

A woman with dark hair, wearing a light-colored t-shirt, is sitting on a bed. She is looking out a window with sheer, light-colored curtains. The room is dimly lit, with light coming from the window. The overall mood is contemplative and somewhat somber.

He wants her.
At any price...

The Mistake I Made

'Hypnotically gripping'
TESS GERRITSEN

PAULA DALY

About the Book

We all think we know who we are.

What we're capable of.

Roz is a single mother, a physiotherapist, a sister, a friend. She's also desperate.

Her business has gone under, she's crippled by debt and she's just had to explain to her son why someone's taken all their furniture away.

But now a stranger has made her an offer. For one night with her, he'll pay enough to bring her back from the edge.

Roz has a choice to make.

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About the Author

Also by Paula Daly

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The Mistake I Made

Paula Daly

For Grace

July

1

BODIES WERE MY business. Living, not dead. And on a sweltering afternoon in early July the body lying face down in front of me was an ordinary specimen. He was my twelfth patient of the day, and my back was aching, my sunny disposition just about beginning to falter.

‘How is it feeling?’ he asked as I sank my thumbs into tough fascia running alongside his spine.

‘Pretty good,’ I replied. ‘I’ve got rid of the scar tissue around L4 – the troublesome joint. You should notice a difference as soon as you stand up.’

He was a quarry worker. Often my toughest customers. They spoke very little, so I enjoyed the brief respite from the interaction that most demanded, but physically, quarry workers were hard on my hands. They have a dense bulk to their musculature, a resistance to the tissues, which requires the full weight of my upper body, directed down through my overused thumbs.

My thumbs were my instruments. Essential for every facet of my work. They were my diagnostic tools, used to detect and assess the nuances in tissue structure; my means of offering relief to a person in pain.

I had contemplated having them insured. Like Betty Grable’s legs. But I never quite did get around to it.

‘When you’ve finished with my back,’ he said, ‘if you’ve got time, would you mind having a quick look at my shoulder?’

He lifted his head, smiling regretfully, as though he really did hate to be a nuisance.

‘Not at all,’ I said brightly, masking a sigh.

I used to be a self-employed physiotherapist, and I did my utmost to take care of the needs of every single patient. If I didn't get results, I didn't get paid. So I worked hard to build up a busy practice.

That thing we strive for? The work-life balance? For a while I had it.

Not any more.

When there was no money left, I found myself here. Working fifty hours a week for a chain of clinics, cooped up in an airless cubicle with a production line of patients. The fruits of my labours go straight into someone else's pocket.

I also found myself at the mercy of a practice manager named Wayne.

Wayne meant well, but his desire to get the job done correctly sometimes made him overbearing. And every so often he could also become flirtatious - though I should say that it was never to the point of harassment. But you had to be firm with him, or else his behaviour would escalate and he would begin suggesting dates. I think he was possibly a little lonely.

With the quarry worker now perched on the edge of the plinth, I knelt behind him and asked him to raise the affected arm out to his side. When he reached ninety degrees he sucked in his breath with the pain and jerked the shoulder involuntarily.

'Supraspinatus,' I told him.

'Is that bad?'

'Can be tricky. I can't treat it properly today, though, there's not enough time. But I'll pop in an acupuncture needle and see if I can give you at least some relief.'

I'd studied acupuncture as a postgraduate course and while I twisted the needle back and forth, back and forth, I could hear Wayne outside in the reception area, cajoling a patient, trying to persuade her to make an appointment with one of the other clinicians.

'I want Roz Toovey,' she was saying to him.

'Roz is fully booked until the middle of next week. How about Gary Muir?' he pressed. 'Gary has one available slot left today. He could see you in ten minutes.'

No answer.

'Okay, what about Magdalena?' Wayne suggested.

This was the general order of things. First, Wayne tried to palm people off with Gary, who I was pretty sure didn't know his arse from his elbow, and, as far as I could tell, was accepted on to the degree course simply because there was a nationwide shortage of male physiotherapists at the time. Before his training, Gary had been a second-division footballer.

'Magdalena?' the patient asked. 'That the German woman?'

'Austrian,' said Wayne.

'She hurt me last time. I felt like I'd been hit by a bus. No, I want Roz.'

