

Goodbye, Perfect

Praise for Sara Barnard:

'Beautiful Broken Things is the book I've been waiting for. It made me want to go and rugby-tackle my best friends and give them a giant hug. It's a beautiful tale of the power and complexities of female friendship' Holly Bourne, author of *Am I Normal Yet?*

'Beautiful Broken Things is a book that the YA world desperately needs – a book about the beauty, passion and extremities of female friendship' Alice Oseman, author of *Solitaire*

'Starkly realistic and ultimately uplifting, Beautiful Broken Things is a compelling tale of pain and redemption, growing up and growing together, and finding empowerment and strength in friendship' Catherine Doyle, author of *Vendetta*

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'Armed with a penchant for incredible warmth, intense drama and fabulously down-to-earth writing, Sara Barnard makes it clear that contemporary doesn't have to be sugar-coated to be sweet; that books with serious issues don't have to be defined by what we think we know about them, and most of all that some stories don't have to involve a romance to be about love' Arianne, Daisy Chain Book Reviews

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'Barnard has a real talent for honest, flawed characters who you cannot help but fall in love with' *Bookseller*

'Stunning' *Guardian*

Books by Sara Barnard

Beautiful Broken Things
A Quiet Kind of Thunder
Goodbye, Perfect

Goodbye, Perfect

Sara
Barnard

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*For all the BHGS girls in form G, '99–04,
in memory of when we all believed our labels.*

*And to all the girls right now who still do:
you're so much more than what they tell you.*

ONE WEEK BEFORE

'Do you ever think about just . . . running away?' Bonnie asked.

'Running away from what?'

'You know. Life.'

'You can't run away from your life,' I said, settling back against the cushions. We were in her bedroom trying to revise, me on the futon, her on the bed. 'It'll always be there when you get back.'

'Not if you don't go back,' Bonnie said. 'If you start a new life.'

I shook my head. 'I don't think you can ever really start over. Because if you're trying to do that, you're basically trying to run away from yourself. And you can't. You're stuck with you, forever. Wherever you go.'

Silence.

'Why're you asking, anyway?' I asked, craning my neck so I could see her, sitting across the room from me.

She shrugged. 'Just . . . argh, exams, you know?'

I smiled. I knew. 'Oh yeah, I'd run away from exams, definitely. But only if you came with me. And Connor.' My boyfriend. I considered, then added, 'And Daisy.' My little sister. 'And we'd need to be back in time for LeeFest.'

'That's a holiday you're describing,' Bonnie said.

'Even better,' I said. I turned a page of my Biology textbook and sighed, feeling the familiar sink in my chest at the sight of all the stuff I would never learn nor understand. 'Maybe it should just be you who runs away, then.'

'Maybe,' she said. I could hear the smile in her voice.

'Give me a heads-up when you go,' I said. I was trying to read

about genes, but I was thinking *jeans* and how I needed new ones, and whether I should go for the embroidered ones I saw down the market. 'Send me a text. Or a postcard.'

'OK,' she said.

'Promise?' I prompted.

'Promise,' she said.

Saturday

The police arrive when I'm in the shower.

I don't realize straight away, of course, because when I shower on a Saturday afternoon I make the most of it. So around the time they're walking over our threshold, I'm covered in a tea-tree-and-minty lather, eyes closed against the bubbles, singing a medley from *The Lion King* at the top of my voice.

The singing might be why I don't hear my adoptive mother, Carolyn, knocking on the bathroom door. And *that* might be why she chooses to break the most sacred of McKinley household rules: she walks right in and bangs her fist on the glass of the shower door.

I scream, obviously.

'Eden!' she yells, which is pretty unnecessary considering (a) she's already got my attention, and (b) it's not like there's anyone else in the shower she could be talking to but me.

I should say here that this is very unCarolynlike behavior, and it's that weirdness, more than the actual request, that makes me turn off the shower, open the door just enough to poke my dripping head out and demand, '*What?!*'

'Can you finish up and come downstairs, please?' she asks, back to her usual calm self, like this is just a normal, reasonable request.

'Why?'

'The police are here,' she says. 'They want to talk to you.'

I feel my entire face drop, my eyes go wide. '*Why?*' I say again, more panicked this time.

'I think you know why,' she says, which is terrifying. 'I need you downstairs in five minutes, OK?'

