and reaching into the tent to catch Natalie's chin.

"Come with me," I said with a lopsided grin.

Natalie gave me a little mischievous smile. "Why should I do that?"

"Come with me," I repeated with a gentle tug.

Natalie gave in, standing up and dusting off her pants. Toby wolf-whistled behind us as I led the way out of the clearing, fingers tangling with Natalie's. My other hand was free, though, and I used it to flip Toby off.

## CHAPTER 2: IGNITION

Dante

“Having fun in here?” I asked, poking my head into the tent.

Iris smiled from the center of a mess of sleeping bags and stuff she’d pulled out from her bag. “Tons. Kinda lonely though.”

“Oh, well, we can’t have that.” I crawled all the way into the tent and sat across from her.

“So,” she said.

“So.”

“We’re sharing a tent.”

“We are indeed,” I agreed. “But...if you’ve changed your mind, that’s fine. I’ll go steal a spot in Toby’s tent, the thing is the size of a small apartment.”

She shook her head. “I haven’t. Changed my mind, I mean. It’s still just...kind of weird, though.”

I nodded. “That’s fair.”

“I never thought I had much dysphoria, not really, but...” she trailed off with a shrug, breaking eye contact and tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

I gently nudged her knee with my foot. “Everyone gets nervous showing their body to their partner for the first time. Gender has nothing to do with it.”

She looked back up at me with a little smile. “What if you do like it now, though, but don’t like it after I have surgery?”

“I’ll like whatever you look like,” I responded. It was true. She was gorgeous no matter what. “Did you ask your parents yet? About surgery?”

She sighed and nodded. “Yeah. They’re fine with me getting

it, but they don't want me to use my college fund for it like I asked. I tried to tell them how much easier it would be than fighting with insurance, how I don't even want to go to college anyway, but I didn't get anywhere."

"You've still got two years to win them over," I said, reaching out to wrap her hands up in mine. "And plenty of time to win some big rodeo pot and use that money instead."

"Such faith in my rodeo skills."

"They are very good skills."

She grinned. "Oh really?"

"Mmmhm." I leaned forward and she met me in the middle for a soft kiss. All I wanted was to keep kissing her, but a shout from Toby asking for help with his tent broke us apart.

"I've been summoned," I sighed.

Iris patted my knee. "Someone has to help him set up the apartment."

I rolled my eyes, gave her another quick peck, and crawled back out of the tent. Toby was standing next to a large rectangle of rumpled fabric, a bunch of poles on top of it.

"Aren't you rich enough to afford one that just pops open through some sort of expensive magic?" I asked, leaning down to grab a pole.

"And listen to River call me a glamper? Not a chance."

I didn't point out this tent was still pretty much a glamper tent anyway with its three sections, multiple zip-up windows, and the fact you could stand up inside with room to spare. All it was missing was a bathroom.

Together we threaded the poles into all the right spots and pulled everything taut, erecting the structure in about ten minutes. Toby put his hands on his hips and nodded in satisfaction.

"Thanks. Now...about a campfire."

"No, Toby. Not happening."

"Come on, Dante, just a little one?" Toby tried. "Five sticks. Just enough for marshmallows once the sun goes down."

If Toby didn't drop this soon, I was going to follow Natalie and River's lead and take Iris off into the forest for a real

makeout session. Except that would leave Toby unsupervised, which probably wasn't a good idea. More and more, having him around felt like babysitting.

"No," I said. "Stop asking."

"You're not in charge," Toby pointed out.

"No, but I am twice your size and I had the most tackles out of anyone in the county last season. Care to try your luck?"

Toby sized me up for a minute then shook his head.

"Here," Iris said, getting up from where she'd been going through the coolers and putting a beer in Toby's hand. "Occupy your mouth with this instead of talking."

"Iris! Always there for us with the beers," Toby said, hooking an arm over her shoulders and planting a sloppy kiss on her cheek. "Thank you!"

"Happy to provide," Iris said, pulling away to hand me one as well.

"Thanks, love," I said. "Your dad gonna miss them?"

"Nah," Iris replied, taking a sip of her own. "I took them from the beer fridge in the shop. He'll figure his mechanics drank them."

"Naughty, naughty," Toby said, letting out a loud belch.

"You're disgusting," Iris laughed.

"I seem to remember a belching contest last week that you won," I pointed out, grinning at her over the lip of my beer. Her nose scrunched up and she stuck her tongue out at me.

