

**NO  
VIRGIN**

ALSO BY ANNE CASSIDY

*Looking for JJ*  
*Finding Jennifer Jones*  
*Moth Girls*

# **NO VIRGIN**

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HOT  
KEY  
BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2016 by  
HOT KEY BOOKS  
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE  
www.hotkeybooks.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-0578-5  
*also available as an ebook*

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This book is typeset using Atomik ePublisher  
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



Hot Key Books is an imprint of Bonnier Zaffre Ltd,  
a Bonnier Publishing company  
www.bonnierpublishing.co.uk

# Part One



## One

My name is Stacey Woods and I was raped.

My best friend, Patrice, told me to write this story. She's strong and probably the only person I know who can persuade me to do things I don't want to do. She's given me instructions. I'm to start at the beginning and take my time with it. *Don't leave a single thing out*, she said, *however bad it is*.

But it's not always easy to put things in the right order.

After the rape I didn't leave straight away. I was so shocked. I stayed in the bathroom with the door locked. I sat on the floor beside the toilet and felt the cold tiles against my legs, my toes curled on the ceramic floor. I heard my name being called over and over but I didn't respond. *Stacey, you all right? Come on, Stacey. Come out, Stacey. It was only a bit of fun*. After a long time, when it had gone quiet, I turned the lock and opened the door a crack and looked out. He was still there. He smiled at me. I couldn't stay in the bathroom forever, so I walked out and picked up my things from the floor and the bedside cabinet. I kept my eyes down the whole time. I ignored what was going on around me and I got dressed and walked to the door.

He gave me three twenty-pound notes. They'd just come

out of a machine and were crisp and sharp and I took them with care in case they cut my skin. I folded them into the palm of my hand and left. I walked to Oxford Street. It was almost six and the pavement was teeming with people. I felt myself carried along by the tide of shoppers and commuters until I edged my way to the road. I put my hand in the air and hailed a taxi. It was something new that I'd learned to do. When the cab stopped I showed the driver the three twenty-pound notes so that he knew I could pay. I gave him my home address.

The cab drove slowly through the rush-hour traffic. I sat in the corner of the seat and let my head rest against the window and watched the city go by. Everywhere people were on their way home from work, walking swiftly, heads down, jackets and cardigans over their arms because of the heat. Men in suits had their ties off or pulled low. The sight of their open collars gave me a churning feeling in my stomach and I held my knees flat together and my whole body tightened and stiffened.

When the cab got to Stratford I asked the driver to pull up at the end of my road. I paid him and walked off down my street. My bag was heavy, the straps digging into my shoulder, so I let it drop down and hugged it to my chest. Two young boys were walking in front of me heading a football to each other, shouting and laughing. They were seeing how long they could go without dropping it. One of them was counting – *twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty*. I stepped out onto the road to pass them.

Just as I reached my house the front door opened and my mum came out.

'Where have you been, Stacey? I've been worried about you! Where did you stay? What were you doing?'



My mum's hair was wet and there was a towel around her shoulders as if she'd been in the middle of washing it. Jodie must have been watching out of the upstairs window and seen that I was coming. For two nights I'd been away and I hadn't explained where I'd been staying. Mum was upset, tugging at the edges of the towel.

'Stacey, what's been going on?'

I shook my head. I couldn't answer her. My sister, Jodie, was standing in the front porch holding her baby, Tyler, on her hip. She stared at me for a few moments and then turned back into the house. My mum tried to put her arm around me but I didn't want to be touched right then, not by anybody. I gently pulled away. From behind I could hear the young boy counting his headers – *thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty* . . . I walked into the hallway.

'I can't explain, Mum. I've got to see Patrice,' I said. 'I'll talk to you later.'

I left my mum gaping at me. I dropped my bag on the hall floor and went back out and headed for Patrice's house. I had to speak to her, to tell *her*. I ran all the way. I banged on the door instead of using the bell and her mum answered. She said Patrice wasn't in but I saw her falter and glance back into the hallway when she said it, so I knew she was lying. When she shut the door I stood at the end of her front garden and sent three texts to Patrice one after the other, but the house stayed quiet and closed against me.

