



“A suspenseful, silly story full of humor and heart that will make a theater lover of any young reader.”—*Booklist*

**“It’s awkward, asking someone if they’re a ghost.”**

***Break a leg!*** That’s what you say to actors when what you mean is *Have a good show!* Anything else is bad luck. When Miss Magnus literally breaks her leg, Noah McNichol and the rest of the Plattsfield-Winklebottom Memorial Sixth-Grade Players are left without a director for their production of *Hamlet*. Coach Fig comes to the rescue—sort of. He’ll direct, even though he is clearly more interested in his phone than in directing. He doesn’t even know upstage from downstage! But then, out of nowhere, a strangely dressed old guy appears. His name is Mike. He tells Noah he has theater experience and then disappears. *Poof!*

Noah has some investigating to do and some decisions to make. Like, does he care more that their new director might be a ghost or about getting to make his stage debut? And who is Mike and why has he decided to help? As things get weirder and weirder, one thing becomes clear: The show must go on, and Noah will do whatever it takes to make that happen.

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**NOAH  
McNICHOL  
and the  
BACKSTAGE  
GHOST**

**by Martha Freeman**

*A Paula Wiseman Book*

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*For drama teacher extraordinaire Samantha Howard,  
who gave me the idea, and her family*

—M. F.

## **Meet the Plattsfield- Winklebottom Memorial Sixth-Grade Players**

**Noah McNichol** (our hero): Born in New York City, Noah moved with his parents to Plattsfield when he was seven years old. While Noah has been a theater fan since he was old enough to say “Encore,” *Hamlet* marks his debut performance.

**Clive Desmond** (Noah’s best friend): Inspired by big sister, Gillian, who starred as Lady Macbeth in a previous Sixth-Grade Play, Clive gave up baseball to take to the boards. Clive was born in Plattsfield, where his family has maintained an apple orchard since 1942.

**Emma Jessel** (the villain): The only daughter of two very successful lawyers, Emma has a big personality perfectly suited to a big part. Emma’s family have been proud residents of New York state since shortly after the Revolutionary War.

**Martha Freeman**

**Madeline Howard** (Emma's best friend): A self-professed theater geek, Madeline reads plays for fun and attends live performances as parents and time permit. Previous roles include Sprinkle Doughnut in the kindergarten pageant, Reluctant Child in a commercial for Your Local Plattsfield Subaru Dealership, and Crying Girl in Santa's Lap in the West Chazy Players production of *A Christmas Story*.

**Fuli Tenzing** (player): A serious reader and lifelong movie fan, Fuli makes her theatrical debut in the Plattsfield-Winklebottom Memorial Sixth-Grade Play. When she is not studying or reading for pleasure, Fuli can be found helping out at her family's popular downtown restaurant, Himalaya, which has the best dumplings in town.

**Brianna Larkin** (player): Brianna's self-admitted stage fright is no match for her passion for theater. Her large family includes three older brothers, all of them standout athletes at Plattsfield-Winklebottom Memorial.

**Marley Jacobs** (player): A Plattsfield native, Marley is the second in her family to take on the Sixth-Grade

**NOAH McNICHOL and the BACKSTAGE GHOST**

Play. Older brother Charles served as stage manager for *The Tempest* several seasons back. Marley is known as a good student, a good friend, and an all-round good kid.

**Diego Arcati** (player): Diego's recent pursuits include chess club, canoe club, and lacrosse, none of which proved to be the right fit for his energy and offbeat sense of humor. Along with his parents, his teachers are grateful that *Hamlet* has at least kept him busy.

**Sarah Monti** (player): While the Sixth-Grade Play marks her theatrical debut, Sarah is a seasoned veteran of numerous performances with the Holy Redeemer Catholic Church's bell choir.

**Eddie Muir** (player): A standout at basketball and cross-country, Eddie is the second generation of his family to appear in the Sixth-Grade Play, his mother having played Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*.

**Lila Moseley** (player): Along with Eddie, Lila is a second-generation Sixth-Grade Player. Her mother, Jeanene, played the title role in *Othello*.

## Martha Freeman

**Mia Duffy** (stage manager): Mia would like to thank her parents, Annamarie and William Duffy IV, for endowing her with a skill set uniquely suited to management.

**Justin Ferri** (lights and sound): Bummed when he sprained his shoulder and couldn't play baseball, Justin—a Plattsfield native—agreed to do Coach Fig a favor and help out with the Sixth-Grade Play.



