

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Being Committed

Anna Maxted

Contents

Title Page
About the Book
About the Author
Also by Anna Maxted
Dedication
Acknowledgements

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23

Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48
Chapter 49
Chapter 50
Chapter 51
Chapter 52

Copyright

About the Book

Hannah thinks you have to be insane to get married. She's content with her life - the job as private investigator at Hound Dog Investigations, the boyfriend of five years, Jason, and the wonderful father (pity her mother is such a disaster). Besides, she's tried marriage once before, but she ended up divorced before she was 21.

So, when the long-suffering Jason proposes, Hannah doesn't think twice about turning him down. Still, she is a little shaken when, a month later, the man has the nerve to get engaged to someone else. Is she not up to settling down? Hannah's family are convinced she blew her one chance of hooking a permanent man, and maybe - just maybe - there's something in Jason's theory that being committed means first coming to terms with your past.

Brimming with the warmth, perception and understanding that characterises Anna Maxted's writing, *Being Committed* mixes heartache with humour and is her finest novel yet.

About the Author

Anna Maxted lives in London with her husband Phil and their two sons Oscar and Conrad. Anna read English at Cambridge and works as a freelance journalist. She is also the author of three international bestselling novels, *Getting Over It*, *Running in Heels* and *Behaving Like Adults*.

Also by Anna Maxted

Getting Over It
Running in Heels
Behaving Like Adults
A Tale of Two Sisters

Being Committed

Anna Maxted



arrow books

*To Nettie Edelman - imagine, everyone,
the best sort of grandma*

Acknowledgements

As Oscar might say, a bigger, taller thank you to:

Phil Robinson, my every hero etc, etc; Jonny Geller - I'll say it again, the best! Mary Miller, without you, this would not have been possible; Paul Hawkes, I love ya, meanwhile I dread to think what you know about me; Gary Akres, apologies for H, she doesn't have your morals! Pamela Walker, and all the lovely people at Garden Suburb Theatre. It was a thrill and a privilege to be allowed behind the scenes; Roger - I named H's father before we met, I swear! Maryanne Hillier - you were fabulous, not to mention hilarious; Maria Yiannikaris - for your wisdom, you said some beautiful things; Andrew Robinson - a credit to your profession, heh heh; Kirsty Fowkes - miracle worker, I mean that; Susan Sandon - for everything, half of which I probably don't even know about ... The same goes for the wonderful Andy McKillop, Ron Beard, Mark McCallum, Richard Cable, Faye Brewster, Charlotte Bush, Georgina Hawtrey-Woore, and Glenn O'Neill. Thank you all for your kindness, talent and support; Deborah Schneider - for being fierce and irrepressible; Mary Maxted, for the priceless information on H; Sarah Spear - for making work so much fun; Jacquie Drewe - Jack owes you! Duncan Heath - fiction is a poor shadow of real life ... Frank Tallis - you were brilliant, as ever; Carol Jackson - for being tireless; Douglas Kean - for helping to effect that lunch; Suzanne McIluff - Jack changed career, forgive me! Anna Moore - for village info; Rupert Reece, super surfer; Geoff Robertson, for putting me in touch with Jo Eccleshare, and

Sarah Hurley, who were great - thank you for your insights into the world of am dram.

Without wishing to scare anyone, there were also people who helped without realising ... Caroline Glass, Laura Dubiner, John Nathan (there's always something!) Rory Aird, Ben Figgis, and Justin Thomson. (R, B and J, see Ch.5). A note to my friends in HGS, I disclaim responsibility for Hannah's views on the Burb (Mostly. I agree with her about the minibus).

And finally, Lesley Diamond and Dr Howard Myers - do excuse me, I've taken dental liberties, as I didn't wish the bride's day to be spoiled with a puffy mouth from root planing (her recovery is miraculous, I admit). Maybe read this after my next appointment.

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! - *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 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 fogs. 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.

'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.'

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.

'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.

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.'

Chapter 2

When I introduced Jason to a member of my family as 'my boyfriend', six months after we first met, Gabrielle's reaction was 'poor kid'. She referred to Jason being younger than I was and moony-eyed, but it still annoyed me. Who did she think I was, Heidi Fleiss? I reasoned that Gabrielle was blissfully married to my brother, Oliver, so perhaps she believed she had the monopoly on love. Her husband thought so too. When Gabrielle told him I was seeing Jason, he left a message on my answer machine: 'Ner!' - 'Hannah' is too much of a stretch for Oliver - 'I hear you're banging Jason! I think it's hilarious!'

