



Suddenly, it's Sunday afternoon and I'm standing outside an old Lutheran church across town, doubt weighing down on me with spine-crushing force.

The red-brick building looks like a normal church, except for the fact that an ugly weatherboard extension has attached itself to one side, like a boxy, cream-colored parasite. There's a concrete ramp running along one side of the church, leading up to a glass door in the weatherboard annex. A massive sign above the door is emblazoned with the words BALLARAT MUSICAL THEATRE SOCIETY, with the expectedly cliché comedy and tragedy masks in the background, their ribbons looping in and out of the black serif text.

It looks like the kind of place people's hopes and dreams go to die a horribly overacted death.

Mum lets out a squeal of excitement as she trots up behind me on the footpath in a pair of stilettos. "Darling, this is *it*. This is where the magic happens!"

I stifle the urge to groan. "We're ten minutes early," I say, glancing down at my watch. "We should wait out here, right?"

"No, no, no," Mum says, looping her arm through mine. "Everyone gets here early. I need to introduce you to the VIPs!"

Without another word, she drags me up the concrete ramp, shoves me through the glass door, and ushers me into what would have been the nave of the church when it was used for praising Jesus instead of staging *Jesus Christ Superstar*. (The only reason I know that's a musical is because Mum was in a local

production of it when I was seven. She played “Leper #1,” which I’m now certain was a title she bestowed upon herself.)

The church still *feels* churchy, even though the stained-glass windows have been replaced with regular frosted glass and the altar has been removed. There’s a small raised stage in the apse, which seems to be where the cast leave their bags and belongings. One whole wall is covered in mirrors, and the others are adorned not with the Stations of the Cross, but with posters of old musicals and newspaper cuttings of BMTS alumni success stories—the ones who’ve “made it,” according to Mum. It smells like dust and sweat and desperation. The lights are the harshest type of fluorescent, the ones that make you feel like you’ve been beamed up to an extraterrestrial spacecraft. Or maybe that’s more to do with the fact that I feel like a complete alien here—a lone introvert drowning in a sea of toothy grins and over-the-top gestures.

I can’t see anyone in the hall who a) looks like Marlon Brando, or b) looks even remotely like a gaymer. There are some high-school girls in lycra stretching in one corner (I honestly didn’t know legs could bend that way); a group of straight-looking guys standing in a tight huddle; some older stragglers wandering around the room making the same ridiculous noises Mum makes when she’s “warming up her voice”; and a probably-mid-forties Black woman with long pink braids sitting on a chair by the wall, holding court with some of the younger cast members, all of whom are literally crying with laughter over something she just said.

They’re all so ... I don’t know. Big? Loud? *On?*

I keep scanning the room for a single person who doesn’t

look like they've walked straight off the set of *Glee* (I'll admit, I've seen a *couple* of episodes, but only because Darren Criss is undeniably hot) and spot two guys around my age chatting in the middle of the hall. One of them is tall and blond, with pretty blue eyes and horse teeth (in an attractive way), and the other is olive-skinned, black-haired, and stocky. He's wearing one of those meme T-shirts with the list of names, but this one says *Hamilton & Jefferson & Madison & Washington & Burr*, and I have no idea who they are. Which means he's not MagePants69, because if he *were*, I'd definitely be able to understand his T-shirt.

I glance past the boys to the upright piano in the far corner of the room. There's a mousy-looking girl sitting there, running her fingers over the keys without actually playing anything. Every now and then, she glances up from the ivories, meets someone's gaze, and then quickly averts her eyes. She's clearly the only other nerd in the room, which—wait . . .

Oh, no. Please, please, *please* don't tell me *she* is MagePants69. I cannot have committed to doing this show only to find out that the boy I'm in love with is not even a *boy*.

"Who's that girl at the piano?" I ask Mum, feeling a little nauseated.

"Oh, that's just Jane, the *répétiteur*." She flicks her hands through the air. "We have more important people to meet, darling. Come, I'll introduce you to David."

She yanks me across the room towards a tall Black man with his back to us. He's deep in conversation with a withered old white lady who looks like my great-grandma, both of them poring over a skein of bright pink silk.

“David,” Mum coos, “this is my son, Noah.”

It’s the first time I’ve heard her say the word “son” like it’s a compliment since . . . I don’t know, maybe ever. Usually it sounds more like an apology. Like she’s preparing them for how incredibly awkward I’m about to be.

David whips around, and my first thought is that he’s . . . well . . . *hot*. For an old guy.

“Noah!” he says, reaching out to clasp my hand in both of his. “We are thrilled you could join us. *Thrilled*.” He squeezes my hand on the word *thrilled*, then lets go. “You and Raf have honestly saved the day. When Juan and Phillip pulled out and we had to bump Eli up to Fred Casely, I didn’t think we’d be able to make up the numbers in the male ensemble! And how on earth could we do ‘Roxie’ justice without her bevy of *boys*?”

He may as well be speaking German (and I do not speak German), because I have no idea if those names belong to people or characters or songs or god-knows-what. I just nod politely, my lips pressed into a very unconvincing smile.

“So, *thank you*,” he says, far too earnest for my liking.

“Happy to help,” I lie.

My eyes flick to the door of the nave, completely out of my control, when an absolute *god* of a boy walks into the church.

“Alex!” someone calls out from across the room.

