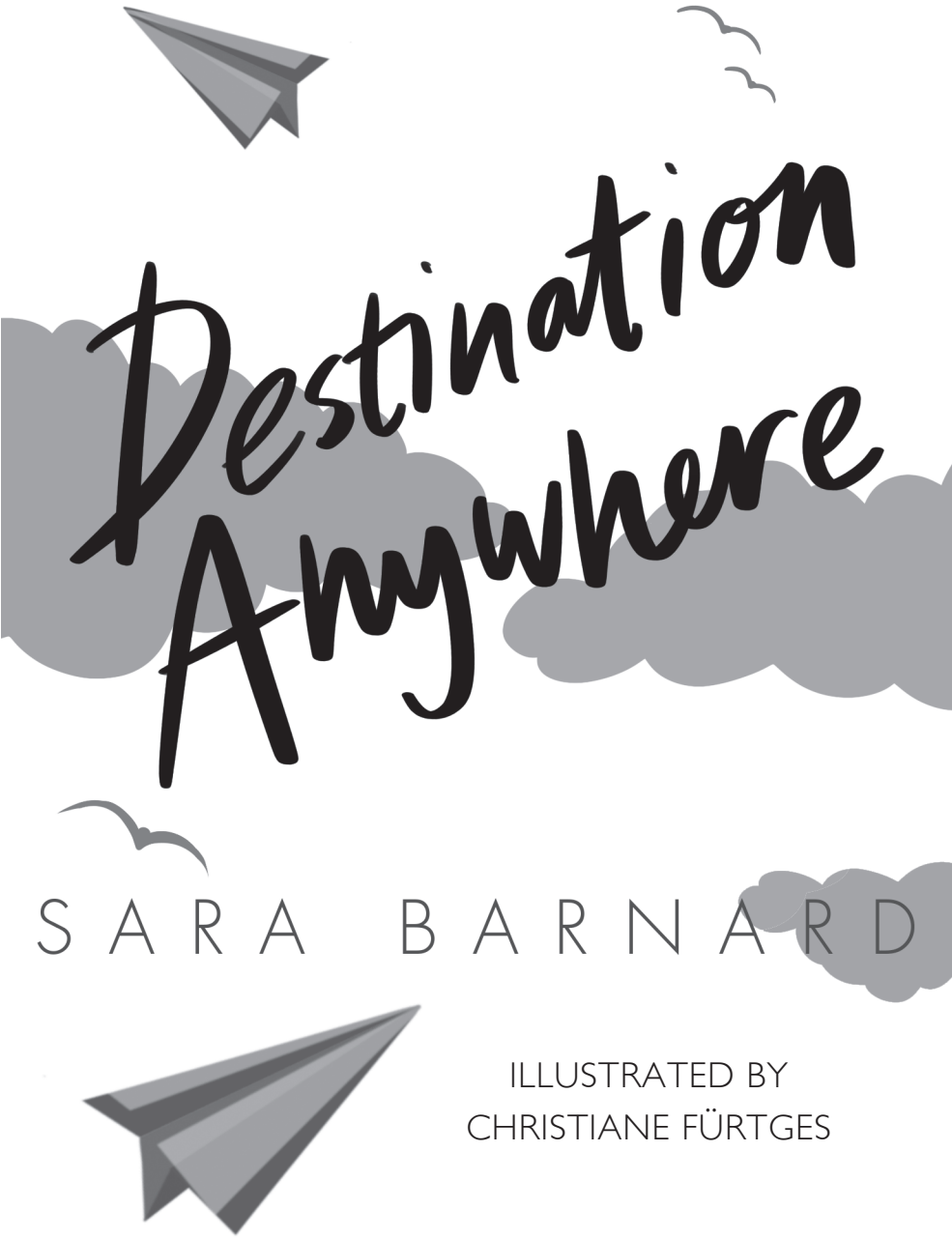


Destination Anywhere

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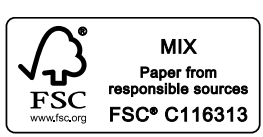
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NOW

The Plane

'Boarding complete.'

