

## The Meet

Trees whip by so fast I'm hovering in that space between barely in control and certain death. Topher's ahead of me, whooping and yelling like he always does when we find a straight downhill, but everything around me stills. Barreling through the woods on a bike is second only to snowboarding, and each turn of the trail makes me feel more centered.

I could stay out here forever.

I'm so in the zone I don't realize he's stopping and have to swerve to avoid hitting his back tire. I drop a foot to the ground and am about to give him crap for killing the moment when I notice the couple farther down the trail. The guy is a little younger than me and seems comfortable on his bike. He's watching the girl as she drinks from a water bottle, her head tilted back, her neck stretched out with a strand of blond hair stuck to her skin.

"She's cute," Topher whispers.

"And taken," I reply.

"You think?"

From the way the guy's eyes haven't left her? "Yeah."

"Let's find out." He clears his throat and raises his voice so they can hear us. "Gorgeous day, huh?" Topher's the most outgoing guy I know and grabs any chance to talk to people, even when they're so gorgeous just being near them does something weird to my breathing.

Like now.

I nod at the girl, hoping the mud stuck to my skin will hide the blush creeping up my neck. "Y'all okay?"

They both say, “Yeah.”

“Just taking a quick break,” the guy adds.

“I’m Topher.”

“Evan,” says the guy.

The girl gives a little wave, her gaze landing on me for a beat. “Mike.”

Interesting.

“No, shit?” Topher says, mirroring my thoughts.

She shrugs like it’s no big deal, but dread pulses through me. Topher loves this shit. He nudges me, and I glance at the ground before saying, “Mica.”

Topher doubles over laughing, and the blush works its way to my ears. I stare at the trees until Toph finally realizes no one else is laughing. He pushes his shoulders back and nods up the trail. “Haven’t seen you before.”

Evan smiles at Mike. “It took me a while to convince her.”

A flash of irritation crosses her face, sparking my curiosity. They might be together, but maybe things aren’t so perfect.

Topher clicks his brake gear back and forth. “You enter the Pow Cross?”

Her head whips up. “Pow Cross?”

I clear the embarrassment from my throat. “It’s a big race at the end of the season. There’s categories for all levels so you”—my eyes meet hers for a millisecond, then flick to Evan—“can enter even if you’re a beginner.”

Evan’s face lights up. “Where do we sign up?”

Mike holds up a hand. “Why pow? Isn’t that snow?”

Topher grips his handlebars like that's all that's keeping him from bouncing out of his skin. "Technically, there's pow—snow—and brown pow," he points at the dirt beneath us, "but this race is so late in the season there's usually snow."

"Biking in snow?" Her blue eyes widen.

I can't stop the grin that spreads over my face. "It's pretty rad." The Pow Cross is my favorite thing about early winter—or fall, as some people insist on calling it.

"It sounds cold."

"You've got gear that'll work." Evan runs his hand down her arm and I get the impression he's making sure we know she's taken. Then he turns to Topher. "Thanks, man. We'll check it out."

Topher hops off his bike to fist bump Evan, then Mike. "Sweet." Then he's back on his bike and moving down the trail. "See ya!" he calls over his shoulder.

I rest a foot on my pedal, not ready to leave yet. What if I never see her again? "It's a cold race, but it's awesome. Think about it." I catch her eye, not caring that Evan's watching, and hold her gaze long enough for my pulse to race. It takes all my strength to pedal away.

Topher's waiting for me around the bend. "Dude, you should get her number."

"Did you not notice the boyfriend?"

"So go back and get both their numbers."

I'm not outgoing like Topher. I save my conversations for people who intrigue me. And while I'm not exactly a hermit, I don't walk up to girls I've just met and ask them out—even when they *don't* have a boyfriend nearby.

"Better hurry," he sing-songs.

My jaw clenches as I debate myself. I might make an ass of myself, but if what I picked up on is true, maybe she could be interested.

Topher slaps my thigh. “Go get her!”

I shake my head and laugh. “Wait here.” I swing my bike around and head back down the trail, but when I get to the clearing, they’re gone.