

# Divas Las Vegas



**BELINDA JONES**

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## About the Author

Belinda Jones's first paid job was on cult kiddy comic *Postman Pat*. Since then she has written for a multitude of magazines and newspapers including, *Sunday, Daily Express, Empire, FHM, heat, New Woman*, and *more!* magazine where she was staff writer for four years. Belinda's widely acclaimed first novel, *Divas Las Vegas*, was voted No.2 in the *New Woman* Bloody Good Reads Awards in 2001 and *On the Road to Mr Right* - a non-fiction travelogue love quest was a *Sunday Times* top ten bestseller. Her new novel *The Love Academy* is available now in Arrow Books.

*Also by Belinda Jones*

*Fiction*

I Love Capri  
The California Club  
The Paradise Room  
Café Tropicana  
The Love Academy  
Out of the Blue

*Non Fiction*

On the Road to Mr Right

*To embark on more fabulous journeys with Belinda Jones,  
visit her website: [www.belindajones.com](http://www.belindajones.com)*

# **DIVAS LAS VEGAS**

Belinda Jones



arrow books

For James  
(and everyone who dreams in neon)

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# 1

We're on our way to Las Vegas to get married. Admittedly we're a little light on grooms - only Izzy has a fiancé and she has no intention of marrying *him* - but still, we're optimistic: with statistically one wedding taking place every six minutes, the air in Vegas is practically 70 per cent oxygen, 30 per cent confetti.

Add to that the fact that drinking hard liquor 24 hours a day is (near enough) compulsory, and we reckon the odds of us finding I do-able men in under a month are stacked in our favour. What do we have to lose, anyway? Lacklustre jobs and men with a gift for making us feel more alone than when we were single.

We've been led - rather brutally - to the uneasy realisation that we're tolerating rather than embracing life. Wishing for a miracle isn't netting us the results we need so we've decided on a more hands-on approach to our fate.

Izzy has packed 72 condoms instead of her usual 36 and I've got a family-size jar of Marmite wrapped in my pyjamas - proof indeed we have no intention of returning to England until our lives are well and truly 'altared'. Well, there comes a time when you have to take a stand. As Izzy says, 'There's only so many crap boyfriends a girl can take.'

At twenty-seven we're plenty old enough for crap husbands.

'There it is!' screeches Izzy, spying her first Vegas light bulb from 12,000 feet up. The solo glow suddenly erupts into a shimmering mirage of chameleon neon. We gasp in unison, severing the circulation in each other's arms with a white-knuckle grip of excitement. I place my other hand over my heart to stop it leaping from my body. It's as if a huge, leaden treasure chest had been prised open to reveal its

glittering booty: the Kryptonite green glow of the MGM Grand, the fizzing pinks and oranges of the Flamingo Hilton, the gleaming gold of Mandalay Bay, the polished jet of the Luxor pyramid . . .

It's all so beautiful. My eyes blur with tears, creating swirling kaleidoscope patterns.

'I can't believe we're here . . .' I breathe.

'I can't believe how far the lights spread out,' says Izzy, craning to take in the million golden spangles scattering into the desert. 'I thought there was just going to be one main street.'

Of course we'd heard rumours that there is life beyond the glitz - that people raise families here, and go to school and college. There's even talk of people mowing the lawn. But we're not interested in hidden suburbia. We need to believe there is a place where 9-5 rules don't apply, a place where ovens clean themselves and ironing is a felony - hell, you'd only melt the sequins.

Marriage may be our mission but we're also craving Sin City's extremes and the excess. We need to escape reality, to be where men walk around dressed as Egyptian pharaohs and no one tries to look up their skirts; where it's not unusual to find Tom Jones impersonators performing on the same night as the Sexbomb himself. We want to shop in places that sell plastic Elvis sunglasses with built-in fun fur sideburns, and stroke one of Siegfried and Roy's white tigers. We want to stand on escalators with newlywed women wearing frilly lace garters with cut-off denim shorts. On a more personal note, I'm looking forward to being around people with bigger debts than me.

'Furnace alert!' Izzy reels as we emerge on to the street outside baggage claim. 'We must be under a faulty air duct, move along a bit, Jamie.'

