

"As *Upstaged* shows so brilliantly, even the blaring of seventy-six trombones is not as glorious as the unfolding of a soul out into the world." —**Gary D. Schmidt**,

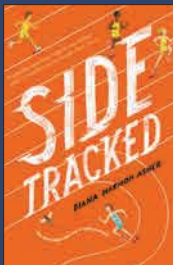
two-time Newbery Honor winner

Shira Gordon is painfully shy. She rarely speaks and blushes at everything. And yet, when she's alone in her room, she'll sing and dance, dreaming she were different. So when her best friend forces her to audition for their school's production of *The Music Man*, she's mostly hoping the play will get canceled . . . but a tiny part of her hopes she'll get in.

And she does. As a member of the barbershop quartet. Playing a dude with a mustache is not exactly her dream role, but Shira is surprised by how much she loves rehearsing with her quirky new friends. When her teacher asks her to understudy the lead role, Marian the Librarian, she reluctantly accepts.

It's not easy to understudy Monica Manley, an eighth-grade diva who *will not* be upstaged. And things get even more complicated when a mysterious prankster starts playing tricks on Monica and Shira's crush joins the cast. But something keeps Shira going, and it might just be Marian herself. Sure, Marian is a leading lady, but she's also misunderstood, lonely . . . and shy. And if a star can be shy, then maybe, just maybe, a shy person can be a star.

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BY DIANA HARMON
ASHER

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Chapter 1

Pilgrim Feet

The front hallway of Hedgebrook Middle

School has that slippery, early morning shine. I know by the end of the day it'll be back to its usual self, gray and grubby, marked up with black sneaker skids and gum pies. But now it's still polished and new and dotted with sunny spotlights. I weave a path around them, zigzagging my way to Mr. Hoover's Music Appreciation class.

Cassie's already waiting in the doorway, bouncing on her toes and waving me in. She has a new streak in her hair, bright blue to match her glasses. "Come on, Shira! The announcement, remember?"

Of course I remember. Mr. Hoover is really into announcements, and he's already let it slip that today's announcement is going to be about the school musical.

There's no reason why I should feel nervous. I have first-period math and Ms. Jablonski's evil pop quiz safely behind me. And I want to hear about the musical. I do. But something's making me hover in the doorway, until finally

Cassie has to practically yank me off my feet and pull me inside. We plop down in the third row.

“I *cain’t* wait,” Cassie says, putting on the goofy twang the kids used in last year’s musical. “I want to get dressed up all *purty*.”

“And dance with a *feller*,” I say, then I throw in, “*Yeehaw*.”

To be honest, it wasn’t the best production in history. A cardboard cutout horse crashed down, barely missing the leading lady. And at the end, somebody stepped on the kid playing a farmhand who was supposed to be dead (“daid”). He screamed—much louder than a dead person ever would. It pretty much killed the drama.

Still, all the girls looked nice in their fluffy skirts, and the boys got to act all country, in their cowboy boots and hats. And, I admit, I wondered how it would feel to be up there in a costume, holding hands, singing, and taking a bow.

Mr. Hoover claps his hands for quiet. He’s looking spiffy, as always, in a light green striped button-down shirt, pressed and tucked neatly into his khaki pants.

“Okay,” he calls out. “Settle down now, people. I have an announcement!”

A cry of “whoo-whoo” comes from the other side of the room. I poke Cassie in the ribs.

“So, who came to see last year’s musical?” asks Mr. Hoover.

Cassie and I raise our hands high, then look around

and lower them slowly. We're either the only two who went, or the only two uncool enough to admit it.

"Well, it was amazing," Mr. Hoover continues. "And this year's is going to be just as great. Now, enough suspense," he says, as if we're all on the edges of our seats. "I'm happy to announce—that this year—our school musical—will be—*The Music Man!*"

Cassie and I look at each other, not sure if this is good news or bad.

"This is such a great show. It's about a lovable con man and a small-town librarian . . ."

A drawn-out yawn comes from somewhere, and in the row behind us, a boy named Eric starts manufacturing a lineup of spitballs. The excitement is dwindling fast.

"Now, wait a minute!" calls out Mr. Hoover. "Keep listening. Because this year, we're holding auditions right here in music class!"

"Whuh?" says somebody, eloquently speaking for all of us.

"We'll still have after-school auditions, but I'm opening up our class today to anyone who wants to sing."

"Wait," says Cassie. "Now?"

"Yes!" answers Mr. Hoover, looking delighted. "And I *know* you're not ready. But that's the thing! There's no time to get nervous, no time to talk yourself out of it. I want everyone to take a chance. Even if you've never been in a show. Even if you're really, really shy."

When he says that last part, I swear he's looking right at me.

"What do we sing?" asks a girl named Frankie.

"Anything! 'My Country 'Tis of Thee' or 'America the Beautiful,' or . . . 'Uptown Funk' . . ." He pauses, clearly expecting a laugh, but there's silence. "Then come by Thursday after school to read a few lines, and you're done!"

