

One

I am Girl X and I was raped. My real name is Stacey Woods.

It happened in an apartment near Oxford Street, in London. The man who did this to me was arrested and charged. That was nine months ago and now his trial is in seven days and I am dreading it. Patrice, my closest friend, wants me to write about it so she bought me a beautiful book. It has got a purple leather cover and creamy lined paper and I was to use it when I was away from my laptop. *It's just for notes, Stacey*, she'd said, bossily. *The real story you put onto your computer.* The notebook had a leather marker for me to keep my page and it fitted into my bag perfectly.

Patrice also bought me a heart-shaped pendant from eBay. She loved to buy things that other people had already used. *It has a history*, she said, holding it up for me to see. The silver chain was resting on her fingers and the pendant hung in the air. It was lovely. The heart was just an outline, so I could put my finger through the space in the middle. *This is to show that you have people who care about you*, Patrice had said.

I'd worn the heart every day since.

The man who raped me was looking after the Poole Place

apartment for someone else. I had fallen out with everyone in my life and I found myself staying there – just for one night. I hadn't met him before. As I was getting ready to leave he came into the bedroom and forced me to have sex with him. Afterwards he gave me money to get a taxi home. I took that money. I know that was wrong but I was confused and shocked. Perhaps he thought he had paid me off and the price of forced sex was a taxi ride home. He was wrong, but I still took the money, so I was wrong as well.

I tried to picture what the courtroom would be like; the judge and barristers in wigs and gowns and the jury sitting on straight-backed chairs deciding whether or not I was telling the truth. I had a vision of myself on the stand being questioned and shrinking a little each time I gave an answer until I was a tiny girl peeking over the wooden bar barely able to see anyone.

My rapist kept his shirt and boxer shorts on. He'd pulled my pants off and then lay on top of me. The buttons on his shirt dug into my skin and he'd reeked of cigarettes. When he finished he let out a cry and rolled to the side. I slid out from under him, picked up my pants and scurried away to the bathroom like a frightened puppy.

Now I sat in my room and thought about what was to come. I had lots of people on my side; my mum and dad (and Gemma, my dad's partner), my sister, Jodie (and Tyler, her baby son), and Patrice. I had Annie Mulligan, my personal policewoman, and Mr Parvez, my solicitor. There would be a barrister too but I hadn't met her yet.

In among all this there was something else on my mind. A boy that I had been thinking about more and more as the trial

got closer. He had given me a heart once. He'd drawn it onto a card and handed it to me. I'd thought it meant that I was special, but I wasn't the only girl he'd done this for. This boy had given his heart all over the place. I just hadn't realised.

I fingered the pendant around my neck.

It had been a long time since I'd seen this boy.

With the trial looming I found myself longing to see him again.



Two

The next day I was walking along a street in west London. I wasn't supposed to be there, I was aware of that. I got off the Tube at South Kensington and walked up the stairs to the street outside. I used my phone for directions and passed a parade of shops. I turned a corner at a crossroads and walked past a church with a spire and then saw some tennis courts. All at once I was in the street that led to his school.

All the way there I tried to imagine what my policewoman, Annie Mulligan, would say if she knew what I was doing. *Are you off your head, Stacey? This could jeopardise the case. What were you thinking of?*

I couldn't explain it. I felt *driven* to go.

The school had a high brick wall around it. On the opposite side of the road was a long terrace of houses with railings. The front doors were solid, glossy and expensive-looking. I stood on a corner by a Tesco van that was delivering a weekly shop. The driver was unloading plastic boxes of groceries onto a trolley. I watched him for a moment and then looked back at the school. The brick wall was solid and uniform and high above it was a wooden sign that had the words *Montagu International College*

printed on it in gold lettering. Behind that was a three-storey building. It was smaller than I'd thought but then there were only one hundred and sixty students. I'd researched it on the internet. I'd also seen that parents paid thousands of pounds each term for their sons to go there.

The Tesco man was coming back.

'Can I help you?' he said, pointedly.

'No, sorry,' I said, stepping away from the van.

It was just after two and I guessed all the students would be inside in classes. It might be different with the sixth form, but still I imagined if they had free periods they would be doing 'prep' or sports or one of the other many extra-curricular activities the school offered. They would be busy and no one would be looking out of the window for a girl from a school in Stratford.