I went home. My mum opened the door for me. Her hair was dry now but pulled roughly back off her face, not styled as it usually was.

'Stacey . . .' she started.

‘I can’t talk now,’ I said. ‘I’m so tired. I just want to lie down.’

She looked hurt, her mouth stretched across her teeth. She stood aside though, so that I could go upstairs. If I couldn’t be with Patrice then I wanted to be alone. When I got to my room my bag was there on my bed. I upended it and watched as the stuff I’d been carrying around for the last few days fell out. In the middle of it was the glossy Selfridges bag.

It gave me a start. I’d almost forgotten about it. I held it up and watched the Whistles dress slither out, still wrapped in tissue. I grabbed hold of it and folded it in half and half again until it wouldn’t fold any more. Then I shoved it into the bottom of my wardrobe.

It had been bought and paid for, but I didn’t want it any more.

In school, the next day, I got in early and found Patrice sitting with Shelly and some other girls. When I tried to catch her eye she looked away. She was hurt because I’d gone away without telling her. She’d sent me loads of texts and I hadn’t answered them. She didn’t know that I’d *tried* to see her three nights ago after the row with Mum and Jodie.

When I finally cornered her, alone, in the corridor, she stared up at the ceiling like she often does when teachers ask her questions she can’t answer, like, *Why didn’t you do the homework?* Or, *Why are you late?*

‘Look, I’m sorry about the last few days. Please speak to me,’ I said.

The cuff on her school shirt was unbuttoned and I wanted to grab hold of it. I often held onto bits of her clothing – the tail of her hoodie or the sleeve of her jumper. She was affectionate

towards me too, linking my arm or occasionally giving me a hug as if she hadn't seen me for months. This time I didn't try to touch her because there was something icy about the way she was standing.

'Sorry, do I know you?'

'Come on, Patrice. Don't be like this!'

'Like what?'

'Blanking me. I need to talk to you. There's something I need to tell you . . .'

I felt a pebble lodge itself in my throat.

'Oh, right. So for three days you just disappear. You don't answer any of my calls or texts. You don't respond on Facebook. You just disappear off the face of the earth. Brutal.'

'I deliberately kept my phone off.'

'Not true!' she said, pointing a finger at my face. 'You texted your mum.'

'Just to stop her calling the police out!'

'I was worried. You couldn't have contacted me?'

'I'm sorry. I was trying to get away from *everyone*.'

'Even me?' she said, looking hurt.

How could I explain?

'I was in a state. In any case, there's this thing I need to talk to you about.'

'Well, now *I'm* sorry. Because I don't have time to listen to a part-time friend.'

And with that she flounced off. Shelly appeared at the end of the corridor. When Patrice reached her she took her arm and led her off. I felt the tears coming, so I turned away and headed for the toilets and splashed my face with cold water.

Later I went to the dining hall and got a drink and sat in the corner with my back to the wall. Patrice was across the hall being loud and joking with a bigger group of girls. One of them was standing behind her doing her hair. I was stung with jealousy because I loved doing Patrice's hair. It was long and she often wore it tied up, like a horse's tail. There were endless things that could be done to it: plaiting, beading, twisting, making it into a bun or sometimes just using a comb to keep it sleek and knot-free.

I should have answered one of her texts. Something simple like, *I'm spending some time away. Be in touch, ☺ Stacey*. I was angry, though. I had needed to see her that night after the row with my sister but she wasn't available and I'd taken offence and decided to look after myself.

Now I regretted it.

She was my best friend even if I wasn't hers.

Some of the girls with Patrice were looking over at me. Patrice was deliberately looking away. She even turned her shoulder to me so that she wouldn't accidentally see me out of the corner of her eye. I crossed my arms as tightly as I could. I was trying to hold my misery inside. Even as I sat like that I could feel it struggling to get out.

