



ELYSSA CAMPBELL

POISON TOWN

"All the page-turning thrills of a mystery novel, but also activism, persistence, and the key health and environmental impacts of air pollution in smelter towns."

— John Sandlos, author of *Mining Country*

THEY SAID THEY FIXED THE PROBLEM, BUT IS THE TOWN STILL BEING POLLUTED?

Addie lives in a company town that used to be polluted by the smelter, but the company says it now runs cleaner than ever before. Addie isn't sure, and when a school project gives her the chance to dig deeper, she sets out to test her theory.

To do this, she'll need help — so she enlists her frenemy, Priya, and her grandfather, who used to work at the plant. Addie is determined to do whatever it takes to get the evidence she needs and prove once and for all if the plant is covering up its pollution.

ELYSSA CAMPBELL'S stories have been published in literary magazines in Canada and the United States. She is a substitute teacher and self-identifies as having an ADHD brain. She grew up in a town with a smelter and now lives near Vancouver, Canada.

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To Mom, Dad, and Amy, who have always supported me.

To the King of my heart.

CHAPTER ONE

THURSDAY, MAY 12

To be fair, this was only the second time I'd been called to Principal Socks's office.

I was waiting for him to get off the phone with Mom (aka Mrs. Woods, Bio 11 and 12). It was so *hot* in here. Sweat glued my bangs to my forehead. The office was a square box with tall windows, but Principal Socks kept the blinds and windows shut, blocking out fresh air and sunlight.

Principal Socks set down the phone.

"Sorry, could you open a window?" I wiped my forehead under my bangs. My palms were sweaty too. Okay, maybe it wasn't just the air. Maybe I was a *little* anxious.

Principal Socks rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. "Addison, I hope you've been reflecting on the consequences of your little prank?" It was a question, but before I could answer he reminded me, as patronizing as ever, "You filled Priya Gill's locker with insects."

"She called me stupid," I mumbled.

"She called you stupid, so you filled her locker with —"

"Not insects. An earthworm," I interrupted. "One worm. One. I didn't *fill* her locker with them. She's totally exaggerating ..."

As I was explaining, the principal's frown deepened until his

large grey eyebrows — they were as thick as his moustache — made his deep-set eyes into caves. Oops. Interrupting him had been a mistake.

“This is your second strike.” Clicking a red pen, he opened a big binder of class lists and marked another *X* next to Addison Woods.

I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans. My first strike had been for missing homework. One more and there would be, to quote Principal Socks, *Serious consequences, young lady*. Maybe an in-school suspension. Still, I took comfort in knowing that the name right below mine — Jamie Woods, my brother — had a full row of red *X*s for absences, arguments, not turning in homework, etcetera. And all in the year since we moved to this town.

So, I was doing fine. Relatively.

“What can you do so you don’t end up in my office again?” Principal Socks tried to pin me with his gaze, but I didn’t look. I looked down at his yellow and green striped socks. (Hence, Principal Socks).

“Uh ...” Honestly, it had been the same quiz since kindergarten. The answer could be: a) talk it out, b) ignore Priya or c) — “We could bring it to the counsellor?”

Slowly, Socks nodded. *Ding, ding, ding! Right answer! My shoulders sagged with relief.*

“I keep my windows closed because the air in this town is ...” Socks began, unexpectedly answering my question from before.

“The air in this town is what?” I asked, curiosity pushing away my worries.

Someone knocked on the door and I twisted in my chair.

My stomach did a little flip when Mom cracked it open. “You two are almost finished?”

“Please come in, Robin.” Socks waved Mom in, and waved me out.

* * *

For the next three hours — or maybe it was just ten minutes — I sat outside the principal’s office, waiting for Socks and Mom to be done talking. After trying to smile at the secretary and getting a frown in return, I avoided making eye contact. She gave off Roz from *Monsters Inc.* vibes, down to the scowl, lipstick, and glasses with the little chain.

The principal’s office door shut with a swish and click. Mom’s shadow fell over me. I was fourteen, and just a few inches shorter than her. I was a photocopy of Mom, with my light-brown hair and bangs. We dressed alike too, comfort first. We were average height but wiry and lanky, and all muscle and bone. Dad and Jamie were taller than Mom and me, but together our family looked as alike as a pack of Germans Shepherds with blue eyes. Rough and tumble, with bruises and grass stains and broken bones. We loved science and nature and adventure — and ignoring our problems instead of talking.

“What’s going on, Addie?” Mom crossed her arms and waited.

I shrugged. “Didn’t you get the whole story in there?”

“There are two sides to every story.” Mom inclined her head toward the hall. “Let’s walk. Come on.” When I didn’t move, she nudged me out of my chair. I slung on my backpack and followed.

