

*Out of
the Blue*



BELINDA JONES

About the Book

Selena Harper always thought she had the perfect job: working on a luxury cruiseship, she's whisked around the world from Alaska to Zanzibar with excitement and adventure awaiting her in every port. But as she prepares for her latest shore-leave—and finds herself unexpectedly deserted by her newly-engaged best friend—she begins to wonder if life on the ocean waves really is her dream come true. Why is she the only one who isn't settling down? And how can she be feeling homesick when she has no home?

On a whim, she agrees to spend a week on the idyllic island of Crete, in the company of Alekos, a man she's convinced is an incorrigible womaniser. Steeped in mythology, the island soon starts to work its magic on Selena—and, more worryingly, so does Alekos. Is he really the cad she's always thought him to be? Or could it turn out that his home is where her heart is?

About the Author

Belinda Jones' 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 a 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. *Out of the Blue* is her seventh novel.

Also available by Belinda Jones

Fiction

Divas Las Vegas
I Love Capri
The California Club
The Paradise Room
Café Tropicana
The Love Academy

Non-fiction

On the Road to Mr Right

For a selection of travel tips, location photos, book club questions and extracts from all Belinda's books go to:

www.belindajones.com

OUT OF THE BLUE

Belinda Jones



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1

'We must free ourselves of the hope that the sea will ever rest. We must learn to sail in high winds.' - Aristotle
Onassis

Oh no. Here he comes again.

Striding purposefully towards me in precision-pressed naval whites complete with rigid black epaulettes, soft white loafers and a patent peaked cap with nifty gold insignia. Even his Mediterranean tan and onyx-glow eyes look like they've been officially issued in a bid to create the ultimate cruiship pin-up, all perfectly offset against an icy blue ocean backdrop.

I dart back along the corridor and into my cabin, leaning on the door like a fugitive. Ever since Officer Alekos Diamantakis boarded the ship in Alaska last month, my life has been one long Benny Hill sketch. I can honestly say that in my twelve years working in Shore Excursions, I have never been pursued so doggedly. I still can't fathom why someone several thousand leagues too good-looking for me is in such hot pursuit but in a matter of hours all speculation will be irrelevant as I am airlifted to safety - having completed my eight-month contract, I am about to get my standard two months off.

I am prone to end-of-an-era blues on my last night, bidding farewell to so many people I'll never see again, running a little flicker book in my mind of all the sights I've seen on this latest journey; I even get nostalgic about the soft furnishings. But tonight is different, for the very first time I've put in a request to return to the same ship. And it's not that this one is any more fabulous than the others, it's

just that lately I seem to be having an uncharacteristic craving for familiarity. At least I think it's that. If I was going to attempt to define the exact sensation, I'd say I'm feeling homesick. But how is that possible when I have no home?

Last year my parents emigrated to New Zealand to be near my sister and her new baby. I did have a brief moment feeling like a child in an abandoned pram but I don't blame them. It's just possible that coastal Wellington, voted twelfth-best quality-of-living city in the world, has the edge over Watford and as my mum says, I'm never home anyway and just as likely to crop up in the southern hemisphere as the northern.

Besides, it's not like I'm going to miss out on my trips to the Harlequin shopping centre because my new best friend Jules lives just a few streets away from my parents' old house, so at least I can leave my homing device set to the same co-ordinates for now. She's who I'll be staying with on my shore leave. The fact that she's a former cruise staffer (we shared a cabin in Hawaii) really eases the transition back to dry land - she understands all the jargon and the nature of ship gossip. Not least because she was often the centre of it.

'Spa girls' (those working in beauty therapy and fitness), along with the female dancers, are the most sought-after women on the ship, especially among the highly competitive Greek officers. I did wonder if that was why Alekos homed in on me initially. I was up visiting my hairdresser friend Kirby when he made his first approach. Admittedly, when he found out I was more sightseeing than shiatsu, he didn't cast me aside, but the fact that he was loitering around the salon in the first place rang a few Tibetan tingsha bells.

