

The School for Husbands

Wendy Holden

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CHAPTER ONE



Sophie twisted round. Relief flooded through her. People had turned up. More guests were coming into the church all the time. Everyone had dressed up too: the men fresh in pale summer suits; the women pretty in floaty florals. Some, even more gratifyingly, had gone as far as hats, which looked sharp and colourful against the soft mediaeval stone of the walls.

Her mother's hat, as expected, was the biggest of all; a huge confection of gold gauze. It seemed to Mark, next to Sophie, that it filled the whole church. Any objection he had had to the 'proper christening' his wife had wanted for Arthur had stemmed less from doubts about delivering his son into the hands of the Almighty than delivering the party into the hands of his in-laws. But Shirley and James lived in a postcard-perfect village. The Dower House had a big garden and they were able to fix it with the vicar. So the venue had been unarguable.

Most of the rest of it, unfortunately, had been very arguable. That Shirley intended the occasion to be the big wedding reception they – and more significantly she – had never had was obvious from the start. His mother-in-law, Mark knew, had never

forgiven him for depriving her of her big-hat moment as Mother of the Bride by insisting on a registry office followed by a small lunch.

But nothing was to be small now, apart from Arthur of course, though the vast christening robe Shirley had bought for her grandson went some way to addressing even that. Mark looked down at his son in his wife's arms, swathed in acres of fake-ancestral frills. He wondered whether Arthur's unusual calm was due less to a sense of occasion and more to a sense of being smothered.

Mark felt smothered himself. Shirley and James were paying for the celebrations, admittedly. They had absolutely insisted, and his and Sophie's financial circumstances did not constitute a contrary argument. But even so, did Shirley's arrangements have to be so relentlessly unheeding of anything he or Sophie had wanted? What he had mainly wanted was to keep it simple. Sophie had wanted to keep the peace. Shirley, however, had wanted fleur-de-lis cocktail napkins, a marquee festooned with ivy, and luxury portaloos with mahogany seats and carnations in the cubicles. She had converted their plans for sandwiches (plain beef or egg) into poached salmon on thyme ciabatta or roasted Mediterranean vegetables on tomato bread. Thankfully, he had got wind about the string quartet in time.

'I was thinking more along the lines of a brass band,' he had told Shirley. In actual fact he didn't care what the music was, but he was damned if Shirley was getting her own way in everything, paying for it or not.

His mother-in-law had frowned as much as facial surgery would allow. 'Rather common, don't you think?'

Her gaze had lingered on him meaningfully. Mark was aware that his mother-in-law considered him a less-than-perfect husband

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for her daughter. Or a less-than-perfect son-in-law for herself, which was possibly a slightly different thing.

He had not particularly expected to win the brass band argument, but Sophie's father James, a retired corporate accountant who generally gave way to his his wife in all things, had most unexpectedly lit up at the suggestion. Sophie, too, had lent her support. So a brass band had been duly engaged and briefed to play 'Oh I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside', 'Knees Up Mother Brown' – which, as Mark pointed out, had particular relevance given Sophie's married surname and Arthur's recent birth – and other jaunty Edwardian ditties.

Shirley had hit back with the flowers. Examining them now as she sat in the church, Sophie tried to persuade herself that her mother's 'statement' gladioli and gerbera weren't garish in the least and worked just as well as the simple summer country flora she and Mark would have preferred.

But the weather was wonderful, which was infinitely more important. The saints, sinners and coats of arms glowed richly in the stained-glass windows as the sun outside gathered momentum. Watching various members of the congregation bow their heads as they sat down, Sophie realised guiltily that she had prayed for good weather far more fervently than anything else. She had consulted the BBC's five-day weather forecast on a daily basis; latterly, almost hourly, much to Mark's amusement.

Frankly, she could have done without him laughing. Much as she loved Mark, and she truly did, Sophie could not help feeling unsupported at times, now being one of them. Organising – or, more accurately, organising her mother organising – an event on the scale the christening had become had sent her stress levels soaring. New problems seemed to emerge every day, none of which Mark had been particularly helpful in solving.

