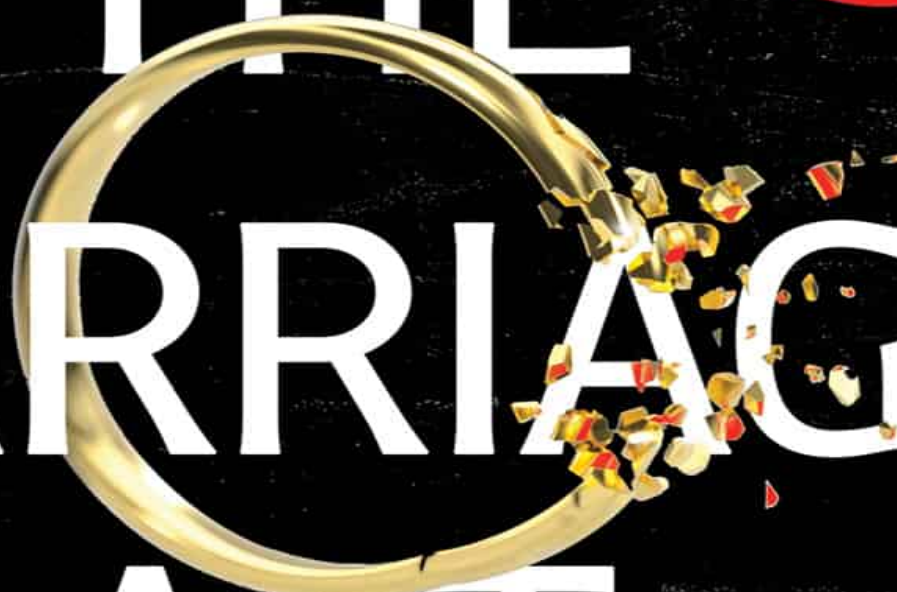


'Clever, compelling and terrifyingly plausible ...
grips from the first page and never lets go ...'

C. J. TUDOR

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BESTSELLING
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THE ONE
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SERIES

THE MARRIAGE ACT



Your relationship
is being monitored.
Break your vows,
pay the price ...

JOHN MARRS

THE MARRIAGE ACT

JOHN MARRS

MACMILLAN

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For Ada Lovelace, 1815–1852

Audite: *Latin, verb, pronounced Aw-Dy-T*

Meaning: I hear. I listen. I learn.

How are Smart Marriages Making Britain Better?*

They're good for your health and the economy

Married couples are **healthier.** They're **35% less** likely to suffer high blood pressure, strokes and heart disease. They recover from operations quicker and have **stronger immune systems.**



Married couples take **fewer sick days.** They don't drain valuable NHS resources and don't rely on benefits. A proud, productive workforce **supports our economic growth.**



Married couples live **4** Caring companions **encourage one to 8 years another** to have regular health check-ups, take medication, **eat nutritiously** longer than singletons. and **exercise more.**



A healthy marriage You're **less likely** to suffer anxiety, means **a healthy** depression, substance abuse, loneliness, **mind.** psychosis or attempt suicide if you're together.



*Statistics based on Government-funded research.



www.smartmarriage.co.uk

ACT 1



PROLOGUE

Jem Jones

Transcript of a live broadcast made across multiple social media platforms by British Vlogger and Influencer JEM JONES.

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTES: Ms Jones is looking away from the camera when her broadcast begins. She is wearing little make-up; the dark roots of her blonde hair are visible and it is scraped back into a casual ponytail. She is dressed in a black knitted jumper and a silver necklace with a St Christopher motif. She appears anxious and emotional. Ms Jones is located in the lounge area of a residential property. She sits at a desk and behind her are two large sofas, framed wall paintings of tropical beaches, and closed window shutters. She is alone. There is a thirty-eight-second gap between the start of filming and when she first looks to the camera and talks.

‘I’ve recorded so many of these Vlogs over the years, but this is the first one where I’m at a loss as to know where to start. (Ms Jones shakes her head and takes a deep, audible breath.)

‘I suppose I should begin with an apology. I’ve not been online much over the last couple of months. But after my last post – or Meltdown Monday, as my critics called it – I thought it best to step back and take some time to work on myself. But this live Vlog isn’t my comeback. It’s the opposite. I’m here to say goodbye.

‘Guys, I’m drained. I don’t have the strength to put myself through this any more. How can it make me happy when I’m a laughing stock and a punchline? The constant, relentless negative attention and the stress of it has given me PTSD, insomnia and anxiety. I’m tired. I’m just really, really tired.

(Ms Jones rubs her face with the palms of her hands. Her fingernails are bitten, the white polish chipped.)