This is it. I'm out of time. I stare at the send icon on my phone screen, willing myself to press it. My heartbeat – already way faster than usual – thunders harder in anticipation of that one tiny moment, the final step in setting this all in motion.

Despite myself, my thumb swishes downwards, my eyes flicking to the start of the email I've been drafting since I walked out of my house, got on a bus, went through departures, boarded, found my seat and buckled up.

Mum and Dad,

Don't freak out. I know you will anyway, but don't.

(There's no point. By the time you read this, I'll be in the air. You always say how safe flying is, Dad. So you don't need to worry, because when you read this, I'll be the safest I've ever been.)

I'm doing this because I have to go. I just have to go. I tried to tell you about how I have nothing left and I HAVE TO GO, but you weren't listening. Now I think you'll have to, because right now I'm on a plane.

I'm on flight BA037 from Gatwick to Vancouver. You'll be able to look it up, see? I'm not trying to lie

or hide anything. You know exactly where I am. I just had to go, so I'm going. If you've been paying any attention, you know why.

I'll call you when I land.

I love you.

P x

P.S. I'm sorry about using your credit card, Dad.

P.P.S. I'll pay you back.

The captain is cheerfully talking about our estimated flight time, how sunny it is in Vancouver, how he expects there may be 'a few small bumps' over Greenland. He asks for all electronic equipment to be put into flight mode.

I swallow. I add a second kiss after 'P'.

Send.

There. It's done. I put my phone into flight mode and settle back against my seat, watching the terminal slide slowly by as we taxi to the runway. In a few minutes, I'll be airborne. England will drop away underneath me, getting smaller and smaller and further away, and all my problems and heartaches and regrets and mistakes will shrink along with it. The next time I set foot on this soil – who knows when that will be – I'll be someone different; someone changed. Not someone new, exactly, but maybe the person I was always meant to be.

We're on the runway. The engines roar, the plane pushes forward. Beside me, a woman in a green jumpsuit whispers, 'Off we go.'

I close my eyes. I finally smile.

Off I go.



BEFORE

aka
Why I gave up everything and ran away from my life even though I'm only seventeen and my parents are going to kill me
aka
When I still thought things could be good

Day one of sixth form college. Day one of my new life! New me in new clothes. (Skinny jeans and a white T-shirt with a daisy necklace – a classic look, but not constrained to a particular personality, not until I found out what that personality needed to be.) And, most importantly, a new attitude. The attitude? Positivity. Me – aka Peyton King, sixth form student, new girl – a friend in waiting. I was ready.

I was so ready. Never mind that I didn't particularly want to be at sixth form college, especially not studying what my parents had dictated instead of what I actually wanted, which began and ended with the word 'art'. No, I was still ready. All of that was irrelevant, anyway, because I had one goal and one goal only: I was going to make friends. Actual, honest-to-god, know-all-your-secrets, WhatsApp-group-having, drinks-in-the-park-with friends.

What had happened at my old school was just a blip. A five-year stint-in-hell blip. Yes, it was soul-sucking, not

having any friends. Yes, it almost destroyed me. And yes, the relentless bullying will probably cause me residual trauma that will haunt me into my adult years.

But! That's done now. All in the past. Fresh start, new me.

'Welcome!' a smiley-faced woman said from one of the info desks that had been set up in the main entrance corridor to the college.

'Hi!' I said. *That's it, Peyton. Enthusiasm.* 'I'm Peyton King.'

The woman nodded, scanning down a list of names and crossing off mine when she reached it. 'Here's your welcome pack,' she said, handing it over. 'You'll find a campus map in there, the canteen timetable, that kind of thing. Orientation is in the common room at nine. Do you have any questions?'

How do I make friends? Will people like me? Why didn't they like me before? Do I look OK? How's my hair? Am I doing the right thing? Will people like me?!

I shook my head. 'Thanks!'

(Is it possible to be a little bit drunk on your own hope and expectation? If yes, then I was. You can see it in all those exclamation marks.)