Speaking of spas, Jules has already booked me in for a Jet Lag Body Wrap to eliminate the travel toxins accumulated on my ten-hour flight from Vancouver. This will be followed by a marathon catch-up of the last series of *Brothers & Sisters* while eating gluten-free home-made muffins. I know

the gluten-free bit kind of kills the pampering vibe but, cocktails aside, Jules' body is a highly toned temple and I'm just grateful I won't be the one watching TV in an assortment of yoga poses. Plus, the fact that I won't have to make any decisions while I'm under her roof is the real holiday. All day long I'm super-organised, keeping track of numerous tour groups, but with Jules I get to set the paperwork aside and relax in the passenger seat. Quite literally, this coming week, as she's planned a little roadtrip to Brighton for my birthday, insisting we wear candy colours and wedge heels, even when we go paddling. I suppose her directional assertiveness spills over from her working life - calling out aerobic moves, correcting people's posture, making sure they are exercising correctly. She's equally opinionated when it comes to other people's love lives and heaven knows I need guidance there.

I remember when she first came on board and I was seeing the Norwegian Chief Radio Officer - Nils. Generally I don't like to get involved with fellow shipmates unless either myself or the other party only has a few weeks left of their contract. It's the first question I ask: 'How much longer have you got?' Like we all have a terminal disease. It's just too risky otherwise - bad enough breaking up with someone in the same town, but on the same ship, with a maximum storm-off distance of three hundred metres? Hideous. But I hadn't been out with anyone in two years and he was so darn clean and courteous, I broke my rule. I did not choose well.

Unaware that Jules was my new cabin-mate, Nils made a play for her. She came straight to me requesting my permission to accept the invitation back to his cabin so she could infiltrate the emails on his laptop and suss him out. She took along a special spa treatment for him to use in the shower, insisting he try it immediately, thus giving her opportunity to snoop. Oh the humiliation when she revealed the magnitude and multiplicity of his cheating ways - forget

his seafaring skills, this is a man you'd want in charge of flight paths at an airport, he was so unbelievably adept at keeping numerous affairs criss-crossing without clashing. Until that moment anyway. She copied every girl in on his mailbox and then forwarded the lot to her own account so she could show me: My darling Caterina . . . My darling Ola . . . My darling Narinda . . . My darling Sheila . . . Talk about a woman in every port, I think it was more literally every porthole. And they say men can't multitask.

I'm just grateful that she was there to give us all a wake-up call.

It's like that with Alekos; everyone else is trying to persuade me to give him a go whereas Jules, well actually she thinks I should sleep with him too but for a very different reason.

'It's the quickest way to get rid of him!' she told me when I first started to complain of his relentless wooing.

'Oh charming!' I retorted. 'What exactly are you implying about my prowess in the boudoir?'

'Nooo!' she had laughed. 'No personal slight intended. It's just that he's only lingering and fixating on you because you're resisting.'

That's a good friend, one who'll tell you straight: 'He's all about the chase!', not fill your head with nonsense about him being different to all the others and worth a chance.

Jules may not be one of life's romantics but she's never short of male attention. Despite all her offers from officers - and one indecent proposal from the captain - it was actually the ship's DJ who triumphed. Dominic was a reluctant sailor, not someone who had ever considered taking a cruise, let alone working on board, but his former girlfriend - an effervescent Entertainments Manager called Cherry - persuaded him to give up his job and flat in Ipswich and do a stint in the ship's nightclub. Within a matter of weeks she got a better offer, not from another man but another ship! It's lucky that Jules was there to comfort Dom after Cherry

left. They soon became an item and when Jules' contract ended he cut his short and they went back to England together. That was nearly a year ago now.

I miss having her on board but cruising for Jules was just a way to get a really good tan; for me it's a way of life. It may not be perfect - a little too reminiscent of boarding school at times and not the best earner - but as far as I'm concerned it beats any alternative.

My mum likes to trace my career choice back to my mermaid-themed ninth birthday party and my sister attributes it to covert viewings of *The Love Boat* but in actuality it was *Shirley Valentine* that made me run off to sea.