I go to close the shower door again – partly out of obedience, but mostly so she can't see my face and whatever might be written across it – but Carolyn puts out a hand to stop me.

'Bonnie's mother is here, too,' she says, then lets the door slide closed, right in my stunned, guilty face.

I do know why. That's true.

Not because I was expecting them, or because I've done anything wrong, but because this morning I got this message from my best friend, Bonnie: **I'm doing it. I'm running away with Jack. EEEEEKKK!!!! Don't tell anyone! Talk later! Xxx** And by 'this morning', I mean at 4.17 a.m.

OK, I realize this might sound a bit alarming out of context. Especially with the whole police-at-the-door thing. But when I read it a few hours after it was sent – bleary-eyed, still half asleep – I was just a bit confused, maybe a little annoyed, mostly because Bonnie and I had made plans to go to Canterbury today, and her unexpected bailing meant I was suddenly planless on a Saturday. She'd agreed that this would be our free day from revision, our chill-out day, practically the only time she's allowed in the ridiculously strict revision schedule she's been sticking to since April. Our first exam – Biology – is on Wednesday. Five days away.

I replied just the way you might expect me to. **Huh?**

Can't talk right now, but I'll call later! Just say you haven't heard from me if anyone asks! I'm on an ADVENTURE! <3 xx

I didn't think for a minute that she really was running away, because that's just not something Bonnie would do, and even if it was, she's got no reason to leave. So I chalked her messages up to exaggeration – *maybe* she's staying out for the night with her

secret boyfriend (more on him later) without telling her mother, at most – and put my energy into salvaging my Saturday.

I carried right on thinking that all morning, which is why, when her mother called Carolyn to ask if I'd heard from Bonnie, I said no, as promised.

'I thought the two of you had plans?' Carolyn asked, her hand cupping the phone to her chest.

'We did,' I said. 'But she changed them last night. Didn't say why.'

'Last night?' Carolyn repeated.

'Yeah,' I said.

'And you haven't heard from her since?'

'Nope,' I said. I didn't think twice about lying for Bonnie. As far as I was concerned, she'd asked, and I'd agreed, and that was that. I didn't need any more details or context. A promise is a promise, and a best friend is a best friend. But I had to try and make it believable, and also get the attention away from me, so I added, 'I wouldn't worry about it, though. She's probably with Jack.'

Carolyn's eyebrows went up. 'Who's Jack?'

'Her boyfriend,' I said, telling myself that Bonnie could hardly expect Jack to stay a secret if she'd 'run away' with him. 'That's probably where she is,' I added. 'I'm sure she'll be back soon.'

That's literally all I know about her secret boyfriend, by the way: his name, and the fact that he's a secret. I'd actually been sure 'secret' was just Bonnie-speak for 'imaginary', especially as I was never allowed to meet him, or even see a picture. But apparently not.

Thinking that made me a little uneasy, so I tried to call Bonnie to ask for more details on the whole running-away thing, but she didn't answer. I sent her a message – **You're OK, right?** – and it took her a few minutes but she finally replied: **More than OK. Don't worry! xx**

I relaxed, because there's no one I trust more than Bonnie, and if she says she's OK, then I know it's true.

So, I knew from this that Bonnie's absence had been noticed by her parents, which I thought was a bit weird, even then, because how could they know so quickly – and know enough to be so worried that they'd call Carolyn – that she'd even gone anywhere? But I didn't think about it for very long because, like I said, it's Bonnie, and Bonnie doesn't get into trouble. Not real trouble. And that's not an opinion – it's a fact.

Here are a few things about Bonnie Wiston-Stanley, aged fifteen and three-quarters:

- She likes Caramac bars broken into little pieces and stirred through vanilla ice cream.
- She's in all the top sets at school, and pretty much top of those, too.
- She's Head Prefect and everyone expects her to be Head Girl when she goes to sixth form next year.
- She plays the flute, and not just in a has-to-because-her-parents-make-her way, but actually properly plays it, like with grades and everything.
- She wears glasses with thin brown frames.
- She has freckles, which she hates even though I think they suit her.
- She never used to wear make-up, not until a couple of months ago.
- She's the best, most steady, most reliable friend in the world.