We drag our straining suitcases further down the pavement but it still feels like the entire staff of Vidal

Sassoon are blasting us with their hairdryers. We fall into the taxi with relief.

‘Where IS that heat coming from?’

The driver gives us a weary look and sighs, ‘The sun.’

‘I didn’t realise we were actually ON it,’ scoffs Izzy.

It’s 8 o’clock at night and easily 90 degrees. The news on the radio tells of a two-year-old boy who got second-degree burns from falling on the pavement and not being able to scramble up quick enough.

‘I think we’ll keep our heavy drinking sessions to carpeted areas,’ Izzy squirms.

The airport is but a dice-throw from the Strip and within minutes we’re entering the dazzling rainbow kingdom, squeaking rapture at a level only dogs can hear. It’s curious how multiple wattage can fill you with such emotion. Imagine the heart-warming sight of fairy lights on a Christmas tree combined with the thrill and wonder of a firework display. Liberace must have felt this way every time he opened his wardrobe door.

‘There’s the Statue of Liberty,’ yawns the cab driver pointing at New York, New York casino with its red rollercoaster wrapped like an undulating ribbon around the replica Manhattan buildings.

‘Caesar’s Palace,’ the driver nods to out left. ‘A classic.’

‘Wow!’ We contort to take in the cloud-nudging Roman columns, gold emblemmed and mighty statues. Tourists crowd the pavements to gawp, kitted out with foot-long margaritas, livid sunburn and perms that should have been outlawed in the seventies.

‘Neil Sedaka!’ yelps Izzy.

‘Where?’ I gasp.

‘No, you fool! On that billboard . . .’

‘Crystal Gayle!’

‘Earth, Wind and Fire!’

‘Taylor Dane!’

We call out the names as we flash by.

'Old rockers don't die, they just play Vegas,' opines the driver as we pass the oriental blue neon of the Imperial Palace.

'Where's *our* hotel?' says Izzy, sounding about four years old.

'Just a bit further down, we should see a pink metallic roof . . .'

'Circus Circus sounds so cheesy,' Izzy pulls a face. 'And I thought clowns gave you the creeps.'

'They do,' I reply, 'and I'm not thrilled about the cat they've got riding a unicycle across a high wire, but a free room is a free room.'

'Yeah, you're right,' Izzy concedes. 'Anyway, I don't care where we stay, just as long as I get to meet my millionaire.'

The cab driver snuffles into his stubble.

'Pardon?' I enquire.

'You won't find any millionaires at Circus Circus! It's full of obese families and LA gang bangers!' he snorts.

Fantastic. No, I mean it. The naffer the better as far as I'm concerned. If I can mentally picture my sister Nadine recoiling and reaching for her facial mist I know I'm on course.

'If you're looking for the big spenders, you wanna get yourselves over to the Las Vegas Hilton or the Desert Inn.' He eyes us for a second, then adds, 'Nah, too classy.'

Charming. We're about to take offence but he realises his tip is at stake and starts talking moolah again.

'Here's a tip for you girls: the casinos wanna ensure the flow of money is not disturbed by some dumbass tourist risking his mortgage on number 15 just because his pet mutt died on the 15th of the month, so you know what they do?'

'What?' we chorus.

'They give the high rollers their own private gaming zones - a lot of these areas are just cordoned off so you can see them in action.'

Izzy lets out a gurgle of anticipation. I take it she finds the idea of clusters of hyper-rich men – ready sorted and sifted – hugely appealing.

‘I wish you luck though, most of those guys only have eyes for the croupiers,’ he notes, turning into a driveway marked by a monstrous ginger Afro-d gatekeeper.

‘That’s Lucky the Clown – he’s made up of three-quarters of a mile of neon tubing!’

We force out an ‘Ooooh’.

‘Like you give a shit!’

He’s right. We prefer his hints about meeting millionaires.

As we roll under an entrance canopy emblazoned with infinite winking and red and gold lights, Izzy whispers in awe: ‘I feel as if we’re about to be sucked up for a close encounter by a UFO.’

