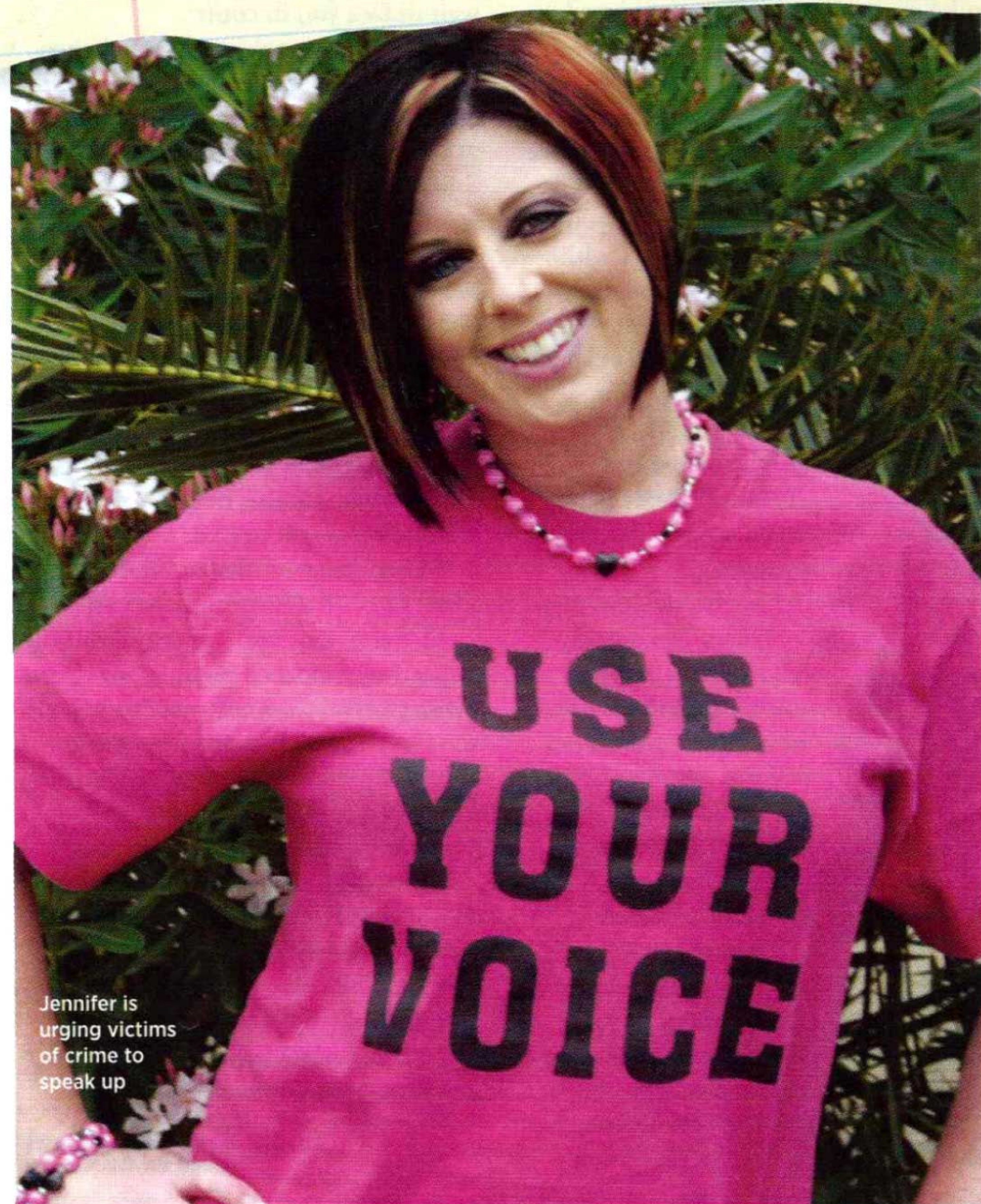


'A letter to my rapist: you stole my innocence but not my voice'

Jennifer Schuett, 30, lived through a horrific ordeal when she was just eight years old. Here, she writes a letter to the man who not only raped her but tried to silence her – forever...



Jennifer is urging victims of crime to speak up

To Dennis Earl Bradford,

"I was an ordinary eight-year-old girl – who loved singing, and was confident and inquisitive – when you changed me forever. Back then, I lived with my mum in a ground-floor flat and, like a lot of kids, I was afraid of the dark. I spent most nights in Mum's bed – but on that August night in 1990, I'd been keeping her awake. 'I'll sleep in my own room tonight,' I said, kissing her goodnight.

