

WILD RIDE

KEITH CALABRESE



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ONE

FRIDAY 3:35 P.M.

On Friday afternoon, shortly before the final bell, Charley Decker received detention for mouthing off to her teacher. Charley didn't get in trouble much. It kind of caught everyone by surprise.

Wade was waiting for her when she finally got out. He was trying not to smirk, but he wasn't trying very hard.

"Don't start," Charley said.

"At least Mr. Bonino didn't keep you that long," Wade offered.

"He shouldn't have kept me at all," Charley protested.

Wade shrugged.

"What?"

"Charley, seriously," Wade said. "You kind of asked for it."

"What part of 'don't start' aren't you getting?"

“Fine,” Wade said, dropping it. “See any familiar faces in the big house?”

“Parker Nadal was in there, too. I don’t know what for.”

“I do,” Wade chuckled.

“Really? Who was he impersonating this time?”

“Not ‘who,’” Wade corrected. “‘What.’ Remember the T. rex from *Jurassic Park*?”

“Sure,” Charley said. “Wait. He didn’t!”

“He did. During passing period. You could hear it all the way down B Hall.”

“No way,” Charley laughed. “Was it good?”

“Good enough to make a bunch of sixth graders cry.”

“He does have a gift.”

“Yeah,” Wade agreed. “But hey, you mouthed off to the nicest teacher in school. Now that’s hard-core.”

Charley gave him a look but couldn’t hold it for long. Everybody needs at least one friend who has no qualms about telling you when you’re full of it. Charley had long ago realized that Wade Harris would always be that friend for her. She just wished he wasn’t so good at it.

“It isn’t a bad word,” she huffed defiantly.

“Sure.”

Charley said, “Just don’t say anything in front of Greg, okay?”

“Course,” Wade said as they started walking home. “We still on, then, for New Farouk’s and everything?”

“You bet,” Charley said, brightening a bit. “Greg promised.”

Greg was Charley’s older brother. It was more than that, though. They were pals, always had been. There were five and a half years between them—Greg was eighteen and she was twelve—but he never treated her like it. He treated her more like his partner in crime. He was always there when she needed him, always had her back.

This year, though, everything was changing. Greg was a senior in high school, and soon he’d be going off to college. Charley was already starting to miss him. Greg wasn’t around the house much anymore. Lately, he was always out with his friends, or at baseball practice, or with Marisa.

Mostly with Marisa.

And even when Greg was around, Marisa was usually there, too. They’d been dating all year and Greg was still totally moony for her. She even came to family game night. It was bad enough when their mom’s boyfriend, Derrick, had started showing up. Now game night was practically a couples’ thing. What was the point anymore?

Take two weeks ago. They were playing Scrabble—Charley, Greg, Mom, and Derrick. Marisa wasn’t there, but she may as

well have been because Greg was texting her, like, every two minutes. Anyway, it was Charley's turn and she had two *f*'s, an *a*, a *d*, a *t*, an *i*, and an *r*. She used them all, a natural bingo (and a double word score to boot, but who's counting), and did Greg even notice? Please, he barely looked up from his phone.

Everything was changing.

For the last week it had just been the two of them in the house. Their mom and Derrick were in Hawaii for vacation, but they'd be getting back tomorrow. At first Charley had been looking forward to this week, just her and her brother. She'd hoped it would give them a chance to hang out like they used to. But it wasn't working out that way.

One way or another, her brother always seemed to be out the door. He and Marisa had been off doing stuff together every day since Mom and Derrick left. They were always *busy*. Always on the go. Charley got to tag along sometimes, to watch Marisa's track meet, or Greg's doubleheader. Whoopee. Like that counted.

And even when Greg was around, he wasn't *there*, not really. Hanging out at home made him all twitchy and distracted. Like he was trapped, or grounded. And he barely noticed Charley anymore, even when they were in the same room together.

