Loves Me, Loves Me Not

Edited by Katie Fforde
and Sue Moorcroft

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FOREWORD by Katie Fforde

I have been a member of the Romantic Novelists' Association since before the dawn of time or before I can remember, anyway. It's hard to say if I would have become a published novelist without them but I suspect not. Like reading romantic fiction, which has always been what got me through the tough times and still does, the RNA is a constant support. Without them I might well have given up, without them I would never have known the many writers who are now my friends. The joy of my first meeting when I realised I was not the only mad woman in the attic, typing away when I should have been ironing, cooking or generally being a wife and mother, was immense.

Thus, it is a complete pleasure to be asked to be involved with this fabulous anthology. It really is a box-of-chocolates of a book. There is everything in here, whatever your taste. There's sophisticated chic lit, tender romance—funny stories, scary stories and even fairy stories—and every other sort of story you can think of, including a vampire story.

One of the things I particularly like is it represents the vast range of writers and writing that the RNA embraces and shows the sparkling talent that our organisation represents.

Romantic fiction is a very popular, and demonstrably broad, genre and in here you don't just get a lot of wonderfully good reads, you get real value for money.

Enjoy—you can dive into this without putting on an ounce!

Adele Parks

Adele Parks was born in Teesside, NE England. She studied English Language and Literature, at Leicester University. She published her first novel, *Playing Away,* in 2000; that year the *Evening Standard* identified Adele as one of London's 'Twenty Faces to Watch'. Indeed, *Playing Away* was the debut bestseller of 2000.

Prolific, Adele has published nine novels in nine years, including *Game Over, Tell Me Something* and *Love Lies*—all nine of her novels have been bestsellers. She's sold over a million copies of her work in the UK but also sells throughout the world. Two of her novels (*Husbands* and *Still Thinking of You*) are currently being developed as movie scripts. *Young Wives' Tales* was shortlisted for the Romantic Novelists' Association Award 2008.

Since 2006 Adele has been an official spokeswoman for World Book Day and wrote a Quick Read, *Happy Families,* as part of the celebrations of World Book Day 2008. To find out more about Adele visit www.adeleparks.com



Grating Expectations

It wasn't entirely Sarah's fault that she had such specific—and high—expectations about the trip to Venice. *Everyone* agreed that a marriage proposal was 'more than likely'. Everyone being her mum, her sister and her four closest friends—one married, two single, one gay—a reasonable cross section of society—at least of Sarah's society. After all, David and Sarah had been together for four years, three months and they lived together, admittedly in *his* flat with *his* name on the mortgage and utility bills but Sarah bought the groceries and she'd redecorated the place from top to bottom—that meant something.

They travelled club class. Which was an unnecessary luxury for a short haul flight and therefore, Sarah thought, proof positive that David wanted this to be a 'particularly special' weekend. Her preference was that he'd pop the question right at the beginning of the mini-break. Perhaps tonight? Then they could utilise the rest of the time planning the wedding or, rather more accurately, Sarah could spend the time telling David what she wanted for

her big day. She had very clear views and, frankly, little actual discussion would be required—although she'd be sensible enough to disguise that fact when the time came. She'd selected the church, venue, menu, band and bridesmaids. She had a good idea about the style of dress—but all the wedding magazines agreed you didn't really know until you actually tried on a selection. So finalising that detail would have to wait.

David wasn't into big romantic gestures so there was a reasonable chance he'd propose somewhere unsuitable, like on the plane or in a restaurant. Sarah had never liked the idea of restaurant proposals. A few of her friends' boyfriends had gone down that route and the girls always claimed to be happy enough with it, but Sarah knew she'd be put off her food and she didn't like waste. Besides, how do you hug and kiss with a table in between and everyone watching?

Sarah talked non-stop on the plane so that David wouldn't find an opportunity to ask. She chattered about the bread rolls, her ankles swelling on flights, whether it was worth sending postcards to friends and family—anything rather than have him ruin her big moment by proposing somewhere inappropriate.

They emerged from the airport and Sarah was thrilled to see a beautiful mahogany boat waiting to take them to the mainland. Surely this private hire meant the proposal was well within reach? As they slipped through the sea, the sunshine made everything appear glittery, the breeze lifted Sarah's hair and she felt like a Bond girl. Now, the boat limousine would be an *ideal* place to propose, she thought.