Before leaving school I had to have a meeting with Ms Harper, the head of year, who was asking about my unauthorised absence of two days. It took a number of shrugs and me looking down at the ground for ages for her to realise that I wasn't going to give any details.

'Is it because of things at home? Is that why you stayed off?'

I shook my head, but there was truth in that question.

‘How are Jodie and the baby?’

My sister, Jodie, had a baby when she was fourteen. She had to leave school in year nine. It was something I didn’t like to talk about.

‘They’re fine. OK.’

‘Is that why you stayed off? To help Jodie look after the baby?’

‘No! My mum helps her. She has my mum. She doesn’t need me.’

‘Because your grades will slip if you take time off school. This is year twelve. A levels are important.’

Mrs Harper made endless notes on a form in front of her.

I walked home alone. The school playground had cleared; there were just a couple of stragglers kicking a football around. I took my jacket off because it was warm; the sun was on my back. As I turned the corner into the high street I saw Patrice standing outside Costa on her own. She was waiting for me, I knew. I felt this little flutter in my chest. I walked up to her.

‘Hi!’ I said.

‘Hi yourself,’ she said.

‘Hair looks good,’ I said.

Patrice shook her head so that her ponytail bobbed.

‘Where’ve you been?’ she said, still looking put out.

‘I . . .’

‘Are you going to tell me or not?’

She stood with her hands on her hips as if she meant business. I wanted to tell her to relax. Of course I was going to tell her about the row with Jodie and then running away and meeting Harry.

But there was something I had to tell her first.  
'I was raped,' I said.  
Her face dropped. She was speechless. She didn't even  
say, *Brutal*.

## Two

Patrice took me back to her house.

She linked my arm tightly.

She has been my friend since year ten. We sat side by side in our English set and became close within days. In class she is bright as anything, always answers first and sorts out any problems there are with poetry criticism – my worst subject. She isn't that good at getting her assignments in on time though, whereas I'm usually up to date with my work. That's not the only difference between us. She's tall and I'm five foot two. She's loud and I'm quiet, shy almost. She's had five boyfriends and I've just had the one. She's a good dancer and can sing songs after hearing them only once. I veer away from anything public. I like my own space. She's very popular with other kids and likes to spend time with them. I prefer it when it is just us two.

It sometimes causes stress between us.

I love Patrice's house. She is an only child and lives with her mum and dad. It is always quiet there. Her mum is usually in one room reading or doing some work on her laptop. Her dad is mostly at a computer or sitting in front of the television

watching football. Patrice's bedroom isn't that tidy but you can tell that any mess is her doing. No one goes into her bedroom without asking her. It is her space. Not like my own house where my mum or my sister seem to breeze in and out of my room whenever they feel like it. Patrice's bedroom has a calm feel. There are private things of hers around, her laptop open, old diaries from years gone by. I know, for a fact, that if I pulled back her top drawer I would find a packet of condoms there, because Patrice is positive that neither her mum nor dad would poke around in her space.

I often stay over at Patrice's house at weekends. It is a relaxing place where she and her parents seem like equals and are always chatting or doing things for each other. When it gets late her parents go off to bed and Patrice and I sit up for as long as we like, watching DVDs or flicking through the channels. Sometimes, if the weather is good, we creep down to the end of her garden and get onto her trampoline, which she's had since she was ten years old. Her mum and dad had wanted to sell it or pass it on to a charity, but Patrice held on to it. It is a huge hexagon shape and has a net around it and we climb onto it and lie on our backs, talking about what we are going to do with our lives. Sometimes we take out tumblers full of freezing-cold white wine and drink them while looking up at the stars. It's peaceful and serene and we both whisper secrets and gossip, our voices disappearing into the darkness.

That day, though, we were sitting in her room. She was on a chair and I was perched on the corner of her bed. I explained what had happened to me. I didn't go into a lot



of detail. I was brief and to the point. She was shocked and shook her head.

'You *have* to go to the police,' she said.

'I can't.'

'Why?'

'Because it was my own fault!'

'That's a ridiculous thing to say. Did you *ask* him to rape you?'

