



The Me You See

RIVERBEND FRIENDS

Jill Williamson

RIVERBEND FRIENDS™

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

THE ME YOU SEE

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R I V E R B E N D F R I E N D S ™

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Chapter

1

“PANCAKES AT SEVEN O’CLOCK.”

My eyes flashed open. Someone stood over my bed, looking down. Fire shot through me as my brain put two and two together.

“Sebastian!” I pulled my blankets up to my chin. “No coming in here without knocking!”

“I did knock, Isabella Valadez,” my brother said. “Pancakes at seven o’clock.”

I glanced past Sebastian to the digital clock on my nightstand. It was 7:04. He’d probably been knocking since 7:01.

“I’ll be downstairs in five minutes,” I said.

Sebastian didn’t move. His eyes—such a light brown they were almost hazel—were fixed on my bedspread. My brother didn’t like making eye contact. His normally frizzy curls were wet and tightly matted together. He’d showered and dressed himself already.

“Go downstairs and wait for me, Bash.” I stifled the *¡Abora!* I wanted to tack on. Anger never worked on my brother. I softened

my tone, reminding myself he wasn't trying to annoy me. "Get out the flour and the comal, okay? That will help me make them faster."

"Get out the flour and the comal. Make them faster." Sebastian wandered out of my room, leaving the door gaping.

"Sebastian!" I yelled after him. "Shut the door behind you. *¿Por favor?*"

He stepped back into the open doorway. "Okay, yes, Isabella Valadez. Shut the door behind me." He turned his back to the door, reached behind him, and closed it.

My head fell back against my pillow. My brother was the most *impaciente* person in the world. He was twelve, but because he had autism, my parents acted like our move last summer nullified Sebastian's independence. Now that we lived in a city, they said someone had to always be watching him. Since Mamá and Papi both worked full-time, Leo was in college, and Claire had robotics *and* a job, that someone was usually me.

I lay under the warm covers, wishing I could doze another hour or three. Captain Marvel gazed at me from the poster on my wall. My whole family was obsessed with the franchise, but with her intelligence, strength, and kindness, Captain Marvel was my favorite. *How would she handle a brother like mine?* No question there. She'd get up and make the kid breakfast. After checking her cell phone, of course. There could be an important message from Nick Fury.

I reached for my phone. Checking it was the first thing I did each morning. I had to know what was going on out there—what I was missing. Cyber-stalk my crushes. All the important aspects of a girl's life.

To my great disappointment, there was nothing going on. At least not with my squad. They'd been gone all winter break. They were still gone. And I was still here with Sebastian. Every day. Making him pancakes for breakfast and peanut butter and honey

sandwiches for lunch. Wishing I could go someplace where people my age were hanging out. Cute people. Boy people.

With that thought, I thumbed over to Cody Nichols's Instagram. He lived at the end of my street and was the whitest white boy I'd ever crushed on. I couldn't help it. He was a total Captain America with peachy skin, blond hair, and the sweetest brown eyes. Sadly, Cody had friend-zoned me from day one. He friend-zoned everyone. I don't think he actually dated. Cody never posted on his feed, but he usually had a story up. Nothing today, though.

Next up was Zac Lloyd's page. His real name was Isaac, but everyone called him Zac. He was a senior and a white boy, too, but he was so tan his skin was as brown as mine. We'd make a striking entrance to prom. He was super hunky. I'd started saying *hunky* after watching an '80s movie with my mom. It made me laugh at the time, but now I think it's perfect for describing boys like Zac. Especially since he looked a lot like Matt Cornett, who played E. J. on *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*, which was my current favorite because, duh, #musicals. Zac was on my sister's robotics team and ran track, but his most notable trait was something I called "The Dazzle." Zac had the most incredible hazel eyes that sparkled. All. The. Time. When those hazel eyes were directed at someone—even accidentally, which had happened to me twice, swoon—they had the power to captivate. Think Flynn Rider's smolder, only I didn't think Zac could control it. It was simply who he was.

I have crushed on Zac ever since I first laid eyes on him at church. He attended sporadically with his dad. Multiple times I've tried to calendar his appearances without success. So far stalking his social media was the best I could do to chase after the man I loved.

Actually, I thought he had a girlfriend, so there was that little problem too.

Oh. And also, the fact that he didn't know I was alive. But I

was a glass-three-quarters-full kind of girl, so I didn't count those things as obstacles against our future marriage.

