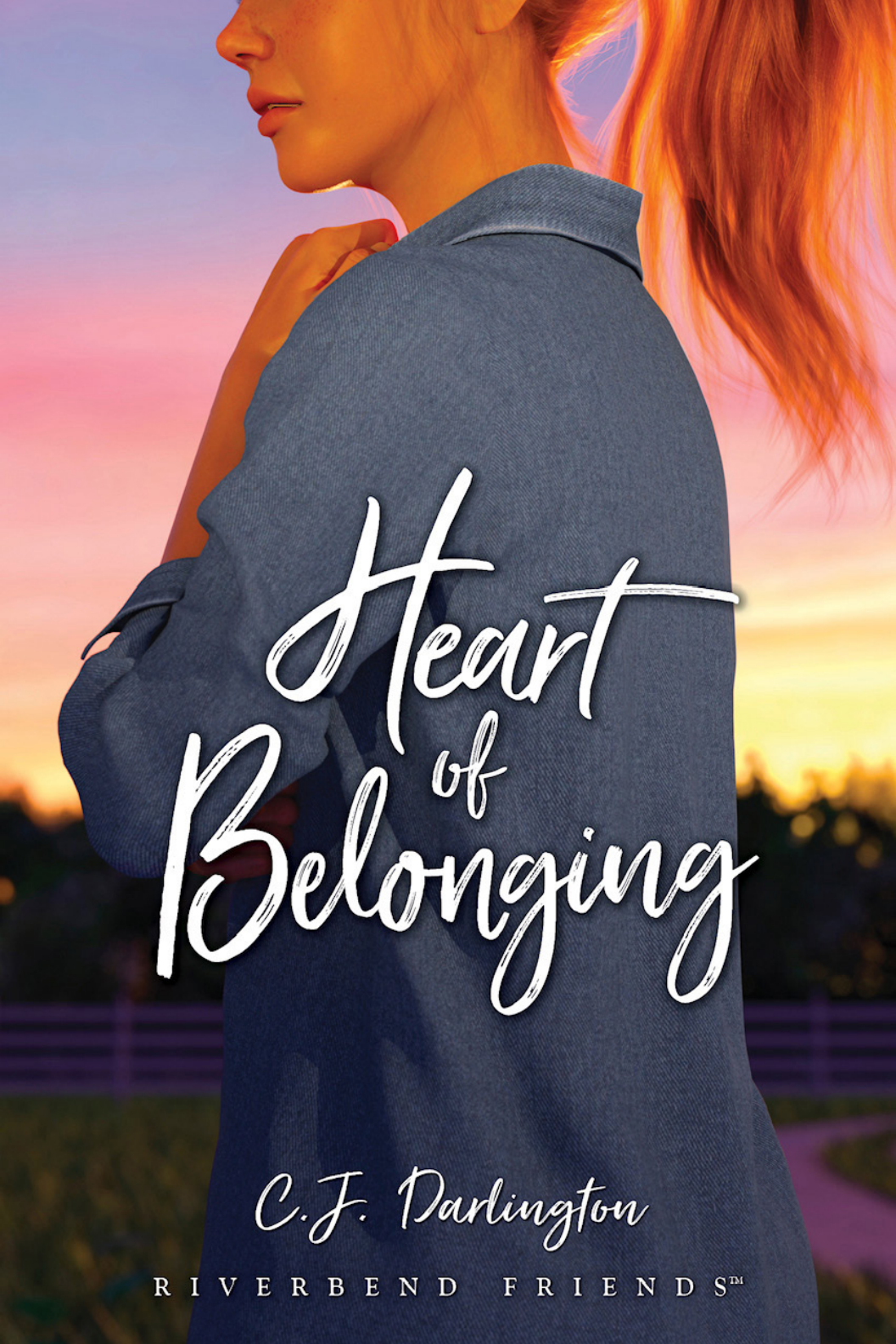
Heart of Belonging
C.J. Darlington
RIVERBEND FRIENDS™

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

HEART OF BELONGING

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RIVERBEND FRIENDS™

C. F. Darlington

CREATED BY

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FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

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For Vicki and Amy,
two dear friends who pulled me through.
Thank you from the bottom of my heart for loving
on me when I had nothing to give. Hope to have
you guys in my life for many years to come!

Chapter 1

I THOUGHT THAT FINDING OUT who my real father was would change my life. It did. Just not how I expected.