Our relationship was new, only a few months old, but her smile still sent a thrill through me. She was terrifyingly pretty. Always had been. I still remembered the first time I'd seen her at a weekend rodeo one town over, strong thighs gripping the sides of her chocolate-colored mare, Fiddle, as the two of them twisted around barrels. They'd taken the turns so tight Iris's knees almost brushed the ground. I'd known her before that, she'd moved here shortly after my family had ten years earlier, but that rodeo was the first time I'd really *seen* her. I hadn't looked back since, even if it took me almost a year to convince her my feelings were genuine no matter what her gender was.

She could see me thinking about her and blushed, hiding it



behind another sip of beer. We'd stayed up late video chatting the night before, and she'd insisted we share a tent. We had yet to do that. It made the coming night feel both terrifyingly close and achingly far away. Sneaking into one another's beds for a few hours while our parents slept was one thing, but there was something so much more intimate about the enclosed space of a little tent. Not having parents around helped too.

I needed a minute, or I was going to reach a point where my pants gave away my hopes for the night. Not that anything would happen if Iris didn't want it to. I wasn't even sure *I* wanted it to. But certain parts of my anatomy had other ideas.

"Be right back, need to pee," I said, handing Iris my beer.

"Don't get eaten by a cougar," she replied.

"I'll do my best," I told her, trotting off among the trees.

It took some work to get far enough away from camp for privacy, heading down the slope away from the direction that River and Natalie had gone. There were a lot of beetle-killed lodgepole pines littering the ground I had to climb over. They lay tangled together like a giant's game of pick-up sticks, spear sharp branches jutting off in all directions. Raspberry bushes, a couple weeks past ripe, sprouted up where they found room, adding tiny thorns to the mess. There wasn't even really anything to duck behind, the still standing lodgepoles only providing a foot of cover at best as they flexed and swayed in the wind. Any semblance of old growth pine had been logged away long ago.

Finding a place that was good enough, I unzipped my pants, taking a few calming breaths as I did. Everything was fine. Iris and I were just sharing a tent. Just. Sharing a tent. It was fine. Maybe something would happen, maybe it wouldn't. Either way, we were going to have a great night. And then we were going to have another one tomorrow, and then we were going to go home and get ready for school to start in a week.

Zippering back up, I headed for camp, trying to focus on things that weren't sharing a tent with my dangerously pretty girlfriend. The falling evening light casting long shadows across the forest. The tiny chipmunks skittering along the fallen trunks. The fat gray camp robbers hopping among the branches

and having twittering arguments with one another. The push and pull of the wind as it came and went. Not Iris's laugh. Not the way she liked to tuck herself against my chest and under my chin. Not the twinkle in her bark-brown eyes when she was up to something. Nope. None of that. Just the forest.

When I made it back to camp, still in much the same anxious condition I'd left it in, I didn't see Iris. But I did see Toby, crouched by the fire pit and leaning low over it, blowing on a small pile of smoking red pine needles under a tepee of sticks.

"Toby!" I shouted, frantically looking around for the closest source of water.

Toby jumped and spun around, looking equal parts sheepish and triumphant. "It's fine, Dante! I've got it. Promise."

The needles crackled, then gave a pop, scattering in all directions as the wind blew through with a little gust.

"What's going on?" Iris asked, emerging from our tent with a book in hand.

"Water! We need water!" I said gesturing at the fire.

Iris's eyes went wide and she dropped the book, boots grinding on the hard-packed dirt as she spun to run over to River's truck. I went straight for the fire pit, trying to kick dirt on the smoldering needles, not having any luck as my boots scraped against nothing but hard, dry ground. I didn't want to stomp on it and risk sending bits flying out. Toby attempted to shove me back but I wrapped my arms around him and bodily tossed him away from the area, sending him stumbling. He lost his balance and fell backward, arms pinwheeling and landing on his ass.

"Asshole!" Toby said. "That fucking hurt!"

"I'm not the asshole here," I snarled.

Little flames licked up at the tepee of sticks Toby had built over the needles, and they liked what they were tasting. Iris slammed into my side, sticker-covered water bottle in hand, and dumped the contents straight on the fire. It sizzled and spat, the flames gone but wisps of smoke still coming from it. I finally stomped on it for good measure as Iris took up attempting to

kick dirt onto everything.

“You two are overreacting!” Toby whined.

“Shut up, Toby!” we both shouted.

“Iris, find more water,” I ordered. We had to drown it.

She knelt down at the coolers and started chucking things out in search of liquids as I cast my eyes around for any stray smoldering needles. I was not prepared to hear her yelp, and it snapped my spine straight with fear.

