



Charlotte
PHILLIPS

Your Room
or Mine?

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DO NOT
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Contents

Dedication

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

About the Author

About HarperImpulse

Copyright

For Fran, who is always in my corner. With love and thanks.

CHAPTER ONE

Izzy Shaw glanced around the hotel lobby full of loved-up couples revelling in the sumptuous luxury and wondered in what universe she'd thought a night here by herself could succeed where ice-cream wine and support sessions with the girls had failed.

To pass the time as she queued for check-in, and to strengthen her resolve, she mentally ran through the list she'd made of Joe's faults, which according to her friend Shauna should be referred to moments of weakness.

- 1) Leaves boxer shorts on the floor.
- 2) Watches more than one show at once on TV resulting in infuriating flicking of remote control.
- 3) Obsessive preoccupation with major football events plus outrageous cash outlay on season ticket.
- 4) Leaves toilet door open.
- 5) Has one night stands while supposedly working away.

Of course, that last one was the only one that really counted. She'd put up with all the others for three years, none of them had been deal breakers.

She reached down for the handle of her overnight bag and moved up two spaces in the line. The couple in front of her were so closely entwined together that she could hardly tell where one person stopped and the other began. As she watched the girl nuzzled into her partner's neck and Izzy averted her eyes and stared at the glossy marble floor.

Urgh! Get a room!

She supposed that's exactly what they were doing. Just as she would have been, in that parallel universe where Joe hadn't let her down.

A few nights in the company of her friends in the wake of her discovery of Joe's betrayal had certainly filled her with temporary bravado. Opting to take this night away herself as a pamper break instead of just cutting her losses and cancelling had seemed like a great idea when she was buoyed up by wine and chocolate and pep talks.

'It'll just be a waste of a good room if you don't go,' Shauna had insisted. 'You won't get the money back now. It's luxurious, it's expensive and best of all it's got the perfect access for Selfridges and Harvey Nicks. An evening in the spa, a gourmet dinner and then you shop until you drop. You'll be over him within 24 hours.'

The moment six months ago when she'd booked this place flashed into her mind. Just *greed*. Because what she really *needed* right now was a flashback to a time when Joe had been everything for her. She gritted her teeth hard. This was her Reinvention Mini-Break, her Get-Strong Mini-Break. It was NOT the planned Izzy-and-Joe's Surprise Romantic Mini-Break. Plans could change.

People could change too.

She reached the front of the line. She carried her bag to the Receptionist and forced a smile across the high marble counter.

'I have a booking in the name of 'Shaw', she said.

The receptionist pressed buttons, nodded efficiently.

'I have a table booked in the restaurant for tonight,' the receptionist said. 'And a His and Hers Spa Treatment.'

She'd forgotten about that. The lobby seemed suddenly too warm.

'Can I change the Spa treatment?' she said, trying to keep her voice as muted as possible. There was zero privacy at the crowded check-in desk. 'Something a bit more...' she groped for the right description and failed. 'For one?' she said.

The receptionist glanced up, clearly taking in the fact that she was alone. The warmth of a blush crept upwards from her neck. She might as well have stood on the counter and announced to the room that she was unexpectedly single.

'I'm afraid the His-and-Hers Treatment is part of the Romantic Getaway Package,' the receptionist said, not bothering to lower her voice. 'I can cancel it of course, but I can't swap it for anything else.'

Izzy stared at her.

'Of course, you're welcome to book additional treatments as you like, they will be charged individually. If you'd care to ring down to the Spa when you've checked in, they can give you a list.'

'Fine,' Izzy said. 'Please can I just get checked in?'

'And would you like me to cancel the His-and-Hers...' she glanced at the screen '...Massage?'

'Cancel it!' Izzy snapped. 'Just cancel it. Not a problem.'

She felt eyes upon her and glanced sideways. A few feet away a man was being checked in by the other receptionist. Standing out, like her, singleton among cosy couples. Thick dark hair, lightly tousled. Strong jaw. Dark suit so sharply cut it had to be crushingly expensive. Broad shoulders and chiselled handsome face that had the receptionist fawning over him. Izzy registered the ghost of a smile on his lips as he looked at her, clearly listening in on every word.

Her heart, broken of course and so not working as it should, upped its pace in her chest because he really was gorgeous. In fact if her head, still channelling anger, hadn't reminded her that Joe had used his nights away with work to bed random women, then her jaw might have hit the polished counter to the floor as it dropped. Was this how he used to behave – eyeing up women at hotel receptions, picking the perfect candidate? She snapped her eyes away.

Think about the shopping, Izzy. Think about complimentary chocolates in the room with no need to worry anymore that they might go straight to your hips...

'Would you like help with your luggage?'

'No, thank you.'

She didn't want help with her luggage or complimentary newspapers or to be stared at by other guests, especially drop-dead gorgeous ones with possibly dubious motives. She wanted to get to her room and pull herself together.

At last taking the keycard from the receptionist, she swung around, handbag hooked into one hand, holdall in the other, and crossed the lobby towards the stairs. A misjudged glance back, just a general glance of course, definitely NOT to see if Mr Dark-Tousled-Hair was still looking at her, and she somehow managed to catch her overstuffed holdall in the enormous plant stupidly located at the corner of the sweeping staircase. It promptly toppled off its ornate circular table and emptied itself onto the deep pile rug at her feet.

The buzz of noise in the lobby dropped a notch as people turned to look. Izzy's face burned hotter than ever. What kind of moron had placed a plant there of all places?

Exasperated, she shoved her bags to one side and knelt down on the carpet to set about picking it up, feeling the eyes of everyone in the lobby burning into her back. Soil dusted her hands and collected beneath her fingernails.

A pair of hands appeared next to hers and helped her right the pot and ease the plant back into its

Big strong hands, a dark-stoned signet ring on the left little finger. Surely too expensive to belong to the scrawny concierge, who had looked about twelve. She glanced up, straight into the hazel eyes of the man from the check-in desk. His eyes crinkled softly at the corners as he smiled at her and her stomach gave a slow and traitorous backflip. She snapped her eyes back down to the black soil littering the carpet and rearranged her face into what she hoped was a neutral expression.

Scooping soil up between her hands, she thrust it back in the pot, pressing gently to reseat the plant. The schoolboy concierge joined them.

‘I’m really sorry,’ she told him. ‘I just caught it with my case and tipped it over.’

‘No problem, madam.’

‘It should be fine but still you might want to consider repotting it,’ she added automatically, the part of her that spent her entire working life around plants taking over. ‘It looks to me like it might be potbound – did you see there were mostly roots there rather than soil? And some of the leaves are turning yellow?’

The concierge stared at her as if she were an alien. Her shoulders sagged. Why was she bothering?

‘Sorry,’ she mumbled and grabbed her bags, leaving the remains of the mess behind her as she took the stairs.