'No!'

'Did you tell him to stop? Did you say *no*?'

'Yes!'

'Then how can it be your fault?'

'It's complicated,' I said. 'You had to be there . . . I misunderstood . . .'

How could I explain without making myself look like a complete fool? A girl who couldn't see what was happening because of her own silly daydreams. It was better not to say anything, so I shut up.

Then Patrice sighed loudly, pulled me over to her dressing-table mirror and made me sit down. She picked up a brush and pulled my hair back off my face. She brushed it through for a while, one stroke after another, and I felt my shoulders soften.

'You'll feel better if you get it all off your chest,' she said quietly.

I shook my head. She didn't know the half of it.

She pulled a tail comb from a drawer and parted my hair at both sides and lifted the top tresses. She made some thin plaits, taking her time, gathering them together so that they

sat on top of my head. She'd done this style for me before and I'd liked it a lot. She scrutinised it in the mirror from time to time and twisted her mouth up to one side, just the way she does when we're trying to find extended metaphors in a poem.

'You have to find a way to talk about this, Stacey. The police need to know,' she said. 'Have you told your mum? Or Jodie?'

'No.'

As if I would tell *Jodie*. I pictured my sister that very morning walking up and down the landing with Tyler on her hip. She was talking on her mobile phone and Tyler was arching away from her, looking round to me. Jodie ignored him and me and talked loudly as if she was the only person in the house. I pictured myself telling her I'd been raped. There would be initial sympathy, but as I began to unpick the details of what had taken place I imagined my sister's expression being one of amazement, which would quickly turn to derision. Her older, more sensible sister, the one who *hadn't* got pregnant at fourteen, had run away from home and got herself raped. The thought of it made me cringe with shame.

Then I thought of Mum standing beside her, puzzled, confused. *You did what?* she might say, incredulous. In the last few years my mum had shouldered the burden of Jodie's mistakes and problems. *Oh, Stacey, you're so sensible*, she always said to me. *You'll get a good education and a great job. Thank God for one sensible daughter.*

I'd let her down.

‘I can’t tell them. I can’t tell anyone. I don’t want to talk about it any more.’

‘What if this happened to someone else? What if he did it again and you could have prevented it?’

‘I don’t know. I can’t be responsible for what might happen to other people. Don’t put that on me. Haven’t I got enough to be miserable about?’

I felt tears coming. Patrice handed me a box of tissues.

‘Budge up,’ she said.

I edged over on the chair. There wasn’t much room but she sat down beside me and her arm went round my shoulder. I could see both of us in the mirror, our heads angled towards each other. I was lucky to have a friend like her.

‘Right, stop, listen,’ she said, playing with some of the strands at the front of my hair. ‘If it’s so *complicated* then you can write it all down. Every single thing that happened, and I’ll read it. There are rape counsellors we could go to. They will read it. Maybe, if you feel up to it, the police could read it.’

‘Like a book?’ I said, with a half-laugh.

‘Don’t make it too long and don’t have lots of description in it. I hate books with lots of description. Meanwhile, if you see *him*, just ignore him.’

‘I’m not likely to see him. He lives in Fulham.’

She stood up, all bossy and businesslike.

‘Well, if he contacts you by phone, don’t talk to him. You got that?’

I agreed because that’s what I do when Patrice tells me to do something. It all sounded simple the way she said it. But

she hadn't needed to tell me not to see him or speak to him again. I had no intention of doing that.

I never told her about the text he had sent me that morning.

**Really like you. Let's meet up again xxxx**

Just reading it had made my stomach twist. That I would keep to myself.

## Three

It's hard to know where to begin this story. When I met Harry in Shoreditch? When I left home? Or did it start with the row with my sister?

I got twelve cards for my seventeenth birthday: one from Jodie and my mum; one from my dad and his girlfriend, and the rest from school. The best one was from Patrice. It opened to a pop-up picture and there was the tune of 'Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you . . .' I also got a card from Benji Ashe, which said *Lots of lurve xxxxx* and which I folded in half and put straight in my bag.

