

TOM BRADLEY



NINE LIVES

The Brightside Bunch



FREE ebook - Book 6 of 6

Contents

Copyright details & more FREE ebooks	3
What the critics said about 'The Brightside Bunch' series	4
What this story is about.....	4
Chapter One	5
Chapter Two	11
Chapter Three.....	15
Chapter Four.....	20
Chapter Five	23
Chapter Six	28
Chapter Seven.....	31
Chapter Eight.....	33
Chapter Nine.....	38
Chapter Ten.....	42

Copyright details & more FREE ebooks

First published in 1995 by HarperCollins New Zealand

Text © Tom Bradley 1995

Cover artwork © Stephen Axelsen 1995

This edition © Tom Bradley 2019

ISBN 978-0-9951221-1-6

Thanks to HarperCollins New Zealand for their permission to reproduce the original print-edition cover and to Stephen Axelsen for the use of his artwork.

This ebook edition of 'Nine Lives' is FREE for educational purposes, or personal reading pleasure, but must not be sold, hired, edited, reprinted or modified in any way.

You can download more of Tom's FREE ebooks at www.bradley.nz

Note to teachers: for classroom use, you're welcome to download a single copy and share the file with your students.

What the critics said about ‘The Brightside Bunch’ series

- “... good dollops of humour” (Waikato Times)
- “... Bradley weaves magic for a widening audience ... an easy-going, light-hearted manner and tone [but] they touch on a number of important themes, carefully woven into the storylines, adding depth and interest” (Greymouth Evening Star)
- “... an exciting series that tells kids how others might react to separation and remarriage” (Townsville Bulletin, Australia)

What this story is about

(Sixth book in the series)

Simone Freeman is sure that she and Todd Wozinsky being in the school concert will please everyone in the newly blended family.

She really wants to help her beloved Gran, who’s lost her zest for life, and her old flat which is being knocked down. But when Simone loses her job playing the cymbals, things start to go wrong.

Would moving into Brightside cheer Gran up? Is there even enough room?

It might take some creative family cooperation for everyone to be happy.

Chapter One

'Simone!' said Mrs Walsh as she waved her conductor's baton. 'Pay attention. And hit those cymbals together softly. Don't wreck them!'

Wreck them? thought 10 year old Simone Freeman. How can I? They're both solid metal. And so big I can hardly hold them up. If they had spokes, I could put them on my bike and use them for wheels.

They'd be a hundred times better than the wheels she had since that truck backed over them.

At least they'd be round!

And Simone hadn't joined the Claxton Road Primary School orchestra to be yelled at. She could get enough of that at home.

Simone had really joined to try and cheer up her grandmother. Gran had been so depressed lately. Not like Gran at all. Something to do with a lot of changes in Gran's street.

But her grandmother loved music, Simone knew, and to see her youngest granddaughter play in the school orchestra would be sure to bring the smile back to Gran's face.

Simone crossed her fingers it would work. Which she found tricky, especially crossing her fingers around one of the leather cymbal handles which looked a bit worn.

So worn, it had started to work loose. Someone should report it to Mrs Walsh, but that someone could be someone else. Simone had been growled at enough.

Mrs Walsh hadn't once growled at the choir. Probably because Simone wasn't in it.

Simone let out a big sigh. She'd be pleased when the rehearsals were finished and they finally did the school concert. Then Gran would be happy again, and Simone could go back to climbing trees and fighting with big sister, Holly. The things other 10 year old girls did.

Simone tightened her grip on the cymbals and looked around as the rest of the orchestra tooted their recorders, scratched their violins, or tapped their triangles and tambourines and blocks of wood.

At least she had an instrument that could make some real noise. No good being in a concert if no one noticed you.

Simone struggled to fight back a yawn. For the last half hour they'd been practising the same song. How long could one stupid train keep coming 'round the same stupid mountain? Simone hoped the choir would get to the final "yippee-yippee-aye" before her arms fell off.

She glanced down at the cymbals and wondered if they'd fit in her school bag. If she just "borrowed" them for the night, took them home, crept into Holly's bedroom while big sister slept, sneaked over to her bed, lifted the cymbals high in the air above Holly's head and brought them down...

Crash!

'Simone!' yelled Mrs Walsh, still conducting but starting to go red in the face. 'Too early and too loud. For the last time, will you please pay attention!'

Todd Wozinsky, who was also 10, sat in front of her with the other recorder players. They stopped playing as Mrs Walsh led the violins in a circuit of the mountain.

Simone leaned forward and whispered in Todd's ear. 'By the sound of those violins, that poor old train needs some oil.'

'So does Mrs Walsh,' Todd whispered back.

The teacher suddenly lunged her baton in Simone's direction and Simone almost missed the cue again. Better, she told herself as she crashed the cymbals together. Only one "yip" late.

Todd flinched, shoved both fingers in his ears, spun around and whispered, 'Every time you do that, Simone, my glasses fall off.'

Simone grinned. Did that mean if she hit the cymbals hard enough his head would fall off?

Simone opened her arms wide for a crashing encore, but the teacher's glare stopped her. Simone looked down and, for the second time, noticed the worn leather cymbal handle.

'Why don't you take up the recorder?' Todd whispered. 'It's quieter.'

Quieter? Simone shook her head. She didn't want quiet. That's why she played the cymbals!

She leaned forward and whispered in Todd's ear. 'I'd never be as good on the recorder as you.'

'Why not?'

'I haven't got enough spit.'

Only one Freeman would qualify. Their dog, Zip. He had enough spit to play every recorder in the orchestra. At the same time.

If dribble equalled talent, Zip would be world champion.

Could I teach old slobber-chops to read music? Simone wondered. Could she teach an old dog new tricks? Gran used to say you could.

But Gran used to be positive. A lively little woman who'd taken up Tai Chi and yoga while other women her age were taking up knitting.

'Last verse,' said Mrs Walsh. 'Big effort... everyone!'

Simone glanced at the teacher and noticed how red her face was. The same colour as Simone's hair. The dye bottle called it "Flaming Desert". Which is where Simone knew she'd be banished to - the flaming desert - if she fouled up on the cymbals again.

She had to get her act together before the train reached the station.

Simone's arms ached, but she forced the cymbals into the air as the choir let out one more "yippee-yippee-aye" and brought the steam train to a screaming halt with a chorus of "woo-woo, woo-woo" whistle noises.

For Gran, thought Simone, as she tightened her grip and swung the two oversized cymbals together with all her might.

As the metal edges met, the worn leather handle finally snapped, and one cymbal took off into space, flying past Todd's ear like a killer Frisbee. Rocketing into the back of the chair in front of him, it barely missed his toes as it fell to the ground with a clattery-bang.

'It was an accident, Mrs Walsh!' yelled Simone, waving the broken handle in evidence.

Mrs Walsh lowered her baton and just stared at Simone as the flaming desert got hotter. The teacher slowly shook her head from side to side and gave Simone a withering look.

Simone knew that look. Her father did it to her all the time.

'But it really was an accident,' Simone insisted as Todd handed her back the stray cymbal.

'I'm sure...' said the teacher, speaking slowly between puffs. 'But... why do these... things... never happen to other people?'

Simone's father said that sometimes, too. Simone shrugged. She couldn't be responsible for what happened to other people.

Mrs Walsh folded up her own music and within seconds had regained her composure. She even managed a smile.

'Well done, everyone. Very good, choir. And orchestra. Most of you. Now, next practic...'

The end-of-lunch bell interrupted.

'Listen,' said Mrs Walsh in a loud voice, insisting on quiet before she continued. 'Next practice on Monday, same time. Those of you with your own instruments, please practise hard over the weekend.'

Maybe I will take the cymbals home, thought Simone. If Holly doesn't like them, Logan will. Four years olds loved noise. As if reading her mind, Mrs Walsh walked over and plucked the cymbals out of Simone's hands.

'I'll take these,' said the teacher. 'I'm going to lock them away in a cupboard with a very big padlock.'

'But I need to practise,' said Simone.

'You need to pay attention,' said the teacher. 'To be honest, Simone, I'm thinking of replacing you.'

Her stomach flipped. 'But you'll never find another cymbal player like me.'

'I hope not,' said the teacher.

Todd jumped in. 'If we took the cymbals to our place, my Uncle Nick could fix the

handle. He can fix anything.'

Except my bike, thought Simone.

Mrs Walsh shook her head. 'Thank you, Todd, but I don't want to spend my weekend listening to Simone practise.'

'But you live miles away from us,' said Simone.

'Not far enough,' said Mrs Walsh. 'I'll fix the handle.'

She tucked the cymbals under one arm and marched off.

No more apples for that teacher, thought Simone. Next time I'll just bring the core.

As the other kids wandered off to their afternoon classes, and Todd packed his music into his backpack, Simone bent down and picked up his recorder.

'I thought these things were made of plastic,' she said, examining it.

'Not that one,' he said. 'It's solid wood.'

Like a Wozinsky head, thought Simone. 'It looks ancient. Where did you get it? The City Mission?'

'You're the only one who shops there.'

Simone held up the recorder like a telescope. She could see light through the other end.

'Hey, Todd, this thing's hollow. Ever tried sucking a milkshake up it?'

Todd leaned across and snatched it off her.

'Don't snatch,' she said. 'It's rude.'

'It's not a toy,' he snapped.