I missed the film when it first came out, which is nearly twenty years ago if you can believe it. In fact, it wasn't until about eight years later when I was twenty myself that I saw it. At the time, I'd opted to forgo university (and my planned degree in Travel & Tourism) in favour of staying home with my boyfriend Ricky. I'll never forget how we met - I was washing my hands in this trendy restaurant bathroom when I felt another soapy set of fingers entwine with my own. I jumped back and looked below the mirror ledge and there was a scruffy blond head staring back at me, equally perturbed. Turns out the bathroom designer had thought it would be amusing to link the sinks between the Ladies and the Gents, but without any obvious indication that this had been done. We got talking, kept talking all weekend and by Sunday night I'd lost my heart and mind. The sense of complete surrender felt nice in a way - in life there is so much deliberation, weighing things up, assessing worst-case scenarios, but for him I was willing to sacrifice all I had planned without question. Everything went blurry, he was my only focus. And when we moved in together my world shrank even more.

Cohabitation wasn't quite the non-stop cuddle I'd imagined it to be. He was working long hours in construction

and when he got home he had no energy for anything except splaying in front of the TV, still covered in brick dust. Meanwhile, the summer job I'd taken in the local travel agent became full-time and though I loved nothing better than matchmaking holidaymaker and hotel, the irony wasn't lost on me that I had the power to send people whizzing all around the globe and yet couldn't get my own boyfriend off the sofa. Still. That's cosy isn't it? Snuggling up watching TV. It got a lot cosier when he lost his job. This was pre-Tivo and I found him so brain-dullingly indiscriminate about what he would watch. Even being a party to his mindless channel-hopping made me feel my life was slipping away from me. Despite my every encouragement he made no effort to look for a new job - well, why should we both suffer? Perhaps we'd take it in turns to work!

And then Marianne at the agency was offered a familiarisation trip to a new resort in Greece and she invited me around the night before for moussaka and *Shirley Valentine* on video, scandalised that I'd never seen it. Poor woman didn't bargain on my reaction. To me this personable comedy was more chilling than any horror film because it could really happen, does happen all the time - women fall in love, get married, have children and lose themselves. And then they spend the rest of their lives searching for 'The Girl Who Used To Be Me' as the theme song goes.

Watching it was like a flash to the future, a cautionary tale - at twenty I could already relate to the feelings of domestic drudgery and 'Is this it?' resignation. Twenty years on would I be talking to the wall and wearing polyester housecoats? Would I have sent a thousand people on exotic adventures and not done a single sodding thing with my life? I went back to the flat in a daze. Without even looking up from the TV, Ricky said he needed me to leave him a fiver for lunch the next day. I explained that I hadn't been to the cashpoint and only had schrapnel in my purse. He promptly went ballistic, telling me how inconsiderate I was and what was

he supposed to do, starve? At that point it struck me that actually I could be a little bit worse off than Shirley because at least her husband Joe had a job.

When I went into work the next day my first instinct was to follow Marianne to Mykonos. But I'd had a couple of dodgy family holidays in Greece in the past and even if this one went like a dream it would only save me for two weeks. I needed something more profoundly life-changing. Something I couldn't cop out of the second I had a pang for Ricky's heart-ensnaring kisses, which is what got me into the trouble in the first place. And that's when a couple came in to book a cruise.

They'd been every year for the past ten, got pally with staff in every department including the one that sold and arranged the trips in each port of call - i.e. Shore Excursions. Though obviously comparable to my own profession, what they described was the absolute antithesis of my current existence and light years away from suburbia.

'It's not just a job,' the husband told me. 'It's a radical change in lifestyle.'

While I was aboard the ship I wouldn't have to cook or clean or commute. I wouldn't have to do laundry or be responsible for anyone else's stomach - if a man wanted his tea on the table at six he'd go to the canteen. It seemed too good to be true - no peeling spuds at the sink watching the rain drizzle down the window pane. No standing at bus stops with plastic carrier bags slicing into careworn hands. No torturing myself with posters for exotic destinations - I would be sipping Caribbean coconut water under that palm tree, touring those Mayan ruins, promoting that Polynesian snorkelling trip.

