

WREN MARTIN RUINS IT ALL



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FOR MICHAEL

—A. D.



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THE TREE

I know something is wrong the moment I step onto school grounds Friday morning. My head goes up, and I'm practically sniffing the air like a meerkat.

"Something's not right," I say ominously, one hand still on the car door like I might change my mind and get back in. Ryan kicks her door shut, signaling that I can sit wherever I want, but it's sure not going to be inside her car. Reed has already disappeared.

"Do you sense it in the Force?" Ryan asks.

I ignore the fact that she's making fun of me. My prediction for Star Wars has nothing to do with this. "Yes," I say without elaborating.

You can tell when something is going on at Rapture High—probably at any high school, or with any particularly condensed collection of human beings. It goes deeper than the rumor mill and into some sort of human instinct

bordering on the psychic. Or maybe it's just the barely audible buzz of everyone talking about the same thing. Probably that. I don't really like the idea of having a psychic connection with any of these people.

There's no time to investigate further before my first-period French class, and my French isn't good enough to ask anyone what they know. But I start to have suspicions when Stephen Hannigan corners me in the hall outside second-period economics.

"What did you do?" he demands, red in the face and practically trembling with righteous fury. Or something. It's a little much for this hour of the morning, but everything about Stephen is a little much. Normally I just roll my eyes, but usually he's saying something pretentious in class, not accusing me of—

I'm not really sure what he's accusing me of, actually.

"What do *you* think I did?" I counter. Stephen's three main personality traits are the robotics team, red hair, and having a subscription to the *New Yorker*. I hate Leo because he's perfect without even trying. I hate Stephen because he tries *too hard* to be perfect.

Also, he's just . . . annoying.

"Leo quit the robotics team yesterday," Stephen says with an expression not unlike he's sucking a lemon, "and I know *you* had something to do with it."

That explains it. The cosmic ripple through the universe, the pervasive wrongness settled over the school. Like I said, the Rapture High robotics team is about the only thing the

school has going for it. And if my amateur assessment is anything to go by, Leo is the only thing the team has going for *it*.

I guess if I were, say, the captain of the robotics team, I'd be worried too. Good thing that's Stephen's problem and not mine.

Yet somehow it's made *Stephen* my problem now. Do I ever get to win? "Literally how is that my fault?"

"I don't know!" Stephen hisses. "I don't know what goes on in your stupid student council meetings! But it can't be coincidence that he starts talking about this whole Buddy thing and suddenly he doesn't have time for the team anymore. So what else am I supposed to think?"

I open my mouth to say something about his lack of thinking at all, but he doesn't give me the chance to display my razor-sharp wit. He pokes me in the chest and my expression turns disgruntled. He *poked* me. Who does that?

"Fix it, Wren," he says, and the warning bell rings, reminding us that we have economics in a minute. He leaves me there with one last withering look before yanking open the classroom door.

"*Fix it, Wren,*" I sneer at the door. Leave it to Leo to somehow make this my problem too.

I mean, *yes*, I'm going to talk to Leo about it. But no, not because Stephen fucking Hannigan told me to. I was going to do it anyway.

I don't get the chance to ambush him until the twenty-minute break between third and fourth periods, which is

nineteen more minutes than I need to ask him if he's lost his mind.

"*Have you lost your mind?*" I hiss from the other side of a book display in the library.

Leo blinks as if he's just been visited by a vengeful ghost, a book still in his hand, midway through the process of slipping it in the drop slot. "Wren?"

"Who else would it be?" I don't mean to imply *Who else would ambush you from behind a book display*, but here we are. "I need to talk to you. Right now. Immediately."

"Behind the display?" Leo drops off his book and sidles around the edge of the display, forcing me to take a step back and arrange my expression into something appropriately scowling. The library isn't exactly the most popular place in Rapture High, and luckily it's pretty deserted even without the shadow of the display to hide behind. The rumor mill is already working overtime today. I don't need Stephen Hannigan thinking I'm his errand boy.

"Why did you quit robotics?" I demand.

Leo can't be surprised that I know—the whole school knows by now—but he looks taken aback. A peculiar expression flickers across his face. "Why do you care?" he asks, frowning. "I thought you said the school cares too much about the robotics team."

