

WILDER

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ONE

I WAS IN THE RUBBER ROOM FOR MY OWN protection. Meili got there by breaking Laura Fenton's middle finger.

The story got retold and exaggerated, but I think it went like this: Laura's boyfriend was seen talking to Meili. Laura confronted Meili outside our high school and grabbed her arm.

Meili famously said, "You ought to remove that hand." Her British-y accent made it "thaht hahnd." It became a saying around school, silly but threatening.

Laura started to say, "Well, you—" and she was on the ground, wailing, her middle finger flopping like a deflated balloon.

Meili—it's May-LEE—was marched into the Rubber Room the next morning by the counselor. Except she wasn't Meili Wen, she was Melissa Young.

"Melissa, you will sit at this table, and you will not

converse or otherwise interact with Mr. Wilder. Is that understood?” Ms. Davies addressed Meili but looked at me.

I nodded.

“Perfectly,” Meili said, head tilted, condescending as always.

Ms. Davies gave the aide on duty some papers and hustled out. Meili dumped a stack of books on her table and opened one.

I tried to go back to reading but couldn't. Maybe I never went back to reading.

Instead, I watched Meili.

Deep in her book, she played with the top button of her yellow sweater, twisting it and releasing. Twisting and releasing. The sweater had a faint background pattern, a swirl you didn't notice at first, you had to stare. I stared. Like all her clothes, that sweater made it seem like everyone else in Unionville, everyone I'd ever met, shopped at the same boring store.

Kids who broke the rules got sent to the Rubber Room. Mike Kosnicki was banned from Spanish because he had said something obscene and possibly threatening to Señor Treadway at a school dance. His defense was that he said it in Spanish. Kids who got in fights or sent out of class for using their phones spent time in the Rubber Room. I was the only all-day resident until Meili.

We didn't speak the first day, not a word.

Or the second day.

Officially, it was In-School Suspension, but kids called it the Rubber Room. It wasn't covered in rubber, but it was delinquent-proof. It was a science lab before they built the addition on the school, so it had long tables with empty racks for lab gear. The windows were Plexiglas instead of glass, permanently scratched up and foggy. There was a list of things that were not allowed: mirrors (could be broken and used as a weapon or to slit your wrists), scissors (same), phones, and key chains, though keys were permitted. There was a box of stubby mini-golf pencils; you used one till it was dull, then threw it out and got another. Real pens and pencils were too dangerous. The Rubber Room was set up to prevent tragedies like school shootings, or at least to make it look like you could prevent them. It was actually an ordinary classroom, echoing with boredom. *Excruciating*, as Meili would say.

Rubber Room monitor was not a coveted job. Ms. Davies or an off-duty aide sat at the front to “supervise,” eating or staring at their phones. Occasionally no one was there, and we were reminded there was a camera above the door. When no adult was present, you could talk as long as you kept a book open and looked down at it. This was a major flaw in the tragedy-prevention system. A couple times a day, a Rubber Room maniac could slip into the hallway—can't lock the door, fire hazard—and do whatever he wanted. Or whatever *she* wanted, since Meili was and always will be the dangerous one.

At the end of Meili's third day in the Rubber Room, Ms. Davies excused herself. "Jason, I'm going to the office to make a call, but I will be watching," she said, pointing at the camera.

I nodded.

"Melissa?" she said. No response. "No talking and no getting up." Ms. Davies stopped halfway out the door. "Melissa?" Nothing. "Melissa, did you hear me?"

"Yes, of course," she said, finally looking up.

Ms. Davies left the door open. The window in the door was papered over to keep curious students from gawking at us. But now, two kids, small and sneaky, probably freshmen, slowed down and peered in, eager for a glimpse they could recount to their friends. Sometimes I snarled at the tourists to give them something juicy to report. But I wasn't sure what Meili would make of that—turns out, of course, she would have loved it—so I stared them down.

Silence.

Meili chewed her lip.

Silence.

"That's not your name," I said. I looked at the page of my biology textbook I'd been pretending to read for twenty minutes.

Big silence.

"Are you talking to me?" she said, not looking up.

"Yup."

"And what did you say?"

“I said that’s not your name.”

Silence.

“What’s not my name?”

“Melissa. You don’t answer when people say ‘Melissa.’”

“Perhaps because I’m reading and not scratching my testicles all day.” The word sounded like “testicools.”

“People respond when their name gets said. You don’t respond to Melissa.”

She turned fully toward me, a move that could bring Ms. Davies back. “Shouldn’t you be burning something down?” She smiled.

She went for the lowest possible blow and connected.

“Fuck you.” I put my fantasy novel right on the table and tried to read.

She stared.

“So you dish it out, but you can’t take it. Very attractive quality,” she said, and went back to her book.

First thing the next day, she dropped an envelope on my table.

I ignored it.

At ten, the aide left to go to the bathroom.

I still ignored it.

I read a novel hidden inside my history textbook. When I started in the Rubber Room in January, I had homework and check-ins. That quietly went away, like all the promises

of *getting you back in class so you graduate in June*. Fine with me. Now it was May, my senior year, and I was killing time.

