

*Life in
the
Middle*

Stephanie Coleman

RIVERBEND FRIENDS™

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

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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
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Chapter

1

MOM'S TEXT CAME AS IZZY AND I rounded the corner out of the sophomore hallway.

It's final. Can I come pick you up from school? Now?

There was no question about what "it" was. She meant the divorce.

Mom and Dad told me last August that this would happen, and my dad had been living with his girlfriend since then. They even had a baby together a couple months ago. I knew Mom and Dad had signed the papers, and yet I still felt a touch of shock.

I read the text again. I also shouldn't have been surprised that Mom wanted to come pick me up from school. This was exactly the kind of situation I'd been telling Kendra, my therapist, about. Talking to Kendra before I responded to Mom would be a good idea.

"Tessa?" Izzy said from alongside me. "Something wrong?"

"One second," I said as I typed, Mom texted the divorce is final. Can we talk?

I tapped *send*. Not that long ago, I would've told Izzy nothing was wrong. I would've claimed I was fine. But after an entire school year of Izzy and our two other friends, Amelia and Shay, standing by me through my parents' split/separation/divorce, I was getting better at being honest with myself and others and not pretending everything was fine. I hesitated a second before turning my phone screen to her.

"Mom wants to pick me up," I said with a sigh. "Because it probably hasn't occurred to her that it's the last week before finals and I *need* to be at school this week."

Izzy bent closer to read Mom's text. "What does she mean 'it's final'?"

"The divorce. They'd already signed papers, but the court had to put some kind of stamp of approval on it."

Izzy winced. "Stars, Tessa, I'm sorry."

"It's not like I didn't know this was going to happen." I jammed my phone into the side pocket of my leggings as we turned toward the multipurpose room. "But I'm going to talk to Kendra before I respond. This is exactly the kind of situation I was telling her about."

"I wish I had a therapist," Izzy said, pushing her wild, dark brown hair over her shoulder. "Well, I do sometimes meet with Zoe outside of small group to talk about, you know, everything that's happened. But it'd be cool to have a professional counselor give me advice."

I bit my lower lip for a moment as I considered how to respond. I'd resisted therapy for a long time, but I liked Kendra a lot, and it *had* been helpful to talk to someone whose sole focus was on helping me and who wasn't biased toward either of my parents. I'd even felt a little disappointed when Kendra said she thought I was doing great and only needed to come once a month.

My phone vibrated in my pocket with Kendra's response.

Can you call now? I'm available until noon or so.

“It is kind of nice sometimes,” I said. In my head, I added, *Though I’d prefer to have parents who adore each other and not need to be in therapy.* “I wonder if Ms. Larkin will let me make a phone call.”

“I don’t know,” Izzy said. “Ms. Larkin is anti-phones. Maybe use one of your bathroom passes?”

Going to the bathroom at Northside High had become increasingly complicated since spring break and now involved a multitude of rules, thanks to several TikTok trends that led to weird vandalism. Like stealing soap dispensers or emptying the tampon dispensers into the sinks. Mom didn’t allow me to have TikTok on my phone, so I never saw any of these dumb challenge videos firsthand, but I had to suffer the consequences all the same. Now we were allowed two no-longer-than-five-minute trips to the bathroom each day, and we had to sign in and out with our teacher. And we were forbidden from going during passing periods. Teachers stood outside each bathroom and guarded the doorways, like the toilets were crown jewels in a museum. It was ridiculous.

“I think I’ll be honest with her,” I said as I pushed open the door into the multipurpose room where our Drama 1 class met.

How weird that I’d started sophomore year hating this class, feeling like it’d never be over, and now I had only one more week of it. I would miss it a little next year. Not enough that I wanted to sign up for Drama 2, but I would miss Ms. Larkin and the guaranteed time with Izzy, Amelia, and Shay.

The room was in its usual state of pre-bell chaos. Marcus and Chad were doing rock, paper, scissors to see who got to sit in the hot pink stiletto chair. K-pop blared from Jaiden’s phone and she, Amber, and Gage were doing a dance routine on stage. Amelia was reciting her audition piece for a summer production to Shay with such gusto that I could hear it from the door, even above the K-pop.

Ms. Larkin sat at her desk in the back of the classroom, tapping away on her MacBook, seemingly unperturbed by the noise. She'd been gone for a lot of the semester taking care of her sick mother, and it was nice having her calming, supportive presence back in the drama room.

While Izzy secured her phone with the others in the shoe organizer by the door, I kept mine in my side pocket and strutted across the multipurpose room directly toward Ms. Larkin.

She looked up and smiled. "Hello, Tessa. What can I do for you?"

Ms. Larkin was effortlessly lovely, with dark hair to her shoulders and dark eyes. If she wore makeup, it was the enhancing-what-God-already-gave-me variety, and nothing that was super obvious. I hoped I had the same confident aura when I was in my thirties.

I took in a deep breath. "Um, my mom sent me a text about her divorce, and I need to talk to my therapist about how to handle it. Can I make a phone call?"

