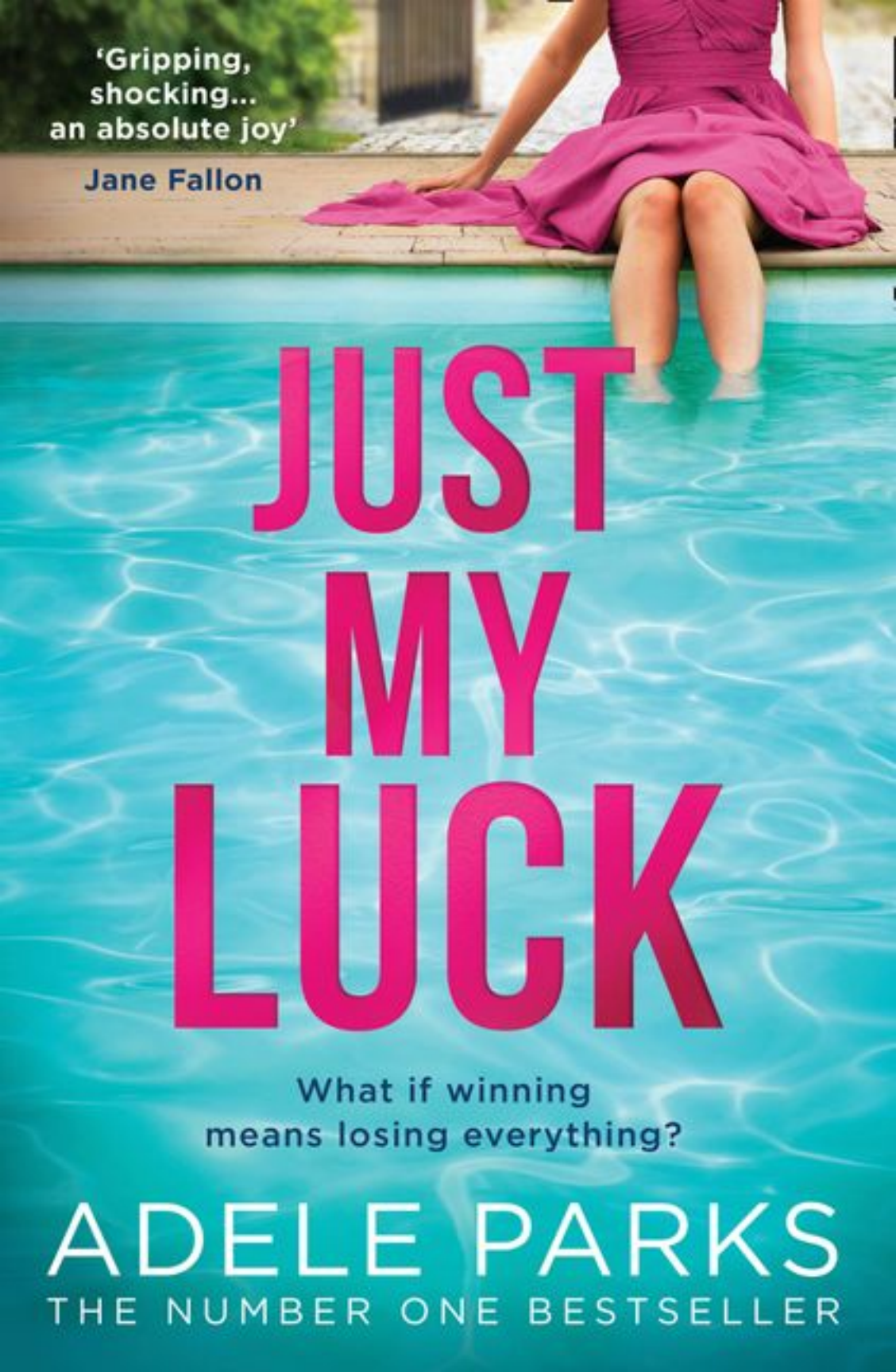


'Gripping,
shocking...
an absolute joy'

Jane Fallon

A woman in a purple dress is sitting on the edge of a swimming pool, with her legs in the water. The background shows a poolside area with a wooden fence and some greenery.

JUST MY LUCK

What if winning
means losing everything?

ADELE PARKS

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

By Adele Parks, Author of Just My Luck, published by
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Plus One

Jack and Oli stood side by side - as they'd done on endless past occasions when they faced their headmaster or mothers (after being caught in boyhood mischief) and as teenagers, as they'd faced Ben-built-like-a-brick house and his gang - both of them refusing to hand over lunch money. They'd stood shoulder to shoulder for team photos, at bars, in ski lifts, before exams and job interviews and now, at the altar.

