



TITLE: FRENCH KISSES
and
A LONDON AFFAIR

Author: Jan Ellis

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About this book:

French Kisses

When Rachel Thompson moved to France in her early twenties, little did she suspect she would stay, become a successful artist and marry Michael, the love of her life.

Life in France is peachy until Michael hits 40, discovers his inner love-rat and runs off with the kids' young, skinny, dance teacher.

Determined to rebuild her life, Rachel recruits friends, neighbours and her children to help her transform the family home into a cosy guest house, and soon attracts an eclectic collection of visitors – and two quite different admirers.

A London Affair

Kate leaves the countryside for a job in a posh London deli and is soon surrounded by croissants and cappuccinos as she finds herself at the centre of a delicatessen dating adventure.

Along with the job come new flat-mates, including the fun, exasperating Imogen and her long-suffering boyfriend, Freddy. Kate thinks she's doomed to early spinsterhood, but Immy has other ideas and sends her friend out into dating land with unexpected consequences for them all.

This is a fun romance that takes the reader from the King's Road to Cornwall with an eclectic bunch of characters including an old hippy, a Russian property magnate and an ex-boyfriend who doesn't know when to give up.

About the Author:



Jan Ellis began writing fiction by accident in 2013. Until then, she had led a blameless life as a publisher, editor and historian of early modern Spain. She fell into fiction when a digital publisher approached her to write a history book, then made the mistake of mentioning women's fiction, which sounded much more fun.

Jan's stories have small-town settings with realistic characters who range in age from young teens to eighty-somethings. She is somewhat surprised to find herself a member of the Romantic Novelists' Association.

Available for events.

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French Kisses

Part One: September–November

Chapter 1: The Encounter

“It’s just so bloody predictable, that’s what gets me.”

Rachel had the phone clamped uncomfortably against one ear as she stomped up and down the kitchen, unpacking the contents of her shopping bags with fury.

“First he has a midlife crisis aged forty and dumps me, and then he goes and gets the poor girl pregnant.”

An aubergine broke loose from her grip and wobbled down the old wooden table to collide with an opened bottle of red wine, fortunately with the cork still in it.

“Buggeration.”

She set the bottle upright again and sat down with a sigh.

“Look Jilly, I’d better go. I’m not up to multitasking at the moment. Yup, pop round later and I’ll give you the full story. Ciao, bye.”

Rachel was in the kitchen of the stone house she had renovated with her soon-to-be ex-husband Michael more than a decade before. Over the years they had acquired odd bits of furniture – some of it, like the table, given to them by neighbours when they had first settled in southeastern France in their twenties.

When Michael started to earn a decent wage from his property business, they could easily have afforded

newer smarter things, but neither of them wanted to change anything about the home they had painstakingly created together. Rachel liked to think about the generations of children who had hidden themselves in their cupboards and built dens under the heavy French table, just like her two had done when they were younger. It was furniture that was built to survive – unlike her marriage, she thought, as she flung bags of pasta and cereal packets into cupboards.

Fortunately, Michael's new squeeze – being a mere slip of a girl – was a fan of chrome and MDF, so there had been no fighting over furniture when Michael moved out.

When she'd finished unpacking, Rachel made a cup of coffee, grabbed a couple of madeleines and went upstairs to her studio. This was her place of work and her sanctuary. It was here that she worked on the prints of birds, animals and landscapes that she sold to local galleries and shops.

It was a warm September day and from the window she could see the red-tiled roofs of the houses lower down the slope, beyond the edge of the village walls. In the distance, the lumpy tops of the far-off hills were turning sage green and grey as the sun moved around them. Normally the view would inspire her and she would dash down ideas in crayon on the thick creamy paper of her sketchbook. Discovering that Michael was about to start a new family had knocked her sideways and she wasn't feeling the least bit creative.

"Damn the man," she muttered to herself. "Paperwork, that's the answer." She picked up a folder full of receipts and invoices, but the morning's

encounter had rattled her and she couldn't even concentrate on basic admin tasks. She turned on the radio, hoping to distract herself, only to find that they were playing what had been "their" tune. Exasperated, Rachel twirled the dial until she reached a talk show and let the chatter wash over her as she dislodged a cat from the chair and sat down with her coffee.