I got money from my mum and dad and some chocolates from Jodie. My best present was from Patrice. She bought me a book on fashion – *Twentieth-Century Style* – which I immediately opened up. It was second-hand and she said she'd got it from eBay. It had page after page of glossy pictures of fashions from the past. Patrice kept apologising that it wasn't new but I didn't mind that at all. At the back, sandwiched between two pages, was a packet for a wedding-dress pattern. It was old fashioned, the paper yellowed, but the actual pattern looked to be still inside. Patrice hadn't known it was there and looked a little embarrassed,

but I absolutely loved it, loved the fact that someone had left it there. I put it in my bag to be looked at later but I kept thinking about who had owned it and the person for whom the wedding dress was made. It gave the book an added layer of interest, knowing that a real dressmaker had owned it. Throughout that morning, when I had a chance, I slipped it out of my bag and glanced through the sections, hoping to find something else.

It was a brilliant present, perfect for me.

I had recently decided I wanted to work in the fashion world. I wanted to be a designer. It wasn't something I talked about at home and I didn't make a big deal of it at school. I was aware that saying it out loud made me sound like the dozens of other kids who wanted to be football players or *X Factor* stars or models. The only person who knew was Patrice. In the last year or so, I'd become fascinated with clothes and style. I'd got into sewing and making things. I hand-sewed cushion covers or napkins or scarves. I helped Patrice to take in waistbands and hem up sleeves. I followed sewing blogs and took pictures of things I'd made and sent them in. I collected magazines and old patterns and had scrapbooks of interesting outfits I'd seen. I was always looking on market stalls for old cut-offs of fabric and had a stash in my bedroom so that I could add decorations to garments.

I had a sketchbook in which I designed clothes. There were pages of simple line drawings of dresses, trousers, suits and coats. I wasn't just dreaming. I was planning out my future so that I could get onto the right courses. I'd researched it and I'd bookmarked the London College of Fashion on my laptop.

I hadn't said anything about it to Mum or Jodie. I'd kept my magazines and the stuff I'd downloaded about courses

and the fashion industry in my bottom drawer underneath my jeans. It was neatly tucked away in envelope files marked *Careers Assignment*. It was my private business. I wanted to keep it to myself.

When I got home from school that day Mum was already in from work. She was still in her smart clothes and around her neck was the lanyard that held her identity tag. She'd shaken off her shoes though, and was wearing the red slippers with the cat face that Tyler so loved. I sat down beside her and showed her my cards and the book Patrice had bought for me.

'These are lovely, Stacey,' she said.

There was an ashtray on the arm of the sofa.

'Jodie smoking again?'

I could hear my sister coming down the stairs. I looked around the room. The armchair by the fire that she usually sat in was covered in bits and pieces of baby clothes. There was a half-filled bottle of formula by the cushion and on the carpet were three pairs of Jodie's shoes, discarded.

'Doesn't she ever clear up?' I said.

'Don't start, Stacey. She's got a lot to do with the baby.'

That wasn't true. When Mum was home from work she usually looked after Tyler while Jodie did her hair or her nails or read magazines. When Mum was at work it was either me who took him or he got left in his playpen or his pushchair to entertain himself.

The door opened then and Jodie walked in with baby Tyler on her hip.

'Hi, Stacey,' she said, her voice high, a little forced. 'You don't fancy spending some quality time with Tyler, do you?'



Tyler was twisting around to see me. I softened immediately. Tyler was a sweet baby with lots of smiles for everyone. He wasn't at all like his father, a surly fifteen-year-old from the next street who visited him every couple of weeks and stood as far away from him as he could.

'Sure,' I said, picking up my stuff and taking Tyler on my hip. 'He can come up to my room.'

Tyler felt damp and smelled bad.

'Does he need changing?' I said.

Jodie shrugged, picked up the ashtray from the arm of the sofa and sat down in her armchair. Dismayed, I took Tyler upstairs to my room. It wasn't the first time I'd come home from school and found Tyler damp and unchanged.