He, too, rarely posted pics of his face, which I found somewhat annoying. Last night he'd posted a football meme I totally didn't get. Me and sports don't mesh so well. I lingered a bit, gazing at the two pics in his feed that actually showed his face and those mesmerizing eyes.

I closed out of Instagram and was about to thumb over to Snapchat, when I remembered I didn't have time. In about three minutes Sebastian would return to demand his breakfast. I sighed and rolled out of bed, knocking about a dozen stuffed animals onto the floor. I shoved my feet into my monkey slippers, put on my bathrobe, and padded downstairs.



"Pancakes at seven o'clock," Sebastian said when I finally placed a plate of five pancakes in front of him. "It's 7:28, Isabella Valadez."

"Sorry to disappoint you, bro," I said, fetching the honey and the butter dish. I set them on the table in front of his plate. "I worked as fast as I could." Considering I'd been dead asleep twenty-four minutes ago, I thought I'd done rather well.

Scowling, Sebastian reached for the honey. He must have been starving because normally he would have reminded me of my error another three times before letting it rest.

My little brother's brain worked differently from mine. His brain liked things done on schedules. His brain took your words literally and did everything possible to hold you to them. Thankfully, his brain also liked pancakes. My nana always said the way to a man's heart was through excellent pancakes. I guess that meant little brothers too.

I returned to the stove and started my own short stack, adding an array of chocolate chips to each one and popping a few

in my mouth while they cooked. Sebastian occupied, I checked Snapchat—which was barren. I scrolled through Instagram again, liking several foodie pics from some of my favorite bakestagrammers: cookie dough cupcakes from @cakenessbakeness and some adorable hedgehog cupcakes from @tastytreats56. I liked those so much I took a screenshot so I could make them for Shay. She was the only one of my squad who appreciated animal-themed cupcakes. Tessa wasn't picky about her cupcakes but preferred chocolate-peanut butter anything. And Amelia? I once made her a banana crême cupcake that she liked so much she stood up in the middle of the cafeteria and sang "Food, Glorious Food" from *Oliver!* at the top of her lungs. That was Amelia. Loud and ostentatious but extremely lovable.

By the time I shut off the burner, Sebastian had finished his food and was lost in the world of dragons. He was obsessed with the Wings of Fire series and had read the books at least five times. *I should probably grab his plate and clean up my cooking mess.* Instead, I carried my food to the living room couch, burrowed under a blanket, and ate my breakfast.

Pancakes never used to be on the menu in the Valadez household until we'd moved to Riverbend, which was where my papi grew up. He was third-generation Mexican American, so his mamá cooked way more American dishes than my Abuelita Ortiz. Nana Valadez had always made pancakes when we spent the night at her house, and Sebastian loved them so much, they'd become our daily breakfast ritual.

I slid my fork across my sticky plate and scooped up my last bite. The bittersweet, buttery goodness melted in my mouth. So yum.

I pressed my cell's home button. Nothing. Not one answer from all the texts I'd sent out yesterday. *Where was everybody?*

Dumb question. I knew exactly where my friends were. Shay had been busy helping her aunt at the bookstore up until Christmas Eve. Then she'd gone to her grandparents' and wasn't returning

until the day before school started. Amelia practically lived at her church during the holidays. If she wasn't helping run something or performing something, she was babysitting or sitting in the audience. Now that Christmas was over, she was off visiting her humongous extended family. And Tessa, the one person I could usually count on seeing at least twice a week at church, had gone skiing with her mom. Skiing. The mere idea of so much athleticism made me shudder.

What I didn't understand was why they weren't texting me back. All those places had cell service.

Christmas used to be my favorite holiday. When we'd lived in Williamsport, the whole town had celebrated Christmas with caroling hayrides, truck parades, and holiday bazaars. After Christmas, we would go to Posen to stay with Abuelita and Abuelito Ortiz until Three Kings' Day. Mamá's parents were Catholic and celebrated Christmas differently than we did. I loved it because it always felt like having two Christmases. Now we lived too far away to drive up for Three Kings' Day. Besides, Mamá had to work at the clinic. Always.

Riverbend hadn't been completely void of celebrations, though. I'd gone to four bazaars and the tree lighting downtown, but I'd gone alone. By myself. There ought to be a law against that. I'd wanted to spend the break with my squad, but everyone was too busy. So I'd resorted to binge-watching YouTube cooking videos and *Cupcake Wars* on Netflix.