A man dressed in ringmaster livery opens the cab door and the heat oven-bakes us again. But not for long. The air conditioning in the hotel is positively Arctic – if we were cartoon characters, we’d have gone from molten, steaming heaps to freeze-framed ice sculptures in seconds. We’d heard stories that they pump extra oxygen into the casinos to keep people awake so they can gamble longer, but it seems they’re also experimenting with cryogenics to keep gamblers immortal.

‘Reception this way!’ Izzy shivers. We give each other a nervous look – the driver has made Circus Circus sound so bargain basement we’re expecting walls papered with discarded popcorn boxes and a sawdust-strewn floor – but instead we find a foyer lavish with regal purples and golds, hand-painted murals and velvet tasselled chaise longues. Okay, so we’re the only people not in jeans formerly worn by hippos but remove all the guests and this place would be *plush*.

A Hispanic man on reception beckons us to the check-in desk and then taps our names into the computer.

'Ah, Miss Miller. It looks like our publicity department have left a press pack for you. Are you with the media?' His eyes light up.

'I . . . er . . . well . . .'

'You're looking at the *Express & Echo's* finest pet and wildlife contributor!' Izzy answers for me.

The receptionist looks bemused and I don't bother explaining that up until recently I actually worked in a poxy call centre and my forays into journalism can only be classed as a hobby. Still, with any luck this trip will change all that. With any luck it will change everything.

The receptionist switches to autopilot as he runs through a booklet describing Circus Circus' various restaurants, facilities and attractions. He then pushes forward a map detailing the wings, towers and extensions of the hotel. There are 3,743 rooms that aren't ours. The odds of us being reunited with our suitcases don't seem great.

Izzy hands over her credit card to be imprinted (mine has been cut up and returned to First Direct) and we sign our names on the registration form: Izzy Ingham and Jamie Miller.

'Just think, this might be the last time we register under our maiden names!' I muse.

Izzy narrows her eyes muttering, 'So long as I don't end up Mrs Copperfield!' and I smile, remembering her leaving card - her temping agency had doctored an old paparazzi shot of David Copperfield and Claudia Schiffer, superimposing Izzy's face over the supermodel's.

'If my hair ever looked that good, I would believe in magic . . .'

Izzy had sighed, eyeing Ms Schiffer's glossy vanilla river.

Izzy's hair is the bane of her life. By her own admission it's the texture of straw, fractured with split ends and so choked with hairspray she lives in fear of brushing up against lit cigarettes. She's the only person I know who can actually relate to the women on *The Jerry Springer Show*.

She is unquestionably blonde but it's hard to describe the exact hue - sometimes she's pale honey, sometimes Pammy peroxide, sometimes she comes out of the bathroom shrieking, 'It's *peach!* Peach, for God's sake!'

The Timotei ads she saw as a teenager torment her still and she is constantly on a quest for the ultimate Nordic-blonde hair dye. Not to mention the styling product that will change her life. She takes what men say with a pinch of salt, unless they happen to be Daniel Galvin, Nicky Clarke or Charles Worthington, in which case she'll fall mousse, gel and serum for their line of products promising tresses like spun gold and follicles that no longer cry out for mercy.

For someone so despairing of her hair she wears it big and proud. And men care not that a caressing hand may never return from a forage in her killer tangles - she fulfils the fantasy cliché of Long Blonde Hair and that's good enough for them. It also explains why no matter how many times she wails, 'I'd look better bald!' she will never consider having it cut or returning to her natural colour, whatever that might be.

Despite these horrors, she's undoubtedly a babe. What she lacks in grooming she makes up for in raw sex appeal. The inside of her leaving card was peppered with quips like, 'She puts the "bed" in bedraggled! The "ass" in sassy! The umbrella in the cocktail!' and the majority of bon voyage messages included references to her most infamous feature: 'Las Vegas or Bust!' 'The Grand Canyon's got nothing on your cleavage!' etc. It's not exactly that her boobs enter the room a good ten seconds before her, it's the way she wears them. She has a gift for arranging them like some people have a gift for flower-arranging. A strategic slash, zip or scoop can do so much and she swears by buying bras a size too small to give a 'spilling forth' illusion.