I guess you'll want to know about me, too. What are a few things about me? Well, my name is Eden. Eden Rose McKinley, in full. I

like plants and flowers and things I can grow with my hands. I was adopted when I was nine years old. I live in Kent. I have a boyfriend called Connor. I once got suspended for drawing moustaches on the portraits of the senior staff in the main entrance hall during a fire drill. My teachers call me 'spirited' when they're trying to be nice, and 'disruptive' when they're not. One day I'm going to get a tattoo of a dandelion on my shoulder. I used to have a recurring dream that I was being flown around in the beak of a pelican. I like cannoli better than anything else in the world. I'm not always as nice as I'd like to be.

There. Now you know about us both.

Anyway, so yes, I do know why the police have turned up at my doorstep, but I know it in a very basic, process-of-elimination way, not in a proper knowing way. For one thing, I've got no idea why the police are involved at all, and even less why they'd want to speak to me. Why would the police be involved in a teenage girl going off with her boyfriend for a bit without telling her mother? Since when is that a crime?

Shit, maybe I shouldn't have mentioned Jack. Maybe that's what this is all about. But I'd got so used to thinking of him as not real that even saying his name out loud hadn't quite felt real. She'd never told me anything concrete about him, never shown me a picture, even. Just given me titbits vague enough that I'd assumed they were lies; *bad* lies, at that. How old is he? *Older*. How did you meet him? *A flute thing*. I'd figured she was jealous of Connor and me and had made up her own imaginary equivalent, and who was I to spoil that for her?

I know that might sound a bit unlikely, but Bonnie has been known to have a pretty wild imagination when it comes to things like boyfriends. It's like a combination of wish-fulfilment and too

much fanfiction. When we were fourteen, she returned from summer camp full of stories about her new boyfriend, Freddie. I believed her, because why wouldn't I, and it took almost six months for me to finally catch on that the whole thing was basically a fantasy. Freddie was just a boy she'd had a crush on and then kissed on the last night of camp. Not exactly a love story.

So as far as I'd been concerned, 'Jack' was either entirely imaginary or just a friend from orchestra or something that she *wanted* to be her boyfriend. Otherwise, why wouldn't I have met him?

I get out of the shower and head for my room, trying to get my head straight. It's not long after four, which means it's about twelve hours since Bonnie sent me her first message, and six since her mother started making calls. It doesn't seem like long enough to get so freaked out you'd get the police involved, but then, what do I know about parenthood?

I towel off in a kind of fast/slow hybrid, because I'm not sure whether I want to hurry up and get downstairs, as instructed, or put it off for as long as possible. I take my time towelling my hair, thinking back to everything I've done over the last twelve hours, just in case they ask.

The answer is, not much. I made French toast for my little sister, Daisy, because she's grounded at the moment for getting into trouble at school, and I felt sorry for her. It wasn't long after that when Carolyn started asking her questions about when I'd last spoken to Bonnie, and I'd figured it was a good idea to get out of the house, so I did. And by that, I mean I went to see my boyfriend. My lovely, non-secret boyfriend, Connor.

I tried to call him before I left, but he didn't answer, so I just sent him a text to let him know I was about to turn up on his

doorstep. We have the kind of relationship where that kind of thing is OK, so I knew he wouldn't mind.

It took me about fifteen minutes to walk to Connor's house – we both live in Larking, which is a boring little market town in Kent – and he was already waiting in the doorway when I started walking up the drive. He was half dressed, his jeans hanging low, revealing a strip of blue boxers. He was shirtless, his hair sticking up at all angles, his eyes morning-blinky. But still he was grinning, his face lit up, like every time he sees me. When I took the step up to walk through the door, he leaned down and dropped a kiss on my lips. He tasted of peanut butter.

'Hey,' I said. 'You just got up?' This is unusual for Connor, who's usually up before 7 a.m. every day of the week.

He shrugged. 'I was up most of the night.'

'Oh, shit,' I said. 'Sorry.'

'It's OK; everything's fine now.'

'Um, what happened?' I wasn't sure how to ask this – or whether I even should – but he didn't seem annoyed.

'Mum had a fall,' he said.

'Shit,' I said again. Connor's mother has rheumatoid arthritis, and he's been her carer since he was eight. His gran lives with them and helps look after them both, even though she's in her seventies and probably needs more care than Connor does, nowadays.

