

A close-up photograph of a woman's hand pressed against a window pane covered in raindrops. The woman's face is partially visible in the upper right corner, looking out. She is wearing a dark red, textured sweater. The background is dark, suggesting it is nighttime.

Real, Not Perfect

RIVERBEND FRIENDS

Stephanie Coleman

RIVERBEND FRIENDS™

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

REAL, NOT PERFECT

Real, Not Perfect

R I V E R B E N D F R I E N D S ™

Stephanie Coleman

CREATED BY

Lissa Halls Johnson

FOCUS
ON
THE FAMILY®

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Chapter

1

I TRIED NOT TO HEAR MY NAME being called, tried to just nudge my way through the humid pool room and out to freedom, but the call came again.

“Where’s Tessa? Does anyone know where Tessa is?”

I had to get home, or I’d be late for the party. I couldn’t be late for a party *I* was throwing. But if I didn’t turn around—didn’t do the right thing—I would spend the rest of the night with guilt simmering in my gut. Had my best friend, Mackenzie, been here to witness my moral crisis, she would’ve rolled her eyes and called me Good Girl Tessa.

I gave the double exit doors of the aquatic center one last longing look and then turned. “I’m here.” I waved half-heartedly.

I hadn’t recognized the voice, and I expected to see one of the senior boys or maybe a dad. I had *not* expected the new boy, Abraham.

His dark eyes locked with mine. “You’re Tessa?”

My stomach squirmed. “Yep.”

“Coach wants you.”

Internally, I winced. I’d been here for several hours already. First with my own heats, and then helping wrangle the middle-school swimmers. I needed to get home, rush through my shower, and complete the last-minute tasks for Mackenzie’s going-away party.

Externally, I put on a smile. “Okay, thanks.”

I started back toward the blocks, where I could hear Coach Shauna yelling warm-up instructions to the young swimmers who were about to start their heats.

“I guess there’s girl drama,” Abraham half yelled as I shouldered my way through the crowd of exiting and entering families. I hadn’t expected him to follow me. “And Coach Shauna was like ‘Where’s Tessa? We need Tessa.’ I tried telling her that I’m qualified for girl drama, but she didn’t buy it.”

I laughed. “Should she have bought it?”

“I’m not *un*qualified. I have sisters.”

I squeezed around a group of chattering pool moms and caught a glimpse of why I’d been summoned. Coach Shauna stood with Kayleigh, who at least had her swim cap on—a victory on its own—but was crying with her ropey eight-year-old arms crossed over her chest.

Good thing I hadn’t just walked out the door.

I turned to Abraham and nearly bumped into him. For weeks, the other girls on swim team had been giggling about how cute Abraham Mitra was. He had dusky skin, long, curly eyelashes, and beautiful swim form. He was too flirtatious for my taste, but up close like this his charisma was hard to ignore.

There was no time for being flustered, however. Not when Kayleigh needed me. “My mom has probably been waiting in the parking lot for me for fifteen minutes. I’m gonna go tell her that I can’t leave yet. Can you tell Coach and Kayleigh I’ll be back in one minute?”

“No problem.”

I elbowed through the thickening crowd. These all-ages practice meets were always chaos. For seasoned swimmers like me, this was a chance to practice before the upcoming season and to collect a few community service hours by helping with the younger swimmers. But for parents of new swimmers, even these practice meets appeared to be a cause for premature gray hair and bitten-off nails.

I pushed open the doors and breathed deeply. Even though it was August, the outdoor air felt comparatively cool, and the smell of not-chlorine was welcome.

“Hey, I was just about to come looking for you.”

I startled at the sound of Alex’s voice. “What are you doing here?”

He stood from a metal bench, surprising me all over again by how tall he’d gotten in the last year. For most of our friendship, I’d had the height advantage. “Your mom asked me to pick you up. Didn’t she text you?”

That was weird. Mom had never asked Alex to pick me up before.

“Possibly, but I have no signal in there.” I swung my swim bag around to dig through it for my phone. “Did she say why?”

“She’s busy with party food, I guess.”

“What about my dad?”

Alex replied with a shrug. “She didn’t say.”

“Sorry to interrogate you.” I pulled out my phone and skimmed Mom’s text. “Just says you’d be coming to pick me up. Huh.”

Alex twirled his key fob around his finger. “She didn’t make it sound like it was a big deal or anything was wrong.”

I started to type a response to Mom, realized it didn’t matter right now, and zipped my phone into its waterproof pocket. “Sorry to do this to you, especially when you’ve been sitting out here for who knows how long, but I can’t go yet. You know Kayleigh from

church whose Mom died a few months ago? I don't have time to explain it all now, but she needs me."

"Oh." Alex stopped twirling his fob. "Okay, no problem. I'll just hang out here."

"Alex, you really don't need to. I can walk home. It's not that far."

Alex frowned. "It's a couple of miles. And doesn't the party start at seven?"

"It does, but I take that shortcut trail through the forest—"

He shook his head, and his sandy hair flopped. "I don't want you going that way by yourself."

I rolled my eyes, even as I felt my cheeks heating, touched by his thoughtfulness. "It's well lit the whole way and full of moms and strollers. I'm fine. That's what I usually do, but it was supposed to rain, so Mom said she'd pick me up." I remembered Kayleigh's tear-streaked face and made myself stop explaining. "I have to get back in there. You can come in if you want, or you can go. I promise I can get home fine."

Alex reached past me, grabbed the door handle, and held it open. "I'll come in."

I tried to say, "Okay," in a casual and unaffected voice.

Mackenzie would have something to say about this situation, too. Since middle school, she'd been after me to "make it official" with Alex before other girls snapped him up. I hadn't disagreed . . . but I also hadn't known how I should go about "making it official" with a boy I used to invite to My Little Pony birthday parties. And then freshman year, when he met Leilani, my "snap him up" opportunity had expired.