She was a few steps up when she realised the man from check-in was keeping pace next to her.

‘Thanks,’ she said, because he was wearing a suit and still he hadn’t hesitated to get soil under her nails on her behalf.

‘You’re welcome,’ he said. ‘You obviously know your way around pot plants.’ His voice was deep and smooth. A voice that could draw you in.

‘Not literally, unfortunately,’ she said.

He smiled and she offered a polite smile back.

‘I’m a gardener,’ she said, turning at the first landing. He stayed alongside her.

‘Really? You don’t look like a gardener.’

‘What does a gardener look like?’

He shrugged.

‘Sweaty, old jeans, grimy hands, crack of butt on show.’

She laughed.

‘Yeah well, it is my day off,’ she said.

He smiled a delicious lop-sided smile that lifted the left corner of his mouth and crinkled the warren of hazel eyes at the corners. A smile that had meaning beyond politeness.

Izzy looked away as her heart gave a skip of triumph, such a long-forgotten sensation that it nearly brought her to a standstill.

He was flirting with her.

When had she last flirted with anyone? Three years of pouring herself into work, building her business up from scratch. Joe doing the same, working all hours, both of them with their shared future in mind. A deposit on a house perhaps, a bit further down the line. The first cautious steps towards proper visible commitment. More than just that denoted by length of time.

Correction: what she’d *thought* was their shared future in mind.

Turned out putting in the hard work for Joe had been too much like...well, like hard work. Her head froze again towards him, a cold hardening in her chest that made her throat contract and her eyes tingle.

She flashed a smile at the man walking next to her along the ornate galleried landing. Why not respond? What was there to stop her? It was so nice just to be found attractive – something that had

been called into question deep inside her since she'd discovered Joe's betrayal.

It hadn't helped that she'd discovered the full horror of Joe's infidelity after a particularly long hard day working on the McNulty garden. There had been soil in her unkempt hair, dirt under her fingernails and across one cheek, and Joe hadn't missed the chance to build his defence on exactly that. Then again, did she think she might somehow have felt better about him playing away if she had been dressed up to the nines with her hair and make-up done? *Idiot*. She was too work-obsessed, he said, she never made any effort to look good for him anymore, she'd stopped being fun. All comments designed to make him feel better about his behaviour by making her feel worse.

Human nature. That didn't stop it from hurting.

And so a bit of harmless attention from a man who looked like an off-duty aftershave model with his open-necked white shirt, perfect suit, tousled hair and lop-sided smile was just the thing to kick off the Make-Izzy-Strong Reinvention Mini-Break.

'I'm this way,' she smiled at him, coming to a stop and tilting her chin at the sign on the wall listing room numbers. He inclined his head almost imperceptibly, the hazel eyes holding her own for just a beat too long. Her stomach, now awakened, wasn't about to quit and gave a slow and delicious flip.

'Oliver Forbes,' he said, holding out his right hand. Easy for him, he had minimal luggage.

She looked from his hand to his face. The smile was still there. She shifted her case from one hand to the other and shook hands briefly with him.

'Izzy,' she said. 'Thanks again for before.'

Oliver Forbes watched from the corner of his eye as she held her head high and lugged her own bag down the passage, key card poised in her hand.

Her unease in the lobby had been almost palpable, drawing in his attention until the rest of the bustle around him seemed to pale into the background. Her finger-drumming impatience at the bureaucracies of check-in, the blush of embarrassment as she cleared up after knocking the plaques flying that managed to highlight her porcelain skin so prettily. She was clearly desperate to escape her room.

He wasn't usually given to noticing such detail.

Then again, he'd been knocked off-centre by the tedium of taking a hotel stay when what he wanted, what he'd *expected* was the work to have been finished on his new house in Highgate by the moment he *chose* to move into it. Turned out his travel and business commitments had lulled his supposedly impeccable team of contractors into a false sense of security over the urgency of the work. Not good enough. Heads would roll.

In the meantime, since he faced a few more days without his private refuge, a face like hers with its blush touching the smooth cheekbones and its tiny spray of golden freckles on her nose, was a welcome distraction.

Gardener? Really?

He took in her appearance as she walked away. Softly curving figure, long legs, healthy-looking rather than skinny. Honey coloured hair gathered loosely at the nape of her neck, touched gold at the ends by the sun. Lightly sun-kissed cheeks and nose beneath minimal make-up. No jewellery, no nail varnish, no accessories. Suddenly her stated profession seemed more plausible.

He wondered what she was doing, checking in alone to her booking for two. He'd barely registered anything his own receptionist had said, it had been far more interesting to listen to Izzy's discomfort at check-in. Damsels in Distress – his particular weakness.

Because where there was fluster, there was always a way in.

Izzy slid the door key card into the slot and pushed the panelled door open, still enjoying the afterglow of his attention. The smile on her face faded on her lips as she leaned back against the closing door and drew in a long breath.

‘Oh hell,’ she muttered out loud.

So the Spa Treatment wasn’t an end to it. In the course of the joint brainwave with her friends to turn the intended surprise night away with Joe into a Get-Over-Him Mini-Break for herself, she had failed to remember that she’d booked the hotel’s Romantic Getaway Package for two.

It wasn’t called that for nothing.

Was there anything in this room that wasn’t his-and-hers? Her eyes took in matching white fluffy bathrobes and waffle slippers, two crystal flutes stood next to the complimentary champagne. And when she walked into the adjoining bathroom she was greeted by Jack-n-Jill sinks.

She stared at her own dismayed face in the ornate scrolled mirror above them. How the hell was she meant to stop thinking about Joe when this whole place was a made-for-two luxury nightmare that mocked her from every angle?

CHAPTER TWO

IZZY SHAW'S GET-OVER-THE-BASTARD ACTION LIST

- 1) Enlist friends for supportive esteem-building summit meetings.
- 2) Stock up on wine and ice cream and eat/drink without regard for calorie counting.
- 3) Calculate budget for Joe's intended birthday and Christmas gifts and spend said amount on treating self to new clothes.
- 4) eBay his collection of football programmes and add profit to own treat-budget.
- 5) Make list of all Joe's faults for reference at weak moments.
- 6) Block him on Facebook and delete all texts and messages from him before responding.
- 7) Book up girls' nights out for the next couple of months.
- 8) Take a night away for me-time, pampering and contemplation.
- 9) Don't get even, get even better. Have a no-strings one night stand.

Izzy leaned back against the smooth tiled wall and closed her eyes to soak up every ounce of relaxation that hot steam had to offer. Tension in her shoulders ingrained from the endless bending and stretching that came with her job slowly began to loosen its grip. It was early evening now and she had the basement pool area and steam room almost to herself as people drifted away to get ready to go out or have dinner. No rush for that. Her appetite hadn't been up to much these last few weeks, she'd rather stay here a bit longer.