I yanked my head towards her, following her gaze to the edge of the clearing. There was a little trickle of smoke, curling out of a pile of dead aspen leaves from last fall that had collected in the crook between two exposed roots of a half-dead lodgepole pine. Before I could really process what was happening a finger of flame rolled up after the smoke, stretching into the air one inch, two, three.

“Water! More water!” I yelled, running to stomp at the leaves.

I heard Iris and Toby both digging through the coolers behind me now, bits of food smacking into the unforgiving ground. Soon Iris was at my side, pulling me back to make room for a new bottle of water to slosh onto the leaves. Toby stumbled up behind her, arms filled with more bottles and a jug of orange juice. He opened them and handed them off to Iris one by one as I continued to stomp at the persistent flames.

Switching tactics I started using my heel to drag the leaves out, attempting to get it down to bare dirt and starve the flames of fuel. It didn't seem to be working any better, the fire sprawling out in all directions. It was already covering a couple square feet at least. The flames licked at my hiking boot, the heat driving in through the leather, making my foot sweat.

“Dante!” Iris said frantically.

I looked over and saw she was out of liquids. Toby had gone back to the coolers, but he shook his head at me when I looked at him. There was nothing left, even the beer having been sacrificed in an attempt to fight back the flames.

Iris's eyes went somehow wider and without warning she jerked me away from the fire. The flames had grown exponentially in just the moment I'd looked away. Stumbling

with Iris, I watched as the flames, backed by another, steadier, gust of wind, raced across the forest floor, gorging on fallen pine needles and scraggly raspberry bushes in a growing arc. When it reached the foot of the lodgepole pine once more the fire seemed stymied for a moment, licking at the bark but not finding purchase. Undeterred it sent out an advance party of embers to float among the branches. One by one the embers alighted, nestling into the crooks of the dead needles and smoldering until, one by one, several crown fires flared to life. The tree became a torch, the flames howling with victory. Their first true victim had been claimed and soon hundreds, thousands, millions more would fall.

Toby just stood there, staring dumbly at the flames as Iris and I darted towards River's truck, only stumbling after us a moment later.

"Call 911! Now!" I gasped, fear making my chest tight. I knew what was coming. Knew it was probably already too late to do anything about it. We had to get out of here.

The heat from the burning tree was already blistering against my back as I dug my phone out so I could just call myself, forcing my hands to stay steady as I dialed. Holding it to my ear, I waited. And waited. There was only silence.

Pulling the phone back around to my face, I checked my bars. None.

"No service!" I said, turning back around to look at the tree.

It almost hurt to look at, the brightest thing on our evening shadowed part of the ridge. The flames were dancing among the long dead branches, elated at how easy it was for them to get hold. The few branches that still had green on them were holding out, but they wouldn't last long.

"I don't have any either," Iris said, voice shaking. Several tears ran down her face, carving tracks through the light coat of dust from driving up with the windows down. "Toby?"

Toby shook his head, mashing down the button on the side of his phone to turn it off and back on. Sometimes you had to do that up here, to get phones to see the towers correctly. Other times the signals just played by mysterious rules that no one

understood. All three of us held our breath, but when his home screen came back the top left corner still said “No Service.”

I made a split-second decision, the crackling of the tree behind me drilling into my ears. “Iris, Toby, get in the truck and drive until you get a signal. I’m going to find River and Natalie. Make the call and come back for us.”

To her credit, and despite her fear, Iris agreed without hesitation.

“We don’t have the keys!” Toby said. His eyes kept darting towards the fire, and each time he’d shuffle another step farther away.

“They’re on the dashboard,” Iris told him, standing on her tiptoes to wrap me in a hug. I squeezed her tight, then let go and watched her climb into the passenger seat.

“I don’t want to drive,” Toby complained, not moving to get into the truck.. His thumbs were hanging through his belt loops and if it weren’t for his constant sideways shuffling, he would have looked like he was enjoying any other day in the woods.

“Well I can’t drive stick so fucking suck it up,” Iris snapped, slamming the door.

“Now,” I ordered when Toby didn’t move.

He stared at the tree for a few seconds before finally doing as told, stomping around the hood and sliding into the driver’s seat. It took him three tries to get the key into the ignition before the truck roared to life, and he almost slammed the back bumper into an outcropping of rock as he attempted to turn around. Eventually, he got the truck pointed in the right direction and let it loose down the road, back the way we’d come.

Giving the tree one last look—it was fully torching now, the flames beginning to leap to neighboring branches on surrounding trees—I took off in the direction River and Natalie had gone, screaming their names.