I guess I did say that a little bit. "I meant I wish it cared about other things more, not less about robotics," I hedge, walking it back like any politician would. If it weren't robotics, it would be football. At least robotics is actually

relevant to education. “It’s good for morale when we win something. And it’s really *bad* when the star player quits for no apparent reason.” Are they even called players? Teammates? Engineers? Whatever.

Leo scoffs. “I’m not the star.”

I scoff back. “Stephen Hannigan seems to think you are.”

Wrong move. “Did he say something to you?” Leo says sharply. He doesn’t wait for an answer before sighing and running a hand through his hair. “Of course he did. This is— Never mind. I’ll tell him to leave you alone.”

“You don’t need to do that,” I say a little too quickly. The only worse thing than Stephen thinking I did what he told me to would be Stephen thinking I ran crying to Leo about it. I take a deep breath. “Just— Listen, if this is about the Buddy thing, you don’t need to worry about it. I’m the student council president. I’m not going to make you do all the work just because I don’t like it.” And think it’s stupid and a little bit degrading and overall just a huge waste of time. I can still be a professional despite all those things. I pause, waiting for him to catch my drift. “So you don’t need to try to scare me into it.”

Leo just stares at me for a moment, his eyebrows slowly contorting into something between confused and incredulous as the words sink in. “You think,” he says slowly, “that I pretended to quit the robotics team to *threaten* you?”

Well, when you say it like that it sounds silly. “I don’t know!” I huff, throwing my hands up in exasperation. “Stephen was pretty threatening this morning!” God, I need

to stop mentioning Stephen Hannigan. “Maybe you thought it would make me . . . sacrifice myself for the good of the school or something.”

Leo is still staring, his expression evolving along a strange path, a funny little smile twisting his mouth like he can’t quite decide if he’s offended or if he wants to laugh. “Wren,” he says, and I can’t decide which of the two emotions he settled on. “Can I tell you something?”

I blink. “I guess,” I say warily.

Leo leans forward, one of his thumbs hooked around the strap of his backpack, and looks me in the eye. He has brown eyes, which I knew. I mean, it isn’t a secret. I mean, they have to be some color or another. I *mean*, it’s just hard not to think about when someone is forcing you to look at them. “Not everything is about you.”

I can’t help what my face does. I must look startled, because Leo laughs and leans back again. “I’ll see you later, Wren,” he says, taking a step out of the protective shadow of the book display.

I watch him go, somehow with even fewer answers than I had before. “Then why?” I call to his back, but Leo only raises his hand in a dismissive farewell as the librarian gives me an exasperated look from the front desk.

I huff. Because you know what? Whatever. I have enough problems. The Dance is my problem. Buddy is my problem. Leo Reyes and whether or not he wants to code the school’s little award-winning robots is *not* my problem.



We meet with Principal Blackburn in the student council classroom that afternoon. It goes more or less how I expected. Short. Brutal. Painful. I sit through it with all the grace of a deposed monarch as Leo extols the virtues of a sponsorship with Buddy and Principal Blackburn nods enthusiastically.

“Yes, absolutely. I think that’s a wonderful idea. The PTA is already in agreement, but I’ll discuss it with the school board on Monday,” he says through his bristling mustache, still nodding. “Now, Leo, if I could talk to you for a moment—”

The meeting kind of falls apart after that, which I’m more than okay with. The thing about the Dance being in February is that we barely get a chance to breathe at the beginning of the year before we need to start planning it. We’re in limbo right now, waiting for the Buddy sponsorship to be officially green-lit, but soon it’ll be a flurry of caterers, decorations, and the logistics of managing a small, dancing army. If I can have one more minimally Dance-related afternoon, I’ll take it.

I gladly ditch the classroom, but Ryan hangs back to talk to Maggie, so I can’t exactly go very far. I lurk outside the door like a ghoul instead, fiddling pointlessly with my phone. No new messages on Buddy, from the guy the other day or otherwise. Which is for the best, though a part of me can’t shake the idea I’m doing badly at this somehow. Not that I want to get a good grade in Buddy, but c’mon. Is it that I’m a Capricorn or that I’m an oak tree?

