Being Committed

Anna Maxted

Chapter 1

Every woman likes to be proposed to, even if she means to refuse. At least, until I'd racked up a couple of marriage offers myself, that's what I believed. Aged fifteen, I read of one thirtysomething who'd totted up five and was happy to boast of it in a national newspaper. Then, I considered her lucky, glamorous, popular with boys. Everything that I, as a teenager, wasn't. (My adolescence can be summarised by one incident in which I took a gobstopper out of my mouth on a train. A man leant forward in his seat and said, 'Oh! I thought you were deformed.')

Years later, I realised that the proposal collector and I were a lot alike. You have to be quite a twit to allow matters to escalate to the point where some guy assumes you'll agree to rely on him for your life's entertainment when you have no intention of doing any such thing. (No man pops the question unless he is convinced of a yes. Which says not very much for the perception and self-regard of quite a few men.)

I'm being harsh. If it happens once, it's understandable. There are certain men who need to get married, for whom the woman is almost incidental to proceedings. The wife is the tedious yet necessary ingredient, similar to yeast in bread. This sort of man fixes on his target rather like a pitbull, and any girl who can't run fast enough is at risk. Then it's not her fault.

That said, sometimes it is. A persistence in finding you perfect can transform even a man of moderate charms into an accidental fiancé. I know that women, as a gender, are renowned for hankering after men one politely describes as 'a challenge'. But I'll bet that even those men have at one point (perhaps by having sex with us) given the impression of finding us attractive. I think it's instinct to gravitate towards those who find us delightful.

Disagree, but you'll disagree until the day you meet a person who dislikes you on sight and doesn't bother to hide it. Then you'll realise there's little more repellent. You won't be able to get away quick enough.

So, putting you at the right end of the desirability scale as it does, it's no wonder that a marriage offer is glorious in fantasy. A man, not noticeably defective, falling at your feet with a shower of gifts: flowers, jewels, big dinners, himself. A vitamin shot to the ego. The fact that out of all the millions of women he has met in his life, you are the one he finds most bewitching (or who he thinks will have him).

Alas. The reality of an unwanted proposal is spitefully different from the dream format. I discovered this the embarrassing way. And as I believe that it cheers the spirit to hear of another person's romantic woes now and then, I feel it's only my duty to share. Patience, however. As I said, I have had two marriage offers - wait! -

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three, now I think about it - one of which was successful. I'm going to detail one here and, to reassert my dignity - presently making for the hills - I've decided not to tell you which it is just yet.

I hope you're sitting comfortably. Even if you don't deserve to.

Jason drove. And not just because our weekend away in St Ives was to celebrate my birthday. He always drove. As I was unbothered about who drove, and of the implications were Jason ever to be seen in public being driven by a woman, I let him drive. Indeed, whenever we travelled together I'd head for his car, no question. I'm all for granting favours at no cost to myself. Driving is an activity that men engage in to boost their self-esteem, which I can relate to but not in a Fiat. Anyway, as we both discovered a while back when I directed him to Swindon out of spite (we were supposed to be going to Oxford), the navigator holds the real power.

Perhaps I'm not giving the greatest impression of myself. My sister-in-law, Gabrielle, says this is inevitable as I grew up in Hampstead Garden Suburb. She means that a typical native of 'the Suburb' - a seemingly quaint residential area of London, characterised by big beautiful houses, trim heathland, and fierce conservation orders - is a rude rich person who drives a large car badly (when your nose is that high in the air, it's hard to see the road) and serially mistreats au pairs, cleaners, waiters, and anyone apparently poor, i.e., who takes home less than £1 million p.a.

I've reminded Gabrielle that I drive a Vauxhall and am comfortably unsuccessful, but her reply is, 'Yes, darling, but for some reason you're still rude.'

If that's true, I apologise, and offer the weaselly excuse that I'm only being defensive. Gabrielle has a point. The Suburb, though picturesque and exclusive, is a bitchy village with a high concentration of unhappy families who resent their neighbours. Even though a friend of mine who's plod - pardon, a police officer - says they have zero to sneer about because half of them are bent. Still, if you don't conform - say, you smile at a gardener or divorce (or worse, divorce, then smile at a gardener) - you are shunned like a traitor. It's an environment that stunts your natural affability, if you had any to begin with.

My job doesn't help. I'm a private investigator, but not a very good one. You can imagine how that went down with Next Door. If I'm not in the mood to offend (rare) I tell people I'm in Public Relations. Which isn't a lie. Occasionally - when I don't botch things - I do help the public with their relations.