Looking offended, the cat jumped back onto her lap, curled up and went to sleep. Rachel ran her fingers through the amber twirls of his fur and gazed absent-mindedly out of the window.

It had been just over a year since Michael had announced to Rachel that he was leaving her for another woman, if you could call her that. Amelie was in her late-twenties and taught dance at the local arts college. She was skinny, blonde, athletic and altogether annoying.

Eventually, Rachel had grown used to the idea and coped with it so long as Michael's new domestic arrangements were not shoved in her face too often. Unfortunately, he had moved into Amelie's apartment in the neighbouring town – Drete – so they ran into each other with depressing regularity.

Rachel had had a few months of peace because the lovebirds had gone down to the coast near Nice for the long summer holidays. Michael had texted the kids to say he would be back soon, but she had been unable to get a specific date from either Alice or Charlie.

The household was running low on supplies of all the heavy boring stuff, so that morning Rachel had decided to pop into Drete while she was fairly sure the coast would be clear. As a rule she avoided supermarkets like the plague, preferring to support

the shops in Pelette. However, it had got to the point where she needed things like industrial quantities of tinned tomatoes and cat food that she didn't want to lug up the hill on her bike.

So, there she was, piling washing powder and loo roll into her trolley at the big Auchan store when she glanced up to see Michael and Amelie holding hands by the baby food section. Her stomach sank like a stone because she knew it could only mean one thing.

The cat on her lap stirred, bringing her back to reality. "She's welcome to him, eh Fudge?" she said, unwrapping a sweet, fluffy madeleine and sipping the coffee, which, she noticed, had gone cold. The tepid liquid gave her a shock. "Get a grip, woman," she said, standing up and carefully replacing the cat on the warm cushion. "We've got work to do." Slipping an ink-covered apron over her head, Rachel selected a cutting tool and set to work on a new print.

* * *

That evening, Rachel rehearsed the horrors of the morning with Jilly, a fellow Brit and neighbour. She had worked with Michael for a few years and was annoyingly even-handed when it came to any conflicts between her former colleague and his wife. Jilly had recently married the local garage owner, Thierry. He was besotted with his new wife, who was a few years older than him.

Being naturally kind and sympathetic and in a soppy state didn't make her ideal company for a rant about Michael. Rachel's first choice would have been Margot – a much tougher cookie – but she was out of town, so Jilly got to hear about the supermarket encounter first.

Rachel grabbed a bottle of white wine and some crackers and led the way to the top terrace, by the house.

"So," said Jilly, once they were settled. "I want to hear all the gory details. You said you ran into them in Auchan?"

"Fraid so," said Rachel, filling her friend's glass.

"And? What did you do?"

"I was in *Détergents* so I tried to hide behind a stack of Toilet Duck, but Michael spotted me."

"Go on," said Jilly, wincing.

"I thought I might get away with it or that the bloody man would just ignore me, but no." Rachel munched thoughtfully on a cracker. "He actually called my name and waved at me across the store!"

"Ouch!"

"You can say that again. I was trapped."

"How awful," said Jilly, entering into the spirit of things. "He should have done the decent thing and stayed in *Bébé et Maman*."

Rachel nodded furiously. "You're right," she said, topping up their glasses. "But when I pretended not to hear him, the two of them came right over. God, it was awful."

"What did they say?"

"Well, it was all very civilised. After the usual kissy-kissy greeting, Michael said they had planned to tell me properly, whatever that means," Rachel took a swig of wine. "But that 'they' were pregnant and so excited, but hadn't wanted to say anything before the summer hols because it was too early and blah, blah, blah."

Jilly gave her a sympathetic pat on the hand.

“And Amelie just stood there looking sweet and proud with the teeniest of bumps as if she was the only bloody woman he had ever got up the duff.”

Jilly got a misty look in her eyes and opened her mouth to speak, but shut it again when she saw her friend’s fierce expression.

“Don’t you dare say anything *nice!*”

They were both silent for a minute, glancing out at the twilight and listening to the clicks and buzzes of insects in the garden. Although it was nearly autumn, the ground was still warm and busy with life. Rachel had planted jasmine and its sweet scent occasionally wafted over to them.

Eventually, Jilly spoke. “It sounds like Michael hasn’t told the kids yet, then?”

Rachel sighed and pulled the cardigan she was wearing tighter around her shoulders. “Nope. And he’d better get his skates on because Junior will be making his appearance in a couple of months’ time, apparently.”

