

(July)

It has always been just the two of us. Mum had me when she was nineteen and while she prefers to call me a 'surprise' rather than an 'accident' we can safely say that I wasn't planned. I know that my dad's name is Daniel and that he promised my mum he would stand by us both, love us both and give us everything our hearts desired. Mum was head over heels in love and called me Danielle after this wonderful man. The ink wasn't even dry on my birth certificate when he told Mum he couldn't cope and was leaving to 'find himself'. That was just over fifteen years ago.

Daniel is obviously still lost.

I think he's the main reason why Mum has never wanted to move house before. We live in the same house as we did when I was born so he would always know where to find us. She has never been interested in going out with other guys and I love that it is just the two of us. We get on well most of the time. She has her moments and gets unusually upset when I leave crumbs on the kitchen worktop, but other than that, we don't really fall out. Moving away is going to be a really big deal for both of us.

One

When it first happened, I wanted to run away.

But as time has passed, I am starting to feel settled again and my friends are no longer treading on eggshells. That was one of the worst things for me, seeing my friends struggle to talk to me. They didn't know what to say so they didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say either; I just wanted things to go back to normal. In the space of 24 hours we'd gone from talking about how much we hate maths and what we were going to wear to the party at the weekend to a painful and awkward silence. I was still me. I had just been given a 'victim' label and now that was all people saw.

My mum told me that I did not have to take on the label of 'victim'. She told me that I was strong, that I had survived, and that the most important thing was that we stick together. I didn't really know what she meant at the time. I didn't feel strong, and there were days immediately afterwards when I wished I hadn't survived at all. Mum took the phrase 'sticking together' very literally in the early days. I couldn't even go to the loo without her. I felt like a victim though. The police called me a victim at every stage when they carried out their procedures and the courts weren't much better, either.

At least he pleaded guilty.

Now that the court case is over, he won't be seeing the outside world for a minimum of eight years.

It's time for Mum and me to have a new start.

This journal was a present from Mum on the day of the verdict. She said that I need to see my future in these pages. The pages are blank, just like my future; I can create whatever I want on them. The only thing she had written was a small quote on the inside of the front cover, which said, 'That which does not destroy you, makes you stronger.' She told me that I could look back on it in years to come and see how far I'd come. I think it was her friend Jane's idea to be honest. She's a psychologist and is always coming up with bright ideas to help us both. I dread it when Mum gets off the phone after

a couple of hours chatting with Jane. We always have a little task or something to talk about. I must admit that this was one of Jane's better ideas and even though it has been sitting on my bedside table for the last three weeks, I'm actually quite enjoying writing in it now. If only I could have been this enthusiastic at school.

So this is my new start.

I'm writing very neatly as I have only just begun, I give myself about three days before I'm back to a rushed scrawl that Jane will probably think is a coded cry for help and I'll be set another task.

Two

So, the new school is just like any other school. Big, pictures on the wall and full of kids. The new house looks great; it's brand new and bigger than the one we have now. My room will look out onto the garden and it's much bigger than the box room I've lived in all my life. More importantly though, we're getting a dog! I've always wanted a dog but Mum said that it wouldn't be fair because of us being out all day. Now that we're moving and things are going to be different, Reggie is a new addition to our family.

He's massive but really he's just like a giant teddy. Within seconds of meeting him, he had rolled over and wanted his belly rubbed. Mum was trying to point me in the direction of a smaller dog that she had spotted, but Reggie wouldn't let me leave. He looked at me with his big, sad eyes and I was smitten. I said to Mum that we'd always feel safe with Reggie around and that was it. She agreed that he was going to be ours!

Reggie is two and has had a horrible start to life. He was with another family that sounded similar to us. A mum and daughter who lived on their own. Unfortunately, that's where the similarity ended as they had mistreated him and he had been taken away from them. The horrible child had even attached pegs from a washing line to his ears, which made him bleed and cry. I promised him there and then that he would never be hurt like that again. Mum started crying as she had said the exact same thing to me a few months ago. Bev, the lovely lady from the rescue centre, was almost in tears too, but she wasn't sure why. She had grown attached to Reggie and said to us that he needed to go to a family who knew how to deal with a big dog. At seven stone he is a very big dog, yet as he lay there with his head on my lap he just looked so vulnerable. Mum said that she completely understood and I panicked, thinking that maybe she was going to say 'no', that he'd be better off with someone else. Then she looked to me, then to Reggie and said to Bev that when she had me she had no idea how to look after a baby, but she learnt very quickly. She said that by the time we picked Reggie up in a couple of weeks, she would have read every book on his breed, booked us into dog training classes and bought everything he would ever need to settle in to our family.

Mum then quite innocently asked, 'What is his breed by the way?'

At that point, Bev had stopped filling in the adoption paperwork and I thought Mum had blown it for us. She hadn't even read the description on the door of his kennel. I knew that Mum just wanted to buy the right book because buying books is her answer to everything. It's a shame she doesn't read them all, but I didn't like to mention that. Bev smiled as she said he's a cross breed: half German Shepherd, and half Rottweiler. Mum's face was a picture! Bev quickly added that people quite often get the wrong impression when they hear what he is, and that's why he's still looking for a home.

They both looked over to see Reggie gently nuzzling me to play and wagging his enormous tail in utter contentment.

I can see myself in him... He is misunderstood. Because of his breed and what had happened to him, people just make assumptions. I only needed to look into his eyes to see that there wasn't an aggressive bone in his giant body, and that all he really wanted was love and someone to play with. People look at me in the same way. They don't assume I'll be aggressive (I hope!), but they see a child from a single parent family, hear what happened to me and assume things about me. They think they know me.

They don't.

Like Reggie, I can still have fun, still smile (Reggie does smile, really!), and still laugh (okay, Reggie doesn't laugh but he does wag his tail a lot).

I hope that when I start my new school they can see me for who I really am, not who they think I am. I'm nervous about the new school but as nobody will know what happened, I'm hoping that I'll be able to make friends without people worrying what to say or do around me.

I have plenty of time to worry about that though.

First of all, we have to move house, get everything Reggie needs and then go and collect him. I wonder if he's nervous about moving in with us?

I like to think he chose us as much as we chose him.

I think Mum is as excited as I am about Reggie moving in with us. She's made me promise that I'll do my fair share of walks and that I'll feed him, brush him, entertain him and still make sure I do my homework. She made it very clear that we would also be sharing poo bag responsibilities, but I'm not thinking about that. We stopped off at a pet shop on the way home (not that it will be 'home' for much longer), and had to put the back seats down to fit his new bed in the car! At that point Mum asked herself, 'What am I doing?' But I pretended not to hear and was still laughing at the fact she had bought two books. One about German Shepherds, and one about Rottweilers. I did say that she wouldn't be tested, but she was adamant that she wanted to know everything so she could give Reggie what he needed. I spent the rest of the journey home looking at the pictures and getting more and more excited about our new family member.