

## Chapter 1

If Cameron knew how that fire would ruin his life, maybe he would have stayed home. Or maybe he would have driven there faster. Instead, he arrived as the house steadily burned.

The back half of the roof collapsed with an air-shattering crunch. Sparks that looked like demonic fireflies erupted into the air and black smoke rolled and folded into the night sky. The red and orange flames licked against the bones of the house, the beams that once held up walls and sectioned off rooms. Shards of glass rained on the sidewalk as a window exploded. It sounded something like a campfire, with crackles and pops, but much angrier. Almost sinister.

The tires screeched as Wilder slammed on the brakes, the reflection of the flames danced in his eyes. Cameron flung himself out of the car door before it even came to a stop. In the blink of an eye, he turned on his camera, pressed record, and focused it on the raging fire. So far only the top floor burned, firefighters might be able to save pieces of the bottom if they hurried. It was a big house. Most of them were in this part of Los Angeles.

“Oh my god guys, do you see this?” Cameron spoke into the mic placed on the back of the camera. He spun to focus on his friends climbing out of the car, the smoke already turning their eyes bloodshot.

Lyle shook his head and ran a shaking hand through his curtain of dark hair. His girlfriend, Blossom, stood behind him, clutching at his elbow as if one small teenager could protect her from this inferno.

Through the camera feed, Cameron saw some of the neighbors milling about along the street. A few of them shot glances at Cameron’s crew and frowned, but he ignored them. He was used to that. He’d made enough content to ruffle a few feathers in his time and most of those incidents resulted in his highest-viewed videos. People loved to watch him do things they never would. Including getting up close and personal with a burning house while the neighbors sneered. Drama gets views. Dramatic fires could get billions of them.

“We gotta get closer,” he said to his friends. Lyle shrugged. His eyes darted around the neighborhood as if he’d rather be anywhere else, but if Cameron said to do it, he’d follow along. Wilder started walking right away and Cameron focused the camera on his broad shoulders. The flames danced into the air over his head and created a truly breathtaking image. Perfect for a thumbnail.

Man. A million views in an hour on this one, easy.

They stopped when the heat grew too oppressive. One time Cameron visited Palm Springs in the middle of summer when his mom came to visit, but this was hotter than even that. It radiated in waves off the rubble of the house, swirling around him like a convection oven. The ash and sparks rained on them, dusting the shoulders of Wilder’s windbreaker.

Someone yelled at them as they moved around the house to the backyard, but Cameron chose to ignore her shrill voice. What did she know, anyway? This content was priceless! The camera feed looked like one of those found footage movies as he crept closer to the searing heat. It bounced up and down and struggled to focus through all of the shadows and bright flames. Cameron couldn’t stop his heart racing and his hand shaking thinking about the numbers climbing higher and higher.

“God, I feel like my eyebrows are going to be burnt off,” Wilder joked.

“We can’t have you being any uglier, bad for the brand,” Cameron shot back and all of them laughed as if they were in a studio audience for some sitcom.

Blossom coughed and winced as a wave of smoke buffeted them. “This is so horrible,” she mumbled.

“This is going to earn me a million dollars,” Cameron said. “I’ll throw your links in the description.”

They backed up several steps as the flames expanded and started to eat the backyard. Soot and ash covered the pool that looked somehow normal. For some reason, Cameron thought the water would boil, but it didn’t. His blood might boil before that water did. The pumps

still sounded, dumping gallon after gallon of pointless water into the hole in the ground while the house turned to char.

“Hold up. Was that someone screaming?” Lyle held up a hand and leaned closer to the fire. As he did, a beam cracked and split the air like a clap of thunder. Blossom screamed and covered her ears with her hand. Even Wilder jumped and cursed as the splintered pieces of wood tumbled from the roof into a crop of bushes that immediately started to simmer.

Gold. Pure gold. “We almost DIED!” A perfect title for the video and it wasn’t even clickbait. Well, not exactly. that beam could have hit any one of them, never mind that they were at least thirty yards away from it.

“Maybe we should get out of here,” Wilder said as he stared at the sparks whirling like a sandstorm.

Cameron shoved the camera into Lyle’s face. “Did you say you heard someone in there? Dude! There’s no way there’s someone in there.” Cameron whipped the camera back toward the house and the darkness with tongues of fire in the crumbling infrastructure looked like the gates of hell.

