SHINE!
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More Favorites by Chris Grabenstein

The Island of Dr. Libris

The Mr. Lemoncello’s Library Series
Escape from Mr. Lemoncello’s Library
Mr. Lemoncello’s Library Olympics
Mr. Lemoncello’s Great Library Race
Mr. Lemoncello’s All-Star Breakout Game

The Welcome to Wonderland Series
Home Sweet Motel
Beach Party Surf Monkey
Sandapalooza Shake-Up
Beach Battle Blowout

The Haunted Mystery Series
The Crossroads
The Demons’ Door
The Zombie Awakening
The Black Heart Crypt

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The I Funny series
The Jacky Ha-Ha series
The Max Einstein series
Pottymouth and Stoopid
The Treasure Hunters series
Word of Mouse
SHINE!

J.J. & Chris Grabenstein

illustrations by Leslie Mechanic

Random House New York
For two of the brightest stars in our life,
Ronna & Jordan Earnest

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Some people are meant to shine.
   Others are better off blending in.
   Me?
   I’m a blender. But tonight is one of the biggest nights ever for my dad, so I’m here to help.

   Dad’s singers are onstage at the Municipal Auditorium, waiting for the curtain to rise. I’m off in the wings, dressed in black, trying to disappear.

   My dad, Marcus Milly, is a music teacher at Fairview Middle School. His a cappella group has finally, for the first time in recorded history, by some sort of miracle, made it all the way to the biggest show in town: the finals of the Winter Sing-Off.
The place is packed. The local news crews are here, too, taping reports for their eleven o’clock broadcasts.

“The finals!” I hear the reporter from Channel 8 say into a camera. “You can’t get much closer to the big finish than that!”

Dad’s group sailed through the first two rounds with their mash-up of “Let It Snow” and “Winter Wonderland,” which, by the way, sounded even better on a stage sparkling with glittery spray-can snow. Now they just have to do one more song for the judges. And they’ll do it without instruments or even a piano because that’s what “a cappella” means. It’s all vocals and *schoop-schoops* and mouth noises.

I don’t go to Fairview. (I’m a seventh grader at Westside.) That’s a good thing.

Music is Dad’s life. And even though I’m related to the director, I don’t sing well enough to make the Fairview choir. Or *any* choir.

Because I can’t carry a tune in a lunch box.

At home, I don’t even sing in the shower.

And we definitely don’t do carpool karaoke.

Anyway, like I said, Dad has never come this close to winning the big countywide holiday a cappella contest, and I’ve never been more excited for him.

That’s why I volunteered to be his assistant and help out backstage. Dad and his singers are the main attraction. I’m just a moon orbiting their planet.
“This is it, Piper,” says Dad, his eyes twinkling with excitement.

“You’ve got this!” I tell him.

We fist-bump on it.

The curtain will go up for everybody’s final songs in seven minutes. I can see other choirs waiting in the wings. Some are in red-and-green outfits. Others in sparkling blue and silver. The backdrop is a row of Christmas trees flanked by a cardboard menorah and a Kwanzaa candle set.

Dad’s group is totally focused, doing their vocal warm-ups.

“Ab-oh-oo-ab-ab...”

They limber up their lips with a tongue twister.

“Red leather, yellow leather, red leather, yellow leather...”

Suddenly I hear a cough!

Dad twirls around. Now there’s panic in his eyes.

One dry throat in the soprano section could ruin everything! That’s exactly what happened at the Nationals last year. Dad and I watched it on YouTube. A coughing fit took down the top team in the country. (A girl up front was hacking so much during “Let It Go” that she sounded like a high-pitched Chihuahua.)

“Water, Piper,” Dad says. From the tremor in his voice, I can tell: he remembers that disaster, too.

“Room-temperature water!” I add, because my scientific
brain knows that room-temperature water is much better for vocal cords than cold or hot.

Cold water could actually hurt a singer’s voice—tighten the cords when they need to be loosened. You don’t want hot water, either, because it can cause your pharynx to swell slightly. You should also avoid dairy.

I take off, looking for a water dispenser with one of those hot taps for making tea, so I can quickly pour the perfect mix of hot and cold to achieve room temperature. On the far side of the stage, I think I see one.

It’s right behind a competing a cappella group.

But they’re not doing any last-minute vocal warm-ups. They’re too busy pointing, laughing, and making fun of Dad and his singers!
“Fairview Middle School shouldn’t even be allowed to enter a competition as important as this,” I hear one girl say. “They are such amateurs.”

She has her hand propped on her hip and is very huffy.

“It’s so close to the holidays—perhaps the judges were feeling charitable,” says a boy sarcastically. “’Tis the season, and all that.”

“Actually, Ainsley,” another girl says to the huffy one, “I think Fairview deserves to be in the finals. Their mash-up of ‘Let It Snow’ and ‘Winter Wonderland’ was amazing.”

“Are you kidding, Brooke? It was more like ‘Winter Blunderland’!”

Some of the other kids snicker. Brooke, the girl who
complimented Dad’s singers, drops her head a little and
slumps her shoulders.

The kids in this group look a lot slicker and more pol-
ished than Dad’s group. All the girls are wearing the exact
same plaid skirt, white blouse, and navy-blue blazer with
a fancy crest. The boys are in khaki pants, white shirts,
striped ties, and the same blazers.

Dad’s choir is in whatever white shirts, black pants, and
black shoes everybody could find. Dad, too. His boys are
wearing holiday ties. Dad’s features a very operatic Santa.

I tilt the twin taps on the water dispenser and check
my watch. It’s still five minutes to curtain. I have time to
eavesdrop.

“We are Chumley Prep,” boasts a boy. “We are the best,
no matter the endeavor.”

“Hear, hear,” says another boy.