I hadn't seen Harry Connaught in a long time. Now he was just the other side of a wall. I stared at it and wondered if I had gone mad and what on earth had propelled me to do this. As I walked along the length of the school it started to rain and I put my hood up. When I got to the corner of the building I crossed the road to a row of shops, the end one empty, the windows boarded. I stepped into the doorway, avoiding the piles of rubbish that had built up in the corners. I stood there and stared further up the road at a pair of wooden double doors that were embedded in the brick wall of the school. Adjacent to them was a wire fence along the edge of the pavement and yellow zigzag lines on the road. I was guessing that this was the student entrance.

In just under an hour Harry Connaught would come out of

that gate. I had no intention of letting him see *me* there; that was not part of any plan. I just had to see him.

I'd made a decision to come here a few days ago, after I'd been at my dad's apartment in Shoreditch. He and his girlfriend, Gemma, are having a baby. Gemma was hardly showing but she'd already bought lots of baby things and they covered every available space in my dad's tiny apartment. I had coffee and a piece of chocolate cake with them. The three of us sat on the sofa balancing the cups and plates on our laps. Between mouthfuls I'd asked them, *Where will you put the baby's cot?* And Gemma, without taking a breath, had said, *Oh, we'll have to move. Out of London. The prices are so high and we need more space.* I'd looked down at what was left of my cake and thought of something Jodie had said as soon as she heard about Gemma's pregnancy: *Now they'll be getting married and moving to somewhere miles away, you bet.*

I didn't say anything. Gemma was doing most of the talking and I could hear Dad mumbling agreement. Later, when I left, Dad put his arms around me and said, *You're not upset, are you? It'll be six months, a year, before it happens. And we'll make sure there's a spare room just for you to come and stay.* I looked him hard in the face. Since the pregnancy he was even more besotted with Gemma, his glance constantly veering towards her tiny tummy bump. He was on his way somewhere and I wasn't going with him. I hugged him back and left.

I'd walked towards the Tube feeling distracted, thoughts running through my head about how everything was changing. Dad would live in a house far away from London where he and Gemma and the baby would have lots of room and I would

hardly see him. I slowed down, reluctant to head off home where I would have to tell Jodie she'd been right. I paused on the corner of the street where the cafe Katie's Kitchen was. I looked along and expected to see the blackboard that sat in front of it. I'd often eyed the cafe from the main road when I was going to Dad's or going home. The blackboard wasn't there though. I walked down the street towards it and could see that the shop was shut up and there was a notice on the door:

We've relocated to Finsbury Park.

See website for details.

Thanks for your custom.

Underneath was the web address.

The windows were covered with metal mesh but I could still see through. The counter was flat, stripped of its coffee machine and displays of cakes and pastries. The tables and chairs had gone. There were some packing boxes stacked at the back but apart from that it was empty. I felt sad looking at it, even though I'd only ever visited the cafe once.

It was the day I first met Harry Connaught. He'd come in and we'd got talking. The cafe hadn't been busy, but still he'd sat at my table with his cafetiere and croissant. I'd been sketching and he'd asked me if I was an artist. It was an innocent picture. Two young people attracted to each other chatting across a table; girl meets boy, the stuff of romcoms. *I'm Harry*, he said, holding his hand out for me to shake as if I was a businessman and he was doing a deal. I don't remember anyone else in the cafe at that moment, at other tables or in the queue or even

behind the counter. I was in a bubble with this boy, the two of us in a world of our own. When he left I'd stood watching as his taxi disappeared round the corner and the colour seemed to seep out of the day and I knew then that I had to have him. It turned out that he had to have me as well but not for the reasons that I thought. The memory of it made my heart twist.

I knew it was mad but I wanted to see him again before the trial.

A little after three thirty some boys started to come out of Montagu International College. They spilled onto the pavement in twos, talking intently to each other, walking a few metres before whipping mobile phones out of pockets and bags. The further away from the gates they got the more physical they became, spreading out, pushing and shoving other boys, running, jumping and shouting out. Not so different from any school in Stratford, I thought. I noticed a couple of large black cars idling by the pavement, waiting to pick up some of the students.

I moved and stood in front of a newsagent's. There were stands along the pavement with foreign newspapers on display. I turned and pretended I was looking at them. Then I moved around so that I was partly hidden by the stand and looked back across at the gates. Some older boys were coming out and I watched with trepidation.

What was I doing? My memories of Harry had drawn me there. From those first few moments in the cafe I had been sucked into his world. I'd wanted him. And when he held out his hand for me to shake, the events of the next two days were settled. I would have done almost anything for him.