'Isn't this just perfect?' she said, staring intently and meaningfully at David.

'Bit blowy,' he replied without taking his eyes off the map.

David had an innate distrust of foreign taxi drivers and made a big deal of following their chosen route from airport to hotel so as to ensure the cabbie took the most direct path. Secretly,

Sarah doubted that he had any idea how to read a map of the sea and waterways but felt it would be rude to point out as much.

It was about four o' clock by the time they dropped off their bags at the hotel; David suggested they went straight out to make the most of the late afternoon sunshine, perhaps buy an ice cream. Sarah agreed but insisted on taking a quick shower and changing her outfit. She didn't want to be proposed to wearing the jeans she'd travelled in. In the end it took about an hour and a half for her to shower, exfoliate, reapply make-up and select the outfit she did want to be wearing when she agreed to become Mrs Johnson.

Unfortunately, by that time the sun had slipped behind a large cloud. David grumbled and commented that stilettos were impractical footwear to forage around the cobbled streets of Venice.

Sarah was in love with Venice. She'd known she would be; she'd decided it *was* the most romantic place in the world the moment David mentioned he'd booked a mini-break. She'd read all about Doge's Palace, she'd imagined them strolling through Piazza San Marco and taking a trip to the Accademia for weeks now.

Venice did not stink; Sarah had never believed it would, despite all the grim warnings she'd had from people—like the lady in the dry cleaners, Mike from next door and the lads in the post room at her office—people who didn't have an ounce of romance in their bodies.

Mooching around the baroque backstreets, they stood outside churches and wandered across umpteen pretty bridges. Despite the lines of washing flapping in the breeze, Sarah thought these streets had a shabby charm and were perfect backdrops for David to pop the big question. Clearly he did not agree. He kept resolutely silent, despite her numerous hints about how *romantic* everything was and how *perfect*. They ambled along the waters of St David's Basin. How was it described in the guidebook? A

mirror to reflect the majesty and splendour of the Basilica of San Giorgio Maggiore. True enough. A perfect place for a proposal. Sarah dawdled. She leaned her elbows onto the iron railing of a bridge and gazed out onto the canals. It was a lovely view, although she hadn't expected to be in the shade of the buildings quite so much and wished she'd worn long sleeves. In her imaginings they were always walking in the sunshine. David leaned his bum against the railings and looked in the opposite direction; Sarah tried not to be disconcerted.

'David, isn't this just so wonderful?'

Sarah gently bit her lower lip. Last week they'd been watching some chat show on TV. They'd ordered a takeaway and opened a bottle of wine. They'd chomped their way through half a box of Milk Tray, not the type of confectionary Sarah would ever take to a friend's dinner party but, in fact, their favourite. The host was interviewing Hollywood's latest hot bit of stuff who kept biting her lower lip whenever she was thinking about a question. David had been mesmerised.

'Do you have a mouth ulcer, love?' David asked.

'No, why?'

'You keep chewing your lip. I thought you were in pain. I've got some Bonjela in my wash bag. I'll dig it out for you when we get back to the hotel.'

'I don't have a mouth ulcer.'

'Maybe you've started to bite your lip as a compensation for giving up biting your nails.'

She'd always been a nail biter; David hated the habit and had often urged her to stop. She'd tried but had never gone longer than two days without caving in and having a nibble; that was until she imagined something sparkly on her third finger, left hand. Stumpy nails would so ruin the effect.

'No,' she mumbled, somewhat exasperated. Clearly, her provocative lower lip nibbling was doing nothing for David. She

looked around for something to talk about but, despite the wealth of history, culture and bars, she was stumped. They endured a fifteen minute silence, the first of their relationship.

Eventually David asked, 'Do you fancy something to eat? The local dish of squid pasta is supposed to be worth trying.'

'I'm tired, let's just go to bed,' and, so that he was absolutely clear, she added, 'to sleep.'

Saturday followed the same pattern. Sarah woke up hopefully and dressed in a way that she thought appropriate for accepting a proposal. David woke up bewildered and a bit resentful that a romantic mini-break in Venice hadn't culminated in even a whiff of sex. Despite the top-notch hotel with four-poster bed and everything. His bewilderment and resentment grew as Sarah spent the day acting increasingly weirdly. Normally so relaxed and such a laugh, she'd started to behave in a way that defied belief. Did she think he was a complete moron? He wasn't impervious to the dawdling at Kodak moments and outside jewellery windows. He knew what she wanted—she was being obvious and, frankly, her behaviour was terrifying.

