

PRAISE FOR SHIRA & ESTHER'S DOUBLE DREAM DEBUT

"Anna E. Jordan's debut novel has everything: a storybook setting, a classic setup, and not one but two heroines on a daring and dramatic dual mission to achieve their dreams. The charming cast of supporting characters are the cherries on the top (or, more accurately, pickles on the side) of a dish that will leave readers very satisfied."

**—ERICA S. PERL, NATIONAL JEWISH BOOK AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF
ALL THREE STOOGES**

"This book is pure magic—set in a world you'll want to live in forever and filled with characters that are brimming with joy. The path to following Shira and Esther's dreams is filled with challenging twists and turns, but they navigate it all with big hearts and even bigger courage. A delightful debut all around!"

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"Completely fresh and absolutely charming."

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SHIRA & ESTHER'S
**DOUBLE DREAM
DEBUT**



BY ANNA E. JORDAN



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HAVE I GOT A STORY FOR YOU.

Shira & Esther's Double Dream Debut by Anna E. Jordan

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OVERTURE



HOUSE ON A HILL

DID YOU EVER NOTICE that when people build a town, they put the most important things on a hill? It's true. Where are your universities? Where do the bosses live? Where are the fancy gardens? On a hill. Am I right? Of course I'm right. So it is in the town of Idylldale.

Now, if there's one thing I know, it's sandwiches, and if I were to make an Idylldale sandwich, I'd start with two thick slices of humor spread with a thin layer of history. Next, alternate a quarter-pound desire with some faith. Grind a generous amount of wonder on top and add a pinch of woe . . . delicious!

So where is Idylldale? How do you get there? Ah, my children, *mayne kinder*, hear that *clang*? That's the Idylldale trolley now. Drop this token in the collector, and take a seat. We'll take a tour. First stop, the theater—the Heights.

“The Heights” is actually the lowest place in town. That's ironic, isn't it? Look, just beyond it, there are the railroad tracks, and beyond them, the laborers and their families who live and work in the shadow of the textile mill.

But here at the Heights the awning lights are a beacon. *Come to me*, the lights say. *Bask in my warmth. For inside, there will be music, bright costumes, and laughter. We speak your language; we are your heritage.* And the people of Idylldale come.

The smell of hot buttered popcorn wafts over the puppet matinee ticket line. Children in short pants and caps or dresses and bows wait with their parents to laugh together at the matinee. At night, a grown-up audience fills the Heights when the Yiddish theater troupe performs. What's Yiddish? Imagine that you combined the languages of Eastern Europe and Germany in a pot with Hebrew and let it

simmer. That warm chicken soup of a language would be Yiddish.

For years, the people of Idylldale watched Yiddish stories and sang Yiddish songs they heard at the Heights. On Saturday nights, after an otherwise drab week, the workers and bosses would rub shoulders at the Heights. They all wore what the actors in the troupe deemed fashionable. They even collected and traded cards with the actors' pictures. And if the actors made it big in New York City? *Oy gevalt*, in Idylldale, it was as if the actors were royalty!

But now, people from both sides of the railroad tracks come to the theater less and watch their televisions more. Many of the children no longer understand Yiddish. Audiences who used to go to the Heights now see their shows at Scheinfeld's. What is Scheinfeld's? Hold your horses, we're on our way.

The town hall, hospital, and Trolley Transfer Station anchor the center of Idylldale where, on street corners, men with aprons rearrange their fruits and vegetables.

On side streets, homes are shoved together like third-class travelers. Fire escapes crisscross the fronts of brick

apartment buildings, and carved brownstone leaves accent the roofs and doors of skinny row houses.

Hang on to the hand straps, now, this bridge over the Idylldale River is bumpy. Up, up, up the hill we go!

Here, the houses have more room to breathe. The trees spread their limbs, and the pavement gives way to an emerald carpet. Look! It's Scheinfeld's Resort and Cottages—a sprawling vacation oasis with bellboys and housekeepers scurrying back and forth to fill the needs of each well-to-do guest.

You see the shuffleboard area? The tennis courts? The spa? Grown-ups at the gazebo learn fancy dances with names like waltz, foxtrot, and tango. At oak-shaded picnic tables, children knot string bracelets and paint macaroni necklaces. The *tumbler*, the funmaker, starts a cannonball contest to make the guests laugh and get them swimming. There's a bellboy carrying luggage for a celebrity from television who will perform in the big Thursday night show.

Scheinfeld's is on the hill. But it's not at the tippy-top of the hill. Why?

Because for some folks here, there is still higher to go. On Friday night and Saturday morning, the guests at Scheinfeld's who want to be closest to God walk along a tree-lined path, up a wide wooden staircase to Idylldale's most important house—the synagogue, where Stars of David decorate circular windows in its dome.

