



It's 2002. In the aftermath of the twin towers—and the death of her beloved grandmother—Shirli Berman is intent on moving forward. The best singer in her junior high, she auditions for the lead role in *Fiddler on the Roof*, but is crushed to learn that she's been given the part of the old Jewish mother rather than the coveted part of the sister. But there is an upside: her “husband” is none other than Ben Morgan, the cutest and most popular boy in the school.

Deciding to throw herself into the role, she rummages in her grandfather's attic for some props. There, she discovers an old violin in the corner—strange, since her Zayde doesn't seem to like music, and has never even been to any of her recitals. Showing it to her grandfather unleashes an anger in him she has never seen before, and while she is frightened of what it might mean, Shirli keeps trying to connect with her Zayde and discover the awful reason behind his anger. Until finally, a long-kept family secret spills out, and Shirli learns the true power of music, both terrible and wonderful.

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CHAPTER ONE

The bell sounded. People jumped to their feet and gathered their things.

“And don’t forget there’s a unit test on Friday!” Mr. Herman, our math teacher, called out over the noise.

A collective groan rose up from the class. Some people started to argue for a postponement till Monday to give them more time to study. On any other day I would have stuck around and joined in the argument. But not today. Today I needed to get out of the classroom as fast as I could. I had something more important to think about than a math test. I threw my books into my bag and joined the crowd funneling out of the room. I’d gone only a few steps when I almost bumped into Natasha, my best friend. She flashed me a big smile. Smiling was the last thing on my mind.

“Are you ready, Shirli?” Natasha asked.

“No!”

“We don’t have to go,” she said. “We could go to the mall, get a soda instead, maybe buy something.”

“And just not look at the cast list?” I asked.

“It’ll still be there tomorrow.”

“Tash, I’ve waited all week. Do you really think I can wait another day?”

She flashed that smile again. “Patience is a virtue.”

“This coming from *you*, the least patient person I know?” I asked.

“Okay, you’re right, and I was just joking. Let’s go and look.”

The hallway was packed, and it felt as if we were salmon fighting our way upstream. We were the largest junior high in New Jersey, but the building didn’t seem big enough to hold all 1,600 of us who called this place our home away from home. We squirmed and shuffled our way forward.

“You know you have nothing to worry about,” Natasha said.

“Thanks. Neither do you.”

“Oh, I’m not worried, Shirli. You know that.”

Natasha and I had been friends, and pretty much inseparable, since third grade—like two peas in a pod, or peanut butter and jam. But there was a big difference between us. Natasha had never been in a school show before. In fact, she had only tried out this time because I’d practically dragged her to the auditions. It really didn’t matter to her whether she got a part or

not. The problem was that for me it mattered way too much.

“Ms. Ramsey really likes you,” she pointed out. I knew she was trying to reassure me.

“She likes everybody,” I said.

“It’s more than that. I think she sees herself when she looks at you.”

I laughed. “Like she’s looking in some sort of fun-house mirror?”

Ms. Ramsey was our drama teacher. She was in her early thirties but looked a lot younger. She was blond and slim and moved in this slinky, smooth way like someone who’d had years of dance training. We couldn’t have been more different in appearance, but I guess I had the same way of moving, thanks to my own dance classes.

“I didn’t mean the way you two look,” Natasha continued. “Ms. Ramsey is *so* beautiful.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Come on, you know what I mean. You’re really pretty, but not like her. You look more like me!”

Well, true, we did look a lot alike, even though my family was eastern European and Jewish, and Natasha’s was Portuguese and Catholic. But where the heck was this going?

“I mean she sees you as being talented like her.”

“Thanks, Tash.” Now *that* was a compliment.

Before becoming a drama teacher, Ms. Ramsey had been in some Off-Broadway productions. She had great

stories to tell, like the time she auditioned for Harold Prince, one of the greatest Broadway directors of all time. Or the time she met Kristin Chenoweth in an audition and got to ask her what it felt like to win a Tony Award for her role in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. Ms. Ramsey tossed those stories out like pieces of confetti and I grabbed each one of them. She could act, she could dance, and she could sing—a real triple threat. It was great to have her here teaching us. And awful at the same time. If somebody with that much talent couldn't make it as a professional actor and ended up teaching junior high school drama, what chance did anybody have? What chance did I have? Especially if I didn't get the part today.

