



Marrying Simone

ANNA JACOBS

Allison & Busby Limited
11 Wardour Mews
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allisonandbusby.com

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Chapter One

Perth, Western Australia

When Simone Ramsey arrived at the school, her grandson met her in the playground as arranged and walked with her to the hall.

A young teacher standing at the door said brightly, 'You must be Mrs Ramsey. I'm sorry but the junior hall's too small to fit all the children, so I'll have to send Tommy off to play games with the other non-performers.'

Simone watched open-mouthed as her grandson shouted a goodbye and ran away. It didn't surprise her that he wasn't performing. It was already evident to anyone who heard him sing that he wasn't musical. Very evident! It did surprise her, however, that Clo had wanted her to attend today. Surely her daughter had known Tommy wasn't going to sing in the concert? Or had he pretended he was in it?

The hall was stuffy even though this wasn't a really hot day, because March was often more humid. Why hadn't

they switched on the air conditioning, for heaven's sake?

As she waited for the concert to begin, it occurred to Simone how often this torture was going to be inflicted on her during the next decade or so. Tommy was the eldest grandchild. She shuddered. She'd already gone through this sort of thing with her two daughters when they were young and not enjoyed it at all.

They'd now produced four children between them – and might produce more, for all she knew – and would probably expect her to keep attending in their place year after year while they carried on with their working lives. The arithmetic of that number of concerts made her gulp.

She should have refused to come today as the grandparents on the other side of the family had done. She had seen them refuse to attend nursery or school functions several times now. They simply smiled and said, 'No, sorry, can't make it this time.'

Why couldn't she follow their example? Because she was a softie, that was why, and a pitiful liar, always had been. Her daughters knew her well enough to see through any attempts to say no.

There was another reason she should have refused. Experience had already taught her how variable these school concerts could be: occasionally excellent, mostly rather tedious and sometimes downright appalling, especially if the teacher hadn't had any previous experience at organising musical events for young participants. Why was she so weak about saying no?

The trouble was, Clo had asked her to go to the concert in front of Tommy and he'd looked at Simone

with such happy expectation on his face that she hadn't been able to refuse.

She was an idiot! Perhaps there was still time to leave.

Unfortunately, just as she was about to stand up and only fifteen minutes past the advertised starting time, an older teacher came out on the stage, smiled brightly at the captive audience and spoke into a faintly fizzing microphone. 'Welcome to our school concert, everyone. I'm sure you're going to enjoy it. Our Year 2 choir will start our show with a lovely song about the sea.'

Simone sank back on her chair with a sigh as a group of children filed on stage, shuffling and pushing one another. The teacher at the piano played the same note twice and sang it herself. This was clearly the signal to begin because the children began to yowl loudly, sounding more like a chorus of midnight cats than a group of human singers.

She winced. Half these children were too young to hold a complex tune like this. Whoever had chosen it had made a bad mistake.

She wriggled in another vain attempt to get comfortable. You'd think the school would provide bigger chairs for an adult audience. These were highly unsuitable for a woman in her fifties and she'd pinned up her hair too tightly. It was irritating her. She'd thought of having it cut but her daughters had both protested that she wouldn't seem herself with short hair, and it hadn't mattered enough to her.

The choir got tangled and faltered to a halt, so had to be restarted. She glanced along the row of fellow sufferers

but could see no way of sneaking out without drawing attention to herself. She should just leave anyway but she didn't quite like to do that. She was a coward.

The next item was a Year 1 class playing a variety of percussion 'instruments' allegedly in time with a recording. They didn't have much sense of rhythm, but they were overflowing with enthusiasm for making a lot of noise.

Simone let her thoughts wander. Her husband had died suddenly four years ago and though she was used to living on her own now, it could be hard to do things like this alone.

She'd met a guy of her own age a couple of years ago and had enjoyed Phil's company greatly until he moved in with her. He was definitely not domesticated, and she'd soon realised exactly why his ex-wife had left him.