After I cleaned him up I let him lie on my bed. I took out a soft toy from my bedside cabinet. It was a small brown monkey that I'd made for him, called Charlie. It was furry with stitched-on ears and eyes and a big smile. Tyler held him in one hand and then moved him towards his mouth. He was so predictable. He liked to taste every single thing. I plumped up the pillows around him so that he couldn't roll off the bed. Then I sat down with my back to the headboard. Every few moments I took hold of Charlie and made him do a silly dance in the air, then I gave him back to Tyler.

After a while I got changed out of my school clothes and put on a clean top, some jeans and sandals. I took a look in my schoolbag. I had some homework to do but decided not to unpack my laptop and papers until later, after Tyler had gone to bed for the night.

Oddly, I wasn't relaxed. I looked around my room. The sight of it usually calmed me but today I felt a little uncomfortable



and I wasn't sure why. I let my eye rest on various things: the chest of drawers, the wardrobe, the storage unit in which I kept all my sewing things. I looked at the hooks on the wall above it where scarves and bits of fabric hung, my big chair in the window and the small table beside it. Then I looked back to my chest of drawers and realised what was troubling me. The top drawer was slightly open.

I made sure Tyler was OK and I went across and opened the drawer. It was where I kept my toiletries. A couple of bottles had fallen over. The lid of one of them was loose and liquid was seeping out. I righted it and tightened the lid. Someone had been rifling through my things.

Jodie.

My sister couldn't do the one thing I had asked her to do and that was to stay out of my room and my things. Without another thought I swept Tyler up and went downstairs, my feet barely touching the steps. The living room was full of cigarette smoke. Jodie was sitting with her feet up on a stool. Outside it was bright sunshine, but she chose to sit in front of the television. My mum looked round and saw me holding Tyler.

'Jodie,' she said. 'Baby.'

Jodie stubbed out the cigarette.

'Have you been in my room?' I said, placing Tyler down on the sofa next to Mum.

'No.'

Jodie and my mum glanced at each other. That was all it took, that one-second look, and I knew my sister was lying.

'What were you doing in my room?'

'Nothing.'

‘But you were in there?’

‘Just for a minute. I was looking for some conditioner. I’d run out of mine.’

‘Conditioner? Does that mean you’ve taken mine?’

Jodie shrugged.

‘Where is it?’

‘In the bathroom.’

I looked at my mum. ‘You said you wouldn’t let her go into my room! After last time you promised me. You said my room was my own, that it was private.’

‘It was just a bit of conditioner, Stacey. She wasn’t in there more than two minutes. I stood at the door.’

‘She could have waited and asked me!’

‘Don’t raise your voice, you’re upsetting Tyler.’

‘Yeah,’ Jodie said.

I looked at both of them. Something was twisting up inside my chest. Tyler was still holding Charlie, the monkey, and I was breathing rapidly, afraid to speak in case I said things I’d regret. My sister got pregnant at fourteen: stupid, idiotic, pathetic. She had ruined her life. It was *easy* to get contraception but she hadn’t been bothered. She’d let some halfwit boy from the next street get on top of her and give her a baby. Now all she did was to move from her bedroom to the living room while at the same time offloading her baby onto Mum or me or anyone who’d have him. She was fifteen and a half and her life had shrunk down to daytime television. The sight of her disgusted me.

‘Don’t go in my room,’ I said quietly, with force. ‘Don’t ever go in my room again.’

I was about to turn away and go back upstairs when I heard

her laugh. I looked back round. She was sitting forward, both elbows on her knees.

'Fashion designer!' she said.

'What?'

'You're going to go to the London College of Fashion and study design? That's rich, that is. You know you need exams for that. Just because you can sew up a cushion cover doesn't mean you can design clothes for a living. You need to be artistic for that.'

'That's enough, Jodie,' my mum said.

'She's been through my stuff!'

I looked at my mum in fury. She was hopeless.