I headed towards the common room for the orientation, both hoping and not hoping that it would involve those awful breaking-the-ice games that are excruciating but also work. I wasn't sure if they'd think they were necessary, because though it was mostly on its own campus, the sixth form college was officially connected to Eastridge High School, and most of the students came from there. It also made up one part of a three-school consortium, so there were lots of students from those feeder schools as well as entirely new students, like me. This was my new life – finally. I was out of the hellhole that

was Claridge Academy, away from everyone who had bullied me, everyone who had let it happen. I was free, and now I could start again somewhere new.

The day before, I'd had my hair done at my mum's hairdressers. I'd told the woman exactly what I wanted – something approachable, low-key, nothing try-hard, nothing too look-at-me – and she'd taken my thick, mousy waves and turned them into a mid-length, rich brown cascade with coppery lowlights, falling easily to my shoulders in straight, unwavy lines. Perfect. I'd been practising how to straighten my hair all summer in preparation and now I had the hairstyle to match.

See how ready I was? So ready.

The orientation was awkward. We were all gathered in the common room to listen to a welcome speech – more like a lecture – from the head of sixth form, Mr Kirby, who barely smiled, before we were broken off into smaller groups at random to get taken on tours around the campus. I was put with two other girls who spoke exclusively to each other, barely glancing at me, and three boys who didn't say a word. Not a great start.

'What school do you come from?' I asked one of the girls when we got dropped off back at the common room after the tour, determined not to let this first opportunity pass without even trying.

'Eastridge,' one of the girls said. She said it possessively, her head gesturing unconsciously to her friend, answering for both of them. 'What about you?'

'Claridge,' I said. 'The academy.'

The girl made a face. 'Why'd you come here?'

I did not say, *Because I have no friends and if I don't make*

friends I will die. I said, 'Because that place is a shithole.' Which, as far as I was concerned, was absolutely true.

It came out wrong; too loud and too vehement. To my ears, I sounded try-hard, the worst thing to be. I smiled, but that felt wrong, too. I could feel a flush working its way up the back of my neck. One conversation and I'd already failed.

'Well, Eastridge is OK,' the girl said, shrugging.

'This isn't Eastridge any more,' her friend reminded her. 'This is college. Totally different.'

'I'm trying to be nice,' the girl replied, frowning. 'Like, encouraging.'

The other girl rolled her eyes, which didn't seem very friendly. But it was her who said to me, 'What registration group are you in?'

I looked hopefully at my registration sheet. 'S6.'

'We're both in S2,' she said, shrugging. The shrug said, *Sorry*. It said, *We're not going to be your friends*. It said, *Bye*.

'OK,' I said.

'We have to go there now,' the first girl said. 'Registration.'

'OK,' I said again. What else could I say?

I hoped they might invite me to go for lunch with them later, but they didn't. They just smiled awkwardly at me before heading off together.

This is fine. It's fine. I'd had my first social interaction and it hadn't ended in shame or tears. That could be my practice run; I couldn't expect every conversation to lead to friendship. S*tay positive*.

I ate the packed lunch I'd brought by myself, sitting on a bench in the sun. I sketched one-handed as I ate, imagining myself in some distant future, graduation cap on my head, friends all around me, big smiles. That was all I wanted in

life. Not the graduation cap – I could take or leave that – but a friend. A best friend, the kind I read about in books. Everyone had best friends in the books I loved, the ones about ordinary girls like me. They had multiple best friends, sometimes. Whole squads of them. A lot of the time they made me feel lonely in my own friendless reality, but I kept reading them. I devoured them, learning how to be a good best friend, so one day – *one day* – I'd be ready.

Let's get this out of the way. I know what you want to know. You want to know why I was so obsessed with making friends at sixth form college; how I could have got to that point in my life without having friends. You're thinking, *You must have friends. Everyone has had friends.* You're thinking, *How could you go through all those years at school and not have friends?* Or maybe you're thinking that I must have had friends when I was at school, and I lost them because I did something awful. Now you're wondering what I did.

So let me say first, that it is true; I didn't have friends then, and I'd never had friends. Not real, actual friends. People who I'd chosen and liked, people who'd chosen and liked me. People I hung out with on Saturdays and planned days out with and talked to on WhatsApp. People I was tagged with in photos on Instagram. People who made me friendship bracelets.

