



*In*  
*My Own*  
*Way*

*Kathy Buchanan*

RIVERBEND FRIENDS™

# My <sup>In</sup> Own Way

R I V E R B E N D F R I E N D S™

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## Chapter

# 1

I FILLED MY LUNCH TRAY with a cheeseburger and mashed potatoes (they were out of fries) and marched over to the table in the center of the cafeteria that my friends always laid claim to.

“So after that, I decided turnips weren’t romantic,” Tessa was saying.

I plunked my tray down with what I hoped was a good mix of angst and frustration. “I feel like I missed something.”

“She’s talking about her latest date with Alex,” explained Shay.

“They went to a farmers market,” added Izzy.

“Amelia, you okay?” asked Shay, her eyes studying me.

I released a slow sigh that was laden with emotion. Shay scooted to the right, and I wedged myself into the spot next to her. Tessa and Izzy sat across from us. A recent spat had created a chasm between Izzy and Shay, and I was glad they were now at least sitting at the same table.

“Skyla ‘Perfect-Barbie-Doll’ Barker is auditioning for the role of Ghost of Christmas Present,” I announced.

“Who’s she?” asked Tessa. Sweet Tessa . . . so focused and responsible she would make an eighty-year-old grandmother appear “in the know.”

Izzy came to the rescue. “Blonde, five-nine, legs that go up to her chin. She’s new this year. A senior.”

“And I’m assuming that the Ghost of Christmas Present is the part you’re hoping to get,” said Shay.

“The part is made for me,” I insisted. “Charles Dickens likely had me in mind when he created the character.”

“Wasn’t that like a hundred years ago?” said Izzy.

Tessa looked up from her salad. “1843.”

“Thank you, *Jeopardy!* champion,” I quipped. *Of course she’d know that.*

Tessa smiled back. “In that case, *what was 1843?*”

“Regardless of when he wrote it, I’m pretty sure Charlie hadn’t met you,” said Izzy.

“But he could envision me. Full of vitality and personality. A crown of red hair.” I pulled one of the close-cropped coils around my face and let it spring back. For the zillionth time, I wondered why I’d decided to get a pixie cut to audition for *Peter Pan*. My hair was finally growing out a bit, so I now sported a fashionable Raggedy Ann–style do. “And zaftig.”

“*Zaftig?* Is that, like, Jewish?” asked Izzy.

“No, it’s me.” I cited the definition. “‘*Zaftig*: having a full rounded figure.’”

My friends only stared at me.

“It’s better than *fat*,” I explained. “Or *obese* or *pudgy* or *pretty-plus*. I mean *full rounded* as a positive thing. Like *a full rounded personality* or *a full rounded experience*.”

“I think the term is *well-rounded*,” said Tessa.

Having smart friends was a curse.

“Well, I’m that, too, then,” I said. “All I’m saying is I was born to play this part.”

“Then why are you worried about Miss Legs Up To Her Chin?” asked Shay, tucking another bite of peanut butter sandwich into her mouth.

“Because one”—I cracked open my can of Dr Pepper—“Ms. Larkin gives preference to seniors. And two, Skyla pretty much always gets what she wants.”

The school year had only recently begun, but that fact had already been made clear. Skyla led an entourage of adoring fans who made a point of agreeing with her about everything. Unfortunately, she'd also made it clear that she wasn't a fan of mine.

“But three,” added Izzy, “you're far more talented.”

“Sometimes that's not enough,” I said. “And unfortunately, my body is as large as my range.”

Tessa lowered the fork that was halfway to her mouth. “That's the second time you mentioned your weight in this conversation.”

“And that's weird,” said Izzy. “You seem more comfortable in your skin than anyone I know.”

They were right—with *seem* being the operative word. Everything had changed that summer. “I'm fine with all my zaftiness,” I said, shifting my weight from one thigh to the other. “But I'm also aware the rest of the world isn't as evolved. The stage was made for the skinny.”

My friends looked at me apologetically, as though it were their fault. I hated the pity. I didn't need anyone to feel sorry for me. I changed the subject. “Izzy, have you decided which part you're going to audition for?”

“Mrs. Cratchit,” she announced. “I really hope I get the part. Being a pirate in *Peter Pan* was so fun that I'd like to try a little bigger role this time.”

Shay groaned, sounding like she could be dying. “Not *fun*, Izzy. *Torture*.”

“So you weren't able to convince Ms. Larkin to do *Les Misérables*?” asked Tessa. My friends knew *Les Miz* was my

favorite-of-all-time Broadway show even though I'd never had the chance to attend a live performance. "Haven't seen it, but I'll star in it," I'd always quip.

"*Les Miz* is a tough show for a high school to do," I said. "*A Christmas Carol* will still be good."

"I can't remember what it's about," Izzy said. "I think I saw the version with Scrooge McDuck when I was little."

"Do you ever watch anything that's not a cartoon or a superhero movie, Izzy?" asked Tessa.

"What would be the point of that?" Izzy said, shrugging.

I sighed dramatically. "Ebenezer Scrooge—who is a *person*, not a duck—is a pompous, greedy, stingy businessman who is shown Christmases past, present, and future. They reveal the meaninglessness of his life and eventually warm his frozen, decrepit soul."

"You sound like a walking Wikipedia page," said Shay.

Izzy snickered.