"Switching on the light, I lay on my bed, counting the coins in my piggy bank before going to sleep. I was so innocent. You were 19, and high on petrol fumes. You saw my light on and peered through a crack in my curtains.

"You'd only ever had a traffic conviction before. How do you go from that to a child rapist? You said later it was a spur-of-the-moment decision to snap the lock on my window and grab me out of bed. When I woke, moments later, you clamped your hand over my mouth, telling me, 'I'm a police officer. Your mum's on her way to meet us.'

"You loaded me into your car, and eventually we stopped in a quiet street. You said your name was Dennis. I still thought Mum was coming for me until I asked, 'If you're a police officer, where's your gun?' You pointed to the back seat – and when I stood up to peer over, you grabbed me and tore off my

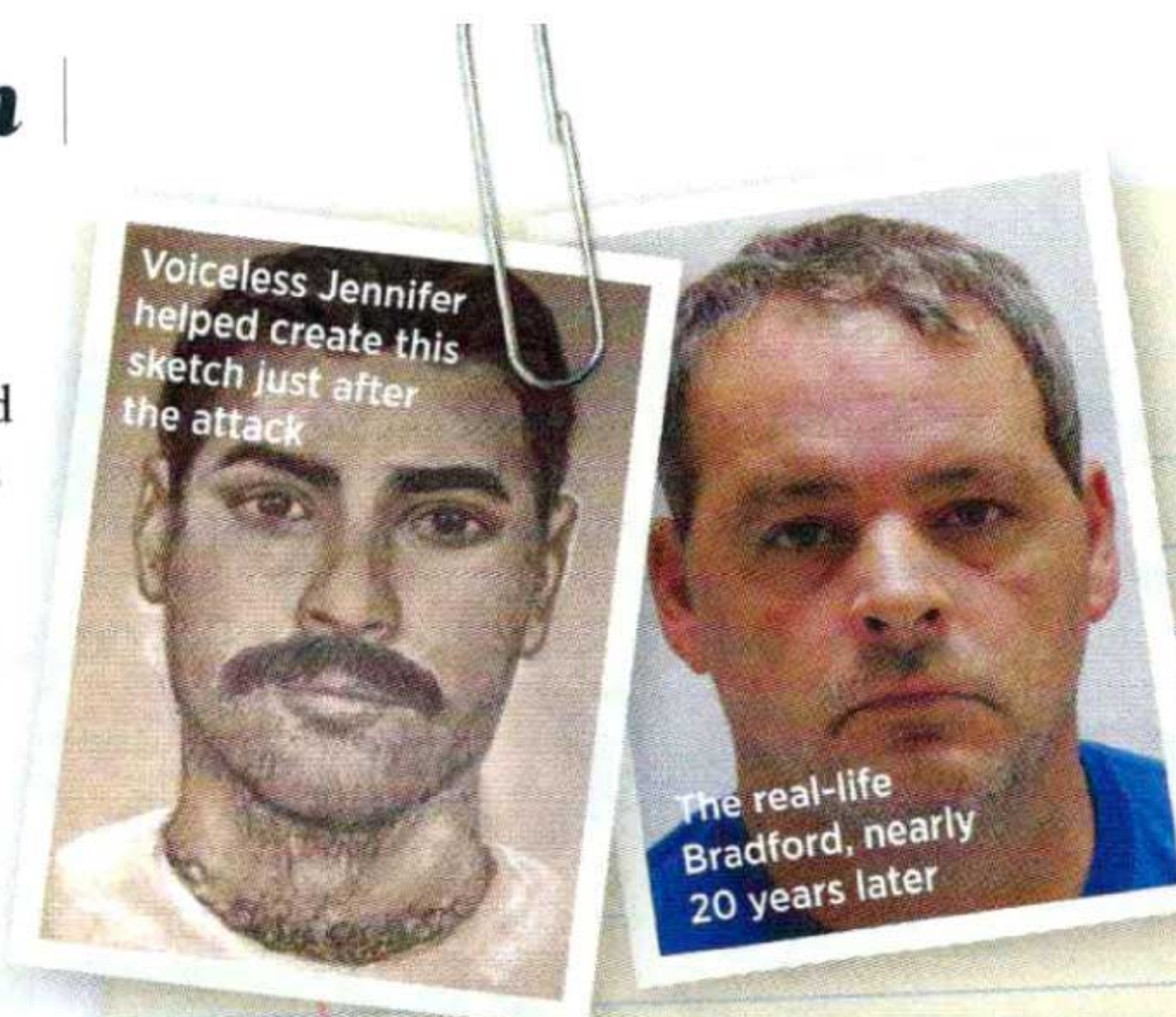
nightclothes. I'm thankful I don't remember what happened next. But I now know that I was raped while I cried out for my mum. You strangled me, then took a pocket knife and slashed my throat from ear to ear.