Right now, no one is at the synagogue on the hill because its religious leader, Rabbi Epstein, is at the hospital. He paces back and forth in the waiting room with Mrs. Epstein's brother. Why are they pacing? They are waiting for Rabbi Epstein to become a father and for Mrs. Epstein's brother to become an uncle. That's right, Mrs. Epstein is having a baby!

And here she is! The baby is rosy cheeked with a small tuft of dark hair on her *keppie*. *Keppie* rhymes with *peppy* and is Yiddish mixed with English for “head.” Isn't that a cute word? As cute as a baby's *keppie*. She is *so* beautiful that the nurse has Papa, Mama, and Uncle Coop all crowd around the bed to take a picture. *Pop!* goes the flash. Boy, oh boy, has that baby got lungs! Listen to her wail.

And she's not the only one wailing! Right down the hall from Mrs. Epstein's hospital room is Fanny Rosenbaum's room. No one calls her Miss Rosenbaum, though. They call her by her stage name: Red Hot Fanny.

There's no Mr. Red Hot Fanny. There *was* a man. A nice traveling salesman, Mel, who fell in love with Fanny as soon as he saw her on the stage at the Heights. Fanny loved him too—body and soul. But when fame came calling in the form of a national television tour, she told him it was over. Fanny's one true love was the stage. And Mel? He was gone, heartbroken, before she could tell him about this new bundle of joy.

Fanny has always said, "For a little love, you pay all your life," and she's paying now. Fanny wails and pushes and pushes and wails and out comes a second baby this night in Idylldale.

The rabbi and Mrs. Epstein name the first baby, the one with strong lungs and dark hair on her *keppie*, Shira, which means "song." Rabbi Epstein hopes that Shira will sing next to him on the *bima* in his synagogue on the hill. Shira drinks her mother's milk this night as if there's no tomorrow—and

there won't be. Oh, don't worry. Shira will be fine, but Mrs. Epstein will die by sunrise.

Red Hot Fanny, on the other hand, will be strong as an ox tomorrow, as will her baby. Did I mention that her baby had dark hair on her *keppie* too? I didn't? Well sue me; I'm telling you now. Fanny's baby had dark hair the same as Shira and a star-shaped mole on her neck that was all her own. But while Shira wails, Fanny's baby lets out the gentlest cry. Fanny is sure that the baby will be a star and perform beside her on the stage at the Heights. And so Fanny names her child Esther, a star of the Jewish people.

Oy vey. Are those parents wrong.

ACT I



CHAPTER ONE THE HEIGHTS

ON SATURDAY NIGHT, THE Sabbath, or the Jewish day of rest, is over. When does night begin? Some people in Idylldale say it's when three stars shine in the sky. These families separate the day of rest, Shabbat in Hebrew or Shabbos in Yiddish, from the workweek by lighting braided candles, smelling sweet spices, drinking wine, and saying prayers.

For others in Idylldale, night is as soon as the bright lights of the Heights flicker and blaze.

To ride the trolley, you need a token; to get into the Heights, you need a ticket. And who takes your ticket? Levi,

the *shtarker*, or strong man, stands at the polished brass doors each Saturday evening to make sure that everyone has a ticket and that everyone in the audience conducts themselves in a respectable manner. Now, Levi doesn't ask for a ticket or even look up from his newspaper as Benny Bell runs past, because Benny is theater family.

A newspaper flaps in Benny's hand as he runs through the brass doors, down the tattered red carpet, and leaps to the stage—a feat his fourteen-year-old body can now manage. He halts for a moment, as he always does, to wish on the ceiling mural of clouds the color of salmon. He hopes that someday he might be featured on a stage like this one, with its ornate carved and gilded proscenium. He pushes past the red velvet curtains calling, "Esther?" but no one is backstage. Passing ladders and lights and jogging down the stairs to the dressing rooms, he calls again, "Esther? Don't let Fanny see the evening paper." After all the yelling, his staccato knock is irrelevant. The door opens enough for Benny to see Esther but not beyond.

"Don't let—" he whispers.

"Too late. She's already seen it."

You remember Esther, yes? Daughter of Red Hot Fanny? Gentle voice? Come, come, if she were still a baby, how could she open a door? She's twelve now, almost thirteen, and the dark tuft of hair on her *keppie* reaches the middle of her back. At this very minute her long hair is not flowing. It's twisted and looped and fastened with a pencil in such a way that it doesn't fall into her eyes. Like a shield, she grasps a prayer book to her heart. Her shoulders and the corners of her mouth droop. Benny wishes he could have gotten to her before Fanny saw the announcement. He mouths, *I'm sorry*, but she just shrugs, defeated.

"Can I come in? Is Fanny decent?"

"Benny, darling. I'm never decent. That's why they call me Red Hot."

Esther looks to the heavens and shakes her head. "Mother, please. Close your robe."

Fanny tightens the belt on her sage-colored silk robe, hiding the tiny, feathered costume underneath. "You sure didn't get your modesty from me," she says, which just gets another eye roll from Esther.

"Come in, Benny." Esther opens the door wider.