The second thing to say is that it wasn't some big incident that made me friendless for all my years at secondary school. I'm not even going to say something dramatic like everyone hated me, because they didn't. In a weird kind of way, I think it might all have been easier if they did. I wasn't hated; I was hounded. (Fox hunters don't hate the fox; it's just sport to

them.) Teased, laughed at, ignored. Occasionally tolerated, more often noticed only to be used as the butt of a joke.

(Now you are thinking, *OK, but why? What was wrong with you?* You are imagining what was so disagreeable about me that I was the bullied kid. Maybe you're thinking about bullied kids you know or knew, and you're judging me alongside them. Stop that – leave them alone. Haven't they suffered enough without being your life benchmark for who deserves to be a target?)

So the third thing is to try and explain why I spent five years at my school, Claridge Academy, friendless and alone. Trust me, this is something I've thought about a lot. (A *lot*.) I've tried to put some kind of narrative over it to make it make sense. Because I get it – it does sound weird and unlikely. One friend, surely, at least once? No friends? Ever?

Yes, I had a handful of transitory, temporary almost-friends over the years. Let's call them Occasionals. There was Soph in year seven, who in another life would have been and remained my best friend, but who abandoned me very early on, somewhere around the bake sale incident – more on that later – and spent the next five years steadfastly ignoring me. I can't really blame her. If it had been the other way around, I probably would have saved myself, too.

I was on the school netball team with girls from other forms and year groups, and most of them were friendly to me. Even the handful of girls from my form left me alone when we were in netball mode, like it was an accepted safe space. Sometimes Imi, the Wing Defence from my year, invited me to come with her and her mum for McDonald's after away games. She never spoke to me during actual school time, but still.

There were other people along the way who made it just

about bearable. Tiny little tethers to goodness, or at least *ordinary,* that kept me from giving up completely. In the library, a quiet and safe escape during lunchtimes, there was the librarian, Ms Randall, who knew me by name and talked to me about what I was reading like she cared what I thought. The art block, all white walls and the smell of linseed oil, and Mr Clayton from year nine onwards, who always smiled at me like he understood, quietly taking me aside after a lesson to tell me that the small studio was open at lunchtimes for students to use if they wanted. The small gang of misfits that gathered there to draw and create, everyone so different and from across year groups, rarely talking to each other – and never outside that lunchtime respite – but glad, all the same, that they weren't alone.

And that was it for me, all the years I was at Claridge. You might ask, *How do you get through school without a friend?* And the answer is, the same way you walk through a downpour when you don't have an umbrella. Head down, shoulders hunched, as quickly as you can.

I still haven't told you why, though. And that's what you want to know. Like I said, it wasn't one big event; it was several small incidents. A kind of snowball effect of no-one-likes-Peyton-King. Here are a few of them, just so you can get the gist. I'll start at the beginning.

My school, Claridge Academy, had a uniform that featured a blazer that they claimed was unisex. On my first day in year seven I, along with a bunch of other girls in my newly assigned form, wore that blazer. One by one, the other girls realized that wearing the 'unisex' blazer as a girl was deeply, deeply uncool and discarded it. I had the misfortune to be

the last to catch on. The last girl to wear the blazer, and the one who earned the '*Why* are you wearing *that?*' from Amber Monroe. (She features heavily in these anecdotes. That same day, she asked me what my name was, and when I told her it was Peyton she screwed up her face and said, *'Why?'* with such disdain I almost wanted to apologize for existing.)

Year seven. A bake sale; the kind of thing that seemed bizarrely important at the time, even though all we were doing was selling fairy cakes for 20p a pop in the school canteen. We all had to bring in cakes and biscuits to sell, and I brought a tin full of homemade salted caramel butterfly cakes, which were fat and creamy and delicious. A group of us were all arranging the cakes on the table when Amber Monroe said – I remember how casually she said it, even mischievously, like it was a joke we were going to share – 'Heard you poisoned yours, King.'

What I *should* have done, if I'd had a seventeen-year-old's wit and confidence, was laugh and say, 'Yeah, with cocaine.' That would have been great. The kind of joke that was funny *and* cool. But I didn't. I stuttered, I went red, and I said, my voice a nasal whine (or at least, it is in my memory), 'No! No, I didn't!' And then Mo Jafari's voice, coming from behind me. A lazy drawl. 'Sounds like you did.'

