


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

C. J. TUDOR

FROM THE  
BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF  
**THE ONE**  
NOW A NETFLIX  
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.**

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Caring companions **encourage one another** to have regular health check-ups, take medication, **eat nutritiously** and **exercise more.**

A healthy marriage  
means **a healthy  
mind.**



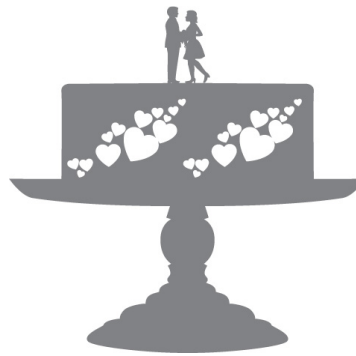
You're **less likely** to suffer anxiety,  
depression, substance abuse,  
loneliness, psychosis or attempt  
suicide if you're together.

\*Statistics based on Government-funded research.



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# 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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**Impartial & supportive marriage advice throughout all stages**



**Helping Britain to build back better**



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# 1

## Roxi

**Roxi glared in disbelief at the YouTube video playing on** her tablet. 'How the hell has she bagged that?' she muttered.

Walking across the white sandy beaches of one of the Maldives' islands, an energetic young woman gesticulated with the gusto of a children's television presenter as she described to the camera the soaring temperatures and natural beauty of the tropical paradise.

'If your bingo wings flap any faster you'll be airborne,' Roxi continued as the camera panned out to focus on the luxury resort.

Autumn Taylor's tan was rich and her skin glowing, her hair was immaculately coiffed and, despite her claims of having only just woken up, her make-up was flawless. She clenched a tube of sunscreen in one hand and, in the other, a bottle of water. Both labels faced the lens.

Roxi paused the video, picked up her phone, opened the Notes App and began to dictate. 'Sunglasses: Prada. Bikini: Harper Beckham. Sunblock: Nivea. Mineral water: Acqua Panna. Tits: sponsor unknown.'

She glanced at the data surrounding the Vlogger's online channel, titled Autumn's Endless Summer. It contained forty-two videos shot around the world in Bali, India, Fiji Islands, the Seychelles, Musha Cay and Bora Bora. Her most recent clip, posted yesterday, had already garnered more than a million views. Her position as one of the world's top ten Influencers ruffled Roxi's feathers every time she thought about it. Which was frequently.

Autumn's content was a far cry from the videos Roxi had been editing that morning in an overcast New Northampton. Yesterday,

she had been wandering around the shop floor of a discount home and fashion outlet discussing the week's new best buys. She'd made sure to use the key words and phrases in every Influencer's dictionary – 'hey guys', 'community', 'get ready with me', 'collab', 'challenge' and 'haul' – and with the same enthusiasm as booking a French Airbnb and being handed the keys to the Palace of Versailles.

Her footage had been shot on a camera phone and lit with a portable LED ring light, both operated by her reluctant offspring Darcy and Josh. The end result was as far removed from Autumn's high production values as the sun and the moon. And when Roxi had briefly dragged her daughter in front of the lens, no amount of sharp editing could disguise Darcy's thunderous expression. She would rather be burning in the fiery flames of hell than be in Costland.

'I don't even get why you're making videos,' Darcy had moaned, her negativity buzzing in Roxi's ear like a trapped mosquito. 'Nobody watches your Vlogs.'

'Let's try a little positivity, shall we?' Roxi had replied. 'One hashtag seen by a PR could change everything.'

'You're far too old for this.'

'Jem Jones isn't much younger than me.'

'She's a dinosaur but at least she's a dinosaur people give a damn about.'

'I have twelve thousand combined social media followers.'

'Is that all?' Darcy had laughed. 'That dog with the lazy eye and patch on its back that looks like Prince Louis has more followers than you. Vlogging isn't going to make you famous. You're embarrassing yourself.'

'Shall I tell you what embarrassing is?' Roxi had retaliated. 'You turning up at school tomorrow with no phone because it's been taken away from you as punishment for not doing as you're told. Now be a good little girl, shut up and point that camera at me when I tell you.'

'I hate you,' Darcy had muttered.

'The feeling's mutual, darling.'

It wasn't, but Roxi couldn't deny that when children had appeared in her world, her former life had swiftly crumbled. Even now, she

was struggling to rebuild it. And she quietly resented them for it.

