



Chasing  
the Spotlight

R I V E R B E N D   F R I E N D S

Sarah Anne Sumpolec

# RIVERBEND FRIENDS™

Real, Not Perfect  
Searching for Normal  
The Me You See  
Chasing the Spotlight



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R I V E R B E N D F R I E N D S ™

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**FOCUS**  
ON  
THE FAMILY.®

A Focus on the Family Resource  
Published by Tyndale House Publishers

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A Focus on the Family book published by Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188

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ISBN 978-1-58997-650-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data can be found at [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov).

Printed in the United States of America

27 26 25 24 23 22 21  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## Chapter

# 1

THE STAGE IS EMPTY. Only the ghost light glows from center stage, throwing light out in a circle on the black floor. Even though I cannot see in the pitch dark beyond, I feel the vastness of the empty auditorium as I step toward the light. I feel the moment when the light finds my face. It is utterly still and silent. I sing a ballad, of course, because every musical and every Disney movie has *that* song. The song where the main character tells everyone what they want the most. Ariel wanted legs, Simba wanted to be king, Evan Hansen wanted to belong.

My ballad is simple. I want THIS. The stage. The spotlight. An audience that leans forward to listen and hear every story my character wants to tell.

I wish I hadn't argued with my mom about piano lessons when I was younger because if I had taken them when she wanted me to, I'd probably be able to write my own ballad by now. Write a musical starring me and telling my story. Some girls see their life as a movie: long, lingering shots of their mundane and magical

moments, their moody feelings. Not me. Hands down, my story is a musical. Sometimes funny, sometimes sad, and plenty of random dancing and bursting into song. If I lived in New York City, I'd see a Broadway show every day. But I don't live in the greatest city in the world. I live in Riverbend, Indiana. Seven hundred and fifty-nine miles away from any Broadway show. I mean, yeah, University of Indiana has hosted many touring companies. But it wasn't the same. Anyone who loves musical theater understands that.

I told my parents repeatedly that the only thing I want—birthday, Christmas, both, whatever—was to go see a real Broadway show. In New York. I even found the cheapest flights, where we could stay and everything. They were sympathetic to my plight and offered morsels of hope that “one day” we will get there. It was too expensive right now.

I knew my wish was akin to asking for a pony to put in our backyard. But at least you don't have to keep feeding a trip. It was a one-time thing.

Who was I kidding? If I got to go to a real show, I'd instantly be begging to go to the next one.

During our conversations, I knew money was only part of their concern. My parents didn't travel often and never very far. They visited family or stayed close to home. Adventurous trips were not in their repertoire. I was the adventurous kid of our family, always pushing to explore and experience. I could imagine that traipsing off to New York City sounded scary instead of exciting to them. They were satisfied with their everyday normal while I was itching to explode out of it. I loved my utterly normal family. But I wanted more.

I brought my arms up and out in a dramatic gesture seen at least once in every Broadway show. Dropping my head back, my heart silently belted out the ballad stanza about how people here don't understand me.

Except for one. My brother, Josh.

A pang squeezed in my chest and my head fell forward as images flipped through my mind. Images of his engagement to Jessica, their wedding, and him moving the last of his boxes out of our house into his own grown-up home. Mom said I needed to give him space now, but I didn't understand why. Just because he got married didn't mean he stopped being my brother.

To banish Josh and my urge to text him, I looked up tickets on *broadway.com* to see how much it would cost to see *Dear Evan Hansen* for tonight's 8:00 p.m. show. A mere \$259. *Sigh. Why did Broadway have to be so expensive? And so far away?*

"Whatcha lookin' at, Amelia?" Six-year-old Emma jumped in between me and my phone, yanking me from the stage back to my basement and knocking the phone from my hand and into the pile of cushions and blankets strewn over the floor. Although we weren't related, Emma looked a bit like me. Her hair was redder than my own, but I had way more freckles than she did.

"Nothing," I told her, letting her little sister Ainsley paw through the blankets for the phone. When she dug it out, instead of handing it to me, she tried to unlock it.

Their sister Parker was pouting on the couch. The girls were getting bored. I was getting bored. My parents were meeting with their parents—Jon and Leah Burfield—so, of course, I was expected to babysit. Usually these impromptu counseling sessions lasted about an hour, but we were pushing two and there was no sign of the adults.

