

WREN MARTIN RUINS IT ALL

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THE DANCE

There's something about decision-making and running full tilt down an empty hallway that doesn't pair well. I have approximately five seconds to get to the student council room. I can make it in four if I don't slow down. If I'm lucky, the new faculty advisor won't be there to see my dramatic entrance. If I'm not—well, I'll worry about that later.

It's this overconfident mindset that leads me to believe I can yank open the door and enter the classroom at the same time. Which might have worked. If the door hadn't been locked.

Rest in peace, Wren Martin. You will be missed.

I collide with the door, my forehead smacking neatly against a solid inch and a half of lacquered wood with a *clunk!* that reverberates through my entire skull. I stumble backward, clutching my forehead like my hands are the only thing keeping my head from splitting open.

Well, that's one way to knock.

The door opens. “Oh,” Leo says, peeking through the doorway like he’s expecting a package to be delivered. I can actually feel his eyes skating downward, taking in the entire scene. “Are you okay?”

Of course it’s Leo, six feet and two inches worth of perfect teenage boy. Somehow it’s always Leo when it comes to my humiliations, like fate arranges to put us in the same place at the same time of disaster. I’m not sure if I was cursed at birth to screw up or if Leo was cursed to witness it. Considering I’m the one who physically hit the door, I suspect it might be me.

I close my eyes and exhale through my nose. “Why was the door locked?” I say in an exemplary display of patience and restraint.

A pause. “The door was locked?” I hear its futile clicking as Leo tests it. “Oh, I guess it was. Sorry, Wren. Are you sure you’re okay?”

My eyes snap back open and a vein throbs in my forehead. Or maybe that’s just the cranial trauma.

Okay, before you think badly of me, it’s not just the door. Or the fact that I made a fool of myself. Or that I was running late in the first place, necessitating the fool-making. There’s more at play here that you need to understand.

Reasons why I hate Leo Reyes:

1. He’s tall. I don’t trust tall people. Ryan is five eight in her boots, and that’s pushing it. And she’s my best friend. Leo is not my best friend.

2. He's a morning person. A morning person who goes for runs. *In the morning*. Worse than that, he talks about doing it like it's normal.
3. One year in middle school, his locker was directly above mine. This is unforgivable.
4. He's just . . . too much. Too pretty, too charming, too tall (did I mention that?). Too *perfect*. Teachers love him, he got elected to student council without even trying, and he's the MVP coder of the robotics team, which has awards hanging up in the school's front office. He doesn't even have to try to be the best person at this school. It's like looking at a photo that's been airbrushed to hell and back. People are meant to have flaws. When they don't, they make your animal brain go feral.
5. Once I saw him eat a banana without pulling the strings off. Like—*excuse me?*
6. New: he witnessed me run into a locked door.

So you see, nothing about this situation is ideal.

"I'm fine," I say, brushing past him and into the classroom with whatever dignity I have left. Once my back is to him, I probe my forehead gently with a wince. Oh, that's going to bruise.

Ryan is already waiting in the back, at the apex of where the desks form a U-shape. Her braids are piled up on top of her head in a thick bun, pink woven into the ends. Matching pink eye shadow pops against her dark skin, which somehow

manages to work with the spider theme she has going on today. She looks more like a goth princess than someone who participates in high school student council, but after ten years of friendship and many hot glue burns, I've moved past being impressed by her outfits.

"Nice earrings," I say as I hook my foot around the chair next to her and pull it out. Eight little googly eyes stare back from the homemade spider earring dangling closest to me, their pupils wiggling slightly whenever Ryan moves her head. Ryan is an unrepentant crafter, which means her cool factor fluctuates wildly depending on whatever she's been experimenting with lately. The jury is still out on the spider earrings.

Bold words on *cool factor* from the guy who ran into the door seconds earlier, I know. Please don't remind me.

"Nice forehead," Ryan counters, either ignorant of or uninterested in my silent pleas for mercy. Typical. "Where were you?"

I forgot my backpack under my desk and had to run across campus and back again. But she doesn't need to know that. "Don't worry about it. Is Ms. Little here yet?"

"You know that makes me worry about it, right?" Ryan meets my eyes and I meet hers and she breaks, predictably, looking beseechingly up at the ceiling for some higher power to grant her the strength to endure being my best friend. It's that kind of dramatic flair that almost landed her in theater club. A fate worse than death. "I think that's her now."