Mason King. My biological father. Knowing I shared blood with a famous horse trainer made me want to work with horses even more, if that were even possible. I had *always* been the crazy horse girl wearing cowboy boots and going to school smelling like a barn—long before I knew Mason King was my father. Now I might actually have a chance to be the horsewoman I'd always dreamed of. After all, I had it in my *genes*.

That has to mean something, right?

At least that's what I told myself when it was the middle of July and I was sweating like a pig while cleaning out horse stalls. I jammed the manure fork under a pile of fresh horse dung and sifted it from the pellet bedding lining the stall floor. The back of my T-shirt was already damp, and it was only eight in the morning. I grinned as I dumped the manure into the wheelbarrow outside the stall. Oh yeah. I was living the dream.

"Water break?"

Janie, the owner of Green Tree Farm—the barn where I'd been working for the past few months—appeared outside the stall, waving a bottle of Dasani water. The fifty-something woman always reminded me of a bulldog—short, stout, and harmless. She handed me the bottle, which must've come from her fridge. Condensation was building up on the plastic.

I eagerly unscrewed the cap and gulped down several icy swallows that almost made my throat cramp. "Thanks."

"Where's Sarah?" Janie asked.

"Didn't show," I said, setting the water bottle on the ground outside the stall and getting back to work. The horses should've been brought in a half hour ago, and I was going as fast as I could to get the stalls cleaned out. In summer, we turned the horses out overnight and brought them inside in the morning. And whoever did turnout last night should've cleaned out their stalls but hadn't.

"You did all this yourself?"

I nodded. Fourteen stalls. I was on the last one.

"Good work," Janie said.

I smiled. My boss could sometimes be gruff, like the bulldog she resembled, so I ate up any encouragement she offered, the way horses eat their grain.

"By the way, I believe your fan club is here," Janie said, chuckling. "I'll make my way back to the house."

"Shay!"

I startled at the exuberant greeting that came from across the barn and looked up to see three teen girls running toward us. I blinked. Tessa, Izzy, and Amelia were all smiles as they rushed over, loosing a cloud of excited energy through the barn.

"Hey, Shay!" Izzy giggled, her wild, curly hair bouncing a little. She was always amused at how that greeting rhymed.

I stepped out of the stall.

"Oh my gosh." Amelia groaned and stepped back, holding her nose. "You stink!"

"That's what you get for surprising me," I said with a huge smile of my own.

Tessa slipped her mirror aviator sunglasses onto the top of her head and patted my shoulder. "I'd give you a hug, but . . ." she said with a laugh, blatantly scanning me up and down. "I hope it was okay to stop in. I know how much you like surprises."

"You guys can surprise me any time."

"Whoa." Amelia raised her hands like she wanted me to back up. "Did I just hear Shay Mitchell say she is okay with surprises?"

"Only from you three." I grinned. "Don't press your luck." But she was right to find my reaction strange. I was usually the introverted girl who needed time to switch gears if plans changed, but these friends had caused that reluctant part of me to wither in a very good way. I was still shy, especially in unfamiliar situations, but I was more willing to try new things with them around. Being accepted for who you are can change you like that.

When I first moved to Riverbend to live with my aunt Laura above her indie bookstore, Booked Up, I was a shell of who I'd been before my adoptive dad died. Grief changes you too. I was continually amazed that these girls knew my biggest secret—a short stint I'd spent in juvie—and they still wanted to be friends. We were as different from each other as our fingerprints, but somehow we complemented each other so well, we were able to make a friendship work.

Tessa had such a kind and gentle manner. She stood firm in her convictions, yet she could be tripped up by her perfectionistic tendencies. She was harder on herself than anyone else, but she had been trying to work on that. Her organization and athleticism made her my go-to if I ever needed someone to help me make sense of my scattered thoughts or move a piece of furniture.

Amelia was probably the most spontaneous, dramatic, and

boisterous person I'd ever met. Fierce. She wouldn't let anyone tell her she couldn't or shouldn't do something. Watching her step boldly forward encouraged me to take risks, speak up, and think outside the box—at least once in a while.

Just thinking about Izzy made me laugh and get warm fuzzies inside. She'd made it her mission to "catch Shay up on the century" by introducing me to pop culture movies from the past and fun shows on Netflix. (Her favorite show is now mine. *Of course* it's about a girl who takes in horses with problems and by the end of the episode has diagnosed—and fixed—their problems.) And her love of animals, her cheerfulness, and her cupcakes were often exactly what I needed to bring me out of a darker mood.

Yeah, we were good for each other. I could only hope I brought something positive to each of them.

Then I got a whiff of my sweaty shirt. "Ugh, you're right. I do stink."

