

*WHERE HAVE ALL THE STORIES GONE?***WHERE HAVE ALL THE STORIES GONE?**

Ellie followed the guidelines in *The Romance Writer's Handbook* meticulously as she planned each chapter of her novel, *Sailing to Love*, set on a cruise ship. Thor, wealthy Scandinavian tycoon, and Madeline diminutive but feisty cruise lecturer from Australia, meet on the first page. They are instantly attracted to each other and after several dramatic twists and turns in the plot; they sail off into the sunset.

However, the two week cruise Ellie had booked to research her novel had been a little disappointing.

'This ship's like a floating RSL club!' her husband Tom announced cheerfully after dinner on the first night. 'Cabin's okay though.'

'They call them state rooms,' Ellie corrected, secretly agreeing with Tom.

'Whoa! Big wave!' Tom gripped a table as the ship lurched towards the Tasman Sea on its voyage to the South Pacific Islands and New Zealand.

On the whole Ellie had enjoyed the cruise but there was no one on board who even vaguely resembled a handsome hero and heroine. The other 2,998 passengers were mostly single women, noisy families and retirees—*lots* of retirees. The cruise lecturer, her heroine's job in *Sailing to Love*, was a retired male university professor. In addition, the poverty-stricken South Sea Islands were less than romantic. She'd felt sorry for the islanders and guilty about her luxury life on the ship—and New Zealand had been very wet.

Ellie sat in her office and re-read Chapter One for the umpteenth time. She moved a comma along a sentence then moved it back again and sighed. Maybe she should send Thor and Madeline on a luxury cruise from Venice to Athens? Sailing the Adriatic and Aegean was probably more romantic than lurching across the Tasman Sea.

'Great day out here!' A voice floated up from the back deck. 'I've brought Greek goodies!'

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Ellie clicked 'save' and left her hero and heroine leaning against the rails on Deck Ten looking at the moon on the ... Ocean ...? Canal ...? Sea ...? So much for planning!

'Ah ha! The author emerges,' Tiggy, her best friend and colleague at Fernleaf Valley Primary school, put a plate of baklava and a cup of coffee in front of her as she sat down at the barbecue table.

'Have Thor and Madeline got it together yet?'

'I've changed their cruise,' Ellie said decisively. 'They're going from Venice to Athens now.'

'Great! Alexis and I've done that. Anyway...you'll *never* guess what happened at work today!'

'Excitement at Fernleaf Valley?' Ellie raised her eyebrows.

'Yes! Bec, the casual who's taken over your class, arrived at work this morning in a terrible state,' Tiggy leaned forward. 'Her 65-year-old Dad has left her mother and run off with a woman half his age. And the *other woman* has already dipped into his superannuation fund. If that was my family the men would drag him back to his wife! We Greeks don't like families being messed with.'

'Gosh!' Ellie was shocked. 'Wasn't he this year's "Healthy Seniors" surf champion?'

'Yeah, that's right. I've seen him; he collected Bec once when her car broke down. He's bald as a coot, very fit, but no oil painting. He looks like Paul Hogan before the face-lift.'

'What about Bec's Mum?'

'Devastated! She's changed the locks on the house, closed the bank accounts, and seen a solicitor. Now there's an *urban* story for you! Like *Tales of the City* by that guy Armi...something.'

'It wouldn't be a romance though!'

'Depends on your point of view,' Tiggy tapped Ellie's coffee cup. 'Turn it over I'll do a reading for you.'

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‘Just predict a publisher and I’ll be happy.’ Ellie took a deep breath—the fresh air felt good after her confinement indoors. ‘Okay Tiggy, can you tell me a bit more about that cruise you did last year?’

‘Well for one thing it was a small ship and *really* expensive, but your hero could afford it. We were the youngest on board! The other passengers were elderly cashed-up Americans and snobbish Poms, some had *titles*, Sir this and Lady that.’ She leaned forward, ‘Now *here’s* a narrative for you—the Trivia quiz every evening in the bar with the Cruise Director.’

Ellie opened her notebook.

‘There were six teams and they all sat up like meerkats when he came in,’ Tiggy laughed. ‘He’d say “Good evening everyone,” and they’d parrot “Hi Malcolm.” Before he’d finished reading the first question someone would call out, “Cayn’t hear ya, Malcolm” or “Cayn’t understand ya, Malcolm...” Like the kids in Year 2!’

