

drama club

THE FALL MUSICAL



P E T E R L E R A N G I S

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Drama Club Book 1:



by Peter Lerangis

speak

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SPEAK

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Prologue

THEY SAY IF YOU STARE AT THE PHOTOS LONG enough, you'll see yourself. You can't miss them. They cover an entire wall of the school lobby, every year since 1907. The ones way up top are hard to see, but they're all boys in togas, animal skins, and drag. Often a mysterious blurry bear lurks in the background, supposedly the ghost of a murdered kid but probably some forgotten joke. It was a boys' school then, and when girls showed up a couple of decades later, the Masque & Wig Society became the Drama Club.

Every few years a newspaper will do a feature on this. They'll say most high schools have walls for sports teams, debate teams, math squads, etc. But Ridgeport High is not most high schools. Okay, if you look *real* hard,

you'll find a small dusty cabinet near the boys' room that contains a few trophies and a list of track records intact since Lamar Williams high-jumped 6' 1¼" in 1985. I guess Kyle Taggart's football records will be added someday, but no one seems to be rushing (ha-ha). But the lobby wall, the school's prime show-off spot, is reserved for something else, something much more important.

Ridgeport is the kind of place where Stephen Sondheim is sung in the hallways, "The Light in the Piazza" is on everyone's playlists, and you can spark a heated argument by mentioning the name Martin Pakledinaz. (He's a set designer. I didn't know that either.) Kids give impromptu concerts in the halls, and teachers sing backup. Even Mr. Ippolito, the custodian, does a mean doo-wop second tenor and can recite Shakespeare. He keeps the photos spotless. Especially the Shrine, a glassed-in photo display of the five RHS alums who went on to win Tony Awards.

Brianna Glaser swears she was, in a previous life, the girl playing in *Annie Get Your Gun* in a 1966 photo; the girl doesn't resemble her at all, but it's hard to disagree with Brianna. Harrison Michaels is the guy playing Zeus in some 1931 play. Reese Van Cleve is, of course, the sexpot in 1989's *Pajama Game* with the 300-watt smile, long legs, and big boobs—a girl who, depending on who you talk to, went on to become a backup singer for Madonna or an Internet porn star.

Me? I didn't pay much attention to the photos at first. For one thing, there were no Asian faces for, oh, seventy years. Brianna insisted that didn't matter and that I was being close-minded, but I think I'm a realist. People see what they want to see. I mean, we all dream of a perfect

place, where everyone *gets* you. Where you can be exactly who you want to be and not worry about making an ass of yourself or pleasing someone else. Some people find it in teams and social cliques. Some have to travel to an imaginary wizard school or through a hidden wardrobe or on a Kansas tornado. In Ridgeport, people find it in the Drama Club.

As for me, I had to work a little harder. A few weeks after I turned sixteen, in another life in Connecticut, everything changed. Nothing I knew or believed made any sense. On that day I stopped being Kara Chang. I was no longer the good girl, the Organized One, the class president and yearbook editor who could do *Whatever She Put Her Mind To*. After the school year ended, Mom and I moved away. We had to. Dad probably would have wanted us to stay, but he'd walked out on us three years earlier so his opinion didn't count. Of all the places to move, why did Mom choose Ridgeport, Long Island? I don't know, probably something like water quality or school SAT scores or the availability of good nursing jobs. I don't think it was because of the magic that's here. That was for me to find out. And I did. I realized that in a town where the stage was reality, I could become a new person.

Of course, I couldn't go too far with this. Mom would have had a heart attack if I'd called myself Ethel or Bernadette or Idina, so I stretched to the limits of my available options. I introduced myself to people as K.C., which isn't exactly a lie, but just as I hoped, they spelled it the way it sounds.

And that's how I became who I am today, Casey.

I became one of those people who need to escape themselves to find themselves. Only I didn't do it via a trip to Oz or Hogwarts or Narnia. I didn't even expect to do it through the Drama Club.

Then I ran into the hurricane known as Brianna Glaser.

Prepare Ye

September 4

24 . . . 15 . . . 4.

Casey spun the lock for the third time and pulled on the locker handle. For the third time, nothing happened. She smiled, tried not to look like an idiot, and checked the locker number against the assignment sheet. Yup—217.

The warning bell clanged loud enough to wake a corpse, but no one seemed to notice. Three minutes to homeroom. Later for the locker. She gave the handle one last sharp, futile yank.

Thwack.

The door lurched open, throwing her off balance. It smacked loudly against the locker next to it, causing at least four hundred heads to turn. Casey's backpack slid down her left arm, and as she twisted around in an effort to save it, her belly popped out over her pants, and for

some reason she was reminded of yeasty bread rising in a pan. It had not been a great summer for weight, and as she now had a rapt and unwanted audience, she pulled down her shirt, and the pack flung itself onto the floor, sliding across the tiles.

“Fumble!”

A blond boy the size of a Dumpster thumped after the pack, scooping it up. He cradled it briefly, lurching from side to side, faking out no one in particular, then tossed the backpack to another Supersizer, who scrunched it into a roughly oblong shape and lifted it as if to pass.