Felix, our giant Labradoodle, rolled around in the blankets. I bent over to give him some good tummy scratches. Emma squatted next to him and joined the scratching. Felix was in doggie heaven.

Then we heard—something. Ainsley looked up at the ceiling. Someone was yelling—muffled and impossible to understand. I watched Parker's face twist like she was trying not to cry.

"Hey! Let's make up a play!" I said. I put the needle on the *Annie* record I'd listened to earlier and turned it up so they wouldn't

hear the muffled yelling. Parker balled herself on the giant gray sectional couch with her head down, arms wrapped around her body. She was eight, and there was no way she didn't know what was happening upstairs. Her parents had been coming for counseling for weeks, and she'd mentioned the yelling problem before. The other girls were younger though, so they were easily distracted.

"What's that music?" Emma wrinkled up her nose, staring at the record.

"It's from a Broadway show called *Annie*," I said.

"I don't like it," Ainsley said. "It's too loud." She covered her ears.

I turned it down, then moved the smaller chairs and glass coffee table out of the way. "Look! We can make up a play! And this will be our stage!" I gestured at the area around me. Ainsley and Emma looked unsure.

"A princess play?" Emma asked.

"Sure. A princess play. Whatever." I cringed, still hearing tense voices upstairs. "What will your princess name be?"

"Anna! Elsa!" they both yelled at the same time.

"Let's make up our own princesses. They can have any name you want!" I said.

"I wanna be Anna!" Ainsley said.

"Elsa!" Emma said.

"Fine. I guess we're doing *Frozen*." I looked around for my phone. Ah. That's right. Ainsley had been trying to open it. When she couldn't get it unlocked, she must have dropped it back into the pile somewhere. I tried to convince the girls to make up their own princess names as I dug through the cushions and the blankets they had pulled out earlier to make a fort.

Emma started singing "Let It Go" really loudly but somewhat in tune. Ainsley joined in, twirling in the open area. Felix joined in the fun. He didn't care what game everyone was playing; he was just certain he had to be a part of it. With them singing and

dancing, and *Annie* playing discordantly, I gave up looking for my phone and went over to Parker.

“Do you want to be a princess?”

Parker scowled. Her hair was blonde rather than red, and she had a little turned-up nose and big, angry blue eyes.

I wondered what you’re supposed to do in this situation. Saying, “Hey, sounds like your parents are screaming at each other,” was what came to mind. I kept my mouth shut.

“Can you get rid of one of those songs?” Parker gave me a pointed look.

I shrugged. “I don’t have a record of *Frozen*, and I can’t find my phone to play it through the speaker.”

Parker rolled her eyes and hit some buttons on her own phone. “Let It Go” started playing, and the little girls cheered and joined in. I stopped the *Annie* record. Much better. Really though, they should know *Annie*. Everyone needs to know *Annie*. It was a classic show. But they were both spinning and singing at the top of their lungs to the favored *Frozen* song. Their voices were loud enough to dull whatever might be happening upstairs.

I dropped on the couch next to Parker. “Nice save. You’re quick with that thing. My parents wouldn’t let me get a phone until I was twelve.”

“Maybe because you can’t keep track of it.”

*Truth.* “Ouch. But no. My parents are weird like that.”

Parker’s eyes dropped to her lap again. *Parents. Wrong topic.*

“Do they do this all the time?” I asked, pointing at her sisters.

“All. The. Time. I don’t even know why they like *Frozen*.”

“Exactly. *Tangled* was my favorite,” I said.

Parker looked surprised and happy for a split second. “Me too!”

“Then you be Rapunzel! And I’ll be Merida! ’Cause this,” I said, pointing at my hair. I jumped up and took Parker’s hands and spun her around.

“You can’t be a princess,” Ainsley yelled over the music.

“I’m already a princess! All girls are princesses!” I said. Parker giggled as I twirled her, one of her hands above her head, her purple skirt flying in a puffy circle.

“You can’t!” Ainsley said. “You’re too fat to be a princess!”

The music kept playing. Parker kept spinning. And I kept quiet.

“Shut up, Ainsley. That’s mean,” Emma said.

“You’re not s’pose to say shut up! I’m telling Mom!”

“I don’t care if you tell Mom. You’ll get in trouble too.”