'But,' Wayne replied, losing patience, '*as I already said*, Roz is fully booked.'

I am Roz Toovey, by the way.

'Can't you just have a word with her?' she said. 'Tell her it's Sue Mitchinson and my back's out again? I used to be one of her regulars. I'm sure she'd fit me in, if she knew it was me. And I am in *incredible pain*. Roz is the only one who can—'

'Hang on,' Wayne said, irritated, and I heard footsteps heading my way.

Three sharp raps on the wood.

'Roz, there's a Sue Mitchinson here, wondering if you can see her.'

'Excuse me a moment,' I said to the patient.

I opened the door and stuck my head out.

Looking past Wayne, I cast my eyes directly over towards Sue, who upon seeing me marched across the reception area.

Before I had the chance to speak, she began to plead her case. 'Roz, I wouldn't ask if I wasn't desperate. You know I wouldn't. If you could just see me for five minutes, I'd be ever so grateful.'

Not only was I the only physiotherapist in South Lakeland apparently capable of fixing Sue, the two of us had a history.

I had a history with a lot of patients who frequented this practice, in that they all followed me from my own clinic when it folded. Most of them had been intrinsic in building up my clientele, so the reality was, I owed them.

In the beginning, I placed one small advertisement in the local press, and the second I offered people relief from their sometimes chronic pain (something other practitioners in the area weren't always able to do), word spread. I became fully booked within a month. Of course, the trouble now was that those early patients, the ones who had been so kind in recommending me, suddenly couldn't get appointments. And so they would resort to the You-know-I-wouldn't-ask-unless-I-was-desperate plea.

'Sue, I can't,' I said firmly. 'I have to collect George from after-school club, and I've been late twice already this week.'

Without pausing to think, she shot back, 'What if I was to ring my mother and get *her* to pick up George?'

I didn't know Sue's mother. Never met the woman. Neither had George.

'We're over in Hawkshead now,' I said, as tactfully as I could. 'So that's not really doable.'

Sue screwed up her face as she tried frantically to come up with a solution that might work, just as Wayne looked on with the beginnings of agitation. It could irk him something terrible that patients insisted upon seeing me and wouldn't be palmed off with the likes of Gary. It made it impossible for Wayne to balance the appointment schedule. And what

we ended up with was me working myself into a stupor, whilst Gary twiddled his thumbs in reception.

Generally, Gary spent this free time chatting to Wayne, discussing the Premier League and the merits of Puma King football boots. Both of them saying 'absolutely' a lot.

'How about you give me five minutes? Five minutes or less,' said Sue, in one last-ditch attempt.

'Okay, five minutes,' I said, beaten. 'But you'll have to wait. I have another patient in straight after this one and I'm running late.'

Sue wasn't listening. She was already hurrying away to take her seat in the waiting area before anyone had the chance to change their minds.

'Did you call that insurance guy?' Wayne asked.

'What? No, sorry. Slipped my mind again.'

Wayne sighed dramatically, rolled his eyes and spoke in the way one would when reprimanding a small child. 'Get it sorted, Roz. Everyone else has had their assessments.' He lowered his voice. 'Without that assessment, you're not fully protected. The clinic *is not fully protected*, unless—'

'I'll do it. Promise. As soon as I've got a free minute. Listen, Wayne,' I said, stepping out of the treatment room and closing the door behind me so the patient couldn't hear what I was about to ask, 'I don't suppose there's any chance of a small advance on my wage, is there? It's just things are really tight right at the minute, and I'm not sure I can make it till next Friday.'

He tilted his head to one side and looked at me with mild reproach. 'I told you this before, Roz,' he said gently. 'The company cannot make exceptions. Not even for you. I wish there was something I could do but, honestly, my hands are tied.' And with that he walked away.

As I finished off with the quarry worker I could hear Wayne informing Sue in reception, his voice now loud and dictatorial, that she must pay for the treatment session up front, and *in full*, regardless of the duration.

He was in the habit of doing this when he'd found himself overruled on a matter of limited importance, and today was no different.

When I started out on my own, years ago, I remember being terribly worried about whether I could make the business work or not. At the time, I voiced these concerns to one of my first patients, Keith Hollinghurst, and he had this to say: 'Those that have to make it work, do. Those that don't, don't.'