'Adults don't play the recorder.'

'Well, it's still not a toy,' Todd insisted, his eyes blazing behind his glasses. 'It used to belong to my Dad.'

'Oh,' said Simone. 'Sorry.'

What else could she say? Todd Wozinsky and his eight year old sister Jaynee didn't have a father anymore. Their dad had been killed in a road accident. Three years later, Todd's mother, Paula, had married Simone's father and they'd all moved in together.

But only until Simone could think of a way to get the Wozinskys to move out again and leave the Freemans on their own. Just her and her dad and Holly and four year old Logan. The way it used to be after Simone's mother left home.

'Is the recorder hard to play?' she asked Todd, trying to be friendly after getting him upset about his dad.

'No, it's easy,' said Todd. 'Even you could learn.'

Thanks a lot, she thought. So much for friendly.

'I'd still rather play the piano,' said Todd, zipping up his bag.

'You don't play the piano.'

‘How do you know?’

Simone didn’t know everything about him, but in the few months the two families had been together, she’d learned a bit. For one thing, she knew the Wozinskys didn’t have a piano.

Not even Brightside was big enough to hide a piano.

‘We used to have one,’ said Todd. ‘When Dad was alive. We sold it when we moved to Hatchwood.’

Simone had a sudden brilliant thought. If she bought Todd another piano, would he move back where he came from, and take his mum and Jaynee and his Uncle Nick with him?

Being broke, Simone realised she’d have to buy the piano in bits. Maybe one key a month when she could afford it. Todd could reassemble the bits. That way, although it would take a while, Simone would be rid of the Wozinskys by the time Todd turned... a hundred!

‘What’s so funny?’ asked Todd as she started chuckling.

‘Nothing,’ said Simone. ‘Just an old joke.’

Simone tried to imagine Todd with wrinkly skin and bifocals instead of regular glasses, and without all his hair.

But thinking of old people made her think of Gran, and that stopped the laughter. The way Gran acted, being old didn’t seem much fun.

Why was Gran so depressed? Why did she not want to talk about it on the phone? Simone decided she and Holly should go visit their grandmother and check it out for themselves.

‘I suppose your Mum’s coming to the concert?’ Simone asked Todd as they walked out of the hall.

He flung his backpack over his shoulder. ‘I think everyone’s going to be there.’

‘If all our bunch comes, we’ll need a bigger hall,’ said Simone.

And what a bunch. Four Wozinskys and four Freemans in one large, but rundown, home. Not including Zip or the Wozinsky’s kitten Digby, or their cat, Carmen.

‘Do you think they’ll enjoy it?’ asked Todd.

‘It’s a school concert,’ said Simone. ‘No one’s meant to enjoy it.’

Todd nodded. ‘Not with a hundred verses of “She’ll be coming ‘round the mountain”.’

‘It just feels like a hundred verses,’ said Simone. ‘There’s only 99.’

Simone thought of her four year old brother again. ‘Imagine Logan having to sit still for so long. Especially when the choir starts doing train sounds, and all yelling “woo-woo”.’

‘What’ll that do?’

Simone grinned. ‘I think “wooz” are related to “weez”.

Todd laughed and said in a pretend cowboy voice, 'does that mean "weez" in trouble?'

'No,' said Simone, 'but Dad could be. If Logan gets over excited, that mountain could see some flash flooding.'

Chapter Two

'How did the rehearsal go?' Todd's mother asked him later that day as she stood at the kitchen bench preparing the evening meal.

'Good,' said Todd, remembering the teacher's advice to practise as he silently fingered the holes in his recorder and ran through the songs in his mind.

'And Mrs Walsh?'

'A bit grouchy towards the end,' said Todd. 'Especially with Simone.'

'I wonder why?' asked his mother with a grin as she wiped her hands on her apron.

Paula Wozinsky, Simone's stepmother, taught English at Green Hills High, where Simone's 14 year old sister, Holly, was a pupil.

Thinking of the eldest Freeman girl made Todd realise something.

'Mum, isn't Holly supposed to be cooking dinner?'

She pulled a face. 'Supposed to be, Todd. Holly's on my roster to cook tonight. But she's locked herself in her room again. Teenagers.'

'You should tell her Dad,' said Todd.

'Maybe I should make *him* cook dinner,' she said. 'I would if we had a week to spare. That girl is a real handful.'

'Another fight on the way home from school?'

She nodded. 'I drive her there and back every day, but I get no thanks for it.'

'What did you fight about this time?' asked Todd.

'The way Holly hogs the phone all the time,' his mother explained. 'She can't seem to understand that her father needs it for his business.'

This is all mum and Holly ever do, thought Todd. Argue. About anything and everything. Another good reason for the Freemans to move out to a place of their own as soon as possible.

No way the Wozinskys would ever leave Brightside. Todd liked the old house. Even more since his Uncle Nick moved in.

And when the Freemans left, he could take over a whole room just for the...

'Piano?' said his mother when he told her how he wanted to start playing again. She put a pot of water on the stove and turned on the element. 'Todd, where would we find money for a piano?'

Here we go again, he thought to himself. They never had spare cash for anything these days. All the money that came into the house had to be shared between two families. How fair was that?

'But you earn all the money, Mum.'

'Todd, shush,' she told him, waving a vegetable peeler in the direction of the room

Todd's stepfather now used as his office.

Michael Freeman had set up his own accountancy business working from home after being made redundant from his old job.

His new business was slow. Very slow.

'This is what marriage is all about,' Todd's mother explained. 'Each partner takes turns to help the other when things get tough.'

'Things are tough now,' said Todd. 'Having to live with them.'

'These are early days, Todd. Things will settle down.'

'Will you and Holly ever settle down?'

'One day, Todd, when Holly stops treating me like the wicked stepmother.'

'Before or after we buy the piano?' he asked.

'Todd, a piano is not a priority. Not this year, anyway. Concentrate on your recorder.'

Todd lifted the instrument to his lips and tootled a few more notes. 'Mum, it's not the same. I was good at the piano.'

'You've got your father's musical talent, all right,' said his mother, 'and I'd like you to play again, but...'

'Mum, how much would a piano cost?'

'Thousands of dollars for a good one like we had.'

'How about an old one?' asked Todd. 'A cheapy.'

'I have no idea,' she replied. 'Doesn't Northmall Music sell pianos?'

'I'll cycle up there now and check it out,' said Todd.

'Right now, young man, you can help me prepare dinner. It's like feeding an army around here.'

At that moment, Todd's eight year old sister walked into the room cuddling her cat.

'Mu-um, Carmen's hungry,' said Jaynee.

'How can she be hungry?' asked Todd. 'She's nearly as big as this house.'

'Mu-um...'

'Jaynee,' said her mother, 'Don't start moaning. Carmen will have to stand in line for food. Put her down and start setting the table while I put the roast in the oven.'

'A roast?' said Jaynee. 'Don't expect me to eat it. Never, never, never.'

'I'm cooking some lentil patties for you,' said her mother, looking at Todd with a tired grin. 'It's like being a chef. Maybe I should apply for the job at Body-Blasta.'

Todd scratched his head. 'But that's a gym.'

'Keval's opened a food bar with it,' said his mother, 'but he's having trouble finding staff.'

'Mu-um,' said Jaynee. 'I could run the food bar for Mr Naidu. But all the food would have to be vegetarian.'

At that moment, Holly and Simone bounced into the kitchen.

'Too many lentils make your brain go soft,' said Holly.

'They do not,' said Jaynee.

'Then what's your excuse?' asked Simone.

Paula stopped and put her hands on her hips. 'Holly, what are you doing?'

'I've come to get dinner ready,' said Holly, curling her top lip. 'That's what I'm supposed to do, isn't it? It says so on your precious roster.'

'You were supposed to have started an hour ago,' said Paula, dropping into what Todd recognised as his mother's "I'm going to stay calm, even though I'm fuming" voice.

'I don't mind eating at midnight,' said Simone.

'Well, I do,' said Paula, handing Holly the apron. 'It's all yours.'

'Let me help,' said Simone, grabbing the vegetable peeler as she plunged a hand into the bag of potatoes by the sink.

Todd raised his eyebrows. Simone volunteering to help Holly? Something was cooking. And not just dinner.

Later, after dinner, when Todd and Simone were alone in the kitchen clearing away the dishes, he asked, 'What's all this about?'

'I'm just being extra helpful.'

'Yeah, right,' said Todd. 'What's the real reason?'

'When I've finished this,' said Simone, 'I'm going to try and get some money out of Dad for a new bike.'

'What if he says no?'

'If things get desperate, I'll beg,' said Simone as she loaded her arms full of plates.

Todd thought about the piano. 'Does begging work?'

Simone stopped and her pile of plates wobbled. 'I could ask Mrs Walsh to put in a good word for me.'

'Not if you don't start paying attention. It may already be too late.'

'She won't replace me on cymbals,' said Simone, walking across the kitchen still balancing the plates. 'It's not my fault if I get distracted.'

'You'll drop those if you're not careful,' said Todd.

'Not me,' she said, looking back over her shoulder, 'I'm very...'

'Careless!' said Todd as the two biggest plates slipped from the top of Simone's pile and crashed to the floor.

Todd's sister, Jaynee, dashed into the room, took one look, smiled, then ran out again, screaming, 'Mu-um, come and see what Simone's done!'