From behind, a third hulk grabbed the pack roughly and turned toward Casey. Oh, great. Now what? Lessons in Humiliation 101, and her career at Ridgeport wasn't even three minutes old. She thought about the open locker. With a little sucking in, she could squeeze inside, pull the door shut, and stay there the rest of the semester.

Until Hulk Number Three came closer, and she got a good look at him.

“Is this yours?”

He was looming over her now, about nine feet tall. Or maybe six feet three. His shoulders strained the seams of a button-down striped Abercrombie shirt that hung loose over a navy T. Possibly jeans, too, but Casey didn't pick up that detail because she was stuck at the upper half, specifically the eyes, which were blue—well, in the sense that freedom and joy and dancing in a field of wildflowers could be called blue. He cocked his head to the left, causing a shock of sandy blond hair to fall across his face, which seemed less a motion than a change in the weather, a sudden spring breeze.

He held out the backpack toward her. "Sorry about my friends," he said. "They're animals."

Casey moved her lips, attempting to respond, but no words came out. By the time she could try again he was gone. She watched him bound down the hallway, his head floating above the sea of shorter people.

"Thanks," she squeaked belatedly, to no one.

"Okay, now, breathe."

The voice startled Casey. It belonged to a girl from a locker to her left. She was the type Casey's dad used to call "a tall drink of water."

"Huh?" Casey said.

"He has that effect on everyone," the girl continued. "Girls, guys, teachers. He can't help it. Brianna."

It took Casey a second to realize the girl was naming herself and not the guy.

"Kar— Casey," she replied, pulling back her old name and cringing at the fact that she had to.

"Make up your mind." Brianna laughed, her eyes crinkling into triangles and her mouth showing a little too much gum line, the only flaws in a face that was otherwise all cheekbone framed by blond ringlets. "His name, in case you were wondering, and I know you were, is Kyle. Kyle Taggart. Where are you from?"

"Westfield," Casey said, adding as an explanation, "that's in Connecticut."

"Thank you, Carmen Sandiego. Who do you have for homeroom?"

Casey pulled a folded sheet out of her pocket. "Liebowitz."

"Lifer," Brianna said with a nod. "Sometimes forgets things, like his socks or toupee. Two naps short of Alzheimer's. I'm going the same direction."

Casey opened her locker and stashed her jacket and book bag, arranging them so that the jacket hung perfectly, and the book bag was at an angle.

"That looks like an ad for a catalog," Brianna observed. "Are you always that neat?"

"Only when I'm nervous," Casey admitted. "It's just first-day jitters."

Brianna grinned and pulled open her own her locker. The inner door was already decorated with family snapshots and magazine photos. A couple of the usual movie stars—Casey was not into them—but also some other shots that she did not expect to see.

"The loves of my life," Brianna said, noticing Casey's curious glance. "The child holding the disgustingly obese hamster is Colter Glaser, my adorably obese brother—"

"Putnam County Spelling Bee . . ." Casey said, glancing at a photo of a white-shirted Latino guy dressed as a kid standing in front of other young men and women, also dressed as kids. She'd seen the show three times, as well as all the other shows represented on Brianna's door.

Avenue Q. Phantom. Les Miz. Wicked . . .

"José Lana is so hot, but you could never tell by this picture," Brianna said.

"I know," Casey replied. "I saw him in *Rent*."

Brianna's face brightened. "Me, too. Didn't you just want to jump his bones?"

"Well, I was little, but—"

"José, don't take this the wrong way, but we *love* you!" Brianna gave the photo a kiss, shut the locker door, then slid over to Casey's and closed hers. "The trick is, after you do the combination, lift the handle first and *then* pull. If you try to do both together, it sticks. I think Mr. Liebowitz installed these, just after the Depression. Try it and let's go."

Casey did, it worked, and she ran to catch up to Brianna, who was already gliding down the hallway with long, graceful steps.

"Do you sing?" Brianna asked.

"Sort of," Casey said. "I'm more an instrument type. Piano, clarinet. I mean, I like to sing, but I've done only regular plays, not musicals. So I kind of suck."

"Sucking is not a relative act. One either sucks or doesn't. No 'kind of' about it. But I'll be the judge of that. In terms of singing, I mean. In any other sense of the word, that's your business." Brianna tossed her a smile and a wink. A *wink*! Casey had never met anyone who actually *winked* in normal conversation. "Now, speaking of sucky singing . . ." Brianna nodded toward a thin girl in fashionably baggy clothes and a fedora, whose red hair flowed nearly to her waist. "That's Darci. You know what we say about Darci. Dances like a butterfly, sings like a bee. Hey, Darse—this is Casey—you coming to the audition?"

"Heeeey!" Darci ran to Brianna and gave her a huge hug, waving to Casey at the same time. "When is it?"

"A week from today, September 11. And if you can sing in tune, which is a big if, callbacks are Thursday."

"LAAAAH!" Darci hooted in a mock operatic voice that sounded, well, pretty sucky.

"Work on it," Brianna said. "A lot." Walking on, she leaned into Casey. "Hope you don't mind. I'm recruiting. Usually, I'm the star, but for this show I'm assistant director. It's something I've wanted to try, but you can't do that *and* act. Unfortunately."