My phone beeped. I picked it out of my pocket and saw that it was a missed call from Mum. I thought about ringing her, then I decided not to. When I looked back to the school gates Harry was there. I was momentarily startled by the sight of him, as if he was the last person I expected to see. He was on his own. I pulled my hood up and turned my back to him. My heart was punching, my hand trembling, as I picked out a copy of a French newspaper from the stand. I looked at it and then glanced back to the school. He was on the other side of the road but had walked in my direction. He had his phone out and was reading something from it as he went slowly along.

He was holding his jacket over his arm. He looked thinner than I remembered and his hair had been cut very short. His face was gaunt, his jaw moving as if he was grinding his teeth. His tie was at an angle and his shirt had come untucked. He stopped abruptly and I thought for one awful moment he was going to glance over and see me.

But he was just searching his bag and I was able to study him. There was something different in the way he held himself. Last year he had been so smooth, so confident, but now he looked all fingers and thumbs, clawing into his bag for a book or some other item that he couldn't find. He pulled some papers out and they slipped from his hand and floated down onto the pavement. Exasperated, he dropped the bag and squatted down by it. A couple of younger boys passed and he spoke sharply to them, which made them hurry their step. He finally stood up and slung his bag over his shoulder and continued walking. I couldn't help myself, I felt this flood of

something for him; sympathy perhaps, because he seemed agitated, unhappy.

After what he had done to me was I allowed any feelings for him?

I replaced the newspaper in the stand and walked a few steps along to keep up with him. From behind me I could hear a beeping sound. I looked round and saw a black Mini. I recognised it from last year. Dom, Harry's friend, was driving it. He overtook Harry and pulled in alongside the pavement.

I wondered why Dom hadn't been at school.

Harry bent down to the car and spoke to him. A conversation went on and I walked back to the far corner where the boarded-up shop was. I paused as I saw Harry walk round the car while Dom leaned across inside and pushed the door open. He stood for a moment by it and looked around the street as if searching for someone. I turned my face to the shop window, afraid that I might be spotted. I heard the car door shut and realised that he'd got in. As it drove off I remembered that day months before when he came to my school to find me. Dom had brought him in the car then and they'd waited across the road for me to come out of the school gate; just as I'd waited this afternoon for him. He'd been so sweet. *I like you*, he'd said. *I've come all this way to find you*. Then he'd looked relaxed, his voice as smooth as honey. Now he was all frowns and sharp angles.

How could I help but have some feelings left for him? After those two days in Oxford Street when I seemed to be the centre of his attention. Was I not allowed that? It wasn't *Harry* who assaulted me.

I turned and began to walk towards South Kensington Station and my thoughts argued back. *No, Harry didn't do anything, a voice in my head said. He just arranged everything so that his brother, Marty, could rape me.*

Three

In the days leading to the trial I became irritable at home, being sharp with Tyler when he only wanted to play; biting Jodie's head off when she asked me if I was all right. I stayed in my room a lot and looked at myself in the mirror and frowned at my hair. Patrice had talked me into a henna treatment and now instead of mousy brown it was a defiant red. It was all part of her project to make me feel stronger. She laid great faith in a new hairdo, and even though she was my friend and she meant well, I felt annoyed every time I looked at it.

When I wasn't being angry I thought about Harry Connaught a lot. Not the Harry I knew last year, but the gaunt and perplexed boy who'd come out of the Kensington school that day. I began to wonder whether there was a chance that Harry had not only changed in appearance but, maybe, he had changed *inside*. Then I pulled myself together. In movies people change; in real life they don't.

My head of year asked me to come and meet her in her office after school on Friday. I'd had no class last period so I was early. I sat on a soft chair in the sixth-form common room until most of the other students had left. It was a non-uniform

day, so I'd paid my pound and was wearing skinny jeans and a giant orange jumper that I'd found in a sale bin. On a seat beside me was a copy of the *Metro*, a free newspaper that someone had picked up on the Tube on their way to school. I was leafing through it and could hear the sound of a single guitar strumming mournfully from one of the music rooms. Otherwise, the place was empty.

The newspaper was wrinkled and someone had cut a square off an inside page. A nearby headline caught my eye: *My Brother Made Me Rob*. I was about to read it when I heard my name being called. I looked up and saw Ms Harper in the doorway. I put the newspaper down and followed her along the corridor.

Inside her office she looked pointedly at my red hair.