But tonight was going to be different. Charley was going to make sure of it. Greg had promised to take her and Wade to New

Farouk's for burgers and shakes. The diner's full name was New Farouk's Famous Ice Cream and Brazier, and they made the best milkshakes in Chicago. The burgers were good, too, but it was really all about the milkshakes. At least that's what Charley thought. It was her favorite place to eat, and the kind of hang-out thing Charley had hoped they'd be doing all week.

Then, after New Farouk's, the three of them would come back to the house and watch their favorite movies all night, just like they used to do when Greg was in middle school and Charley and Wade were just in grade school. The coolest movies. Movies they had been too young to watch. That's what made Greg such an awesome big brother. Like *Purple Rain* and the first two *Alien* movies—but you had to stop after that—and *Galaxy Quest* and *Hot Fuzz*.

Charley had the whole night planned out. Tonight was going to be like old times. Like it used to be. Tonight was going to be the best.



Wade and Charley walked through the garage on their way into Charley's house. They came in the side door and Charley dropped her bag on the kitchen island. Wade lingered behind in the doorway.

“Man,” Wade said, gazing adoringly at Derrick’s Mustang.
“That is some car.”

“You say that every time.”

“It bears repeating. Every time.”

Greg was upstairs; it sounded like he was on the phone.

“You still good to stay over?” Charley asked.

“No problem,” Wade said as he joined her at the island. “It’s a gap weekend.”

Wade’s parents were divorced. They were also both lawyers. They shared Wade through a joint-custody agreement that was so complicated it required a computer algorithm to enforce.

But with all the back-and-forth, there were bound to be gaps. Misread emails, blind spots in the code. Days when neither Wade’s mother nor father technically had custody of Wade. But since his parents never actually talked to each other, no one really noticed.

The first time it happened, Wade hadn’t said anything. He’d just gone to stay with his uncle Terry in the city and waited for someone—his parents, their lawyers, the algorithm—to figure out the mistake.

That was two years ago.

Wade didn’t mind much. He always had a blast with his uncle Terry. Besides, no one had ever asked him whether he wanted a stupid computer program to tell him where to eat and sleep and

do his homework. So why should he help his parents micro-manage *his* life?

Greg came downstairs. He was still in his baseball clothes, talking excitedly on his cell phone.

“No, no,” he said. “I want to wait and surprise Mom and Derrick when they get back tomorrow. Yeah. Okay, see you soon.” He ended the call and put the phone back in his pocket.

“Hey, you’re home,” he said, noticing Charley and Wade. “Where were you guys? It’s later than usual.”

“Loitering,” Charley said.

“Light trespassing,” Wade added.

“How was practice?” Charley asked, to get them off the subject.

“Aw, fine. Coach let us out early on account of yesterday’s doubleheader. Never mind that, though. Guess what.” His eyes looked big, like he’d just pounded two iced coffees.

“What?” Charley asked warily.

He held up his phone. “I just found out . . . I got into the University of British Columbia!”

Charley felt like somebody had just knocked the wind out of her. “In Canada?” she managed.

“Hey, that’s great,” Wade said, reading the acceptance email on Greg’s phone. “Congratulations!”

“Thanks! It’s my first choice. I’m so stoked.”

Wade sat down on one of the stools while Greg gushed about how excellent UBC was going to be. Charley sat, too, but she didn’t say anything. She hadn’t known he was looking at schools that were thousands of miles away. She stared into space for a good ten minutes while the boys prattled on until she heard her brother say to Wade, “So, you’re coming with us to New Farouk’s?”

“Yeah. If that’s cool.”

“Absolutely,” Greg said. “We need to celebrate, right?” He looked over at his sister. “Charley?”

“Huh?”

“New Farouk’s? Still want to go?”

“Definitely,” Charley said, perking up a little.

“Great! Let me shower and get changed. Then as soon as Marisa gets here, we’ll head out.”

“Great,” Charley said. Then: “Wait, what?”