



Saying Yes to the Millionaire (A Bride for All Seasons)

By Fiona Harper

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Editorial Review

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'No, I can't. I don't think I can do this!'

Solid ground was a distant memory. Fern glanced down past her feet and a tidal wave of nausea crashed in her stomach. The Thames glittered in the June sun and London politely carried on about its business one hundred and fifty feet below her. Someone behind her muttered, 'Is she going to jump or not?'

Not. Definitely not. Surely, if God had meant us to do this we'd have been born with lengths of elastic attached to our feet.

She gulped. Every muscle in her body had tightened itself into a dozen knots. She closed her eyes, but that just made things worse. The darkness magnified the dull roar of the traffic and the flap of the bungee cord as it swung in the faint breeze. Her body swayed.

No. She was not going to do this.

Her eyes snapped open and she twisted her head, opening her mouth to tell them it had all been a horrible mistake. But, before the sounds emerged from the back of her throat, a warm pair of hands steadied her on either side of her waist.

'She's all right. Aren't you, Fern?'

Fern shook her head, but the squeak that finally made it out of her mouth sounded an awful lot like yes.

She caught a faint hint of aftershave as he moved closer, felt his breath as it tickled the fine tendrils of hair that had worked their way out of her ponytail and now curled in front of her ears.

'You can do this.' The voice sounded so warm and reassuring. 'You know that, don't you?'

For a second, Fern almost forgot where she was, high on a crane on the banks of the Thames. Almost forgot the crowd of onlookers and charity event organisers looking up at her from the hard concrete below. She recognised that voice!

Josh was here.

And he was right behind her, whispering words of encouragement into her ear. Her pulse didn't know whether to speed up, slow down or stop altogether. But, bizarrely, she felt safe with him there, so close she could feel the beat of his heart against her back.

'Yes,' she whispered. This time, she half-believed her answer.

'So...I'm going to count to three, and when I say go, you just allow yourself to fall.'

He had the most delicious voice. It seemed to curl and roll inside her ears. She got carried away just listening to the sounds, the individual syllables, forgetting the meaning of the words. And then suddenly she realised he was saying three.

'But I—'

He didn't shout; he said the next word so gently it was almost as if he'd just breathed out. 'Go.'

And then she was falling, falling—the breath sucked so hard from her body that she couldn't even scream.

Three days earlier...

'No, thank you.' Fern shook her head once, firmly, hoping Lisette would get the message. She should have known better. Her friend waved something slimy-looking on a fork in front of her face, so close she was going cross-eyed trying to focus on it.

'Go on! Try it.'

'Really, Lisette. No. I don't like seafood.'

'It's squid. Hardly tastes of anything.' The fork swayed in a hypnotising motion. 'We've been coming to Giovanni's once a month for the past year and each time you order exactly the same.'

Fern fended the squid-loaded cutlery off with her hand. 'I like Pasta Neapolitana. It's my favourite.'

Lisette threw her fork down on her plate. 'It's boring, that's what it is.'

'It's nice. And I don't run the risk of food poisoning if it hasn't been cooked or stored properly.'

'Spoken like a true Health and Safety specialist.'

Fern stabbed a pasta bow with her fork, put it in her mouth and chewed, all the time staring defiantly at her friend. Lisette was always poking fun at her job. She swallowed her mouthful and took a sip of wine. Not everybody could have an outlandish job like Lisette's. And besides, her job might seem routine, but she helped people, kept them safe.

'Talking of jobs, what are you up to next week?'

Lisette popped the squid in her mouth and swallowed, wearing a playful smile as she gulped it down. 'Guess.'

Fern rolled her eyes. Lisette's main work was being a professional 'extra'. She could end up sitting in a pub in one of the weekly soaps or dressed up in tin-foil for a sci-fi series. Variety might be the spice of life, but Fern couldn't understand how Lisette tolerated a job with sporadic work, long hours and four o'clock in the morning starts.

'Lis, I haven't got a clue. Why don't you just tell me?'

'I've got a spot on a new police drama. Next week my uniform will be fishnets, high heels and a wicked glint in my eye.'

A small crease appeared between Fern's brows. 'Since when did police officers wear fishnets?'

Lisette grinned at her. 'Come on, can you really picture me in big clumpy heels and a neat white shirt? I'm going to be "Hooker Number Three". Cool, huh?'

Fern nodded, perhaps a little too hard. Lisette gave her a knowing smile.

'I'm sorry, Lis. I'm really pleased you've got the work but...'