Ms. Little breezes through the door, a beat-up backpack slung over one shoulder. She's young enough that it almost makes her look like a student, except for the badge on a

lanyard around her neck and the existential dread in her eyes as she surveys the illustrious Rapture High student council.

Yes, someone named this town Rapture. Yes, it was the 1970s. I'll explain later.

The U-shaped desk arrangement gives her a good look at us—Ryan and me all the way in the back, me still fussing with my hair, trying to get it to obscure my forehead. Leo tilts back in his chair, one foot resting on his knee in a way that I'm sure is supposed to make him look cool, next to the twins, who are notable for hating it when you refer to them as *the twins*. As a group, I'm sure we don't look like much. I probably wouldn't want to supervise us either.

Which, yeah, how interesting is a high school student council supposed to be? But I don't think boredom is the reason Ms. Little looks distinctly unenthused to be our faculty advisor. The school year has barely started and we've already had more than one shake-up to the status quo. It probably doesn't bode well for the rest of the year, at least if you're the teacher who's supposed to be running the show.

"As you all know," Ms. Little says, facing us with all the energy of the president delivering grave news on the state of the nation, "there will be some necessary changes to the student council moving forward. For starters, I'll be your new faculty advisor." She dumps her backpack unceremoniously against the wall.

I trade a look with Ryan. Or try to. The spider wobbles at me.

"Mr. Duncan has decided to take a"—she gestures circuitously—"sabbatical."

Sabbatical is a nice word for *quit*, but I think the school is hoping he'll change his mind and come back eventually. I'm not sure if being the faculty advisor for student council is what drove him over the edge exactly, but losing two student council members within the first week of school probably didn't help. Not like they died or anything. Josh Barker moved to Arkansas because his dad's in the Air Force, and Samantha Ford got impeached for selling calculus test answer keys because *her* dad teaches the class. Maybe the idea of facing student council drama was too much for poor Mr. Duncan, but more realistically, I think he realized how sad it was that Samantha was making better money off academic dishonesty than he was off teaching. Which left Ms. Little to bravely take up the mantle of pretending to care about student council. Or at least making an attempt.

Which is fine—I have no love lost on Mr. Duncan. Mostly because he was uninteresting, but the omnipresent smell of stale cigarettes and, strangely, cheddar cheese wasn't very endearing either. More importantly, Josh and Samantha left president- and vice president-sized holes in the student council. The laws of succession mean that I was next in line for president. Which is what I wanted all along. I settled for secretary because it was better than nothing, but I guess things have a way of working themselves out. I'm sure mine isn't the first political career that started with scandal, and it certainly won't be the last.

“So.” Ms. Little manages to turn the word into a sigh. She puffs out her cheeks and consults the clipboard in her hands. “Some of you will be changing positions now, to fill in our

new vacancies. Seemed easiest to just move everyone up a slot, but if you'd prefer a different position . . . well, fight it out among yourselves."

"Doesn't that kind of undermine the democratic process?" Ryan says skeptically. I stomp on her foot, but I don't think she feels it under a layer of protective Doc Martens. She fiddles with the pencil behind her ear and smiles, just a little bit, just enough to let me know that she is messing with me on purpose, and she's enjoying it. I step on her boot a little harder.

This is my moment. I should have been president from the start, if student elections were won with policy instead of square chins and sparkling blue eyes. But Josh Barker's pretty-boy good looks are in Arkansas now, and it's my time to shine.

"Yes," Ms. Little says blithely. "As former secretary, Wren Martin will be our new president." I open my mouth to graciously accept. She gestures expansively . . . toward Ryan.

This happens a lot.

Ryan blinks. "I'm not Wren."

"I'm Wren," I say with a barely restrained scowl.

Ms. Little frowns. Maybe the scowl isn't as restrained as I thought. "You're Wren?" she says. "Then who's Ryan?"

"*She's* Ryan."

"I'm Leo," Leo says helpfully, "and that's Archer and Maggie." The twins wave, looking a little nonplussed. I'm not really sure how they qualified to be added to student council except by virtue of knowing Leo. I don't know how Archer even has time to be here, considering he's involved in every

sport known to man. It probably should have been my job to fill the new vacancies, but I have no idea who I would have asked. So they'll have to do, I guess.