She accepted that he had been very busy with work – his job was new, he had to prove himself, and their financial circumstances were straitened. But even so, he could have been more diplomatic with Shirley and more constructive about the crucial question of godparents.

In the end it had been Sophie who had decided that what they needed was one reliable, steady godparent and one exciting and influential one. ‘That way we cover all bases,’ she had explained to Mark.

Cecily was the reliable one. An old university friend of Sophie’s, she was single, childless and a primary school teacher. ‘Cess’ll have time for Arthur because she doesn’t have children of her own, and she’ll be able to tell me whether he’s reaching his milestones or not.’

‘And confirm he’s an undoubted genius at five months, too,’ joked Mark, effortlessly guessing his wife’s unspoken agenda. ‘But are you sure she does organised religion?’

‘Absolutely. She’s very interested in religion. Has to be. Her school is in one of the most deprived areas of London, ninety-nine per cent Muslim, I think she said.’

Mark nodded. ‘But isn’t she a bit – well – alternative? You didn’t speak for weeks, remember, when she found out you were putting Pampers on Arthur.’

‘Oh, she’s got over that now. And anyway, it will be good for Arthur to have a godparent who can raise his social consciousness. He needs to realise there are other people out there apart from middle-class kids like him.’

‘I suppose so.’ Mark decided not to point out that their street of gentrified terraces faced one of the largest council estates in South London.

‘Good. That’s decided then.’ Sophie smiled.

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For the exciting and influential godparent Sophie chose a former work colleague whose father was a frozen-foods tycoon. His revelation that Arthur would be one of his ten godchildren and not, as she had thought, the special one and only, was a disappointment.

‘Of course,’ she had grumbled to Mark, ‘the others only asked Richard because he’s got no children, a rich father and good contacts.’

‘So why else did *you* ask him?’ Mark had teased.

‘Because,’ Sophie flashed back, ‘Richard’s the one who’ll take him out and buy him champagne cocktails and tell him about girls.’

Shortly after this exchange, Richard texted to say he had come out and was going to New York to live with his boyfriend. It was the text that hurt. Sophie withdrew the godparent invitation and announced they must find someone else to fulfil the fun and influential brief.

‘But who?’ Mark had asked.

It was a good, if difficult, question, and one, again, which seemed to fall to Sophie. The problem was that every other suitable male of their acquaintance was married with children of his own and no spare capacity, financial or spiritual, to take an interest in someone else’s offspring. As the date of the christening neared, Sophie was even considering asking the postman. He was pleasant, friendly, clean and childless, although, as he had a girlfriend, there was no guarantee this would continue. Still, he was better than nothing.

In the end, help had come from a most unexpected source.

Her mother had taken to ringing Sophie about the party on an almost daily basis. ‘Cambozola!’ Shirley declaimed dramatically as Sophie picked up the phone one morning.

'Sorry?' Sophie frowned. What language was being spoken? 'Who *is* this?'

'Cheese, darling. We need to decide.'

'I don't care, Mum,' Sophie groaned. She was by now wondering whether the nice man in the newsagents had spare godparental capacity. After all, if it was contacts in the media she was wanting . . .

'Still no luck with the replacement godfather, darling?' Shirley enquired, divining the reason for her daughter's lack of interest in dairy products.

'Not as such.'

'Well you'll never guess who I bumped into in town today!' Shirley exclaimed. 'Margaret Sharp!'

Her mother was right; Sophie never would have guessed. While Shirley meeting this mother of an old boyfriend was not improbable – they lived in neighbouring villages, after all – the warmth with which she spoke of it was astonishing.

'Margaret! But I thought you didn't like her. You used to say she was common when I was going out with Simon.'

'That was nearly twenty years ago.' Shirley sniffed. 'People change.'