'She's your sister,' Simone said to Todd as she scrambled around the floor picking up the pieces. 'Will you strangle her, or will I?'

As Todd bent down to help, his mother and stepfather walked into the kitchen.

'Talking of executions...' Simone whispered to Todd.

He looked up and saw Michael Freeman gazing down at Simone, slowly shaking his head from side to side. The way Mrs Walsh did.

'Simone, what do you have to say for yourself?' asked her dad.

Simone stood up and held out her hand, palm up.

'What's the hand for?' asked Simone's father, looking puzzled. 'I'm not going to smack you.'

'I know that,' said Simone. 'Please, Dad, I need some money for a new bike.'

Chapter Three

'Biking to Gran's is still more fun than this,' said Simone as she followed Holly off the Saturday morning cross-town bus.

'Only for little kids,' said Holly. 'Like you.'

'Just 'cos you haven't got a bike,' said Simone.

Holly snorted. 'At least when I had a bike, it didn't have square wheels.'

'My wheels were okay before that stupid truck ran over them,' said Simone. 'The frame's twisted as well.'

'Like your face,' said Holly.

'Nick says it's more like your face,' said Simone. 'Not worth repairing.'

Holly flushed. 'He did not say that. He likes me.'

Not as much as you like him, thought Simone. Todd and Jaynee's uncle was 29, twice Holly's age. Simone grinned. And the ex-jockey was only half Holly's size.

'If you're really desperate about a bike,' said Holly, 'you could recycle Logan's old trike. It's still got a seat and a couple of wheels.'

'So has Logan's old roller-potty,' said Simone. 'But who'd want to ride that to school?'

'Don't be gross,' said Holly, as Simone shoved a finger in her mouth and extracted a stringy piece of last night's roast.

'It's your cooking that's gross,' said Simone. 'No wonder Dad said no when I asked for the money. Your cooking probably gave him indigestion.'

'Then Paula should take me off her dumb rosters,' said Holly, 'and stop forcing me to cook and do everything else around that house.'

'You don't do *anything* around the house.'

'I do enough,' said Holly. 'It's like being in the army.'

They walked a bit further, then Simone said, 'Dad thinks Paula's okay.'

'Huh,' Holly snorted. 'Dad has to think that. He's married to her.'

'Paula's nice to Logan.'

'Everyone's nice to Logan,' said Holly.

Simone shrugged. 'She treats me okay.'

'You don't have to drive to school with her every day.'

'Nor do you,' said Simone. 'You could catch a bus.'

'I'd have to get up too early,' said Holly. 'And stop defending her. We've been broke since those Wozinskys barged into our lives, and we're getting broker by the day.'

'Dad's doing his best to build his business,' said Simone.

'He could start by getting a second phone line installed,' said Holly. 'I'm sick of being yelled at when I want to make a call.'

‘With your voice, you don’t need a phone,’ said Simone. ‘You could just open the window and yell.’

Holly pulled a chocolate bar out of her pocket and took a bite. ‘I don’t make that much noise.’

‘Except when you’re eating,’ said Simone, as more of the bar disappeared. ‘Which is every waking minute.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘You’re right,’ said Simone. ‘You stop eating while you drink.’

‘I’ll have you know, *brace-face*, this is the last piece of chocolate I’ll ever eat.’

‘Not another diet,’ said Simone as they turned into Gran’s street. ‘What is it this time? No sugar? No fat? No sense?’

‘Very funny,’ said Holly. ‘I found it in a woman’s magazine. It’s guaranteed fool-proof.’

‘It’ll have to be for you.’

‘I’d thump you for that,’ said Holly as they arrived at their destination, ‘but we mustn’t upset Gran.’

Looking around, Simone could see plenty of other things to upset Gran. She hardly recognised the street. If it hadn’t been for Gran’s red mini standing outside, Simone might have walked right past.

Simone knew about the new development in the street, but she had no idea it meant knocking down so many buildings. The old houses on either side of Gran’s block of tiny, one-bedroom flats had vanished, with teams of workers busily pouring concrete into new foundations.

Simone knocked on the familiar front door.

‘Hello, girls,’ said Gran, giving them each the briefest hug as she waved them inside.

As Simone walked down the tiny passage towards Gran’s equally tiny lounge, she spotted a familiar object. The plaster cast off Simone’s broken leg that Gran had turned into an umbrella stand. Who’d think to recycle something like that? Only Gran. Or Simone.

People always said Simone was a younger version of her grandmother. The same size, the same wacky sense of humour, and the same weird taste in clothes.

Which is why Simone couldn’t believe her grandmother’s serious face, or the drab clothes she’s thrown on. Or the slippers.

Awful slippers. Other grandmothers wore slippers like that. Not Gran Freeman. They were so bad, even Zip would refuse to chew them.

‘Sit down, girls,’ said Gran, waving to a couch piled with paper.

That didn’t make sense to Simone either. Gran was normally very tidy. She’d helped keep the Freeman house running after Simone’s mother walked out. Now, the inside of

Gran's flat looked like part of the building site outside.

Simone glanced at Holly and could see big sister had the same bad thoughts.

'How are things at Brightside?' asked Gran, looking serious.

'Never ending Wozinsky woes,' said Holly. 'Mainly Paula problems.'

'A new blended family can have all sorts of teething troubles,' said Gran.

You seem to be the one with teething troubles, thought Simone. Gran had lost her magic smile. The one that normally cracked her face from ear to ear.

Outside a mechanical digger roared into life.

Simone tried to force a smile out of her grandmother. 'That machine sounds like my stomach when Holly's cooking.'

Gran frowned. 'It's all coming to an end.'

Simone tried harder. 'What's coming to an end, Gran? Holly's cooking, I hope.'

Gran shook her head, but the face didn't move. 'I've just received some really bad news,' she told her granddaughters.

This sounded serious. Simone gripped the arm of the couch.

'I've been expecting it,' said Gran. 'but it's still come as a shock. I've just rung your father and told him.'

Simone dug her fingers into the couch arm, stretching the material.

'I'm not going to be here much longer,' said Gran, staring into space.

Simone's stomach suddenly felt like it was full of rocks. Was Gran sick? Really, really sick? Was she going to... die?

Gran let out a big sigh. 'I'm afraid they're going to... demolish my flat. Knock it down.'

'But they can't...' Holly began.

'Yes, they can,' said Gran.

'You've been here for ages,' said Simone, shocked, but relieved only the flats were about to be buried.

'I moved here after your Granddad died,' said Gran. 'It's small, but it's always been enough for me. And it's rent-protected.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means the rent's never gone so high I couldn't afford to stay here.'

'Isn't it still protected?' asked Simone.

'Not from bulldozers,' said Gran.

'Where are you going to live?' asked Holly.

'With... you,' said Gran. 'At Brightside.'

Simone heard Gran hesitate before answering, but felt too excited to wonder why. She felt as light as a balloon, floating towards the ceiling in excitement. Her Gran, one of her

favourite people, coming to live with them at Brightside!

‘But only for a week or two,’ said Gran firmly. ‘Until I find another place of my own.’

Simone felt the balloon coming down again. ‘Why can’t you stay for a long time?’

‘Yeah, Gran,’ said Holly.

‘It’s a nice thought, girls, but it’s not really an option.’ Gran shook her head. ‘Things have changed a lot since your Mum left. For a start, you girls are older now.’

‘What’s that got to do with it?’ asked Simone.

‘You don’t need me around anymore.’

‘We may not need you, Gran, but we still *want* you,’ said Simone.

‘But what about Paula?’ asked Gran. ‘She doesn’t want her mother-in-law under the same roof.’

‘It’s not her decision!’ said Holly. ‘Anyway, the last one to arrive at Brightside was a Wozinsky.’

‘Yeah,’ said Simone, ‘that’s right. Nick made it four all.’

‘Sounds like a game of football,’ said Gran.

‘Without the shin pads,’ said Simone, still trying to get Gran to crack her face.

Gran Freeman’s top lip quivered, but stayed in place.

‘You can do much better than that, Gran,’ said Simone, which brought a slightly bigger smile. But not the old smile.

Simone clenched her fists. She couldn’t do much about the flat being knocked down, but she could knuckle down and play those cymbals properly for Mrs Walsh. Make Gran the proudest person at the school concert. Do whatever it took to make Gran smile that old smile again, and keep on smiling.

‘Gran, I still think you should stay at Brightside forever,’ said Simone.

‘At my age, nothing is forever,’ said Gran, quietly. ‘All I want in my last years is some peace and quiet.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Simone.

Normally, Gran could make as much noise as any of the Freemans. Only Zip could bark louder, but not by much.

And Gran always told them she wanted to stay active as she got older, and she’d rather wear out than rust out.

‘I keep thinking of poor Thelma,’ said Gran, without prompting. ‘I can’t get her off my mind.’

Simone nodded. Poor Gran. Losing her home so soon after the other big loss. Thelma Redmond, Gran’s life-long friend, had died a few months before. Simone and Gran had gone to the funeral. Then the Freemans and the Wozinskys had bought Mrs Redmond’s old

house.

Which was now getting pretty full. So where would Gran sleep?

'You can have my room if you like, Gran,' said Simone.

'My room's better,' said Holly. 'At least it's downstairs.'