My dream was to perform in front of thousands of people. Something always happened to me when I stepped in front of an audience. Sure, I was nervous. Every performer I'd ever talked to got butterflies—some worse than others. But for me, the nerves would fade and a rush of excitement would take over—like being at a fireworks display, or being a *part* of the fireworks. The first time I felt that, I knew I wanted to be a performer. My father always joked that I could dance and sing before I could walk or talk. I had been taking dance classes, singing lessons, and piano lessons for as long I could remember. And for the last two years I'd added acting lessons as well.

My parents had been so encouraging, not just paying

for everything and driving me to lessons and competitions and recitals and plays, but always being there. They are the best. They really are. Still, I was pretty sure that they would have been happier if I'd been leaning toward something a little more traditional in terms of career. My brother Adam, who's eight years older than me, was following in my mom's footsteps and was in pre-med at Rider University. My father was an accountant. He'd taken over his father's—my Zayde's—business in Manhattan. But my father was also the musical one in the family. He said he'd always wanted to learn an instrument, but my grandfather had said no. Dad claimed he was the only Jewish kid on the planet whose parents hadn't put him into violin or piano lessons. And he didn't have a bad voice—well, he didn't have a bad *untrained* voice. I guess I got the musical bug from him.

We turned down the hall toward the Drama department. The cast list was supposed to be posted on the wall outside the auditorium. Up ahead I saw a crowd gathered around the bulletin board. I came to a dead stop, my heart pounding out of control.

“Okay, Shirli, take a deep breath and relax,” Natasha said.

“Easy for you to say!”

We joined the crowd at the back. So many people had tried out. Some schools were football schools. Some were basketball schools. Ours was a musical school. Of

course, we had all those sports as well, but we were known as the junior high that put on big musicals. We had a great reputation, and that was one of the reasons why Ms. Ramsey had come to teach here.

Last year we had put on *A Chorus Line*. Of course, I didn't get one of the leads, but I did end up with a featured spot, which was pretty amazing for a student in seventh grade. And I'd also ended up being the understudy for two of the supporting roles. I didn't actually get the chance to play either part during the run, but people who heard me sing in rehearsals said I was better than the people who did perform. This year's production was going to be *Fiddler on the Roof*. And the part I wanted was Hodel, one of the daughters. Not only did she sing "Matchmaker, Matchmaker" in the sisters' trio, but she had the most beautiful, haunting solo in the whole production as far as I was concerned—a song called "Far From the Home I Love." Yup, Hodel was the part I was holding my breath for.

As we shuffled forward I watched the people in front. Some would look at the list and come away looking pretty upset, while others jumped up and down and shrieked. With each joyful scream I knew a part was gone. And with each disappointed face I knew another person had been eliminated from the competition for the remaining roles. Was it wrong that I was secretly happy to see those faces? Not that anybody could tell what I was thinking or feeling.

We got closer to the front, closer to the list. I started to think that I understood what it would be like to walk along the corridor on death row, moving toward my execution. Okay, a little dramatic, but I was *more* than a little dramatic.

Mohammed let out a yell—"I got a part!"—and pumped his fist in the air. I couldn't help but smile. Mohammed and I had acted together before, and he was talented. I wasn't surprised at all. He worked his way back through the crowd as people slapped him on the back and offered their congratulations.

"What part?" I asked as he came up to us.

"Perchik. I'm playing Perchik, the scholar!" he said excitedly, running a hand through his jet-black hair.

"You'll do a great job."

"Thanks, thanks so much, Shirli."

If I got the part of Hodel, then he would be playing my stage husband. It wasn't like there was any big romance between the two characters, just some hand-holding and staring into each other's eyes. I could do that. I liked Mohammed. He was funny, and pretty smart.