When door opened and Oliver Forbes climbed into the steam room, she took an unintentional deep breath, filling her lungs with steam and launching a spectacular coughing fit.

He stared at her through the hot mist, one hand on the door.

'Are you OK?' he asked doubtfully.

She turned away, her eyes and nose streaming, one hand plastered over her mouth, the other flapping at him.

'Fine,' she croaked in between hacking.

He sat down on the opposite bench and raised one foot. As she gradually got her cough under control she was grateful for the steam, which she hoped might hide her undoubtedly tomato-red face.

She offered his concerned expression an I'm-perfectly-alright smile and he nodded and closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the tiles. Hah! The perfect opportunity to steal a proper sneaky look at him in his dark blue swim shorts. He had the most toned abs she'd ever seen. Broad shoulders, lean and fit body, legs roped with muscle. His dark hair was damply tousled from the steam and he had a light tan. She imagined him on some extreme sports holiday abroad, leaping off a cliff in the sunshine.

He opened his eyes unexpectedly and she snapped her gaze away and examined her fingernails.

'How's the stay going?' he asked. 'Making good use of the spa?'

She knew just from his pointed tone of voice and the smile that lurked on his lips that he'd overheard at check-in.

'Trying to,' she said. 'It's all such a treat, especially the whirlpool bath and steam room. I get a lot of back pain in my job.'

She raised eyebrows at his cheeky grin.

‘What now?’

‘I was imagining you with a shovel.’

‘What can I say, I give good garden,’ she said. ‘What about you? Are you here for the leisure complex too?’

‘Not really,’ he said. ‘Not that the gym and spa aren’t a nice bonus. This is a bit of an unscheduled stay. It’s in a good location for me for work.’

‘How long are you staying?’

He shrugged.

‘As long as I need to.’

So he was clearly not on the budget break. Why was she even surprised? Everything about him oozed cash – the clothes he’d worn at check-in, the expensive leather overnight bag, the way he spoke.

‘You?’ he asked.

‘It’s a treat break,’ she said. ‘You know, one of those packages you can book. Dinner, bed and breakfast with use of the spa thrown in.’

He was looking at her politely and she supposed he’d never had to look for the deal price in his life.

‘So just the one night,’ she added.

‘Better make it count, then,’ he said and the way he held her eyes a moment too long made it feel like he wasn’t just talking about the spa and the gourmet restaurant. Her stomach felt suddenly melted, not helped by the fact she was hitting the edge of her heat tolerance.

‘I am,’ she said. ‘I’ve tried out every facility in the spa, well, the free ones anyway, and I’ve still got dinner to go. Then tomorrow I hit the shops.’ She stood up. ‘I need to cool down. Excuse me.’

She stood eyes closed under the aromatherapy shower, letting it cool her skin, then walked around the pool to the lounge where she’d left her bag and towel. Oliver Forbes with his perfect body was still in the steam room. Instead of lying back on the towel she picked it up and automatically wrapped it around her. Confidence in the way she looked wasn’t her strong point right now. If Joe was washed up drowning on a beach she’d throw a bucket of water over him, but that didn’t diminish the little seeds of doubt he’d planted in her mind when he’d tried to shift some of the blame for his behavior her way. OK so she knew she was carrying a few extra pounds, mainly around the hips, but she’d been so sure of Joe’s love she hadn’t given it a second thought before.

Oliver Forbes emerged from the steam room and stood under the shower. She watched as the water cascaded over his body, knowing she shouldn’t be staring but unable to tear her eyes away. Joe hadn’t been keen on exercise beyond playing a bit of football with his mates. What might it feel like to be with someone that fit? He grabbed a towel from a row of hooks, then skirted the pool and headed towards her.

‘You mind?’ he indicated the lounge next to her. There was a roomful of them to choose from and he wanted that one? Her heart gave a tiny skip.

She shrugged and he sat down, rubbing his hair with a corner of the towel.

‘Drink?’ he asked, reaching for the phone on the table between loungers.

She looked up at him. A drink? A flurry of excited butterflies zipped briefly through her stomach before common sense bashed them into submission. A drink did *not* mean he was hitting on her, and even if he was she couldn’t be less interested. Someone like him would never look twice at her, he was obviously just being polite.

Her own package deal danced through her mind. Outside its remit, you were practically charged for drawing breath in this place. Why not take him up on the drink, it meant nothing.

‘I’d love coffee,’ she said.

He gave the order over the phone and sat back.

~~'I can't remember the last time I went swimming,' she said, pulling her own towel a little closer around her.~~

'You don't belong to a gym?'

That meant he did, presumably. Who was she kidding, of course he did. You didn't get abs like that from sitting around watching TV. He clearly put in a lot of work.

She shook her head.

'My working hours are long,' she said. 'Sometimes I'm so tired by the time I get home the last thing I'd want to do is more exercise.'

'I thought your job was more about potting plants,' he said, a grin touching his lips. 'I didn't realize it could be so physically demanding.'

She raised an eyebrow.

'It's not standing with a basket picking flowers,' she said. 'There's a lot of heavy work involved. You have to be prepared to get your hands dirty.'

He reached across suddenly and paused, hand outstretched.

'May I?'

She stared. What exactly was he playing at?

She watched in surprise as he took one of her hands in his, no impulse kicked in to pull it away despite the sudden hot feeling in her stomach. He uncurled her fingers to see the palm and turned his hand to see her fingernails.

'This doesn't look like the hand of a heavyweight gardener,' he said.

She took her hand away and held both of them up.

'Yeah well, it's amazing what a bit of hand cream can do. Sometimes at the end of a working day they look like shovels.'

'So gym, spa treatments and swimming is a welcome break then. Is this something you do often?'

Because she really *looked* like a gym bunny. Not.

'Not often. I'm treating myself.'

'And you prefer to do that alone?'

Her self-consciousness about staying here alone resurfaced and she squashed it back down.

'It wasn't supposed to be a solitary thing,' she said.

'No?'

For a moment she considered fobbing him off, but she was used to being the subject of gossip now. Why bother making up some story for someone she didn't know and didn't care about?

'I booked the room for a romantic night away with my boyfriend.' She looked him boldly in the eye. Nothing to be embarrassed about. 'This hotel offers themed breaks – dinner, spa, breakfast, on price and it's all included. Ex-boyfriend now,' she added, pasting on an I-couldn't-care-less smile, to prove she was absolutely fine with that.

'You came alone on your own romantic night away?' He sounded amused. 'You didn't cancel?'

She couldn't blame him. It did sound a bit insane spoken out loud. She squared her shoulders.

'It seemed a shame to waste it,' she said. 'It was a non-refundable payment. So I figured I'd turn it into a Reinvention Break instead.'