'Goodness, you look *different*. What's happened to your hair?'

'Just some henna . . .'

On a side table were two china cups and saucers and a matching teapot. Behind them was a kettle which had just boiled and there were wisps of steam still ribboning out of the spout.

'Do you approve of my new crockery?' she said. 'Charity shop in Ilford.'

Ms Harper was always buying chinaware from charity shops. It was her hobby. She said she had shelves of it at home and every now and again she brought some into school. They were old-fashioned, thin porcelain with scalloped edges and tiny handles only big enough for a thumb and forefinger. The amount of tea they held was small, so Ms Harper was constantly refilling them from the pot.

'Now,' she said, sitting on the other side of a coffee table, 'how are you?'

‘I’m good. I’m pretty much OK.’

‘I can’t get used to your hair. You look so, well, different.’

I tucked some strands behind my ear.

Ms Harper was wearing one of her many dark suits; a knee-length skirt and single-breasted jacket. Underneath she had a grey shirt, the cuffs sticking out of her jacket sleeves. She wore no jewellery or make-up and her hair was cut neatly into her neck and round her ears. In contrast, the teacup she was drinking from was a pale yellow with blue flowers and the rim looked as if it had been dipped in gold.

She was sitting on a hard chair, straight backed. I was perched on the edge of an old armchair that seemed to droop the moment I sat in it. I had to look up at her and it made me feel like a year seven.

‘The trial starts on Monday, correct?’

I nodded.

‘And you have your story straight for next week?’

‘I’ll be off sick on Monday and Tuesday. Those are the days when I will be definitely giving evidence. After that I don’t actually *have* to be there so I’ll pop into school and get some work from my teachers and say I’ll do it at home. I may go back to the court, I don’t know.’

‘I doubt there’ll be much publicity attached to this trial but it’s best to have a story worked out. And it will most certainly be over by Easter, correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘So,’ she continued, ‘when you come back to school after Easter you will have your exams to prepare for. I know that at this moment the exams are the last thing on your mind

and I understand that. You have more important things to think about, but I will keep them at the forefront of *my* mind because I do not want this thing that has happened to you to destroy your future.'

Ms Harper drained her cup and then replaced it on the saucer. Without taking her eyes off me she picked up the teapot and refilled it. She was about to go on but I interrupted.

'Actually, I've made a decision about that.'

'Oh?'

'I've decided to defer university for a year.'

Ms Harper's face went slack. She pushed her cup and saucer away and stared at me. She looked as though she was on the brink of telling me off. I carried on speaking, though my voice was a little high.

'I . . . I've thought about it a lot and realised that I'm not ready to leave home and live in a different city among people I don't know. I'm just not ready.'

'I see.'

I couldn't blame her for being put out. We'd been meeting once a fortnight since the day I first told her about the rape, the previous September. She and the head teacher were the only two people in school who knew (except for Patrice). These meetings were important so that I could keep on track with my studies. So every two weeks she looked over my work and my progress. She gave me pep talks and if my grades were slipping she spoke to my teachers. She'd spent a long time with me choosing courses and universities and she'd given me lots of help with my personal statement.

'You didn't mention it at *our* last meeting.'

‘I just decided over the last few days.’

‘You have offers from Reading and Birmingham, correct?’

‘I don’t feel in the right frame of mind for university.’

Ms Harper sighed. It was what she did at sixth-form assemblies when she had a particularly difficult problem to discuss; personal safety or sexism or racist jokes.

‘But you are still going to take your exams?’

‘I’ll get the best grades I can. Then I’ll defer my start for a year. Lots of people do it.’

‘Yes, they usually do it to go and work with a charity for a year or go abroad and travel. They don’t do it so that they can stay in Stratford and work in Budgens.’

I flinched at her words.

‘Well, of course I didn’t mean that in the way it sounds . . .’

‘It’s OK. I understand.’

‘No, no, Stacey. I spoke out of turn. I apologise. There is nothing wrong with having a part-time job in Budgens. There is nothing inherently bad about taking a year out and staying at home so that you can decide what you want to do. There is something wrong with doing these things because a crime has been committed against you. Don’t let the actions of this man push you into hiding away.’

‘I’m not hiding . . .’

‘Aren’t you? Really?’

I didn’t speak because I felt a tightening in my throat. I’d made this decision and would have preferred to keep it private until after the trial.

‘Will you do me a favour? Will you leave this until after your exams? That way you keep your options open.’

