



*Searching
for
Normal*

RIVERBEND FRIENDS

C.J. Darlington

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

RIVERBEND FRIENDS™

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

SEARCHING FOR NORMAL

Searching for Normal

R I V E R B E N D F R I E N D S ™

C. J. Darlington

CREATED BY

Lissa Halls Johnson

FOCUS
ON
THE FAMILY®

A Focus on the Family Resource
Published by Tyndale House Publishers

Searching for Normal

Copyright © 2021 by Focus on the Family. All rights reserved.

A Focus on the Family book published by Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188

Focus on the Family and the accompanying logo and design are federally registered trademarks and *Riverbend Friends* is a trademark of Focus on the Family, 8605 Explorer Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80920.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Ministries

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of Focus on the Family.

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Cover design by Mike Harrigan

The characters and events in this story are fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

For manufacturing information regarding this product, please call 1-800-323-9400.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

ISBN 978-1-58997-705-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data can be found at www.loc.gov.

Printed in the United States of America

27 26 25 24 23 22 21
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter

1

I WISHED MY GRANDMOTHER would yell at me. Or say *something*. Even a scolding about how I needed to stop slouching or speak up or quit being so sensitive would've been better than the icy silence that filled the SUV. So I stayed quiet too, watching the green street signs pass by us in the darkness and listening to the squeaky windshield wipers keep rhythmic time. Grams didn't have to say a word to convey her disappointment. The silence screamed what she couldn't say: *Shay Mitchell, you're a loser.*

I glanced over at the older woman, her graying hair coiffed and styled like she was heading to a gala at the country club rather than pawning off her granddaughter. I'd been staying off and on with my Aunt Laura since school started, but now it was going to be official. My grandparents had made that very clear. Screw up like I had, and you end up alone. Or at least out of their house.

When we were nearly at the bookstore my aunt owned, I almost spoke up. Wouldn't speaking my mind be better than holding everything inside? That's what my friend Amelia would definitely

say. And Izzy and Tessa would probably agree too, though Tessa might at least understand why I was regularly labeled shy. But people who called me that usually didn't understand I was often quiet just because it sometimes took me a while to figure out what I wanted to say. By the time I did, everyone else had usually moved on. I wasn't antisocial. I just needed to socialize with the right people. People who got me. Unfortunately, most didn't.

"Did you pack your Bible?"

I closed my eyes for a second before waving toward the back seat currently loaded with my meager belongings. "I packed *everything*."

"Well, you seem to have forgotten *everything* your dad taught you."

In my heart I tried to remember that even though I'd lost my dad six months ago, she'd lost her only son. Her callousness made sense, but it didn't hurt any less.

"Your aunt's sacrificing a lot to take you in."

Like Grams hadn't told me that about a million times in the last week.

I shrugged.

My grandmother shook her head.

About the sum of our relationship these days. I could barely remember the fun Christmases where we'd trek to the tree farm and cut down our own tree and my grandfather made his famous eggnog even my dad couldn't replicate. Or every year on my birthday when we'd all go camping with the horses.

I rubbed the small scar hidden under my hairline. I wanted to say I was sorry for the trouble I'd caused them, and how I wished things were different. I would do anything to go back and change what happened. But instead, I did what I always did—I kept it all inside.

Grams turned into the back parking lot of Booked Up, and a burst of adrenaline flickered across my chest. I actually liked

my aunt, mostly because she left me alone a lot of the time. This nervousness was rooted at a deeper level. I'd never really thrived on uncertainty or the unknown. That was for people like my dad, the brilliant artist and book-cover designer by day and adrenaline junkie by night. Dad had *skydive over every continent* plastered at the top of his bucket list. *Had* being the operative word.

I climbed out of the SUV and opened the back door, grabbing my overfilled suitcase and duffel bag. It was still raining, but I didn't really care.

Grams carefully unfurled her umbrella before stepping out. "Shay, your hair!"

I shrugged again. My hair was the least of my concerns pretty much every day. A little water wouldn't hurt it.

I made two wet trips from the SUV to the bookstore storeroom before Grams found Aunt Laura somewhere in the store. She knew we were coming, but I didn't expect her to be waiting. Despite the fact that she was a successful entrepreneur in her thirties, my aunt was late to nearly everything. It would almost be an endearing quality if it didn't mean that I ended up late everywhere too.

Aunt Laura rushed into the storeroom behind my grandmother, tucking strands of her shoulder-length, wavy dark hair behind her ears. She'd dyed a thin strip of it red, and today she rocked the professional, entrepreneurial-woman look in skinny jeans and a blazer. I glanced down at my own worn jeans and cowboy boots. One small positive. Maybe some of her style would rub off on me.

"Sorry," Aunt Laura said. "Lost track of the time."

I managed a smile. My grandmother did not.

