

# “Meeting my soulmate never even entered my head”

SHIPS MAY BE CLASSIC SETTINGS FOR TALES OF ROMANCE, BUT WHAT HAPPENED TO SINGLE PARENTS LINDA AND STEPHEN ON THEIR LAST CRUISE WAS BEYOND THEIR WILDEST DREAMS. BY JILL FOSTER

Falling in love was the last thing on Linda Johnson's mind when she embarked on a Christmas cruise in December 2003. The 52-year-old businesswoman, from Southport, Merseyside, was grieving for her father, who had died from a stroke that October. To compound her pain, her mother had passed away from cancer only months earlier and Linda's divorce, after 27 years of marriage, had just been finalised.

"I was in a state of shock and feeling vulnerable and scared," admits Linda, who has two sons – Dale, 18, and Glen, 17. "Christmas had always been a large, family event and, suddenly, both my parents were gone and I was a single mother. I couldn't face spending Christmas at home. I'd taken

the boys on a cruise over the summer, so suggested we spend the festive period doing the same thing. They were thrilled, so I booked us onto a Mediterranean cruise on the *Costa Fortuna*.

"As a single woman, cruises are perfect because you can get dressed up and enjoy the nightlife without ever being worried that people think you're trying to attract attention. Plus, you're never worried about safety. But, certainly, meeting my soulmate never even entered my head."

However, fate – or should that be *Fortuna* – had other ideas. Embarking on the same cruise was Stephen Levitt, 52, an independent financial advisor from Hertfordshire, who was also coming to terms with the end of his 21-year marriage. ▶





Happy families: Linda with her two sons Dale and Glen and Stephen with his two sons Adam and Daniel

## IT HAS BEEN LIKE BEING A TEENAGER AGAIN - FANTASTIC FOR LOSING WEIGHT!



He had decided to take his sons Adam, 18, and Daniel, 16, on a cruise as a Christmas treat, but romance was not on his itinerary either.

"Absolutely not," says Stephen. "This was a holiday for me and the boys. I've always loved cruises – my parents introduced me to them when I was young and they have been on about 80 cruises – so, to me, this was just a normal holiday and a chance to spend time with Adam and Daniel. I had no intention of meeting anyone special."

The two families had flown into Milan to board the 105,000-ton luxury liner at Savona, Italy. Unbeknownst to Linda and Stephen, the four teenage boys struck up an immediate friendship, but it was only three days into the voyage that the couple's path crossed for the first time.

"We'd just been to Morocco and it was a lovely warm evening," recalls Linda. "I was on deck, looking out to sea, and this man came up to me and said 'Hello'. My first reaction was: 'Oh no, what do I do now?' I was very

wary. But he seemed relaxed and behaved very gentlemanly. He introduced me to his children and we chatted about the holiday – and, even at that early stage, I felt a warmth towards him. I hoped I'd see him again.

"Sure enough, we kept bumping into each other. We'd see each other every evening just before dinner when we picked our children up from the video arcade on the top deck. Even though our rooms were on different parts of the ship – and despite the fact there were at least 2,500 other passengers – I'd see him whenever I got out of a lift or to the top of the stairs." She laughs: "If I didn't know better, I'd say he was following me!"

For Stephen, the attraction was also instant. "I felt I needed to find out more about this beautiful lady," he says.

It seems serendipity was playing its part and, thanks to one 'small world' coincidence, the couple finally got together.

"During the trip, I met another couple and got chatting to the husband, Mark," says

Linda. "It turned out Mark's parents knew Stephen's parents – it was all very spooky. The following evening, we all went to see a show with the children.

"Afterwards, when everyone had left the auditorium, Stephen and I stayed to chat, and that's when we seemed to click. We were talking for so long that the rehearsals for the next day's show had started by the time we left!"

Even so, after one failed marriage – and still coping with bereavement – Linda was unsure if she wanted to start a new relationship. It was the intervention of a stranger that helped her to realise she could be happy again.

"On Christmas Eve, a lady came up to me and smiled. 'I've seen you with that man,' she said. 'You seem to get on very well.' I was alarmed. I thought she thought I was 'with' Stephen already and I tried to play it down. But she turned to me and simply said: 'Look, it's Christmas Eve, just relax



Picture perfect: Linda and Stephen reminisce about the Costa cruise on which they met

and enjoy his company. That made me stop worrying and just go with the flow."

That evening, the ship was holding a dinner dance. "I'd never been so nervous in my life," admits Stephen. "I knew Linda would want me to dance, but I've got two left feet and was terrified I'd embarrass myself in front of her. It was like being a teenager again.

"I knew by this stage I really liked her and wanted to see her again, but I still wasn't sure how she felt about me – and I'd not dated anyone for more than 21 years. What are you supposed to do? I had butterflies in my stomach all evening."

But Stephen need not have worried. His dance moves may have been shocking – but only in a positively electrifying sense.

"The first time we touched on that dance floor it was like an electric shock running through my system," says Linda. "I'd never felt anything like that before in my life." Stephen agrees: "We shared this incredible physical attraction straight away, what I can only describe as..."

"Chemistry," they chorus.

But, afterwards, all was kept above board. "We had our own cabins and went back to them every night," Linda is keen to point out. "In fact, that dance was the first and only time we touched throughout the cruise."

By the final day of the voyage, Linda

knew she wanted to see Stephen again, but also felt he had to do the asking. Thankfully, Stephen was also convinced he wanted Linda to be a part of his life.


"I saw her waiting for her coach to pick her up from the ship and thought: 'Right, it's now or never, what have I got to lose?' It was a very nerve-wracking experience, but something told me it would be alright and I marched over and asked her for her number. And she gave it to me! It was fantastic."

Stephen rang Linda the following day.

"We met up at a country house, halfway between where we both lived," says Linda. "That's when it all began. Even then, I was wary – I remember telling my friends the address and the number of the hotel in case I never made it back! But of course, we fell in love and, since then, it has been like being a teenager again – fantastic for losing weight! We don't live together yet, although I've moved down to Hertfordshire to be nearer to Stephen. Once our boys are at university we plan to move in together."

Several other cruises – to Barbados, Grenada, St Lucia and around the Mediterranean – have recaptured some of the magic of that first time on the *Fortuna*. But is a honeymoon cruise on the horizon?

"I'll have to be asked."

Jill Foster is a freelance writer based in London 

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