Lyle turned on the enhanced character as soon as he saw the camera. The version of himself that is like turning the volume knob a few ticks higher on an amplifier. He’d been in enough videos to get the persona.

“I swear man, I heard something! I think someone’s in there!”

“What do we do?! What do we do?!” Cameron flung the camera between Lyle staring at him with his mouth open, Wilder flexing his hands as he watched the fire, sweat dripping down his face, Blossom nibbling on the sleeves of her sweatshirt, her eyes watering.

Was there actually someone in there? It didn’t matter, they couldn’t do anything. They shouldn’t do anything, but Cameron felt the urge. What if they ran into a burning building and saved a child? How great content would that be? He might be able to make a two-part video out

of it, not to mention the free press from news stations. When he saw the start of this fire from his balcony up the street, he never thought it could turn into this. Such a wealth of content.

“Go in there, Wilder,” Cameron urged. He didn’t actually mean it, but if Wilder took him seriously...No, he couldn’t let him go through with that. Could he? It’d make for such a good thumbnail.

“Are you kidding?” Wilder arched one eyebrow as he stared down the lens. “*You* go in there!”

“But you’re bigger than me. What if you have to, like, move some rubble around or something.”

“The only thing I’d be moving is my black ass out of there, I’ll tell ya that.” Again, they all laughed.

“Can we leave now? It’s so hot.” Blossom didn’t understand. She wasn’t a content creator. Her parents had enough money. But Cameron had to work.

“For real, Campo, it’s getting intense. Where are the firefighters?” Lyle looked over the yard where they could see the neighborhood street snaking into the dark of night. No sirens, no flashing lights.

“A little bit longer. This is amazing. Who else is doing this kind of stuff?” Cameron said.

“No one else is this stupid, you mean,” Wilder said.

“We’ll see whose laughing when this video hits trending.”

Cameron adjusted his grip and held the camera steady as he pushed closer to the house, ignoring the waves of intense heat and the smoke that filled his lungs. He pulled his shirt over his mouth, but could still feel it choking and filling his mind. The others didn’t follow him, but that didn’t matter. Cameron needed a few close shots of the house to really show the damage and intensity. To make the viewers feel the danger. The things he did for content.

“Dude, this is NUTS!” Cameron breathed a little heavier to make it seem like he was in distress. Part of the second floor collapsed under the heat and sent sparks ballooning into the air, so Cameron fell sideways with a yell. Part of the show.

He scampered back to his friends and, as if rehearsed, Lyle had wide eyes and rushed to meet him. “Dude! Are you okay?”

“Oh my god! Oh my god!” Cameron chanted. “I almost died!” He fell to his knees, handing the camera to Lyle in a coordinated movement as he landed, and started to cough. Some of it was real, the smoke did get into his lungs, but he played it up. He was a professional.

They saw the police cars and the fire trucks as they left the backyard and stepped into the street. Blue and red lights lined the entire road as uniformed men and women set up barriers to keep the crowd back. No one noticed the four teenagers as they slipped into a neighboring yard and then to the back of the crowd.

The fire trucks just started to unroll the hose and rush toward the house, but there was no chance of saving anything now. They should have been here a long time ago.

“Man, I’m never getting my car out of this,” Wilder moaned as he looked at the barricades.

“We can walk back, it’s not far,” Lyle said.

As they walked up the hills, cutting through yards, Cameron started to edit the video in his head. He’d need a good dramatic intro. After all, this was a serious situation. Someone lost their house. He’d need to play that up, pull the emotional strings. Before he knew it, Cameron walked down his driveway to his small, adobe-style house.

“I’m probably going to be up all night editing this video,” he said as he waved goodbye to his friends. “Gotta get this one up as soon as possible.”

“Can’t wait to see it, bro,” Lyle said as he hopped into his Nissan to drive Blossom back to Beverly Hills. Blossom didn’t say anything, she looked shell-shocked with black smudges on her cheeks.

The next morning, Cameron uploaded the video. He filmed a sappy, serious intro under the soft glow of street lights the night before. If he looked closely in the background, he could see the smoke from the fire rising in a dark cloud, blocking the canopy of stars. Almost immediately, the video skyrocketed to attention. Cameron's fastest to ever hit a million views. But, as he slept, he missed the dislikes careening out of control. He missed the comments railing him as an idiot and insisting he be arrested.

