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Ann Bryant



## For my faithful and discerning first reader and wonderful daughter, Jody

### My grateful thanks to Ginny Whitelaw for all her invaluable help



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# Chapter One



was staring into the distance with a massive smile I on my face, imagining myself on a stage somewhere in the West End of London. The sound of applause was ringing round the auditorium, and I felt the waves of adoration rolling over me as I took yet another bow. But then this totally cool daydream was interrupted by the sound of my best friend, Mia, whispering my name urgently and tapping me on the leg.

"Georgie!"

I came back to earth with a nasty bump, realizing I wasn't on a stage at all. I was in my school assembly and the headmistress, Ms. Carmichael, was saying the prayer while every single one of the 360 girls in the hall was bowing her head respectfully. Well, every one except me. I quickly looked down and tried to get myself back into the daydream but got distracted by the sight of a ladder in my tights. It definitely hadn't been there first thing this morning. I know that for a fact, because Miss Jennings would have spotted it with her eagle eye and made me go back to the dorm to change into a new pair of tights immediately.

Good old Miss Jennings. She's the matron at Hazeldean, which is my boarding house at Silver Spires school. Most people find her really strict, and it's true that she keeps her face straight the whole time, which Mia says is totally scary, but personally I like her. The secret is to chat to her lots and tell her jokes and then you can get a smile out of her. Well, I can anyway.

Yes I can! That makes two things I'm talented at. Acting and getting a smile out of Matron. Hallelujah! I tell you, it's tough being in a dorm with five other girls who are all completely good-looking and talented. I mean, take Mia. She came to Silver Spires on a music scholarship because she's so brilliant at piano. Then there's Grace – she got a

sports scholarship. As for Jess, she'd definitely have an art scholarship if there was such a thing. And Katy...well she's the trendiest babe on this planet – I'd love to look like Katy – and we all just know she'll finish up as a fashion designer because her sketches are amazing and she's obsessed with the whole fashion scene. And finally – and this is the big one – there's Naomi, who is an African princess. She's also extremely beautiful and very wise. It's just not fair that all of them are talented. I mean, how am I supposed to compete with that lot? They're all my friends and I love them to death, but I do wish they weren't quite so clever.

Seriously, the only thing I'm good at is acting. Drama has always been my passion. Even when I was only two and a half I used to love dressing up and stuff. My mum said I would stand in the middle of the circle of mothers at baby and toddler group, wearing an apron from the dressing-up box, and entertain everyone by pretending to scrub the floor. Thinking about it, I wonder if I might have developed a bit of a Cinderella obsession, but I don't see how I could have understood the story if I was only two and a half. Aha! Maybe I really am a very bright person but nobody has managed to bring it out of me yet.

#### "Amen."

Whoops! I think I must have been in another daydream. Anyway, now Ms. Carmichael had finished the prayer we'd only got the teachers' announcements to go, or notices, as everyone calls them. I wonder why they're called notices when they're not written down. And I also wonder if anyone ever listens to them. I looked round and wasn't surprised to see that most people seemed to have glazed over. Assemblies are probably the most boring part of boarding-school life. Oh and science, and geography... and history. Actually, I can't say I'm a big fan of any lessons except drama. The drama lesson and drama club are the biggest highlights of my week, well, apart from watching The Fast Lane on telly, which is my fave programme ever. Drama even beats eating smuggled biscuits after lights out and stifling giggles with my friends in case Miss Carol, the housemistress, hears, or going shopping at the beginning of term before you've spent all your allowance. Now I come to think about it there are hundreds of highlights to boarding-school life - well, to Silver Spires life anyway. Silver Spires is the best school in the world, in case I didn't mention that.

"Georgie!"

Mia was bashing my leg again, but this time when

she said my name it didn't sound like a telling-off. In fact for some reason or other Mia was pretty excited. I tuned into what was happening and realized that Miss Pritchard, the senior drama teacher, was standing up. It's funny because the hall was already silent but it went into an even deeper silence when Miss Pritchard began to speak. And personally I went into ecstasy.