Meili, without looking up, said, “Really?” Pause. “*Really?*” Pause. “You’re not going to read it?”

I wanted to open it the moment she put it down. But I was terrified it would be some cruel thing, mocking me. I pictured the newspaper article about the fire.

But the way she asked, I had a feeling it wasn’t cruel. I opened it and took out a girly little card, a kitten blowing out candles on a cake. Inside, she had crossed out *Happy Seventh Birthday to One Cool Cat* and written:

Dear Firebug,

Still angry?

Your cellmate,
Esmerelda (aka Melissa)

I put the card back in the envelope and saw the money: ten dollars folded into a tight rectangle.

“Well?” she said.

“Well, what?”

“Are you still angry?”

“Why did you call me firefly?”

“I didn’t call you *firefly*, I called you *firebug*.”

“Same thing.”

“No, a firebug is someone who starts a lot of fires. What d’you call that here?”

I took a deep breath. “Pyromaniac.” That was a word I heard a lot.

“Ooh, much scarier. I prefer firebug. A bit sweeter, isn’t it?” She smiled. “So, still angry?”

Confusing. She mentioned the fire but didn’t judge me for it. “I guess not. Firebug forgives Esmerelda.”

“Cheers. But I didn’t ask to be forgiven, OK? Let’s be clear about that. And now that you aren’t mad, mind doing me a favor?”

I would have done pretty much anything for her, as evidenced by what happened later.

“Depends.”

“You have a motorbike?”

“Yeah.” She had noticed.

“So you might could pick up a cable for me?” “Might could” was the kind of Meili phrase I immediately loved and never tired of. “It’s on the back.”

That explained the money. On the back of the card was *1/8 inch to RCA cable, at least three foot please. Cheers!* which, I came to learn, connects a computer to a stereo. Her apology card was (a) not an apology and (b) actually to get me to do something for her. Very Meili.

“Why can’t you get it?” I said.

“No car, I’m ’fraid.”

“You could order it.”

“No credit card. And I’m a bit restricted. My aunt and uncle don’t want me going online so much. They think I might waste time communicating with my real friends overseas. They want me to focus on my brilliant life here, engage with the local floorenfawna.” I had to look that up later. It’s two words: “flora” and “fauna,” plants and animals.

“How’s that going?”

“Absolutely marvelous. I’m best friends with Laura Fenton. And I’ve met a firemaniac in the Rubber Room.”

“Pyromaniac.”

“So you *are* a pyromaniac.”

I tried to put on a British accent and failed completely. “No, I just hate it when you rednecks use the wrong word.”

“Snob.” She tried to sound American—“Snaaab”—and failed completely.

I continued in my fake British voice. “I can’t help it if I’ve sailed the world and dined with heads of state. It’s not snobbery if I am actually better than everyone else.”

She spoke in her regular voice. “Heads of state. See, that’s nice, actually. That’s the type of phrase you don’t hear in Alabama very much.”

“We’re not in Alabama.”

“May as well be.”

“Snob.”

She put on an even snootier British voice, lisping and

over-the-top. “It’s not snobbery if I am actually better than everyone else.”

I was still laughing my ass off when Ms. Davies walked in. And that made Melissa, or Esmerelda, or Meili, quite pleased.

I have lots of time now to think about what happened. I’m straightening out how one thing led to the next, how I got drawn in, how things became inevitable.

Other people have their ideas, what should have happened, what I did and didn’t do. Meili has her version. This is my story, what it’s like inside my skin. If it doesn’t line up with what other people believe, I’m sorry, but I’m not surprised. Or as Meili would say, “Who cares what they think? They’re all half asleep, trying to fit the rest of us into some twisted dream they’re having.” She’d back me up. But then she’d point at me, raise her eyebrows. “On the other hand, don’t believe a word this one says. Complete lunatic, such a pain in the arse. Even if he can make me laugh so hard I lit’rally piss my knickers.” And she’d stand up, pointing at her crotch. “D’you remember, Jason? When I had to go in the bathroom and, like, dry myself out?”

All that is to say: Meili swerves. And so do I now. And so does this story. If you want facts, read a newspaper. If you want truth, read this.

The next day, I came into the Rubber Room with an

audio connector for Meili and a shiny cut over my lip. Ronny and Dmitri and a couple other guys had caught me getting a hot dog at Stewart's. Again. And messed with me. Again.

Meili saw the cut before she saw the adaptor. We had three minutes till the bell.

"Shit, what happened?"

"Got in an argument." I wanted to talk about the favor I'd done, not my face.

"Argument? 'Bout what?" Meili's shimmery blue T-shirt showed off the dips behind her collarbones. Do those have a name? Hers should.

"About whether I'm allowed to eat at Stewart's."

"You're not allowed to eat at Stewart's? What does that mean?" She folded her arms, deepening those collarbone indentations. You have no idea.

"It means, when I go there, I get this."

"Not from the workers." A statement, but actually a question.

"No, from some guys who don't want me there."

"So they told you not to go to Stewart's, but you go." I nodded. "Bit stupid, isn't it?" She noticed my stare and looked down to see if she was showing cleavage. She wasn't. She didn't really have cleavage.

"Yup."

"Why d'you do it then?"