I stared at her with frustration.

'That's my problem. I've got too many options. I need to know *what* I'm going to be doing in September. I can't deal with the uncertainty. I might be doing History and English at Birmingham. I might be doing Communications at Reading. I might be in halls or sharing a house. I can't *picture* myself anywhere. Who will I be with? I don't make friends easily. If I stay here – just for a year – then I know exactly what I'll be doing.'

'Working in Budgens.'

'And I'll go to university the following year!'

'If you make this choice now you will view your exams differently. You will lose momentum.'

'I can resit if necessary . . .'

'It sounds to me like you've already given up, Stacey,' she said.

'No, no, I haven't.'

She stood up, picked up her cup and saucer and the teapot and put them back on the shelf beside the kettle. I wondered if the meeting was over, if she'd had enough of me. Six months of plans and discussions about university and now I'd let her down. She continued talking, her voice sounding weary.

'I've seen boys and girls say they're going to have a gap year so their grades plummet and a year later they're working in McDonald's. I don't want that to happen to you. Will you at least put this decision off until after the trial?'

'I've made up my mind,' I said.

'But you'll do *me* the courtesy of waiting until we meet again before you let the colleges know. Just so that I can be sure that you're doing the right thing.'

I nodded. It was pointless arguing with her. Her suits and mild manner covered a will of steel. The only fragile thing about Ms Harper was her china. I stood up. The meeting was over for me. As I opened the door she spoke.

‘Good luck, Stacey. Just tell the truth and let justice work its course.’

‘I will,’ I said, ‘and . . . thank you. I really am grateful for the trouble you’ve taken . . .’

‘My pleasure, Stacey. I’ll be thinking of you on Monday.’

I left feeling out of sorts. On my way out of the sixth-form block I picked up the free newspaper I had looked at earlier. I glanced over the article *My Brother Made Me Rob*. Then I tucked it in my bag and headed to the supermarket for my shift.



Four

It was busy at Budgens. I started at five and faced a wave of weary commuters dropping in to buy last-minute groceries. When that died down there were people on their way somewhere, dressed up for Friday night out, buying wine, beers, crisps and confectionery. Later I spent a lot of time wheeling the cages in and out of the storage area and restacking shelves.

While I did it I thought about the article I'd read in the *Metro*.

It was about Jeremy and Heather Morton, a brother and sister, who lived in Cornwall and had befriended an elderly lady who lived next door to them. They were accused of stealing thousands of pounds from the old lady, Mrs Joan Rider. It happened over some years. The brother admitted he was guilty but the sister was pleading not guilty and had said that her brother *made* her steal the money from the pensioner. The case was still going on. The article was short and gave no more details. I knew that the report had caught my attention because of the headline *My Brother Made Me . . .* The words stayed in my mind as I worked.

At eight I had a break. My friend Dan was already in the tiny staffroom, sitting down, his legs splayed, a can of Coke

on the floor. He was looking at his phone, scrolling through something rapidly.

'I've just stacked enough tins of soup to feed an army,' I said.

'Good for you, physical work. Keeps you fit.'

'You should try some.'

'Look at this . . .'

Dan held his phone out for me to see. On the screen was a GIF of his dog. Every week he had some new set of photos or footage of Woody, a black mixed-pedigree dog.

'I've just had him groomed,' he said.

I looked at the screen and saw a leggy black dog staring at me, its eyes dark and shiny, one ear cocked, the other out of sight.

'Great,' I said, pretending a yawn.

'Here's my sister with him.'

I sighed and looked again. There in the photo was a blonde girl kneeling beside the dog. They were outside somewhere and the girl's long hair was blowing across her face.

'Right,' I said, 'I think I've seen enough photos of Woody today.'

I took a plastic cup from the water dispenser and poured a drink. I sat down beside Dan and for a minute neither of us said anything. We'd both worked there since the previous Christmas and I was comfortable with him and didn't feel the need to talk. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and googled the names Jeremy and Heather Morton. Several links came up and I read over some of the articles. Heather Morton hadn't been physically threatened by her brother. She just said that she and her brother had always been very close and if he asked

her to do something she usually did, she always had. She had been worried about taking Joan Rider's money, she'd felt terrible about it, but her brother had told her that he needed the money to pay back a loan.

As I was reading their story a message icon came up on the screen. It was a text from Patrice. She'd been off school that day so I'd not seen her. I opened it immediately.