Neither Jason nor I - we were in my kitchen discussing what we should eat from the freezer at the time - agreed with him.

'It's because we're younger than them,' I said, deleting the message. 'They think they can patronise us. Oh, and because Gab and Oliver are *married*. You'd think they invented it.'

Jason laughed. He often laughed at things I said, surprising me. I never thought I was funny till I got together with Jason.

That I got together with Jason at all was unlikely. He'd attended the same school as Oliver. Our older brothers had been in the same class. His family lived in Highgate, in a huge white house. The first time I set eyes on Jason, I felt I knew him. And I don't mean that in the 'you complete me' sense. I felt I knew him simply because I knew hundreds of boys like him. The dark hair, the brown eyes, the wealthy

family, the five-a-side football on Sunday mornings. I took one look at him and I knew which university he'd attended and that his mother had sent him food parcels once a week all through term.

As it happened, his mother hadn't sent him food parcels all through term because she'd died when he was thirteen. She dropped dead of a heart attack in the street. She was buying nuts for a party. When he mentioned it, I remembered. Bad news is social currency - I was going to say 'when you're a teenager', but on second thoughts, I'll amend that to 'when you're a human being'. Aged fifteen, I had no idea how you treated someone with a dead parent, so I'd played safe and ignored him if we passed in the school corridor. I did apologise about that, later. He *had* noticed. He was a sensitive boy. On our third date he said, 'Were you breastfed?' I nearly ended it there. I didn't, though, because he was delightful. He was enthusiastic, without cynicism, like a new puppy.

Jason and I met in the kitchen, at a New Year's Eve party. I hate those things. I'd rather sit on my own, see in 1 January looking up medical complaints on Google. It was ten to twelve and I was about to leave. I'd decided I'd prefer to spend midnight in the Vauxhall than with these people, and I was hoping to filch some peanuts for the road. I was starving - people never provide anything *substantial* for guests under twenty-five; do they think hunger only hits in middle-age?

I'd just tipped the dusty remains of a packet of Doritos down my throat, when I realised that I wasn't alone. I turned round and there was this guy, staring at me. Twit, I thought. It's the first rule of surveillance. Never stare directly at the back of the subject's head because chances are they will turn round and look at you. It's *instinct*.

'Yes? Can I help you?' I said.

If I sounded harsh, it's because I hadn't had a good year.

He replied, 'I like the back of your head,' and I laughed before I could stop myself. If he'd thought of a better line I don't think I would have stayed.

'I'm not even meant to be here,' I told him.

The host was a friend of Oliver, which was fine, but he and Gabrielle had said they'd meet me there and they hadn't turned up.

'I'm not meant to be here either,' said Jason, who turned out to be the host's younger brother. He was meant to be surfing in Australia, but the holiday firm he'd paid a grand had collapsed three days before and he hadn't taken out travel insurance *yet*.

'So when were you planning to take it out?' I said. I cracked a smile. 'On the flight home?'

He talked to me about surfing and, to my surprise, we were still in that kitchen at 5 a.m. Jason fell in love with surfing after seeing Sean Pertwee star in *Blue Juice* with Catherine Zeta-Jones. Not her finest hour, although it probably was Sean Pertwee's. I was touched to meet the man who could claim with a straight face that he had been influenced by *Blue Juice*. I'm sure it's why I let him kiss me.

Truth was, Jason wanted to impress, and I wanted to be impressed. A few weeks after we got together, I even tried surfing. It was his idea, not mine. I've never felt the need to encroach on a partner's interests. Not least when they take place in Polzeath. I believe a crucial element in the success of any relationship is the quality time you spend apart.

I wasn't enthralled at wearing a wetsuit. As bodies go, mine is like the Vauxhall. It does its job but isn't flash. I accept that, but there's a difference between compromising one's dignity and taking liberties with it. I had the air of a walrus and my thighs squeaked as I approached the water. Though the dress code was nothing to the sport itself. Surfing made me realise how little I enjoy exerting myself. Also, I wear contacts so was forced to keep my eyes

screwed up the entire time I was in the sea. It was a tense eight minutes.