Word got around, obviously. No one bought, let alone ate, my beautiful cakes. They all seemed to think it was so funny. Especially when I cried.

Year eight. PSHE class under the control of a guest speaker who'd come to talk to us all about healthy relationships. She, cheerful and oblivious, suggested we all moved from our usual assigned seating to sit with our friends. As my heart plummeted

down into my stomach, I watched as everyone else happily, thoughtlessly moved around the room, pairing up, separating off into clearly defined mini-groups and trios. I was left, face flaming, eyes tearing, staring at the floor, not having moved from my seat, hoping no one would notice. I think the guest speaker would have graciously let me be invisible, as I clearly wanted, but Amber Monroe's loud, confident voice sounded across the entire room. 'Oh my God, Peyton, do you actually have *no friends?*' She sounded so horrified. Loudly, affectedly horrified, but still horrified. Like the fact of my friendlessness was so horrible, even she was almost sympathetic at having to be faced with it. 'Oh my God,' she said again, so loudly. So loudly. 'Peyton King has no friends!' (You might think that's the kind of thing people forget and get over. Let me tell you, it is not. That phrase may as well have been carved in stone. It never left me.)

Year eight. I decided I should find out why people didn't like me so I could work on the problem and fix it. I sent a message to one of the nice girls, Kerry Bridges, in my form, one of the ones who got her work done and had her hair brushed nicely and never made trouble. She'd never tried to be my friend, but she'd never been mean to me, either. The message said, **Kerry, sorry to message out of the blue, but I hope you can help me. As you may have noticed, I don't really have many friends and people don't seem to like me, and I wondered if maybe you knew why and you could tell me so I can make things better! If you can't help, no worries! But thanks for reading :) Peyton.**

(Are you cringing for my twelve-year-old self? Yeah, me too.)

Kerry Bridges screenshotted that message and sent it to one of her friends. Who sent it to two of her friends. Who posted it on Snapchat. Everyone in my form saw that message. Everyone in my year saw that message. It's possible the entire school saw it. It turns out that being friendless is bad, but *trying not to be* friendless is worse. I may as well have got up on the stage during assembly and stripped naked. In the long run, it probably would have been better for my reputation.

For what it's worth, Kerry wrote me a letter after that incident, apologizing for sharing the message, insisting she didn't know what would happen and saying that she was sorry. She stuck a smiley-face sticker on it and slipped it through the slats of my locker. But she didn't try to be my friend, or tell people to stop when they laughed at me, and she never did tell me why no one liked me. I guess by that point she thought it was obvious.

Year nine. Mo Jafari figured out that P. King sounded like *Peking,* as in Peking duck. Suddenly, and for the rest of my time at Claridge, I was 'Duck', and any number of variants that included, but were not limited to, Duckie, Quack, Quackers, Goose (as in *Duck, duck, goose*) and Fucka (as in Fuck a duck). These may sound like affectionate nicknames, just a fun little joke we were all in on. Nope.

Year ten. By then I'd mostly rode the bullying storm and was just a loner no one talked to. It wasn't a good life, but it was better than being hounded. And then the head of art, Mr Clayton, chose a painting of mine to be framed and hung on the wall of the school canteen. This was a big deal; only year elevens usually got selected for that kind of honour, and it

was mostly for their GCSE art projects. Mine was a painting I'd been working on in the studio during my lunch breaks, which was my newer place of refuge from the rest of the school. It was sort of my own version of *The Starry Night* in that it was a painting of my town at night with the skyline rendered tiny (and grey and muted) under a huge, vibrant night sky. Mr Clayton said it was 'fantastic', a word I'd never heard him use before. It got announced in assembly and the whole school clapped dutifully, and I was so proud and happy, even when Amber Monroe and her friends were way too enthusiastic, whistling between their teeth, waving at me and doing mock little bows.

It had been hanging for three and a half days when I got called into the headteacher's office, where I found Mr Clayton waiting, a deep frown on his face. My painting had been desecrated – that's the word he used. That morning before registration someone had Sharpied KING TWAT across the entire surface, complete with a crude attempt at a cock and balls beside it. (Even at the time, I thought that a vagina would have made far more sense, and it said so much about who'd done it that they were unable to draw one.) There was no saving the painting. My work was destroyed, and it broke my heart.