Pretty much the rest of my time is spent tracing people, which I hope sounds glamorous. Actually, all that tracing usually entails is a series of chats in which I invariably pretend to be someone I'm not. Anyone could do it. Really, it's no different from dating. Anyhow, Greg, my boss, finds me amusing, which is the reason I'm not on the street.

At the time I'm speaking of, the one part of my life under control was my relationship with Jason. Mainly, I have to admit, thanks to Jason. Given the chance, I would have messed up. But Jason was that rarest of men, a real sweetheart. Don't ask

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me why, he liked difficult women. (Well, I'd hesitate to introduce myself as 'easy'.) 'Difficult' gives an impression of being wild, independent, untameable, which I like. But, stripped of its cute, coltish associations, I fear the true translation of 'difficult' is 'bad-tempered'.

Jason has stood by me for five years. When a person describes themselves as 'easy-going', I say nah (although I have the nous to say it in my head). What they mean is, they're too lazy to organise themselves so they let someone else do it. The true test of being easy-going is whether you accept someone else's choice when it proves to be the exact opposite of what you would have chosen for yourself. Most self-proclaimed easy-going types flip out on seeing that the wrong brand of juice has been procured from the supermarket. Easy-going is Jason Brocklehurst. Five years is a long time to let your girlfriend have her own way.

The day before I turned thirty-one, I was feeling fine. I'm a London girl but it's always a relief to escape the fight. Also, Jason kept saying, 'I can't wait to give you your birthday present,' so I knew he'd bought me a bath. That must sound strange but my bath was green and re-enamelled and it flaked. (Never re-enamel a bath; it doesn't work.) I'd sit in it and feel dirtier than before I'd washed. I was convinced that particles of dead skin from the bottoms of my flat's previous owners were caught in its scratchy surface. The thought made me feel slightly sick.

As a result, my baths lasted a mean two minutes. The deprivation was beginning to affect my sanity. My dream bath was a designer rip-off. Philip Stuck? Something like that. It was white, sleek, freestanding, with gently sloping sides and it cost a cool £700 in the sale. I didn't expect that Jason had bought the bath and hidden it in the Fiat boot (a bath tap would barely fit in the Fiat boot) but I guessed he was planning to present me with a picture of the bath. The excitement was affecting my sleep, which I'm not ashamed of. People who don't get excited about receiving gifts are tired of life. (Nor do I buy that 'more pleasure in giving' blather, unless you give in anonymity. If you give in grinning person, you might as well be getting - it all reflects back to the ego.)

My birthday journey to St Ives took a while longer than it should have, because Jason had to accomplish everything on his to-do list. Task twenty-eight was, 'Buy water en route for hotel.'

As Jason emerged from the petrol station, carrying seven monster Evian bottles, I showed my teeth. One of those babies (well, they're the size of babies) can last me a fortnight. My excuse is, they're too heavy to lift, and by the time they're not, the water's gone stale. London tap water has been - cute euphemism - recycled seven times, and when I bought a water filter I emptied it so rarely that all the lovely, pure, filtered water turned green. Consequently I'm as hydrated as the food NASA gives astronauts to take into space.

Only a week back, Jason had stuck a pink note to the toilet lid: 'URINE TOO YELLOW. CORRECT SHADE: PALE STRAW. DRINK MORE CLEAR FLUIDS.' We'd gone out that night. I'd drunk seven vodkas just to oblige him.

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'There you go.' Jason dropped a stunted bottle of Evian into my lap. 'Even you can lift that.'

'Oh, sweet of you. Thanks. Though I won't drink it now or we'll have to keep stopping.'

Jason glanced at me. 'We'll stop anyway, Hannah.'

'Yeah, but we don't want to have to stop immediately.'

Jason laughed. 'Your skin will dry up and you'll get wrinkles. You have to drink enough water to hydrate every organ in your body before your skin even gets a drop.'

'Ah well,' I said.

Jason sighed. 'What music do you want?'

Now I laughed. 'You're determined to be nice.'

He smiled. 'It's your birthday tomorrow, Gorgeous. We're in love, and we're on an adventure. What could be nicer?'

'Jason, people say things like that in films, then in the next scene they die in a car crash.'

'Hannah!'

'Sorry. I just like to guard against the worst-case scenario by pre-empting it.'

Jason shook his head. Aware that I was crushing the mood like a small child stamping on berries, I chose Scott 3 and the rest of the journey was harmonious.

Jason had booked us into a castle because he knew I loved castles, and he was appalled to find it was a fake.

'It looked old on the website!' he kept saying, as we stared at its newly crenellated walls. There is a silence familiar to long relationships, which people refer to as 'comfortable'. This wasn't one of those.

'We can go home,' said Jason.

