

Chapter 1

Wylie Frye, a rugged mill worker in Encampment, Wyoming, is accustomed to the pervasive smell of wood smoke that clings to him after long nights tending the sawdust burner. Despite the discomfort it causes others, he finds solace in the warmth of the burner shack, a stark contrast to his past hardships, including frostbite injuries from working on a North Dakota fracking rig. As he waits anxiously for a late-night visitor, the roaring fire and oppressive heat amplify his tension, compounded by the acidic aftertaste of a recent meal. The chapter establishes Wylie as a man marked by physical labor and a looming sense of unease.

The wigwam burner, a towering steel structure, dominates the night with its fiery intensity, designed to operate when the town sleeps to avoid complaints. Its flames reach extreme temperatures, glowing red and spewing sparks like shooting stars. This setting underscores the industrial grit of Wylie's world, where the mill's operations are both a source of livelihood and a backdrop for clandestine activities. The burner's relentless noise and heat create an isolating environment, heightening Wylie's anticipation as he watches for headlights through a smoke-filmed window.

Wylie's plan hinges on a narrow window of time between 2:15 and 3:30 AM, when the town's bars have emptied and the local cop, Jalen Spanks, begins his routine patrol. The chapter paints Encampment as a tight-knit, rough-around-the-edges community, where drunks and workers coexist in a rhythm dictated by the harsh environment. Wylie's disdain for Jalen's self-important demeanor adds tension, as their encounters are polite but strained. The stakes rise as Wylie's accomplices delay, risking exposure during Jalen's inevitable arrival.

The chapter hints at Wylie's involvement in a shady scheme, though the details remain vague. His instructions are clear: avoid witnessing the men's actions at the burner, preserving plausible deniability. The backdrop of the town's economic

struggles—highlighted by the pine beetle infestation and federal logging policies—adds depth to Wylie’s motivations. As he steps into the brutal cold to avoid seeing the arriving vehicle, the chapter closes with a sense of impending consequence, leaving readers curious about the nature of his criminality and the mill’s role in it.