'That would be kinder on my knees,' said Gran.

It would mean Holly moving in with Simone again. They hadn't shared a bedroom since they'd moved to Brightside. But if it helped Gran, Simone was willing to do it.

'I'm forgetting my manners,' said Gran, getting slowly to her feet. 'Would you girls like a drink or something to eat?'

Normally, Gran leapt to her feet to bring out the food. Baking was Gran's great passion. She always whipped up heaps of delicious, mouth-watering treats - cakes, muffins, things-with-no-name - using stuff no one else thought to put in the same recipe.

'I think I've got a packet of biscuits somewhere,' she told her granddaughters.

Simone's mouth dropped open. She saw Holly's do the same.

Some giant vacuum cleaner had dropped from the sky and sucked most of the life out of their grandmother. The same woman who'd recently bounced around Hatchwood doing Tai Chi now dragged her slippers off to the kitchen.

No smile and no bounce.

What would go next?

Chapter Four

'It's not fair,' Simone told Todd as they headed for Northmall. 'It's just not fair.'

Before their Monday lunchtime practice, Mrs Walsh had taken Simone aside and told her the bad news. After thinking about it all weekend, she'd decided to take Simone off the cymbals.

'Just when I'd made up my mind to stop mucking about,' said Simone.

'At least Ben pays attention,' said Todd.

The new cymbal player was the biggest boy at Claxton Road Primary and known to his classmates as Big Ben.

'He doesn't need cymbals,' said Simone. 'With those hands, all he has to do is clap.'

'Try playing soccer against him,' said Todd. 'He's got the biggest feet I've ever seen.'

'He must buy his shoes from a clown shop,' said Simone, starting to laugh.

She hadn't laughed when she'd lost her place in the orchestra. She'd wanted to cry. After practice, she'd stayed behind and begged Mrs Walsh to be allowed to keep playing the cymbals.

The teacher had only softened up when Simone explained about Gran losing her home and her friend, and how she needed cheering up.

One final chance, the teacher told Simone, but banned her from playing cymbals, drums, tambourines, wood blocks or anything that could make too much noise.

Great, thought Simone, thinking about what that left. No way she could learn the violin in less than two weeks.

Then Mrs Walsh had given Simone the last, and what seemed the best, option. The recorder. Only because, the teacher explained, she felt sure Simone couldn't blow loud enough to disrupt the concert.

But Simone would be on trial. Not only did she have to behave at rehearsals, she had to know all the songs note perfect before the concert.

The only way she could do that, Simone realised, would be to get some coaching. From someone who knew what they were doing.

'I suppose I could give you some lessons,' said Todd, as they walked. 'But I've got a lot of chores to do.'

'Haven't we all,' said Simone. 'Your mother doesn't make lists, she writes books. I'll make you a deal. You help me with the recorder, and I'll do some of your chores. How about I put out the rubbish?'

Once, thought Simone. When the bags aren't too full.

'For the next two weeks,' said Todd.

Simone started to argue, then stopped. Putting out the rubbish for a couple of weeks

couldn't be that bad.

'What about the lawns?' asked Todd.

'What about them?'

He grinned. 'I haven't got time to cut the lawns and give you lessons.'

'When am I supposed to practise?'

'You can practise cutting the lawns any time you like,' said Todd.

'I mean the recorder,' said Simone. 'If I do all your chores, I'll be going till midnight.'

'So?'

'Okay. I'll give the lawns a cut as well.'

'For a month,' said Todd.

'A month?' yelled Simone.

'It's a good deal.'

'It's robbery,' said Simone. 'What's your real name? Ned Kelly?'

Up ahead loomed Northmall, and the music shop.

'Buying this recorder is going to make a big hole in my new bike fund,' said Simone, pulling a wallet from her pocket.

'How big a hole?' asked Todd.

'At the moment I could just about afford the seat,' said Simone. She checked the wallet again. 'Make that half a seat.'

'Sounds painful,' said Todd.

'Maybe I should look for an after-school job,' said Simone.

'I suppose I could get a paper round,' said Todd as they waited at the pedestrian crossing for the lights to change.

Simone's eyebrows shot up so high they almost tipped the hat off her head. 'The Herald's a morning newspaper.'

'I know that.'

'Do you know what time you'd have to get up?' she asked.

'About five o'clock.'

'You must like worms,' said Simone. 'Gran says that's what early birds catch.'

'I'm not working for worms,' said Todd.

'You could take them home to your sister,' said Simone. 'Yum yum, slithering salads.'

'Jaynee's right,' said Todd. 'You can be gross sometimes.'

'I'm trying to improve that to *all* the time,' said Simone.

'Why don't you go for a Herald round as well?' asked Todd as the pedestrian crossing sign changed to green.

'Get up early?' asked Simone. 'Forget it. I'm a night owl.'

Everyone knew that. That's why her father called her a real hoot.

'I wonder if Uncle Nick's working today,' said Todd, as they walked through the mall entrance.

Nick Wozinsky worked at Northmall as a security guard. Mainly night shifts, but occasionally during the day.

Simone spotted her favourite shop, KidsHeaven, Hatchwood's best toy shop and owned by their Brightside next-door-neighbour, Keval Naidu.

'Do people ever grow out of looking at this stuff?' asked Todd pressing his nose against the shop's glass window and gazing at all the goodies.

'I hope not,' said Simone.

'Let's go inside and take a look,' said Todd.

'Too tempting,' said Simone. 'Unless they sell recorders.'

'They probably do,' said Todd, 'but let's see what the music shop's got before we buy anything.'

'Unless it's a drink,' said Simone.

Todd pulled out some coins and counted them. 'I know you're broke. My treat.'

Simone looked around then remembered Mr Naidu's new food bar upstairs. Time for a drink and a race. They hadn't raced for a couple of days.

But Todd stood between her and the up-escalator so he'd get a head start if they took that route. Better find another way up.

She looked behind her and found it.

'On the count of three,' she said, back-peddling towards the exit door and the stairwell that led to the second floor.

'Hey,' said Todd. 'That's not fair.'

'What's fair got to do with it?' she said, and then yelled, 'one, two, three!' as she threw the door open and leapt for the first step.

Chapter Five

'That's cheating,' Todd yelled as Simone disappeared through the door.

She'd pulled her regular trick. She did this every time they raced, and every time she caught him out.

He charged through the door after her, leaping up the concrete steps two at a time, using the metal rail for support. Every few paces he glanced up at the colourful figure in the outsized hat with the floppy brim flapping like wings.

Any more flap and she'll take off, thought Todd.

Above them loomed the door to the next level. With her hat flapping, Simone probably couldn't see a thing.

She certainly didn't see the small man who stepped through the door and out onto the landing. With a thud, they collided, and the man stumbled back, bashing his foot against the half-open door.

'Gee, you Freemans play rough!'

'Nick!' said Simone, stopping dead in her tracks. 'I'm sorry. I didn't see you.'

'I may be little,' said Nick, 'but I'm not that small.'

Todd arrived two seconds later. 'Are you okay, Uncle Nick?'

'I think I've broken something,' said Nick, as he bent down to rub the toe of his left boot.

'Oh, no,' said Todd. 'What have you done?'

Nick stood up, his face like a mask. 'Nothing a bit of super-glue wouldn't fix.'

Todd started to laugh. Uncle Nick hadn't broken anything at all. He had a wooden left foot. A result of the same accident that had killed Todd's father.

'You did give me a fright, though,' Nick told Simone. 'When I saw that hat flapping up the stairs towards me, I thought I was about to be jumped by The Flying Nun.'

'That would make me a nun on the run,' said Simone.

'A bad habit to get into,' said Nick. 'And keep the noise down, I'm here to work, not to have fun. Not officially. What are you two up to?'

'Buying Simone a recorder,' said Todd.

Nick looked at Simone. 'I thought you played the cymbals.'

'Not anymore,' said Simone. 'I got a red card.'

'Why doesn't that surprise me?' asked Nick.

'Just when I'd turned over a new leaf,' said Simone.

'She's going to mow the lawns as well,' said Todd.

'You've lost me,' said Nick.

'Mrs Walsh took pity,' Simone explained, 'but my head's still on the block.'

'The way Simone played the cymbals,' said Todd, 'my head was nearly on the floor.'

‘Gee,’ said Nick, ‘when I went to school we only did kids stuff like making stink bombs and putting dead mice in the teacher’s desk.’

‘We still do that,’ said Simone.

‘We were just heading for Mr Naidu’s food bar,’ Todd explained.

‘You’ll be lucky,’ said Nick. ‘He’s had to close it up again. Still can’t find the right person to run it.’

‘Hey,’ said Todd as the penny dropped. ‘I’m looking for a job.’

‘So am I,’ said Simone.

Nick grinned. ‘It would mean getting up real early in the morning.’

‘No problem,’ said Todd, glancing at Simone. ‘I’m not an owl.’

‘Well hoot-hoot for you,’ said Simone.

‘And whoever ran it would need to be a good baker,’ said Nick.

‘Like Gran,’ said Simone.

‘Right,’ said Nick, ‘but about 20 years younger.’

Two minutes later, Todd and Simone walked into the Northmall music shop.

‘Can I help you?’ asked a tall, unfriendly-looking man who Todd had never seen before. He reminded Todd of the stick insects they studied in class.