I might not have taken to his hobbies, but I took to Jason. For five years, I'd been sleeping. He woke me up.

I'd skipped college, become what my boss, Greg, calls a 'blagger'. A blagger is a low life form in the world of PIs. I worked for a trace agency. The years became a blur. Your every day is spent ringing people to blag information out of them. You can do this in a nice way, but truth is, you choose the quickest. You reveal a little of your chosen persona. If I was claiming to be from the DSS, it might be, 'We've just had a new system installed, it's a nightmare.' I was paid less than the minimum wage, I know it. It was not great for one's self-esteem. Jason was the boot in the ass I needed. The week after we met, I talked my way into a job at Hound Dog Investigations.

Jason was still a student then, and keen to save the world. After 'uni', he'd been to Tibet and wouldn't shut up about it. When he completed his 'post-grad' law degree he planned to specialise in human rights. He recycled his lemonade cans and copies of the *Guardian*. I noticed that unlike some of his peers, he treated women with reverence. Maybe, in his eyes, we all were potential mothers. Whatever, I found him charming. Old-fashioned, a real gentleman. He was an antidote to my entire lifestyle. He took me to see *Hamlet* at the National, and sat there for nearly four hours, wet-eyed. My eyes stayed dry. My seat nearly didn't.

'What did you think?' he breathed, afterwards.

'Yeah,' I said. 'I've dated men like him.'

I'd never dated a man like Jason. Gabrielle and Oliver might scoff but we had a lot in common. Jason thought it would 'spoil things' if you lived together before you got married. I couldn't agree more. I was twenty-six years old and I liked my own space. There wasn't much of it, which made me value it all the more. I had an apartment that was

pretty much all corridor, in Camden. It was a basement flat, and the lounge window was at pavement level. As I viewed the place, a tramp lifted her skirt and relieved herself in front of *my* railings. Even the estate agent was shocked when I made an offer. I didn't care about tramps' bottoms. I thought it was sad but funny. Presumably, the estate agent wouldn't have been offended had she been a dog.

I don't think Jason was impressed with my home, but he wasn't repelled by it either. As he still lived with his father at the age of twenty-four, I think he saw it as some achievement that I could stuff crisp wrappers down the side of my sofa without being yelled at. Actually, I didn't do this as often as I might. I'm a messy person who is obsessively tidy in bouts. When the flat lapses into a state worthy of *Grime Watch*, I'll spend until 3 a.m. scrubbing. I find I have the eyesight of an eagle and at 4 a.m. I'll still be pouncing on a rice grain on the kitchen floor or a biscuit crumb near the leg of the lounge table.

It would make sense to employ a cleaner, but I don't. Even though Gabrielle taunts me, 'It's your heritage.' Gabrielle gets a lot of mileage from the fact I was born in the Suburb. This isn't a whine. Because I get even more from the fact that she was born in Mill Hill. *Miw Hiw*, I call it, in deference to the local accent (at the end of each word draw down both corners of your mouth as far as they'll go).

Actually, there's nothing wrong with *Miw Hiw* except that it's a long hike out of London and not exactly kicking. I've spent no time in *Miw Hiw*, but I sense that its female inhabitants attend the local salon weekly for a *do*, carry bags that match their denim and tan leather uppers, and refuse to step outside unless their long acrylic nails are painted red. If ever I want to annoy Gabrielle I'll describe a client with the words, 'She was a bit *Miw Hiw*.' Gabrielle will shriek, 'Shut up, you've never even set foot in the place.' I tell her, 'You live in North-West London all your life, Gabrielle, you get an instinct for these things.'

Gabrielle has changed since the days she let a woman who'd escaped from an asylum and into Snippits perm and dye her hair. Oliver once showed me an old photo and I did myself an injury. She had eye make-up like Ozzy Osbourne and a barnet like Axl Rose.