‘So why ...?’

‘Malcolm’s Scottish accent threw them. He’d say “What’s the capital of Spain?” but it sounded like “Whits the carpitarl of Spin?”’

‘No handsome hero?’ Ellie asked plaintively

‘Only my husband! Anyway the cruise director finally got fed up. The evening we sailed out of the Bay of Naples he made an announcement. “Right!” he says, “if ye dinna underrrrstand the question, I’m repeatin’ it *wuns ownle* okay?”’

“‘Whatdesay?’” they all muttered, but they got the message.’

She bit into her baklava while Ellie scribbled.

‘Why weren’t they all on deck? Sailing out of the Bay of Naples must be spectacular,’ she commented.

‘They’d all been there before, like us,’ Tiggy shrugged. ‘You could write about dinner with the Captain.’

‘Sounds promising,’ Ellie flipped to a new page.

‘Alexis and I are seated next to this English couple, Claire and Roger, who are all agog, like it’s a Buckingham Palace garden party and opposite them is a really nice

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Aussie couple, Beryl and Dennis: they've got a cattle station in Queensland. Before the captain arrives, Claire gushes across the table to Beryl,

“It's *such* an honour to be invited to *daine* with the Captain, isn't it?”

‘And *Beryl* says, “Oh you know what love, these Captains are lovely people, but usually boring as bat shit.”’

“Oh!” says Claire looking like she's sat on a hat pin, “Is that an *Awstralian* expression?”

“Fair dinkum,” says Dennis’

‘That's priceless Tiggy,’ Ellie laughed.

‘Use it, just change the names,’ Tiggy said airily.

The following morning Ellie sat at her desk staring into space. Did the readers of romance novels really want the truth? Tiggy's anecdotes would fit better in a mainstream novel. Maybe I should write a novel set in Sydney, Ellie thought. But her own life was boring: husband, two teenage sons, food shopping and teaching Year 5. She closed down the computer. She couldn't put it off any longer; she'd have to go to the supermarket.

She was still seething and hadn't written a word when Tiggy appeared at the patio window that afternoon. She looked cool and glamorous in a floaty white dress, her fabulous hair piled up in a fashionably messy heap on top of her head.

‘Just been telling Year 6 about the Greek treasures in the British Museum that the Poms won't hand over,’ Tiggy said brightly. ‘Geez you look a bit wound up.’

‘Supermarket stress.’

‘Visa card didn't work? Dropped your parking ticket on the way out? Queue jumper ...?’

‘That!’ Ellie poured two glasses of white wine.

‘It's a bit early, but what the hell,’ Tiggy said picking up her glass.

‘I've earned it!’ Ellie hissed. ‘Listen to this: I'm rushing to the checkout with my trolley and I see this woman heading for the same *empty* check-out. We're neck and neck and *she's* huffing like a horse in the Melbourne Cup coming up the outside.

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She puts a spurt on and gets there first. She hasn't got the guts to turn and acknowledge me! She dumps **three items** from her trolley onto the belt!

'I know the type,' Tiggy commented.

'**Then** she sings out to the girl at the till, "Ooooh, sorreeeee, forgot the toilet rolls! Won't be a minute." She even knocks my trolley on the way past! I ask the checkout girl if I can get mine through first but she says **that woman's** stuff has registered ...'

'Another line ...?' Tiggy was all solicitude.

'All full. The express lane isn't operating. Remember that movie *The Birds*, where the birds gather slowly on the TV antenna? The self-checkout was like that. First one person then in the blink of an eye ... ten!'

'And ...'

'Well she shows up *finally*, with toilet rolls, soy sauce and two packets of mini Mars bars. She unloads the trolley, one item at a time! *And* she's wearing gym gear.'

'There are always the magazines ...'

'I read a whole magazine while I was waiting. It was about some people called Dathelina and Fungi and their kids--Ethelgold, Sage and Thursday. Who *are* they?'

'Soap stars—they split up last week. He's some Italian heart-throb,' Tiggy said dismissively. 'What a horrible experience, you should write it down. Here's a title: *Nightmare in Suburbia*. Got to go, sorry, Alexis's speaking at a black tie dinner – successful entrepreneur and all that.'