It seemed so obvious, but it was tricky to find the words.

“Because if I let them tell me what I can’t do, it never ends.” I didn’t mention the fighting, how I craved it, waited for it.

“Bit of a shame that it’s all for some crap hot dogs, though. Couldn’t you fight over something more important, like a girl or a horse or something?”

Ms. Davies came through the door, and the conversation ended.

She hadn’t thanked me. Driving to Winslow to get the adaptor had taken a silly amount of time, and it was all leading to a moment with her. Except it wasn’t. I had an experience I would have a lot: expect Meili to do something, she veers off and does something else.

Did she really need me to get that adaptor? She could have figured out a way, right? Looking back, so much seems flimsy, “unsupported by the evidence,” as my lawyer would say. But in the moment, I didn’t ask questions. The right questions, anyway.

Before lunch, we got a few minutes to ourselves. “Thanks, Firebug. If there’s ever anything you need, you go ahead and ask.” Pause. “I’ll say no, but you can certainly ask.”

“Come for a ride,” I said too quickly.

“What sort of ride?”

“On my bike. My motorcycle.” I’d been thinking about this for days. Me and Meili on the motorcycle.

A pause. She was writing in her notebook. “That sounds terribly uncomfortable and dirty and dangerous. And certainly my aunt and uncle wouldn’t allow it.”

Fuck. Of course she wouldn't do a redneck-y thing with a pyromaniac.

We didn't speak again before the last bell. I walked out without looking at her.

I'll say no, but you can certainly ask. She told me up front, and I didn't listen. Maybe that's the whole story.

TWO

TWO HOURS LATER, I WAS IN MY BOXER shorts watching TV. I'm not even going to say what. Someone knocked.

I looked out the window and saw the side of Meili's head.

What?

Shit.

I needed to turn off the TV, hide the onion dip, and put on some pants. And maybe get nicer furniture.

"Hold on!" I yelled, grabbing sweatpants from the dirty pile.

I couldn't even begin to clean up, so I cracked the door open. Seeing Meili's face reminded me I'd made an ass of myself by asking her out.

"Hey, Melissa." I was not inviting her in. My house was somehow both depressingly empty and a total mess.

She glanced at me, then half turned away. "I'm here for

my ride.” She pulled her blue coat tight around her, an old-fashioned army coat, something Napoleon would have worn.

“Your ride?” I asked.

“On the *motorbike*,” she said, exasperated that she had to remind me.

“You said you didn’t want to.” I pulled the door closed behind me. We were definitely not going in.

“No, I said it sounded dirty and dangerous. That’s different.” She checked the bottom of her shoe for something.

“Now you want to go?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” she said, not exactly answering my question.

A milk tanker truck turned the corner on Black Rock, air brakes barking.

“OK. Give me a couple minutes.”

“Take your time,” she said with a sarcastic smile.

I grabbed my helmet and my mom’s helmet for Meili, which I worried might smell like my mom. I went out back to the shed, where I locked up my bike. Too many people around who didn’t like me.

I had to run-start it, and I didn’t want her to see, so I tried running it in the backyard. It didn’t start, and she came around.

“It does work, doesn’t it?” she asked. She was smoking a cigarette now. Or maybe a joint.

“It just needs a little help when you start it cold.” I pushed the bike past her on the dirt driveway, and it turned over.

Not bad. Some days, I'd get halfway to the Maroneys' before it started. I revved it and blew out the lines: loud pops, blue smoke. I handed her my mom's helmet.

"Do I have to?" she asked. I nodded. She carefully placed her cigarette (not a joint, a roll-your-own) on the ground, pulled her hair back, and slid the helmet on. She picked up the cigarette, took a puff, and climbed on.

"Please don't grievously injure me," she said.

"I'll try not to."

"It's fine if I die. I just really, really don't want to get paralyzed, d'yaknowwahmean?"

I gunned it, showing off a bit. She grabbed my waist with her nonsmoking arm. She didn't have an ounce of warmth toward me, but she held on tight. I felt the stone of her necklace—I found out later it was a shark tooth—press into my shoulder blade.

She didn't yell or tell me to slow down. In fact, right as we hit the pavement, dipping down to turn left, she took a drag off her cigarette.

We rolled past farms and used-to-be farms. Corn, feed crops, dairy cows. We cut through clouds of manure smell, thick enough to taste, through our small downtown, with the houses huddled together, out past the Sunoco and the creek. Early May, mud season was over. I turned onto the dirt track that went up Brandt Hill. It was more fun, and we were less likely to get pulled over. The air cooled in the woods, snaking under my helmet and through the holes in my jeans.

We bumped over some divots, and she went with it, leaning in, never complaining. This was the thing I had pictured: Meili on the back of my bike, the wind, the open fields, her holding me tight enough that I felt her fingers on my ribs. But it was lonely and off. She didn't want to be here. It was that gap between what you tell yourself and what actually happens. I hate that gap. I want to destroy that gap.

We passed through the woods into the clearing at the top of Brandt Hill. She climbed off first, removed her helmet.

"What's this?" She looked down at the bowl with the dirt-bike trails and jumps. She was rolling another cigarette, pulling tobacco out of a dark-blue pouch.