It sounded a lot better than being buried alive with a mean-mouthed couch potato. As I filled in my application, I vowed I would never again settle to the point of stagnation. I even decided I would never marry, just to be extra sure I

would forever repel the label housewife. Instead my life would be one long honeymoon cruise. Albeit solo.

I remember my first day. I was so daunted. Instead of telling myself to just get through the next eight hours so I could go home and collapse, it felt like I had an eight-month-long day ahead of me. The commitment was huge but every time I thought of bailing, I would think about what I'd be going back to. And then, of course, when I did get to go back to England on my break, I was antsy within a fortnight. It was like I'd been given a ticket to a magical new world and I couldn't wait to see where it would take me next.

Most of my friends were excited for me but then I remember at a Christmas party a few years back we were picking songs for each other to karaoke to death and someone handed me Charlene's 'I've Never Been to Me' . . . I wasn't quite sure how to take that. At the time I couldn't empathise with the regretful singer. What was she complaining about - if you've been to Nice and the 'isle' of Greece and sipped champagne on a yacht, that's not a bad life. In fact she's probably quite similar to Joanna Lumley's character in *Shirley Valentine* - remember classmate Marjorie Majors who went on to become the jet-set high-class hooker? Well I've been to Georgia and California without having to resort to prostitution. I may not have been undressed by kings but I have had my share of international flings and though none of them have worked out at least it's been culturally educational.

Anyway, what Charlene seems to be saying is that she'd swap her misleadingly glamorous and ultimately lonely life for the day-to-day reality of a husband and baby. And what makes me wonder if this choice of song was somewhat barbed, is that the friend who handed me the lyrics was a mother of two.

I've been pondering the differences between us a lot lately. (It's amazing how that song catches me unawares in

the strangest places – a supermarket in Barbados, a disco in Anchorage.) But I'm still not convinced about the trade-off. Whoever you are, you always feel something is missing, don't you? Isn't that just part of the human condition? And unlike Charlene, I *have* been to me. I know who I am. More or less. My only concern is that I'm running out of world to see because that's what keeps me going – the thrill of discovering something new.

At least that's what I've always felt. As someone with 'Keep moving!' as their mantra, I keep doubting my decision to return to the same ship – I just hope it's not a slippery slope. Am I slowing down when actually what I need is another big shake-up? But what could that be? The most dramatic thing someone who is always on the move can do is stand still! And I can't possibly do that.

I partly blame Alekos for my current jarred equilibrium. When I first met him I was as intrigued and attracted as the rest of the ship, then came word of his reputation: heartbreaker of the first degree. Succumb at your peril. So I stepped back and shut down, which isn't easy when you've got all stirred up by the attentions of a wickedly handsome man. Holding strong (in a run-and-hide kind of way) I reminded myself how miserable I felt after the Norwegian – I didn't want that again. At least this one had come with a warning.

Of course intentions are one thing but it's not so easy to un-trigger your desire. Even if you've switched off to that particular person, you still can't help lying in bed wondering about alternatives . . . What if I did meet someone nice, someone Jules gave her seal of approval to? What if we moved in together and it deteriorated into sofa life again, would that be so bad now that I'd seen something of the world?

But then off I'd go on some tour and find myself brimming over with wonder as I beheld a two-hundred-foot-high

glacier face glowing blue and I'd think, 'I can't give up all this for a man, I just can't.'

I even feel a little annoyed now - look at me cowering in my cabin when I should be having farewell Martinis with my friends. I'll give it two more minutes to be sure he's gone and then head out. Perhaps if I finish my packing I'll at least feel I've done something constructive . . .

I flip open my suitcase, tucking a few pairs of shoes down the sides, not that I'm short of space - now that I know I'm returning to the ship, I don't have to take any of my winter woolies or jackets back to England. I can't wait for the day when I can walk out the door in just a T-shirt. Well not literally - oop, that'll be the phone. 'Selena?' It's Jules.

'Heyy!' I cheer. 'I'm just packing!'