'She's fine,' he added. 'I mean, not fine. But, you know, fine enough. We had to go to hospital, but it's nothing major, just a couple of fractures.'

'A couple?' I repeated, horrified. I tried to remind myself that in Connor's house this qualifies as 'nothing major'. But I couldn't help but think of how *completely major* it would be if Carolyn had to spend half the night in hospital. I wouldn't shut up about it for weeks. But this didn't even warrant a text.

Connor smiled at me. 'Just a couple,' he said. 'She's sleeping now. So's Gran.'

'You can go back to sleep, too,' I said quickly. 'I can go.'

He shook his head. 'No way. Stay, obviously.' He leaned down to kiss me again – he's just taller enough than me that he has to lean when we kiss, which I love – and we stayed like that for a while, broken bones and runaway friends skittered from my mind.

Connor and I shouldn't be a perfect match. Him, the shy ginger kid, and me, the wild(ish), difficult one. But the thing about Connor is he isn't actually that shy at all. And I'm not wild or difficult, not really. Sometimes it just takes that one person to see beyond what everyone tells them they're meant to see.

Here are a few things about Connor Elliott, aged sixteen years and six months:

- He was bullied from Year 7 to Year 9, but he doesn't ever talk about it, even now.
- He loves birds and wants to be an ornithologist, and he's proud of this, not even slightly embarrassed, even though the other kids have always tried to make him be.
- He can tell what bird it is just by the sound it makes.
- He knows how to cook.
- He's dyslexic, like me, but he tries harder and he actually likes to read.
- He has blue eyes and hair the colour of paprika.
- He broke his nose when he was nine and now it has a bump on it.
- His mum and gran say he's the best boy on the planet.
- I agree.

No one thought we would work, let alone last. But here we are, over a year on, happy. We're like veterans of a teenage love story.

I didn't stay at Connor's long, because even though he tried to hide it he was clearly knackered. We spent a lazy couple of hours in his bedroom, watching TV, kissing and playing *Portal*, which is the only video game I ever agree to play with him, even though he insists it's old now and I should give some newer games a chance. Every now and then, he left to go and check on his mother and gran – both still sleeping off the previous night's stresses – and to replenish our bowl of tortilla chips.

'I should go,' I said finally, after he'd literally fallen asleep on my shoulder twice.

'Nah, stay,' he started to say, but he broke into yet another massive yawn instead. When he was done he laughed, sheepish. 'OK, maybe I'm a bit tired. Don't go, though.'

'I'll see you tomorrow,' I suggested. 'When you're a bit more awake.'

He made a face like a little boy refusing a nap. 'But you're here,' he said. 'It's a waste of Eden-time.'

I rolled my eyes. 'Can it, you sappy div. Go to sleep.'

'Cuddle first?' he suggested, pulling back the covers and burrowing under them.

'You're so macho, Connor,' I said. 'I can't handle what a manly man you are.'

He laughed, pulling me under the covers towards him. His skinny frame was warm and cosy, impossible to resist. Connor is comfortable with himself like no other boy our age I've ever met. Not in a loves-himself way, either. More like he has his priorities, and he knows what matters, and what matters isn't wasting energy on worrying that he isn't the model of masculinity. It's basically the thing that made me fall in love with him in the first place. That and the fact that warmth comes off him like a radiator in winter.

Anyway, that was it with Connor today. I didn't even tell him about Bonnie. I must have left his house sometime after two, come home, mooched for a bit and then decided to have the proper long shower that Carolyn ended up interrupting.

And now here I am, in my room with the police downstairs waiting for me, stepping into my jeans and deciding that, yes, I'll carry on telling the small lie, as promised. I can't see what difference Bonnie's message from earlier would really make to anything, anyway, and I don't want Carolyn getting mad at me for lying to her this morning.

Carolyn's head appears around my bedroom door and I jump, almost tripping over my own feet.

'Are you nearly ready?' she asks.

'Let me just do my hair,' I say.

'Eden,' Carolyn says warningly.

The tone in her voice, together with the situation, makes me feel suddenly panicky. 'Why do the police want to talk to me?' I demand. 'I don't know where Bonnie is. I really don't!'