She mumbled the last part and he leaned in close enough for her to see the tiny droplets of water that still clung to his skin and hair. A light frown touched his eyebrows.

'Reinvention? Of what?'

She looked straight at him. He was a total stranger, what the hell did she care what he thought?

‘Of me,’ she said.

Oliver leaned back in his lounge as their coffee arrived, watching her, all obstinate bravado protesting that she didn’t care.

‘Odd choice of word, ‘reinvention’’, he said, when the waiter had gone. ‘Implies that you need change. Which in turn implies that you’re somehow responsible for whatever went wrong.’

‘I’m not!’ she snapped.

He looked at her over his coffee cup.

‘Call it something else then. Not reinvention. I haven’t seen anything about you yet that I change.’

As he heard her light intake of breath and saw a touch of blush rise high on her cheekbones, he wondered when she’d last received a compliment. *Long-term complacent relationship? A breeding ground for lack of appreciation.* All he had to do was take advantage of that.

There was something very appealing about her at close quarters. Put aside for a moment the fact that she was pretty, albeit in a dishevelled outdoorsy sort of way. There was an air of defiance about her that he liked. Whatever the ex-boyfriend had done, she wasn’t sitting at home crying into her pillow was she? She’d kicked him into touch and had turned her romantic break into a treat. He couldn’t help but admire that fighting spirit.

‘How about I call it my Freedom Break instead then,’ she said. ‘Shopping and spa relaxation. Just what I need.’

‘Perfect,’ he said. ‘And tonight?’

He held her gaze intently with his own. She didn’t drop her eyes. Encouraging.

‘A luxury meal in the restaurant,’ she said.

‘Alone?’

‘I’m quite happy with my own company.’

‘Understandable.’ He paused, then added in another compliment. ‘I like it too.’ He paused to gauge the effect and when she smiled softly he zoomed in.

‘How about having dinner with me? The place is full of couples. We can keep each other company.’

There was a sudden loud clatter as she dropped her cup into the saucer from a height and then tried to cover up her mistake by fiddling with the spoon. He watched, enjoying putting her on edge.

‘Don’t you have some kind of other plans?’ she said, not looking up, furiously stirring the remainder of her coffee.

He leaned back against the lounge and took a sip of his own drink.

‘Nope. Dinner alone for me too. And I’d much prefer your company to my own.’ He waited and then added in extra encouragement. ‘It would be my treat of course.’ He paused. ‘Unless you want some time alone to –you know- get over things.’

That finally seemed to galvanise her into action. The implication that she was here to lick her wounds, that she might spend the evening crying into her pillow and enjoying the martyrdom of sitting alone in the sumptuous restaurant among the loved-up couples.

She put her coffee cup down on the table, no clatter this time, and sat back taking in the surroundings. A pause this long was not a good sign. *Win some, lose some.* Not that he ever lost out on a dinner date, or more, when he put his mind to it. For some reason the thought of missing out on that one brought a disappointed stab in his chest. Must be the thought of being stuck here overnight with no entertainment when he should be settling into his newly-finished luxury pad.

Then she looked at him, a tiny smile playing about her full lips, and his heart turned over softly.

‘Dinner is thrown into my booking,’ she said. ‘It’s a package deal. Spa treatments, dinner, bed and

breakfast. So maybe *you'd* like to have dinner with *me*?'

He stared at her, momentarily wrong-footed. Had she really just counter-offered him on dinner? There was a hint of challenge in her eyes that made his mouth leech of moisture, as if he'd sunk his teeth into one of the hotel's fluffy towels.

'Sod the thrown-in dinner,' he said. 'You'll get the package-deal dinner menu, nothing worth having. Have dinner with me and choose what you like.'

Izzy pawed through the contents of her overnight bag and laid out the only possibility on the bed. If she'd known she'd be having dinner with male model material, she would have packed something a bit more alluring than the maxi skirt, top and cardigan. She'd planned on eating early to avoid any pitying stares, followed by a likely return to the spa with a stack of magazines. At least she'd packed matching underwear instead of any greying old cotton.

Not that her underwear should matter. Because this was just dinner – right?

She looked at her reflection in the scroll-edged upright mirror. Her hair had behaved itself for once, the unruly waves lying softly over one shoulder.

Did she really think a man like him, on his own for the night in a luxury hotel, would ask a girl like her to dinner with nothing more in mind than eating a meal? Her stomach gave a slow and delicious flip at the thought and she pressed her hands hard against it to make it stop. Rubbish. What the hell was she reading any more into it than just dinner? And wasn't it irrelevant anyway? What mattered was the alternative – sitting alone in the restaurant at a table for two surrounded by couples playing footsie.

Whether he expected something in return or not, she didn't have to give it. She could have dinner with him, enjoy an evening of flirting and then walk away with her self-esteem happily boosted.

Unless she wanted more.

Item nine on her GET-OVER-THE-BASTARD LIST pranced through her mind. *Don't get even, get even better...*

She sat down hard on the bed. Where had that come from? By the time they reached the end of compiling the list, she and Shauna had been pretty drunk. A one-night-stand had been added as more of a laugh than anything, because of course they both knew that Izzy Shaw didn't *do* that kind of thing.

She shook her head lightly to clear it. Dinner didn't have to lead anywhere. She was satisfied with the dependable play-by-the-rules Izzy. Impetuous flings with strangers were not part of that remit.

Because of course that remit had really worked for her in the past. *Not.*

The fluttering in her stomach was back with a vengeance.

A tiny heart-shaped chocolate made up the centrepiece of each place setting in the candlelit dining room, soft piano played in the background and the set menu was a special romance-themed selection.

Oliver stared at the pink embossed menu, eyebrows raised.

'Romantic Getaway Three Course Menu For Two...' he read.

Her cheeks felt a little too warm and she didn't look up. Instead she picked up her heart-shaped chocolate and dropped it into her purse. After a pause, she added his chocolate too. With no need to diet ever again, she could scoff them at leisure.

'Like I said, it's a package deal break. Dinner, bed and breakfast for one all-in price.'

Oliver beckoned the waiter and issued swift orders for a bottle of champagne and the standard menu while she tried to control the mad squiggling in her stomach.

'Like *I* said, sod the knocked-down package break.' The waiter returned and handed her the full

restaurant menu. 'Choose whatever you like.'

Oliver watched her as she tucked into the main course of roasted sea bass with celeriac and truff with obvious enjoyment. She'd finished every bite of the starter, too. He liked her uninhibited delight in the food. And he liked her relaxed outfit. She wore her hair loose, and just a touch of make highlighted the grey-green eyes and long eyelashes. Her lips looked peachily softer than ever with a touch of gloss. He was used to high maintenance – glossy, manicured women who picked at their food and obsessed about their appearance. So used to it in fact that it had become the norm. Being with her was like eating a sharp sorbet after a very cloying main meal.