'Don't be silly. Anyway, it is old,' I murmured as the porter slammed our bedroom door behind us, and we surveyed the 1960s décor. Jason looked as though he might cry.

'Jase,' I said, 'look at the view.'

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From our window we could see the buxom curves of the coastline, the sun casting diamonds on the water, and the sultry blue summer sky.

I squeezed Jason's hand. 'We're going to have a great weekend. Let's go for a walk.' Walks, I presume, are the point of being in the country. 'And let's go out tonight and eat baked potatoes and fudge.'

Jason got a stiff look on his face, as if he'd sat on a pin.

'What?' I said. I was having trouble warding off my own stiff looks. I was about to be thirty-one. I was past the age where roughing it meant I was cool. Now, roughing it meant I hadn't done very well in life. It was a sore point.

'I'm happy to do whatever you like,' said Jason.

'But?'

'It's all-inclusive.'

Don't think he was mean. He wasn't. He knew I hated to owe him. On my pay it was inevitable, but he liked to help limit the damage. We went to the restaurant for dinner, after a dutiful walk by the sea. Twelve minutes of piped Charles Aznavour and tinned runner beans, and we left the restaurant and dinner.

'God, I'm sorry,' said Jason.

He drove into St Ives and I sat in the car while he purchased two baked potatoes - cottage cheese and salad, no butter for him; cheddar cheese, butter, and tuna mayonnaise for me. I feel that Jason is healthy enough for both of us.

'Hooray,' I said, as he passed me my food. I balanced the yellow container on my knees and undid the catch. It made a scratchy squeak that gave me goose pimples.

'No!' said Jason, tapping the lid of my carton.

'Oh!'

'Wait until we get back to the castle.'

'Why?'

'Because.'

It was unlike Jason to give orders, and this made me uncomfortable. I wondered suddenly if he was intending to dump me. It was an intriguing thought. Some men think that to conclude a relationship in civilised surroundings reduces a woman's disappointment. These men are mad. What a surprise if Jason was one of them. Neither of us spoke until we reached our room. I made a second lunge for my potato. If I were about to lose my man, best to cover the loss of my appetite.

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'Leave the potato!' said Jason, as if I were a dog. (Working, as I do, for a firm called Hound Dog Investigations, the issue has been raised.)

'Why don't you lie on the bed and read,' he added, 'and I'll lay the table?'

I belly-flopped onto the bed, snatched my book, and pretended to read. Jason dragged an ornamental table and two chairs over to the window, pulled two small bottles of champagne from the minibar, fuffed about with napkins and plastic cutlery, arranged the potatoes on two fruit plates. Then he attached the dinkiest speakers to his portable stereo and pressed Play.

The strains of 'Brown-Eyed Girl' filled the room. I curled my toes. In a past life I'd attended an exercise class run by a woman named Gertrude who I have no doubt was a corporal on leave from the German army. 'Brown-Eyed Girl' was the tune she made us squat to, and I can never hear it without suffering a flashback. Van Morrison croons, 'Everywhere I go,' and Gertrude screams, 'BEND LOWER, BUTTOCKS OUT!'

'I'll be one sec,' said Jason, and vanished into the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later I knocked on the door. 'Jase?'

Jason has an irritable bowel and spends as long in the toilet as other people spend in the pub. I was going to demand special dispensation to eat my potato before it rotted.

'Jase?' I pushed open the door. And there was Jason sprawled lifeless in front of the toilet.

'Jason!' I screamed. He was face down and I had a mad vision of turning him over to see half of his head had been eaten away. Happily it was all there. He was pale but warm. He blinked.

'Careful,' I said, as he struggled to sit. 'You must have fainted.'

'Fainted,' Jason repeated. He struggled with his trousers, which were at his ankles. 'Hannah, will you marry me?'

'What?'

'Will you marry me?' said Jason. He was beaming now, and ferreting in his pocket.

'Come away from the toilet,' I said.

I hope, for the sake of humanity, that I am alone in replying to the question, 'Will you marry me?' with, 'Come away from the toilet.'

'Did you hit your head?' I added.

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Neither of us was really listening to the other.

Jason flashed open his left hand, and I recognised his grandmother's engagement ring. He'd shown it to me before and it reminded me of a big wart. Encrusted with red and black stones, it reeked of evil and belonged to a dead woman. Not my thing. I'd yet to see an engagement ring that was.

Jason sank to the floor again, this time on purpose. I was shocked that he wanted to do this.

'Hannah,' he said, 'I've waited nearly five years to make you mine. Please marry me.'

I took his hand and kissed it.

'Jason,' I said, 'you are a wonderful, gorgeous man. I'm so very sorry. But . . . no.'

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