I have to give it to Mum, “swoon-worthy” is definitely the most apt adjective for Alex Di Mario, and the young Marlon Brando reference is so accurate it hurts. He smiles a Hollywood smile and jogs over to Horse Teeth and Meme T-shirt. They take turns hugging hello, then both boys laugh

at something Alex says, in that overenthusiastic way you laugh when someone infinitely more popular deigns to talk to you.

Staring over at Alex, basking in his tanned, athletic glory, my stomach sinks into my feet. He has to be the *least* likely online RPG player I have ever laid eyes upon. He's the sort of guy who's into sunbaking and selfies, not Dungeons and Dragons. Besides, it's a scientific fact that Hot People don't lock themselves inside their dark bedrooms all day where no one can see how attractive they are. That's *not* how the world works.

So . . . if not Alex Di Mario, which cast member is MagePants69? Horse Teeth looks like a typical Drama Gay, but I guess Meme T-shirt is giving off a bit of a nerdy vibe. And then there's Jane the pianist, of course, who is clearly nerdy enough to play computer games, but that would be some seriously intense karma for me trying to secretly stalk my online crush.

Unless . . . Could I have been way off with this? Maybe MagePants69 isn't here at all? Realistically, he could be rehearsing for a million things that aren't *Chicago*. Maybe I've sent myself on an undercover mission as a chorus member of an amateur musical—with my *mother* playing the lead role, no less—for *absolutely no reason*.

No. He's going to be here.

He has to be here.

I know it.

"Noah," Mum snaps from beside me and I turn back to her. "David asked you a question."

"Oh," I reply. "Sorry, sir."

He laughs, loud and expansive. "'Sir?' We'll have none of that private school nonsense in my rehearsal room, thanks, Noah."

“Uh, sorry,” I say again.

“I asked if you’re ready for the challenge?” He says it like it’s a dare. “You’ve certainly got some catching up to do. Luckily, your mother is one of the most talented women I’ve worked with in many years.”

“David, *stop*,” she says, slapping him on the arm. “You’ll embarrass me.”

Un-fucking-likely.

“I’m sure you’ve got some of that ‘Rose Mitchell sparkle’ inside you somewhere,” David says, clamping a hand on my shoulder.

Ugh. Theatre people are so *touchy*.

“Somewhere very deep down,” I reply. “Buried under all the layers of sparkle-repellent teen angst.”

Mum laughs possibly the fakest laugh I’ve ever heard (which is saying something for her). “Didn’t I tell you he was *funny*?”

David chuckles. “Welcome to the cast, Noah.” He steps aside, claps his hands twice, and the room falls silent. “Chairs around the piano, people. Let’s revise what we’ve learned so far.”

“Grab a chair, darling,” Mum orders, pointing to the wall. “Find somewhere to sit.”

Suddenly fending for myself, I fall in step with the rest of the cast as they form a semicircle around the piano. As we shuffle around the room, I continue searching for signs of MagePants69’s existence. Not that I know what I’m looking for. Something that screams *I love online D&D games and Noah Mitchell is my soulmate* would be preferable.

“Are you a bari?” Horse Teeth asks from beside me, taking a seat on his plastic chair.

“A what, sorry?”

“A baritone.”

“Uhh . . .”

He raises an eyebrow. “Is this baby’s first show?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“I mean, you do have a bit of a deer-in-the-headlights vibe about you,” he replies with a smirk, and all I can think is, *Are you MagePants69? Are you smirking at me because you know who I am and you’re in love with me?*

“Is your singing voice low or high?” he asks.

I can’t say that I’ve ever tested it out, given I’m hardly the type of guy who belts along to Beyoncé in the shower. Having said that, my speaking pitch *did* drop considerably when my voice broke, so . . .

“Low?” I reply with a shrug. “Low-ish?”

“Sit with us, girl,” he replies, pointing his thumb at Meme T-shirt beside him. “We’re the baritones. The fun ones, anyway. You’ll catch up quickly. The harmonies are so easy.”

As I take my seat next to Horse Teeth, I realize that’s probably the longest conversation I’ve had with anyone not in my immediate family since Year Nine. This tiny voice in the back of my head (that happens to sound a lot like Charly) says, *See, it’s not so bad.*

“I’m Keegan, by the way,” Horse Teeth says. “And this is Chris.”

“Noah,” I say, forcing a smile for Meme T-shirt, who is grinning at me almost fanatically.

“Nice to meet you, Noah,” he replies.

“Nice to meet you t—”

But before I can finish, someone shouts from the door, “Sorry I’m late, David! I missed the bus!”

“It’s fine, Eli,” David replies, and I turn to see a young guy wearing a green knitted jumper and black jeans jogging into the room. “Take a seat,” David goes on. “We’re just about to start on ‘All That Jazz.’”

I keep my eyes on the boy as he crosses the hall, dumps his backpack, grabs a chair, and jogs back over to our huddle around the piano. The guys directly in front of me shuffle apart so he can squeeze in between them.

My heart is suddenly beating triple-time. Because this boy—*Eli*—with his quaffed, flame-red hair and angular Elven features, looks *exactly* like a certain Half-Elf Bard avatar I know all too well . . .

He glances over his shoulder and his sparkly, emerald green eyes meet mine. He gives me the briefest smile and my heart stops dead.

Because it’s him. I’d bet my life on it.

MagePants69.