I secretly admire the way Izzy embraces slutdom. I've always said she's more of 'a slag with a gag' than 'a tart with a heart'. She makes no apologies and she can get away

with it (even with a fiancé in tow) because she's got such a smart mouth. Men are initially lured by her bod and then wowed by her wit. With that combination - and the fact that she's so good at flattering them - they naturally think they are in love ten minutes after meeting her. I suppose she's not an obvious choice as Best Friend because she's such a man's woman - some people say any man's woman - and I certainly know more reliable, sweeter people than Izzy, but none more fun. She leads me astray and I like it that way. We've shared a flat for the past five years and been friends since we were seven. (It amuses me greatly to think I knew Izzy when she was a virgin.)

We met at a Christmas panto in Plymouth - when Buttons asked if there were any birthday girls in the audience our hands shot up simultaneously, just two seats apart. Egged on by near-hysterical parents we went up on stage where Izzy threw Roy Hudd off his stride with her pre-Lolita flirtations. Naturally we slaughtered the 'Birthday Boy' team. Afterwards, we polished off the sack of prize sweets leaving only a candy bracelet each - a memento of our triumph.

We've hooked them over a succession of dressing-table mirrors, un nibbled, for the last twenty years, but today they are stashed in our hand luggage.

Izzy jingles another bracelet as she takes the room keys and flusters the chap on reception by winking 'You know where to find me . . .' It's a silver charm bracelet - our mums conspired to buy us matching ones for our fifteenth birthday and each year we have a ritual exchange of charms. We were eighteen when the Vegas obsession kicked in - I bought her a mini Elvis head, she bought me lucky dice studded with eensy-weensy diamanté. And now here we are, finally putting Project Presley into action. I would never have guessed it would take us this long to get here, or predicted what prompted us to make the leap. But

right now that doesn't matter. The night is young and we're overdue for some fun.

'Look, I know we said we wouldn't,' Izzy whispers, 'but shall we?'

So much for our pact to steer well clear of gambling - we haven't even got as far as the lifts and Izzy's Devil horns have sprouted. Obviously we have nothing against a big win but we don't want to end up down at the pawn shop trying to convince the broker of the value of our make-up bags. Still, a little flutter couldn't hurt . . .

'Okay, but no more than \$10,' I insist. 'We can't ruin ourselves on our first night. At least not financially . . .'

The jangling-clanging-bleeping-ringing of the infinite fruit machines assaults our ears like anarchic percussion as we step into the casino. To our right a cascade of coins clatters noisily.

‘Now that’s what I call music!’ Izzy cheers.

The room is the size of a big top with rows of old ladies in garish appliquéd blouses sitting mindlessly feeding quarters into the machines, sometimes playing two simultaneously, eyes flicking between them entirely expressionless, even when they win. People always harp on about how depressing and disturbing this phenomenon is. We’re delighted.

‘It’s all real!’ we whoop, with no sense of irony.

We change up a \$20 bill – well, there are two of us – and prowl around attempting to sense which machine is ready to give birth.

‘Use the force!’ I mutter, passing on Fast Buck but feeling drawn to the Zodiac grouping. Unfortunately the Sagittarius seat is already taken so I settle for a *Wizard of Oz*-themed machine called Ruby Slippers. I feed in a dollar bill and after a few spins it rewards me with a \$10 payout. I’m shaking from the thrill. Looking around I see people helping themselves to the plastic pots stacked on the top of the machines so I grab one and shovel in my coins, feeling wise to the scene. It occurs to me that if I collected a logo-d pot from every casino they’d make great kitsch plant pots. I’m already having far too much fun and I’ve lost Izzy.

After twenty minutes trying to track her down aisles where all the machines and the people look the same, I take a wrong turning and find myself waist-deep in children in the amusement arcade. It seems that the universe intends to

test my insistence that I'm through with younger men for there, across the room, stands the ultimate temptation: an angelic manchild with a halo of gleaming blond hair peering in my direction from beneath feathery lashes. I look behind me, expecting to see some fifteen-year-old Britney Spears babe with a bare midriff and combats. Nothing but a bank of video games. I watch a kid shoot a mini basketball hoop and then look back at the teen angel. He is still looking at me. I watch another kid slam a mole on the head with a mallet and look back again. The yearning in his eyes is unmistakable.

'I'm an on-the-shelf, jet-lagged hag and I'm getting attention from an American Adam Rickett? How fantastic is this?' I think gleefully.