"You thought you'd killed me – but I was still alive. When I came round you were dragging me into a field. I kept my eyes squeezed shut as you dumped me in the long grass. I lay there for 14 hours. At one point, I woke up to find the sun had risen. I could hear children playing nearby. I tried to scream but no sound came out. Because you'd severed my vocal cords. I remember looking up at the sky knowing I was going to die. I prayed Mum would be OK.

"Then something hit my foot. Suddenly, a little boy was staring down at me – he'd tripped over me. An air ambulance arrived in minutes and I was rushed to hospital, where doctors closed up the gaping wound in my throat. I was covered in cuts, bruises and ant bites, with thorns embedded in my back from being dragged through the field. Mum was by my bedside. She must have been traumatised but she never let me see it.

"Back then, DNA testing wasn't advanced enough to identify you, so I wrote down all I could remember. And when, miraculously, my vocal cords healed after a few days and I could speak again, I saw it as a sign that I was meant to talk about what you'd done – and help bring you to justice.

"Just three weeks after the attack, I returned to school – a tracheotomy



'You tried to kill me, but I was still alive'

tube protruding from my bandaged throat. I'd been fearless and happy, but now I suffered terrible nightmares, and was terrified of men. For six months I wouldn't let my own granddad near me.

"Years passed while you were still free. I was too afraid to stay in my own room in our house in Texas, and slept with Mum until I was 15. I got tired of always looking over my shoulder.

"Eventually, I started living a normal life – shopping with friends, going to parties and having boyfriends. My survival had made me realise how precious life is. But I still lived for the moment I'd face you again – this time as a strong young woman.

"At 23, I met my boyfriend, Jonathan, through a mutual friend. We quickly

fell in love, and he comforted me as I cried when, three years later, doctors told me the rape had caused internal damage as I'd been so young. I'd never fall pregnant naturally.

"Then in 2008, nearly 20 years after the attack, a new detective was assigned to my case. 'I'm going to get you the answers you deserve,' he promised. He sent my

clothing, which the police still had, to be retested – and this time, they got a hit.

"Dennis Earl Bradford. I'd waited so long to learn your full name, and now I knew it, I felt elated. You were a welder and had two children – a girl and a boy – who weren't much older than I'd been when you abducted me.

"I half expected you to deny it, but the police say you admitted everything. Watching your video confession, I couldn't believe it. I'd spent years with an image of a monster in my mind, but you were an ordinary, middle-aged man with greying hair.

"Charged with attempted capital murder, you were remanded in custody awaiting trial – innocent until proven guilty. The relief, knowing you were locked up, was indescribable.

I was on a high for weeks, and couldn't wait to face you in court.

"Cruelly, you took away that chance. In May 2010, seven months after your arrest, you tied your cell's sheets into a noose and hanged yourself. I don't think you did it out of remorse – you were a coward taking the easy way out.

"Devastated, it was months before I could talk about it without crying. But I eventually realised your death wouldn't stop me. I started talking to the police and social workers, helping them understand how to deal with survivors of violent crime. I also hoped to encourage victims of crime to use their voices to get justice.

"Twenty years to the day after the abduction, I had my moment with you – I drove to your grave and read out the impact statement I'd planned for court: 'When you cut my throat, you assumed I'd die – or if I lived, I wouldn't be able to talk. Well, you chose the wrong eight-year-old to try and murder...' I read, feeling a weight lifting off me.

"Now I have a degree in criminology, and, after IVF, Jonathan and I are expecting a baby. I often think of your wife and children – they were innocent victims too. This letter is to show you that, instead of silencing me, you made me stronger, and louder, than ever." ♦

Jennifer

For more on Jennifer's work, visit Justiceforjennifer.com