To this day, he has always remained scornful of people who play at running a business; not grasping what it actually takes to turn a profit year in, year out. 'Nine out of ten companies fail,' he would tell me. 'Make sure yours is the one that doesn't.'

Keith Hollinghurst was old school. He ran a scrap-metal firm. He was never without a wad of rolled-up twenties in his pocket, and was not backward at coming forward. Keith continued on as my patient and, while he lay face down now, his hairy back peppered with acupuncture needles, I listened to him rant about the general incompetence of South Lakeland district council. As he relayed conversations he'd had with various jobsworths - who, naturally, he'd put in their rightful places - I would chip in, oohing and ahing, asking the odd question to give the impression of being attentive. Then I pulled the needles out of Keith's skin and asked him to turn over, face up, so I could manipulate his lower back - by levering his leg across the front of his body. He obliged, and as I propped a pillow beneath his head, I caught sight of the large, dried urine stain on his Y-fronts.

'I've got a proposition for you when you're done with my back,' he said, blinking rapidly.

'I'm not watching you masturbate, Keith.'

He'd suggested this more than once.

He kept silent as I levered his leg over, asking him to take a breath in, then a breath out, as I pushed down hard and listened for the tell-tale click.

Patients think this is the sound of an intervertebral disc being pushed back into place. It's not. It's either the sound of two joint surfaces distracting, coming apart – the gas coming out of its solution to give rise to a popping noise – or, more commonly, and in this instance, it's the sound of adhesions tearing around the joint.

But I go along with the disc idea because it's easier.

Other things I go along with are: one, the fact that anyone who has visited an osteopath will claim to have one leg longer than the other; two, the irritating assumption that blind physiotherapists have healing powers on a par with Jesus Christ himself and three, the false claim made by all middle-aged women to have a very high pain threshold.

'Look,' said Keith, 'I know you're short of cash. I know you're on your own with that kiddie. I'll give you an extra sixty quid in your hand *right now* if you do it. You don't even have to come anywhere near me. And I'll be fast.'

'Absolutely not.'

'Remember what I said to you when you first started out?'

'Remind me,' I said.

'That you have to go the extra mile if you're to survive. The ones who just do the necessary in business fail ... the ones who don't give the extra customer satisfaction—'

'My business has already failed. It's too late for that.'

'Yes, but if you're going to get back on your feet, Roz, you can't just do the bare minimum. People expect more, they expect more today than ever before. What with the economy the way it is. Everyone is chasing the same money. Jobs are disappearing and—'

I looked at him.

'You're not seriously justifying what you're asking me to do by debating unemployment levels, are you, Keith?'

Shiftily, he looked sideways, before biting down on his lower lip.

'Eighty quid,' he said. 'Eighty quid, cash. Right now. You don't even have to pretend to like what you see.'

'I *don't* like what I see.'

'A hundred quid.'

'No, Keith,' I said firmly. 'Now get your trousers on.'

2

AS THE FERRY groaned away from the shore, I got out of the car.

For tourists, it's a given they exit their vehicles the moment the ferry gates close – taking photographs of each other smiling, the lake as their backdrop, pointing to the pretty mansions dotted along the shoreline. But like most locals I took the beauty for granted. I forgot to look at the slate-topped fells, the ancient forests, the glistening water.

The sheer majesty of the place can become invisible when you're faced with daily worries, daily concerns.

The villages of Bowness and Hawkshead are separated by the largest natural lake in the country: Windermere. The ferry crosses it at its midpoint, the lake's widest point in fact, and there has been a service here at its current site for more than five hundred years. It's a fifteen-mile trip to go around the lake in either direction, and in the heavy summer traffic that journey can easily take more than an hour, so the ferry is essential. Early craft were rowed over, then later a steam boat ran. The current ferry, which carries eighteen cars and runs on cables, is powered by diesel.

On good days I would feel so fortunate. My heart would swell at the splendour of the commute home to Hawkshead, and I would feel glad to be alive. Blessed to live in one of the prettiest places on earth. The kind of place people dream of retiring to after working hard all their lives.

