Running on Empty
Jill Williamson
RIVERBEND FRIENDS™

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Real, Not Perfect
Searching for Normal
The Me You See
Chasing the Spotlight
Life in the Middle
Heart of Belonging
Running on Empty

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FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

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To Kaitlyn:

Thanks for inspiring Izzy's quirkiness, love of baking cupcakes, and wild leggings. She wouldn't exist without you.

Chapter 1

A girl could learn to do anything if she could find the right keywords.

I sat in the den at the family computer scrolling through a list of search results. I honestly doubted golfing would ever become my new fave, but I wanted to try my best.

My first search for "how to golf" brought up a host of tutorials, including several on mini golf. I added "-mini" to limit my search, and after browsing a few results, I learned that the first time a player hits the golf ball off the tee, they usually use a club called the driver.

So there are a lot of different kinds of golf clubs. Stars.

I refined my search by typing "how to use a driver in golf" and viewing the video results. This brought up a list of promising tutorials. With over 1.5 million views, "How to Hit the Golf Ball with Driver for Beginners" from the channel *Golf Guy* won out, and I watched the entire fifteen-and-a-half-minute video, taking as many mental notes as possible.

When that video ended, I moved the mouse to choose a similar video and accidentally jostled the desk. The sticky note I had placed over the webcam fluttered onto the keyboard. I picked it up and pressed it back over the camera, this time securing it with a piece of tape. I did not want anyone looking at me in my own home.

Paranoid? Maybe, but I'd learned the hard way to be careful about such things.

I was midway through learning how to putt when my cell phone played my custom text message alert: *"We love you, Miss Hannigan!"*

I glanced at the phone, which was lying face up to the right of the mouse pad.

Tessa: On my way.

I texted back: Shay's not coming, right?

I watched the words of my text sit on that white screen with the little *Delivered* notification underneath. When there was no sign of the three dots showing that Tessa was typing back, I squirmed in my chair, worried I'd annoyed her. I knew this thing between Shay and me was hard for Tessa and Amelia, but I just couldn't talk to Shay right now. I felt too . . . betrayed. Tessa and Amelia didn't understand, of course, but so far, they had tried to be supportive.

The problem? They were being supportive to both of us.

Not taking sides was likely the right thing for friends to do, but somehow, it didn't really feel like full support when I knew my friends were also supporting the person in the wrong.

"We love you, Miss Hannigan!"

I jumped. I'd zoned out while thinking about Shay, and Tessa had taken so long to reply that my phone had gone to sleep.

Tessa: No, she's not.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Of course Shay wouldn't be coming. This was *my* day. I had planned it with Tessa, and I had not invited Shay Mitchell.

I watched a few more videos. Golf sure seemed like an easy sport.

When I grew bored, I logged into my school account to see if our fall schedules had been posted yet. Still nothing. Ugh. I needed to know if Shay and I were in Baking and Pastry together or not. Baking and Pastry was a popular class, and I had been super excited to take it. Until the whole rift with Shay. Then I had called the office and put in a request for a new elective. I didn't really care which one I got. I just knew I couldn't handle spending so much time with Shay, especially when baking.

It would be *so great* if no one got their first choices. Then everyone would be disappointed, but no one would suspect I had changed my schedule. Then I wouldn't have to deal with it at all.

Please, God?

I heard the hum of the garage door rise and fall, then the inner door opened. "Isabella?"

"*Sí*, Papi?" I said.

Papi appeared in the hallway to the kitchen, and my brothers, Leo and Sebastian, were behind him. Leo, tall and skinny, stood a head taller than Papi, while Sebastian now matched Papi in height.

"Hello, Isabella Valadez," Sebastian said.

"You're still here," Leo added.

I checked my phone and shrugged. "Leaving any minute now, I'm sure. How was the car?"

Yesterday, Cody Nichols, my adorable neighbor, had bought himself a sports car. When Papi first heard about it, he said it was a street-racer. Papi and the boys had gone over to have a look, and I was quite curious about Cody's new wheels.

"Cody Nichols has a very fast car," Sebastian said, nodding as if to prove his point.

Papi smiled wistfully. "*Muy bonito*."

"Papi's in love," Leo said.

"No," Papi said. "An Acura RSX is not classic enough for me, but it's a nice ride. Peppy engine with a slick manual shifter."