We were getting closer to the front, and I realized that I was now shoulder to shoulder with Mindi McConnell. We gave each other a perfunctory nod and a slight, polite smile. Mindi was a year older than me, but we were in the same dance company and we took private lessons from the same vocal coach. She used to be nice to me, but that was before we started

competing for the same dance parts, and my applause at recitals began to rival hers.

At our last recital she had sung a Destiny's Child song. *Why does everybody think they can do Beyoncé?* Well, really, she did a pretty good job. Me, I went old school and sang an Aretha Franklin classic, and the audience went wild. I even got a standing ovation. That was when Mindi pretty much stopped talking to me completely.

We both knew it was either going to be me or her to snag the part of Hodel. She was a better dancer, but I was a better singer—I'd proven that. The big advantage she had was that she was in ninth grade and I was in eighth. Our school had a tradition of giving the leading roles to seniors.

The crowd was moving forward again and suddenly we were right in front of the list. I felt sweat running down my sides and my hands were getting clammy. Tash was wrong. I did have a lot to worry about. Oh, why had Ms. Ramsey chosen *Fiddler on the Roof* when there were so many other incredible musicals with so many more good parts to choose from? I knew I shouldn't complain. At least we were getting to stage a show. In the first months following 9/11 some people said we shouldn't have a production at all this year. I wasn't sure if they thought it was disrespectful or because they didn't think large groups of kids should be together in the same place—like we made too good a target.

It had been almost five months since the attack now, since the towers had fallen. In some ways it seemed like yesterday. In others, like it was forever ago, or, in a way, as if it had never happened at all. Then you'd turn on the TV and see people still cleaning up at Ground Zero—cranes loading dump trucks taking away concrete and tangled metal beams . . . and other things.

Most of the time I didn't really think about it much, but there was still an uneasiness in people. It hung in the air like the black smoke that had risen from the site. People wondered if things would ever be the same again. I guess that's what putting on the show was really about for us—trying to make things the same as they were before. In the end, our school had decided that the show would help us heal from the sadness of that terrible time.

Someone flipped the pages of the list and—

"I'm in the ensemble!" Natasha cried out, and then she added a delighted little shriek.

"Congratulations!" I was happy for her. I just wanted her to get to the sheet that showed the rest of the roles—including the one I was after.

Natasha lifted up the page and now the featured player roles came into view. First the lesser-known male roles, and then two female parts that, technically, I could have gotten—Hodel's youngest sisters. I let out the breath that I was holding, grateful and relieved not to see my name beside either role.

Somebody turned another page and more roles appeared, bigger ones, including Tzeitel and Chava—the two other sisters. My name was absent again. Those had been my safety spots—they also got to sing “Matchmaker”—but they had gone to other people.

That left only three major female roles. *Come on*, I prayed. *Somebody turn the page!* I could feel my heart pounding, and I started winding my long, curly hair around my fingers, a nervous habit.

And then I heard another shriek. I knew *that* voice. It was Mindi. She was jumping up and down like she had just won a Tony Award instead of some part in a junior high school musical. Her friends crowded around her and hugged her and added to the shrieks. That was when I saw her name beside the role—beside *my* role. Mindi had been given the part of Hodel—the daughter with the very best solo.

I felt numb. I wasn’t the lead. I wasn’t one of the lesser sister roles. I wasn’t in the ensemble. I was nothing. How could that possibly be?

“Shirli, you’re in! You got a lead!” Natasha screamed and threw her arms around me.

Had I read it wrong? I peered at the list again, and finally saw my name, Shirli Berman, come into focus.

“You’re Golde!” Natasha yelled. “You got a lead role!”

Golde! Golde was the mother, the wife of the male lead, Tevye—yes, technically she was also a lead. But while she sang in a couple of duets, she had no solo and

no real standout moment on stage. *I'm playing Mindi's mother. I'm playing everybody's mother. I'm playing an old Jewish woman who has no solo.*

Natasha was still squealing and jumping up and down. But I wasn't nearly as happy for me as she was.