Today, I was late.

The *no excuses* kind of late.

Tall tales of temporary traffic lights, tractors with trailers loading sheep, or flat tyres would not wash. And no matter how late I was, the ferry couldn't go any faster.

Two weeks ago, my car sat alongside an ambulance carrying a casualty, and the ferry couldn't go any faster in that instance either. It was an arresting sight, the ambulance stationary, its blue lights on, as we crawled across the lake. The passengers were casting nervous glances at one another, wondering who was inside, who it was that required urgent medical attention. We never did find out.

I wasn't going to make it to after-school club until well past the deadline and by then George would be anxious, probably a little tearful. He was nine, and though generally a tough kid when he needed to be, since his father and I split, the past couple of years had been hard on him. I could see his easy-going nature gradually seeping away and being replaced by a sort of moody apprehension, a state more akin to that of a displaced teenager. More and more, he wore a guarded expression, as though he needed to be properly prepared for the obstacles thrown our way by the constant state of flux in which we found ourselves.

I took out my mobile and pressed redial.

The sun was still high in the sky and the heat beat down hard.

The diesel fumes from both the ferry and the couple of car engines still running gave the air a heavy, polluted feel, a contamination that was incongruous with the clean, clear lake water through which we cut. I stood against the rail, cradling the phone in my hand as I listened, once more, to the recorded message from the after-school club.

Then I dialled Dylis again in an attempt to locate my ex-husband. This time, she picked up.

'Dylis? It's Roz.'

'Who?'

'Roz,' I repeated. 'Where's Winston?'

‘Oh, I don’t know, dear,’ she said vaguely, as if she’d just woken up. She was often like this, acting as if she were mildly drugged, not quite with it. ‘He’s at work, I think,’ she said. ‘Let me find a pen and paper and I’ll write the message down, because I’m terrible at—’

‘Dylis,’ I interrupted, ‘Winston doesn’t have a job. He’s out of work, remember? That’s why I don’t get any child-support payments. Are you saying that he’s working at a job *right now*?’

‘Oh - no,’ she stammered, ‘I’m not saying that. No, that’s not it. I’m not exactly sure *where* he is. Perhaps he’s out helping someone, you know, for free?’

‘For free,’ I mirrored flatly. ‘That sounds just like Winston. Look, Dylis, if he gets back in the next five minutes, can you get him to run and pick up George for me? I’m late.’

‘But it’s not our turn to have him,’ she said, confused, and I could hear her flicking through pages; must have been the pages of her diary.

‘It’s not your weekend to have him,’ I explained, ‘but I’m very late. And it would really help if you could locate Winston and—’

‘Ticket, Roz,’ came a voice from behind.

With the phone lodged against my ear, I turned, withdrawing a note from my wallet and handing it over. ‘I need a new book, Terry,’ I whispered to the aged attendant. ‘I used my last ticket this morning.’

We made the exchange, Terry being a man of few words, and I went back to explaining the situation to Dylis. She couldn’t drive, so I didn’t suggest she should get George herself. She lived in Outgate, a hamlet a mile and a half or so from Hawkshead. But Winston Toovey, my ex, who was obviously doing work cash-in-hand - had been since Christmas, if my suspicions were correct - was probably breezing about nearby, passing the time of day with folk, in no real hurry to be anywhere whatsoever now that he was

living with his mother and had absolved himself nicely of all major responsibilities. And since he didn't always carry a mobile phone, we couldn't locate him.

I ended the call with Dylis, not for the first time filled with the urge to slam my phone against something solid. She got me like that. It was like trying to get information out of a child. Often, she'd slip up, make some comment about Winston she wasn't supposed to - to *me*, in particular - and when I pressed her about it, she'd go mute and stare at her feet.

Pressed really hard, Dylis would lift her head and look at me, woefully, as though she knew she was in deep, deep trouble. She would look at me as if to say, *Please don't tell Winston.*

I wanted to shake the woman. I wanted to scream: *How can you let your son walk out and leave me with this mountain of debt?* But I didn't, because I was aware on some deeper level that Dylis's dreamy, scatterbrained manner was the best she could do.

By the time I reached the school it was 6.28.

Twenty-eight minutes late.