'You said this place is convenient for work,' she said, between mouthfuls. 'What is it that you do?'

'I'm a lawyer,' he said. 'I travel a lot, but I'm based in London. This hotel is close to my office.'

She frowned.

'Why the need for a hotel then, if you live in the city? Don't you keep a house here?'

He thought of his beautiful new house, supposed to be finished a week ago to a stunningly high spec. His irritation at the delay seemed to have dissipated a little in her company.

'I have a house, bought it a few months ago, in Highgate.'

He didn't miss the brief widening of her eyes. Highgate was one of the most exclusive and beautiful suburbs of the city.

'Lucky you,' she said.

'I would be, if I could move into the damn place,' he said.

'What do you mean?'

'It's been gutted and refurbished from scratch,' he said. 'The whole thing needed stripping back. So redecorating, floors laid, kitchen and bathroom installation, everything. I've been away because of work so I've missed the worst of the disruption. It was meant to be finished a week ago. That's why I'm staying here, because my building team have overrun.'

'Do you have a project manager?'

He shook his head.

'I'm in control of it myself.'

'That's why it's overrun then,' she said. 'It would be like me handing over the plans for a garden and just letting the project cruise along rudderless. Things just don't get done sometimes if you're not there to kick butt.'

The implication that the delay was down to him irked a little and he made himself ignore it. To be fair, she had a point. He might have total focused control over his work but leaving things to chance in any other area of his life was clearly also a bad move.

'It should be finished in a day or two,' he said. 'And it'll be great to have somewhere to stay that feels like home,' he said. 'When I'm in London at least.'

'So you stay in hotels a lot then. For work?'

He thought he picked up a slight edge to her tone, but her face hadn't changed.

He nodded.

'I'm pretty good at living out of a suitcase. After a while it becomes second nature, luggage gear pared down, you start to use the same places in the same cities. It gets to be a way of life.'

'Doesn't it get lonely, being away like that?'

Something in that sentence touched him, and he paused for a moment to sip his drink and rationalise it. Loneliness was just a word. It meant focus and drive. It was a positive not a negative if you wanted success. And he could always find company if he wanted it, a non-committal bri

encounter was easy to come by on the international hotel circuit.

~~‘It helps if you like your own company,’ he said. ‘Sometimes you come across the same work contacts. It varies. Sometimes you meet new people. It doesn’t have to be isolated if you don’t want it to be.’~~

She sat back a little in her seat, her gaze holding his, a hint of knowing in the grey-green eyes that he couldn’t fathom.

‘Like tonight, you mean. Like me.’

He nodded.

‘Yes. Room service or dinner with you. No contest.’

Her posture stiffened almost imperceptibly, as if some thought had occurred to her. The gaze didn’t waver and she tilted her chin as she looked at him, an almost judgemental look in her eyes. Then she looked down at her champagne flute and the moment was gone.

Izzy took a sip of her champagne. Serial hotel guest... lots of travel for work...doesn’t have to be isolated if you don’t want it to be.

She pushed her plate to one side.

Don’t get even. Get even better...

Curiosity needled at her. Hotels, girls, one-night-stands. Was this the way Joe had behaved when he was away supposedly working towards their future? Did he single out the best prospect and ask her for dinner? Was that how it had started? Was she seeing that dark mirror image of her own life?

She wanted, *needed* to see more. This had nothing to do with revenge, this was about understanding. For the first time she had a flash of the type of woman who inhabited Joe’s alternative fun life, the foil to herself - the type of woman who held things together at home. An image of her mother flashed unbidden into her mind, the person she’d vowed never to become. Fifties cupcake housewife living in the wrong decade. Izzy might have bucked that trend with her traditionally male-dominated work, but she’d fallen right into the same trap in her relationship.

This was her chance. Her opportunity to flout the rules and be the other woman for once instead of the homemaker. Exactly what *was* the fun she was missing out on? Her heart picked up speed in anticipation of where this thought process might lead.

‘It must be difficult to keep a relationship going when you’re travelling a lot,’ she said, keeping her voice carefully neutral.

Oliver finished his main course and pushed the plate to one side.

‘I imagine it would be,’ he said. ‘I don’t do them.’

She stared at him.

‘Not at all?’

‘Not in the long-term sense.’ He took a sip of his drink. ‘My work comes first, it always has. I need that focus and I can never predict the hours I’ll be working or where I’ll need to be. It wouldn’t be fair to drag another person along on that ride.’

Nothing detracted from the need for irreversible success, that aim which never quite felt within reach. Allowing a relationship to distract him from work would be unheard of, would go against every instinct he’d learned growing up.

‘Relationships are not all they are cracked up to be,’ he said.

She gave a rueful laugh.

‘I’ll drink to that.’ She raised her drink and he nodded and picked his own glass up in response.

‘Relationships, relationships,’ he said. ‘All that grief, all that input.’

‘It’s not a one-way street,’ she said. ‘You’re meant to get something back.’

‘Doesn’t sound like *you* did,’ he countered, but she didn’t reply, just met his gaze with her grey-green eyes.

‘Relationships sap the energy from what can be a perfect meeting of the physical,’ he said.

He watched carefully for her response to that and noticed her shift almost imperceptibly in her seat.

‘You mean a fling.’

He shrugged.

‘If you want to call it that. It’s perfectly simple. You’ve obviously been messed around by some idiot who’s treated you badly. Doesn’t sound remotely like fun to me. The way I play it, things never get beyond the fun stage. You never discover the loathsome habits. You never even make it to your first argument. I don’t have time to deal with any of that.’

‘You don’t even date?’ she clarified.

He shook his head.

‘Why let things get that far?’

A tiny smile touched the corner of her mouth and his pulse began to climb.

‘That’s very interesting,’ she said.

‘Is it?’

She toyed with her glass. As he watched the slender fingers slowly and rhythmically turning the stem of it, heat began to tingle low in his abdomen.

‘I’d be lying if I said I haven’t been feeling a bit low,’ she said. ‘The break up came out of the blue, it smacked me between the eyes.’ She looked up. ‘It’s all fine though, I have a planned strategy.’ She gave him another smile.

‘Dinner with a stranger part of that strategy?’ he said.

‘Not dinner exactly,’ she said, and he saw a flash of something in her eyes.

‘What then?’

She blushed prettily and took a sip of her drink. Saying nothing said it all and he zoomed in immediately. Knowing when to pounce was key.

‘Ah, I see.’

‘Do you?’ She looked up at him, eyes slightly narrowed.

He held her gaze.

‘No better way to draw a line under a break-up,’ he said. ‘What you need now is concrete approval from someone with no agenda that you’re beautiful and appealing and sexy. Which, by the way, you are. All those things you’ve been secretly questioning about yourself.’