It was 3:30 p.m. and the hallways were empty. The whole school smelled faintly of compost, thanks to Mom pushing for a school-wide compost and garden program. But you usually couldn’t smell it during the day because all the BO was overpowering.

My white runners squeaked on the floor, satisfying as bubble wrap. I shuffled, squeaking them as loudly as I could.

“What happened with Priya this time?” Mom asked.

Priya and her friends had been giving me trouble all year. They started little fires with laughing and teasing, but somehow *I* always ended up in detention. I was a bomb, and Priya had the detonator.

“She called me dumb.”

That wasn't the whole story. I'd been asked to read a few lines of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to the class. I'd choked, then stumbled over my words while Priya and her friends giggled.

Priya had looked at me scornfully, raised her hand, and offered, *That's all right, Mr. Turner. I can read Addie's part, too.* Then after class in the hall, while she knew I could hear, one of her friends joked, *Is she like, actually stupid or something?* and Priya had laughed.

“Are you worried she's right?” Mom asked.

“No! Of course not.” The question punched me in the stomach. It was just ... school had never been my thing, even back in Vancouver. Math was hard, and English was even harder. I couldn't get along with anyone in my class, teachers included. It had taken me so long to make friends back home, and now I barely talked to most of them. Like Mom, Dad, and Jamie though, I'd always loved science, and I was on track to finish with an A-minus even with some missing homework and careless mistakes on tests.

Mom wasn't finished. “You know that Priya's wrong, Addie. You shouldn't need to prove it to her. Especially like this. What does a prank like this prove?” Her voice warmed, and I felt her smile even without looking. “You know how you can prove her wrong? Get through high school and vet tech school. You have so much potential. Don't waste it.”

She'd played the vet tech card. That wasn't fair. If I wanted to be a vet, I had to stay in school. I needed good grades. For some annoying reason, tears pricked my eyes. I hid them behind a shrug. “I'm going to bike home.”

“Not today,” Mom said gently, but in a tone that told me there was no point arguing. “I'm done planning class for tomorrow. Let's drive home together.”

* * *

The school building was bright, shiny, and new, with giant windows and two crisp, green soccer fields. The smelting company had dumped hundreds of thousands of dollars into it, just like everything else in this town, and wouldn't let anyone forget it. A granite slab below the Canadian flag in front of the school reminded every kid, teacher, and parent of our corporate sponsors.

It was a warm, wet, golden Thursday in May. Birds fluttered between the evergreen trees around the staff parking lot. The sky was hazy, but not gloomy. I sucked in a long, deep breath, and tasted faint metal — like the smell of an indoor pool. When we first moved here I thought the smell had just been smoke from the forest fires, but that wasn't it.

We moved from Vancouver to this company town in the Kootenays last fall for a job opportunity Dad couldn't pass up — despite Mom's efforts to talk him out of it. I hadn't wanted to leave Vancouver, but when we first arrived here, I'd thought we'd moved to paradise. I had freedom like never before. I could walk or bike everywhere. And the mountains. *Oh, the mountains.* They seemed to go on forever, each range peaking higher than the last. We could hike and mountain bike and rock climb in the summer. There was skiing and snowshoeing in the winter. And when the snow melted, it pooled in hidden lakes, perfect for camping and swimming.

I unlocked my bike and walked it over to our CR-V. Puddles from last night's rain were drying up all around the parking lot. They were ringed in yellow. I crouched to inspect them.

“Hey, Mom, there are those yellow rings again.”

Mom glanced back. A dark look crossed her face like a cloud passing over the sun, just like the last time I'd pointed out the yellow puddles. Her lips pressed thin. I stared at her until she turned away. What was she worried about?

On the drive home, Mom said, “I know you don’t want to talk, so just hear me out. Making friends is risky. Keeping them is even riskier. Friendships take work and forgiveness, because people make mistakes, and sometimes their mistakes can hurt.”

Resting my chin on my hand, I frowned out the window. The road wound down the mountain, past a park, and through streets with old, single-storey houses. We’d lived here for almost a year, and I hadn’t made any real friends yet. *Whatever*. Most of the kids in my grade were just drama anyway.

When we pulled into the garage, I grabbed my helmet and bike out of the trunk.

“Won’t go past the park, Mom, promise! Love you!” I glided out of the driveway before Mom could add grounded to the list of consequences.

My ponytail breezed behind me. Gravel crunched under my tires. Dogs barked. Leaves swished. My beat-up, red bike was Jamie’s old one and had gears and shocks and everything.

A basketball whizzed over my head. It bounced once, then rolled into the gutter. I braked with a screech and whirled, ponytail whipping over my shoulder.

“Hey, earthworm!”

Jamie. He was shooting hoops with two of his friends at a neighbour’s house.