"It's trails you can ride."

Most of them you wouldn't want to do with two people, though. I didn't know why I'd brought us here. But this was what I'd pictured: me and Meili on Brandt Hill, her laughing at something I said. There's that moment when a girl laughs at your joke so hard she looks away, and then, right as the laugh is ending, her eyes dart back to you, and she has this sweet, lit-up smile on her face cause you cracked her up. That's the moment I'd pictured.

Not this.

"Imagine that," she said, bored as hell.

I heard the strain of a motor. A tractor, thankfully, not a bike on its way up the hill.

“Look, I’ll take you home. Where do you live?” I was sick of her.

“We just got here.”

“You hate being here. Why did you even come?”

“I dunno,” she said, licking the paper and sealing it. “I mean, it’s complicated, y’know?”

“No, it’s not. I asked you to come for a ride and you said no, and then you came anyway, even though you don’t want to be here. That’s not complicated, it’s stupid.” I was pissed. Enough.

She laughed, and smoke came out of the first non-sarcastic smile I’d seen from her all day. “You’re right. It’s fucking stupid, isn’t it?” She looked down into the bowl. “D’you mind if I have a go?”

“On the bike?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you ridden before?”

“Uhhhhh . . . once.”

She was already climbing on, cigarette in her mouth. She cranked the throttle, and I had to yell to be heard. “So, that foot is the gears, and it’s in neutral, which—”

“Do you mind?” She leaned over, wanting me to hold her cigarette. I reached out and carefully pulled it from between her lips. That was sexy. Dead sexy, as Meili would say.

“You should wear a helmet,” I said, bending to pick it up.

“Yeah, you’re right,” she said, and peeled out.

She headed down into the bowl, a move that isn’t easy. She wobbled but then sped down the cut and up the far side. She flushed some birds out of the bushes, and they briefly flew above her, a nature goddess on a Yamaha. She rode the rim, then turned down toward a small ramp. She slowed before she hit it, almost too much, because if you hit it slow, you tip forward. But she cleared it. She wasn’t ripping it up, but she wasn’t bad at all.

She did a last run up to the edge and got a tiny bit of air coming over the top. She put her feet down to steady the bike as she landed, then gunned it back to me and slid to a stop.

“That’s not bad,” she said, smiling and looking to see if I was impressed. I was.

I could hear the tractor again, now that the bike was off. That was Unionville: shut off one motor and you heard the one behind it.

“You call me fag?” she said.

“What?”

“You got my fag? The cigarette?” I passed her the now-extinguished cigarette. “Proper etiquette says you puff on a girl’s cigarette to keep it lit until she comes back.” She took out her lighter.

“I don’t smoke.”

She was off the bike now, and I put the kickstand down.

“You don’t have to *inhale*, silly.” She relit the half cigarette, her face haloed by the lighter. I liked looking at her face.

“You’ve done that before,” I said.

“Yeah, in Malaysia we used to ride everywhere. Lit’rally. On the beach, in the jungle. It was mad.” She brushed her hair back, took a long drag, and looked out over the bowl. “You want to know why I came?” I didn’t answer. “I was having a fight with my aunt, and she was saying I didn’t have any friends here, and it was all my fault, so I said: ‘Actually, someone did ask me to . . . to do something today,’ and she tells me I absolutely *have* to go, I have *no* choice, so then I thought I’d tell her that it was a motorbike ride with a pyromaniac—I mean, no offense, I don’t know if you’re a pyromaniac, but that’s the sort of thing that would terrify my aunt—and then I realized she would never let me go if she heard that, so I said, ‘Fine,’ and I fuckin’ walked out and came to your house.” She said it in one breathless sentence. Meili talked in short, bored bursts or long, unbroken paragraphs.

The fact that she knew where I lived could have been creepy, but it felt flattering. I’m not hard to find; anybody in town could tell you where Jason Wilder lives. But it means she asked.

“It’s amazing you don’t have friends,” I said. “You’re so sweet.”

She laughed, coughed up smoke. “That’s what’s great

about you, Firebug, you're sarcastic as fuck, and I fuckin' love it. Everybody here is so goddamn genuine, it's sick. But riding in there"—she pointed in the bowl—"that was the dog's bollocks. So, cheers."

Her smoke—not the car exhaust of a regular cigarette but intense and organic like a grass fire—was overwhelming, nauseating, and I turned my head. She noticed and waved the smoke off, exhaled out of the corner of her mouth.

"The what?" I said.

"Dog's balls, something amazing. 'Bollocks' means a load of crap. Like, 'Oh, bollocks!' But 'the dog's bollocks' is really, really good." And then with only the slightest pause: "So, what about this fire?"

"What fire?" My heart started racing.

"The fire you're in trouble for."

"What about it?" Smoke, cigarettes, burning grass, burning houses. I was dizzy.

"What happened?" She left it open. "Before you answer that, did you bring any snacks?"

"Snacks? No."

"Great, cause I did." She reached into her coat pocket and offered me a bunch of red grapes. "I'm a bit scratchy at first, but look, I brought fags, I brought snacks. I'm pretty good long-term."