Ellie was beginning to feel desperate. It had taken six weeks to write Chapter One, and a week to write two paragraphs of Chapter Two, in spite of her well-constructed plan. She saved her work and checked her emails. The book she'd reserved at the library: *Write your Heart Out*, described as 'The must-have book for the Romance writer' had finally been returned. Was this a sign that she shouldn't give up on Thor and Madeline? She'd go to the library right now! She'd treat it as an urban research trip and catch a bus.

As Ellie crossed the road she noticed her neighbour, an exceptionally good looking man in his thirties, standing by his car. As usual, he was wearing an

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expensive suit and highly polished leather shoes. He plucked a folded sheet of paper from under the windscreen wipers of his new Ford Mustang and scanned it. When he saw Ellie, he gave her a dimpled smile which lit up his amazing blue eyes. He really is cute Ellie thought, checking out his open necked shirt, golden tan and fashionably-cut dark brown hair.

‘The vigilante parking police have got me again,’ he remarked in his cultured voice. He screwed up the note and threw it nonchalantly into a nearby hedge. His sculptured lips parted in another intimate smile showing his even white teeth. He raised his hand as he slid inside his car, ‘Ciao, Ellie!’

Startled that he knew her name Ellie waved clumsily. She wished she’d worn her leather jacket and a bit more lipstick as she watched him drive away in the purring silver vehicle.

After his car had turned the corner she pulled the screwed up paper from the hedge. ‘*Please do not park outside my house again*’ she read—the writing was worse than her Year 5 class. ‘*I have a bad leg and must park my car here.*’

*Liar* she thought—Rhonda from number six was the author. Ellie could hear her whining nasal voice in every word. Rhonda had no health issues; she just wanted to keep a parking spot outside her own house. Didn’t she know that in Sydney’s suburban parking jungle it’s first in, best dressed? It’s a wonder her hedge isn’t full of screwed up notes, Ellie thought as she stuck her hand out to stop the bus.

Ellie sat down near the front of the bus and immediately regretted it. Across the aisle from her an agitated woman was shifting up and down in her seat. She looked like she’d got dressed in the dark—purple hat, grubby t-shirt, khaki shorts and worn sneakers. She jerked up suddenly and rang the bell. The bus stopped; the doors opened but she didn’t move.

The driver heaved the bus back out into the traffic. Once again the woman rang the bell; the bus stopped but she didn’t get off. The bus driver leaned round his seat and yelled down the aisle,

‘You kids at the back, stop ringing the bell or I’ll chuck you off!’

‘Not guilty,’ one of them shouted back.

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The driver grunted and pulled out into the traffic.

Another passenger sidled up to him.

‘It was her,’ she said quietly and nodded towards the purple-hatted woman.

‘Okay luv,’ the driver muttered.

Purple hat rang the bell again.

‘Someone better get off this time or there’ll be trouble!’ the driver called swivelling his eyes between the road and the bus mirrors.

‘I’m getting off and you’ll **all burn in hell!**’ Purple hat jumped to her feet and stomped down the aisle.

‘Sit down till the bus stops madam,’ the driver ordered.

The teenagers at the back shrieked with hysterical laughter.

‘**YOUS,**’ the woman turned and pointed at them. ‘You’ll be flung into Lucifer’s burning lake of fire! He’ll destroy the earth with brimstone and pestilence!’

‘Please not JB Hi-Fi!’ a girl snorted, bent double with laughter on the back seat.

The driver glanced round quickly.

‘**SIT DOWN** madam! The bus hasn’t stopped.’

‘I’m going to Centrelink,’ the woman announced. ‘Even the Almighty can’t save them from their doom!’

Ellie staggered off the bus with the teenagers. One of them took a picture of the unfortunate woman, two were texting furiously and one with earphones stuck in her ears said plaintively: ‘What? What’s happened?’

Poor woman where’s her family? Ellie thought, feeling sorry for the case-workers at Centrelink. How could she write about Sydney’s urban environment? It was full of distractions like purple-hat. The *Tales of the City* collection was set in San Francisco; a much more ‘happening’ place.

Tiggy dropped by on Friday afternoon.

‘TGIF,’ her friend said flopping down on a garden chair. ‘I miss you, Ellie. No one’s got a sense of humour in that staff room.’