Being the older woman, he is clearly waiting for me to make the move so I sidle over to where he's standing at the top of the escalators and give him a 'Go ahead - I'm all yours' look.

Falteringly he inches closer, looking enticingly embarrassed.

'Errmm,' he begins.

'Yes . . .?'' I encourage gently.

'I was wondering . . .'

'Yes? . . .'' I smile indulgently, tingling with expectation.

'The security man won't let me in the games area unless I'm accompanied by an adult . . .'' he mumbles.

I'm gobsmacked. 'Oh, right, I—'

'Would you mind saying you are my mum?'

My jaw dents the floor. I look at him in absolute wonderment. The cheek! Just how old does he think I am? Oblivious to my mortification he continues to look imploringly at me.

'You just have to walk in with me . . .'

Perhaps it isn't entirely necessary to drag him in by the ear but I feel it adds authenticity.

As I attempt to retrace my steps to the main casino, I wonder if the teen angel humiliation is a sign that I should choose an adult male for my future husband. That concept could take some getting use to as I'm almost exclusively attracted to younger men. I've heard all the cradle-snatching comments like, 'Should he be out on a school night?' and 'How nice, he's only seventeen - you'll get to spend all his important birthdays together: eighteen, twenty-one . . .' Very droll.

Normally I just laugh it off but I have to say I did cringe when people asked Brent how he broke his arm and he replied, 'I fell off my skateboard!'

He was a full-grown nineteen-year-old but this immediately made him sound twelve. People would give me rueful looks as if to say, 'Give him back his Curly Wurly and send him on his way.'

The outside world may not take these relationships seriously but in a way that removes a lot of the pressure, so the focus is simply on having a rip-roaring time. And that's not the only bonus. Here's what I consider to be the the top 10 advantages to dating a boybabe:

1. All his ex-girlfriends are schoolgirls with Saturday jobs in Budgens so you won't feel intimidated by them.
2. He has a lovely lean body - the puppy fat has fallen away and the beer belly isn't due for another five years.
3. His heart has experienced ten to twenty years less relationship hell than the average older man so it's still squidgy and available, not cowering beneath his ribcage.
4. Dating an older woman is every young man's fantasy - suddenly you are Isabella Rossellini and you didn't even need surgery.
5. He brings out the frisky, live-for-today, kiddyplayful side in you. (Just as well because being mature around him would make you feel like his mum.)

6. He thinks that by your age you've tried every sexual position (twice if you like it) so he tries extra hard to impress you in bed.
7. He's so easy to buy presents for - a little bit of Tommy Hilfiger goes a long way.
8. Young guys totally dig equality with women - they're not as confused as thirtysomethings about the role of men and women today. As far as they are concern, *there are no rules*.
9. He'll stay up all night eating Häagen-Dazs, watching videos and snuggling you because he doesn't have to get up for work the next day. (And even if he does, he can survive on two hours' sleep.)
10. It does your ego good - why do you think older men have been dating teen bimbettes for so long?

Of course it won't last. But what relationship does?

Only one boy has ever really got to me. His name was CJ. It's amazing how some people penetrate your heart and take root, but I'm tired of feeling in pain every time I think of him, and one of the main aims of this trip is to get over him once and for all. People think I was upset when Travis (the last in a string of loser boyfriends) dumped me three months ago, but that was nothing. He told me: 'The fact you don't take drugs means you must be harbouring latent disapproval for my, er, recreational pursuits and I cannot be with someone who does not accept me for how I am.'

I would have debated the point but he passed out. I'm feeling pretty unsteady myself right now - small wonder - its 5 a.m. back in Britain and we've been up for 21 hours. I have to find Izzy and get to our room. I'm looking around for her, absently humming to the piped casino music when I feel my heart lurch and I'm swamped with emotion. It's as if CJ had just kissed me. It takes me a few seconds to realise it's because 'our' song has come on.

*Tonight I need your sweet caress, hold me in the darkness,*  
croon Breathe.