Earthworm. My gaze narrowed. News travelled fast around a town with one high school and a population of eight thousand. I was an Introvert with a capital “I.” I didn’t even have Instagram. Jamie had every social media app, which was terrible because he already found plenty of ways to be a jerk in real life.

Jamie had been especially nasty since we moved. Dad’s fancy new job at the emissions monitoring lab kept him busy, so Jamie didn’t see much of him. Plus, Jamie’s asthma had started to come

back, and our doctor made him quit swimming, rock climbing, cross-country, track and field, baseball, band — *everything*. I still practised and played, while Jamie sat on the bleachers doodling and sulking.

“You’re not supposed to be playing basketball, *Jamison*,” I snapped. “You’re not supposed to be playing anything.”

Jamie pulled a mocking, pouty, punchable face. He was tall like Dad, with Dad’s dark brown hair and nose, too. “You’re gonna tell on me to Mom?”

“*Ooh*,” came a chorus of laughter from Jamie’s friends.

“Whatever.” I tried to sound chill even as my face heated. “I’m not going to go running for help when your lungs explode.”

Jamie jogged past me to retrieve the basketball. He made a big show of dribbling it through his legs as he passed me, then went in for a lay-up. With the ball in the air, he froze. He grabbed his throat, making choking noises. His friends laughed, and Jamie began to laugh too.

Forget Jamie. I rode off, pedalling until my feet couldn’t keep up and I had to shift gears again. I took my usual route around our neighbourhood, through the grid of quiet streets, muddy back alleys, and to the sidewalk along the riverbank.

I hopped off at the top of the hill. It was a grassy strip of park, perfect for sledding in winter (if you could stop before you hit the river). In summer, when the river was low, there would usually be a dog or two that would come up to say hello, then splash through the water playing fetch.

The roar of the river couldn’t quite drown out the low, steady hum of the smelter. The smelter was a factory that extracted lead, zinc, gold, and other metals from ores. It was as big as the whole town and a half. Three smokestacks towered as high as the skyscrapers back in Vancouver, pouring out grey smog. Piles of slag — the

rocky waste product left over from smelting the ore — lay around it like black sand dunes.

Over a thousand people worked there, including Dad. Without the smelter, there would be no town. The town had grown around the company. What would happen if the smelter shut down? What would happen if all those office lights went dark, and the smokestacks stopped pouring out smog? Dad and so many others would lose their jobs. Families would leave. Schools would close. The town would really be nothing but a slag heap.

The smelter was huge, gloomy, and threatening ... but also kind of beautiful. Its thousands of orange lights flickered, and as the sun set they reflected on the river. Long shadows of poplar trees unfolded across the hill. The fiery evening sky had turned from blue to orange to violet, but there were no stars yet. Crows rose from the treeline behind the smelter. They flew over the river toward me like a vast, dark cloud, calling to each other. I smiled up at the sky, admiring them. Mom and I loved all kinds of animals, but crows were our favourite birds. They were tiny, feathered geniuses. They could solve puzzles and use tools, just like monkeys and octopuses.

I felt my smile freeze, then shrink.

The crows were struggling to fly. Not all of them, but enough to look weird, and one crow was flying lopsided. It was falling behind. *Come on*, I thought, as if I could help it just by thinking hard enough. *Come on, you can do it!*

The crow fell like a paper airplane.

I threw down my bike. I tore down the grassy hill, sliding and twisting my ankle a bit as the grass became reedy mud at the edge of the river. My heart pounded. The crow wasn't dead. It was lying in the mud, wings splayed, breathing fast and shallowly through its open beak. It looked like ... it looked like ...

It looked like when Jamie used to have asthma attacks.

The crow didn't react as I scooped it up. Ignoring the pain in my ankle, I ran back up the hill, yelling, "Jamie! Help! Help!"

I heard Jamie shout back; far away, then getting closer, "Addie? What's wrong?!"

When I crested the hill, Jamie was already there, breathing hard as if he'd sprinted the whole way. He saw me, and his eyes went wide. The terror on his face became relief ... then frustration. His eyes flashed, and he shouted, "Addie! What the —!"

Pushing the crow into his arms, I shouted over him, "You need to get it to Mom!"

"Seriously? It's just a bird," Jamie scoffed, but didn't drop it.

"It's dying! You need to get it to Mom, Jamie!" I pointed. "Take my bike." Jamie could bike faster than I could, even if I hadn't rolled my ankle. I pushed and shoved him toward my bike.

"Okay, okay!" Muttering, Jamie climbed onto his old bike and rode home as fast as he could with the crow in one arm. For the first time in his fifteen years of life, Jamie listened to me.

The crow had fallen out of the sky. But it hadn't hit anything. It was fine, then it couldn't breathe ... after it had flown directly over the smokestacks through the smog. I looked back at the smelter — the smog still rising from its stacks — and frowned.