"He took you for a ride?" I asked.

Leo wiggled his eyebrows. "He let Papi drive it."

"Papi!" I couldn't believe my dad had driven Cody's new car.

"What?" Papi said, shrugging. "He offered. I just took it around the block."

I rolled my eyes, then asked Leo, "What did *you* think?"

"Oh, it's nice," Leo said. "It's fast, and the back seat is nearly useless, so he won't have to drive his friends everywhere. I'd take it in a heartbeat if he wanted to trade."

Leo drove a beat-up Honda Civic. All I knew about Cody's car was that it was small, sporty, and cobalt blue. The perfect color for Captain America, even though Papi had said the car was foreign.

"We love you, Miss Hannigan!"

I checked my phone.

Tessa: I'm here.

I closed the windows on the computer and jumped up from the chair. "Tessa is here," I said. "If you ever get your car finished, Papi, maybe you and Cody can race."

Since Leo was out of college for the summer, he and Papi had put in quite a few hours working on Papi's old '65 Ford Mustang in the garage.

"Oh, I wouldn't stand a chance," Papi said, tucking me under his arm in a side hug. "Have fun, *mija*."

Leo snickered. "I kind of wish I could see you golf," he said. "Might be a good laugh."

"*Estás pesado*," I said, walking away. Leo could be pretty annoying sometimes.

At the door, I shoved my feet into my tennis shoes, grabbed my Captain Marvel baseball cap, and ran outside. Tessa's silver Camry looked small in my driveway. I hopped into the passenger's side and buckled my seat belt.

"You look adorable!" I said, admiring Tessa's royal-blue polo shirt tucked into a pleated white skirt, which she wore without leggings. I was taller than Tessa and had never been comfortable leaving my legs bare. I always covered them with leggings. Tessa also wore a white sun visor with her hair combed into a braided ponytail that fell over the top.

"Thanks," Tessa said. "So do you."

"*Pfft*. The whole golfing dress code had me worried for a while. I don't even own a collared shirt. Thankfully, Claire said I could borrow this." I glanced down at the words embroidered at the top left of my sister's polo shirt: *Riverbend Robotics Team 1015*.

"Alex and Amelia are both going to meet us there," Tessa said as she backed out onto the street.

I caught sight of Cody's car in his driveway. I wanted to tell Tessa that Papi had driven it, but I didn't want to give her anything that would add to her theory that Cody liked me—or that I liked him.

"How is your scarf coming along?" Tessa asked.

"Slowly." I hadn't touched it in over a week. "I'm not sure crocheting is my thing."

Over the past few months, I'd tried dozens of different activities. It was all part of my mission to discover the real Isabella Valadez. I got the idea from Zoe, one of the youth workers at the church Tessa and I attended, and so far, it had been a lot of fun.

In the arts, I'd tried calligraphy, candle making, origami, cross-stitching, and crocheting that scarf I'd all but abandoned. I'd also taken a painting class from Miss Carrie, Tessa's mom, and completed two whole paintings. *That* I had loved.

Leo had taught me how to play poker, cribbage, and blackjack. Papi had taught me how to play chess and do Sudoku puzzles.

I'd tried a lot of sports. My favorites were archery, tennis, and bowling. I had learned to juggle—I could do four balls! I'd also taken a line dancing class.

Since I'm from Mexico, I thought it would be fun to explore activities connected to my culture. So I learned some traditional Mexican dancing from watching YouTube, and I still wanted to take a class on *Jarabe Tapatío*, the traditional Mexican Hat Dance. I'd found a local class but couldn't bring myself to sign up because it would mean dancing with boys—boys I didn't even know—and I wasn't ready for that.

Once school was out, I'd gone hiking and camping with Leo and Papi. Leo also took me rock climbing and rappelling. My *abuelito* took me fishing. My neighbor, Mrs. Kirby, had been teaching me to garden and care for chickens. My friends and I even got to go horseback riding once—but that was before the fight.

Sadly, music, which I love, had been my most avoided category. I've always had a good singing voice, but I had no desire to again try the piano lessons I'd hated as a child. I thought it might be fun to learn the *vihuela Mexicana* so I could play some *mariachi*-style music, but Papi wouldn't buy me a guitar until I tried Leo's. So I'd played around with it and watched some online lessons, but it hurt my fingers so badly I quit.