Mr. Hoover sits down at the piano and waves an arm. "So, line up and let's go!"

Two boys in front of me start pushing each other, racing to hide under their chairs. Eric drops his spitballs and bolts dramatically for the door.

I sit still in my seat.

"Come on," says Cassie. "Let's get in line."

"Are you *kidding*?" I answer.

"Why not? You're in chorus. You have a nice voice."

"That's different. You don't have to audition for chorus."

"You know, when he said that shy part, he was looking right at—"

"I know," I snap.

"Listen," says Cassie, "we can't possibly be worse than that."

She's talking about Kevin Clancy. He's the kid who always wants to go first—scoliosis screening, hearing test, it doesn't matter. He's singing, "My Country 'Tis of Thee." At least I think that's what it is.

Mr. Hoover congratulates Kevin. "See?" he says. "It's easy." A few more kids start to get in line.

Cassie is standing, hands on hips. "What happened to this being the year you were going to stop being Shy Shira? The year you were going to stop blushing at every little thing?"

I take this as a reminder not to share secret goals with anyone, even if they are your best friend.

"We can go after school," I mumble.

"You know you won't," she says, and she's right. I won't. "Look, if you don't audition, I won't, either. Then neither of us will be in the show, and I'll never let you forget it. Ever."

I know she's not bluffing. She'll blame me, forever.

So, when she pulls me up out of my chair, I let her, even though my knees are shaking, and I feel like I might end up "daid" on the music room floor. And when she goes to the back of the line, I stand behind her, holding on to the thought that Cassie will go first, then I can bail.

Meanwhile, a group of boys cracks up through "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain," and then a girl starts "My Heart Will Go On," but she loses her way and ends up in "I Will Always Love You." Somehow, Mr. Hoover knows to go along with her.

I'm fourth in line and it feels like feeding time for the butterflies in my stomach.

None of this makes sense. The kids who get the good parts are the ones who take acting lessons and dance class and go to Rising Starz Music Camp. The outgoing kids, the ones with confidence. Not kids like Cassie and me.

I stare at the floor, the singing and giggling a blur around me. But when I look up, Cassie isn't in front of me anymore. She's singing an enthusiastic and slightly off-pitch verse of "Oh My Darling Clementine." And then, before I can think of where to hide, it's my turn.

"'America the Beautiful'?" Mr. Hoover suggests, and before I can say no, please no, he plays a note and smiles.

Not every single kid is staring at me, but plenty are. I do a bobblehead move to catch the sweat droplet that's trickling down the back of my neck, but it's no use. That one's just the trailblazer. I know another is right behind it, and another and another.

I could burst into tears and run. But nothing marks you for life like crying in school, unless it's about a crush, or a breakup, or a B-minus, all subjects that have suddenly become cool to cry about this year. The only way out of this seems to be to sing and get it over with. But I promise myself, if I do this, if I get through this moment, then I'll never sing in front of anyone ever again. Because there are things that are Shira and things that are not Shira, and this is not a Shira thing.

My mouth has gone dry. I'm not sure if I'm breathing.

There's sweat behind my knees. I didn't even know knees could sweat.

It seems like Mr. Hoover has been holding that note forever. It hangs there, waiting for me. Mr. Hoover gives me a nod and plays it again. And finally, I start.

"Oh beautiful, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain." I hear my voice, and it surprises me. Even though I'm shaking all over, it's not a disaster—yet. *"For purple mountain majesties . . ."* I make sure to say "mountain" and not "mountains," because Mr. Hoover always makes a huge deal that that's the right way. *" . . . above the fruited plain."*

Something about the singing itself, the physical feeling of it, calms me down. It feels like taking a long stroke in a pool, feeling yourself propelled forward, in a smooth space where nobody can bother you. I sing, *"America, America,"* a little louder, because it feels good, the line of it, letting my voice free to go up there, and then come down softer on *"God shed his grace on thee."* One more line, one more line and I'll be done. *"And crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea."*

I look at Mr. Hoover, and for a second I'm afraid he's going to want me to go on, to sing the second verse, which would be a disaster because I don't know all the words, just something about "pilgrim feet," which always makes me think of barefoot Puritans with big black hats and goofy cartoon toes.

But instead, he just drops his hands from the piano keys into his lap and smiles wide. “Thank you, Shira,” he says. The room is quiet, and everyone is staring at me. I want to just run out of here, down the street, back home, up the stairs to my room, and never come out. I feel like I’ve just read the most embarrassing diary page ever written out loud to everybody. A diary I didn’t even remember writing.

I run toward the door. I get as far as the second row, where my foot gets caught in a backpack strap. I manage to pull, drag, hop my way free and out to the hall, with the door crashing closed behind me. Then I drop down onto the floor, my back to the metal of somebody’s locker, which I swear is rattling along to the pounding of my heart.

Inside, I can hear Mr. Hoover start up “The Star-Spangled Banner.” And I listen as Dylan Scheiner butchers it, in at least three different keys.