'I thought you said you were at my room door while she looked for the conditioner? You said she was in there two minutes and yet she's found my careers stuff. You left her. Didn't you? You left her in my room!'

'I honestly don't know why you are getting so upset, Stacey. I think you should calm down.'

'It's my room. MY ROOM!' I shouted.

Tyler started to cry.

'Now look what you've done,' Jodie said.

I walked out and went upstairs. My throat was hot and I was on the edge of tears. I went straight to my chest of drawers. I pulled open the bottom drawer. My jeans had been moved around. I looked underneath and saw that my folder of information on fashion courses had shifted and the flap had been folded back, some of the printouts inside were sticking out at an angle.

I slammed the drawer shut.

I sat on my bed, my fingers woven together, tight with frustration. It wasn't the first time Jodie had been in my room.

How often had I argued with Mum about it? I just wanted some privacy, some space of my own. The previous time Jodie had helped herself to my T-shirt because she hadn't bothered to put her own in the wash. Then, when I found it crumpled up in the corner of the sofa, I'd demanded a lock on my room. I'd even gone to stay at my dad's for a night in a fury. When I got home my mum had promised that she would not let Jodie go there. She had sworn she wouldn't allow it.

But that was Mum. She was hopeless when Jodie started whining and asking for things. Why couldn't she stick up for me? I hadn't got pregnant. I hadn't messed up my life. I was still working hard and looking forward to going to university. I didn't sit in front of the television all day, sneaking a crafty cigarette while my baby was having a nap.

Mum and Jodie; they had always been so close. Jodie, as a little girl, had spent most of her time on Mum's knee or leaning into the crook of her arm. If Mum put her down she would scream the place down. *She's just a little anxious*, Mum would say, shrugging her shoulders. Jodie was no longer the baby of the family but she was always there, at Mum's side, whispering to her, asking her favours. If only she took as much notice of Tyler.

My throat was fiery and I was on the brink of crying, so I stood up, picked up my bag and my phone and my charger. Patrice would let me stay the night at her place. I could go straight to school in the morning. I wouldn't have to see Jodie or Mum again until I'd calmed down. I packed some smart clothes for school the next day and made sure I had everything I needed for an overnight stay.

I was still angry when I went downstairs, so I left the house without saying goodbye.

## Four

I headed for Patrice's, walking quickly, puffed up with indignation. I was picturing Jodie poking about in my drawer. I remembered her laughing and saying, *Fashion designer!* as if I shouldn't have an ambition.

Just because she had given up on life, she wanted me to do the same.

We hadn't always been at each other's throats. When she was younger I took care of her, especially when Mum and Dad were out at work. I got her dressed and played with her, read stories to her; we watched television together and I took her round to her friend's house and picked her up later. She loved coming into my room and looking through my school things. *Can I tidy up your felt tips?* she'd say and then spend ages slotting them into their plastic holder, making sure the colours moved along the continuum from yellow to black. Even after the divorce we were close. In her early days at secondary school I used to pass by her form room to make sure she was all right. She was always introducing me to her friends. *Meet my big sister*, she'd say, even though some of them were already taller than me. At first she would wait around for me after school

and we'd walk home together, but somewhere along the line it changed. She had new friends who she hung around with, surly girls who wore thick mascara and talked behind their hands. She started to ignore me in school and walked around the house in total silence. If I spoke to her she said, *What?* in an irritable way. She got into trouble with teachers and kept telling Mum to leave her alone.

She became a stranger.

Then I began to see her with the boy from the next street, Philip Day. They were usually lounging around in the park or sitting in a bus shelter or in the kitchen eating from McDonald's wrappers. While she was pregnant Philip Day disappeared for a while. After Tyler was born Jodie began to look ten years older, her shoulders rounded, her mouth constantly pursed up to one side, a cigarette in her fingers.

My phone rang. I took it out of my bag and saw *Mum* on the screen.

