

FIERCE FRAGILE HEARTS

Fierce Fragile Hearts is the stunning companion novel to Sara Barnard's YA bestseller *Beautiful Broken Things*. It is about leaving the past behind, the friends who form your future, and learning to find love, in all its forms.

Two years after a downward spiral took her as low as you can possibly go, Suzanne is starting again. Again. She's back in Brighton, the only place she felt she belonged, back with her best friends Caddy and Rosie. But they're about to leave for university. When your friends have been your light in the darkness, what happens when you're the one left behind?

Sara Barnard lives in Brighton and does all her best writing on trains. She loves books, book people and book things. She has been writing ever since she was too small to reach the 'on' switch on the family's Amstrad computer. She gets her love of words from her dad, who made sure she always had books to read and introduced her to the wonders of second-hand bookshops at a young age.

Sara is trying to visit every country in Europe, and has managed to reach thirteen with her best friend. She has also lived in Canada and worked in India.



Books by Sara Barnard

Beautiful Broken Things
A Quiet Kind of Thunder
Goodbye, Perfect
Fierce Fragile Hearts

**FIERCE
FRAGILE
HEARTS**

**Sara
Barnard**

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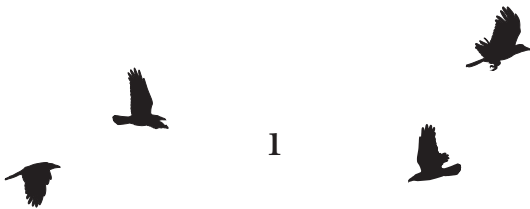
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Dedication

'There is freedom waiting for you,
On the breezes of the sky,
And you ask, "What if I fall?"
Oh, but my darling,
What if you fly?'



Erin Hanson



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'Flames'

– David Guetta & Sia

I have lost my necklace, and it feels like a sign.

'What are you doing?' Josh asks, voice bleary and muffled.

'Nothing,' I say. I'm actually crawling around under the covers, my hands sliding over the sheets, searching. I brush his leg and he yelps. 'Sorry. Did you see my necklace earlier? I was wearing it, right?'

'What necklace?'

I shouldn't be offended, but I am. 'You're so observant – Yes!' My fingers close around the thin chain and I sigh with relief. I climb out from under the covers and lean over to switch on the light.

Josh yelps again. 'Christ, what are you doing now?'

'I have to go,' I say, pulling on my jeans with one hand and shaking out my necklace with the other. 'Oh, shit.' It's *broken*, the chain split a few links down from the clasp. I stare at it for a moment, half into my jeans, half out of them. The dove looks so lonely, set adrift on a broken chain.

'Should I get up?' Josh asks.

I roll my eyes. 'Don't put yourself out or anything. It's not like I'm leaving tomorrow. Or . . .' I pull my phone out of the pocket of my jeans and check the time. 'Today.' It's later than I thought. Or earlier, depending on your point of view. It had felt like a good idea to see Josh rather than spend my last night in Southampton not sleeping in my own bed, but now it's after 4 a.m. and I've got a broken necklace and what might be the beginnings of a

headache pressing at the base of my skull. Well done, me. Solid decision-making skills, as usual.

I wrap my necklace around my wrist so it hangs as a loose, tangled bracelet and dress quickly, glancing back at Josh as I open the door to leave.

'I'll see you,' Josh says.

'Sure,' I say.

He grins. 'Take care of yourself, yeah?'

I don't reply, just smile back and lift my hand as I turn to go in a wave goodbye. I head out of the building, taking the steps at a jog. The outside air is cool and I pull up the hood of my jacket, breathing it in. It's going to be a beautiful day in Southampton.

It's about a mile from Josh's to mine and I take it slowly, hands in my pockets. It's coming up to 5 a.m. and the streets are deserted, which is how I like it best. I take a detour along the harbour and allow myself a few minutes, pulling myself up on to the railing to sit and watch the the dawn break in pink streaks across the sky. It's quiet except for the seagulls and the soft, calming swish of the sea against the boats.

I know that when I get home, or what's passed for home for the last eighteen months or so, there'll be boxes in my room and packing to do and goodbyes to say. My foster parents, Christie and Don, will make French toast and we'll go through my transition plan for the thousandth time while we wait for Sarah, my aunt, to arrive to take me back to Brighton.

I close my eyes and listen to the seagulls, which sound exactly the same in Southampton as they ever did in Brighton. Maybe they're even the same seagulls, travelling from one coastal city to another when they get bored or restless. It must be nice not to be tied down like that.