By the time he woke up the next afternoon, missing half of the school day, but he never showed up there anyway, the internet wildfire consumed his entire career and the official police investigation already started. Several drama channels - the bottom feeders of the internet, as far as Cameron was concerned - posted videos calling Cameron's exploits stupid, immature, and criminal. As if they wouldn't have done the same thing if Cameron didn't beat them to it.

Wiping the sleep from his eyes, Cameron stared, stupefied, at his Twitter feed. #CancelCampo trending nationwide. The harsh blue light of his phone reflected his dazed face as he jolted up in bed, his fingers darted across the phone screen. The first article he found, a pop-up-ridden page from TMZ, showed the headline, in vibrant, bold type: "Popular Internet Content Creator's Car Blocked Fire Trucks as They Responded to House Fire."

Oh no.

None of them paid attention to where they parked. There was a fire! How were they supposed to have the presence of mind to park out of the way? Plus, it was a fire truck, couldn't they just bump Wilder's car out of the way?

With his heart thudding in his ribs, Cameron scanned the rest of the article. In the third paragraph, his stomach sank out of his body.

"It has been reported that a man, 43-year-old Justin Tucker, a native of Los Angeles, passed away during the fire. He leaves behind a wife and two young children. One has to think: if the brave firemen and women were not delayed, could they have saved him?"

No. This wasn't good. Of course, they couldn't have saved him! The fire nearly enveloped the whole house by the time Cameron got there, Justin had to have been long gone. That couldn't possibly be his fault. Sure, it sucked that man died and it sucked even worse about his family, but no one could call that his fault. Right?

But what about the person calling for help that Lyle heard? Was that Justin?

Impossible. That had to be an echo of wood crackling or someone on the street or something, it couldn't have been Justin. Still, Cameron's blood ran cold as he scanned a few other articles about the fire: one from ABC News, one from the freaking BBC. How fast could these journalists write?

In the past five hours, Cameron lost 500 thousand subscribers and that plummeted minute by minute. His Twitter mentions demanded he leave the internet permanently. Some of his sponsors announced that they were investigating the situation and their involvement with the "Campo" brand.

How did this happen? How could he stop this from happening?

Cameron paced his room, glancing at his phone and putting it back down, shaking his head, pumping his fist into his palm. His mind ran a thousand thoughts per second, but none of them latched on. This was it. The end of his career. Over something that wasn't even his fault. He didn't start the damn fire!

They did drive to it and park in the middle of the road.

Cameron forced that small voice deep into the back of his mind. It was completely foolish to think this had anything to do with him.

Hovering the mouse over the permanently delete button, Cameron winced. So many views. At this rate, the fire video would surpass all of the others. Even the one where he surprised his dad with a new car - but the journalists would never write about that one. Besides, if he deleted it, someone else would simply upload a clone. Surely, he should profit from it instead.

But then he glanced at the dislikes and deleted the video.

In the next few weeks, Cameron regretted rushing his apology video. What he uploaded sounded more like a defense of his actions than a genuine apology and - if he was being honest - it was a defense. After all, he didn't do anything wrong. But at least for the internet, the more tactful approach worked better. The wider public accepted Wilder's apology without reservation. Maybe the fake tears and the lip trembling sold the act or maybe his smaller audience made him a smaller target, but since the apology videos got posted, Wilder ignored all of Cameron's calls and texts.

Lyle posted his own apology, but his calloused jokes in the fire video - which appeared across countless other channels immediately after Cameron deleted it - created more of an uproar. Cameron hired a publicist, but their advice didn't help. He couldn't lay low, he had to get out of this! Now! He needed an excuse, a reasonable defense, something people would accept. He needed an interview on CNN and a large charitable donation. Anything to get his fans back. Anything to bring in more views.

As the weeks turned to months, the fans didn't come back. Everything Cameron posted got torn to shreds. The Campo brand did nothing but collect dislikes. The sponsorships dried up, the promising negotiations and auditions with Disney and Paramount vanished. His excessive rent drained his bank accounts. The public poured through hours of his past content, finding any even slightly disrespectful joke or comment to paint him as the internet's biggest villain. Lyle stopped returning his calls. Even his dad got snide comments at work.

The once-great Campo was finished, dead in the water.

As he threw his favorite sweatshirt into a moving box a single tear rolled down his cheek. The only real tear he cried during the whole scandal.