I turned to Alex and found him wide-eyed, surveying the mess of parents, kids, and swim bags. "I know, it's Crazy Town. You can wait here. I'm gonna be over by the blocks, but I'll be done as soon as possible."

He pointed at my bag. "Want me to take that?"

“Uh, sure.” With a quick smile, I swung it off my shoulder and handed it to him. “Thanks.”

I rushed away, wondering if he was watching me, and trying to remember if I had brushed my hair after my heats. I was pretty sure I hadn't.

The pool deck wasn't quite as crowded now that most parents had either cleared out or found seats, and that made it easier to get back to Kayleigh. Coach Shauna was by the pool, organizing the kids into lanes for warm-ups. Kayleigh was turned to the wall now, and Abraham stood near her looking perplexed. When he spotted me approaching, his relief was clear.

I rested a hand on Kayleigh's trembling shoulder. “Hi, Kayleigh.”

She sniffed but stayed facing the wall. “Hi.” The word barely registered in the muggy room.

“I like your swim cap. It's new, right?”

“The old one pulled at my hair.”

“I used to have one like that. The boys have it easy, huh?”

Beside me, Abraham snorted. “Not *that* easy.”

Kayleigh glanced up at him but kept her arms wrapped around herself, then looked back at the wall. The room echoed with coaches yelling instructions, swimmers splashing into the water, and parents chatting in the stands. The noise was so familiar I hardly noticed it, but I wondered what Alex thought.

“Is your dad here?”

“Yeah.”

Abraham murmured close to my ear, “He was already down here trying to convince her to get in the pool.”

I nodded and asked, “Kayleigh, what stroke did Coach Shauna ask you to swim today?”

She wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “She said I could pick.”

I figured. Early in the summer, right after Kayleigh's mom died, she would come to practice but refuse to get in the water. Her mom

had always been the one to bring her, and even though Kayleigh didn't articulate it, our guess was that swimming without her mom in the bleachers just felt too painful. I knew Kayleigh's family a little bit from going to church together, and I had sat on the edge of the pool with her a number of times, hoping to get her back in the water—until her dad gave up and stopped bringing her.

Since this was Kayleigh's first time at the pool since June, I doubted Coach Shauna would be picky about what or how she swam. At this point, Coach would probably be fine no matter how I got her in the water and down the lane.

Then, my crazy thought bloomed into an actual idea. *Would Coach Shauna go for it? Would Kayleigh be willing to try?*

I turned to Abraham and whispered, "Do you want to stay here with Kayleigh, or do you want to ask Coach Shauna if I can swim warm-ups with her? We'll need a lane to ourselves."

Abraham glanced at Kayleigh's unyielding profile and headed for Coach Shauna. I watched him ask her, and then Coach gave me a thumbs-up and started moving swimmers out of the nearest lane.

I knelt beside Kayleigh. "What if I swam for you?"

She turned her face partly to me. Her blue eyes were bloodshot from crying. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what if I did the swimming, and all you had to do was hold on to me?"

Kayleigh glanced at the pool, where the others on her team were butterflying up or down the lane. "How does that work?"

"Like a piggyback ride. Only since we'll be in the water, it will be more like a mermaid ride."

A smile flickered on her face. "But that's not allowed."

I pointed to the newly emptied lane. "Today it is."

I stripped down to my damp suit and offered my hand to Kayleigh. When she took it, I led her to the edge of the pool.

"I'm going to get in." I crouched close to make sure she heard. "And then you can get on my back."

I knew it was impossible to feel someone looking at you, but it seemed as though the whole room watched to see if today was the day Kayleigh would swim. I tried to push away the thought of Alex watching but found myself glancing at him anyway.

I bobbed a couple of times in the water, letting my body adjust to the cold, and then turned to Kayleigh. She looked down at me, her arms and legs both crossed.

“You don’t have to swim,” I told her. “All you have to do is hold on to me. I’ll swim for you.”

For a moment, I feared she would start crying all over again. But then she slowly lowered herself to the pool’s edge, clasping her knees to her chest.

I held in my excitement, afraid it would freak her out. “There you go. Now let’s just get your feet in the water.”

After a few minutes of coaxing, I had her whole body in the water. Coach Shauna looked like she wanted to do cartwheels on the pool deck.

“Ready to go for a mermaid ride?” I asked.

Kayleigh hesitated, but then nodded. I took her arms, draped them around my shoulders, and then pushed off. We inched down the lane and had only reached the flags when I felt Kayleigh start kicking too.

“Mermaid rides are kinda slow,” she said in my ear. Her voice sounded lighter, almost as if she was teasing me.

“Well, kick harder, then.”

She did. In the lane beside us, kids her age blew by, swimming freestyle. I felt Kayleigh’s head turn to look at them, her body slipping off mine just a bit.

“Carter always beats me at freestyle,” she said as she watched him. In her voice, I could hear that bite of competitiveness that I always felt when in the water. “But not at breaststroke. He still can’t get his feet right.”

“You’re fast at breaststroke,” I said, even though I wasn’t sure. “I bet if we raced to the wall, you could beat me.”

Kayleigh hesitated a moment, and then slipped completely from my back. When she took off, delight surged in my heart. I trailed after her, doing breaststroke at half speed with chlorine burning my eyes and a huge smile on my face.

Kayleigh touched the wall, and every coach stopped what they were doing to cheer for her. A few of the parents joined in, and Kayleigh’s dad was easy to spot now. He was the one standing, wiping his eyes, and applauding with the same gusto as parents of Olympic swimmers who just medaled.