"Well," Amelia said, pointing at a blob on my jeans, "that might have something to do with it. Is that horse . . . poop?"

I didn't even have to look where she pointed. "Yep," I said.

"That would explain it." Amelia looked into the stall, which had brown piles of digested grass still waiting to be scooped. "Aren't you supposed to be done by now?"

I sighed. "Yeah."

"We'll help," Izzy said.

"You don't have to."

Izzy ignored me and grabbed a manure fork. Before I could protest any further, she was picking out the last few piles in the stall and laughing again. Her personality and the fact that she was a middle child sometimes allowed her to see humor in things that I, an only child, didn't. But Izzy's laughter was always contagious. It was all I could do to keep from cracking a grin.

I playfully smacked her arm. "Oh, stop."

Amelia reached hesitantly for the broom leaning against the stall, like it was contaminated with Covid. "Yep, we're helping you."

None of them were dressed for barn work in their shorts and tees, and Tessa and Izzy wore flip-flops. Izzy didn't seem to care. Tessa was more uncertain and seemed to be watching her step so her foot didn't land in something mushy.

Izzy grabbed the handles of the manure cart. "We're kidnapping you after we're done."

"Wait . . . what?" I said.

"Where's this go?" she asked without answering me.

I told her where the manure pile was located, and Izzy pushed the heavy cart toward the open barn door. The cart was filled to the top, and she was using all her body weight to get it going. Yet she didn't complain. Izzy couldn't have any pets because her brother was allergic, and anytime she got to be around animals, she was as happy as a duck in a rainstorm. If it were up to her, she'd probably have a house full of anything with four legs. Or even three legs. I sometimes joked that she probably wouldn't be friends with me if I didn't have a dog and cat.

"Ice cream!" Izzy suddenly shouted over her shoulder. "We're taking you to get ice cream."

I gave the other girls a quizzical look.

"A new ice cream shop just opened downtown," Tessa explained. "Mom and I went, and it's *uh-mazing*."

Amelia swept the aisle vigorously, stirring dust, hay, and who knew what else into the air. "How could you miss it, Shay? It's like a block from you."

Tessa and I watched Amelia's wild sweeping for a second until she noticed us staring and stopped. Tessa coughed. Amelia cocked her head like her Labradoodle sometimes did, and I lost it. It wasn't the first time my friend's gesture sent me into a laughing fit.

"What?" Amelia asked, clueless as usual about why we were amused. She touched her head. "Is it my hair?"

"No, no," I said. "Your hair is fine." Last year she'd rashly decided to chop off her beautiful long, curly, reddish hair into a pixie cut in an attempt to get the role of Peter in the musical *Peter Pan*. She'd regretted the decision almost immediately and was still self-conscious about how long it was taking to grow out.

"The head tilt," I said.

Amelia rolled her eyes. She'd heard this from me before.

"You do everything with such . . ." Tessa made a general motion with her hand. "Panache."

"Oh!" I said. "I have to bring the horses in!"

Izzy parked the empty cart and clapped her hands together. "Can I help?"

I pointed at her now-dusty flip-flops, shaking my head. It wasn't safe to be around horses in anything but boots, at least if you could help it. One accidental stomp, and Izzy's toes could be broken.

"Guys, my aunt needs me back at the store. I can't do ice cream."

"No, she doesn't," Tessa said.

Amelia started singing a crazy mishmash, made-up song about ice cream, wearing shoes around horses, and freedom from work. She sang like she was a rock star, and the broomstick became her microphone. The barn aisle was instantly transformed into her stage. But then, pretty much anywhere could be a stage for Amelia.

"We texted her," Tessa said.

"She said it was okay," Izzy agreed and began to dance to Amelia's song. My goodness, my friends could be silly. I wished I could just let go of my shyness and join in.

Tessa grabbed my shoulders from behind and pushed me toward the other open barn door, where the pastures were located. "Horses, Shay."

I jogged out to the first gate, where six geldings waited. The

flies were already starting to bother the animals even though they wore fly masks, which were mesh coverings that went over their eyes and ears. Flies were merciless in the summer, especially in the day—another reason we turned the horses out at night from May to September.

As I led the horses in, my friends hung over the corral gates to watch. Izzy was completely unable to keep quiet and sounded like she was watching fireworks. "That one is so pretty. Wowww. That one's mane is beautiful!"

As Izzy *oohed* and *aahed*, I considered again what a gift it was to have friends teaching me to believe it was okay to just be me—Shay Mitchell, the crazy horse girl.