‘When I began Vlogging six years ago, it was with the best of intentions. I wanted to make a little film that a few people might watch where I could speak about the stuff that mattered to me as a twenty-something woman. I thought it’d be an amazing result if a hundred people watched it who didn’t know me.

‘But then – and for reasons I don’t think I’ll ever get my head around – my posts went viral. One hundred subscribers became two hundred and then a thousand and, within a year, I’d reached the million mark. (Ms Jones smiles briefly for the first time.) All of those people, watching and listening to little old me blathering on about where to buy the best shades of lipstick, or watching me unwrap my first tattoo, or the horrendous hangovers I went through after a night out with the girls . . . God, life was fun and easy back then, wasn’t it? Honestly, they were some of the best times and I got to share them all with you. And your feedback made it even more worthwhile. Your messages, your tags, your silly emojis and your kind words . . . they meant the world to me. I’d never even met most of you but you felt like my mates. You were there to join in with my happiness when boyfriends came; and when they went, it was your shoulders I cried on. The community we built together was so supportive and nurturing; you made me feel truly loved.

(Ms Jones shuts her eyes.)

‘I should have known it couldn’t last. Nothing good ever does. And all because I dared to have an opinion. I love the idea of commitment and I love being in love. So supporting the Sanctity of Marriage Act was a no-brainer. But then I became a target for campaigners who didn’t agree with it. That’s when the hate started. Even in these so-called enlightened times, it’s more of

a sport to try and shut down a woman with a voice than it is with a man who says the same thing.

‘Those of you who’ve followed me over the years will know that when I’m told I can’t do something, or that I should think a certain way, it’s going to make me all the more determined to behave how I want to. So when the Government asked me to become the face of the Act and spread the word about its benefits, of course I was going to say yes.

‘If I thought the backlash was bad before . . . well, it was a walk in the park compared to the shit that followed. I became the poster girl for cancel culture. I received thousands of emails and messages every single day telling me what a selfish, evil bitch I was, that I deserved to die and so did my family. Negative comments were left all over my social media posts. My sponsors were targeted and warned not to work with me or they’d be cancelled next. I could just about cope with the death threats, Deepfake videos, memes, graffiti daubed across my walls and bricks hurled through my windows . . . but then when my dogs were poisoned, I was done. England turned its back on me so I did the same to it.

(Ms Jones reaches under her monitor to reveal to the camera seven plastic containers of prescription medicine. It is unclear which pharmacy has provided them. She slides up the right sleeve of her jumper to reveal two translucent patches stuck to her upper arm. Her lower arm contains healed scars alongside fresh wounds. She does not comment on them.)

‘The patches are slow-release antidepressants. Some of the tablets help me sleep and others are to keep me awake. I’ve got pills to help me think, pills to stop me overthinking, pills to give me an appetite and pills that stop me feeling anything but empty. I even have pills to give me enough clarity to remember to take the other pills.

‘But they all have one thing in common: they remind me of how out of control my life has become. I can’t remember the last time I felt optimistic about anything. Every time I dare to go online all I see is hate directed at me and it doesn’t matter that it’s coming from anonymous keyboard warriors, it still hurts like hell. These attacks are relentless, day in, day out. Being online

used to be my sanctuary, but now it's a prison. Yet here I am, online again when I know how much it messes with my head. I'm addicted to it and I don't know how to stop. It makes me miserable and depressed and leaves me feeling worthless, but I can't stop myself. I can't stop myself . . .

(Ms Jones' bottom lip trembles. She hesitates.)

'I wish I could go back to the Jem Jones I was before I started Vlogging. And some of you will tell me there's no reason why I can't do that. But I don't know how to be that woman again. Too much has happened and I don't know who I am or what I am. Sometimes I feel so far removed from myself that I don't even think I'm real any more.'

(Ms Jones pauses to cry. She holds her head down to hide her face, then reaches for tissues and dabs at her eyes.)

'I'm sorry, guys, but I'm no use to anyone like this so that's why I'm saying goodbye. Congratulations to anyone watching who has helped to make my life a living hell – you win. I give up, I surrender. I can't make anything right any more. Thank you to those who have shown me love, and I apologize for letting you all down so badly. I have no control over anything . . . I'm better off away from both the virtual world and the real one.'

(Ms Jones offers an apologetic smile and reaches for something out of camera shot. A grey gun becomes visible in her left hand. She slowly points it to her temple, closes her eyes, pulls the trigger and temporarily falls from view, until the automatic lens finds her again. The broadcast continues for around seventeen minutes until her body is discovered.)

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