'Standing up in front of a room full of people and being outrageous is just not your cup of tea. I know. Horses for courses, and all that. I'd die of boredom being an insurance investigator.'

'Risk analyst,' Fern reminded her, although she didn't know why she bothered. Lisette always got her job title wrong. You just had to mention the word 'insurance' or 'office' and Lis's eyes glazed over.

'Yeah, yeah. I remember.'

They returned their attention to their food. Lisette speared a mussel and paused before she put the fork into her mouth. 'If not squid, how about one of these?'

Fern sighed.

'No. D'you know,' Lis said, still munching the dollop of yuckiness, 'I think I hear you say that word more than any other in your vocabulary.'

'No, you don't.'

Lisette stabbed the air with her fork in a got you kind of manner. Fern looked at her plate and decided she couldn't be bothered with the rest.

'See? You're bored with that already. What you need is a bit more excitement in your life.'

Oh, yeah. Here we go.

Lisette saw it as her mission in life to liven up her poor, deprived friend. Over the years she'd dragged her along to all sorts of strange activities: kickboxing, paragliding, weird yoga classes where you were supposed to fold yourself up like a pretzel... And when those attempts had failed it had got even worse. Next she'd started trying to find exciting men for Fern to date. After an evening with Brad the Formula One driver, she'd been scared of getting in a car for a week.

'No, I do not.'

Lis's mouth stretched into a thin, wide smile. 'There's that word again. You just can't help yourself, can you?'

'Yes. I can.' Now it was her turn to wear the wide smile. Lisette shovelled more pasta into her mouth and as she chewed she stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. When she'd finished she sat back in her chair and folded her arms. 'I reckon if you had to go a week without saying no, you'd shrivel up and die.'

'Now you're just being ridiculous.'

'Am I? Okay, let's see just how ridiculous my theory is.'

Fern really should have listened to her instinct to get up and sprint out of the restaurant door at that point but she was too intrigued to miss out on the last part of her character assassination.

Lisette nodded to herself and then looked Fern square in the eye. 'I challenge you to say yes to every question you are asked for one whole week.'

Fern laughed so hard that a couple of other diners turned round to stare at her and she clapped a hand over

her mouth. 'And why on earth would I accept a challenge like that?'

A glint appeared in Lisette's eye. Fern's stomach dropped. When Lis thought on the hop like this, there was normally trouble to follow. Her brain was likely to kangaroo off in all sorts of directions and come up with some really stupid ideas.

'Because I will donate five hundred pounds to your Leukaemia Research thingy if you do it.'

That was below the belt. How was she going to refuse an offer like that? The cancer research charity she championed desperately needed more funds for vital research—research into treatments that might have saved Ryan's life all those years ago, if they'd been available. The charity was asking its volunteer fundraisers to try and raise one hundred thousand pounds. She'd been on countless fun runs, had sponsored this-and-thats, all to hike the total up—and they were so close now. Five thousand pounds to go. What Lisette was offering was a tenth of that. More than she could ever hope to raise by herself in one week.

'You're insane.'

'Quite possibly. But I'd quite happily hand over the cash if I got to see you take a few chances, live life a little. You're stuck in a rut, darling.'

No, she wasn't! She opened her mouth to tell Lisette so, but then realised she'd just be using that word again and it would only encourage her.

'Perhaps I like my rut.'

Lisette leaned back to let the waiter clear their plates. 'That, my dear Fern, is the heart of the problem. You need to break out of it now, before you hit middle age and get stuck in it for ever.'

If her insides hadn't been churning, the dramatic look on Lisette's face would have made her want to laugh. She took a deep breath. Her friend might be letting her imagination run away with her, but she still had some weapons of her own. Logic. Good sense. Sanity, even.

'You haven't thought this through at all. I couldn't possibly say yes to every question somebody asked me in a week. What if somebody asked me if I wanted to rob a bank, or set myself on fire?'

'Yes, complete strangers always wander up to you in London and ask you to join them in a spot of light burglary.'

Fern looked heavenwards and pushed her plate even further away from her. It was invading her personal space, making her feel uncomfortable. 'You're over-dramatising again. You know what I'm talking about. Someone could ask me to look the other way while they stole something or ask me to do something risky. I know the rest of the world might see London as being so very proper and a little bit stuffy but, let's face it, there are nutters roaming the streets of this city.'

Lisette should know. She'd dated half of them.

'You're right.' Lisette dug in her handbag for a pen and started doodling on a napkin. ...

Users Review

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