Sophie considered. She remembered Margaret Sharp as a dumpy woman who worked in a factory and had a face like an anxious hamster. Short of her suddenly becoming the Duchess of Devonshire, it was hard to imagine how she could possibly have changed enough to interest her mother.

'Simon's doing awfully well now,' Shirley added casually. 'He's a millionaire banker with a manor house in Hertfordshire.'

'*Simon* is?' Sophie exclaimed. 'I mean, I knew he was a banker, but—'

'Heated swimming pool as well!' her mother interrupted. 'You see what you missed!'

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Sophie's hackles rose. 'Mum! Simon was twenty years ago. We hardly went out for more than a month. And you didn't like him anyway. You used to say he was a spotty oik.'

'As I say,' Shirley said breezily, 'people change. Do you ever hear from him, by the way?'

'He still sends me a birthday card.' Sophie had never been quite sure why. She suspected the date was on his secretary's database.

'Mmm.' Her mother was silent for a few moments. 'Well, seeing Margaret gave me an idea. It's the obvious answer to your problem.'

'What is?'

'Simon's *perfect* godfather material.'

'*Godfather* material!'

'Well, why not?' her mother challenged. 'He's rich and successful and a wonderful role model. Arthur needs good role models.'

'Are you saying,' Sophie asked touchily, 'that Mark isn't a good role model?' But why ask the question? Of course her mother was saying that. Mark was a book salesman and Simon a millionaire. 'It's not all about money you know,' she grumbled.

'Well, most of it is. And it's Arthur you're thinking about here, anyway. Simon's rich and successful, he's someone you're still in touch with and someone who could help Arthur a lot in the future. And frankly, darling, isn't time running out?'

The vicar had now arrived. A woman vicar, whom Mark had liked from the first meeting. She was laid-back, friendly and obviously hadn't minded his uncertain approach to Believing. She had also turned out to be a Merseysider, with an interest in Liverpool Football Club as well informed as it was unexpected.

The organist, an old lady whose style Mark appreciated for its clear Les Dawson influences, struck up a tune that emerged, after a few confusing seconds, as 'Jerusalem'. This being the cue, Mark, Sophie, Arthur and the godparents moved forward to the font.

They made an arresting group. Cess, who was no lightweight and whose clumsily bundled-up hair was dyed a brilliant red, was dressed for the occasion in a hot-pink sari. This not only made her pink face look puce by comparison, but also clashed, Sophie feared, with her own flowered wrap dress. Thank goodness Simon and Mark looked properly sober. Simon in particular looked perfect.

About this, Mark was less sure. Simon Sharp had apparently been Sophie's boyfriend when they were both eighteen. Although, frankly, it was difficult to imagine the tall, grave Simon as a teenager.

He seemed focused and controlled to a rather scary degree; polite but uneffusive. His face was flat and masklike and his eyes were watchful. The feeling of standing in front of him was, Mark thought, that of standing before an open freezer door.

'He's not much fun, is he?' Mark had objected. 'You wanted someone fun and influential to be the other godparent.'

'But Simon *is* influential,' Sophie argued. 'Just think how useful he'd be if Arthur ever wants to go into the City. Or law. I think Simon has lots of legal connections as well.'

Mark raised his eyebrows. Admittedly, Arthur was only a few months old, yet already possessed of the kind of volcanic temper that sat ill with a career at the Bar. Unless, that was, as a defendant.

'And Simon's single, and doesn't have any other godchildren,' Sophie added.

'Yes, but what does that say about his ability to form relationships? Like I say, he's not much fun, is he?'

‘Look, we’re not choosing a godparent for ourselves, we’re choosing one for Arthur. Anyway, there is something fun about him.’

‘What?’

‘He’s very rich, according to Mum. He has a manor house in Hertfordshire with a heated swimming pool.’ Sophie felt a twinge of guilt at using the argument that had so annoyed her coming from Shirley. But of course – to a certain extent – money did matter. As, she suppressed a sigh, did the lack of it.

‘Good for him.’ Mark was unimpressed. In his pool, in his manor house even, Simon Sharp was still Simon Sharp. And it would take more than a heated swimming pool to warm a cold fish like that up.