Chumley Prep is the school over in the part of town
where there’s a country club with a golf course and where
all the homes look like palaces surrounded by gigantic oak
trees. Sometimes on Sundays Dad and I drive around over
there and gawk at the houses. Tuition to Chumley Prep
is superexpensive. That would explain why I don’t know
anybody who ever went there.

Except, of course, my mother.

Twenty-some years ago, she won a full music scholar-
ship and went to Chumley. My mom was basically the
opposite of me. Everything she touched sparkled. From
what I’ve heard, she never disappeared into the background. Ever since she was little, people called her a musical prodigy. She could sing, play the cello, and even juggle maracas. Seriously. I’ve seen pictures in her yearbooks. (I’m not sure how useful maraca juggling is—but still!)

“Did you see the shoes the Fairview director is wearing?” Ainsley sneers. “Can someone say ‘fashion mistake’? They’re not even dress shoes. They’re gym shoes! Black gym shoes—with white socks!”

Several of the Chumley singers chortle and snort.

I can’t stand hearing this girl making fun of my father on his big night. He’s been working to be here since forever. Who cares what kind of shoes and socks he’s wearing? I’m really, really proud of him. Mom would be, too.

But she’s not here.

More about that later.

I finish filling the water cup. I’m trying to muster up enough courage to give the Chumley Prep a cappella group a piece of my mind.

Fortunately, I don’t have to.

Somebody slips out of the shadows to do it for me.
An elderly man in a blue blazer scampers out of the darkness.

He may be old, but he’s feisty. Judging from his outfit, I’d say he must also be a Chumley Prep booster or alum. He’s dressed just like the kids, only his blazer is kind of baggy, his khaki pants kind of saggy. I think he might be eighty years old.

“Children?” he demands. “Where is Mr. Glass? Where is your director?”

The kids ignore him. They keep chattering about what’s wrong with the other finalists.

He stamps his foot down, hard. “I said, where is Mr. Glass?”
Finally he has their attention.

“I sent him to go talk to the judges,” says Ainsley. “They’re letting Fairview Middle School go on first in the final round, and that, sir, is one hundred percent unacceptable. We need to be the first group on that stage so we can set the bar so high no one will ever be able to top it!”

“Hear, hear,” says the boy who, if you ask me, says “hear, hear” too much.

The old man narrows his eyes and says what I’m thinking. “You, my friends, are not the center of this or any other known universe.”

Wow. He’s quoting Nellie DuMont Frissé, one of my favorite astronomers.

But the group from Chumley Prep isn’t as impressed as I am. Several kids roll their eyes when the man isn’t looking in their direction.

He takes a small step forward.

“Think hard about who you want to be, children,” he tells them. “Think very, very hard.”

The group is stunned silent.

For maybe two seconds.

“Who do I want to be?” says Ainsley. “How about a winner?”

Other members jump in and pile on.

“I want to be famous!”

“I want to be a person who goes to Yale and sings with the Whiffenpoofs!”
The old man shakes his head and walks away.
Me?
I race across the stage with my cup of room-temperature water. I need to make sure all of Dad’s singers are at their absolute best.
Because I’ve never wanted them to win a competition so much in my whole, entire life!
My new favorite song of all time?
“{A Merry Holiday Medley}”—snippets from thirty different holiday songs in four minutes (everything from “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town” to “Rocking Around the Christmas Tree” to “Kwanzaa Celebration” to “The Dreidel Song”) all done Pentatonix-style by twenty middle school kids.

That’s what Dad’s a cappella group did to win (for the first time ever) the Winter Sing-Off!

Woo-hoo!

They call the group onstage to take a bow. The judges give Dad a trophy. His singers present him with a dozen roses wrapped in green tissue paper and a bright red bow.
“Yay, Dad!” I shout from the wings.

He looks so happy. I swear he’s not seeing the Municipal Auditorium when he looks out at the crowd. In his mind, he’s on a Broadway stage, just like he’s always dreamed about. I clap till my hands hurt. Because I know Dad gave up that dream for me. He wanted to write musicals and conduct Broadway orchestras. But that’s a risky career with no guarantees. You need a ton of talent and lots of lucky breaks. Dad definitely has the talent. The lucky breaks? Not so much.

After Mom died, he had to find a steady job so he could take care of me. Winning the a cappella competition? For him, that’s even better than taking a bow on Broadway. Well, that’s what he tells me on the ride home, anyway.

The next night, we host a big party at our house to celebrate. All the a cappella kids are there, making up funny schoop-schoop songs about the punch. (They do an amazing four-part harmony on “Sherbet and ginger ale, don’t add any kale, ba-doop-ba-doo-ba-doo!”)

Teachers from Fairview and the principal drop by to toast Dad with eggnog and iced sugar cookies. A bunch of my friends from school and our neighbors come over, too. Did I mention there are sugar cookies?

“Your dad is, like, officially the best choir director in America!” says Hannah Schnell, who goes to Westside
with me. “Too bad this wasn’t the state competition.” She bites the head off a sparkly red reindeer.

Sometimes in big crowds, I need a break. It’s a “blender” thing. So while everybody pats each other on the back, I drift off to my bedroom to have a word with my mother.

Well, a photo of her, anyway.

She’s dressed in a black gown, cradling her cello and laughing with her head tossed back. The picture was taken the night my mother performed at the world-famous Carnegie Hall in New York City. Yes, she was that good on the cello.

“Everybody’s here to congratulate Dad,” I tell her. “They were so awesome last night at the concert. You should’ve heard them. Maybe you did. Anyway, they were amazing. You would’ve been so proud!”

Music was something my mom and dad loved almost as much as they loved each other.

So, yeah—sometimes I wish I could sing.

Or hum.