"It's a very serious, profound play," I argued, transitioning into storytelling mode. "Mr. Scrooge has suffered some terrible things in his life, and it's hardened his heart." I rearranged my face into an expression of painful sorrow. "But on Christmas Eve, he's visited by three ghosts—"

"Spooooooky," said Shay in a haunted voice.

"They're nice ghosts—at least the Ghosts of Christmas Past and Present are." My arms were now waving nearly as actively as the expressions were changing on my face. "The Ghost of Christmas Future is decidedly freaky." I stood up from the table and leaned in closer. "The ghosts make Scrooge visit his painful past, where he lost his one true love and his last bit of goodness along with her. And then the present, where he sees how those around him view him, as well as the pain they're in. And finally, they show him the dark, lonely place where he's headed"—my voice grew sinister, and I raised my hands goblinlike—"and his cold grave that no one visits."

"How sad," said Izzy.

“But because of all this”—I pointed my index finger into the air—“Ebenezer Scrooge changes his ways and lives out the rest of his days generously and surrounded by warmth and love.”

Izzy gave me a smattering of applause. And I noticed kids at other tables turning back toward their lunches after watching my mini performance. I retreated to my space, realizing how I’d expanded across the table.

“Well done,” said Shay. “Except now I’ve already seen the entire show and don’t need to go again.”

“You have to come watch me play the part of the Ghost of Christmas Present.”

“Of course.” Shay bit her lip. “Just don’t get too excited yet. Whatever you end up with—even if it’s being stage manager again—you’re going to be great at it.”

“Seriously?” I said, offended. “That’s how much you believe in me?”

“We’ve seen you get excited before,” said Tessa. “We know you’re a great actress, but we also know that doesn’t always mean you’ll get selected for a part.”

I absorbed myself in building a volcano with my mashed potatoes. They were right. I’d been disappointed before—repeatedly relegated to the position of stage manager instead of being made part of the cast. But this show was different. I knew it.

Izzy spoke up. “And to be honest, Amelia, this summer’s theater camp seemed to really affect you. We’ve all been worried about you.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve been fine.” I shoved a spoonful of potatoes into my mouth.

The three girls exchanged glances.

“You’ve been different since then,” said Tessa. “We know how badly you wanted the part of Miss Hannigan.”

I sipped my Dr Pepper. I *had* wanted that part. I’d been so excited when the theater camp had decided to perform *Annie*. But that disappointment had been nothing compared with the

humiliation I'd experienced later in the summer. As much as I loved my friends, however, I wasn't about to share the details with them. I'd go along with what they assumed.

"Yeah, it was a blow," I said.

"And Wilson moving away must've been disappointing too," Shay added.

Wilson was the first guy who had seen me as a girl worth knowing, not just a crazy wannabe actress. He'd been a good friend, and he could have been more if his dad hadn't taken a new pastorate position in Nevada. He'd moved that summer while I was at camp.

"We believe in you," said Tessa.

The other girls nodded their agreement.

"We just hate seeing you disappointed," said Izzy. "I mean, not like you'll *be* disappointed because you'll for sure get a part, but if, hypothetically, you didn't, it wouldn't be the end of the world. But of course, you *will*—"

"Izzy," I interrupted. "I get it."

"Good, because I wasn't sure how I was going to end that sentence."

"So everything at camp went okay?" asked Tessa. Uncertainty gleamed in her eye.

"Of course. Yeah. Great," I told her, forcing a huge grin. "Terrific experience."

Her mouth twisted to the side skeptically.

The bell rang, saving me from further interrogation and Tessa's eagle-eyed stare. The churning in my stomach slowed. Although grateful to be surrounded by good friends, I was annoyed by how perceptive they could be.

I stood and collected my things, swinging my backpack over my shoulder and piling the remnants of lunch onto my tray. I glanced around the table. "Anyone see my phone?"

"You laid it down next to you," said Izzy with a smirk, whisking away a napkin that partially covered it.

*Right . . . there it is.* I pocketed it into my bright-pink corduroy skirt. “See you after school.” I didn’t want to be late to class.

“I have swim practice,” said Tessa. “Do you guys want to meet at Booked Up later?”

Booked Up was the cute bookstore that Shay’s aunt owned, and Shay worked there when she wasn’t working with horses. It was the perfect place to curl up with a book or snuggle into one of the oversize beanbags and gossip with my girls. I gave a thumbs-up in response and lost myself in the throng of students.



Northside High School happened to be the largest school in the area, well funded and recognized for its academic strength. Stripes of blue and gold lined the hallways, occasionally interrupted by a well-stocked trophy case. A roaring wildcat—our school mascot—stared down at us as I headed into the main thoroughfare. The school corridor teemed with fist-bumping football players, seniors who had already stopped caring about the dress code, and clueless-faced freshmen scampering around and hunting for lost lockers. Together, we flowed down the hallway like a run of salmon, bumping and dodging and darting. Being on the larger side, I often got jostled and found myself apologizing repeatedly, though it wasn’t always my fault. I learned long ago that “Oops, excuse me” meant less “I didn’t mean to bump into you” and more “I’m sorry I take up so much space.”

I took a deep breath and drew myself to my full five-foot three-inch height. *Amelia Bryan can do anything*, I told myself. *I can get the part in the fall play. I can make this a great year.* I forced a happy-go-lucky smile as though I were an inspirational meme brought to life.

*And I can forget this summer.* It was all a bad dream—a dream I’d make myself forget. *Chin up, Amelia. Just push forward.*