Mark had eventually agreed to Simon because he could not imagine why anyone, least of all a busy banker, would want to be godfather to the child of someone he had not seen for twenty years. He had not expected Simon to accept the invitation. When he had, and with alacrity, Mark had assumed, slightly contemptuously, that their teenage relationship had meant more to Simon than it had done to his wife.

Watching Simon Sharp now, holding Arthur at the font, Mark tried to imagine him married to Sophie. He wondered what his blonde, vivacious wife had seen in this feelingless waxwork. On the other hand, as Sophie had said herself, an alternative evening’s entertainment at the time had been sitting in front of *The Two Ronnies* with her parents. Mark could just imagine it: James snoring in his armchair and Shirley not getting the jokes.

Glancing at Sophie, listening intently to the service, her straight features lit in a shaft of colour from the windows, he felt a rush of pure love. How wonderful that Sharp hadn’t got her first. That

they had found each other. That she had married him. And now that they had Arthur.

Watching Simon Sharp now, holding Arthur at the font, Shirley tried to imagine him married to Sophie too. She found it a great deal easier than Mark had. *My son-in-law the millionaire financier. My daughter's mansion in Hertfordshire with the heated swimming pool.* What wouldn't she give to be able to say that to certain villagers, especially Venetia Bothamley-Tartt! *My daughter the sub-editor and my son-in-law the book salesman living on Verona Road, South London* somehow lacked the same ring.

She looked fondly at her grandson – such a gorgeous little boy, such a beautiful christening robe, such a shame his father was . . . well. Shirley heaved a sigh so powerful it sent waves across the water in the font. The main chance may have been missed but at least she'd roped Simon in as godfather. Not all had been lost.

Watching Simon Sharp, now, holding Arthur at the font, Sophie's main emotion was gratitude. He had responded to her nervous invitation to be a godfather with an eagerness she had not expected after the near-two decades since she last saw him. A gratifying contrast to the deeply unworthy Richard. And as she had only spoken to Simon on the phone about the christening – some crucial takeover had impeded meeting in person – she was unprepared for how much he had changed physically. It was amazing. He actually looked as if he lived in the same space-time continuum as everyone else these days.

Gone was the side-parted, short fair hair of 1986 and the accompanying paperweight glasses. Unencumbered by optical real estate, Simon's face looked surprisingly regular. Handsome, even, although not, she thought, sliding a glance at her husband, anything approaching Mark's blend of dark-haired, crumpled glamour. As Mark caught her glance and flashed a smile, her

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heart compressed with love. She had a handsome and loving husband and a beautiful son. She was the luckiest woman in the world.

The last hymn, 'Dear Lord And Father Of Mankind', struck up, and Sophie sang heartily. Happiness poured into her like the sun through the stained-glass windows. The stress of the last few weeks was fading. All they had to do now was go and drink champagne in her parents' garden. Everything was perfect.

CHAPTER TWO



Simon Sharp watched Shirley proudly parade The Dower House lawns with her grandson. As she smiled and waved at him over the hatted heads he nodded briefly back. Her new cordiality towards him did not fool him in the least. Years ago it may be, but he had not forgotten her hauteur when he had dared to pay court to her daughter. The exclamations of amused surprise when he shovelled his peas in, tines-up. The polite and repeated enquiries as to where exactly in the council estate his home was.

He watched as she struggled to extract a high heel from the lawn without falling over with the baby. Silly woman, always had been mutton dressed as lamb. And more so than usual today, with that tiny skirt and huge, ridiculous hat.

Being asked to be godfather to Arthur had been a surprise, but not a shock. It was obvious that the reason was money just as soon as Sophie confessed it had been her mother's idea. Normally he would have said no; Sophie, after all, had been a summer romance a million years ago. The reason she had had virtually no successors was less because she was the love of his life than because the real love of his life was money. Simon had little interest in

anything else, and no interest in anything that got between him and the making of it, as a woman might.