“How do you think they’ll take it?”

“What, losing a father and gaining a sibling twenty years younger?”

“I thought Alice was not quite fifteen?”

“Details, details. Top up?” asked Rachel, proffering the bottle.

“Better not. Thierry is cooking, so I mustn’t be late.”

Jilly was still quite starry-eyed about her new husband, a trait that Rachel and battle-hardened friends like Margot sometimes found a trifle irritating.

They both stood and Jilly went over to hug her friend.

“Will you be okay? You’re welcome to join us for supper.”

Rachel smiled and shook her head, thinking she didn't fancy being the gooseberry that evening. "That's really sweet of you but I've got things to do."

"Well, if you're sure."

"Quite sure. Give my love to Thierry."

Jilly nodded and squeezed her hand. "Of course."

They walked together to the end of the terrace, then Rachel watched as her friend headed down the path to her adoring husband and his lovingly prepared casserole.

Rachel gathered up the glasses and went back inside. The kids were both out somewhere and there was nothing on TV so she decided to head back to her studio. She didn't trust herself with a lino-cutting tool after she'd had a glass or two of wine, so instead she pulled out the prints she had finished that week and laid them out on her work bench.

She had promised to deliver a new batch of work to the gallery in Drete and wanted to select some pieces to have framed. She enjoyed everything about the creative process, including making her own frames when she had the time. She switched on the radio and listened to Europop for a while until the incessant chatter got too much and she turned it off.

"How can people bear that twaddle?" she asked the dusty grey cat who lay curled up on a pile of rags. She tutted as she watched it try to pull a streak of vermilion ink off its tail.

"That's what happens if you insist on sleeping up here, Mousey." The cat opened a lazy eye, yawned, turned and went back to sleep.

Chapter 2: Summer in England

Rachel's life post-Michael had developed a routine in which she worked every day in the studio, creating her prints and greetings cards. When she was involved in a new design she was inclined to lose track of time, so she had an old-fashioned alarm clock in the studio that buzzed and clanked when it was time to do important stuff like lock up the chickens or feed the kids.

In the morning, she accompanied Charlie and Alice to the main square where they were collected by the village bus and taken into town to school. They were grown-up enough not to need a chaperone, but Rachel enjoyed the walk. Mid-afternoon, she downed tools and went to meet them or they ambled back themselves, sometimes calling in on friends in the village. The shrill ring of the alarm clock now showed her that it was home time.

"It's time to go and fetch the offspring, pusskins. Want to come?"

Rachel took off her apron and dashed downstairs. The cats sometimes liked a walk and would follow at a distance then sit on the church wall to wait for her to return.

Rachel knew she was lucky: despite all the changes and the new developments that had happened in the nearly two decades since they had pitched up,

Pelette hadn't really altered. There was a core of local people who knew her well.

They had watched Rachel and Michael arrive, restore their house and have the children. When Michael took off with Amelie, the villagers had quietly and discreetly come together to look after Rachel and the children.

She couldn't say what had changed, but she felt protected and knew that Alice and Charlie would never come to harm in the area. It was partly the fact that everyone knew everyone, but it was more than this: her children had been the first to be born in the old Seurat farmhouse for many years and that made them special.

Now the kids were gradually settling back to school after the long summer holidays. This year, like every year since they were born, Rachel had taken them to England for four weeks to visit their relatives in Devon and Yorkshire.

When the children were little, she and Michael would watch and worry about them. They were eccentric – English kids who chattered away together in French – but after a while they would be bounding around the Dales or across Exmoor with their cousins, picking up the local accents.

After the split, she had dreaded the trip back. What would people think of her? Surely they would wonder what she had or hadn't done to make her husband look for love elsewhere. In fact, family and friends – including Michael's friends – had been sympathetic and understanding.

One of his oldest mates had sidled up to her rather drunkenly at a barbecue and said Michael was a

stupid sod to leave her. She managed to extract herself before his wife came over and dragged him back to the chicken thighs.

That was in Harrogate, near the ex in-laws' place. What she really loved and looked forward to most was being back in Devon at her childhood home.

One evening after a long day exploring rock pools and sunning themselves at the beach, she had left Alice and Charlie with their grandfather, Harold, and hiked up to the cliff top. The tangy sea air was the one element she really missed from her home. She felt the pull of it every time she visited: there was a strong, physical connection with the ocean that she guessed only people born on an island ever developed. A love of the sea was one of many things she had shared with her parents.