‘Are you buying, or just... looking?’ asked Stick Man, making Todd feel unwelcome.

‘We want to buy a recorder,’ said Simone.

‘A good one,’ said Todd.

‘The only kind we sell,’ said Stick Man.

‘As long as they’re real cheap,’ said Simone.

‘If you mean cheap-cheap you’ll have to go to that... place downstairs.’

‘You mean KidsHeaven?’ asked Simone.

‘Not my idea of heaven,’ said Stick Man.

That’s ‘cos you’re not a kid, thought Todd. You probably can’t remember back that far.

Stick Man pointed to the recorder display and Todd walked over. ‘Can I try some of these?’

‘They’re all top quality.’

‘But I still want to try them.’

‘Do you mean put them in your mouth?’ asked Stick Man.

Where does he think I want to put them, Todd wondered.

‘I’m afraid the store has a strict policy with recorders,’ said Stick Man. ‘If you blow it, you buy it.’

‘Blow that for a joke,’ said Simone.

Todd looked at the prices and shook his head. They’d have to go back down to

KidsHeaven.

'While I'm here,' said Todd, 'do you have many second-hand pianos?'

'Second-hand, no,' said Stick Man, directing them towards the piano section, 'but we do have some lovely pre-owned instruments.'

'What's the difference?' Todd whispered to Simone.

'Probably the price,' she whispered back.

Stick Man stopped in front of a large, shiny piano.

'What are those?' asked Todd, pointing to screw holes on either side of the music stand.

'That's where the candle-holders used to fit,' said Stick Man.

'You mean this thing's pre-electric?' asked Simone. 'You can't even plug it in?'

'I can't see a price tag,' Todd told Stick Man.

'Four and a half,' he replied.

'If that's four dollars fifty, we'll take it,' said Simone.

'I think he means four hundred and fifty,' said Todd.

'I mean four thousand five hundred,' said Stick Man, 'and if you've come here to waste my time...'

'I'm serious about wanting a piano,' said Todd.

Stick Man screwed up his eyes and looked down his nose. 'I suppose you also want something *really* cheap. Like your sister.'

'She's not my sister,' said Todd.

'And I'm not cheap,' said Simone. 'Ask Dad.'

'We could perhaps find you a playable piano for under two,' said Stick Man, 'and I don't mean two dollars.'

'I know what you mean,' said Todd.

'A lifetime of pocket money,' said Simone.

'A million Herald's on cold winter mornings,' said Todd, swallowing hard. 'I need to think about it,' he told Stick Man.

A few minutes later, Todd and Simone walked into KidsHeaven.

'I'll go this way,' said Todd, 'you try the other aisle.'

'You could get lost in here,' said Simone.

'Happily,' said Todd, as Simone took off.

Toy shops always had cheap recorders, thought Todd, but wouldn't it be great if they also had cheap pianos.

Then he spotted one. Real cheap. And real small. Not much bigger than his lunchbox. He walked over to the tiny keyboard and picked out a simple tune.

‘That is jolly good,’ said a voice from somewhere nearby.

Todd looked around. The voice seemed familiar, but all he could see was a row of giant stuffed bears.

He turned back to the piano and picked out the tune the orchestra had struggled with for weeks.

Now the unseen voice added tuneless words. ‘She will be coming around the jolly mountain...’

‘Hello, Mr Naidu,’ said Todd.

His neighbour stepped out from behind the bear display.

‘What are you thinking about my singing, Todd?’

‘Um...’ said Todd. ‘You have your own sound.’

‘Thank you, Todd,’ said Mr Naidu. ‘My wife is always laughing at me if I am singing. She is also telling me to shut up when she is playing the piano.’

Todd scratched his head. The Naidus had a piano? He didn’t know that.

‘It is a very old piano,’ said Mr Naidu. ‘I bought it for Ameeta when we were newly married and did not have much money.’

Money wasn’t a problem for the Naidus now, Todd knew.

‘I am telling you a secret, Todd. I am buying Mrs Naidu a new piano for her birthday. A grand piano.’

I’ll bet it’s a very grand piano, thought Todd. If any family in Hatchwood could afford it, the Naidus could. Their bright and shiny new house made Brightside next door look very shabby.

Then Todd had another thought. ‘Mr Naidu, what are you going to do with the old piano?’

‘And he’ll sell it to you?’ Simone asked Todd as they walked home from the mall. ‘How much?’

‘Three,’ said Todd.

‘Three thousand dollars?’ yelled Simone, making big circles in the air with the plastic recorder they’d bought from KidsHeaven.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Todd.

‘Seeing if it doubles as a magic wand. I’m trying to conjure up a spell. That’s the only way you’ll get that sort of money.’

‘Mr Naidu says his piano is really old, but it’s solid and it stays in tune.’

‘At that price,’ said Simone, ‘it should also make your coffee.’

Todd laughed. ‘It’s only three hundred.’

Simone made smaller circles in the air.

‘What are you doing now?’ he asked.

‘Trying a smaller magic spell,’ said Simone. ‘It’s still the only way you’ll get the money.’

‘Wherever I get it from, I’ve got to be quick,’ said Todd. ‘The deal has to be done by the time the new piano arrives.’

‘When’s that?’

‘Mrs Naidu’s birthday,’ said Todd. ‘The day after the concert.’

‘That gives you less than two weeks,’ said Simone.

‘I need a job,’ said Todd, ‘and quick.’

‘I’m looking for someone to cut my lawns,’ said Simone.

‘You couldn’t afford me,’ said Todd, laughing. ‘But I hope somebody can.’

Chapter Six

Simone lay in the top bunk, in the dark, and stared at the ceiling. On the bottom bunk, Holly snored loud enough to make the floor vibrate.

In her head, Simone rehearsed the orchestra pieces. The only practise she'd managed all day, even though the concert was on Friday.

All Simone's Saturday had gone in helping Gran move out of her little flat and into Brightside. Everyone had given a hand. They'd finished up storing Gran's bits and pieces in the old shed out the back.

Gran had tried to be brave, but Simone still saw tears. Sad tears. Tired tears. Simone hoped Gran found Holly's bed comfortable. Maybe a good night's sleep would get rid of the dark circles under her eyes.

Holly stopped snoring and started tossing and turning, thumping from side to side, letting out the occasional loud grunt and groan.

Great, thought Simone. Welcome to Jurassic Park.

'Holly,' said Simone, leaning down to thump the lump under the bedclothes.

Holly stopped moaning, and turned over again.

The peace and quiet lasted less than 30 seconds.

'Holly,' said Simone, thumping her sister even harder. 'Wake up! Monster on the loose!'

Holly shot up in bed. 'Where?'

Simone hit the bunk lamp. 'There! In the mirror!'

Holly looked at her reflection then flopped back on the bed. 'If I wasn't still half asleep, I'd climb up there and thump you.'

'You'd have to catch me first.'

Holly grunted and turned over. 'Turn off that light.'

'I can't sleep,' said Simone.

'Tough. That's not my problem.'

'Yes, it is,' said Simone. 'It's like trying to sleep above an earthquake up here.'

'Listen, brat,' said Holly, 'this is only for a week or two. Until Gran moves.'

'But moves where?' asked Simone.

'Into your room?'

'Where would I go?'

'How about outer Mongolia?' said Holly.

'Outer where?' asked Simone.

'Just out of my life would do.'

Simone did a forward roll off the top bunk and dropped down beside her sister.

'Holly, I heard Dad and Paula talking about putting Gran in an old folks home.'

Holly sat up in a hurry. 'That... woman Dad married is not putting my grandmother in an old folks anything. For a start, Gran's much too young.'

'Did you see her crying today?' asked Simone.

Holly nodded. 'Made me want to cry.'

Simone nodded. 'She cried a lot at Mrs Redmond's funeral, too.'

'I want the old Gran back,' said Holly.

'But where is she?' asked Simone.

Holly pulled an unopened packet of chocolate biscuits from under her pillow, ripped open the top, and shoved one in her mouth. Without offering one to Simone.

'No, thanks, Holly,' said Simone. 'Don't try to force them on me. You know I hate chocolate biscuits.'

'Good,' said Holly, who swallowed the first biscuit and shoved another in her mouth.

Simone watched a thin trickle of chocolate dribble out the corner of her sister's mouth.

'Don't let Zip see that,' said Simone. 'He'll be jealous.'

Holly grunted and reached for another biscuit.

'What happened to the fool-proof diet?' asked Simone.

'I'll start again tomorrow,' said Holly.

'This is tomorrow,' said Simone. 'Look at the time.'

'Then I'll start again the day after,' said Holly. 'Stop nagging me. I'm unhappy about Gran. When I get unhappy, I eat.'

Simone tried to work it out in her head. Holly spent half her life being unhappy about something. Therefore, if she scoffed a chocolate biscuit every time...

Simone whistled under her breath.

At this rate, Holly would not only overflow the bottom bunk, but the whole house. One day, she'd get so big she'd roll out the front gate and stop all the traffic in Yardley Street.

She might even become a new peak on the mountain range over the back!

Simone heard a tap on the bedroom door and watched Holly stuff the rest of the biscuits under her pillow before she said, 'Come in.'

'You girls all right in there?' asked their father, opening the door and peeking in. 'What's going on?'

'A Teddy Bears picnic,' said Simone. 'Holly's brought the food.'