His job, and the accumulation of wealth that it afforded, were Simon's entire focus. Within the international bank where he worked he had risen higher and higher and grown richer and richer. There seemed no obstacle to his getting higher and richer still. Until, that was, the recent, dramatic boardroom coup in which Isaiah and Abel Wintergreen had taken over.

It was a typical move by the Wintergreen brothers, who liked to strike fast, hard and unexpectedly. Within corporate financial circles their boldness and brilliance was legendary. Each company they acquired flourished, and it was expected that Simon's already successful bank would now out-perform itself several times over. The opportunities that lay before Simon therefore looked considerable. Within his grasp was the prospect of acquiring wealth beyond even his dreams of avarice.

Only one thing stood between Simon and this happy outcome. It was, however, a considerable thing. The Wintergreens hailed from the one of the poorest parts of the American Deep South and were passionately proud of their roots. This expressed itself in a number of ways. For a start, the Wintergreens spurned suits and ties, preferring cowboy boots and check shirts. They also held firm and unbending views about family life. Both Wintergreens had been married since age seventeen and had eight children each. It was rumoured – and the rumour seemed to be backed up with fact – that only employees who were married parents were promoted within the company.

This rumour unsettled Simon considerably. Not only did he not have a wife or a family, he realised that he didn't even know any children. While his colleagues frantically framed and displayed on their desks every available image of their offspring,

Simon's workstation remained incriminatingly empty. Into this difficult situation, and the dire threat it posed to his future, Sophie's invitation to be a godfather had appeared nothing less than a miracle. Arthur might not be a son, but a godson was better than nothing. He was, at least, something to put on the desk.

Simon now slapped his pockets for the hi-tech, super-slim, wildly expensive camera he had bought for the christening. As he framed a shot of the distant Arthur, still being shown off by his grandmother, a large figure in pink blundered into the picture. A split second later, Cess collided with him heavily.

'God, sorry,' she gasped, retrieving her mobile from the grass. 'Didn't see you there. Just taking a few snaps on my phone. Thought it would be good for a project on Ceremonies we're doing at school.'

'Oh,' said Simon, utterly uninterested.

'We never got properly introduced in the church, did we? I'm Cess. Godmother.'

'Cess,' repeated Simon, faintly. 'I'm Simon.'

'I've heard about you. Banker, yeah?' She eyed him challengingly. 'D'you think they should drop the debt?'

'Certainly not,' Simon said immediately. The more debt there was the better. Debt meant interest and interest meant profits.

'Hmm. Suppose a City breadhead would say that. D'you think this is Fairtrade champagne?' She brandished a near-empty glass in front of him.

'I have no idea,' Simon said coldly.

'Well, whatever, I've drunk too much of it,' Cess remarked cheerfully, stumbling off.

Elsewhere in the garden, Sophie tried to hold a conversation with an old friend while simultaneously holding Arthur, with

whom she had just been reunited. 'He's awfully squirmy, darling,' Shirley had announced, shoving the thrashing bundle back in her arms.

Sophie looked around for Mark. There he was, in the middle distance, with a group of their friends, throwing back his head to laugh between sips of champagne. She hadn't had a glass at all yet. A quiver of exasperation ran through her. Surely it was about time Mark looked after Arthur?

'When was it you said you were going back to work?' Juliet drawled.

'When Arthur's six months, at the beginning of September. About a fortnight from now, in fact.' Sophie felt a charge of excitement at the prospect of picking up her work bag again, of clacking smartly out of the house in high heels and fitted clothes. How different it would feel from lolloping around in flip-flops and slobwear.

'Rather you than me,' Juliet yawned. 'I couldn't face work after I'd had the kids.'

Sophie suppressed a smile. Juliet couldn't face work before she'd had the kids either. After university, which was where they had met, Juliet's working life had consisted of one half-hearted attempt to start up a luxury mail-order food business. Since Cassandra and Orlando had appeared, she had retreated into the luxurious languor of her husband's ancestral home in Wales.