Twelve years and one child later, Gabrielle resides in Belsize Park with my brother and has adjusted her image - though I wouldn't say *accordingly*. Belsize Park isn't short on high-maintenance women but I can't believe there are many who spend quite so much on their appearance as my sister-in-law. Last September, when Jude was four months old, Oliver found a £3,000 suede coat in a plastic bag in their bedroom. Next to a box of £545 stilettos. Jimmy Shoes, I think she said they were. Anyway, Oliver gently suggested to Gabrielle that perhaps shopping was becoming 'an emotional crutch?'

Her reply: '*Du-uh!*'

Their part-time nanny was employed shortly after, enabling Gabrielle to resume her work - she designs and makes wedding dresses - and her health club membership. I think the shopping bills decreased, a little. She claims she needs to dress well for her career, as brides-to-be want first-sight evidence of your good taste even if they don't know they do. I'm giving attitude but secretly I defer to everything she says. Fashion is not my thing. It is hers. She reads *Womens Wear Daily* like a preacher reading from the Bible. Only on occasion do I doubt its influence. One morning she knocked on my door and I opened it in my Snoopy nightie. She cried, 'Hannah, I *love* your look!'

When I first introduced Gabrielle and Jason, four and a half years ago, I reckoned they'd get on. Gabrielle's knowledge of what to wear, now and in the *future*, what will suit, where to get your hair cut, which restaurant is hot, what wine to order, is exhaustive (and exhausting). If her mission as an ex-inmate of Miw Hiw was to become sophisticated, she succeeded. Being a mother cramped her

glamorous style for about five minutes. *But*, but. Like Jason, she has a warm, loving heart and traditional leanings. Some minor celebrity got hitched in a dress that I swear was modelled on a toilet-roll holder doll, and I made the error of commenting on it.

In a voice of ice, Gabrielle said, 'You know, Hannah, you should take a day off. Every girl who gets married has a secret image of herself. Of how she wants to look on her wedding day. And I believe in her right to look beautiful, if only for once in her life, and for everyone to be on her side for that moment. And it is true that brides are radiant. Even the plainest, plumpest girl is transformed. I get very angry if ever I hear someone say anything against a bride.'

I felt like shit. I deserved to.

I was surprised that Gabrielle didn't take to Jason. I remember, early in our relationship, Jason sauntering into a café to fetch us some coffees while I sat outside. A blonde made cat-eyes at him as he passed. He didn't notice, which amused me, so on his return I remarked on it. The conversation wandered to fidelity. Cheating, he told me, wasn't in his nature. 'My father never had an affair,' he said, as if that explained it.

His words reminded me of something Gabrielle had said when I'd mentioned a case I was working on: older guy, young wife, he suspected her of cheating with her fitness instructor, and he was right.

With real exasperation, Gabrielle had said, "'To the exclusion of all others.'" Why don't people *get* that?'

How could those two not adore each other?

Well, they didn't. They were mutually polite, ever so respectful and attentive. But they had trouble stretching civilities beyond two minutes. It was inconvenient. I couldn't even read a magazine on Gabrielle and Oliver's luxury toilet. Or as Gabrielle once called it, '*luxe* toilet'. What the hell does that mean? Jason would loiter outside the bathroom, sighing. Gabrielle would suddenly recall she

had an urgent email to write. ('Like *what?*' I grumbled to Jason after she used this excuse once too often. "'Cancel the black satin. On second thoughts, I'll make this one white.'")

Their indifference bothered me, but not that much. It's not as if my faith in Gabrielle was absolute. I was happy to let her correct me on the *zeitgeist* (now I no longer pronounce St Tropez 'Saint Trowpez', or Merlot 'Merlot'), but I put her straight on quite a few things too. She was so naïve. One time she had her purse stolen. A while later, she got a call at home from the Barclaycard Fraud Department. 'We've found your credit card, madam. To establish your identity, please state your mother's maiden name, your credit limit and your date of birth.' It was pure luck I was there and overheard the conversation.

As Gabrielle opened her mouth to tell all, I pressed my thumb on the receiver cradle and cut off the caller.

'What did you do that for?' shouted Gabrielle.

I rolled my eyes. 'You give the details, that guy runs up three and a half grand on your card.'

As it happened, it *was* Barclaycard Fraud Department. But it might not have been.

Chapter 3

When I turned down Jason's marriage offer, he squirmed his hand out of my grasp and ran it over his face.