Ms. Larkin blinked rapidly—the only sign that what I'd said surprised her—and her smile turned to sympathy. "Of course. What about the prop closet backstage? If you can get a signal in there, that should be quiet."

"Okay, thank you."

"Sure."

I considered dropping my backpack off at the black-and-white striped loveseat where I always sat with the girls, but Izzy was looking at me as she talked low and rapidly to Amelia and Shay. I assumed she was filling them in, and if I went over there, I'd have to talk about it. I kept my backpack with me and headed toward the closet backstage.

Kendra answered right away with her characteristic warm voice. "Hello, Tessa. Nice to hear from you."

“Thanks for being available so quickly.” I settled onto a step-ladder beside a shelf full of wigs.

“Of course, what’s going on?”

“Well, like I said in my message, Mom texted that the divorce is final.” To my surprise, my throat cinched shut like a drawstring had been pulled. My eyes glazed with tears, and when I laughed it sounded more like a half sob. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know I was going to cry.”

“That’s a fine thing to cry about.” Kendra said, her voice as gentle and comforting as a fuzzy blanket.

I propped my elbow on my knee and cupped my forehead with my hand. My dark hair fell in sheets around either side of my face. “I’ve known for nearly a year, though. Shouldn’t I be so adjusted to the idea that this feels anticlimactic?”

“You know how I feel about the word *should*.” I could hear Kendra’s smile.

I swallowed hard. “Yes, I know. I was calling because in the same text, Mom said she wants to pick me up from school. Like, right now.”

“Ah. Have you responded yet?”

We’d talked about this more than anything else in the last few sessions—that I needed to separate my feelings from Mom’s feelings. That being supportive of Mom was different than taking responsibility for her.

“No. I texted you right away.”

“I’m glad we’re able to talk about this together. Do you mind walking me through what you’re feeling?”

I blew out a breath. “Lots of things.”

“That’s fine. Tell me about them.”

“Well, upset, obviously. And like my mom needs me and that I should say ‘yes, come pick me up.’ Who better to understand and sit with her than me, right?”

“What else?” Kendra said instead of confirming or denying.

“Well, I also feel like I’m the absolute worst person for her to talk to. And since I have school and finals next week, I need to be here for the review sessions. And maybe I’m also annoyed that she texted me in the first place. Didn’t she think this would upset me? Couldn’t it have waited until after school?” I pulled my phone back from my ear. Eleven fifty-eight. “And I know you have to go at noon.”

“So, in this situation, what belongs to you? What has God given you to control?” Kendra said without any hint of hurry in her voice.

We’d done this enough that I knew how to break it down. I took a deep breath. “I get to control if I respond or not. I get to control what I say.” I paused and thought a moment. “I get to control the decision of whether I’ll leave school or not.” I considered a few seconds longer. “I think that’s it.”

“Okay. Do you want to respond to her?”

“Yes.” I said. “Absolutely.”

“Great. You’ve already made one decision. Are you going to leave school or stay?”

I bit my lower lip for a moment. “I want to stay. I need to prepare for finals.”

“Okay. What do you think is the best way to tell your mom that?”

I closed my eyes, imagining the words in my head. “That I’m sorry, but I can’t. I need to be in class. But we could talk after school, like before her art class and before swimming.”

“I think that sounds good, Tessa. You’re drawing a boundary around your school and swim time, but still communicating that you care about your mom, which I know is important to you.” After a beat, Kendra asked, “Do you know when you come in next? I don’t have my calendar in front of me.”

“I think Wednesday the eighteenth.”

“Okay, does a week from now feel soon enough considering everything going on? If not, I can have Jake call you to set up an appointment for sooner.”

“I think I’m okay.” I was about 50 percent sure that I was telling the truth. “Thank you.”

“Okay. Let me know if you change your mind.”

“I will.”

“See you then, Tessa.”

After Kendra hung up, I sat there in the prop closet for a few minutes, my eyes pressed closed. Oddly, it felt like prayer, even though I wasn’t saying anything. I was sitting. Being silent.

This time last year, my life was basically perfect. Sure, Alex—the boy I had liked for years—was hung up on a different girl, but other than that, life had been pretty sweet. Good friends, good parents, good grades. I had a nice house, a sport I loved and enjoyed, and I thought I’d be celebrating sweet sixteen with a dream trip to Iceland with my dad, who was my hero.

And now . . .

A wry laugh slipped out as I looked at my surroundings. Now I was sitting in the prop closet on the phone with my therapist because my dad had decided to have an affair that had resulted in my half brother, Logan. My best friend for years, Mackenzie, had moved away and tried to commit suicide. Our other friends, who I thought I’d have through high school, were obsessed with partying and now felt like strangers to me.

I’d ended up with the boy after all—Alex and I would celebrate eight months together next week—and I still loved swimming. But those were pretty much the only things still intact from my old, perfect life. That and the house, which was more like a museum for a life I no longer had.

You’ll get me through, God, I whispered as I turned off the lights in the prop closet. *You always have.*