She giggles, knowing this is her cue to quote one of our favourite moments from *Desperate Housewives*. 'Whoah! I told you to just pack essentials!' she channels Carlos addressing his high-maintenance wife Gabrielle. 'Is that a *boa*?'

I clutch at an imaginary ruffle of black feathers and pout. 'If you're taking me somewhere where I don't need a *boa*, then I don't want to go!'

We chuckle and then I huddle up for a gossip - even though I'll be seeing her in two days' time I have to bring her up to speed on the latest - and last - instalment with Alekos.

'Well, you say last but I bet you anything he'll be in the bar tonight and then giving it one last shot outside your cabin door at two a.m.!'

'Don't!' I wail. There's only so many times I can say no convincingly to that man.

'I expect you'll be glad to get away,' Jules concludes.

'And even more glad to see you! So, what Duty Free booze should I bring?'

Silence.

'Jules?'

'Oh Selena! I don't even know how to tell you this . . .'

'Tell me what? You surely haven't quit drinking—'

'I'm getting married!'

My stomach drops all the way down to the engine room. 'To Dom?' I don't know why I asked that, who else would it be? Clearly I'm stalling for time.

'Yes!' she exclaims. 'It was supposed to be this big surprise but then I found the tickets for Mauritius—'

'You're doing the whole barefoot beach thing?' Now at least that makes perfect sense - Jules will make the ultimate bikini bride.

'Dom said we should do it naked but the hotel won't allow it.'

'Spoilsports!'

'It's okay, they'll more than make it up to me in spa treatments - I've already booked in for the frangipani body float and there's this Exotic Moisture Dew facial that sounds divine!'

I know Jules loves her fancy gunks and pummellings but she actually sounds more excited about Elemis than becoming a Mrs.

'So when's the big day?' I ask. 'Or should I say the big *holiday*?'

'We leave Sunday.'

'Sunday Sunday? This Sunday?' Surely she can't mean the day I am due to arrive on her doorstep. 'As in the day after tomorrow?'

'Sudden, huh? Good thing I had booked the time off work to be with you.'

'Yes. Well. Wow.' I sit down on the bed, accidentally flattening my straw cowboy hat. 'So I take it it's just the two of you? Or is your family going?'

Suddenly I feel a total outsider - reminding me how recent a friendship this is.

'No, it's just the two of us. You're not miffed, are you - that it's ruined our plans?'

‘Don’t be silly,’ I tut. ‘I’m just shocked. I mean surprised.’ I scrunch my brow trying to come up with the appropriate phrase. ‘What I mean to say is that I’m delighted!’ I conclude, only to add, ‘If this is what you want?’

She hasn’t even mentioned Dom in any recent correspondence but I suppose that’s a good sign – in my experience people generally have more to say about their partners when they’re peeved with them and want to vent and gain support for their side of the argument – I remember bumping into an old friend on my last trip to the UK and asking how life was since his girlfriend moved in and he said, ‘Uneventful.’ And he meant it in a good way.

I decide to sidestep the emotional probing and cut to the crux of the matter – ‘What are you going to wear?’

‘Well, for the old I have my nan’s diamond earrings, new is going to be this amazing white sequin bikini I’m collecting tomorrow, and my mum is letting me borrow her Gucci sunglasses.’

‘What about the blue?’

‘I’ll just pick up something out there.’

I listen to her talking about coconut-scented body shimmer and the possibility of using a wispy sarong as a veil while simultaneously trying to break down my feeling of unease.

Obviously I’m disappointed that I won’t be seeing her and that our plans have gone awry and I can’t help but feel snubbed by Dom – Jules took the week off to be with me and he’s trumped my company with a marriage proposal and a spa-fest. I suddenly feel very dispensable. On the upside I don’t have to worry about being homeless, at least initially, because she’s kindly said I can stay at her flat while she’s gone. But what about when they come back? Will he be moving in straight away? Where will I go? I shake my head – look at me selfishly considering all the repercussions in my life! This is supposed to be a time for celebration and, more significantly, jealousy. Well, I can certainly cop to a pang of

the latter. It's not the marriage itself that gets me, just that partnership thing - being in cahoots, be it with a friend or a lover, moving forward in life with someone by your side. I sigh to myself. This really is the end of an era, only with Jules I don't have the benefit of a last-night party. When I see her next she will be someone's wife.