I'm the queen of fresh starts, which is another way of saying I've lived a lot of failures. I've thought *things will be different this*

time more than once, but this time it's actually true, for good or bad, whether I want it or not. This time, I'm eighteen. I'm an adult. I'm legally independent.

This time, I'm on my own.

'Good morning, sunshine.' Don greets me when I come through the back door. He's sitting at the kitchen table, paper spread in front of him.

'Hey,' I say. I lock the door behind me and hang the key on its hook. 'You're up early.'

Don smiles. 'Look who's talking.'

I shrug. 'If I don't sleep, does it still count as my last night?'

'That is an interesting question,' Don says, pointing at me. 'Is sleep an essential component of the night? What, in fact, is night? Perhaps it is an illusion?'

I smile. 'I'll nap, OK?' I pause on my way out of the kitchen. 'You weren't waiting for me, were you?'

Don busies himself with the paper. 'They think it might get up to twenty-five degrees today.'

I rest my head against the door frame. 'I'm fine.'

'You should put that on a T-shirt,' Don says, glancing at me to smile. 'Save yourself some time.'

He's worried about me; they all are. All the people who've guided me through the last two years to get me to this place, my shot at independence. Outwardly, they're keeping positive, but I know what they're really thinking. They're thinking that I won't be able to handle this, that I'm going to fall apart.

I'm much more stable than I used to be, which is a lot to do with my medication and also, you know, actual stability, but that's the problem now; the ending of the stability part. Me moving on from Christie and Don – leaving the care system – to live on my own is pretty *unstable*. And I've got previous on falling apart. They've got good reason to worry. But I can't stay in this Southampton

limbo forever, and I've waited what feels like such a long time to have some kind of control over my own life. However scary this is, and however badly it might go, I have to believe that it's worth it. Otherwise, what's the point?

Here's where I should explain why they're worried; why I fell apart before, what that even means. This is the bit I hate the most, the bit where I give up any control over how people see me. I want them to look at me and see just that: *me*. If I say that I was abused, that I'm prone to severe depression, that I've tried to kill more than once, all of that falls away. When someone knows you've been broken, all they see is the cracks. The knowledge colours everything, an extra filter between me and the world. People look at me differently, and maybe I look out at the world a little differently, too.

That's the thing about trauma, the thing people on the other side of it don't understand. It isn't a bump on the road of your life, a jolt that'll take your breath away, but only for a moment. It's the double yellow lines snaking on either side of everything you do, trapping you on a track down a one-way street. You can't stop. You can't pull over and take a break. You just have to keep going.

That's the thing I still can't deal with. I want it to just be something that happened, past tense, but it's not. It can't ever be, even though I'm doing so much better now – everyone says so.

Two years ago, when I first started on this track – my last great fresh start – I thought I knew what it meant, getting better. It meant *being* better. No more climbing out of windows, no more sleeping around, no more drugs, no more hoarding pills, no more lies, no more pretending. No more fake smiles. All that crazy just therapied right out of me and nothing to stop my future happiness except . . . what, exactly?

Well, life. Me. My head. My history. Take your pick.

For the record, I managed it with some of the things. I don't lie any more, or at least, not like I used to, not about things that matter. I pretend . . . less. I don't hoard pills. I don't climb out of windows. Everything else . . . well, let's just say I'm a work in progress. And that's OK, right? You can't have everything.

And now I'm moving on again, and this time there's a plan to follow. Me, now officially a care leaver, returning to Brighton to learn how to live independently. I'll be living in a bedsit on the second floor of a converted Victorian terrace, the kind that's ten a penny in Brighton. I'll pay my rent with my wages from my job, housing benefit and my care leaver's allowance. It'll be tight, but doable.

And here's what's waiting for me: my favourite people. My best-in-every-sense-of-the-word friends. Sweet, loyal and goddamn *patient*, Caddy and Rosie. (I mean, I'll have them for about three months, before they both go to university. But still. I'll be fine by then.) They have this power, my friends, even after all this time, even though I don't deserve it; they're like lamp posts on midnight streets. Lights in the dark.

I would never have believed that I'd want to live in Brighton again, but the truth is it's the only place I've ever come close to feeling like I belonged. That's what I want, more than anything; to feel like I belong, even if that just means in my own life, in my own head.

I have to believe that, finally, that will happen now. I'm overdue some goodness.