I say 'our' song, CJ never even liked it but for some reason whenever I hear it, I'm consumed with love for him. I feel churned up, as though my internal organs are swapping places, and this shifting summons up other memories of love and disappointment - the CJ domino knocks into the Travis domino which in turn topples the teen angel domino. Half an hour ago I was on a major high, now - woozy and wilting from jet lag - I seem intent on grabbing at anything to OD on self-pity and there is only one conclusion. Here we go . . .

I tilt my head back to stop my eyes over flowing but a trickle of Maybelline Great Lash mascara escapes . . . I try to smear it back in place but the Shu Uemera peach shimmer shadow is also in motion. The designer brands get no special treatment - Dior Touche Éclat concealer mingles with Rimmel eyeliner and streaks down my face as one. These are not tears that can be dismissed with a sniff and a 'silly me' laugh. I sense the tidal wave gathering momentum and hurtle towards a nearby ladies'. The cubicle offers little sanctuary with its voyeur-friendly gaps around the door but I don't care.

I'm just glad to be surrounded by reams of toilet paper.

Over the last ten years I've replayed the memories of CJ countless times, struggling to preserve every detail and conjure up the exact sensation of lying in his arms. Falling in love with him shaped my life and yet Izzy has only just found out how much he meant to me.

I hadn't deliberately kept my feelings a secret, it was just that when I tried to tell her about him at the time (we were seventeen) she was so scathing I barely mentioned him again. I suppose I was a little resentful that he got so little airtime but she wasn't being deliberately cruel. She'd spent the whole of July in Greece at her dad's hotel, inventing hazardous ouzo cocktails and sending me postcards about a Greek waiter who was very free with his hummus and made her heart go 'pitta-patter'. I expected her to come back all golden and loved up, signing her name Izzy Acropolis, but instead she was sunburnt and man-hating having lost her virginity to a 'Manky Manc' who'd got separated from his 18-30s group one night. He left before she even woke up.

For the rest of the summer she shuddered every time she heard a Mancunian accent and had to give up watching *Coronation Street* altogether. How could I possibly tell her my heart had inflated to the size of a dinghy and that I was in love with someone other than a pop star for the first time in my life?

She did ask about the drama course I'd been on, but when I said, 'There was this one guy . . .' she just rolled her eyes.

Ignoring her blatant lack of interest, I told her his name was CJ and he had ultra-shiny shoulder-length hair and was carrying the collected works of W.B. Yeats when we met.

She shot me down by tagging him the 'Pantene Poet'.

'Let's hear it! Let's hear his line!' she crowed.

I couldn't do it. His 'lines' were too precious and too open to ridicule.

'Did you shag him?' she asked.

'No, but—'

'Thank God one of us has been spared the violation!' she huffed. 'Bastards. Lousy cherry-nicking bastards.'

Within a week of being back at school, she was having a full-on affair with the supply teacher. He was entirely at her mercy so her confidence was restored and she was back to her gregarious self. She salivated over their clandestine encounters and when she described the way he kissed, I found myself picturing CJ's lips. I tentatively tried to include him in the conversations, 'Oooh, I know what your mean . . . You know that bloke I met on the drama course? Sometimes his mouth would just hover over mine and we'd breathe each other's breath before kissing and . . .'

I never got more than a 'hmmmm' or a 'yeah' in response. One day she did ask, 'Where's the Pantene Poet now? Floating downstream with the Lady of Shalot, I suppose . . .'

but even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't answer her. CJ's parents had moved up north, taking him away from me, and I'd never heard from him again. Not one letter. I rang my mum every lunchbreak to check if there was anything in the second post but nothing ever came. So I made a million excuses for him and secretly planned pilgrimages across the Scottish highlands, dreaming of a passionate reunion amid the heather. I never even got to the Edinburgh Festival.

It still feels like unfinished business. No one else has ever come close to having such an impact on me. My heart started pounding before I even saw his face. I remember walking into class and despite all the new faces in the room I just couldn't take my eyes off the back of his head. Admittedly I do have a weakness for hippy hair but when he turned round, revealing an aquiline nose (my personal favourite), olive skin and the palest green eyes, I was entranced.

I remember Linda Evans saying that when she met Yanni it was as if he had been invented purely for her eyes. Okay, they've split up now but I related to the sentiment. I couldn't stop looking at him. He wasn't model-perfect but he had a face I felt I could look at for the rest of my life.