It was a surprise to everyone that Jack was to marry first. Oli was the romantic, Jack the cynic – or at least he had been until he met pretty, funny, intelligent Emma. Jack was gaga. Oli didn't resent that their double act had become a triple act; a best mate shouldn't, couldn't, begrudge a pal finding true love.

Oli wouldn't mind the same himself.

The bright and rare sunlight slipped through the stained-glass windows. Jack looked colourless. Had any groom ever thrown up in the font, through nerves?

'You OK, mate?'

'Fine,' said Ian, managing a tight, nod.

'Don't worry, she'll turn up. She loves weddings; she's not going to miss her own.'

Truly petrified, Jack resolutely stared ahead, Oli glanced over his shoulder; the church was nearly full. Heidi, Emma's second cousin slipped into a pew; she also loved weddings - the heady smell of the lilies, confetti, champagne - even mediocre Coronation chicken had an allure. Her favourite moment was when bride stepped through the church door, swathed in silk and

lace, possibility and optimism.

Heidi was determined to love *this* wedding, even though two relatives had already asked to meet her 'plus one'. He was non-existent. Three others had assured her it was 'her turn next'. Unlikely, her love life was as dry as an AA meeting. Still, a wedding was an excuse to buy a new outfit. She'd blown a silly amount on a chocolate halter neck dress; she'd bravely teamed it with emerald shoes and a saffron scarf, as the shop manikin was styled. This morning she'd immodestly stood in front of the mirror, twirled around, pleased.

'My God, she's gorgeous,' Oli murmured. 'Who is that woman in the brown dress, yellow scarf, green shoes?'

'I don't know, Someone colour blind,' said Ian.

Heidi was horrified to notice (how could she fail to) the woman click-clacking her way over the ancient enamel tiles, then settling in the pew opposite. She was wearing the exact same outfit - dress, shoes scarf. The women stared at one another, slack jawed, facing social calamity.

Heidi wanted to cry but instead summoned up a broad beam. Her smile was rebuffed with a scowl as the other woman picked up the order of service and pretended to be engrossed.

Jack forced himself to sneak a peak at the congregation. 'No, no mate. You mustn't touch her. That's Tabitha, Emma's boss. She eats men for breakfast. She's a horror. Emma only invited her because she'd be sacked if she didn't,' said Ian.

Oli stole a quick second glance. 'She doesn't look like the sort of woman who eats men for any meal. She looks like she's hoping the pew will swallow her up,' he commented.

‘That’s your problem, mate, you never believe people have faults. Trust me, leave her alone.’

Oli didn’t get time to think about the woman anymore, because the organ announced that Emma, in all her glory, had arrived.

The wedding was an enormous success; utterly perfect. The ceremony hit the correct note of sober reverence and evident elation. The reception was idyllic, guests drank champagne on the lawn basking in the sun; the food and the speeches were sublime and hilarious, respectively. Everybody had a sensational time.

Except Oli.

Oli tried to catch the woman outside the church, but he lost her in the crowd. At the reception, he got a fleeting glance of the brown satin of her skirt, but he was crushed, she had her arms wrapped around one of the ushers. Fast worker. Jack was right. Oli felt a deep sting of disappointment. Maybe he was too romantic he admitted as he watched her fly from the arms of the usher, to the side of a waiter and then later, during the meal, he watched her flirt with *all* the men on her table. He couldn’t hear exactly what she was saying or catch her expressions, as she was sat with her back to him, but her actions left little to the imagination. She fed profiteroles (with her mouth!) to the guy to her left throughout his speech; a speech she interrupted at inappropriate times with a low throaty, drunken laugh. He’d imagined, having clocked her smile in the church, that her laugh would be more joyous.

He was a fool to have these idealistic views of women.

‘Mate can you scoop up Tabitha and take her somewhere to sober up, she’s passed out under the table that with the cake on. We can’t cut it.’

Oli didn't want to get involved, but he was best man, so he considered it his duty. Carefully, he eased her out from under the table.

My god, she was barely recognizable. She *wasn't* recognizable. This wasn't the woman he saw in the church. Same dress, yes, same scarf and shoes but even if she was conscious, he instinctively knew that this woman would not bestow face-splitting smiles.

Confused, Oli carried the wilting woman towards the lobby. She needed water, then black coffee. The lobby was deserted, except for one other person. *There* she was. Sitting on a cushioned chair, looking lost and bored.

Shocked, they stared at one another. Heidi unable to take her eyes off the unconscious fashion faux par in his arms. Oli unable to take his eyes off the woman he'd hunted all day.

'One or two too many,' he said by way of explanation.

'Bottles?' said Heidi with a smile.

'Fabulous outfit.'

'Apparently it's very popular. Great speech.'

'Thank you. Great wedding.'

'Yes, maybe,' she smiled.