I did have two fun things happen. Zoe, a youth leader at my church, had hosted a girls' night at her apartment. With Tessa out of town, I'd hung out with Lauren, another sophomore, and Becky and Morgan, two eighth graders who volunteered with me in the church nursery. Zoe made us watch *Anne of Green Gables*, a super-long old movie that turned out to be pretty chill. I also went out last Saturday to the bookstore Shay's aunt owned and read to the kids, but that had been the extent of my adventuring.

Thankfully, winter break was almost over. I'd be with my people again soon.

I grabbed the remote control and clicked on the TV. Noise burst from the speakers. I jumped—panicked—and fumbled for the mute button as the blaring sounds of *Cupcake Wars* assaulted our ears.

“Sorry!” I called out, but it was too late. Sebastian went into ambulance mode, which was what I called his high-pitched wail. He shoved his book off the table and kicked it, sending it gliding over the floor until it smacked against the back door.

I managed to press mute, and the room went silent but for my brother's howling. Sebastian had two moods: good and bad. He could flip from one to the other with little provocation. Loud or sudden noises were one of his triggers, which was why we usually watched TV muted with subtitles. I don't know who had put the volume up that loud, but if I ever found out, I would make the offender do the chicken dance and post it on Instagram.

I watched my brother carefully. He was standing by the kitchen table, moaning, palms over his ears, fingers curved around his head. His elbows touched in front of his face like a large beak. I called it *elbow face*. At least his volume had subsided.

“Tell me about Marvel, Bash,” I said.

He rocked from foot to foot, and for a minute I thought he was going to ignore me. Then he wandered my way, still in elbow-face mode, and began to mumble, “*Iron Man*, May 2, 2008. *The Incredible Hulk*, June 13, 2008.” Whenever Bash got stressed, I tried to get him to list the Marvel movies by year. He had an excellent memory for facts, and reciting them calmed him down.

He edged closer and then passed by the couch, headed for the baby grand piano. He didn't play—hated the sound of the piano, actually—but sitting underneath was his favorite place to play video games. Sure enough, he let go of his ears and crouched, continuing to say his Marvel movies.

“*Iron Man 2*, May 7, 2010. *Thor*, May 6, 2011.” He crawled to his spot beneath the piano, sat cross-legged, and picked up his Nintendo Switch. As it loaded, he continued to recite. “*Captain America: The First Avenger*, July 22, 2011. *The Avengers*, May 4, 2012. *Iron Man 3*, May 3, 2013.”

I relaxed, proud of my brother. He used to be so much harder to deal with, but his new teachers here in Riverbend were helping him learn to manage his own behavior. They believed he could learn independence to be able to one day care for himself and live and work in society. I was all for that. I loved my brother, but I did *not* want to babysit him for the rest of my life.

I picked up my phone and thumbed my way back to Instagram. Zoe had posted a picture of herself on the balcony of her apartment, Bible in lap, Cookie Monster coffee mug in hand. I’d have to make her a Cookie Monster cupcake sometime. The thought came to me that I might have turned off my notifications on Snapchat, so I went to check. No notifications popped up, which made me sure there must be something wrong. But when I got to the settings, I was let down again. They were on. I just hadn’t received any Snaps.

Whhhyy? Where was everyone?

The question inspired me. I found a picture of an adorable, frowning puppy and snapped to all of my followers, “Where is everyone?” Inspired by my misery and hoping to draw some pity comments at the very least, I crafted a similar post for my Instagram stories.

There. Maybe now someone would connect.

Cupcake Wars ended, and I made myself grab my plate and get off the couch. I abhorred cleaning, but I grabbed Sebastian’s plate and carried both plates to the sink—actually rinsed them off and put them in the dishwasher. I stood there, annoyed that I was even thinking about washing the batter bowl.

“We love you, Miss Hannigan!”

Panic spiraled through me as my custom text message alert

blasted from my phone, along with a small thrill of hope. I desperately wanted to hear from just about anyone, but I did not want to send Sebastian into ambulance mode again. As I ran to the living room, I practically tripped over my own feet. I slid across the hardwood floor in my monkey slippers, snatched up the phone, and swiped just as Sebastian said, “Text message, Isabella Valadez!”

“Thank you,” I said.