## CHAPTER ONE

### Monday, Rehearsal Week One, 46 Days till Performance

**M**iss Magnus went to New York City over spring break to see shows and was crossing Broadway, not even jaywalking, when a taxi hit her and broke her leg in three places, and that's how it started.

Miss Magnus had been teaching at Plattsfield-Winklebottom Memorial Elementary for twenty-five years and had so many sick days saved she didn't have to come back to school till fall, so she didn't. Instead, she sat home with her leg propped up and read poetry to her elderly chihuahua.

At least, that's what my mom heard at Sal's, the mini-mart close to our house, the store we go to if we don't need anything unusual, like matzoh for my dad's favorite weekend breakfast, matzoh brie, which is like scrambled eggs with crackers, only it tastes better than that sounds.

“It’s pretty funny that our director broke her leg—get it? Break a leg?” Clive said after school that Monday. We were walking from the school’s main building to the auditorium next door.

“Not funny exactly. I bet it hurt. But yeah, I get it,” I said. *Break a leg!* is what you say to actors when what you mean is *Have a good show!* because if you say something positive, it’s bad luck. Theater people think everything is bad luck.

“So without Miss Magnus, who will be in charge?” Clive asked.

“I guess we’ll see when we open the door to the auditorium. Can you wait that long?” I said.

“Hey—snark alert,” Clive said. “I was merely asking.”

“Sorry. I’m worried is all. I have a bad feeling that without Miss Magnus, the grown-ups will mess this up.”

“Mess up your chance to be a star?” Clive said.

“You got it.” By now we were climbing the steps. “Broadway! Hollywood! My ticket out of this backwater!”

“You’re strange, Noah,” Clive said.

“What do you expect? I’m a sixth-grade boy trying out for Shakespeare. You’re strange too.”

“I know, but don’t tell my mom,” Clive said. “She’s not-so-secretly hoping I won’t get a part so I can play baseball.”

“Ha! You’re a dude and you can read. You will definitely get a part.”

In the lobby, Clive pointed to a poster on the wall by the box office:

PLATTSFIELD-WINKLEBOTTOM MEMORIAL SIXTH-  
GRADE PLAYERS PRESENT WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S  
*HAMLET*, THE TALE OF A GRITTY PRINCE WHO  
LEARNS TO BE PATIENT! ONE NIGHT ONLY: FRIDAY,  
MAY 8!

The Plattsfield-Winklebottom Memorial Auditorium, the aud, is old-fashioned and massive and fancy. Now, with Clive behind me, I pushed open the heavy door that led from the lobby to the house. Before us, down the long aisle, was the stage, curtain closed, looking small and far away. Right and left of the aisle were rows and rows of seats, enough to hold grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbors—practically the whole town of Plattsfield.

I was in second grade the first time I walked into the aud, probably for a presentation on playground safety or the alphabet from A to Z. Back then, I was a very small person in a very large space. The stage might as well have been in Canada. The ceiling

seemed as distant as the sky. I can't describe how it made me feel exactly, but the feeling was strong. I don't mean I felt scared or puny or unimportant, which would have made sense. Instead, it was more like the opposite, as if I had the power to expand, grow big enough to fill the emptiness.

So even before I ever saw a play in it, I loved the aud for the feeling I got when I was there. Then, the same year, I think, my parents took me to the sixth-grade play, and even though I didn't understand the story exactly, and even though I had to pee really bad, I thought that was great too. The actors were only sixth graders, same as I am now, but when they put on costumes and makeup and spoke strange, beautiful words, they became something else: the characters they were playing.

That day, Clive and I ran down the aisle. I think he was excited, too, even though, cool as he is, he never would've admitted it. Since the house lights were up, we could see that already around twenty kids were clustered in the seats closest to the stage. Most of them I'd known since my family moved to town almost five years ago. Plattsfield, New York, is not very big.

"I don't see a teacher," Clive said. "Maybe Mrs.

Winklebottom couldn't find anybody. I heard no one wants to do it. They've all got too many kids and extra jobs."

Squeals and high fives—"Hey!" "Hey!" "Hello!" I mean, all of us had seen each other, like, half an hour before, but we did the long-lost friend thing anyway. Drama geeks, right?

And with or without a director, we were excited to be getting started.

I guess because of Mrs. Winklebottom—Mrs. Winklebottom and her money—the Plattsfield-Winklebottom Memorial Sixth-Grade Play is a big deal. I'm going to bet everyone in the auditorium that day went to it with their families every year. Clive's big sister, Gillian, had acted in it when we were in third grade. Lila Moseley's and Eddie Muir's moms had been in it when they were kids. Maybe other kids' parents had too.