Their cohabitation hadn't even lasted three months. She wasn't stupid enough to let anyone treat her like a servant and when he'd told her two weeks running that he was a bit short of money and couldn't pay his share of the household bills 'just yet', that had been the final straw. She'd dumped his belongings on the front lawn while he was at work and had all the locks to the house changed.

'Never mind,' she'd said carelessly to her daughters when she told them, 'I'll be able to babysit for you more often.'

Big mistake. Since then she'd found herself in great demand. She loved her grandchildren dearly – how could you not? – but she wanted to do something more interesting with her life than sit watching TV while her grandchildren

slept and their parents went out enjoying themselves.

To make matters worse, for the past year many of her friends and acquaintances had started introducing her to eligible men. Ha! There hadn't been one she really fancied. But some of the men had taken a while to stop pestering her. With one or two, she suspected that was because she was financially independent rather than due to an overwhelming attraction.

People began applauding and she realised the concert had ended. Well, that was a relief anyway.

'Weren't they cute?' the woman next to her said.

'No. Dreadful.' That got her several dirty looks from people nearby. Too bad. It was the worst school concert she'd ever attended.

When she went outside, she looked for Tommy, but he seemed to have vanished. Clo had said he'd catch the school bus at the usual time, so that Simone wouldn't need to go out of her way to take him home afterwards.

The buses were all lined up with children bobbing about inside. The ones who'd been performing in the concert were running across the oval to join them, shrieking and yelling.

What a total waste of an afternoon!

She was wasting her life, too. She sat in the car, feeling depressed, wondering how to change that. There had to be a more meaningful way of spending her time.

When she got home, Simone stared at the row of family photos on her mantelpiece and the dreadful thought returned. Years of school concerts lay ahead of her.

Both her daughters and their partners worked full-time and didn't go to many daytime school functions. And even the evening ones were usually too tiring after a day's work. She frowned as it occurred to her yet again that they didn't find it too tiring to go out in the evenings to cafés or friends' houses, or even too expensive for all their claims of tight budgets. Partly thanks to her free babysitting, no doubt!

Did anyone run classes in how to tell white lies to family members whom you loved dearly but who were driving you mad? If so, she'd be the first to enrol.

The phone rang just as she was getting ready for bed, but she didn't pick it up straight away. She listened to Deb leaving a message on the answerphone – another request for babysitting because a sudden wonderful opportunity had arisen for Deb and Logan the following evening.

'You won't believe it, Ma, but we've been given theatre tickets to a gala opening night, and there's a reception afterwards, so you may as well sleep over because we'll be late back.'

It was rare that Deb's outings ended before midnight anyway, so what did 'late' mean this time? Simone was an early-to-bed person and staying up till the small hours disrupted the following day for her, because she woke around her normal time of 6 a.m. and struggled for lack of sleep.

She hesitated, hand hovering near the phone, then shook her head and made no attempt to pick it up as her daughter ended the call with a request to get back to her and confirm the arrangement.

‘No, thank you, Deb. I can’t face it,’ she said aloud.

Easy to say that now, but how was she going to say it to her daughter?

The following day the phone rang early in the morning. Simone checked who was calling before picking up and was delighted to accept a spur-of-the-moment invitation from her best friend, Libby, to go round for an Indian takeaway and drinks that evening.

She danced round the living room after she’d put down the phone. A genuine excuse for not babysitting this time. She could cope with refusing now. And Libby never tried to find her a new husband. Yeah!

Later, she left a message on Deb’s phone at a time she knew her daughter would be unable to pick it up because staff weren’t allowed to receive personal calls during working hours.

‘Hi, darling. Only just got your message as I had an early night. Sorry, but I can’t babysit for you tonight because I’m going out myself. Got to dash.’ She put the phone down hastily and backed away from it.

There was another phone call from Deb in the late afternoon. Once again Simone listened to the message being recorded and her heart sank.