"Glad we can all get acquainted," I say quickly. "I'm Wren. I'm student council president. I accept. Thank you, thank you." Pause for applause.

Ryan does a golf clap. I shove her hands back down as I stand up.

"So, about the VP—"

"Leo Reyes," Ms. Little reads off that sheet.

I stop short with a huff. "Shouldn't I get to choose? I choose Ryan." She *did* say we could fight it out among ourselves.

"Ryan Robinson is the new secretary," Ms. Little says pointedly, raising her eyebrows when I open my mouth to argue. For someone that's *maybe* twenty-seven and chronically disinterested, she can be surprisingly intimidating when she wants to be. I guess the fighting part was an exaggeration. "Archer Min is treasurer and historian is Magnolia . . . also Min. Are you related?"

"They're twins," Leo supplies.

"They can speak for themselves," I scoff, rolling my eyes. "If they're going to be a part of student council, they should have their own opinions. Right?"

Archer and Maggie trade a look. "We're . . . twins?" Maggie says, more nonplussed than ever. "We were born at the same time. Not really an opinion. Hey, are we getting some sort of class credit for this?"

I close my eyes and exhale.

Additional reason I hate Leo Reyes:

7. He doesn't care about student council like I do. I mean, no one cares about student council like I do, but at least the others made an effort. And maybe it was because Josh was buying a passing grade in calc from Samantha, but hey, whatever works. Leo, meanwhile, has always been just *there*, sitting quietly to the side, usually typing on his laptop like whatever he's doing is more interesting than the yearly budget. Which, like, it probably *is*, but that's not why you join student council. There's a reason Leo ran for historian, and I suspect it was to put student council on his college applications without having to do all that much except type meeting notes. Which was fine before. At least he stayed out of my way.

Now he's very much in my way. Physically. The way he leans back in his chair blocks the path behind him to the front of the classroom.

"Fine," I say. "Can we get started?"

"Go wild," Ms. Little says, dropping into the swivel chair behind the teacher's desk. "Just not too wild." She looks up expectantly. "That was a joke, by the way."

Archer laughs politely.

I pull a folder out of my backpack and consider my options. The U-shape means I can either skirt awkwardly around either side to get to the front of the room, or I can sit

on the desk and swing my legs around the other side of it. Considering Leo is already blocking one side—

“Don’t— Okay,” Ms. Little sighs as I slide over the desk and hop down on the other side. “Whatever.”

I take my place at the front of the room and clear my throat. Leo is leaning back in his chair again, the wobbling irritatingly distracting. My eyes sweep the assembled council. Like I said, I care about student council. Think what you like, but it’s not just because I’m a complete nerd. Or maybe it is, but Ryan wouldn’t have gone along with it if I didn’t have a good reason. An agenda, if you will. We had a bit of a setback when I was elected secretary, but the universe righted itself in the end. If a teenager getting suspended for selling answer keys outside the girls locker room is what it takes . . . well, what’s that but divine intervention?

Or, well, close enough.

“I want to fix this school,” I announce.

There’s a long pause where they all stare back at me with varying shades of anticipation. A purposeful pause, for emphasis, but still, I expected a little bit of a reaction. An *About time someone did!* or a *Please, tell us more!* Instead, Ryan flashes me a little thumbs-up and Leo looks politely curious but doesn’t tilt his chair forward onto four legs in awestruck wonder. So I guess that’s all I’m working with right now.

Whatever. There’s plenty of time to be impressed with my presidential platform. The *pièce de résistance* is yet to come.

“Rapture High sucks. Frankly,” I say, maybe a little too frankly. I *am* the president of its student council. “Our textbooks are older than we are. There are fewer teachers every year. There’s the hole in the stage that that freshman fell through last year during *The Sound of Music*.”

“That was so messed up,” Archer murmurs, leaning over to Leo.

“And school administration *doesn’t care*,” I forge ahead. “They don’t care about me. They don’t care about you. I mean, they didn’t even make us hold reelections, they just let us pick two random people to fill the vacancies.” I gesture sweepingly at Maggie and Archer.

“Okay. *Random?*” Maggie scoffs.

The point, Ryan mouths, her spider earrings wiggling furiously.