Casey trailed her around the corner, where a group of guys (and one Goth girl) was playing Magic cards in the hallway. "The two handsome guys," Brianna said, "are Ethan Smith and Corbin Smythe, who sing in the a cappella group, the Vanderdonks, which comes from when this place was the Adriaen Van der Donck School for Boys, I kid you not. Anyway, they have a stand-up act called—three guesses—Smith and Smythe. They are actually funny. The guy in blue is Jason. He can sing, but he acts with his shoulders. Ask him to be happy, he shrugs. Sad, he shrugs. The girl is Lilith. She likes Jason's shoulders very much. Often you will see her crying on them. Hey, guys!"

"Yo!" some of the boys shouted, including Jason, who shrugged.

"Now, Lori Terrell over there, the one with the huge crucifix hanging from her neck, will be singing at the Met someday—that's the Metropolitan Opera, not the museum," Brianna said, waving to a modestly dressed, raven-haired girl who looked like she knew her way around the plus-size rack at Talbot's. "She's a senior. Standing stalwartly beside her is Royce Reardon, also a senior. We call him Royce of No Voice, but he's tried out for every show and he's sweet. And there's Reese, our star dancer-slut, who at the moment is involved in her favorite activity, baring flesh before the clamoring multitudes."

"Hey, Bri," called Reese, a girl with pulled-back red hair who, right there in the hallway, was doing a split that revealed the longest, most perfectly bronzed legs Casey had ever seen—although they were a little hard to see through the thicket of boys surrounding her.

"Drool alert, Mr. Ippolito—all over the floor next to Reese!" Brianna said to a custodian who was approaching with a mop. "Mr. Ippolito, by the way, played Hector, the third Iowan from the right, in this school's 1972 production of *Music Man*."

"How do you know that?" Casey asked.

"I have a photographic memory."

Mr. Ippolito, a gangly man with sandy hair turning silver, began dancing with his mop. "Dancinnnnng in the daaaark," he sang. "Do I get a callback?"

"We love you, but keep your day job," Brianna replied.

Casey stared at Brianna in wonder. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?" Brianna said.

"When you say those things about them—do they mind it?"

"They love it," Brianna replied. "That's because it's said with love and honesty. Well, honesty at least. When you *don't* say things, when you pretend or keep secrets—that's when people freak. No secrets, no twisted knickers. That's the motto of the DC. Well, it's not, but it should be."

"The who?"

"DC? You know, *Drama Club*?" Brianna looked at

Casey as if she were reminding a child what her bedtime was. "Which you're about to join?"

"I am?" Casey asked.

"Great! I knew you'd say yes!"

And like that, she was around the next corner.

Back in Westfield, when she was a sophomore, Casey knew a senior who liked to drive close behind trucks, claiming they created pockets of airspace that sucked you along. It was kind of dangerous, he admitted, but it felt great, like you were pulled into a magnetic field. That's what it was like with Brianna. Walking with her in a crowded hallway was like flying on someone else's power. The movement all around them changed—body language, eyes, crowd patterns, everything adjusted to Brianna. She was the only one traveling in a straight line—aside from Casey, who was only borrowing the pocket of airspace.

Casey's Westfield friends had been quiet and studious. The student government and yearbook types. They would have had plenty to say about someone like Brianna, none of it very nice. But Brianna turned expectations upside down.

Brianna stopped in front of Room 147. "Here we are, the Lair of Liebowitz. You know about theater in this school?"

Casey nodded. "The town rolls up on opening night," she said. "Everyone shows up to the musicals. It's like football teams in Texas. The costume and set budgets are six figures—"

"You read about us in the *New York Times*."

"Sunday Arts and Leisure section—"

"Good Lord, you are a total freak." Brianna smiled, and

the sun seemed to blast in through the windowless walls and ceiling. "Like it or not, girl, you are one of us. Have an up-tempo and a ballad prepared for next Tuesday. Ms. Gunderson will accompany, and she can play anything. For callbacks, we'll have sides available. This is not—I repeat, *not*—the Big One. The stores will not shut early, or any of that crap. It's our small fall musical, something new this year—Harrison's idea. He worked on getting permission all summer long. You'll like Harrison; he's Greek, but don't hold it against him. Actually, he's pretty hot, if you like the dark, smoldering, serious type. He swears his eyes are brown, but look closely, they're *black*. Anyway, the show is *Godspell*. Great music. As you know, it's about Jesus, but you don't have to be Christian. Stephen Schwartz wrote it, and he's Jewish. Actually, so was Jesus. You can sing from the show if you want."

"Sides?" Casey said.

"Sections of the script you can read. Scenes. One of the other Drama Club members will read the other characters."

"Okay," Casey said, already numb from trying to remember the details.

"I'm the assistant director, which means I won't be playing a role. Mr. Levin—he's our faculty adviser—is the director, but only because the administration says kids can't direct. Which means I'll mostly be in charge." Brianna looked at her watch. "Gotta go. Hey, do you know Alex Duboff? From Westfield?"

Clang. The sound of the name smacked Casey right back into reality.