'This isn't happening,' he said. 'Tell me this isn't happening.' He shook his head at the ceiling and laughed, a nasty sound. Tears came and he smudged them away with his thumbs.

I watched in horror. 'Jase,' I said. I reached out to touch him.

He jerked away, shaking his head, one hand held up as if to ward off the devil.

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

Easily said, but the truth. I *was* sorry. I was sorry he'd blown our future by asking such a stupid question. That sounds mean, but really. If you don't like Chinese food, say, and your partner takes you to a Chinese restaurant for your birthday, even if it's the best Chinese in the city ('yeah, you say you don't like Chinese food, but wait till you taste this, this is different, you'll *love* it') there is a part of you that's going to be irked. The action of treating one's beloved to a large meal is seemingly above reproach, but this sort of deed has an evangelical selfishness to it. The undertone is, 'Your opinion is wrong, let me convert you to *my* way of thinking, you'll be much happier ...' When in my experience, if ya don't like Chinese food, ya just don't like it.

Well, *I* don't like Chinese food, but I prefer it to marriage. Not marriage in general - some of my best

friends are married – just marriage for *me*. Jason knew this. I feel, therefore, I had a right to be annoyed.

Jason stumbled away, out of the bathroom. I followed, my heart at boot level. Jason has the body of a young god and – in theory – should have been able to protect me in a fight. I'm not saying that's what most women look for, but in these mean times it's a bonus, whether you care to admit it or not. I had no doubt that if ever I was attacked in Jason's presence, he'd leap to my aid and faint on the spot, leaving my aggressor to stamp on my head. (I'd hope to defend myself, but I suspect that if I tried to throw a punch I'd break my knuckles. I never drank enough milk.)

My point is, there has always been a softness to Jason, which I liked. I saw where I was needed. *I* could protect him. He trusted people and I thought that was admirable, if foolish. I could take care of him, in that sense.

The second time we met he took me back to his dad's place. It was 5 January. Jason, who likes order, had thrown away the previous year's contents of his Filofax. There it was, in his bin, the entire diary. I didn't expect Jason to possess a two-way shredder. (We've pieced together a document shredded one way before, but that's rare; it's just that at Hound Dog, time is someone else's money.) Still, most crooks are lazy – at least invest in a one-way shredder. He hadn't even torn each page in half!

'Jason,' I said, 'what are you going to do with that?'

'Throw it in the rubbish.' He laughed. 'I *was* going to recycle it, but ... I didn't want it cluttering up the corner of my room for a week.'

I looked severe.

'What?' said Jason.

'I burn my rubbish,' I said. 'All of it.'

'You do? Why?'

'I'm not paranoid,' I said – he was doing a bad job of looking unalarmed – 'I know how people work. And you're leaving a data trail behind you that can be abused. They

can go through your bins, take your name, proof of address, your credit card details, your bank details, steal your whole identity. They can take out loans in your name. All they need are two, three items with your home address on them, and they can walk into PC World. Before you know it, you've bought five computers at two grand each. Worst-case scenario, the bailiffs come knocking, your credit rating is destroyed, you've got years of aggro trying to clean it up.'

'Gosh,' said Jason. He marched over to the bin, fished out his Filofax papers and placed them at the back of his sock drawer.

I smiled. I could keep this man from being hurt.

Now, five years later, *I* was doing the hurting. It made me want to get away. I couldn't stand to be around him when he was in this delicate state. It repelled me - not a noble feeling to admit to but, I'm hoping, a human one. It's instinct to remove yourself from the person most likely to get eaten (primitively speaking). That didn't stop me from feeling ashamed. I'd always presumed that my desire to protect Jason from harm was because I loved him. Now I wondered if it was because I couldn't stand a man to exhibit weakness.

'Jason,' I said, 'I am so sorry. I *do* ... you know ... feel the same way. But ...' I didn't want to sound piqued but it was hard not to. 'I ... was surprised you asked. Knowing how I feel about marriage.'

Jason's face turned a pinchy red and white with rage. 'You say that like it's a bloody computer program!' he shouted. '*Marriage* is only as bad or good as the people in it, you, you *fool!*'

'I—'

'Five years,' he said. 'Five years. What, did you think we'd just meander on like this for ever? I'm twenty-nine and you've wasted my time. What is so *scary* about getting