'They're not expecting you to know,' Carolyn replies. 'They just want to talk to you. And anyway, if you ask me, Bonnie's mother is the one you should be more concerned about. The woman's practically hysterical.'

'Why do they think I'll know *anything*, though?'

'Because you're her best friend. God knows, if you disappeared, Bonnie is the first person I'd want to speak to.'

'No, I mean, why are they freaking out like this? Why are the police even involved? She's probably just off with her boyfriend somewhere.'

Carolyn lets out a little noise I can't interpret, and I frown at her, trying to get a reading. What is going on? None of this feels right.

'I know Bonnie's usually Miss Responsible, or whatever,' I add.

‘So yeah, maybe it’s a bit unusual. But not police-unusual.’

Carolyn doesn’t answer this, just glances behind her at the empty corridor and then back at me, raising her eyebrows in a silent ‘hurry up’. ‘The police are going to ask you why Bonnie has run away with Jack,’ she says.

‘Why would I know—’

‘There’s no point in wasting your breath telling me,’ Carolyn breaks in. ‘You’re just going to have to repeat yourself. So let’s go downstairs and speak to the police, OK? I’ll be right there, and you don’t need to be nervous.’

‘I’m not nervous,’ I say, surprised.

Carolyn mutters something, which I think for a second might be ‘I am’, but she’s already turning away and heading down the hall, so I follow.

There are two police officers waiting for me when we get downstairs. One is a man, grey and gruff, who does all of the talking. The other is a woman, younger than Carolyn, who takes notes in almost total silence.

‘There’s no need to be nervous,’ the man says, after we’re done with the introductions and preamble. His name is DC Delmonte, and it’s making me think of peaches. ‘All we need from you is the truth.’

‘I don’t know anything,’ I say. Actually, I’ve already said this four times. No one seems to be listening.

Matilda, Bonnie’s mother – who’s never liked me, by the way – let’s out a loud ‘hmm’.

‘I don’t!’ I insist.

‘Just tell us what you *do* know,’ DC Delmonte says. ‘Even the things that may seem . . . insignificant. When did Bonnie meet Jack?’

‘I don’t know,’ I say.

‘Well, how long have they been in a relationship?’

'I don't know,' I say.

'Did Bonnie ask for your assistance in keeping their relationship a secret?'

'What? No. Why would she?'

'Have you spoken to her today?'

'No.' WhatsApp messages don't count as speaking, do they?

'Did you speak to her yesterday?'

'Yes. But just to talk about revision.'

'Did you talk about Jack?'

'No.' Why are they so obsessed with Jack? Is this all because I mentioned his name to Carolyn this morning?

They're all looking at me like they're waiting for me to say something very specific, but I have no idea what it is. It's like having an in-joke described to me by the group of people it involves in painstaking detail, and everyone's waiting for my reaction to the punchline.

'What the hell is going on?' I ask finally.

'Eden,' Carolyn says, her voice straining with the clear effort of staying calm. 'Do you know who Jack is?'

There's a tense, potent silence. I can hear Bonnie's mother's laboured breathing, her eyes brimming and rage-filled. The policewoman has her head tilted slightly, concentration in the lines of her face, and I get the unnerving sense that she's profiling me, or something.

'No,' I say, and I hear how small my voice is in the room, shrunken by adult voices, strident and loud. And, suddenly, I'm scared.

'It's Jack Cohn,' Carolyn says.

'Who?' I ask. My brain is too frazzled, too anxious, to process the information. I don't know anyone called Jack Cohn.

'For God's sake!' Bonnie's mother shrieks in a sudden burst of frustration, so unexpectedly that I actually jump. She takes a

step towards me and I shrink back. Why is she so angry at *me*? I'm not the one who's disappeared. 'Just tell us where they are, Eden!'

And that's the moment that Carolyn says it, and everything I thought I knew shatters. '*Mr Cohn, Eden,*' she says. 'Jack is Mr Cohn.'

An image pops into my head, then. Waiting in the music block for Bonnie to finish her flute lesson. Leaning against the whitewashed wall, my head resting underneath a nameplate. *Mr J. Cohn: Head of Music.*

Mr Cohn, Music teacher. Mr Cohn, form tutor of my little sister. Mr Cohn, full-grown adult man.

Mr Cohn, my best friend's secret boyfriend.

Holy. Shit.