The classroom door opens and I close the app quickly, forcing it to duck back into the folder I've buried it in. I'm expecting Ryan, but it's Leo who steps out, his backpack slung over one shoulder.

He flashes me a smile that feels like he's rubbing something in. "That wasn't so bad," he says.

"Convincing Blackburn to go along with your hare-brained scheme, or listening to him beg you to come back to the robotics team?" I say dryly, our conversation in the library still at the front of my mind. I *don't* think everything is about me. I *like* it when things aren't about me. It's just that everyone else keeps dragging me into things.

If everyone did things right in the first place, I wouldn't have to be involved at all.

"Both," he says, cheerfully ignoring the bait about the robotics team. I guess he's gotten enough of that from Blackburn. He shrugs. "Mr. Blackburn gets it. He knows I've got a lot going on. With the Dance and the sponsorship and everything."

It sure didn't look like he *got it*. It looked a bit more like he was ready to get on his hands and knees and beg, but again, not my problem.

"Seems like a lot of trouble to go to over a dance," I grouse—my small, petty rebellion. The only rebellion I have left. "I hope you're happy."

"Are you?"

I look up, startled. "I— *What about me makes you think I'm happy right now?*"

He fiddles with one of his backpack straps, the end frayed like this is a common occurrence. He does that a lot, actually. I don't know when I started noticing, but now I can't stop. He's always quietly fidgeting with something—a pencil or a backpack strap or a loose thread. It makes me want to grab his hand and force it still again.

Things I hate about Leo Reyes:

1. He never stops moving. It's distracting.

“Mr. Vernon won't stop talking about how he's getting his stage fixed,” Leo says. “I know that was important to you.”

I hesitate. It's true. I can't say it's *not* true, especially when I'm a little pleased that Mr. Vernon is talking about it. Mr. Vernon likes to talk, so I weight the news with that in mind, but still. It's nice to be appreciated.

Am I smiling? Dammit. I force my face back into an appropriate expression.

“I figured we could forgo the vote on that,” I say, brushing past the fact that maybe he's a little bit right. Maybe I'm a little bit happy. “Unless anyone really wants to see who breaks their arm this year.”

The corner of his mouth twitches. “Forgo?”

I frown. “What? Is that a weird thing to say?”

Leo shrugs one shoulder. “Just very Wren Martin,” he says. He doesn't specify if that means the same thing as *weird*.

Weird or not, no one can take my one victory away from me. “You might have saved the Dance,” I say loftily, “but I saved this school from *Cats*.”

“Not all heroes wear capes,” Ryan says, pushing open the classroom door. “You know, I kind of like *Cats*.”

“You like watching aviation disaster documentaries too,” I say blandly, hiking up my backpack on one shoulder. *Now* we can escape. “Are we going?”

“Just one more thing,” Leo says before Ryan can answer. He leans his shoulder against the wall, his arms folded across his chest. He probably thinks it makes him look cool. Or maybe he’s just too tall to carry his own unreasonable height for too long unassisted. “This will take a little more planning than previous years. It’s probably not feasible to meet all the time.” I swear his eyes crinkle at the corners when he says *feasible*, laughing at me silently. I make sure I roll my eyes hard enough for him to notice. *Feasible* and *forgo* are not big words. “I was thinking we could probably figure out a lot of the logistics between the two of us and delegate.”

I open my mouth, but Ryan is as quick as a viper, pinching me in the side before I can even think about objecting.

“Sounds great,” I say, trying not to squeak.

“Sounds very presidential,” Ryan agrees indulgently.

Leo’s eyes flicker between the two of us, but I’m pretty sure he didn’t see the pinch. Ryan is too good at bullying me to be caught that easily. “Cool,” he says, flashing a smile that

I can only describe as *tentative*. It's almost disarming. "Looking forward to it."

I wait until we've rounded the corner to dig my elbow into Ryan's side. "You need shorter nails."

Ryan laughs. "You need a little sister," she says. "That was nothing."



Well, that's that, then. The Dance is on. Buddy is on. And Leo and I are going to be the ones running the whole show. It's like watching the next several months of my life go down in a sunshine-yellow-and-white ball of flames.