"Some of you will know that the junior play will be staged at the end of term. Anyone in Year Seven, Eight or Nine can audition. The play is called *Castles* in the Air and it's based on the book *Little Women* by Louisa M. Alcott."

My heart hammered with excitement. A play. How brilliant is that? And *Little Women* is my favourite book ever.

"I'm sure many of you will have read the book," went on Miss Pritchard, "and know that the story is centred around four sisters: Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy."

Just hearing those four names felt magical, especially the name Amy. That was the sister I always liked reading about the most.

"There are quite a few other substantial roles in the play as well as these four main ones, and there are also lots of smaller roles." Miss Pritchard paused and smiled round at everyone, and I smiled right back. I was suddenly Cinderella again and she was my fairy godmother – You shall go to the ball!

I hung on to her every word because I didn't want to miss a thing or get anything wrong. It would be terrible if I didn't show up at the auditions because I hadn't taken in the time properly.

"There's a very high standard of acting at Silver Spires, and traditionally this junior play has always been incredibly well received by the parents, which is important because it's a showcase for the school..." She smiled again but then suddenly looked very serious and spoke in a slow, firm voice. "To produce a fine performance I need total commitment from my actors..."

I stood up straight and stuck out my chin. She could rely on me, all right. I'd learn all my words overnight and turn up at every rehearsal bang on time. I couldn't wait to get started, in fact. Come on, Miss Pritchard, tell us when the auditions are...

"So bear that in mind if you're thinking of auditioning for a part. It's great fun being involved in a theatre production but it's also hard work and there are sacrifices to be made, such as missing your favourite clubs sometimes, missing television to learn your lines..." I didn't care. I'd miss every meal as well, if she wanted me to, even though the meals at Silver Spires are mouth-wateringly yum-worthy and eating is one of my favourite activities in the whole world.

"If you'd like to audition for a part you'll need to come to the senior hall, which, for Year Seven students who don't do drama club, is upstairs and along the main corridor in this building..."

She pointed to the ceiling, and I thought back to my first day at Silver Spires when I'd gone exploring for anything to do with drama, and first come across the senior hall and also seen the incredible new theatre, which looked like something out of the West End of London. It would be so fantastic to perform on that stage.

"I'm going to be doing auditions for Year Nines during their drama lessons on Thursday, and for Year Sevens and Eights after school on Thursday, which gives you a few days to prepare yourselves. I've run off masses of mini-scripts and they're on my desk in my office, which is next to the hall. You can help yourselves to those. Choose a speech by the character you want to audition for, but also come armed with an idea of another role you might be interested in, because, of course, you're not

necessarily going to be lucky enough to get the first part you want."

Miss Pritchard sat down and Ms. Carmichael nodded at the music teacher, who pressed play on the CD, and next minute the hall was filled with some beautiful violin music, or was it cello? Who cared? I just wanted to push past everyone filing out neatly row by row, get hold of a script and take it to the dorm, then spend the whole day flopped on my bed learning every single word of every single part.

"Bet you're happy!" said Mia, tucking her arm through mine when we finally got out of the hall.

"You are so right! I am in fact the happiest girl on the planet!" I gabbled as I pulled away and rushed upstairs, taking two steps at a time.

Grabbing a script from the desk in Miss Pritchard's office, I started reading it immediately so I had to walk very slowly to make sure I didn't fall or bash into anyone as I went back downstairs to my friends.

Mia put her arm round me as we left the main building and Grace patted me on the back. "Well done, Georgie! I've never seen you go upstairs so fast!"

Katy laughed. "And look! She's actually concentrating on something. This must be serious!" "Yes, and it's not easy concentrating with everyone

talking!" I said, throwing her a cross look, which I quickly turned into a grin because how could I feel cross when every single nerve and tendon and sinew and all those other scientific bits of the human body that have always been a mystery to me were glowing brightly and lighting up my life? "I'm going for the part of Amy!" I announced in a voice that came out squeaky with excitement.