I took a few grapes and started eating—that helped—hoping she would forget her question.

But when I looked back at her, she raised her eyebrows and said, “So. The fire.”

Big breath. Finish the grape. “It was stupid. I was getting back at these guys who did all this stuff to me and my house. It was part of a fight I’ve been in.” Meili munched her grapes and nodded, as if I was describing a vacation. “Last summer, some stuff happened with my mom, then I got involved, and it kind of escalated. Six months ago, day after Halloween, these guys shot bottle rockets into our house. They cut the screen window and shot eight bottle rockets in.”

“What’s a bottle rocket?”

“It’s a firework, a little stick with a firecracker, and it shoots through the air, and then the firecracker explodes.”

“Right, OK.”

“I freaked out. I went to this one kid’s house, and I opened the window and put this big firework canister in there, big cardboard tube that shoots all these different things, and it was fuckin’ stupid, cause I didn’t think about how it could start a real fire. Which it did. And the fire trucks came, and all this shit happened and . . .” I stopped. Meili was still eating and listening happily. “This is the part I can’t tell without crying. So, I’m sorry, but I’m gonna cry.”

Her eyes went fake-wide. “It *will* be the first time I’ve seen someone cry, but I think I can handle it.”

“There was a boy who got hurt, he got burned. A little

kid.” A sob welled up, as always. “Seven years old, just a little guy, and he got burned kinda bad.” I leaned my head back and squeezed my eyes shut. “He’s OK, he’s gonna be OK, but he was in the hospital. And . . . that’s how I ruined my life.”

We were quiet. No more tractor. A breeze pushed Meili’s hair toward her mouth.

“Not *ruined*, exactly. A bit dramatic, don’t you think?” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not like you killed someone or, you know, went paralyzed or something. Just sounds like you fucked up.”

“Tell that to people around here.”

“Are you going to jail?”

“I was in for twenty-four days. I’m on probation, a suspended sentence. If I mess up again, I go to juvenile detention for a long time.”

“Brilliant. So you’re basically free.”

“Doesn’t feel that way.”

“You’ll get over it.” She finished her grapes and got out a fresh rolling paper. “D’you know when I was twelve, me and my girlfriend stole a taxi—a fucking *taxi*—cause this shit driver kept us waiting in his cab while he drank or whatever, so, finally, we jumped in the front seat and took off. It was absolutely mad.” She smiled. “Until we hit an old lady, like, a *really* old lady. Too old to even, like, walk down the street. It was a complete disaaaahster. And I cried for days.

Lit'rally. My dad had to, like, hold me for two days, I wouldn't let go of him." She squinted her eyes closed, shook her head. "But it was alright in the end. She went to hospital, she came back out, it wasn't so bad. And I thought my life was over. But, unfortunately, it wasn't." She grinned and curtsied. "Instead, I'm in beautiful Unionville." She lit the cigarette, blew a swirl of blue smoke through the hair in front of her mouth. How did she not set her hair on fire? "But it is nice to cry a bit. Anyway, sh'we go back?"

That was it. No discussion. Just: tell me your most heart-breaking story, I'll tell you mine, and then, great, let's go. Meili swerved fast.

"Uh, yeah. If you want."

"Mind if I drive?"

"Prolly not a good idea."

She was already climbing on. "It's like *that*, is it? The girl can ride up here in the woods, but not in the real world, right?"

"No, I have to be careful—"

"God forbid anyone sees you being driven around by a girl."

"No. Bullshit." I was conceding and climbing on the back now, but I wasn't done with the argument. "Don't turn this into a gender thing. If you aren't licensed, we—"

"It was bullshit, wasn't it? I only said it so I could get what I wanted. I am *so* crap. How can you stand being with me? Don't fucking answer that or I *will* crash this piece of

shit with both of us on it, swear to fucking god, are you ready?”

No. Yes. Didn't matter.

I reached both arms around Meili's waist. She started up fast, and we zoomed down Brandt Hill.

The gap was gone: this was what I pictured, only reversed. Meili driving the bike, me behind. Holding on to her—tightly because she showed off by riding a little too fast—was the sexiest thing I'd done in years, maybe ever.

If you're a good person, this won't make sense to you. For the past four months, my only physical contact with people had been fighting. The crunch of my elbow on Dmitri's cheek. The burn of a well-done headlock. Putting my chin on Meili's shoulder reminded me of that, scratched a similar itch. Scratched it better, of course. I'd forgotten what a friendly body felt like.

I shifted my arms, pulled closer to her. Meili's body was kind of blocky, thick in the middle like a boy's. She didn't have boobs, or much of a butt. Her gorgeousness was beyond that. She was sexy because she smelled real and talked real and chewed her food real. Other girls looked like girls; Meili *was* a girl.

I held on to her as we bumped down through the woods. It was warmer on the back, shielded from the wind. I enjoyed it so much I didn't mind when she missed my street. A longer ride.

“You missed the turn,” I yelled. She was opening it up on the paved road.

“What?”

“You missed the turn. My house is back there.”

“We’re not going to your house,” she yelled, and I grabbed on tighter as she cranked the throttle. She let up a bit and signaled a left turn.

“OK, not funny,” I said.