I pushed open the front door and was greeted by a silent corridor, naked coat hooks, the odd PE bag dangling.

I took a breath and went into the classroom. The after-school club used the Year 1 classroom and, whilst waiting as George gathered up his belongings, I liked to look around at their first attempts at writing, at portraits of parents - which were often surprisingly true in their likeness, highlighting qualities perhaps parents wished they'd not (jug ears, shuffled teeth).

Now George was seated on the floor, his legs stretched out in front of him, his eyes cast downwards as he played on a Nintendo DS. He didn't raise his head when I entered, even though he was aware of my presence. Instead he gave one quick flick of his head to shift his hair out of his eyes.

Iona, the young woman in command of the after-school club, glanced up from her desk and offered a wan smile. One to suggest that this really was going to be the last time.

It was Friday. The sun was out. She was ready for a bikini top, shorts, flip-flops and a cold, dripping bottle of Peroni in the village square.

‘So sorry,’ I said emphatically. ‘I’m so, so sorry. George, quickly, get your things.’

‘Roz?’ said Iona.

‘I know. This is unacceptable. How much extra do I owe you?’

‘Ten pounds,’ she said. ‘We’ve had to start charging five pounds for every extra quarter of an hour, or parents don’t seem to see the urgency.’

‘Here,’ I said, pulling out a note I could not afford to part with, ‘take twenty. I know you can’t keep on—’

‘Roz,’ she said sadly, ‘it’s not the money. It’s my time. I’ve been here since seven thirty this morning, and I have a life, you know?’ Iona didn’t raise her voice as she spoke. She was too professional to get angry in front of George. It was almost worse in a way. She spoke as if I were letting myself down. Letting my son down.

‘I’m sorry,’ I repeated. ‘It won’t happen again, I assure you.’

‘We’re going to have to call an end to this arrangement. It’s just not—’

‘Don’t,’ I said quickly. ‘Please don’t do that. I can’t manage without it.’

‘It’s not that I don’t understand, Roz,’ she said. ‘I can see that you’re struggling. But you’re late practically every day, and it’s not fair. It’s not fair on us and it’s not fair on ...’ She didn’t finish her sentence, simply gestured towards George, who was pretending not to listen as he collected his lunchbox from the windowsill. Having run out of biscuits, I’d stuck a peach yoghurt in there this morning

and was now regretting it. The school had a policy of sending the kids' rubbish home with them so you'd know if they'd eaten all of their lunch. That empty yoghurt pot would be supporting its own ecosystem.

Turning back to Iona, I saw she was waiting for me to speak.

'I don't know what to do,' I said honestly, as I thought through the logistics of the following week.

Iona didn't offer a solution. Unsurprising, really, since her patience had run out over a month ago. I'd had second chance after second chance.

I could ask my sister.

No. Today was her fortieth birthday. We were attending her party this evening and she was off to New York next week. My parents were too far away and I'd made a promise to my sister that I absolutely would not impose on them again. I'd let them down in the past, and I couldn't bear to ask for their help. At least not for a good while anyway.

Winston was unreliable. He had left George waiting at the school gates more than once when he'd become fascinated by extreme weather and had gone off storm chasing at the coast.

Iona cleared her throat. She was still waiting for me to speak.

But then, oddly, as she attempted to stand, she winced.

'Are you okay?' I asked as I watched her adjust her weight, moving from one foot to the other.

'Not really, no,' she answered, and she sighed. Twice.

'Oh, okay,' she said eventually, her expression beaten, jaded. 'Okay, Roz, one more chance.' And before I had time to express my gratitude, before I had a chance to tell her I would *absolutely not let it happen again*, she reached down and lifted her trouser leg.

'I don't suppose you've got ten minutes to have a look at my knee, have you?'

3

LOOKING BACK, I can see how everything was ultimately building towards this point, the point when life went off at a crazy tangent, but I think it was the note itself that was the trigger for the series of events that followed.

DON'T GO INSIDE
I SMELL GAS
LOVE, CELIA

It was taped to my front door and had been put there by my neighbour. Celia had lived in the village for five years and was not a native; she was in fact a Scouser. But if you asked her where she hailed from, she'd say, 'Southport, Lancashire', in her best telephone voice. (Notice: Lancashire, not Merseyside. An important distinction, apparently.)