And I'm still at school. The meeting didn't last long, but it did go long enough that Ryan's mom decided we could stick around and pick Reed up from freshman cheer practice to save her the trip. Practice that ended fifteen minutes ago. Ryan goes stomping off to get her sister's ass in gear. I, in my infinite wisdom, decide to wait rather than hike halfway across campus and back.

I choose BigTree to wait under, one of the landmarks of Rapture High. Presumably once known as the big tree. Somewhere along the way, everyone dropped the *the* and smashed the words together into a proper noun. It is, as you might assume, a very big tree.

It's also a common hang-out spot, probably the most popular besides where the smokers congregate behind the back fence, but it's deserted now. I immediately sit on one of

the low-hanging branches that are usually taken, one leg curled underneath me.

I'm lucky that Ryan isn't here to look over my shoulder when a Buddy notification appears on my screen.

Him:

Hey! Sorry, me again.

I wasn't entirely honest with you before.

This account is a joke—I mean, it's a joke to me. But my friends were actually trying to, like, set me up with people. Because they're pushy assholes.

So I guess what I'm saying is that I need a favor.

I look around a little more suspiciously than necessary, but it's just me and BigTree here. I know I should probably be stewing a little more, after having the deal more or less sealed on the Buddy sponsorship, but I can't help feeling a little self-satisfied that he messaged me again. I guess Capricorn oak trees are worth talking to after all.

Me:

set up? i thought this was for finding friends

Him:

I mean, yeah it is.

I mean some people just use it differently.

They probably shouldn't, but you know. They do.

Me:

i'm just fucking with you
i go to this school too i know how
people use it
go on

Him:

Haha, I should've known.

Can you just chat with me a bit so I
can pretend I'm actually using it?

They want me to "show my work"
haha.

It's okay if you don't want to.

Me:

aren't we chatting right now?

Him:

Yeah, but, like

You know, chatting.

Like you're supposed to do on these
apps.

I mean, you know what I mean.

I pull a face.

Me:

like sexting?

The response is immediate.

Him:

NO. God no. Not that.

Definitely not that.

Thank God. I slowly move my thumb away from the block button.

Me:

i wasn't going to
for the record

Him:

Let's just . . . move away from that
It's just, I don't know, getting to know
each other
Here, I'll start
Do you have any hobbies?

Me:

i dont know, like what?

Him:

That's what you're supposed to tell
me, doofus

Me:

oh well i feel real compelled to tell
you my darkest secrets now

Him:

I don't think hobbies are supposed to
be dark secrets

Me:

maybe if youre boring
i like to read?

Him:

Okay! We're getting somewhere.
What do you like to read?

Me:

books?

Him:

I'm starting to think you're doing this
on purpose

Me:

you're the one who asked for a
favor, you never said I had to take it
seriously
okay here, because I feel bad for you
ask it again

Him:

What kind of books do you like to
read?

Me:

Anything science fiction or fantasy! (:
Tolkien is my favorite. Kind of basic,
right? I know, but my best friend got
me into him. We watch the extended
edition LOTR movies on her birthday
every year.

How about you? What are your
favorites?

Him:

Oh.

That felt weird.

Like you were possessed by the
ghost of someone friendly and
cooperative for a second

Me:

imagine how I felt

Him:

Are you in theater?

Me:

i think this might be more creative
writing
but also: god no
is that enough to appease your
friends?

Him:

That should do it!

Thanks 😊

“All right, let’s go.” Ryan’s voice makes me jump. I totter backward, slipping over the side of the branch and falling unceremoniously into the dirt, still clutching my phone to my chest. Luckily I was only three feet above the ground. The fall knocks the wind out of me instead of breaking my back like a twig.

Reed’s face appears inches above mine. That girl needs to learn to respect personal space, I swear to God. “Falling is an art,” she says. “That’s what Coach Bailey says.” She tilts her head and scrunches her nose, lowering her voice theatrically. “I don’t think you’ve got the talent for it.” She abruptly sneezes. In my face.

“Eugh!” I plant my hand on her face and push her away, groaning as my spine pops back into place. “Let’s go,” I wheeze, silently grateful that it’s Friday.

The sooner this week ends, the better.