

LITTLE

Rhino

by RYAN HOWARD
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● BOOK FOUR ●
THE TALENT SHOW

SCHOLASTIC INC.

To those who build the confidence to believe in themselves.

—R.H. & K.H.



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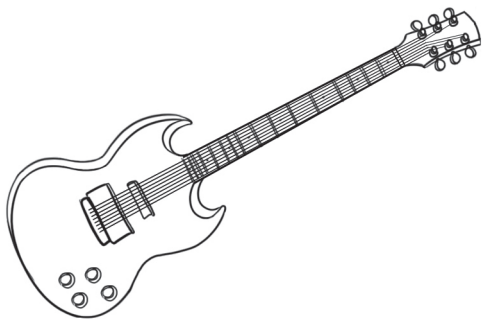
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• CHAPTER 1 •
Hidden Talents



Little Rhino watched the baseball sail high over the field. He'd hit it hard, but it was drifting toward the foul pole.

Stay fair, he thought. He felt a surge of energy as the ball flew past the pole, clearing the right-field fence in fair territory.

Home run!

Rhino smiled. This was batting practice, so he didn't run around the bases. But the excitement was there anyway.

"One more swing," said Coach Ray, who was pitching.

Rhino drew back his bat and waited. He'd hit three balls over the fence while at bat. Rhino had turned into a strong hitter during his first baseball season, and his confidence grew with every swing.

Just like a major leaguer, he thought.

The next pitch was straight down the middle and waist high. Rhino clobbered it, sending it streaking toward center field. It bounced near the top of the fence and rebounded onto the grass. Another solid hit.

Rhino walked to the dugout and went to bump fists with his best friend, Cooper. But instead Cooper raised a finger to his lips, signaling to Rhino to stay quiet. Cooper jutted his chin toward the only other player in the dugout.

Carlos sat alone on the bench, singing softly. His blue Mustangs cap was pulled low over his forehead.

Rhino raised his eyebrows. Carlos was one of the smallest players on the team, and he was one

of the quietest kids Rhino knew. But his singing voice was surprisingly good. Clear and tuneful.

Carlos was singing a hymn. But then he switched to another song, more upbeat and soulful.

Rhino laughed.

Carlos stopped singing and clamped his mouth shut.

“Don’t stop,” Rhino said. “You have a great voice. I was only laughing because I was surprised to hear it.”

Carlos looked down, but he smiled. “Forgot where I was for a minute,” he said.

“Sounded like you could have been on a stage!” Cooper said. “Are you a singer?”

“Sort of,” Carlos replied. “I’ve been in our church choir since kindergarten. But I’ve never sung a solo or anything like that.”

“You should be performing,” Rhino said. “The school talent show is coming up. You’d win with a voice like that!”

Carlos laughed and shook his head. “I’d have stage fright in a talent show. Wouldn’t be able to make a peep.”

“You need a backup band to give you confidence,” Cooper said. “I play drums. Do you play an instrument?”

Clang! A baseball rattled off the dugout fence, making them jump. Their teammate Dylan was at bat, and he’d lined a hard foul ball in their direction.

“Wake up in there!” Dylan called.

“Try hitting it straight!” Rhino yelled back.

Dylan grinned. “Just wanted to make sure you were paying attention,” he said.

They watched as Dylan smacked the next pitch toward the shortstop. Then Rhino and Cooper turned back to Carlos.

“I can play the keyboard,” Carlos said. “I have a little portable one.”

“We should do it!” Cooper said. “That would be so cool. We’d rock the place.”

Rhino nodded. “Think about it, Carlos. It could be a lot of fun!”

Carlos shrugged. “Maybe,” he muttered.

The idea sounded great to Rhino. He had another idea, too. His thinker told him not to do it, but he blurted it out anyway. “A rock band needs a guitarist,” he said. “I’m the man for that.” He held his baseball bat like a guitar and pretended to strum it.

“You play the guitar?” Carlos asked.