'Dad,' said Holly. 'We need a family conference.'

'Everyone's fast asleep,' said her father.

'A Freeman family conference,' said Holly, the tone of her voice matched by the scowl on her face.

'Why the urgency?' he asked.

'Holly's sending me away,' said Simone. 'To a garden centre.'

'Garden centre?' asked Holly. 'I said outer Mongolia.'

Simone shrugged. 'I thought you said "out to magnolia".'

Holly shook her head in disgust. 'Who needs a brat of a sister like you around?'

'That's what I keep saying,' said Simone.

She made room for her father to ease himself down on the bed beside them. His once loose fitting dressing gown now strained to meet in the middle.

'Dad,' said Holly, 'Simone and I have been talking.'

'Is that what you call it?' he asked. 'From outside the door it sounded like two cats fighting on a tin roof.'

'That was Holly on her own,' said Simone. 'Chewing.'

Her father shook his head. 'Please, girls. Make this quick. I need my sleep.'

'And Gran needs help,' said Simone.

'Dad, you can't send her to an old folks home,' said Holly.

'Who mentioned that?' he asked.

'Simone overheard you,' said Holly. 'You and that... woman.'

Her father sighed. 'Yes, Holly, Paula and I did discuss it, but not seriously. Paula had drawn up a list of the possible options...'

'Another list,' Holly snorted.

'We crossed off the old folks home,' said her father. 'Gran's not ready for that yet. She's still got too much life left in her.'

If we can find it again, thought Simone.

'Your grandmother will have to stay here at Brightside until we come up with the right solution,' he explained. 'That's if you girls can survive a bit longer in the same room.'

'Sure,' said Simone. Her mission in life was to make Gran smile again, not drive her away.

'We'll manage,' Holly told her father. 'We'll do it for Gran.'

He stood up. 'Good, that's settled. And, in the meantime, if you two come up with any bright ideas...'

'A second phone line?' asked Holly.

'Not that sort of idea,' said her father. 'No spending on anything like that until we work out what's happening with Gran. No extras at all.'

As he left the room, Holly reached under her pillow.

'I think chocolate biscuits count as extras,' said Simone. 'Why don't you leave the other half of the packet for breakfast?'

Chapter Seven

'Getting better,' Todd told Simone as he listened to her play another song. They sat in Brightside's family room, the music for the concert scattered around the floor.

Jayne Wozinsky sat on the couch, cuddling her kitten, Digby, and watching them.

'Still a bit loud,' Todd added, 'but you're getting most of the notes.'

When she paid attention, Simone had a good ear for music, and if she kept practising, she'd make the concert lineup, no problem.

Simone took the recorder out of her mouth and grinned. 'The pictures help.'

Next to the musical notes on the music were little diagrams showing which finger holes to cover up.

'But you're also good at explaining things,' Simone told Todd. 'You should be a teacher.'

'Like Mum?' he asked.

'No,' said Simone. 'You could never be a teacher like your Mum.'

'Why not?'

'Because you're a boy.'

Simone grabbed another piece of music and started to play.

'To-od,' said Jayne. 'Make Simone stop. I want to watch television now.'

'When we've finished,' said Simone.

'You're being mean,' said Jayne. 'I'll tell Mum.'

'I'm trying to be nice,' said Simone. 'I'm letting you listen to me practise. For free.'

'Big deal,' said Jayne. 'You're not even making music.'

'What am I making, then?' asked Simone. 'Tomato soup?'

'Why don't you and Todd go somewhere else?'

'There is nowhere else,' said Todd.

'He's right,' said Simone. 'We've already been thrown out of every other room in the house.'

'Well, Digby hates all the noise,' said Jayne.

'Then why don't you stop talking?' asked Simone.

'Digby sounds happy enough,' said Todd, hearing the loud purr as he leaned over and tickled the kitten under the chin.

'This little fellow's a music lover,' said Simone, rubbing the end of the recorder up and down Digby's back. 'Aren't you, Fluffbucket?'

'That's not his name,' said Jayne, snatching Digby away. 'Even if Digby did like it, the noise is driving me crazy.'

Simone blew an extra loud note.

'Yuck,' said Jayne, plugging her ears with her fingers.

Simone picked up a cushion and handed it to her. 'This works better. Try shoving it in your mouth.'

"Mu-um!" yelled Jaynee, grabbing Digby and heading for the door.

Simone piped her out with a few more loud blasts.

Todd slumped back against the edge of the couch. 'Let's take a break.'

'How's the job hunting?' she asked.

'Awful,' said Todd. 'I'm too young to deliver the Herald. You've got to be 12. I can't wait another two years.'

'Isn't that some sort of age discrimination?' asked Simone.

'I thought only us oldies had that problem,' said Gran Freeman, putting her head in the door.

Todd looked at the woman standing in the doorway. Definitely an older Simone, but without the laughter. She'd only been at Brightside one day, but had spent it sitting in her room, staring into space.

'Don't let me stop the music,' said Gran, sitting down on a chair. 'This house used to be full of it.'

Simone had to explain to Todd how Gran had spent a lot of time at Brightside when her friend, Thelma Redmond, was still alive. What Gran called the good old days. As if there were no good *new* days to come.

'Wait until I get my piano,' Todd told her.

Todd thought he saw a faint spark in Gran Freeman's eyes, above the circles, but he couldn't be sure.

'What piano?' she asked.

Todd explained the deal he'd done with Mr Naidu. 'And it's such a good price,' he added.

'As long as you can find the money by Saturday,' Simone reminded him.

Todd nodded. 'I'm keeping my fingers crossed.'

'I wish I'd learned to play the piano,' said Gran as she polished her glasses.

'What's stopping you?' asked Simone.

'Age,' said Gran.

'Rubbish,' said Simone.

'You can't teach an old dog new tricks,' said Gran.

'But, Gran,' Simone protested, 'you've always told us you could!'

Todd shook his head. He hated to see anyone look as depressed as Simone's Gran. But what could he do, apart from keeping up Simone's recorder lessons?

Maybe the concert would fix things. Or maybe not.

Chapter Eight

Simone gripped her recorder tightly and peeped out through a crack in the curtain and into the school hall. Friday, concert night, had finally arrived.

With Todd's help, and by practising every spare minute, Simone had finally learned every song. Even Mrs Walsh smiled after hearing Simone play them through at a special lunchtime audition.

Now, through the curtain, Simone saw the whole bunch from Brightside taking their seats along the front row in the audience. At least Gran would get a good view.

Holly sat at one end of the row, with Gran beside her, then Logan, Simone's dad, Paula, Nick, and finally Jaynee.

That afternoon, Simone had heard Jaynee arguing with her mum. Jaynee wanted to bring one of her animals. Paula had said no.

Now Jaynee sat, staring straight ahead, wearing a bulky jacket and a very bored look.

I'd be bored out there, too, thought Simone. Claxton Road concerts were like watching a dentist drill teeth.

Then Simone saw Jaynee fidget and realised why her jacket bulged. A small head appeared over the top of the zip and looked around.

Digby. Jaynee had smuggled her kitten into the concert!

I hope Fluffbucket likes trains, thought Simone. If he gets frightened, he might disgrace himself. So might Logan.

Simone checked her watch. Logan's world record for sitting still and not wanting to go weez was one hour. The concert would be an hour and a half. Logan needed a new world record.

'Places, everyone,' said Mrs Walsh in a loud whisper, climbing onto the little black box she'd conduct from, and shooing the choir and orchestra into position.

As Simone took her seat with the rest of the recorder players, she caught a glimpse of her replacement on the cymbals.

Big Ben didn't look too happy. In fact, to Simone, he looked just like The Incredible Hulk. Big and bulky and very green.

'What's the matter, Benjamin?' said Mrs Walsh, her cheeks brightening.

'I... I don't feel very well,' said Big Ben, turning greener by the second.

'Everyone gets a bit nervous before a performance,' said the teacher.

'It's not nerves,' said Ben.

'What is it then?'

'The two pizzas I had for dinner,' said Ben.

What a softy, thought Simone. Holly could eat *three* pizzas and come back for a fourth.

In fact, the only people likely to get sick were the ones who watched her do it.

Big Ben dropped the cymbals with a clang and clutched both hands over his mouth. Just as well he did that in the right order, thought Simone, or he'd have rearranged his face.

Next second, the cymbal player put his head down and charged for the emergency exit at the side of the stage.

Straight past the recorder section.

Todd leapt to his feet as Big Ben pushed by, but the bottom of Simone's baggy trousers caught under the leg of her chair. As she tried to drag it free, the recorder slipped from her hand.

Right under Big Ben's outsized shoe.

Crunch!

'Hey!' yelled Simone, but Big Ben kept going.

Simone felt sicker than Ben as she waved the remains of her recorder in the air.

'I thought this was a concert,' she told the teacher, 'not a demolition derby.'

'This is a disaster,' said Mrs Walsh, climbing down from her box.

A big disaster, thought Simone. Where do I find another recorder at this time of night?

'We can get by with one less recorder,' said the teacher, as if answering Simone's question, 'but we need our cymbals.'

Simone sighed. She just knew Mrs Walsh was about to give her back her old job. At least Simone would be on stage. And she could play loud.

Simone walked over and picked up the cymbals.

'What do you think you're doing?' asked Mrs Walsh.