Not my parents, though. My family's not from here, and I wasn't born here. Around Plattsfield, that makes me strange, an outsider.

Meanwhile, everybody at rehearsal was talking about who the new director would be.

"Mrs. Winklebottom is going to direct us *herself*. I have it on *good authority*," said Emma Jessel.

“What does that even mean—*good authority*?” asked Sarah Monti.

Emma rolled her eyes the way she does. “Well, if *you* don’t know, far be it from *me* to tell you.” Emma was standing right next to me. Her loud voice rang in my ear, and I took a step away.

“She means she heard it somewhere,” Clive told Sarah. Clive, even if he called me a snark, is actually one of the nicer people in sixth grade.

“Well, so what? Because I heard—on *authority*—that Mr. Irving is going to do it, only he’ll have to bring his new baby, so half the time he’ll be”—Sarah made a face—“*changing diapers*.”

Brianna Larkin said, “This is going to be a disaster.”

Madeline Howard said, “I love babies.”

Diego Arcati said, “You guys! You guys! *I know*—”

But whatever he knew, we didn’t find out. From onstage came the hissing of the ropes raising the curtain, and—like a well-trained audience—we went silent. There must’ve been someone in the tech booth because—*buzz*—the stage lights came up, and there stood Mrs. Winklebottom herself.

“*See?*” Emma said.

“*Shhhh!*” everybody told her.

“Greetings, sixth graders!” Mrs. Winklebottom

is the kind of person you can’t believe was ever young. You can’t believe she will ever die. She is and always was Mrs. Winklebottom. She wears and always wore either a red, a purple, or a blue dress—red that day—matching jewels in her ears, and heeled, uncomfortable-looking shoes with buckles.

“By now you have all heard the unfortunate news about dear Miss Magnus’s encounter with a taxi,” Mrs. Winklebottom continued. “But, as the Bard said, fear not! I have arranged for someone else to take over directing duties for this year’s production. With your permission, I would like to introduce your new director now.”

Well-trained audience, right? We kids clapped and whistled. From the wings strolled Mr. Nate Newton, the gym teacher, wearing headphones, muttering and looking into the great faraway.

In other words, he was on his phone.

“*Coach Fig!*” Diego hollered.

“Hello? What was that?” Mrs. Winklebottom squinted.

We sat in silence, stunned silence I mean. Mr. Newton—known as Coach Fig—is one of those bulgy kind of guys, with some bulges being muscle and others probably fat. He’s a good guy, popular, with six

kids of his own he talks about all the time. Besides knowing the rules to every sport, he doesn't blame you for being a klutz, doesn't favor the superstar athletes either.

But did he know downstage from upstage? Unlikely.

"Hang on a mo, so sorry," he said to whoever he had on the phone. Then he looked around, oriented himself in real life. "Hey, you guys. Hey, Mrs. Winklebottom. This *Hamlet* play is gonna be great, you know what? I mean, we are gonna *dominate!*"

"Excuse me! Mrs. Winklebottom?"

"Is that Mia Duffy addressing me?" Mrs. Winklebottom said. "With the lights, you're a bit of a blur."

"Mrs. Winklebottom," said Mia, "first, can I just say thank you for all you've done for the performing arts?"

"You're quite welcome, I'm sure," Mrs. Winklebottom said. "Now"—she looked at her watch—"if you don't mind, I have—"

"I'm not done," Mia said.

"Oh," said Mrs. Winklebottom.

"What I'd like to know, with all due respect, is this: What exactly is Coach Newton's theatrical background?"

Mia Duffy's family are neighbors of Mrs. Winklebottom. They live on the nicest street in Plattsfield, the one that overlooks the lake and has all the big houses, which is why, I'm guessing, she thought she could be rude like that. Usually I think Mia Duffy is a pain, but that day I was grateful.

Mrs. Winklebottom straightened her shoulders and her frown. "Well, Mia, dear, I think I'll allow the coach himself to answer."

Coach Fig had returned to his call, but something alerted him to look up, first at Mrs. Winklebottom, then at us. "I'm just happy to be here," he said. "And I want to thank all the people who made it possible. Now, who else is ready for kickoff?"

"Heck yeah!" said Diego, who has a reputation for being outrageous, mostly meaning he dresses funny. Also he is super enthusiastic. According to Clive, you have to love the kid or else you'd be tempted to punch him.

Mrs. Winklebottom took a deep breath and let it out. "I know we all appreciate Mr. Newton's dedication," she said. "Now on to practical matters. Rehearsal schedules will be available before you leave this afternoon. Scripts will be here tomorrow for pickup so you can study before auditions on