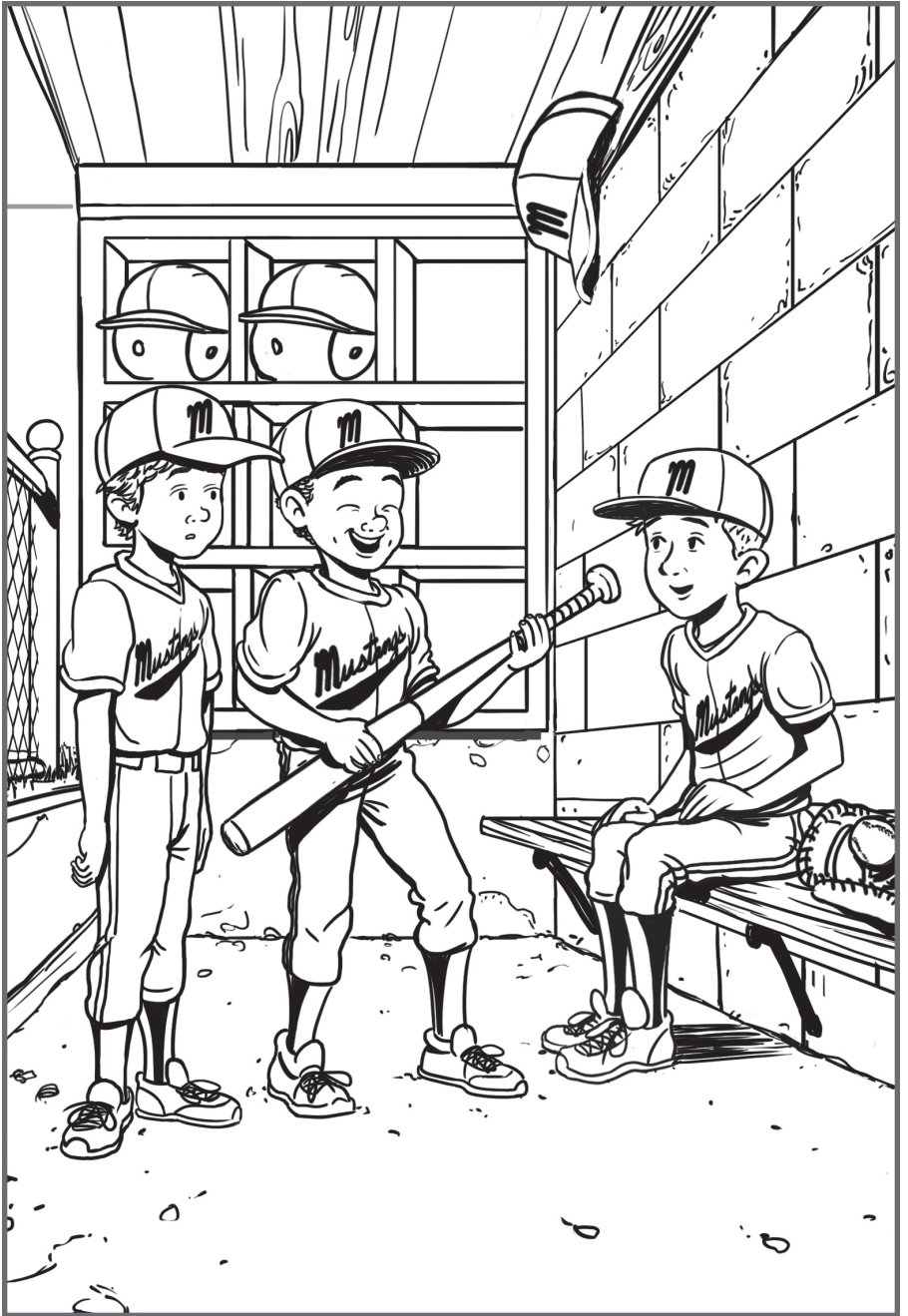
“Sure,” Rhino replied. He pictured himself on a stage in front of a large audience, rocking out with a hot guitar solo. All the fans were on their feet, dancing to the music.

“Wait,” Cooper said, looking puzzled. “Since when do you play the guitar, Rhino?”

“I’ve been playing for a while.”

“Really?” Cooper asked.

Rhino’s voice sounded a little less sure this time. “Yeah?” *Uh-oh. What am I saying?* Rhino’s thinker chimed in.



“You and I hang out together every day,” Cooper said. “I’ve never seen you play the guitar.”

Rhino looked away and his palms started to feel sweaty. “C.J.’s been teaching me. At night.”

That was somewhat true. Rhino’s older brother had been taking guitar lessons for a couple of months, and he’d shown Rhino how to play a few chords. But C.J. was no expert, and Rhino definitely wasn’t either.

Rhino had recently begun taking trombone lessons, so he was familiar with reading musical notes and he had a good sense of timing. When C.J. started taking lessons, Rhino remembered his brother saying that every band needs a guitarist. That’s why Rhino had jumped at the opportunity when Cooper and Carlos were talking about performing at the talent show, but Rhino knew that he shouldn’t have said he could play the guitar. There was no way he was ready to perform in a band.

Still, the idea seemed very cool. And the talent

show was two weeks away. If Rhino practiced every night, maybe he would be good enough by then.

Carlos slapped hands with Cooper. "I'll do it," he said. "We'll sign up for the talent show tomorrow at school. What will we call ourselves?"

"Mustang Rock!" Cooper said. "Starring Carlos Rivera."

Carlos blushed. "I was just trying to practice for Sunday's church service," he said softly. "I didn't expect to be discovered by a talent agent like Cooper."

"Speaking of practice, there's no time to waste," Cooper said. "How about Saturday after our game? We can practice at my house, since my drums are set up there."

"Sounds great," Rhino said. He gulped. What was he getting himself into?

"Should be interesting," Cooper said, smirking at Rhino. "We uncovered Carlos's hidden singing talent today. Guess we'll see your hidden guitar talent on Saturday afternoon."

Coach Ray called the players onto the field. The practice session was nearly over, but there was still time to work on fielding. Rhino grabbed his glove and hurried to first base.

I'm in a big mess now, Rhino's thinker told him. Cooper's suspicious, and he has a good reason to be. I only have two days to learn how to play the guitar!