Where did she turn?

“No, Melissa, we can’t stop here.”

Stewart’s Root Beer.

THREE

SHE STOPPED THE BIKE AWKWARDLY IN THE gravel parking lot, and we half stepped, half fell off.

“This is stupid,” I said, keeping my helmet on as if I might not be recognized. The orange Stewart’s sign behind Meili, chronically short of letters, announced: NOW ON WEKND T 10. It was Friday, a big night for Stewart’s, but it was early yet, not crowded.

“I’m hungry. What d’you want?” She was walking to the front door, past two pickups, one of which I recognized. Unfortunately. Polaris sticker and a custom hitch.

I couldn’t retreat now that I was here. Shit. I hung my helmet on the handlebars and followed her through the glass doors. A two-tone bell chimed whenever the door opened. *Ding-dong*. To me, it meant: next round, come out fighting.

“Mark! Tammy! How you doin’?” Meili was chatting up a table of four by the windows. “Mind if we sit?” She could

talk to anyone, although she basically hated everyone. And people were curious about her.

Mark, who wasn't part of my battle, hesitated. "Uh, well . . ."

"Fab. And let me get you something, what d'you want, Tammy? Hot dog? One of those foot-long fuckers?" This made Tammy laugh. "No, right? It's like, 'No thank you.' You blokes have got it all wrong, you think girls want some donkey-size monster. I mean, it's gotta be big enough, right, Tammy? You don't want some little sausage-link fucker." She wiggled her pinkie, and now Mark laughed, too. "But, no, I don't want a fuckin' bloated horse dick, OK? Thanks."

She glanced over at me. I was by the door, watching but not exactly looking at James Bouchard, aka Butchie. The gray linoleum had a path worn into it from the door to the counter, cows to the feed trough. I was at one end of the path, and Butchie was at the other, ordering, not yet aware of me. He was part of my battle, not central, but definitely in it.

"Foot-longs for everybody, then? Jason, what d'you like? We're all getting . . . horse wieners." Even she started giggling now. "I can't believe you say 'wiener' here. It's appalling."

Tammy said, "Jason, come sit." Some people liked me from before the fire. It was easy to forget that.

I pulled a chair over. I vaguely recognized the other two girls. Sophomores?

Mark gave me a chin chuck. "'Sup?" School hoodie with

the hood on for some reason. Dressed like a jock though he wasn't. Not useful in a fight. I'm just saying.

Tammy said, "Jason, do you know Ann-Marie and Marcy?" Big girls with straightened hair, not popular but not *not*. Like a lot of thick girls at my school, they wore tight clothes all the time. They smiled, but with an edge: *I'm meeting the pyromaniac*.

"How you doin'?" I said.

They both said "Good" right away and then giggled. I made people nervous.

Butchie was texting, which would bring other boys here. And I would fight and get my ass kicked. In front of Meili. *Goddamn*.

"How are you, Jason? I heard you're on probation or something, right?" Tammy, glittery eye makeup and two different earrings, as alternative as it got in Unionville, was being nice and maybe a little nosy.

"Yeah, I have to be a good boy. They check up on me, but—"

"Alright, they're a bit skinny for horse cocks, but they are plenty long, aren't they?" Meili put down three foot-longs, overflowing their red-and-white cardboard trays, and went back for more.

"When are they gonna let you back in class?" Tammy asked. After a bunch of fights at school, all because of the fire, I had been pulled out of class four months ago,

January 12, and sent to the Rubber Room. For my own protection.

“I don’t know. They don’t tell me stuff.”

“That’s messed up,” Mark said, shaking his head.

Meili dropped two more enormous hot dogs on the table. “Who needs one?”

Mark shook his head.

“Someone’s having two, then.” She pushed one toward Tammy. “Have you ever taken on two at once, Tammy? Don’t answer that. I found out the hard way you do not want people telling tales about you at this school. Isn’t that right?”

“You mean that whole Darren thing,” Tammy said. “That was so crazy!”

“It was ridiculous. I’ll tell you one thing I learned, it’s like . . . like, Tammy, you’re fucking gorgeous, right? Seriously, look at you, you’re so cute. And then, look at me. I’m a chubby ten-year-old boy, right? But around here, it’s like, ‘Asian girl. Must chat her up.’” She moved her arms robotically.

“Yeah, guys go crazy for Asian girls,” Tammy said. “We call it the Asian Persuasion.”

“That’s good,” Meili said. “Or even *PersuAsian*, you know, if you put the A in there to make it ‘Asian.’”

“There’s already an A in ‘persuasion,’” Tammy said. “That’s why we call it the Asian Persuasion. Asian girls have magical powers.”

“Yeah.” Meili cringed a little. “That is . . . better, isn’t it?”

I saw her profound disappointment. Being surrounded by people who couldn’t keep up, who didn’t appreciate PersuAsian, was physically painful for her.

“But, seriously,” Meili said. “Laura whatever-her-name-is is so gorgeous. She’s a *knockout*, right? I was like, sorry, Laura, I’m not even in your *league*. I’ve got *nothing*. Now, are either of you boys ever going to interrupt me and tell me I’m not ugly? Cause it seems to me I’ve been saying I’m ugly for a while now, and I’m waiting for a little, like: ‘Hey, Melissa, you’re not that bad.’”