Right, the point. “There are two things the administration *does* care about,” I say. I hold up a finger. “They care about the robotics team.” I avoid looking at Leo. Leo, the star coder of the Rapture High robotics team, who single-handedly launched robotics into relevancy here. Caring has nothing to do with the sport (science?) and everything to do with the case of shiny plaques and trophies in the front office. If Leo decided to go win a couple of badminton tournaments tomorrow, I’m sure the principal would sell off all the little robot arms on eBay to buy the school a badminton court.

“And”—I hold up another finger—“they care about the Dance.”

The. Dance. Capital-letter-D *Dance*. It has a name, but it doesn't *need* one, because it's all anyone ever talks about.

Let me explain a little bit about Rapture High School: there is absolutely nothing interesting going on here.

Okay, except for the Samantha Ford thing, but test keys are hardly the same as Harvard acceptance letters. Rapture, Florida, is a beach town, a patch of sand made viable only by tourists' propensity to visit and spend a lot of cash. There are two things available for an enterprising teenager to base their personality around: the beach and—

The Dance.

Not prom. Prom is at the end of the school year, which is the beginning of summer, which is also the beginning of tourist season. When half of the student body is pulling shifts at the Beachy Bites Ice Cream Parlor or the Holiday Inn for the season, no one really has time for it. So instead, they've collectively and culturally decided to focus their energy on a more reasonable time frame, like February, when they can all lose their absolute shit over the Valentine's Day Dance.

People start planning for the Valentine's Day Dance in *November*. Dresses, flowers, limos. They close the road outside school to non-Dance traffic just to mitigate the madness. It is, simply put, *a lot*.

And I hate it with every fiber of my being.

"I want to abolish the Valentine's Day Dance," I say with all the confidence of someone dropping an atomic bomb. "And redirect the funding into the school's infrastructure to actually improve this place for everybody who goes here

after us.” I manage not to drop the word *legacy*, but I want to. I want to very badly.

It doesn’t quite have the impact I expected. Ms. Little laughs.

“Sorry,” she says, hiding her mouth behind her hand. “I’ll let you finish.”

“Maybe *abolish* isn’t the right word,” Ryan hedges. “Maybe . . . reduce?”

“Terminate,” I counter.

“Tone down.”

“Obliterate.”

“I have a question.” Maggie raises her hand. “Before you ask us to commit social suicide . . . uh, why?”

I can see the hope leaving Ryan’s eyes. I stare at Maggie, squinting incredulously. Did she not hear the first part?

“There’s a *hole* in the *stage*,” I say, enunciating the words like maybe she didn’t understand them the first time around. “That kid broke her arm.” The hole would’ve been cheaper to fix than the ensuing lawsuit, and *yet*.

I flip open my folder with a crisp *thwack*, my neatly stapled informational packets waiting like soldiers inside the pockets. Some people need the numbers right in front of them to understand, I get that. I’ve come prepared. “The money this school puts into the Dance is absolutely ridiculous.” I start distributing packets like it’s the first day of class. “Here you’ll find the student council budget for the last five years. The Dance accounts for over fifty percent of the budget in any given year. We’re blowing that on *one night*. Instead, we could be fixing the hole, or buying art supplies, or subsi-

dizing instruments for band students who can't afford them. There's literally a thousand other things we could do with that money for the benefit of the *whole* school."

Archer shuffles his packet and clears his throat. "Well, as treasurer," he says, which I can already tell is going to get on my nerves, "I think your problem might be with the school district, dude. The student council is just here to do, like . . . fun stuff? Like dances?" He glances at Leo as if for confirmation. "I mean, it's only my first day, but that was my read on the situation."

"Fun for *who*?" I say, unable to hide the note of derision in my voice. "Gay kids? Trans kids? Poor kids? Kids who don't want to date? It's a social minefield. I mean, it's *Valentine's Day*. Somehow y'all have managed to make it worse than *prom*." I roll my eyes. "The school district won't do anything, *clearly*. So what's the point in waiting around wishing they would? We can actually do something as a student council instead of just . . . researching caterers so football players can show off to each other and get wasted in the bathrooms."

Okay, maybe a little more bitterness than I'd intended, but it's gotten the point across. Dances are only fun for *some* people, but the whole school pays for them. Not to mention everyone has to deal with the weight of the social obligation. Even *not* going is some sort of political statement at Rapture High, because it's all anyone cares about, and the administration likes it that way. The more we obsess over the Dance, the less we're thinking about our wobbly desks or how a "long-term substitute" has been teaching health class for a year and a half.