The suggestion, oblique, not direct, was clear enough that he might as well have announced it to the restaurant. Izzy’s heart thundered in her chest so fast she could hear it in her ears. Every nerve sparked with excitement, heat tingled between her legs, she felt more alive than she could remember.

A couple of hours in the company of Oliver Forbes and she felt like she could conquer the world.

How might you feel after the night with him? Her mind whispered, and a rippling shiver sparkled the length of her spine. She met the hazel eyes, holding herself steady despite her shortening breath.

‘Don’t you ever feel like being reckless?’ he said.

She saw the heat inherent in his eyes and instead of feeling wary, she felt unexpectedly inspired. Whatever his motivation was, it had no relevance to her. She could make this situation whatever she wanted it to be. When had she ever done anything for the pure fun and pleasure of it without analysing the hell out of it first? When had she last lived in the moment?

You couldn’t get much more living-in-the-moment than a no-strings one-night-stand.

Dessert arrived. A delectable pot of creamy lemon posset with raspberry running through it that she

really didn't want and that neither of them ate.

Oliver beckoned the waiter.

'Would you like coffee?' he asked them.

She looked Oliver straight in the eye.

'Why don't we have coffee upstairs?' she said.

CHAPTER THREE

She was acutely aware of his hand at the small of her back as he accompanied her through the velvet and marble of the lobby and up the sweeping staircase. At the top of the stairs next to the sign where they'd parted after check-in, she paused.

Still time to back out.

Izzy Shaw didn't do reckless and impulsive. She did spot-on timekeeping, she did savings accounts, she gave bloody good girlfriend.

The soft fluttering of excitement in her stomach was tempered by a vague feeling that this was somehow wrong. She clamped down hard on that thought. How could it be wrong? Just who or what was she being unfaithful to here? Some stupid idealised future that she'd been so committed to she couldn't see what was going on under her nose? She shoved all thoughts of unfaithfulness away. She was free and single and she could do as she chose.

'Your place or mine?' he said.

The last stop before she left sensible Izzy outside the bedroom door. Common sense kicked in with a list of considerations. Her friends knew her room number, her phone and her belongings were there and she knew for a fact there were condoms lurking in the zip pocket of her case, left over from a long ago weekend away she'd spent with Joe.

'Mine,' she said.

At the door she paused to look up at him in the soft light from the hallway. Nerves were there, of course they were, sharpening her senses to a needle point. But alongside them was desire to break out of the mould she was in. And more. As he locked eyes with her, his hand circling the base of her spine generating sparks of promise, she was shocked by the strength of her physical desire for him.

She could hear her heartbeat in her ears. The moment they were inside the room she closed the door behind her. All the romance of the made-for-two suite stood beyond, the bed now turned down and pink tissue paper-wrapped chocolates on the his 'n' hers fluffy pillows.

Was she really going to do this? Sleep with someone she'd only just met?

Never in a million years would she have picked someone up in a bar and had a one-night-stand. The whole situation she was in lent itself to this, as if it was somehow meant to be. The anonymity of the hotel room, the fact he had no idea beyond her first name and a bit of background who the hell she was. No knowledge of her hangups, her failings, her aspirations, her past or future. It was like existing in a bubble. The inherent danger of what she was doing seemed far away – her friends knew where she was, she hadn't gone back to his place, he'd told her he was a lawyer and she had no reason to disbelieve him. The only thing stopping her was the idea that this was out of character or somehow wrong.

To hell with that.

If Joe could do it, then so could she.

And that was why she'd let things get this far. Why she wasn't stopping things in their tracks. Because a one-night-stand was the perfect antidote to the poison Joe had tainted her with. No strings. One night of therapy. Call it payback. Call it an ego boost. Call it what you like. She couldn't conceive right now of trusting another man with the intricacies of her life. She had no need for a man she could

turn to or rely on only to have her hopes crushed somewhere down the line. She needed some fun, and he was perfect for that because the type of man who went in for one-night-stands was exactly the type of man she would never give life-space to again.

Why not taste the other side just this once. Being reliable, loving Izzy had got her zilch. Less than zilch in fact. A broken heart.

Before she could lose her nerve, she turned towards him, stood on tiptoe and touched his lips briefly with her own, registering his surprised intake of breath and relishing it.

His hand moved to caress her jaw as she looked up into his eyes. Clear hazel, speckled with yellow. She breathed in the faint spice of aftershave on warm skin. He took control, tilted her chin gently and kissed her, softly at first and then with growing hunger, his fingers tangling in her hair, his free hand sliding around her waist. She could taste the faint twist of red wine from dinner on his lips.

She felt light headed, and as the last tendrils of sensibility began to slip away she made herself break the kiss. She took a couple of calming breaths, her hands on his chest, sharply aware of his hands circling her back and the hardness of his body against hers.

‘Ground rules,’ she managed, trying not to pant.

He gave her a look of intensity and amusement.

‘Ground rules?’ he said. A smile touched the corner of his mouth. ‘When you say ground rules maybe you mean second thoughts.’

She shook her head immediately.

Out-of-character was intoxicating in a way she had never imagined. She was sweet, dependable, hardworking, loyal Izzy.

Joe’s Doormat.

In this room she could be none of these things, especially that last one. Oliver would know her whatever she wanted to be. The excitement that thought invoked made her stomach flutter deliciously and she was glad of his arms around her because her knees felt suddenly like they might give underneath her.

‘No second thoughts,’ she said. ‘Ground rules.’

She waited until he nodded.

‘This is a one-off. No strings, no comeback. No follow-up date, no swapping phone numbers, no poking me on Facebook. This is a one-night-only take-it-or-leave-it experience. Agreed?’

He looked into her grey-green eyes, at the bold, defensive expression in them. She was utterly adorable. He felt an absurd desire to press rewind just so he could be sure he’d heard her correctly. The novelty of being on the receiving end of the proposition wrong-footed him. Of course he’d read the signals, would have made a move himself if she hadn’t kissed him like that. He had nothing to lose, this being the usual deal.

Except that she’d turned out not to be the usual deal. She had her own agenda.

Miss Sensible Garden Expert. Maybe this was her getting back at her boyfriend, whatever he’d done. A one-night-stand to make her feel better. Whatever it was, he blocked consideration of it from his mind. Why make this more than it needed to be? No strings suited him down to the ground, a fling was the only kind of relationship he indulged in. Yet he’d never had a girl set the tone from the outside before.

He was used to driving the situation, making his intentions clear, distancing himself afterwards. To have her take that role was an enticing novelty and it flamed his desire for her on a visceral level that made him want to scoop her up and take her right now, no preamble. Instead he made himself go slowly, sensing there was fragility beneath her bravado. He could tell by the way she trembled under

his hands that she was out of her comfort zone, however determined she might be not to show it.