“Ohmygod, you’re totally cute,” Tammy said, and Marcy and Ann-Marie nodded. “You have such a pretty face . . .”

“And your hair . . .” Marcy or Ann-Marie said.

“Your hair is amazing, it’s so shiny and dark,” the other one said.

“You’re very kind. But you boys.” Meili pointed at Mark. “F. And for you.” She pointed at me. “F minus.”

Tammy socked Mark in the shoulder. “Come on, isn’t she pretty?”

“Yeah, no, she is. But I can’t tell another girl she’s pretty in front of you,” Mark said, a credible defense.

Butchie was standing. Leaving? Walking over here?

“Here’s what you say, Mark,” Meili said. “‘Oh, Melissa, you are such a pretty girl. Of course, you can’t hold a candle to my gorgeous Tammy, but you are attractive.’ Got it?”

She turned to me. “You don’t even have that excuse, do you? Have you got a girlfriend? How could I not know that? Have you got one?”

Someone pulled into the parking lot. Not a car I recognized.

“Can’t remember.”

“Oh, fuck off. You couldn’t possibly, the way you act. Such a pain in the arse, you should see him in the Rubber Room. Though he did teach me how to ride a motorbike today, which was amazing. Ever done it?”

“Jason, man, you can’t be here.” Butchie was standing next to me now, and I braced for a punch or a grab.

“I’m here, aren’t I?” I said. Exactly what Meili said on my front step. Same tone and everything. Weird.

“Come on, man, you and the girl should go.” He was giving me a chance to get out of the fight, which was nice, considering.

“I’ll go when I’m finished.”

“Just take your food and go, man,” Butchie said. “Don’t make it a thing.”

“Shit, I do need to get home, Jason,” Meili said, checking the time. “Gawd, my aunt’s gonna have a cow.” She took a bite of her hot dog and stood up.

“I can’t leave now,” I said.

Mark absorbed himself in his phone to avoid taking sides, but Tammy jumped in. “Come on, Butchie, don’t be a dick. We’re all hanging out.”

“It’s not me, it’s Ronny and those guys.”

“So don’t tell them Jason’s here.”

Meili was pulling me. “I do need a ride. Come back and arm wrestle your little friends after you drop me home, ’K?”

I stood up. This wasn’t good.

“It’s nothing personal, Jason,” Butchie said, shrugging.

“Fuck you, it’s not personal,” I said, turning around, ready to get in his face. But Meili pulled my wrist hard, and I stumbled toward the door.

“See you guys later!” Tammy called after us.

Ding-dong. Round over.

We were in the parking lot.

“Why are you doing this?” I said. An older dude was getting out of his car. Not part of it.

“Doing what?” Meili asked.

“If I come here, I have to stand my ground.”

“Take me home, and then you can come back and do whatever you want, can’t you?” She was on the back of the bike. At least I wouldn’t ride bitch out of the parking lot.

“Fine.” That’s exactly what I would do. Ride her home and come back to get my ass kicked. Fuck.

I put my helmet on my lap and gunned it out of the parking lot. Meili held on extra tight, but the thrill of touching her was gone. I was in fighting mode.

“Where do you live?” I yelled.

“Drop me at MacArthur Street.”

“You’re really fucking things up for me, you know that?”

“Come on, that was fun. Who cares what they think?”

“Now, it’s gonna be: ‘Jason showed up at Stewart’s and had to be rescued by the weird girl with the accent.’ Now I’m a pyro and a pussy.”

We rode on in silence.

I pulled off by MacArthur. “You live here?”

“Up the road a bit. But it won’t do to be dropped off on a motorbike.” She handed me her helmet. “You really care what people say? It’s so stupid. It’s like . . . it’s like sport.” (She never said sports, always sport.) “If you follow it, if you spend all your time thinking about it, then it’s like: ‘Oh no, my favorite player got injured, what a tragedy.’ But if you don’t follow it, it’s like: ‘Football *who?*’ Doesn’t exist.”

“I care what people say because I’m in danger.”

“Oh, please, you’re in danger cause you want to be. You love it. And did you even hear the conversation back there? All these white people talking about how I’m Asian and desirable and have secret powers. And meanwhile lit’rally every man in this town stares at me, and half of them say something nasty. Now that’s fucking dangerous.”

That was deep. It wasn’t the spelling of PersuAsian that pained Meili. Why hadn’t I been more disturbed by that conversation?

An SUV roared by. Ronny?

“Yeah, that sucks, but you’ll be out of here in a few

months.” I didn’t know that, but I assumed it was true. “I live here. And you’re making that a lot harder.”

“I’m so sorry. Is your life hard? That’s certainly got to be my fault.”

“You’re impossible.” I put my helmet back on.

“And unattractive, don’t forget. And I’m a weird girl with an accent.”

I backed the bike up. I was done talking.

“Thanks for the ride,” she said, and gave me a gesture, a two-finger peace sign with the back of her hand, which I later learned was her version of the middle finger.

I rode back toward Stewart’s wishing she was still holding on to me.