Ellie handed her a cold drink.

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‘So, dare I ask...?’ Tiggy raised her eyebrows.

‘My characters are too one-dimensional. I need some inspiration.’

‘Well, there’s a hairdresser you could check out at “*Hairlarious*” near the school.’

‘And?’

‘Remember Bec’s Dad? Ran away with the thirty-something?’

Listen to this ...!’

‘We shouldn’t gossip...’

‘This is about the English language,’ Tiggy said breezily. ‘You remember Lauren who teaches Kinder One?’

Ellie nodded.

‘Well ... she was at *Hairlarious* yesterday and the hairdresser told her about one of the other clients whose husband had shot through. She was gossiping about *Bec’s Mum*! Lauren didn’t let on that she knew Bec. Then the hairdresser says, “Of course, he won’t be able to have children with her (the other woman), because he’s had a Circumcision!”—get it—she meant a *Vasectomy*!’

Ellie laughed out loud. ‘That is *funny*!’

‘*Please* come back to work, Ellie! I miss you.’

‘I’ve only got four more weeks off including the Easter break,’ Ellie sighed.

‘Anyway, I’ve put Thor and Madeline on an Adriatic cruise now. Thanks Tiggy.’

‘Here’s a romantic story: my first date with Alexis,’ Tiggy laughed.

‘Didn’t you meet at a wedding ...?’

‘We did, he asked me out but I messed up. We arranged to meet after work at the Queen Victoria Building by the statue. It was winter and he was outside waiting in the freezing cold. I was inside waiting near the *portrait* of Queen Victoria. My mobile was dead and I walked round and round inside looking for him. He was walking in circles *outside* looking for me!’

‘Did you find each other?’ Ellie hadn’t heard this before.

‘No we both went home furious. We worked out later that we got the same train but we were in different carriages. I met him again at another wedding, he was best man and I was chief bridesmaid. He cut me dead. We had to dance together—



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talk about tense! Then we just kept running into each other and,’ she smiled, ‘we fell in love. Now *that’s* romantic! You could call it “The Odyssey of Alexis and Antigone.”’

‘Nice. But the QVB, Sydney isn’t very exotic is it?’ Ellie pulled a face. ‘I couldn’t put Thor and Madeline anywhere near that crass chiming clock on the third floor.’

‘Don’t remind me!’ Tiggy shuddered. ‘You know *we* don’t think Sydney’s exotic because we live here.’

She stood up and slung her oversized bag across her shoulder.

‘Oh, yeah, I forgot, Bec sent a message. She loves those books you wrote for the slow readers—sorry—the LCS’s—Literacy challenged students. The ones you illustrated and stapled together? The kids can’t get enough of them. Bec wants to know if you’ve written any more.’ Tiggy grinned. ‘You should think of sending *them* to a publisher.’

Ellie sighed. ‘Thanks Tiggs, but I’ve got to get *Sailing to Love* sorted first.’

At the final assembly of the year Ellie sat on the stage with the staff of Fernleaf Valley Primary school. The procession of children receiving certificates and medals seemed endless and her thoughts wandered back eight months.

After Tiggy had left that day Ellie opened a file called ‘*Yucky Yarns*.’ She edited several of the stories she’d written for slower readers and started a new one.

She jerked back to the present. Oliver Wong, the school captain had just said her name.

‘... Year 5H teacher,’ Oliver’s high pitched voice reverberated through the microphone. ‘Congratulations on the publication of “Yucky Yarns—Book One: Cassie and Jaden Go on a Cruise.”’

Bryony Paul, the co-captain beckoned Ellie forward and presented her, somewhat awkwardly, with a large bunch of flowers.

‘Mrs Hoskins, we wish you every success with your future writing,’ Bryony beamed and held up *Yucky Yarns*. When the children saw the bright red cover of

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Book One, they erupted in applause. Ellie thanked them and looked out fondly at the jiggling mass of students; her inspiration for *Yucky Yarns, easy readers for Years Three to Six*.

‘Well done! A four book contract and a recurring readership,’ Tiggy murmured as Ellie returned to her seat.

She sighed and thought of Thor and Madeline, still waiting on Deck Ten in Chapter One as they watched the moon rise over the Grand Canal in Venice. ‘I haven’t forgotten you,’ she whispered.

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