When I first moved into the cottage we had a few run-ins - Celia getting herself into a state of fractious agitation if I left the wheelie bin at the end of the garden path for more than two days running, or if my living-room curtains remained closed while I was at work or, heaven forbid, if I left my washing on the line when her book club was in attendance. Celia was a terrible snob. A working-class woman who liked to let you know that she was *just that little bit better* than everyone else. It was terribly amusing and, unexpectedly, I had grown to love her for it.

We reached an agreement early on whereby, because I didn't have time to give the cottage the kerb appeal Celia deemed necessary, and because she lived in mortal fear of falling property values, Celia had a key to my place.

Anything that was going to fray her nerves, I told her to address herself. So her husband would bring my bin in the very second the waste wagon left. I would arrive home to find the fringe of grass edges neatly trimmed in the front garden, or small pink stains on the path where Celia had poured weed killer on my dandelions. Lately, I could feel her itching to affix a hanging basket or two, to match her four, but she hadn't yet broached the subject.

I pulled the note from the door. 'Come on,' I said to George, 'let's go to Celia's.' This was the last thing I needed, to be honest. We were supposed to be out of the house again by seven thirty for my sister's party. George needed feeding and we both needed smartening up. Glancing his way, I noticed some hair missing above his right ear. How I'd not realized it earlier, I had no idea, because there was quite a chunk gone.

'What's going on there?' I said, gesturing.

'I'm not sure.'

'George,' I said.

'I don't remember.'

A quick word about fibs. You've noticed, I'm certain, the inability of little boys to tell the truth. Don't hold it against them. They're simply afraid of making us cross. 'George, I'm not angry with you, I just want to know why you've cut away such a large piece of your hair.'

'I needed it for a creature I was making,' he said.

'Seems reasonable,' I replied.

We made our way down the path, out of the front gate and along the short stretch of road to Celia's. 'I'm really thirsty. I need a drink, Mum,' George said, and I said, 'You and me both.' The heat was fierce: thick, heavy air trapped in the basin formed by the surrounding fells. I pulled my tunic away from my midriff in a wafting motion, a lame attempt to get some ventilation. Sweat trickled down my skin, making me itch.

Celia's house was a detached cottage. Ours was a semi; the other side of my house was a holiday home. I never saw the owners. Instead there was a parade of similar kinds of people - folk who smiled if the sun was shining, were grim-faced and uncommunicative if it was not.

Remember the village of Greendale, from the children's television programme *Postman Pat*? Well, Greendale doesn't exist, but it was modelled on Longsleddale, a spot over on the other side of the lake, and it's close enough to form a fairly accurate picture of Hawkshead. Five hundred people live in the village and, aside from the holidaymakers, everyone really does know everyone. Set amongst farmland (mostly used for grazing sheep), the stone or white-rendered cottages are bordered by drystone walls. Those of us in the village centre benefit from gas and mains drainage, those on the outskirts heat their homes with electricity, or more commonly oil, and have septic tanks. Everyone within a mile of the village centre has a small notice next to the loo, requesting guests not to flush anything other than the necessities, and the smallest amount of toilet tissue. It's something you're used to if you've grown up with it. Like pasteurized milk and half-day closing.

Celia must have been loitering by her window, looking out for us, as the second we opened her gate she was at the front door. 'Good Lord, George!' she declared loudly. 'What on earth have you done to your hair?' I suppose he *was* kind of scalped above his ear. 'He looks like that simple lad, Billy. You know, from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*?' She was frowning, her chin retracted. 'Doesn't he, Roz?'

'What does she mean, Mum?' George whispered, worried, as we approached the house.

'Nothing. Just an old film. Billy was the kickass hero,' I lied.

'You saw the note?' Celia asked, and I nodded. 'Come in, come in,' she said and ushered us through. George

removed his shoes automatically without being instructed to do so.

‘Did you call Transco?’ I asked her, and she didn’t answer. Instead she became momentarily flustered, telling George to ‘Go through to the back kitchen and find Dennis. He’s out there messing about with his tomato plants. And Foxy’s in the garden, too.’