Yet Sophie did not envy her. It would be nice to be rich, certainly; nice not to have to walk the financial knife-edge in which Mark's unexpected recent redundancy had resulted. But be married to the boorish, red-faced Harry instead of Mark? Not nice. Not at all.

Besides, quite apart from the financial imperative, Sophie had never seriously entertained not resuming her career. While being

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at home with Arthur had had its positive aspects – him, most of all – she had known full-time motherhood would eventually pall. As her maternity leave had drawn to a close, she began once more to hear the call of the world, the pull of work and proper waistbands.

Just for now, though, she was hearing the call of alcohol. Urgently. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Mark drain his glass and pick up another from a passing tray.

‘Look,’ she said to Juliet, desperately. ‘You don’t think you could go and get me a—’

‘Oh God. Look at them. Cassie! Lando! Where’s that bloody nanny of theirs?’ Juliet dived after her children.

Something tall and grave now loomed at Sophie’s side. ‘I’ve brought you a drink,’ Simon Sharp announced.

‘How absolutely lovely of you!’ Sophie seized the longed-for glass and smiled while Simon pointed a miniature digital camera. Her smile widened as his finger pushed the button. How very sweet of him to want to take so many pictures of his godson. Touching, too, how concerned he seemed to be to get absolutely the right shot. She stared at the camera lens zooming in and out. It looked very expensive, but what about Simon didn’t? His suit, was unmistakably cashmere, while his skin had an expensive, Jermyn-Street-wet-shaved look, very different from the patchy, snatched affairs that haste forced upon Mark.

‘Awfully sorry to hear about Mark’s job,’ Simon murmured in his rather nasal voice.

Sophie coughed into her glass. ‘Sorry? How do you mean?’

‘Him being made redundant and everything.’

‘He got a great new job, straightaway,’ Sophie said defensively. Who, she thought furiously, had been so indiscreet as to let slip to Simon Mark’s recent, brief professional setback? Her eye caught

her mother, bustling after a caterer carrying a tower of profiteroles. 'Make way for the *croquembouche*!' Shirley was trilling.

'Your mother never mentioned he had a new job,' Simon remarked.

'I don't suppose she did. But in fact he's just started as sales director designate of a new publishing company.

'Designate?'

'If he does well, he gets the job permanently. And he *will* do well,' Sophie said loyally.

'Does it pay well, though?'

Sophie started at such frankness. On the other hand, Simon was clearly taking his financial godparental duties very seriously, to judge by the large cheque that had been paid into the bank account he had opened for Arthur at Coutts. That their son had more expendable capital at the age of five months than they had at a combined age of over seventy, had been a sobering realisation.

'Not bad,' she said, which about summed it up. Mark's new company was small and unestablished. Making it big and established was his challenge. Then he would reap the rewards.

Simon felt scornful. No doubt the husband was making peanuts; he knew from his own experience recruiting redundant staff how pathetically grateful they were to have a job again. Their willingness to accept tiny wages was something he had exploited several times in the past. He watched Mark laughing in the sunshine and wondered what on earth, given his obvious poverty, he had to be so happy about. Being content without several million in the bank was inconceivable to Simon.

Emboldened by champagne, Sophie decided it was her turn as question master.

'Never married, then, Simon?' she asked playfully.

'Er, no.' Simon's heart was pounding. He was prepared for

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such questions in the bank, but to be cross-examined on this most sensitive of subjects amid the bright sunshine of a christening party was a horrible shock.

He kept his shock concealed from Sophie, however. The champagne on her empty stomach made her merry enough to probe further.

‘But you’d make someone a lovely husband,’ she teased.

‘I never found the right girl, I suppose,’ Simon muttered. ‘No one quite measured up to you, you see,’ he added lightly.

‘Oh Simon!’ Sophie burst out. ‘As if!’ Slightly embarrassed, she sought to change the subject, as he had intended her to.

‘I’m going back to work soon,’ she told him excitedly.