The improv tutor - Mr Reise - came in to the room and told everyone to take a seat. CJ sat right next to me and I was busily trying not to hyperventilate when Mr Reise pointed straight at us and said, 'You two are falling in love!'

CJ just smiled and said, 'Excellent!'

Then Mr Reise pointed to another couple and said, 'You two have been rivals since childhood.' Then another and said, 'You have a guilty secret you are finally about to confess to your neighbour.'

It was just an acting exercise. He told us that most of the class would consist of quick-changing improvisations but that we would keep coming back to the characters he'd assigned that day so that we could experiment with going deeper.

When the bell rang Eloise from school pounced and insisted I go into town shopping with her. I couldn't help but turn back for another look at CJ. He was right behind me.

'Darling!' he said, all mock-angst. '*When will I see you again, sweet, sweet love?*'

'*Tomorrow, tomorrow, I'll love ya, tomorrow - it's only a day away . . .*' I replied.

'Ah well, *I can dream about you, if I can't hold you tonight . . .*'

And so it went on. Being consummate professionals, we never stepped out of character. I could barely concentrate through the play critiquing and mime and Alexander Technique lessons, I just counted the minutes till Mr Reise's class. I saw our pairing as an act of fate. It was as if we had been given official permission to fall in love. In class, we got a taste of how it could be with no limits and no caution required. It was amazing to be coached on how to express

emotions that I was genuinely feeling but that we only joked about in the real world.

'Now let's see you aching for that first kiss - stop distracting him with the chatter, Jamie, be brave and just look at each other . . . .' And then, 'Okay . . . you can stop now . . . that's enough . . . Jamie . . .?'

Within the week we had moved on from exchanging song lyrics to lines from classic poems. He definitely had the upper hand here, poetry being his passion. I had to pack in some intensive research, speed-reading poetry anthologies in break times, but it gave me such a buzz when I found the perfect words to reflect our situation.

The day after our first kiss - in front of a class of twenty-two whooping students - he asked me, 'How was it for you?'

I took a deep breath and replied:

*'I felt the while a pleasing kind of smart,  
The kiss went tingling to my panting  
heart:  
When it was gone, the sense of it did stay,  
The sweetness cling'd upon my lips all  
day.'*

The look in his eyes made my knees go weak. I was relieved that he pushed me against the wall to kiss me again because I needed something to prop me up. I'd never experienced such a surge of passion. I was a gonner - plunging from a plane with no parachute and loving it.

CJ took my hand and led me out of the college building, our pace quickening as we crossed the grounds and ran down to the river. We trampled through delicate jasmine and robust cowslips until we reached a grassy rest under a weeping willow tree. We kissed for about five hours, barely coming up for air. From then on all our free time was spent at that spot by the river. It became our secret world.

Warmed by the sunlight, our nest was as nuzzly as peach fuzz by day, even before we started bringing an old dog blanket along with us. After dark (when we snuck away from the dormitories), it became our own enchanting scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. My hair may have been cropped and erect with gel but, lying there, I felt I had Rapunzel ringlets entwined with exquisite buds and vines. My Miss Selfridge T-shirt dress was a diaphanous gown. My face entirely blemish-free.

Sometimes we would sit in perfect silence, and I'd nestle in his arms, utterly content, almost floating. Other times we were playful and teasing – on one particular scorcher, I was waiting for him by the river as usual and he stumbled up, kissed me and then said:

*'I saw her stretched upon a flow'ry bank  
With her soft sorrows lulled into a slumber  
The summer's heat had to her nat'ral  
blush  
Added a brighter and more tempting  
red . . .*

In other words, you're burning. Here!' he grinned, slinging some factor 30 at me.

'What are your plans for this afternoon?' I asked.

'I think I'll just sit here and count your freckles!' he beamed.

'As opposed to counting the ways you love me . . .?'

'I can do that too.'

'Or, if I may just channel Eliza Dolittle: "*Haven't your lips longed for my touch? Don't say how much – SHOW ME!*"'

'Show you?' He laughed. 'I'll give you grass stains no dry cleaner in the land can remove!'

'Promises, promises . . .'