When her mother Jean passed away, Rachel had tried to persuade her father to live with them in France, but he had refused. She was disappointed, but she understood.

Taking her hand, Harold had spoken to her gently. "I'm too old and set in my ways, sweet pea. The move would probably finish me off, anyway."

"Don't say that, Dad," said Rachel, a lump in her throat. "I'm too young to be an orphan."

Harold had laughed. "As long as I take my daily totter along the sea front, I'll be fine for a few years yet."

She had cried when the family returned to France, leaving Harold alone in the house. Her brother Henry lived in America and visited as often as he could, but they both wondered how Harold would cope on his own after decades of marriage. They needn't have

worried: a handsome man, he was soon scooped up by Connie, a merry widow from London, and had never looked back.

Rachel smiled to herself, remembering that evening in Devon, when the pair had agreed to skip their Tai Chi class and look after Charlie and Alice so she could go for a walk and enjoy her brief time back in England.

She hadn't kept up with many people, but she had arranged to call in at her friend Mary's house for tea after her walk. They had been at secondary school together and had kept in touch even during the years when Rachel was completely absorbed in Michael and their new life together. Mary was the person Rachel felt closest to from the old days. Over strong tea and Jaffa Cakes, she brought her friend up to date with Michael's romance and her own life with the kids.

Rachel thought she had made her experience as an artist in rural France sound rather fun and exciting, and had been surprised by her friend's reaction.

"It sounds a bit lonely, Rach," Mary had said with a frown.

"I'm not lonely. I'm just, well, busy."

"You could come back and live here, you know?"

Rachel shook her head. "No, I couldn't. Not any more. The kids are more French than English. And there's the house, my friends and my work ..."

"Kids are adaptable and you could easily find some studio space in town." Mary smiled. "But I understand." She got up and walked over to the kitchen window where a band of drizzle was starting to blow in off the sea. "Who would exchange all that lovely French sunshine for this?"

"Oh, we have our fair share of bad weather, don't you worry. Some of the storms are real humdingers." Rachel stood and joined her friend by the sink, putting an arm around her shoulder. "But it is my home."

Mary patted her on the hip. "I know. So, do you fancy a quick drink at the King's Head for old times' sake or are you expected back at Harold's?"

"Nope, I've got the night off. Dad has promised the kids fish finger sandwiches for tea so I said I might give supper a miss and see what you were up to."

"Great. Two large Chardonnays and that fine English delicacy, scampi and chips, coming up."

"Yum, my favourite!"

A few hours later, when she had tottered tipsily back to the house, Rachel found everything quiet and assumed that everyone had gone to bed. Instead she discovered the entire household plus a couple of local kids playing darts in the kitchen.

"It's good for hand-eye coordination," her father had said when she'd expressed concern as the sharp objects whizzed across the room and pinged off walls.

"And I insisted they all wear cycle helmets to protect their heads," added Connie, who was safely positioned by the door.

Knowing when she was beaten, Rachel shook her head, laughing. "Well, there's not much I can say to that. Goodnight all."

Now, sitting under a plane tree in Pelette waiting for the bus to arrive from Drete, Rachel smiled at the recollection. She knew her children didn't yet appreciate how lucky they were to have friends and family in two countries. She had enjoyed her time in England more than she had expected to this year.

Michael's relatives had been kind, agreeing with her that it was important for the children not to lose touch with their cousins just because their parents had split up.

A creak and rattle indicated that the bus was about to crest the steep, narrow street and make its way into the square. It drew to a halt opposite where she sat. Rachel was always fascinated as she watched the youngsters get off – the girls looked so much more glamorous than she and her friends had been at that age. She'd never had the big hair and perfect skin these girls had. Alice was turning into a young woman and was worryingly gorgeous. Charlie was only two years younger but he was still a boy. As she saw him slouch towards her, Rachel was overwhelmed with love for her children.

The three of them walked home together, the cats joining them when they reached the church and running alongside.

Back at the house, she prepared supper then went into the studio to carry on with some birthday cards she was designing. The rhythm of work always helped her to think. She wasn't quite sure how things were going to turn out, but she was determined that her little family would be okay. And was she lonely, as Mary had suggested? Of course not. In any case, she was far too busy with her prints and the kids to think about finding a new man.