Where would golfing end up on my list? Would it be another try and fail? Or would I discover a new interest that could change the course of my life?

Only one way to find out.

Tessa stopped at the gate of the Riverbend Country Club and gave her name to the security guy sitting in a little booth. He must have found her on his list because the bar across the driveway lifted, and he waved us through. I spotted Amelia sitting on a bench in a courtyard just off the parking lot. Her orange hair, which had grown out quite a bit since her *Peter Pan* haircut and looked super cute and wild now, was a beacon to the eye. Perhaps the new Izzy

needed a short haircut? I had enough curls to pull off Amelia's look, but something told me short hair was not for me.

Tessa parked the car, and we headed over to Amelia, who was wearing a white polo shirt and what looked like a pair of men's pleat-front khaki shorts, along with blue-and-green argyle socks pulled up to her knees. She held a floppy straw hat in her hands. We were still at least ten steps away when Amelia started talking.

"You won't believe the week I've had," she said, standing to meet us. "We're going to do a play next Friday—they always do one at the end of camp. Guess what Jonathan put me in charge of? Managing the stage. Again. Can you believe it?"

"It's just because you're so good at it," Tessa said. "They don't dare trust anyone else."

"But this time I wanted to do casting, and when I asked Jonathan about it, he said Sophie always does casting. Always. Why do we all have to do the same jobs every time? Wouldn't we learn a lot more if we traded off and tried different things?"

"You totally would," I said, thinking of all I'd learned in the past few months.

"Did you tell him that?" Tessa asked.

"Um, *yes*! Do you think he listened, though? Of course he didn't. Because he has been in the organization two months longer than me, and that makes him an expert. And apparently that makes me forever a newbie. It's so annoying."

"That sounds really frustrating," Tessa said.

"That's not the half of it," Amelia said, then went into another story about how Sophie chose all the wrong students for the roles and the play was going to be an absolute disaster.

When Amelia finally paused for air, Tessa pulled out her cell phone and said, "Let me text Alex and see if he's close."

"I'm sure the play won't be a disaster with you running stage crew," I said.

Amelia sighed, gesturing at me with her hat. "I'm going to do

everything in my power to help put on a good show, but I'm afraid it's going to be very juvenile."

"But it's a kids' camp, right?" I said. "It's for fun and learning. Plus, they *are* juveniles."

Amelia frowned. "I guess."

Tessa's phone chimed. "He's waiting for us in the pro shop. Let's go."

The pro shop was a golf store that sold clothing and all kinds of golfing accessories, like hats, sunglasses, shoes, and boxes of golf balls. Tessa spotted Alex standing between two displays, one for Oakley sunglasses and another for FootJoy, which according to the display were the best golfing shoes. We joined him there, and I picked up one of the golf shoes, curious.

"Why do you need a special shoe to golf?" I asked.

"They have spikes to help you keep your balance," Alex said.

I frowned and turned the shoe over, examining the spikes, which looked like little grabby stars. "Do a lot of people fall down while playing golf?"

Alex merely shrugged and followed Tessa through the store. Amelia and I trailed after the couple, who I noticed were now holding hands.

Ugh. I tried not to care or be jealous or judgy about Tessa and Alex, who seemed to have the perfect relationship. It was kind of hard, though. Merely looking at boys these days made me nervous. And while I'd just successfully spoken to Alex three seconds ago, now that he was holding hands with Tessa, calling attention to himself as a boy with romance on his mind, I suddenly needed to get away from him.

I paused, pretending to look at a rack of golf shirts. When I caught up with the group, I put myself on Amelia's other side, creating a nice, safe boy-buffer.

Tessa and Alex stopped at a counter where a man stood beside a computer. He wore a bright-yellow polo shirt with a gold name

tag that read *Riverbend Country Club* and, beneath it, the name *Mike*.

"Hi," Tessa said. "We're here to golf under the name David Hart."

"Do you have a tee time?" Mike asked.

"Yes, one o'clock," Tessa said.

"We're drinking tea?" Amelia asked.

"Not T-E-A," I said. "T-E-E, like a golf tee."

"That makes much more sense," Amelia said.

"Okay, yeah," Mike said, concentrating on his computer screen. "I'll put you on the front nine. Let me just print your ticket." He fiddled with his computer, and a printer on the counter behind him began to hum. It spat out a small receipt, which Mike handed to Tessa.