Foxy was Celia’s old dog. She was a spiteful, peevish little terrier who hated kids but for some reason allowed George access to her belly when she was in the right mood. She had recently started to refuse to walk on the lead. That is, unless she was heading back home. So now Celia and Dennis could be seen driving to the other side of the village, early each morning, whereupon Dennis would deposit Celia and Foxy, and they would walk back. Celia was delighted with this ruse, proclaiming Foxy to be ‘almost sprightly’, even pulling on the lead.

George traipsed off to find the dog, and Celia swallowed hard before speaking.

‘A problem,’ she began.

‘A gas problem,’ I said.

‘Afraid not. I put that note there to stop you from going inside. I didn’t want George to see.’

‘To see what?’

‘Prepare yourself, Roz, the bailiffs have been.’

‘What did they take?’

‘The lot. Well, all except the beds, because they belong to your landlord, apparently, who *has also* been slithering around, leaving his usual trail of slime, asking if I’d seen you. He left you a note demanding payment, I believe.’

‘I’m late with the rent.’

‘I did assume,’ she said. ‘Anyway, the three-piece suite has gone—’

‘I was paying that off,’ I interrupted.

‘As well as the dining-room furniture, the cooker—’

‘The cooker?’

‘They said that was on finance as well.’

I sank down heavily on to Celia’s sofa. ‘It was.’ I sighed, remembering now.

‘I think they would have had your car away as well, if you were home. Good job I saw them, because they were about to break in through the front door. They said you’d be liable for the damage to that, too.’ She paused. Then said, ‘*Bastards!*’ emphatically, before continuing. ‘So in the end I let them in with the key. Sorry, Roz, but they had all the right legal paperwork. I got Dennis to take a look at it before, and he said you didn’t have a leg to stand on.’

Dennis used to work in a solicitor’s. Doing what, I’m not entirely sure. Celia, naturally, liked to give the impression he *was* a solicitor, but I had noticed that Dennis had been quick to point out on more than one occasion that he was *not really qualified* to give advice.

Sitting with my head in my hands, I told Celia that it was okay to use the key. ‘You did the right thing,’ I said, because she was wringing her hands and I could tell she wasn’t sure how I was going to react.

‘I thought it best to stick that note on the door, and then you could prepare George. Not nice for the child to get home and have no furniture.’

‘Did they take his PlayStation?’

Celia nodded.

‘Bloody stupid thing to have anyway,’ I said. ‘Typical of his father. We can’t afford to put fuel in the car and he goes and buys him that. And of course George loves him for it. Thinks I’m Cruella when I can’t buy games for the thing.’

‘That’s men for you. No common sense.’

‘Christ, Celia,’ I said, the full weight of what had happened now dawning on me. ‘What the hell am I going to do?’

I left George with Celia and went to inspect the house.

The place had been gutted. They'd taken stuff I didn't even know I owned until it was gone. Pictures I wasn't particularly fond of. Cookery books I never had time to read but were part of my history, that time when I revelled in domesticity for a few short, wonderful months when George was born.

It was like going back to the seventies when people owned nothing. When bare asphalt floors were the norm and orange crates doubled as bedside cabinets.

There was even an ugly, gaping gash in the fitted kitchen where the oven ought to be. That's when I made the decision not to face the problem tonight. George needed a quick bite to eat before we were to leave for Petra's party. '*Dress smart! Think cocktail dress!*' she'd inscribed on the invitation with a silver metallic gel pen. And so I headed back to Celia's with a change of clothes for us both, ready to collect George, with a hasty plan forming in my mind:

I would have one large glass of cold, white Torres Viña Sol in the King's Arms (low ceilings, horse brasses, welcoming smell of beer hanging heavily in the air) while George shovelled down Cumberland sausage and chips, and *then* I would tackle the furniture crisis, explaining to George the reality of our new situation.

The note from my landlord would just have to wait.

4

GEORGE SAT IN the front seat of the Jeep with a clip-on tie and a worried expression.

‘Will I have to go and live with Nanna Dylis?’ he asked, after I’d finished explaining what had happened to the furniture and given him a quick lecture on that basic principle: don’t spend more money than you have.