~~'Agreed,' he said and stopped her mouth with another kiss. Deeper this time, a chance to feel and taste.~~

Decision made now. Stupid misplaced guilt shoved away. This was her time, the ultimate indulgence. She could take from him whatever she wanted with no fear of comeback afterwards. She could use him however she wanted to.

Tentatively, slowly at first, nerves competing with desire in her fluttering stomach, she let her curiosity take over, let her hands go where they wanted. His hand moved to caress her cheek and slid behind her head, tilting her face to the perfect angle. He had caught the curve of her lips perfectly in his, easing them apart and caressing with his tongue, sending waves of heat through her body to tingle between her legs. His other hand traced her spine and cupped the curve of her bottom to press her against him, melding her body hard against his so she could feel his growing arousal.

In the slide of her hands up his chest she could feel hard muscle beneath his shirt, and she moved her fingers to buttons, tugging them open until she could slide greedy hands beneath, across the warm taut contours of his chest. She eased his shirt off and dropped it on the floor. How different he felt. He was so much broader than Joe and far more toned. Three years with the same man and the very newness of this sparked her hunger for him even further.

In one shrug her sparkly cardigan fell from her shoulders to the floor. She gasped against his mouth as he kept her hard against him with one hand and slipped the other from her hair, across tingling skin to pull the straps of her camisole from her bare shoulders. He traced his lips from her mouth slowly down her neck in a trail of tiny soft kisses, making her writhe as he reached the hollow spot above her collarbones. Her top slipped down into a silky pool around her waist. Instead of undoing her bra, he eased the cups down to gently reveal and push up her breasts, the hard buds of her nipples now exposed for the taking as he slid his mouth lower still. She sucked in a sharp breath as he closed his lips over a nipple and stroked its tip gently with his tongue, sending dizzying waves through her right down to her toes.

The knowledge that this was a one-off unleashed inhibitions so ingrained she'd thought them unshakeable, had assumed they were simply part of her. Her hang ups about her appearance were shoved to one side. Who cared that she'd never gotten around to losing that extra couple of pounds from her thighs? Why would it matter if she made some move that might shock, if she took the lead? Sex with Joe had been shrouded by a duvet, had been horizontal, even way back when they'd first met. Unimaginative beyond what he assumed did it for them, she never indicated otherwise, not wanting to hurt his feelings, satisfied enough with her assumption that this was how it was between two people. She had enjoyed it, the intimacy of it, the sensation of it, but it had never blown her away. No, it had never done that.

She had no one here to please save herself. No need to worry about hurting Oliver's feelings because she didn't know him, didn't care about him, no need to worry about shocking him because she'd never see him again after this. When had she ever felt this free? So eager to take all the pleasure she could get?

Smoothing her hands over his taut abdomen, she let them go lower, eager now to explore every inch of him. She tugged at his belt until it came free and waited for him to step out of his clothes. Her oversized maxi skirt fell softly into a puddle at her feet. She stroked her hands softly over the length of his erection, testing the texture, the size, the feel of him with tentative fingertips. His sharp intake of breath in response to her touch thrilled her.

I did that.

She eased her stroking into a slow, deliberate rhythm, feeling him react in the hiss of his breath against her neck and the tension of his body, loving the way she could evoke a response. Feeling desirable for once, knowing he wanted her and that she was toying with that want, she felt deliciously empowered.

Gently seizing control back, he curled his hands beneath her and lifted her gently, her hard nipples grazing his chest, her legs hooked behind his waist. His mouth slid back against hers with more passion now as he crossed the room and lowered her gently back onto the softness of the huge bed.

The sheet was cool and smooth against her back and his mouth was back against hers, his hands removing her bra, tugging her top off and casting it aside, exploring her body. Her mind followed the progress of his fingers downwards, anticipation rising as he caressed her softly through the damp lace of her panties. Teasing, circular motions that made her ache for him to go further. Her breath hitched against his lips as he eased her panties down and away and then he was stroking his way up her inner thighs until his fingertips teased featherlight strokes over her most sensitive place. Hot desire flooded her, pushing everything else out of her consciousness as she squirmed to cover his hand with her own, wanting his fingers inside her, wanting more than that. He refused to be rushed, simply took her hands away and held it lightly in his free hand as he continued to circle the nub of her with his thumb, making her wait until she was dizzy with need, all other thoughts gone from her mind. Then he slid two fingers inside her all the way. She cried out as he moved them in a slow rhythm, his thumb still stroking, the delicious friction driving her to heights of pleasure she hadn't known existed.

As she regained control bit by bit, he tugged gently at her hip until he'd turned her over. The sheet felt momentarily cool against her stomach and breasts and then he slid his hands to the front of her thighs and pulled her back against him until she was on her knees. A pause as he ripped open the condom and then she felt his erection, big and hard between her thighs. She bit her lip in anticipation as he rubbed it against her slick entrance and then he thrust smoothly forward, as far as he could go deep inside her. She heard herself cry out softly and then he pulled back with smooth, tantalising slowness almost all the way, and began to thrust forward deeply again and again at a slow delicious pace. Her pleasure began to climb again.

Tangling a hand gently in her hair he tugged softly.

'Look,' he whispered. 'Look how gorgeous you are.'

She lifted her head, unsure of what he wanted, and then saw. The huge gilt mirror leaned against the opposite wall, depicting them in the honeyed glow of the single table lamp as he took her steadily from behind. He held her reflected gaze steadily with his own as he thrust into her again and again, one hand cupping her breast and teasing the nipple as the other moved between her legs to circle her most sensitive sweet spot with one finger. She moved against him, working towards the height of her pleasure, feeling it there for the taking, unable to tear her eyes away from the mirror, watching him take her. She felt the tension in his body change, his breathing up the pace, and as she finally tipped over into a sublime deliciousness she had never known he was right there with her.

The light filtering through Izzy's closed eyelids was brighter than she was used to, and her first thought was that she'd forgotten to shut the bedroom curtains in her flat.

She opened her eyes. The light was brighter because the high sash windows of the hotel room were dressed with the flimsiest of silk curtains. They put the tiny windows and concrete view of her flat to shame.

Boutique Hotel. Reinvention Get-Over-Joe Mini-Break. One-Night-Stand.

She froze in the king-size bed, the vague cushion of euphoria on which she had woken deflating

if stuck with a pin. She turned over inch by careful inch, knowing perfectly well what she would see before it came into view. She stuffed a mouthful of squashy pillow into her mouth to stifle her own squeak of shock.

Dark tousled hair, smooth skin with a faint tan, the beginnings of stubble on the chiselled jaw and thick eyelashes that were wasted on a guy. They'd spent half the night screwing every ounce of energy out of each other. Her toes curled just at the thought of it.

She peeled the pillow out of her mouth so she could take in a big calming breath.