It felt so brilliant to hear those words hanging in the air after I'd spoken them that I repeated the main one three times. "Amy, Amy, Amy!" Which gave everyone a giggle. But then Naomi gently reminded us that hanging around waiting for me to collect the script had made us a bit late for science and we ought to get a move on. So we put on a bit of a spurt and caught up with a group of Year Eight girls just ahead. I was still at the back though, walking slowly so I could read the script at the same time.

"I've never read *Little Women*," I heard Jess say. Then she called back to me, "What's it about? Who's Amy?"

My mind went straight back to the time when I was nine and I got the book in my Christmas stocking. I hadn't wanted to read it at first because it looked so old-fashioned, but Mum had actually sat me down and read the first chapter out loud, and

after that I'd been hooked. I remember how I used to keep turning to the front cover to have another look at the picture of the sisters, and even now I can visualize Amy, clear as anything. She had blonde hair that curled at the bottom, blue eyes and a cheeky kind of smile, a bit like my little sister, Roxanne. My hair is a sort of medium brown colour and it's just long enough to put in a ponytail without having any short bits hanging out. It's quite thick. I used to wish it wasn't, but actually, now I come to think about it, Amy's hair looks quite thick. If only I was blonde, that would be even better.

I sighed a happy sigh and caught up with the others. "She's the youngest of the four March sisters and she's bright and bubbly..."

"Like you, Georgie!" laughed Naomi. "Typecasting! Terrific!"

"And she's also very artistic, which I know *isn't* like me," I quickly pointed out. "But that's what acting's all about." Then I suddenly realized there was something I hadn't found out. "Are any of you lot going to audition?"

They all started gabbling away at once so I couldn't make out what any of them was saying, but I got the general idea that nobody was that keen on the thought of acting.

"I wonder if the students can help paint the sets and scenery for the stage," said Jess, looking thoughtful.

Katy fell into step beside her. "I think I'll find out who's in charge of costumes. I'd love to be—"

One of the Year Eight girls we were passing flung a very haughty look in our direction and interrupted Katy in a know-all voice. "Mrs. Chambers looks after the wardrobe department, actually, but she won't let you help. She only lets Year Nines."

Katy looked disappointed and Naomi obviously felt sorry for her. "You can always ask, anyway, Kates," she said quietly. "But we'd better go now or we'll be late..."

"See you back at Hazeldean, you two," Mia called over her shoulder as she and Grace went jogging off to their lab with Naomi and Katy, because the four of them are all in set one for science.

Jess and I carried on walking with the Year Eights and I wished I had the guts to turn to the know-all girl and say, "Did you write the book of life or something?" But Year Sevens don't talk to Year Eights like that. It's just not done.

"Do the students get to help with the set?" Jess asked her.

The girl shrugged and the expression on her face

said she couldn't care less about such a trivial little thing. "You'll have to check with the art department. I'm an actor."

Jess said, "Right," then stopped walking as she seemed to suddenly remember something. "Oh no!" she said. "I've totally forgotten my science textbook – I'll have to run back and get it. Save me a place, Georgie, okay?" And off she went.

As soon as she'd gone, *know-all features* nodded at the script I was clutching. "So what part are you going for?"

"Amy."

"Amy!" She did a little snort of laughter as though I'd announced that I intended to be the director or something.

Then all her friends started smirking. One of them turned to the know-all girl and said, "Wooo, competition for you, Cara," in a sarcastic tone of voice, which made everyone burst into laughter. And another girl rolled her eyes and said, "As if!" which really made my hackles rise.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"Sorry," said Cara, shaking her head slowly. "I shouldn't laugh really because you're not to know, being Year Seven..."

I didn't like the way she flashed her eyes round all