‘No,’ I replied, hoping he wouldn’t sense the uncertainty in my voice.

We were just about to board the ferry to cross the lake to Petra’s house in Windermere, so George became silent. There’s a tricky bit that must be negotiated, where the ramp of the ferry meets the dip in the shoreline. If you don’t drive carefully you’re liable to take out the underside of your car. Not such a problem in a Jeep, but hell if you’re in a low-sitting sports car.

Once I’d cut the engine and was neatly positioned I told George he could speak again if he wanted to.

‘This is because of Dad, isn’t it?’ he said.

‘Honestly?’ I replied. ‘Yes. But there’s no point blaming him, because it gets us nowhere. What we’re going to do is put it out of our heads until after Auntie Petra’s party. Let’s enjoy ourselves tonight and worry about it tomorrow. We’ve got beds to sleep in, we’ve got running water, and we’ve got each other. We’ll be fine.’

The truth was, though, we weren’t fine.

When Winston left I could no longer make the mortgage payments on either our house or my business premises, and they were repossessed by the bank. Coupled with that, Winston had run up debts to the tune of twelve thousand on

a credit card that was in our joint names, and now I was barely covering the minimum monthly payments.

Though I couldn't blame Winston totally.

Five years ago, life was good. We were earning plenty, we spent freely (more money than we had), and we thought it would continue like that for ever. But an event was to cause a change in our circumstances, and we didn't change along with them. Not nearly fast enough anyhow. Winston's building firm lost its major contract and his hours were cut, along with his hourly rate. Ultimately, we fell apart. Winston left and I found myself without a home, with my on tick furniture taken away, without a business, and with a small child to support.

I probably should have declared bankruptcy at that point, but a combination of pride and a fear of being refused credit in the future prevented me from doing so. I borrowed some money from my sister for a deposit, rented a house, purchased a few bits and pieces on finance to furnish the place, and now, thanks to Winston and the exorbitant monthly interest on the credit card, I carried a debt of close to eighteen thousand pounds.

After rent, the cost of my car, food, household bills, the ferry, after-school club, and the loan repayments, my wage from the clinic left me with around fifty pounds a month to spare - if things didn't go wrong. And things always went wrong.

I glanced at George to check if he was okay with what I'd just told him, and he seemed to be. His expression became wistful, as if he'd already moved on to other things. Kids. So resilient.

'Foxy bit me,' he said after a minute or two.

'Again?' I asked, and he nodded. 'Did it hurt?'

'No.'

'Show me,' I said.

He held out his hand and there was a small, raised nub of flesh on his knuckle, but no break to the skin.

‘She didn’t mean to do it,’ he said. ‘Sometimes she can’t help it. I don’t think she realized it was me. Is she blind? Celia says she is.’

‘Getting that way,’ I replied. ‘Although Dennis reckons she can see next door’s cat well enough.’

We had a dog. Once. A three-year-old shaggy lurcher which George named Cesar after his hero, the ‘Dog Whisperer’, Cesar Millan. George asked for a dog every Christmas and birthday from the time he was able to talk. When he was six, Winston and I finally acquiesced, and there never was a happier child than George Toovey.

Two years later and after Winston moved out, the dog had to leave, too. We tried to make it work. But the difficulty of finding a rental property which allowed dogs, and the hours I spent at my job, made it untenable. I’d like to say George bought the lie all parents tell their kids when they’ve taken their pet to the shelter – the one where the dog goes to live on a farm somewhere, running free, all happily ever after – but George insisted on my calling the Rescue Me animal shelter to check Cesar was okay and was told by a kind woman that he’d been adopted by a little boy around his own age who was enjoying his new companion immensely.

George still wasn’t over it and was counting down the weeks until we could move from our current address into more permanent accommodation, where animals were allowed. I told him this wouldn’t be any time soon, but he remained undeterred, keeping his dog-ownership skills up to date by continuing to watch Cesar Millan whenever he stayed over at Winston’s mother’s house. She was fortunate enough to have Sky TV.

I smiled at George and reached across, tousling his hair above his bald patch. ‘I love you, you know,’ I said to him.

‘Love you more,’ he said back.

We drove with the windows down because the AC was out of gas. Along the roadside there were mounds of cut grass