What does it look like I'm doing, thought Simone. Baking a cake?

'Don't touch those,' said the teacher. 'I'm not trusting you with them again.'

'But I haven't got any other instrument to play,' said Simone.

'I'm sorry, Simone.'

'Can I... join the choir or something?' asked Simone, desperately searching for ideas.

'No one sings in that choir without an audition,' said Mrs Walsh. 'And if you sing half as loud as you played the cymbals...'

'But, Mrs Walsh...' Simone began.

The teacher looked around. 'I need a new cymbal player. Urgently.'

That's when Todd stood up. 'I could play them, Mrs Walsh.'

Simone's stomach flipped. Todd Wozinsky, pushing her out of her last-chance role in the concert. The sooner the Wozinskys got out of Brightside, the better.

Mrs Walsh smiled. 'Thank you, Todd,' she said, climbing back on her black box. 'You read music so well, and you always pay attention.'

Simone snorted in disgust and headed for the exit.

'Into positions, please, everyone,' she heard the teacher call. 'Ready with the curtain.'

As she reached the door, Simone felt a tap on her shoulder. Her heart skipped a beat. Had Mrs Walsh changed her mind?

Simone spun around. Todd stood there, clutching a cymbal in his right hand. The last person in the world she wanted to see.

'Have you come to gloat?' asked Simone.

'No,' said Todd, looking surprised. He held up his other hand. 'I came to lend you this.'

Simone couldn't believe her eyes. Todd's recorder. The one that had belonged to his Dad.

'I can't play the recorder *and* the cymbals,' he explained. 'Not enough hands. And I know how much your Gran's looking forward to seeing you in the concert.'

'Thanks,' said Simone, taking the old wooden instrument. She was back in the orchestra and she knew all the songs. Nothing could go wrong now.

'I'll take good care of it,' she told him.

'It's no harder to play than your old one,' said Todd.

'I'll bet it is,' said Simone. 'The other one's in a million bits.'

'Come on,' said Todd. 'The concert's about to start.'

'One last thing,' said Simone, stroking the polished wood of the old recorder. 'Where's the loud button?'

Simone had so much to concentrate on, the concert seemed to race along. The first chance she got to look at her watch told her an hour and 20 minutes had sped by.

Balancing carefully on her black box, Mrs Walsh turned around and faced the audience.

'Thank you all very much for coming,' she said. 'For our final song...'

We'll be chugging around the mountain, thought Simone. Fasten your seat belts.

As Mrs Walsh explained the history of the song, Simone caught Gran's eye and winked at her. Gran managed a small smile. Still not the old Gran. But better.

What about Logan? she wondered, running her eye along the Brightside front row. Logan seemed fine. Not wriggling at all. Maybe he would set a new world record.

Only one member of the front row audience wriggled. Jaynee Wozinsky. That's because Digby kept trying to get out of her jacket, but Jaynee kept shoving him back.

I hope that kitten's got a strong bladder, thought Simone.

Mrs Walsh turned back to the choir and orchestra, raised her arms, dropped them, and the musical train pulled out from the platform.

Slowly it gathered pace as round and round the mountain it chuffed. Simone soon lost

count, but reckoned they were heading for lap ninety-something when Digby suddenly burst out of Jaynee's jacket with a flash of fur.

Simone laughed into the recorder, which produced a very loud, flat, note.

Mrs Walsh frowned, but kept waving her arms.

Down in the front row, Jaynee's mum had spotted the escaped kitten, and leaned across Nick to give Jaynee a telling off.

Nick stuck out his wooden foot and tried to scoop up Digby, but the kitten leapt over the obstacle, and raced up the stairs onto the stage.

It seemed the only person in the hall who couldn't see Digby's progress was Mrs Walsh. Simone watched the teacher getting redder in the face as the laughter from the audience started to drown out her musical express.

The teacher, not knowing about the kitten, responded by waving her arms more frantically.

'Pay attention, children,' hissed Mrs Walsh, her whole body jiggling up and down, 'we're almost there.'

Digby was almost there as well, crawling towards Mrs Walsh's black box as if stalking a mouse in the grass.

Simone's little brother, Logan, sat like a statue, his eyes fixed on Digby's progress.

Trying desperately not to laugh, Simone clenched her teeth over the recorder mouthpiece and pretended to finger the notes.

Other players must have done the same because she heard the volume on stage start to fade, and even Todd missed a cymbal cue by a fraction.

'Children!' said Mrs Walsh.

Digby stopped between Mrs Walsh and the edge of the stage.

'Big finish!' yelled Mrs Walsh, still unaware of the kitten right behind her.

'Woo-woo,' sang the choir.

In his seat, Logan started to wriggle.

'Woo-woo,' sang the choir, even louder, as Mrs Walsh beat her arms faster.

Digby cocked one leg against the black box.

Logan wriggled some more.

'Woo-woo,' sang the choir, at full volume.

As they did, Digby released a tiny jet of water which ran down the side of the black box and formed a puddle on the stage.

'Woo-woo!' yelled the choir for the last time.

As the music stopped, a moment of stunned silence fell over the crowd.

The voice that broke that silence, reached every corner of the hall.

‘Weez, Daddy, Weez!’ yelled Logan Freeman.

The whole place erupted. People stood up, blocking the aisles, laughing and talking. Some yelling. Especially Mrs Walsh.

All as Simone’s dad, dragging Logan by one hand, tried to fight his way through the crowd to the toilet at the other end of the hall.

Simone scanned the crowd, looking for Gran’s face.

If this doesn’t bring back the old smile, thought Simone, nothing will.

Chapter Nine

'Best night out I've had in ages,' said Gran, as the Freemans and the Wozinskys gathered around the kitchen table for an after-show supper.

Simone studied Gran's face, looking for the old smile. Almost there, but not quite. What would it take to bring back the rest?

'I'm still angry with you, Jaynee,' said Paula. 'I told you. No animals at that concert.'

'Apart from Holly,' said Simone.

Holly scowled and lashed out with a foot under the table which Simone avoided.

'Mu-um,' said Jaynee, 'it's not my fault. I didn't know Digby would try and escape.'

'I could have told you,' said Nick. 'Us boys can't hang on forever. When you've gotta go, you've gotta go.'

'Tell me about it,' said Michael Freeman. 'When I finally got Logan to the toilet, the place was full.'

'What did you do?' asked Simone.

'What could we do? We found a dark corner around the back of the hall and sprinkled the lawn.'

'What do you mean, "we"?' asked Paula.

Michael's cheeks turned pink. 'I told you, the... toilets were full.'

'When you gotta go,' said Nick.

'Dad!' said Holly. 'Just as well someone didn't catch you. It's embarrassing enough being part of this... this...'

'Mad-house,' said Simone.

'That's the word,' said Holly, getting up from the table. 'I'm going to watch some TV in the family room.'

'Me, too,' said Jaynee.

'I'm going to bed,' said Todd.

The first words he'd said since they got home, Simone realised.

Then she remembered. Tomorrow. Saturday. The deadline for buying the piano. And Todd hadn't found any money, or a job, although he'd tried hard enough.

'I'm off, too,' said Nick, back on night shift at the mall.

With Logan already in bed, that left Simone and her father, plus Paula and Gran in Brightside's kitchen.

'Simone, why don't you go and watch TV as well?' her father suggested. 'Paula and I want to have a chat with your grandmother.'

'Let her stay,' said Gran. 'I know what this is about. My new flat.'

Simone's dad and Paula had spent most of the week helping Gran check out the

possibilities.

‘Have you found a flat, Gran?’ asked Simone.

‘Unfortunately, not,’ said Gran. ‘There are some very nice flats out there...’

‘Why didn’t you take one?’

Gran shook her head. ‘I can’t afford them.’

‘Weren’t there any cheapies?’ asked Simone.

Like cheapy recorders and cheapy pianos... and cheapy bladders!

‘There were some cheap flats,’ her father explained, ‘but they were awful. Zip would have turned up his nose.’

‘All so old and rundown,’ said Paula.

Simone looked around. ‘That’s what people say about this place.’

‘But at least Brightside is clean,’ said her dad, ‘and dry. Finally.’

Simone had a flashback to the Brightside fair. The big garage sale in the back yard to raise funds to replace the rusty tin roof. They’d sold off most of the old furniture they’d bought with the house. Furniture they’d stored in the shed out the back.

The same shed they used now to store Gran’s stuff.

‘Look, Mum,’ said Michael. ‘I think the best solution is for you to move into Brightside. Permanently.’

Simone’s heart flipped and flopped with joy. Why wasn’t Gran smiling?

‘I don’t think staying here would be a good idea,’ said Gran.

Paula reached out and touched Gran’s arm. ‘We wouldn’t have to get in each other’s way.’ She smiled. ‘Anyway, since I married your son, I’ve learned to cope with anything.’

‘But let’s be practical,’ said Gran. ‘If I did stay, where would I sleep? Holly needs her room back.’

Simone sat up straight. ‘What about the shed?’

Her father jumped. ‘We’re not putting your grandmother in any...’

‘Not Gran,’ said Simone. ‘You.’

‘Sleep in the shed?’

Paula laughed. ‘I know your Dad snores, Simone, but throwing him out of the house is a bit severe.’

‘Not to sleep,’ said Simone. ‘To work.’