Aunt Laura took my duffel from me and gave me a quick pat on the shoulder. No hug, which also didn't surprise me. Physical affection was a scarce commodity with my aunt, though not because she didn't care. Hugs just weren't her thing.

"I'll catch up with you," Aunt Laura said to me.

Which meant she and my grandmother wanted to talk about me.

I started to walk away still lugging my suitcase, but then I hesitated as a twinge of sadness touched me. My grandmother and I might not be on the best of terms, but she was still my grandmother.

“See ya, Grams,” I said.

But my grandmother had already turned her back.



The bookstore smelled like paper and French roast coffee, and even though my suitcase had wheels, I chose to carry it. At seven o'clock the place was crowded, and I hated the attention the noisy wheels would bring. I could've used the outside entrance to get to my aunt's apartment above the bookstore, but I didn't relish carrying luggage up a flight of slippery wooden stairs. So through the bookstore I went, hoping to avoid eye contact with customers.

I weaved my way around a woman perusing the shelves of used books, a dripping umbrella hanging from her hand. Aunt Laura would lose it if she saw that. It was going to stain the—

“Shay!”

I almost pretended I didn't hear the girl calling my name.

“Hey, Shay!” another girl called.

I reluctantly turned toward the voices. It wasn't that I didn't care about my friends. I just didn't want them to see me like this. I felt too raw, and I was carrying a suitcase. All of them already thought I lived with my aunt since I'd stayed with her a few times when my grandparents vacationed at their cabin. I'd never corrected their assumptions.

I quickly tucked my suitcase beside an endcap displaying Jane Austen classics and walked over to the alcove with the love seat and beanbag chairs my friends always snagged when they were here.

That's when I remembered all the Snapchat notifications I'd gotten earlier and had neglected to check. They'd probably been trying to wrangle me into one of their outside-of-class drama team meetings.

"Didn't you get my message?" Amelia waved her phone in my direction, pulling her purple-yoga-pant-clad leg underneath herself on the love seat.

Note to self: Remind her not to leave her phone in the bookstore. Amelia notoriously forgot the thing everywhere, and I didn't want to have to remember to bring it to school tomorrow.

"Um . . . no." I pulled my phone from my back pocket. Yep. At least ten notifications.

I hadn't been very involved with social media before I met these girls, and while it was kinda fun to actually have friends to interact with, there were times I wanted to turn my phone completely off and curl up with a good book. Sometimes I did.

"What if we'd really needed to reach you?" Amelia's eyebrows cocked. She reminded me of her family's Labradoodle—bouncy, boisterous, and ready to have a good time. I envied her zest for life.

"This is Shay we're talking about," Izzy chimed in, leaning backward in her beanbag chair to stare up at me. I spotted a copy of *Martha Stewart's Cookie Perfection* in her lap and hoped I might soon be on the receiving end of one of her baking experiments. Even Izzy's cooking rejects were culinary delights to me.

"Admit it. You hate your phone," Amelia said.

Normally I didn't mind their teasing. It made me feel like they cared about me. And I *did* dislike technology, but today I didn't feel like pretending I was happy. I glanced at Tessa, who shared the love seat with Amelia, holding a coffee cup with both hands. She was the only one of us who drank coffee and liked it. It unnerved me how she could usually tell when I was uncomfortable, but today I hoped she did and could steer the others onto topics that didn't involve me.

"I'm no Luddite," I said and immediately wished I hadn't.

Sometimes I used big words from my reading habits, often pronounced incorrectly. I didn't even think about it, but I hoped they didn't assume I was trying to sound smarter than them, because that was totally not the case. All of my friends got better grades than I did.

Amelia cocked her head. "Lu . . . what?"

Izzy pecked at her phone with her index finger. "Bingo! Dictionary app, girls. I need it with these two." She pointed at Tessa and me. "Luddite means . . . hold on . . . 'a person opposed to new technology or ways of working.'"

All three of them laughed.

"You were saying, Shay?"

"Okay, okay." I couldn't help but join in.

"So." Amelia scooted to the edge of the love seat, clapping her hands together. "We're talking about a Christmas play."

Tessa took a sip from her mug. "We?"

"I'm telling you, it will be fun!"

"But we just finished the One Act," I said.

"Exactly!" Amelia waved her hand in the air. "We're on a roll."

"I don't—"

"Shay, come on. You gotta help me out here."

Izzy picked up her cookbook, flipping through the pages. "I'm staying out of this."

I took a deep breath and crossed my arms. I'd only taken Intro to Drama because I was required to take a fine arts class, and it was the only one that fit my schedule. I didn't hate creativity or the arts per se, but I honestly hated performing in front of anyone. Even my friends. They had to know that by now. I was the weakest link in our drama group, and I was surprised they hadn't asked me to leave.

"You were great playing Lena," Amelia said.