"Here you are," he said. "Give this to the starter on the first hole." He glanced at the four of us. "Did you bring clubs?"

"No," Tessa said. "We need to rent four sets of clubs."

"Certainly," Mike said. "Shall I charge that to Mr. Hart's account?"

"Yes, please." Tessa raised her eyebrows at me and grinned.

I grinned back and sang, "Thank you, Mr. Hart!"

"You'll need some balls, too," Mike said. "Unless you brought some?"

"I brought one," Amelia said, setting on the counter a bright-green golf ball with one eye that looked like Mike Wazowski from the movie *Monsters, Inc.* "We've had it forever. I have no idea where we got it."

"You might not want to risk losing that one," Mike said.

"I guess you should throw in a dozen golf balls," Tessa said.

"For four of you?" Mike looked skeptical. "You might need two dozen."

Tessa glanced at Alex, who shrugged.

"Okay," she said. "Two dozen it is."

Mike typed a bit more on his computer, then set two boxes of Titleist Pro golf balls on the counter. "Here you are. I'll radio down to Dan. He'll get you set up."

"And where would we find Dan?" Tessa asked.

"Back out those doors and down the steps," Mike said. "You'll see the clubhouse and the golf cart parking lot. Dan will meet you on the lot with your carts and clubs."

"Our carts?" I asked, suddenly excited.

"It's a big golf course," Mike said. "You don't want to walk the whole way."

"Thank you!" I said, eager to get started. Eager to drive a golf cart!

Then Mike ended all my fun. "Only licensed drivers may drive the golf carts."

"Of course," Tessa said, and our foursome headed back outside. The sun shone bright and warm overhead, and I was glad to be wearing my cap. I sunburned easily, despite my brown skin.

"Did he give you a copy of the bill?" Alex asked.

"No," Tessa said. "I didn't think to ask. You think I should have?"

"Not necessarily," Alex said. "It just seemed like a lot."

"Was it?" A wrinkle formed between Tessa's brows. "Dad said not to worry about the cost."

"Two hundred and seventy-nine dollars and change," Alex said. "That's a week's pay for me during the school year."

"To golf?" Amelia said.

"It cost fifty each to rent the clubs," Alex said.

Guilt washed over me. "I had no idea golfing would be so expensive, Tessa," I said. "We should have borrowed someone's clubs."

"Doesn't your dad have some?" Amelia asked Tessa.

Tessa laughed dryly. "Dad does not want anyone touching his clubs. I didn't even ask Rebecca. Dad told me to rent them and said not to worry about the cost, so I said thank you and left it at that."

"Must be nice," Amelia muttered.

"Please thank him for me," I said. "Or even better, text me his mailing address, and I'll send him a card. I made some of my own when I tried papermaking a few months ago."

"He'd like that," Tessa said.

We walked down a set of cement stairs in silence, likely all pondering the cost of this sport. Down at the clubhouse, we approached a cluster of high school boys, all wearing the yellow polos of the Riverbend Country Club and beige chino shorts. Three boys were washing golf carts. Two others were lugging golf bags filled with clubs toward carts. The remaining boys were just standing there, chatting. They all looked clean-cut and sharp in their work uniforms.

"Look how *tan* they are," Amelia said. "All these boys in the sun all the time, washing those golf carts . . ."

Alex shot Amelia an amused look that turned her face nearly the color of her hair, and I felt a moment of regret that Claire had refused to come golfing with us. We couldn't be ourselves with Alex here. Still, Tessa's dad had insisted we needed two or four to golf, not three. This brought Shay to mind, but I doubted she would have liked golf anyway. Besides, my discomfort around Alex was nothing compared with how I would feel around Shay. If taking the lesser of two evils was the only way I'd get to try golf, this worked for me.

"Alex!" One of the yellow shirts peeled off from the cluster and approached us. I recognized that white-blond hair immediately. This was a Nichols boy, specifically Cody's brother Daniel. He had been one of the five seniors charged in the Dropbox scandal last spring, in which some guys had been sharing pictures of girls in an online folder. The scandal had also included my sort-of first boyfriend, Zac.

Daniel's frosty blue eyes panned over the four of us and stopped on me, sending a shiver up my arms.