‘Now that makes a lot of sense,’ said Paula. ‘Michael, you say working in the house is driving you crazy. Why not take over the shed and let your Mum move into your old office?’

‘The shed’s got power,’ said Simone.

‘But no phone,’ said her dad.

‘We can’t use the one we’ve got,’ Paula pointed out. ‘It’s a teenage hotline.’

‘A bit of paint would brighten the shed up, Dad,’ said Simone. ‘I’ve seen the odd tin of real cheap paint down at the City Mission.’

‘Nothing too weird, thank you,’ said her father. ‘I know your sense of colour, Simone. White only.’

‘And if there’s any other fixing up needed, Nick could give you a hand,’ Paula told her husband. ‘In fact I’m sure he could convert the shed into a really pleasant work space for you.’

‘I suppose it’s worth considering,’ said Gran, not sounding completely convinced. ‘Of course, I’d insist on paying for my room. The way I paid for my old flat.’

Michael nodded. ‘Holly will be pleased. With some extra money coming in, I could afford a second phone line. Strictly for business.’

‘And adults,’ said Paula.

‘Does this mean there’ll be some money for my new bike?’ asked Simone.

Her father frowned. ‘One thing at a time, Simone.’

She knew what that meant. Not this side of Christmas.

Gran suddenly sighed. ‘I’m still not sure. Giving up all my independence.’

‘You’ve still got your mini, Gran,’ said Simone.

‘It’s more than transport,’ said Gran. ‘If only I was 20 years younger.’

Simone scratched her head. Someone else had said that about Gran. But who?

Michael Freeman stood up ‘Think about it overnight, Mum.’

‘I hope you say yes,’ Paula told Gran.

‘Will you stay here, Gran?’ begged Simone as her father and Paula left the room. ‘Please say yes, Gran, please, please.’

‘I think it’s the only option,’ said Gran, taking Simone’s hand. ‘But I refuse to rot away in my room. I really need a new challenge.’

‘Sky diving?’ asked Simone.

Gran grinned. ‘That’s not a bad idea. But a job would be better.’

Simone suddenly remembered who she’d been talking to. Nick, when she and Todd went up to the mall. They’d been discussing Mr Naidu’s food bar and how he needed the right person to run it. Someone like a younger Gran.

But why should their neighbour settle for a younger copy when he could have the original?

‘Gran,’ said Simone. ‘I’ve got a great idea.’

‘Hello, Simone,’ said Mr Naidu, looking puzzled as he opened his front door a few minutes later. ‘What are you doing here at this time of night? Oh, hello, Mrs Freeman.’

‘Gran and I need to talk to you,’ said Simone.

‘You want to be talking now?’ asked Mr Naidu.

‘No time like the present,’ said Gran, and Simone saw the smile. The old Gran smile. Ear to ear.

‘I’ve come to make you an offer you can’t refuse,’ Gran told the gym owner. ‘In fact, two offers.’

Chapter Ten

Todd stood at his bedroom window and looked down as the truck from Northmall Music pulled up outside the Naidus to deliver the new piano.

Without either the money, or a job, Todd's only chance was to ask Mr Naidu to give him more time.

Simone came out of her room as Todd raced for the stairs.

'Gran's coming to live here,' said Simone. 'Isn't that great?'

Todd stopped. Another Freeman. A nice Freeman, but still a Freeman.

'Hey, that's not all I've got to tell you...' she called after him, but he didn't stop to listen.

Todd sprinted out the front door and pushed through the line of trees separating the houses as several men wheeled Mrs Naidu's birthday present off the back of the truck and towards the house.

'I'm sorry I haven't got the money, Mr Naidu,' said Todd, as his neighbour opened the door, 'but if you can just give me a bit more time. I know you want the old piano out of the house, but we could store it in our shed. I promise I won't even play it until it's all paid for.'

'I am so sorry, Todd,' said his neighbour, pointing the way for the delivery men. 'I cannot be holding it for you. Someone else is wanting to buy it.'

Stick Man, thought Todd, his heart sinking. Traded in on the new one. And then resold as pre-owned for some ridiculous price up at Northmall Music.

Todd spun on his heels and raced back towards Brightside.

He'd not only lost his piano, another Freeman was moving in. What else could go wrong today? As he neared the house, he spotted Simone, waving to him.

In no mood for piano jokes, Todd decided to skip breakfast. He raced to the back fence, slipped through the wire, and jogged out across the field behind the house.

Maybe he should just keep on running, he thought to himself as he jogged.

And never come back.

'Where have you been?' asked Simone as he walked through the back door and into the kitchen. 'You've been gone for hours. You've missed lunch. Gran baked a cake.'

'Big deal,' said Todd.

'Don't you like the idea of my Gran living here?'

Todd shrugged. 'You Freemans let my Uncle Nick move in. I suppose we're even.'

'Want to hear some more news?' asked Simone. 'I've got myself a job.'

Todd sighed. So Simone had a job and he didn't. Talk about downhill.

'I'll be helping Gran,' said Simone.

'Helping her do what? Play the fool?'

'No,' said Simone. 'Cooking for Mr Naidu's food bar.'

Gran Freeman would not only run the bar, Simone explained, but do most of the cooking, early morning, at Brightside. Then take it up to the mall in the boot of her mini.

'But you hate getting up in the morning,' said Todd.

'I'll get used to it,' said Simone.

'What are you going to cook, early-bird?' asked Todd. 'Worm muffins?'

'If I have to,' said Simone. 'But at least I'll get my new bike.'

'Does she need another helper?' asked Todd.

'Sort of,' said Simone.

Todd pricked up his ears as he heard the sound of a piano. Probably Mrs Naidu playing her birthday present.

Not playing very well, thought Todd, as he kept listening. Someone just hitting a few keys. Then he realised the sound came from inside Brightside.

With Simone close behind, Todd sprinted out of the kitchen and into the lounge.

Gran Freeman sat in one corner of the room with her back to Todd. She spun around as he entered.

'Hello, Todd,' she said. 'Come over here and see what I've just bought.'

Todd could already see. His piano! The piano Mr Naidu had offered to him!

Todd started to get angry, but then stopped. He hadn't found the 300 dollars and that meant Mr Naidu had a right to sell it to anyone he liked.

But to a Freeman...

Gran Freeman stood up and stepped back. 'I don't know the white keys from the black ones. Want to show me how it's done?'

Todd thought about walking away, but instead, sat down on the piano stool. His stomach hurt. If he'd found a job, this piano could have been his.

He ran his fingers up and down the keys, picking out simple tunes and playing scales.

'I thought Mr Naidu might sell it to the music shop if I didn't jump in,' Gran explained. 'I took the piano as my first week's wages.'

Gran paused as Todd kept playing, then said, 'Todd, how would you like to buy this piano off me?'

Todd stopped playing. 'What with? Bottle tops?'

Gran grinned and sat down beside him on the piano stool. 'No, Todd, with the money I give you for my piano lessons.'

'Are you serious?'

'Very,' said Gran, 'and one good turn deserves another.'

'What good turn?'

'The concert,' said Simone. 'Gran really enjoyed seeing me play.'

'It started me smiling again,' said Gran. 'I'm grateful for that.'

'I'd have missed that concert,' Simone reminded Todd, 'if you hadn't loaned me your Dad's recorder.'

'What is this?' asked Michael Freeman walking into the room. 'Another concert?'

'Todd's going to entertain us,' said Paula walking in behind her husband.

'Mu-um', said Todd.

'You sound like Jaynee when you say that,' said his mother.

'I don't know what to play,' said Todd.

'Don't play anything,' said Jaynee, joining them, Logan in tow. 'There's too much noise in this house already.'

'Is this invitation only or can anybody join in?' asked Nick Wozinsky, putting his head in the door.

'How can I read with all this racket?' said Holly coming out of her downstairs bedroom.

'Well, now we're all here,' said Gran. 'Why don't we have a family sing-along?'

'That's a nice idea,' said Paula.

Holly frowned. 'We have to live together. No law says we have to sing together.'

'Do it for me,' said Nick with a wink at Holly which made her blush.

'It won't hurt you, Holly,' said her father. 'You can carry a tune.'

'Only in a bucket,' said Simone.

'Let's all try, anyway,' said Gran. 'Todd, you must be able to play something we know the words to.'

Todd grinned. 'How about the short version of this?' and he launched straight in.

'Woo-woo,' sang Todd and Simone, making the train sounds first time around.

'Woo-woo,' sang Paula and Michael and Gran second time around.

'Our turn, this time,' said Nick, pointing to Jaynee and nudging Holly. 'Woo-woo.'

'Pulling into the station,' said Todd.

'Woo-woo, woo-woo, woo-woo,' went the Brightside Bunch, as Todd eased off and brought the musical train to a perfect stop.

'Great,' said Nick, leading the applause.

'Better than the concert,' said Gran.

'That's 'cos it was shorter,' said Holly.

'Not short enough,' said Todd, pointing at Logan.

The four year old crossed his legs and looked up at his father.

'I know, I know,' said Michael Freeman. 'Come, on, Logan.'

'You could always sprinkle the back lawn,' Nick yelled after them.

'Don't encourage them,' said Paula.

'I agree,' said Simone.

'Why?' asked Todd. 'Because someone might see them?'

'No,' said Simone, 'because it'll make the grass grow, and guess who has to cut it?'

The End