The little-girl voices began to sound muffled and far away as I faded back to the stage. I’m standing in the circle cast by the ghost light. I back up, one step at a time, letting the light disappear from my face, body, legs, and finally my feet until I am in the shadows once again. The darkness wraps like a blanket around my shoulders; I could almost feel its weight.

From the darkness I tried to call out, “We are all princesses! No matter what size we are!” But I couldn’t get the words to come out of my mouth.

“Amelia?”

The voice popped me back to the present—where I did not want to be.

Mom stared at me, one hand on her hip and a tight smile on her face, while the little girls ran to their parents and threw themselves in for hugs—like they hadn’t seen them for days. Ainsley’s dad picked her up and ruffled her hair, then quickly left with her in his arms. Mom turned to the other mom and made comments about fighting and how it’s normal, but the woman looked as if she was about to cry. Parker and Emma and Mom were talking at once, so I stayed quiet and started cleaning up the room while they gathered their things and left.

Emma ran over, hugged me goodbye, and took her mom’s hand to leave. Parker waved and followed them out the door, leaving me alone with Mom. I kept tidying.

“Well, that looked lovely, walking the parents down here to find their children fighting and you staring off into space.” She folded the fluffy orange blanket that Emma had used as a cape for about three seconds.

I picked up the smaller cushions and arranged them on the couch the way Mom liked them. Everything in our house was arranged just so. Since Mom used the basement room as often as she used the upstairs to host gatherings, it had to be as perfect as the rest of the house.

*Ask. Ask.*

It wasn't a good time to ask, but when else would I be able to? I moved the coffee table back and set the legs exactly in place where they had left carpet divots.

“Why does this room look like a tornado hit it every time you babysit?”

*Ask. Ask.*

“Only when it's girls. The boys like the PlayStation and stay in one place,” I said.

“Still. You should try to clean up before we come down. It looks so chaotic.” She folded another blanket. “I didn't realize how many blankets we have down here.”

*Ask.* “Miss Roxanne has a cancellation for tomorrow at 3:45. Could I take another voice lesson?”

I kept folding and tried to read her expression.

Mom was quiet as she straightened the shelf of DVDs the girls had dismantled.

*Quiet* was my least favorite response from her. I was pretty sure my mother didn't have a single impulsive bone in her body. Still, I hoped she would say, “Sure!” and move on without long, drawn-out discussions. I would've skipped Mom and asked Dad directly except it was Mom who was going to have to drive me there. And help me pay for it. *I needed Mom on my side, yet how could she be when I was the one kid in our family who baffled her?*

“You’ve already had, what, three?” She stopped fussing with things and folded her arms across her perfectly flat belly. She had her wavy brunette hair up in a messy bun, and despite her age and choice of wearing a simple pair of black pants, blue blouse, and white sweater, she looked picture perfect. Effortless and easy, the quintessential elder’s wife.

I knew what I looked like at that moment. Her exact opposite. A mass of frizzy hair to hers perfectly coiffed. A pair of red track pants to her tailored ones. A rather dirty vintage T-shirt to her filmy blue blouse underneath a fitted button-down sweater. Bare feet to her Rothys. I sometimes wondered how I was her kid at all. Josh and Maggie, my older siblings, were more like her. Maggie was intense and driven like Mom. Josh looked a lot like her and acted more like Dad. *Me? It was like I was dropped in from another planet.*

Mom never responded when I exposed my heightened emotions—good or bad. I had to be calm. Rational. “Two. I’ve only had two lessons. Most people go every week. It’s hard to get a spot with Miss Roxanne because she’s so good, her schedule is always full.” I tried to keep my tone light. I longed to say how badly I wanted to have one of those coveted weekly spots, but I resisted. Barely. If Mom got a whiff that I was arguing with her, she would shut down the discussion.

She sighed. “Millie. We’ve talked about this. I’m really sorry. Voice lessons aren’t in the budget.”

I resisted for about two seconds before I burst. “You paid for Josh to do travel soccer. And Maggie got piano lessons and a bunch of stuff for cheerleading.” I stopped, unable to share that I was worried about my singing. I could work on acting and dancing at home on my own. But vocals? I was at a loss. I didn’t know how to improve without help—actual professional help.

“Millie—”

“Those two lessons really helped me! I know if I could—”

“Yes, we encouraged you children to participate in sports because they teach so many great things about teamwork and perseverance.”