Watching Autumn's video was forcing Roxi to accept that, despite her best efforts, her clip lacked excitement in the subject matter. Not even a warm colour filter, background music and a screen filled with positive emojis could save it. The Taylors of this virtual universe received beautifully boxed high-end fashion, jewellery, luxury holidays and perfumes. The Roxis received non-aspirational products like espadrilles, panty liners and renewable wooden cases for Audites, the mandatory Artificial Intelligence-powered personal assistants installed in all Smart Marriage homes. Regardless, she was always the consummate professional, reminding herself that even Jem Jones had started somewhere.

Today, though, Autumn's video had pushed her to the edge. She made a snap decision and hit the delete button. There would be no more clips like this.

Darcy had been partially to blame for her mother's Vlogging. Twelve years earlier, her daughter hadn't been the easiest of infants, thanks to colic, reflux, eczema and frequent sleep regressions. Roxi had spent many a sleepless night online searching for advice. And there'd been a video or a Vlog for just about every ailment known to babykind. But very few of these Influencers had resembled her. They weren't sleep-deprived mums in torn joggers and threadbare jumpers that hid their lumps and bumps. They didn't tie their hair up in scrunchies or go outside with make-up free faces. They were immaculately turned-out domestic goddesses living their best, filter-lensed lives. Roxi had subscribed to their channels, bookmarked their pages, lived vicariously through their videos and photos, queued at their book signings and voted for them as they competed on reality TV shows. They became friends Roxi had yet to meet.

But, over time, envy had replaced her fascination. Why were they travelling the world, eating at the best restaurants, wearing the most sought-after outfits, while she was doing the school run in decade-old elasticated jeans and returning home to piles of dirty washing? Against the chaos and disorder of her early years, she had found normality in two children and a husband. Only it wasn't enough. She needed something else, something more.

The solution had appeared as unexpectedly as if God had delivered it to her by hand. She would start her own Vlog.

'You should definitely do it, babes,' her closest friend Phoebe had advised. 'If that lot can do it, why can't you? You'd be a natural. You're smart, funny and very persuasive. You could sell meat to a vegan.'

Roxi had thrown everything but the kitchen sink at her content. Some weeks her posts focused on budget fashions; in others, she offered advice on keeping a relationship fresh. Everything from sex to shopping, beauty and motherhood were covered. But, to her frustration, her audience numbers were slow to grow – and she was not being seen by the brands she coveted.

Her attention returned to Autumn and her followers. The majority were in the lucrative teen and twenty-something female market with high disposable incomes. But one profile image took her by surprise – it belonged to Darcy. She wasn't aware her daughter had even activated an Instagram account. Roxi skimmed through her posts. They were mostly made up of videos of Darcy and her friends pouting before the camera or performing choreographed dance routines. It was only as she was about to leave that she clocked Darcy's follower total. It was approaching 12,000 on one platform alone. Bewildered, she went back to Autumn's homepage.

'If I didn't know better, I'd think you had a girl-crush on her,' came a voice from behind.

'Jesus, Owen!' Roxi gasped as her husband pecked her on the cheek and peered over her shoulder. His sports bag and hockey stick lay in the doorway.

'How is the lovely Autumn today? I see her in this house so often that she feels like part of the family.'

'Another thirty thousand people have followed her in the last week. *In the last bloody week.* Why? Please explain it to me.'

He shrugged. 'People like her? She's fun, she's enthusiastic, she's young and she's pretty.'

Roxi's eyes narrowed. 'Is that what you want to see online, young pretty girls?'

'Careful.' Owen pointed to the Audite on the kitchen side.

The small, black cylindrical device seemed to be staring back at her. Upgrading to a Smart Marriage allowed it to record ten random minutes of their conversation and alert them to any problems it might find in their relationship. She changed her tack. 'Any idiot can do what Autumn does. I want to help people; she wants to humblebrag.'

'You're kidding yourself if you think you're Vlogging out of the goodness of your heart. You want what she has. And you're jealous she's better at it than you.'

'Thanks, Owen, that's really what I need to hear right now.'

'You know there's a shelf life when it comes to being an Influencer. Perhaps no matter what you do, age isn't on your side.'

'So if I looked younger, I might get more work? Is that what you're saying?'

Owen shook his head. 'You look perfect to me,' he added before leaving her alone to research the internet for a discount code for face-tightening procedures. She only stopped when a news alert appeared on her screen, along with Jem Jones' image.