‘Hi, Ma. Are you sure there’s absolutely no chance of you changing what you’re doing tonight? All my other babysitters are busy, and this is such a golden opportunity to see that play in style. Please take pity on us.’

Simone didn’t return the call in case she let herself

be persuaded to change her plans. In fact, she left home a little early in case Deb called round in person to plead with her. That had happened before.

Her friend Libby opened the front door, beaming at her. ‘Oh, I’m glad you came early. I’m famished after running up and down those playing fields all day.’

‘You love running.’

Libby grinned. ‘Of course I do. I wouldn’t be a sports teacher otherwise, and it keeps me fit, but I do get tired sometimes by the end of the day. And hungry. We’ll order as soon as Greg gets home from work.’

She stopped talking to study Simone’s face. ‘Hey, what’s the matter?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Come on. I’ve known you since we were kids. I can recognise when you’re upset.’

Greg came in just then, but Libby wasn’t letting go. ‘Simone was about to tell me what’s upset her. Pour her a glass of wine and she can sleep over tonight so she doesn’t drink and drive. If anyone ever needed cheering up, it’s her.’

Simone leant back in her chair, relaxing as she always did with these two. ‘I’d love a glass of wine.’

When the food order had been phoned through, Libby said, ‘Right. Tell all.’

So Simone explained her dilemma, ending, ‘Am I being selfish?’

‘Not at all. It’s about time you made a stand. I know they love you and you love them, but your family are running you ragged, taking advantage of your kindness

since you got rid of rat man. I've been wanting to give you a nudge about it for a few months now, but Greg kept saying it was none of my business.'

Simone felt tears come into her eyes. 'You don't think I'm being selfish, then?'

Libby came across to give her a hug. 'No way.'

As they were settling down again, Greg snapped his fingers and exclaimed, 'I've got it! I know exactly what you can do to change things, Simone.'

The two women looked at him expectantly. Greg was a man of few words but rarely claimed what he couldn't deliver.

'A colleague of mine at work, Michael Westing, was asking only yesterday whether anyone knew a family who'd like to do a house swap for a few months. His in-laws in the UK want to come and stay in Australia for a while because his wife, who is their only child, is having her first baby. They have friends who do house swaps regularly and thought this might be a good, low-cost way to stay here, while still leaving their daughter and Michael their privacy.' He beamed at her. 'That might be just the thing for you.'

Simone gaped at him. 'Swap my house with strangers? I don't think so.'

'Not complete strangers, friends of a friend. They'd swap both their house *and* car, and expect the same from you in return, so you'd get an overseas holiday at the cost of an air fare.' He waited expectantly and when she didn't say anything, added, 'It'd be a perfect way for you to loosen the shackles of your loving family for a while.'

‘And for you to do something *exciting*,’ Libby put in. ‘After all, you’re from England originally so you can catch up with your relatives there.’

Simone stared from one to the other, still having trouble dealing with this idea. ‘I don’t know these relatives. We left the UK when I was six. That’s a crazy idea.’

Greg reached across to pat her hand. ‘Don’t be so hasty. You don’t have to decide this minute.’

But she wasn’t off the hook yet because Libby took over. ‘It’d do you good to get away, Simone. You gave up your job when Harvey died, so you’ve nothing to tie you down here.’

‘Well, the business was dependent on Harvey’s skills. I only used to run the office. I couldn’t keep things going on my own without him and when I had a brilliant offer to buy it, I bit their hand off. My accountant agreed it was the right thing to do. And then there was all that insurance money. I’d not expected that much.’

‘I didn’t expect you to stay at home, though, Simone. I thought you’d get a part-time job, or do some charity work or something. Since you split up with rat man, you’ve almost turned into a hermit.’

‘I looked at Jobs Vacant sections when I’d got over things a bit. Part-time jobs aren’t usually very interesting. I don’t *need* to work so I don’t have to put up with doing something tedious. If I don’t go mad and spend all my money on extravagances, I need never go out to work again.’