'Oooh, I've got to go,' she suddenly blurts. 'My sunrise pilates class is here!'

As I put down the phone, I turn my head to look out into the churning black abyss. Tomorrow I have a set schedule involving a bus, a plane and a couple of trains. Logistically I know exactly where I'm going and when. And yet the truth is, I've never felt more at sea.

2

'The oldest, shortest words - yes and no - are those which require the most thought.' - Pythagoras

Passing laughter weaves under my cabin door reminding me that I'm letting my last night of guaranteed sociability slip away from me.

'Come on, Miss Harper - your guests are waiting!' I gee myself up, flouncing the netting of my skirt and checking on the elaborate up-do Kirby experimented with earlier. One more swish of Benefit blush and I'm on my way.

Normally I would walk the internal route to the bar but feeling in need of a quick blast of air, I tug open the glass side door and find myself caught in a salt-tinged twister. Instead of ducking back inside like a sane person, I step boldly into its midst, holding down my skirt, closing my eyes and letting the wind bluster and muss me, hoping it will buffet the queasiness from my body.

As I reach for the railing to steady myself, I find myself leaning over, concentrating on the water rushing below me.

'Don't do it!' Kirby is suddenly upon me, pretending to wrestle me back from the edge and bundling me inside. 'Christ, you look like Helena Bonham Carter!' he curses as he assesses the damage. 'I've never seen such wilful wrecking of a hairdo. What were you thinking?'

Technically the answer would be, *'I don't want to leave - I've got nothing and no one to go back to!'*, but I don't want his parting impression of me to be a moany no-mates so I tell him I was just thinking about Mrs Burrell's false teeth falling overboard while she was whale-watching.

‘Don’t worry,’ he says, smoothing my stray strands back into place before leading me onwards, ‘just one more night of this insanity and you’re free!’

I force a smile but there it is again, that sinking feeling and a niggling query: ‘Free to do *what?*’

What choice could I possibly make now that would revive my deflated spirits?

‘White Chocolate Martini or Peach Bellini?’

Well. Everything starts with baby steps.

I take a sip of my smooth, perfectly chilled cocktail and look around me. There’s something so comforting about a cruiseship on formal night. With everyone putting on the ritz, it’s as though we are all harking back to a more refined era.

People are so quick to dismiss cruises as full of newlyweds and ‘nearly deads’ and even my own parents say they’re saving it for their eighties ‘because there are doctors and coffins on board’, but I say don’t knock it until you’ve tried it. There’s a camaraderie among the guests that you rarely find in hotels; a sense of shared experience. Here people actually talk to one another in the lift or at the café counter. That’s one of the things I have to watch when I first get back to England – not saying good morning to every person I pass on the street. Maybe I’ll solve that by not getting up till noon – oh glorious lie-ins here I come!

While Kirby goes in search of Lana the Lithuanian croupier who he sent in search of me, I approach the group of foxy fortysomething divorcees who chose Alaska based on the state’s excess of single men.

‘So, how’s the manhunt going, ladies?’

‘Oh that lumberjack show you sent us to was hilarious!’ the ringleader raves. ‘All check shirts and whopping great axes!’

‘We got pictures with them, look!’ Her friend shows me on her camera – three strapping chaps with necks like tree

trunks and one who looks like he'd be better suited to IT. 'Well, you know what they say about Alaskan men - "The odds may be good but the goods are odd!"' they all chorus and then fall about laughing.

'So you've had a fun time?' I conclude happily.

'The best!' they enthuse. 'We've already booked the Southern Caribbean for Jen's fiftieth next year!'

I congratulate them though I am a little envious, imagining them all cavorting together when my own birthday plans have so recently gone awry. But I don't have time to ponder this further because two of my most adventurous customers are beckoning me over to the piano.