I silenced my phone, thankful my text alert hadn’t been loud enough to throw him. My older brother, Leo, had loaded a bunch of Broadway musical ringtones onto my phone last year for my birthday. Best present ever. *Annie* was one of my favorite movies, and the “*We love you, Miss Hannigan!*” line was short enough to make a good text alert. I liked my ringtone better—it was a couple of lines from “I Feel Pretty” from *West Side Story*—but no one ever called me. Everyone texted. So I heard the *Annie* line most often.

I checked my messages. Seeing *Mamá* at the top of the text was a total letdown.

Mamá: Need to stay late. Can you start dinner?

These days my mamá always worked late, but I never shied away from an opportunity to cook. I texted back: Sure 😊

Mamá: Was going to make mole. There’s some chicken in the freezer. If you take it out, it should thaw in time. You can use the instant pot too.

Me: I’m on it. 😊😊

Mamá: Thanks, Mija. Sebastian ok?

Me: He’s playing video games

Mamá: Ok. Hasta luego.

Me: Love u

Mamá: Love you too.

Authentic mole took about two hours from start to finish, but the Instant Pot could make a cheater mole that still tasted great.

Abuelita Ortiz would never approve of such methods, but she didn't have to eat it.

I set my phone alarm for 3:30 to remind me when to get started, then went to the kitchen to do the prep work. I found the chicken in the freezer and pulled it out. I washed my hands and put the chicken in a bowl to thaw in the fridge. Then I grabbed the mole paste from the cupboard and started the sauce. Mole paste on its own never tastes quite right, so I put the paste in the blender and then added half a chopped onion, chunks of dark chocolate, a garlic clove, tomato puree, sesame seeds, raisins, salted peanuts, and a couple of cans of chicken stock. I pureed this until it was smooth and then set it in the fridge too. Later, I'd put the chicken in the Instant Pot, pour on the mole sauce, and set the pot cooking.

That done, I went back to my spot on the couch and started another episode of *Cupcake Wars*. The show had barely begun when Sebastian started screeching.

I ran to the piano and knelt so I could see him. He had his hands over his ears and was rocking back and forth like a bobble-head, his Switch on his lap.

"What's wrong, bud?" I asked, grabbing the Switch.

"Lost!" Sebastian yelled.

The screen was black. I pressed the power button and it started up. "Did it crash?"

"Lost, lost!"

It annoyed Sebastian how the auto save function in *Minecraft* froze his game while he was building, and he had a bad habit of turning it off. Every once in a while the game crashed, and Sebastian would lose days of work. He was building the Avengers tower, and he'd been at it since before Thanksgiving.

Sebastian rolled onto his knees and shoved me.

"¡Ay!" I said, righting myself.

He crawled past and ran toward the stairs.

I set the Switch back on its charger, then climbed out from under the piano. I grabbed the *Wings of Fire* book and headed upstairs. I found Bash in his room, under the blankets on his bed, rocking and moaning. From the weird shape of his head under the blankets, I could tell he was in elbow-face mode. He thankfully hadn't started destroying the place. Wailing and kicking his book like he had this morning were mild reactions compared to a full-blown episode. It had been a while since we'd seen the kind of destructive behavior from him when he broke things and injured others.

"Tell me about Marvel," I said.

The groaning switched to a growl.

I decided to give it a try, though I was always wrong on purpose since he couldn't stand it and had to correct me. "Let's see . . . *Iron Man*, May 20, 2010."

"No!"

I fought back a smile and went on. "*The Incredible Hulk*, June 3, 1992, I think?"

"Wrong, Isabella Valadez. Wrong, wrong, wrong."

"Then came *Guardians of the Galaxy*, right? But I can't remember the date."

Sebastian started to speak in a rush. "*Iron Man*, May 2, 2008. *The Incredible Hulk*, June 13, 2008. *Iron Man 2*, May 7, 2010 . . ."

As he went on, I stayed put, watching and waiting. That he was still under the covers meant he wasn't pushing or biting me, which was a major pro. I still had a scar on my hand from an episode he'd had three years ago.

". . . *Thor*, May 6, 2011. *Captain America: The First Avenger*, July 22, 2011 . . ." When he was done reciting them all, he pulled the blanket off his head, revealing tousled hair and red eyes. He was grinning, though, so I figured we'd made it through. Again.

"You did it," I said. "Bash, you're so smart."

He grinned. "I did it, Isabella Valadez. I am so smart."

I held up his book and smiled. “Wings of Fire?”

“Okay, yes. Wings of Fire.” He snatched the book and opened it. I waited another ten seconds and then slipped from his room and back downstairs, relieved I’d gotten off easy twice today.