I scoffed. "Liar."

"No, seriously. I could feel your anger. It was . . ."

"Terrible?"

Amelia gestured for me to sit in the empty beanbag chair by her, but the last thing I wanted to do was discuss my performance. My friends had no idea why I'd struggled so much with Lena. At first I hadn't even been sure myself. If anything, I actually related to the fictional girl's feelings. Maybe that was why. Every time I'd tried to channel Lena's anger, I felt the rage inside myself, and it had scared me. I felt if I truly got into her character, I might take it too far.

"I'm sorry I missed your messages," I said, glancing at my feet. The leather of my boots was soaked, and I could feel the moisture seeping through my socks. I wanted to tell her the truth, that I was too tired and emotionally spent to handle any intelligent conversation, even with my friends. But instead, what did I do?

With a groan, I slumped down in the beanbag chair.

Tessa nudged my shoulder. "You okay?"

I nodded. I wasn't lying entirely. Not really. Somehow I'd make it through this. I just wasn't sure how much of me would be left in the end. My dad, he was the one who . . . no. I couldn't afford to think about Dad right now.

"Guys, a Christmas play. We can do it." Amelia's eyes sparkled. She really was into this drama thing.

"Has anyone talked to Ms. Larkin?" Izzy asked, still flipping through the cookbook.

Our drama teacher reminded me of a beautiful Afghan Hound, her hair and dresses all flowy and elegant. Izzy and Amelia had wondered aloud about why the woman was still single, but I thought it was cool she didn't need a guy in her life to complete her.

"Are we really thinking about Christmas already?" I leaned back and closed my eyes. I was not one to fall asleep anywhere, but the warm bookstore air and comfortable beanbag chair were enticing.

"Yes, Shay, we are." Amelia poked me in the ribs with her foot. "How else will we have time to memorize our lines and—"

Tessa groaned. "I'm with Shay. I barely have time for the swim team. I can't add anything else to my plate right now."

"And Alex," Izzy teased. "A girl's gotta make time for the important things in life."

I opened my eyes and distinctly saw a pink hue spread across Tessa's cheeks at the mention of her boyfriend. Even I, who was staunchly the Jo March of our group, thought Alex and Tessa made a cute couple. He had helped Tessa through a lot in the last few weeks, proving he was not only a great boyfriend, but also a true-blue friend to her.

Tessa took a sip of her coffee, probably to give herself a second to think. "You guys are just as important," she finally said.

"Mm-hmm," Izzy mumbled, but there was a smile pulling at her mouth.

"So what's with the suitcase?"

I tensed at Amelia's question. "What suitcase?"

"The one you were carrying," Amelia said.

"I . . ."

"Going on a weekend trip?"

I really wanted to lie. I did. But if my dad taught me anything, it was that the truth never hurt anyone. Which wasn't exactly true, if you asked me, but since I knew how God felt about lying, I decided I would either have to find a way not to answer or tell them the real story. Because right now I think they just assumed my parents weren't in the picture because there was some nasty custody battle or something.

I looked around at our little group. I'd never been good at making friends, but here I finally had a few and I was thinking about lying to them? What kind of friendship was that? I just didn't want their pity. I'd already felt it before when, one time, Izzy gushed about how fun her family could be, and then quickly changed the subject. Or even when Tessa opened up about her parents' divorce, I could feel that she hesitated. At least she *had* a father, even if he

was a jerk sometimes. What they didn't realize was that I didn't want them to treat me any differently. I wanted them to be happy and enjoy their lives. My dad wasn't coming back, and there was nothing anyone could do about it. End of story.

But at some point, I really was going to have to tell them.

"I'm moving in with my aunt," I said softly.

My friends all stopped for a beat. Izzy closed her book. Amelia scooted even farther to the edge of the love seat, and Tessa set down her coffee mug.

"Don't you already live with her?" Izzy asked.

"I have been staying with her sometimes," I said, wishing I wasn't sitting in the beanbag chair anymore where my friends could stare at me easier. "Officially I've been living with my grandparents, but now I'm moving in with Aunt Laura."

"But . . . why?"

Leave it to Amelia to ask the obvious question probably shooting through all of their minds. The one I wasn't prepared to answer and probably never would be.

I climbed to my feet. "Just because."

Amelia started to ask me again, but Tessa elbowed her.

Izzy's eyes brightened. "Need any help unpacking?"

I'd only known these girls for two and a half months, and I hadn't gotten to the invite-them-over-to-my-house stage. *Unpacking my clothes? Um, no thanks.* I appreciated the offer, I really did, but I needed time to myself.

"I'm good," I said. "And I really have to get going."

Without thinking, I turned on my heels, pulled my suitcase from behind the display and headed to the stairs leading to my aunt's apartment.

I wondered if my friends realized only one of those statements was true.