My whole form got bollocked for it. Everyone knew I was a social pariah, even the teachers, and so it was obvious what had happened and why. Our head of year, Mr Karousi, kept us all in at break-time to find out who did it. It was Joe Hedge; we all knew that. Literally everyone knew, but no one said a word. And I sat there in that room, listening to the silence of everyone protecting him as if he was worth protecting, rage burning in my chest and my hands and my eyes. He was just

going to get away with it. He'd done something so cruel – not just mean, but *cruel* – and they still didn't care.

So I said, just when Mr Karousi was winding down, talking about how disappointed he was that no one was going to take responsibility, 'Everyone knows it was Joe.'

A tiny gasp sweeping across the room. Joe turning to me in shock. Amber's dagger eyes. Mr Karousi frowning at me, like I'd confessed to the crime myself. Mo Jafari muttering, 'Shitting hell, King.'

'Why won't anyone say it?' I asked. I was full-on crying, my voice a choked shriek. 'It was Joe.'

Joe, who didn't bother denying it, was suspended for four days and lost his place on the football team for two months. It was the first time anyone actually faced consequences for what they'd done to me, and I was glad, despite everything.

Glad until the following week, when we were long-distance running in PE. I was jogging along on my own, as per usual, lost in my own comfy thoughts, when someone knocked into me from behind. When I stumbled and fell, too startled to even cry out, hands grabbed at my arms, pulling me off the side of the track. The playing field must have been freshly mowed because there were small piles of grass dotted around the perimeter of the track, and it was into one of them that I was pushed down, face first. Grass in my mouth and nose and eyes. My head held down. A male voice in my ear. 'Eat the grass, grass. Fucking eat it.'

They left me there and I cried and coughed out grass and wished hell and herpes on all of them. When I finally got to my feet and staggered to the finish line, Mr McGee told me off for 'taking so long' – ignoring the grass stains on my PE kit, the grass in my hair, the grassy tears streaked across my dirty

face – and sent me into the snakepit that was the changing rooms. There, I was completely ignored by Amber and her friends, which was merciful, but also all the other girls, who probably thought of themselves as good people and always hugged their friends when they cried. Which was agony.

I think that whole incident was when I started to get angry. Really angry. The kind of angry that gets called 'rage' instead. The burning rage that settles in and stokes the fire of every emotion. I was angry at being shoved into a pile of grass, yes. But the rage came from the absolute fundamental unfairness of it. It wasn't fair; it wasn't right. Joe had done something wrong. Not questionable or on the line, but actually *wrong*. Destroying someone's work is wrong; destroying someone's art is wrong; hurting someone is wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong. And yet he was protected by everyone I was meant to call a peer. And in their eyes *I* was the one in the wrong for being a 'grass', essentially for simply *pointing out* that he was in the wrong. I was the one who was truly punished for the whole incident. He was even more of a hero; I was even more of an outcast. It made no sense at all.

In school, cool is currency, and cool, apparently, is letting shitheads get away with being shitheads. It's praising them for their shitheadery.

Anyone who believes that the world operates on a basis of right and wrong has never been to secondary school.

Anyway, I endured five years' worth of the kind of thing I've just described. Five long, horrible years where the best I could hope for was being ignored. I hadn't ever done anything wrong, not even anything particularly embarrassing; I was just the unlucky one.

That was what I told myself when I was trying to be positive, anyway. Way back then, when I was first starting college, and I allowed myself to hope. There wasn't something fundamental about me that my bullies had seen; it wasn't going to be the pattern the rest of my life would follow. I could make friends just like anyone else, and then everything would be better.

I was so sure of that second part, that's the thing. That everything would be better. Did it even occur to me, then, that friends might not be the answer? That I might make friends and it could go *wrong*? (And I mean really wrong. Like, *really* wrong.) No. I just had all that stupid hope.

So that was me, first day of sixth form college, hoping. For friends – *any* friends – to make everything better.

Well, I got the friends. I even believed things really were better. For a while.