It could be worse. Wasn't it practically obligatory for a one-night-stand to never look as good as you remembered them the next morning? He certainly bucked that trend. Which was more than could be said for her. Sitting up carefully, she caught sight of her own insane reflection in the huge gilt-framed mirror at the side of the room. Her hair stuck out at odd angles and last night's mascara was smudged panda-style beneath her eyes. Her face reddened as she flashed on last night's use of the mirror. Had that really been her? Shy, retiring Izzy?

She had to get out of here.

Thank goodness he was sound asleep. She checked her watch. A little past five o'clock. A new undiscovered benefit to having a body clock that woke you up at cockcrow no matter how little sleep you'd had: you could make a swift exit after an ill-conceived fling without discovery.

She held her breath and eased her way out of the bed then around the room, picking up her clothes and dressing, keeping every movement smooth and pin-drop quiet. Oliver didn't stir. She wondered randomly where in Highgate he lived, and squashed the thought immediately.

The flipside of last night's triumphant fingers-up at Joe trickled into her mind. Last night it had been all about getting even, all about trying to make some kind of sense of what he'd done so she might move on. Now in the cold light of morning the wider implications of what she'd done kicked in.

Was this what the morning after was like for Joe? Making a sharp exit, backing out of what he'd started before it went any further. She looked at the dark head on the pillow. All she knew of him was what he'd told her and she'd accepted it all without question. For the first time she saw a new parallel with Joe. Was there some other girl somewhere, thinking Oliver was away on a work trip, waiting for him to call her, trusting him? He'd told her he didn't do relationships, had sounded so convincing, but no doubt Joe said exactly the same thing to all his conquests.

She needed to get out of here. Right now, before he woke up.

CHAPTER FOUR

Oliver came to life slowly. Bright sunshine slanted onto the empty pillow next to him. Not his hotel room. Not his bed. He leaned up on an elbow and rubbed his scratchy eyes. Not enough sleep.

The events of the previous night trickled back into his consciousness, driving out his usual first waking desire for caffeine, and he glanced immediately around the room.

For her.

No clothes anywhere. No cosmetics, no bags. No sign that he'd shared this room with anyone except for the crumpled bedclothes and the hot rerun that flashed into his mind. His stomach gave a slow flutter which he insisted to himself was due to hunger, nothing more. It was breakfast time, after all. He threw the covers back and checked the ensuite. There was no question about it – she was gone.

Unless.

Her package deal included dinner, bed and breakfast, didn't it? Maybe she'd decided to make the most of the thrown-in breakfast buffet on her way out. He dressed at speed and headed for the dining room, his shoes whispering on the deep nap of the carpet.

Not that he needed to see her this morning of course. All that needed to be said had been said the previous evening. They were both crystal clear about where they stood. It was simply a matter of politeness, right? Checking she was fine, saying a perfunctory goodbye before she checked out.

Down in the ornate dining room, no longer intimately candlelit and instead now flooded with sunlight from the high windows and reset for breakfast, he pointedly filled a glass with fresh squeezed orange juice from the buffet, while in reality he scanned the room for her.

Right up to the moment he realised she wasn't there he had been utterly certain that she would be. As his mood took a stupid inexplicable nosedive, he discarded the orange juice and left the room.

He approached the high marble desk in the morning-busy lobby poised to question the receptionist. 'Can I help you, Mr Forbes?' She remembered him from check-in yesterday. And he knew immediately from the over-attentive smile she gave him that with a few carefully-chosen sentences he could persuade her to give him the information he wanted. Izzy's last name might be a start.

He hesitated.

Ground rules, not second thoughts.

Her words of the previous night came back to him and he bit back the question that lurked in his mouth. If she'd wanted to be found she would have told him her name or left him a note. She would have joined him for breakfast. She wouldn't have made her excuses and left halfway through the night.

And why the hell was he feeling so piqued anyway? Just because she had robbed him of the chance to be in control, to be the one who did the backing-off?

He thought of the reason she'd been staying here. Some kind of waste-of-space boyfriend had laid her down.

'Mr Forbes?'

'Can I order a newspaper?' he said randomly.

He took a breath.

What was he thinking? Like he needed or wanted a woman in his life. Like he had time

headspace for that kind of distraction.

Let it go. Let her have got her own back for whatever wrong had been done to her. She'd done him a favour here, why the hell was he questioning it? One glorious night and he didn't even have the dirtiest work of backing out to do.

He realised suddenly that the Receptionist had asked him three times which paper he would prefer. Her quick exit should feel like a gift.

Why the hell then, had it left him feeling so short-changed?

'You had a one-night-stand?' Shauna stared at Izzy, incredulous. 'You?'

Izzy took a defensive sip of her coffee because she still couldn't quite believe her own behaviour and glanced around the café to make sure no one had heard.

'It WAS on the 'Get-over-Him List,' she pointed out, keeping her voice low and hoping Shauna and Suzy might do the same. 'You suggested it. Right there at number nine, right after eat your own body weight in ice-cream, blow some cash on a new wardrobe and get plastered on white wine.' She paused. 'All of which I did.'

Shauna was shaking her head.

'It wasn't a *real* suggestion. I'd had a couple of drinks. It was just one of those things that come up when you brainstorm. I never for one second thought you'd actually DO that one. If I did, I would have told you about all the caveats that come with it.'

Oh for Pete's sake.

'Caveats?'

'Exactly.' Suzy, veteran reader of womens' magazines, leaned in as if about to impart a great secret. 'There are rules you need to follow if you're going to do something as reckless as have a one-night-stand.'

'Go on.'

She flapped a hand at Izzy, the other clapped to her forehead.

'Don't rush me, don't rush me, I'm trying to remember. OK, first and foremost, you don't pick anyone you're likely to encounter in daily life. Far too complicated. No bosses, no brother's-best-mates, no colleagues...'

'That's fine then,' Izzy said with a note of triumph. 'Box ticked.'

Suzy nodded approvingly. 'There's more.'

Of course there was.

'You make it clear from the outset there won't be anything further than this one night.'

Izzy took a sip of her coffee and nodded.

'Ground rules. I did all of that. I'm not a complete idiot.'

'Safe sex?' Shauna said and Izzy inhaled a mouthful of coffee.

'Of course,' she managed, trying not to cough.

'And you can give him no way of finding you afterwards. No phone number swapping.'

'Even if you want it to be more?' Izzy asked with sudden interest. Not, of course, that she did.

'Especially if you want it to be more. They never look that good the next morning you know. You go to sleep thinking you're with an Adonis and then you wake up and he looks like a troll.'

Whatever Izzy was uncertain of regarding the previous night, she was sure about one thing.

'He wasn't a troll,' she said. She could hardly think of him without her stomach melting.

'Trust me, he was. They always are. The magic never extends past the next morning,' Shauna insisted. 'Best to bail out of these things while it's all going well.' She sat back in her chair and folded

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