“So does theater!” My voice cracked. “And Mom, I don’t *want* to do sports. I hate sports.” *Settle down.*

Mom’s lips tightened.

Yelling wasn’t going to help her understand. I breathed in slowly. I held it a brief moment, and then I slowly exhaled before speaking again. “I thought it would be okay to try extracurricular activities of my choosing.” I congratulated myself on sounding reasonable.

“If you love singing so much, join the choir or worship team at church. They always take new members. You’ll learn so much.”

*Breathe. Breathe. Don’t say it.*

“It’s not the same thing!”

Well. There it was. My traditional fail. If only I could remain calm for an entire conversation.

She started to walk away.

“Mom? Please? Auditions for the school musical are on Wednesday. I’m not ready. I need another lesson.” I clenched my fists, so my nails dug into my palms. I hoped the pain would stop me from saying more.

“You’ll be fine for a high school audition. Get this room back in shape, please. I’m having a women’s brunch in here Wednesday morning.”

As soon as I heard her close the basement door at the top of the stairs, I threw myself onto the couch and screamed into one of the striped pillows. I should not have said anything. I should have waited for a better moment.

Once I found my phone, I texted the Fan4 for moral support. Fantastic 4 is what we finally agreed to label the text group for Shay, Tessa, Izzy, and me only a week ago. Izzy, of course, was the one who came up with it. These three girls were my besties

now. Maybe a little over-involved and opinionated at times, but in mostly good ways.

I got an assortment of “sorry 😊” and “that stinks.” But while, yes, not getting the voice lesson was frustrating, not knowing how to make my mother understand why it was important was worse. No matter what I did, she didn’t take my passions seriously.

So I FaceTimed Josh.

“Hey, Millie Vanilli!” He grinned into the camera. “What’s up?”  
“Mom doesn’t get it.”

He laughed. “What? Let me guess. Our mother doesn’t understand your insatiable love of all things Broadway? Mills, her idea of engaging with popular culture is watching *The Great British Baking Show*.”

I frowned, and he laughed again. “I am sorry though.”

“I can’t just . . . wait, you know? I want to do musical theater for a career. But I’m already behind. There’s this girl at school named Presley who performs in professional productions. And she’s only a junior! I have a long way to go to catch up.”

“Hey, Amelia!” Jessica leaned in so I could see her and waved. At least she called me Amelia. My family and many of the kids at school were still calling me Millie despite my constant requests to call me Amelia. *Amelia* sounded more mature and professional to me. Amelia Bryan. Yeah. I could see that in a *Playbill* bio.

“Hey, Jess.” I smiled but wanted her to go away so I could finish talking to Josh. She was sweet, and I knew she loved Josh—both very good reasons to like her. But she still irritated me because I had to share my brother with her. Always.

I preferred Josh over my sister, Maggie, because he treated me like he actually liked me. Maggie, the sister in between Josh and me, acted resentful of my entire existence. Maggie was a sophomore at University of Illinois, which was fine with me. But Josh getting married and moving out for good? That made home feel a whole lot less like home. Josh had always been the one to jump

to my defense. Without him, it was me against Mom—especially since Dad didn't have strong opinions about the whole theater thing.

Everything would be different if Josh were home.

Jessica asked me a bunch of small-talk questions about school, and then she finally left.

"Can you talk to Mom?" I asked.

Josh shook his head. "You know I'm your biggest fan. But this is your battle, kiddo, not mine."

"But she listens to you. She acts like I'm gonna grow out of it or something. Like it's a phase."

"Like the monkeys! Or the owls!" Josh laughed.

"Stop. They were cute, and yes, a phase, but this is not."

"How can she be sure that this passion you've got for theater won't vanish and you'll suddenly want to do something else?" He paused. "No offense, kiddo, but you have been known to do that."

For the rest of the night I thought about what Josh said. He was right. I had popped from thing to thing in the past. But I was more mature now. I knew what I wanted. *But how to convince Mom that I was serious about theater, that it wasn't some silly schoolgirl phase?*

If Mom could see me up onstage for our spring musical, *Peter Pan*, maybe she'd see what I knew. Theater is my calling. My present and my future rolled into one. Then she'd understand.

But it would take more than any old part to convince her. I had to play the lead. I had to play Peter Pan.