She'd had offers, of course. As soon as Michael had left her, she had been surprised when all kinds of unsuitable men – men who had been friends of theirs for years – rushed around to offer help, and sometimes more. The fact that every available male

in the local area turned up at her door was one more reason for her to be angry with Michael.

Things hadn't been going too well between them for some time; they didn't not get on, things had just become a bit boring. Rachel had secretly imagined that she might make her own bid for freedom when the children were older, though she doubted whether she would ever really have done it. She loved her husband and it seemed to her that marriage was bound to be unexciting sometimes, so she was furious when Michael decided to jump ship. Whenever she thought about it, all the frustration came rushing back.

* * *

Rachel had been clearing out one of the sheds at the side of the house to use for storage and was dusty, tired and thirsty. The children were out with friends so she was on her own. Michael had gone into the village and come back with only half the things she had asked him for, looking rather sheepish. That's when he'd broken the news: he hadn't been to the village, he'd gone into Drete to see Amelie and – Rachel guessed – to make sure the girl really did want him.

That moment was frozen in time and Rachel could remember every detail: the chickens preening in the dust that swirled around the courtyard, the church bell striking 3pm, the sound of children splashing around in a neighbour's swimming pool. She had stood there, open-mouthed, not making sense of the words that washed over her. Then Michael had put on his reasonable voice, the one he used to clinch a property deal. The one that made her cringe.

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Rachel's brain couldn't take it in for a minute. "That you're leaving?"

Michael nodded, looking sorrowful. "Of course I still love you and the children ..."

"But you love this girl more than us."

Michael had paced around the terrace, rubbing the top of his bald head as he tended to when he was upset.

"Rach, this isn't easy for me either."

"Pah!" Rachel almost spat the word at him. "Not easy for you? How dare you say that! You're walzing out of my life with Miss Tippy-Toes leaving me with two kids and this bloody great house to manage on my own. With no money."

Michael raised his hands in a gesture of submission and looked pained. "I'm sorry, sweetheart ..."

"Don't bloody well 'sweetheart' me!"

"Rachel, you'll be fine. We'll sort out the money – I won't let you starve." He had stopped pacing and was looking from the sun-baked terrace towards the kitchen, where Rachel had put a pile of new prints that she planned to have framed.

"With the maintenance and the money from your work, you'll be fine." He smiled weakly. "And I'll pay you rent to use the garage, of course."

That had been the final straw.

"I don't want you anywhere near the garage. You can keep that geriatric vehicle of yours in Dreste. Or, better still, take it to the wrecker's yard where it belongs."

For the first time, Michael looked shocked. He shook his head, sounding pained. "How can you say that about Di-Di?"

Rachel felt the teeniest sense of remorse bubbling under the fury as she pictured the old mustard yellow car, a Citroën Dyane, which had been pretty ancient when they'd acquired her and the house from their canny neighbour all those years ago. He, Monsieur Seurat, had looked about ninety then but was still going strong, unlike the car. Despite the fact that Di-Di had a tendency to conk out at inopportune moments and they now had a proper car, they had clung on to her.

"I've got things to do here," said Rachel, fearful that she was about to cry over a darned metal box.

Michael nodded and looked relieved to have an excuse to leave. "I'll go now, but perhaps we can talk again tomorrow. You know you can call me any time."

The look he got made him beat a hasty retreat. "Okay, I'm off." And with that he turned, got into Di-Di and drove off, the engine stuttering and farting as it went.

The details of the next few days and weeks were a blur. After some initial tears, the children had been remarkably sanguine about it. All their friends' parents seemed to be divorced. Amelie had taught Alice ballet, so it was not as though she was a complete stranger to them. Her parents were clearly embarrassed by their daughter turning into a home-breaker and went out of their way to be generous to their newly acquired grandchildren.

Michael was as good as his word about the money and Rachel got a regular lump of cash every month to help with the children. But she found herself more and more uneasy at the idea of being a "kept woman". She also discovered that losing

a husband – unsatisfactory though he might have been – left a big hole in her life. She seemed to have more time on her hands for some reason. She channelled a lot of energy into her work, occasionally stabbing right through the sheets of lino and imagining Michael's sensitive parts under the roller as she worked the heavy press.