‘That’s what rat man wanted you to do, wasn’t it? Stay home and wait on him hand and foot, as well as providing a house for him at zero cost.’

‘I thought we’d agreed that the least said about him the better. You were right about him and I was wrong. I’m well over that mistake.’ But she’d have trouble trusting anyone again.

‘Yes, I know, but I still get mad every time I think about him trying to take you for a ride. Admit it, though. You’re bored out of your mind half the time.’ Libby’s voice grew softer. ‘Don’t you think it’s time to spread your wings a little?’

Greg took over again. ‘Michael told me about the place where his in-laws live. It’s in a leisure village in Wiltshire and I’m sure you’d find it easier to make friends in a set-up like that.’

‘What’s a leisure village?’

‘A small housing development on a campus of its own with a whole range of activities provided, rather like a miniature village. The other owners are mostly older people, apparently.’

‘Oh, retirement homes. I’ve looked at them here and the houses are tiny. It’d be like living in a cupboard.’

‘This isn’t like the Aussie retirement places. I’ve seen the photos and the houses at Penny Lake are quite big, and you’d have all sorts of activities available right on site. Owners pay an annual membership fee and take their pick from golf, a gym, a swimming pool, a hotel with restaurant and bar. Oh, and apparently there are lovely country walks near this one, as well as the lake it’s named after. You can just walk out of your front door and join in.’

‘That does sound rather nice.’ She enjoyed swimming, though not in the sea, which was too

bumpy for her. And she'd been doing a lot of walking lately. It helped fill the time.

They waited and she couldn't think what else to say.

Libby took over in a coaxing voice, 'It sounds like a safe place for a woman on her own to live.'

Greg added, 'The Dittons have only been living there for a few months. They love it and wouldn't be leaving it and going overseas so soon after moving in if it weren't for their first grandchild being on the way. Their daughter has been trying in vain to get pregnant for several years. They're thrilled to pieces but she's not been well, so has to rest a lot. Her parents want to help out without interfering too much.'

Simone had talked vaguely to Libby about finding something new to do with her life, but going away to England for a few months would be more than a bit OTT for a first step. The England she vaguely remembered from her childhood before her parents emigrated would have changed beyond recognition and she wouldn't recognise a single one of her relatives now. Her parents hadn't even taken photographs of them when they went back for a visit.

No, she couldn't do it! Definitely not. She opened her mouth to say so but Greg got in first.

'I know what, I'll ask Michael and his wife to call round to your place tomorrow evening and show you the photos of her parents' house. I've seen them and it looks lovely. They can suss out your house while they're at it and send photos of it back to her parents. I'll phone him now, shall I?'

As she hesitated, Libby nodded energetically at her, with *that look* on her face. No one could be as stubborn as her

friend when she thought something was right, so Simone gave in. 'It won't hurt to see what's involved, I suppose.'

'And we'll come round tomorrow too. I haven't seen their photos, only heard about the place,' Libby said. 'Ah, there's the doorbell. Our food must have arrived.'

They chatted about other things over the meal and Simone enjoyed her friends' company as always. It was lovely to go somewhere and be sure no stray men would be joining them. If the samples of colourless, ageing manhood who had been trotted out to meet her so far were typical, she'd never want to remarry. However pleasant they'd been, none had attracted her in the slightest during the past couple of years.

Perhaps rat man had put her off men for good. She smiled. Funny how the nickname Libby had given him had stuck and defused some of her embarrassment. All Simone's family and friends called him that now.

She wasn't looking to remarry. Definitely not.

Only what was she going to do with her life? She didn't know, only that she couldn't go on like this, had to find something more.

When she went to bed, she looked in the mirror and told herself firmly that she wasn't going so far away for several months. Definitely not. She'd make a show of considering it then refuse graciously.

Whatever Libby said or did.