The evening sun pushed shadows across the road, strobing faster as I accelerated. Alone.

Goddammit.

Before I got to Stewart’s, I turned onto my road and went home.

Meili and I didn’t speak Monday in the Rubber Room.

That night was the first time I saw Manny.

I was home, rereading *The Fallen Queen*, the first book in my favorite series, and listening to hip-hop.

He may have been knocking for a while; I heard him when the song ended. It was after nine, I had to be careful. I looked out and saw a guy I didn’t recognize. He wasn’t white

or black, maybe Chinese. Hawaiian? Super short hair, arm tats, clean but muscled. Not someone I open the door for.

I yelled, "Who is it?"

"Hello, Jason. My name is Manny."

"What do you want?"

I checked the back window and the side yard. Could be more of them ready to rush in.

"I'm here about Melissa."

"Yeah?"

"I want to talk." He paused. "I'm Melissa's friend. Please." His calm voice made my two dead bolts plus a knob lock seem absurd. And he used the magic word: Melissa.

I cracked the door. "What?"

"May I come in? I have a gift." He held up a dirty cardboard box. Nice gift.

I opened the door, and Manny walked in. Glided in. He stood in my barren living room, the kitchen fluorescents glaring in sideways. I didn't want him to sit. I had already broken my first rule: never let anyone in the house you can't forcibly remove. Manny would be hard to evict, maybe impossible.

"This is for you." He handed me the box. Inside was a carburetor, the same as my bike's. He smiled when he saw me recognize it. "I understand you're having starter problems. This will help."

Manny was warm. Manny was generous. Behind all that, Manny could kick your ass.

“Uh, yeah. Thank you. How did you—”

“I need to talk to you about Melissa.” He sat on the faded pink, fake-leather sofa. “Please, sit. This is a conversation.”

I pulled a folding chair over and sat with the carburetor in my lap, not relaxing.

“I have to ask a favor. And, please, it’s nothing personal.” He sounded like Butchie. “You need to stop seeing Melissa.”

Was I *seeing* her? As in dating? God, I wished I was.

“Says who?”

He dodged that one. “Melissa is in a delicate situation with her citizenship. She needs to keep to herself for the time being. If her situation becomes more . . . stable, then of course you would be welcome to visit with her whenever you want.”

Huh.

“And who are you?”

“I’m a friend. I watch after her. And trust me, if you want what’s best for her, and I know you do, you will leave her alone.”

“And if I don’t?”

He dodged this one, too. “Jason, I’m sure you don’t like being told what to do. I wouldn’t either, if I were you.” He stopped, and his voice changed. “But you’ll do as I ask. Because you aren’t foolish, and you have a lot to lose. Especially now.”

“Is that a threat?”

He smiled and shook his head slightly. “When I threaten you, you won’t need to ask if it’s a threat.”

I've heard a lot of guys talk shit and act hard, and 99 percent of them are faking. Manny wasn't. Manny was understating how hard he was, I could feel it. It kind of made me want to hug him, and it kind of made me want to punch him in the fucking mouth.

"It won't come to that," he said, smiling but still in charge. He stood up and extended his hand. "Good luck with the bike. If you have more engine problems, come to Gorman's. I'm sure I can help."

I didn't shake his hand. We stared a bit too long, then he walked out, closing the door carefully. "Good night, Jason."

I put the cold, heavy carburetor on the floor. What the hell just happened?

The next day, it took forever to get a moment with Meili.

Sometimes when Meili was absorbed in a book, she would drag her top teeth across her bottom lip: a silent, slow-motion "Ffff." There was this moment when her lip would release from her teeth and pop out. I timed my nonchalant looks at the clock to catch the end of the "Ffff."

"Ffff."

9:57.

"Ffff."

Still 9:57.

At 11:30, this classroom assistant (she recognized me

from Algebra but pretended she didn't, like most people in those days) finally left us alone. Not completely alone. A boy came in crying during third period and sat way off to the side, sniffing and occasionally shaking his head, arguing silently with whatever had just happened.

"Got a message from Manny last night," I said.

Meili didn't look up. "Who's that?"

The other boy stopped his mental fight and stared: *Talking in the Rubber Room?*

"Funny, I was going to ask you the same thing," I said.

She kept fake-reading. "Don't think I know a Manny."

"Works at Gorman's," I said. "And you're a shitty liar. I expected better."

She ignored that. "What did he say?"

"He told me I'm not allowed to talk to you anymore." I didn't say "see you," because that would sound like we were dating, which I desperately wanted to be true.

"That's a pity. Why not?"

"You tell me."

"I have no clue."

"Is he in charge of you?"

"Sure, why not? Everybody's in charge of me. My aunt and uncle, Ms. Davies, the fucking principal. I get to decide, let's see, basically fuckall about my life." There was a long silence. "What are you staring at, cry boy?"

The poor kid looked away. He didn't sniffle again.

“So what should I do?” I asked.

“How should I know? Do whatever you want. It’s not like you’re talking to me anyway, is it?” The Algebra assistant waddled back in. Conversation over.

Twenty minutes later, Meili said she had a stomachache and asked to see the nurse. I didn’t see her again that day.