'We're so sorry you won't be with us next week.' A liver-spotted hand caresses my wrist. 'You've taken such good care of us!'

'It was my pleasure,' I tell Mr and Mrs Sinclair. 'You've been an inspiration - I hope I'm game for ziplining and canoe safaris when I retire!'

'We're just a little bit concerned about the choppy seas they are predicting.'

'Just get a pair of those anti-seasickness wristbands,' I tell them. 'They really do work.'

'What about acupuncture? I see they have a special on at the moment.'

I pull a face. Each to their own but all I could think as I lay there covered in needles was that if the ship made a particularly violent pitch I'd be tossed from the treatment table to the floor and impaled, dying a thousand deaths like an Agatha Christie murder victim.

They look suitably stricken. 'Ginger is supposed to be good for settling the stomach . . .' I try to temper my accidental scaremongering. 'Oh, and by the way, I've left that book on totem poles at the Shore Excursions desk for you to have a look at.'

This cheers them up no end. 'You're a gem!' they say, kissing a cheek apiece before I move on, colliding with

Dashing Danny from the Entertainments crew – dashing as in he’s always running, as opposed to his being particularly debonair.

‘Oh Selena! I’m glad I caught you!’ His eyes are even brighter than normal. ‘I spoke to the boss and he’s interested in your idea!’

‘Really?’ I gawp. Now this is unexpectedly good news.

‘Which idea?’ Kirby reappears, nosing in alongside me. ‘Voyager or Voyeur?’

Kirby has a natty label for everything. Voyager is what he calls my travel project, offering guests personally customised tours, and Voyeur is his name for my bid to get into guest speaking.

Every week we have an expert come on board and present three fifty-minute talks on a specialised subject, be it opera, astronomy or something more destination-related like the behaviours of Alaskan black bears. They don’t actually get paid for this – the cruise itself is the fee – which is where my custom tour sideline would come in. I’ve actually had a fair bit of practice at the speaking part in that I do daily talks on stage in the theatre to showcase our range of upcoming tours – a combination of promotion and information and answering any questions the guests may have, however bizarre and unrelated. Anyway, I have boldly decided to become an ‘expert’ on the one thing I probably know least about – love.

It all began on my last South America run. I met a beautiful Swiss lady of seventy who became a teenager before my very eyes as she spoke of a Peruvian man she’d fallen in love with in her youth and never forgotten. It really was captivating, being so close to such treasured emotions . . . I couldn’t believe that over fifty years on – and now that her husband had passed away – she’d come to Lima in the hope that she might pass him in the street and have another chance . . .

It seemed incredibly romantic but also sad. I looked at her thinking, she'd spent her whole life missing him and it made me wonder, who does it really happen for, enduring love? I know I've never experienced it. But then I started looking around me - cruiseships are full of people celebrating twenty-and thirty-and even sixty-years anniversaries. I started listening to their stories and then when I was in Singapore I picked up a camcorder and began filming couples on location, talking about how they met and what has kept them in a state of bliss, as well as looking at the way different nationalities express and define love. Kirby calls it voyeurism because he says I'm all observation and no personal interaction. I can't argue with that. Meanwhile, Jules thinks I'm delusional. She says it's like I'm out collecting evidence so that one day when I've met enough happy couples I can present the film footage to the high court and say, *'I have proof! True love does exist!'* And then as a reward they will hand me over my man.

She could be right. Perhaps falling hopelessly in love again is my secret wish as well as my greatest fear.

Danny brings me back to business. 'Have you filmed all sixteen of the couples you outlined in your proposal?'

'I've done fourteen,' I tell him. 'I was planning to do a British couple when I'm back home and then one more European couple to finish up.'

'So it's feasible you could be good to go for the start of your next contract?'

'Absolutely!' I pip. 'Are you really going to let me try this out on a live audience?'

He nods. 'But as for the notion of offering guests sample aphrodisiacs from the countries you are featuring . . .'

'Oh jeez!' Kirby mutters. 'If this boat's a-rocking!'

'Is that a no?' I look rueful.

'Well, we checked with the head chef and he said not enough research has been done into the potential effects of