**Come round tomorrow at 11
for chat xxxx**

I texted back.

See you then xxx

Dan stood up, picked up his can and tossed it into the bin. I'd been so engrossed I'd almost forgotten he was there.

'What's with the hair?' he said.

I touched my head, remembering the henna treatment.

'Felt like a change,' I said.

'It's OK.'

'Just OK?'

'It's all right.'

'King of compliments, you are.'

'I'm being honest. I liked it the way it was before.'

'OK, I'll let you off.'

'See you . . .'

The door closed behind him as my phone beeped with another text. I expected it to be from Patrice but when I looked

at the screen I was surprised to see the name *Bella* there. I frowned and opened the message.

**Would be good to see you. Coffee in
Costa's? Sunday morning?**

I read the words over and felt odd. I hadn't heard from Bella for months, as far back as January. My finger was poised to send a reply but I didn't. I sat there for the rest of my break and wondered why Bella wanted to see me again. She must have known somehow that the trial was coming up. Did she know it actually started on the following Monday? Or was her text just a coincidence? When my break was over I put my phone back in my pocket and went out.

The store was narrow but stretched back far enough to house a lot of products. I was lucky to have a job there. The pay was good and there were half a dozen other kids who turned up on my shifts from time to time so I got to know new people, like Dan, who went to an all-boys' school in Ilford. And there were a couple of chatty girls each called Sue from a school in Plaistow who were always asking me stuff about my life: boyfriends, school and clothes.

The supervisor, Mrs Bakhtar, asked me to sort out the shampoos, so I went into the storeroom, filled up a cage, wheeled it back out and spent a while stacking the bottles and tubes and tidying up the nearby mousses and lacquers. With just under an hour to go to the end of my shift I went on the till. Only a trickle of people came in.

I thought about Bella; hearing from her so soon after seeing



Harry was weird. I patted my pocket where my phone was and tried to work out why I hadn't immediately answered her text.

I had met Bella the previous June in the weeks after the rape. She had been Harry Connaught's girlfriend some weeks before I had met him and I'd gone looking for her to find out whether she had experienced the same thing that I had. I had clicked with her right away. She was small, like me, and young-looking. Right from the moment I met her I could tell she was in pain because of Harry and his brother. We'd talked about what had happened to both of us. I hadn't been sure whether to go to the police but she had been definite that she was going to keep her assault secret.

We kept in touch over the months. I met her for coffee at Liverpool Street a few times and after we'd talked through our anguish about what happened we began to talk about other things. She was just starting her A levels and had plans to go to university, but she also had singing lessons as well as belonging to a choir. She told me she wrote her own songs and had recorded a demo.

I liked her. She was creative and I admired that. I had thought, at one time, that I might be creative in a different way, but those ambitions had gone. After the first few meetings I stopped feeling sorry for Bella because I could see she was a strong person. I began to think that maybe she didn't need to get justice in the way that I did. She took me to her house once in Dalston and introduced me to her mum, who was a theatre nurse in a hospital at King's Cross. She baked a chocolate cake for my visit.

The last time I saw Bella was after Christmas. She'd been wearing a red velvet coat that came almost down to her ankles.

We talked about school. She was doing English literature and so was I and we argued about the set text, *Wuthering Heights*. She loved it but I did not. She talked about the romance of the doomed couple in the book but I hadn't been convinced by them and anyway I'd written a ton of essays on it and I was sick of it. I remember saying to her, *You're still a romantic, then?* She'd looked at me sadly and nodded. Even after she'd been raped she believed in love. *Don't you believe there's someone out there for you?* she'd said and I had shaken my head. *Maybe there is but I've got a lot of other stuff to do first. The trial, my exams, university, career.*

That was long before I decided to defer my university place for a year.

I'd texted her a few times after January and suggested we meet up again but somehow we never did. She replied to a couple saying she had a lot on and would get back to me. I had stuff going on myself with schoolwork and my personal policewoman, Annie, preparing me for the trial. Weeks passed and then it was a couple of months and I did think about contacting her but I left it. The thing we had that linked us probably wasn't a good enough basis for a long-term friendship.

Now I had this text from her wanting to meet up. I didn't know whether I wanted to go but then I thought, *Why not?* When my shift was over and I was getting ready to go home I sent her an answer.

**How about Sunday morning
at 11, Liverpool Street?**

Seconds later I got a reply. As if she'd been sitting waiting for my message.

See you in Costa at 11.

I replied with three smileys.