And we rolled down the bank squealing, wrestling in the reeds, trying to dunk the other's head in the blanket weed.

No doubt we made all the other students nauseous.

The stars were so bright on our last night together they gave me a kind of hope and I didn't feel sad. I didn't really believe tomorrow could exist without him anyway. At one point he stood up and paced a little.

'My own words seem inadequate to describe how I feel about you, Jamie,' he said, swatting at the willow leaves. 'I've found this poem. I want to read it to you.'

His hands were shaking as he unfolded the sheet . . .

*'There's not a fibre in my trembling frame  
That does not vibrate when thy step  
draws near,  
There's not a pulse that throbs not when I  
hear  
Thy voice, thy breathing, nay thy very  
name.  
When thou art with me every sense  
seems dim,  
And all I am, or know, or feel is thee.'*

He looked down at me nervously. I reached over and tugged at his trouser leg to bring him closer to me.

As he dropped down beside me, he whispered, 'Jamie, I love you!' and before I could speak pressed a tiny tissue package into my hand. Inside was a dainty silver charm - a mask showing the two faces of the theatre.

'The smile shows how happy you've made me,' he explained. 'The frown is for how sad I am that we have to part.'

Is it any wonder I felt like screaming when my life was reduced to mindlessly watching game shows on the sofa with Travis? I once insisted he write me a poem, convinced that all the drugs he took should give him some access to creativity.

This is what he wrote:

*There was a young girl called Jamie  
Whose smile could positively slay me  
But the best thing of all  
Was her wake-up call  
Because of the two cups of tea that she  
made me*

To CJ I had been the sun, the moon and the stars. to Travis I was, essentially, a Teasmade.

I wished sometimes I'd never met CJ because he raised my romantic expectations so high. He showed me how it could be, what I could feel. And every other man seemed so crude and dull by comparison. Not to mention utterly unaware of what my heart was capable of. It's as if he took me for a walk in this magical garden, then shut me outside, leaving me slumped against the mossy gate aching to get back inside. Mentally I was still there, waiting for him to turn up with the key.

For years I had weepy tantrums about it. 'Why would I feel so much for someone and not be able to follow it through? What was the point?' It had felt like such a beginning with him, such an invincible bond. It was a criminal waste of love that we couldn't be together. And then, when the disappointment of losing him got too much to bear, I got angry. Then I got cynical. Then I started to make incredibly bad choices with boyfriends. I am not one of those women who can say, 'No regrets' and mean it. I've got plenty. I don't even know some of their names. It was like I peaked romantically at seventeen and my liaisons got steadily worse from then on.

You know how episodes of *Friends* are called things like, 'The One Where Monica Shags Magnum?' Well, my 'series' of boyfriends would go something like this:

1. The one who was paranoid every girl he dated was really in love with his gay brother (quite rightly so).
2. The one who insisted on tailing his ex-wife of an evening, returning apoplectic that she had a boyfriend, even though he had a girlfriend - i.e. me.
3. The one who insisted on paying for my ride home after our date - and then handed me my bus fare.
4. The one whose parents considered me to be some kind of corrupting Mrs Robinson figure.
5. The one I let go in favour of a git, who then joined a boy band and became a superstar pin-up.
6. The one who dismissed me with a pitying, 'You're never going to be Mrs Michael Cheney!' (Pur-/ease!)
7. The one who told me that he was so glad we'd slept together because it made him realise how much he still loved his ex-girlfriend.
8. The one who told me that, in his country, only the really attractive women had moustaches. (Thank God for facial strip wax.)
9. The one who bragged about having the smallest willy in the south-west. (And then confessed that women's curiosity/sympathy had netted him over 100 shags.)
10. The four who are now gay. Four!!! (I *am* a gay man trapped in a woman's body.)

I could go on. And on. But there's little point because as different as they all sound, I basically make the same mistake over and over again.

I tell myself this one can't possibly be like the rest because he has short hair and bathes regularly and then one day he pulls off one of those stretchy prosthetic masks and reveals the face of the basket case that prompted my emotional breakdown, aged twenty. And Izzy wonders why I've stayed obsessed with CJ for so long.

I read this book that says if you've felt true love once it means it's always inside you. And that means it can happen