He *had* been going to do it. Of course he had. Why not? The girl was a marvel; he adored her. Or at least he thought he adored her. But her peculiar pushy behaviour was making him… nervous. Suddenly, he didn't like the way she munched her food and her walk was funny, sort of lopsided. This wouldn't have been a deal-breaker under normal circumstances but what was normal about your girlfriend holding a gun to your head, full of emotional bullets that she so clearly wanted to spend?

He'd planned to take her to Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, arguably one of Venice's most sublime religious treasure troves, to see Titian's gloriously uplifting *Assumption* altar painting. He'd wanted to propose to her in front of that painting; *he* was also capable of assuming, planning and plotting. But her needy expectations had ruined everything. He felt she was presuming,

second-guessing and, worst of all, waiting. Now he felt that he might return to England with the Princess-cut diamond still in his jacket pocket.

By Sunday they were barely speaking. Sarah insisted that she didn't want to go to a market—unheard of. David said he had no appetite for visiting restaurants—a first. Instead of enjoying the café orchestras, cooing pigeons and constant traffic of waiters serving alfresco diners, Sarah complained that St Mark's Square was too boisterous. She rushed towards a gondola, no longer envisaging romantic opportunities—she'd given up on that; it was Sunday evening and they were leaving early the next day—but she desperately wanted to be away from the crowds, which, as far as she could ascertain, were entirely made up of besotted lovers.

They drifted gently on a gondola, away from the crowds. Sarah stared at the stars glistening in the navy sky and wondered if she could be bothered to comment to David that the scene was perfect. She thought he'd ask, *Perfect for what?* in an impatient voice, as he had every other time she'd helpfully pointed out the perfect moments on their trip. Not that there had been so many today. Of course, everything was still as interesting, steeped in history, culturally amazing as when they'd first arrived—only, somehow, things weren't so perfect now.

David asked the gondolier to stop singing. He whispered to Sarah that he had a headache, although she'd never known him to suffer from one before. He also muttered that the whole experience had been excruciating and a rip-off at sixty quid per person for twenty minutes entertainment. Sarah wondered what to do next. She supposed she'd have to finish the relationship. It was clearly going nowhere fast. She couldn't just sit around and wait for David to finally decide she was the girl for him, or, worse, decide she wasn't. She had ovaries shrivelling by the minute, she didn't have unlimited time.

But she loved him so.

She couldn't imagine life without him. It was all so depressing and wrong. Nothing was turning out as she'd hoped and now she could even detect unsavoury wafts from the sewer and stale sweat from the gondolier's T-shirt.

David felt miserable. Really low. He'd thought the break would be such a laugh. He'd really splashed out—good flights, cool hotel, booked the best restaurants. Not that they'd actually honoured a booking as yet—Sarah had cried off on Friday *and* Saturday. He wondered if the jewellers accepted returns. What a waste. Things couldn't get any worse unless, of course, he lost the ring.

Panic! David self frisked in a frantic attempt to track down the little box.

'What is it?' asked Sarah.

'The ring! I've lost it. On top of you being a freak I've lost the damned ring.'

'What?'

'Sorry, I didn't mean to call you a freak.'

'That's OK. I meant the other bit. What ring?'

'An engagement ring, of course. Christ, it is dark. Can you see a ring? It cost a fortune. I can't believe this! It's in a blue box. Will you?'

'Yes, I will.'

'Look for it!'

'Oh, right. I thought you meant—'

'I'm unlikely to propose at the moment I've lost the ring, am I?' snapped David. Sarah was already on her hands and knees. In that instant she completely forgot that she was wearing high heels and a white skirt. She groped around the damp and dark gondola floor. Her round bottom bobbed up and down and something shifted back into place for David. Sarah no longer seemed overly keen or controlling. She was concerned and well-meaning again. He loved her curvy bum and everything else about her. His gut turned.

'I'll do you a deal: if we do find the ring, I will propose, OK?' David laughed.

'Deal, and if I like the ring I'll accept,' she added with a grin.

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