I didn't want to answer the call. I turned it to silent and put it in the pocket of my bag. I slowed down, wanting to shake off my temper before I got to Patrice's. I turned onto the high road and walked for a while. Then I saw Shelly Goodman, from school. She was coming out of a corner shop and was talking on her phone. She had her head angled towards her shoulder and was ambling rather than walking, as if she had no particular place she had to be. She stopped by a bench and perched on the back of it, as if she was waiting for someone. She ended her phone call and looked around.

Shelly was one of the popular girls in our form class. As soon as she was dropped off at school in the morning, and almost

before she had closed the passenger door, other girls would rush over and start talking rapidly to her. In the common room she was always talking to Patrice about work they were doing in their Law A level, Patrice raising her voice with excitement. Patrice wanted to be a barrister. It was her burning ambition to defend people who had been accused of crimes they hadn't committed. She was always reading out examples of miscarriages of justice, her finger floating above her iPad to keep her place.

I knew Shelly and Patrice often sat together in their Law lessons and I knew that they helped each other out with notes and handouts. Walking towards room SS28 with Patrice I usually felt tangled up inside. She would go in to Law and I would walk on to AR3 for Art. As I left her at the door I could hear Shelly's voice singing out, *Here, Patrice*, no doubt having saved a seat for her.

I often asked Patrice about her. *What were her plans? Did she want to be a barrister? Did she have a boyfriend? Did she like music? Where did she live?* Sometimes Patrice would answer, but often I felt her getting a bit irritated. Just last week she said, *Honestly, Stacey, ask her yourself. She sits across the room from you in form group!* But I only really spoke to Shelly in passing. The fact that she and Patrice shared an A level meant that they had a friendship that I was excluded from.

When I saw Shelly in the street close to Patrice's house I was confused. She lived in Forest Gate, a bus ride away. I wondered why she was there. I should have walked up to her and tapped her on the shoulder and said hi. I found myself stopping though, turning my back on her and looking into

the window of a dusty hardware shop, sidestepping the rows of plastic boxes and buckets that sat outside.

That day, being my birthday, I'd asked Patrice if she'd like to go for a pizza with me. It would be my treat and then we could go back to her house and watch a DVD or listen to music. She'd said she couldn't. She'd said that her mum was going to put some henna into her hair and so she was staying in. She said we could do it on Friday, which was a better day anyway because it was the end of the week.

I hadn't minded.

Turning my head slightly I could see Shelly out of the corner of my eye. She answered her phone again and talked for a few minutes, then she walked off. I watched her go, hoping that she would head towards a bus stop or in the direction of the Tube. When I looked further I saw Patrice standing up the road, on the corner of her street. Shelly was walking towards her.

It was a shock.

I quickly went inside the hardware shop and looked out through the window. I could hear the man in the shop saying, *Can I help you, miss?* I ignored him and watched Shelly and Patrice standing in the street, talking, smiling. Then Shelly threaded her hand through Patrice's arm and they started walking.

I felt my neck tighten and I swallowed a couple of times. I could hear the shop owner's voice again, so I walked outside. Shelly and Patrice were no longer there. They'd turned back into Patrice's street.

I was filled with anguish. Why didn't Patrice just say, *I can't come for a pizza tonight because I've said I'd meet Shelly?* Why



not just be honest? Deep down, though, I knew the reason; she was keeping it from me because she knew I'd be upset about it. Her and Shelly's friendship was growing, and Patrice knew I wouldn't like it.

I stood there for a long time, watching the end of Patrice's road. I imagined them walking along, talking about law and the things they were studying. Maybe Shelly wanted to be a solicitor or a barrister. It would be a sensible ambition, one that Patrice would share. Maybe that's what they were talking about: courses to choose, which university to go to. Possibly they would both apply to the same one and live in a shared house.

Possibly, later on, when it was dark, they would both go and lie on the trampoline and look up at the sky. Maybe they would get round to talking about me. I thought that after all their chat about dreams and ambitions Patrice would tell Shelly that I wanted to be a dress designer. I pictured Shelly, her head flat on the rubber surface, saying, *She wants to be in fashion? Huh! No chance of that!*

I knew I couldn't go to Patrice's house that night.

