

Storybook Ending

Also by Poppy Alexander

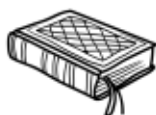
The Littlest Library

25 Days 'Til Christmas

The 12 Days of Christmas

Storybook Ending

A Novel



POPPY ALEXANDER



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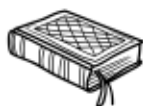
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For my little mate, Saffy



Chapter One

Once upon a time, there was a marmalade cat.

His best friend in the whole world was a little girl called Ruth. She thought Tango—because that was his name—was the cleverest, handsomest, most magical cat in the whole world. And she wasn't the only one, because Tango thought so too.

One day—

The telephone rang.

Imogen jumped, dropping the writing pad in a flurry of paper.

"Imo," said Nigel without preamble. "We've just bought a house!"

"Oh my God!" she replied, clutching her pad to her chest, her heart inexplicably starting to race. "Already?"

"Yep. I told you we didn't need a property solicitor slowing things up."

Nigel had insisted on doing his own legal work, she remembered, even though he was a matrimonial lawyer, not the property sort.

"I'm coming home to celebrate," he announced. "Put some champagne on ice, would you?"

"That's fantastic!" she said, taking the pencil out from

behind her ear and twizzling it nervously into her auburn curls. "Only, can we celebrate tonight, do you think? It's just that Sally's coming for lunch . . . I'm showing her my sketches."

"Bloody Sally again? You only saw her the other day. Isn't this much more important than some boring old designs?" he snapped. "Sorry, babe, I don't mean your designs are boring, of course."

She knew he did.

"Anyway," he continued, "I'm leaving the office now. Call Sally and tell her you can't make it."

He hung up without waiting for a reply.

Guiltily, Imogen looked around the flat as she wrenched free the pencil, which was now hopelessly entwined in her hair. The flat had become shamefully untidy since Nigel had left that morning. Her drawings were spread out all over the carpet. Colored pencils were scattered on and around the coffee table, and Tango was lounging fatly in his favorite outlawed place, on the seat of Nigel's armchair. Unforgivably, the overstuffed velvet cushion now had a generous sprinkling of orange fur.

The doorbell made her jump. Guiltily, she went to shoo Tango off the chair before realizing it couldn't possibly be Nigel so soon.

"Sally?" she asked, with her finger on the intercom button.

"Chardonnay . . . chardonnay . . ." a voice croaked weakly.

"The door switch thingy is broken," she said, grinning.

"Try to survive until I get down there."

Downstairs, throwing open the wide, stained-glass-paneled

door, she stepped aside sighing as Sally crawled into the communal hall, dragging her briefcase in one hand and wrapping her other arm around Imogen's legs.

"Honestly," Imogen complained mildly, "you're such a drama queen."

"It was horrible," Sally gasped. "I thought I'd never get away."

"Really? Because you're actually quite early."

"I am?" Sally asked—miraculously recovered as she stood up and brushed off the trousers of her immaculately cut suit. "Blimey, it felt like forever. I had the CEO of Grantley's Mushrooms Inc. determined to waste his money telling his advertising agency how to do their job according to the advice of his wife, who he can't possibly have married for her brains, by the way."

"Tell me more."

"Well, she's got massive tits, for one thing. Mind you, I don't reckon they're real—"

"Not the wife, you twit, the campaign."

"Oh, right. Well, how about a prime-time TV campaign—he wants it on during *Love Island*, dunno why—based on a series of cartoons, starring—no less . . ." Sally paused for effect. "Martin the Mushroom," she declared in an I-rest-my-case sort of way.

"Could have been worse," said Imogen as they reached the flat door.

"Really? How?"

"What about Toby the Toadstool," she suggested, "or Mike the Morel, or even Fergus the Fungus . . . Actually,

that one's quite good, although it's a bit familiar, I think it might have been done before . . ." She continued to ramble as she went to collect wine and glasses from the kitchen.

By the time she returned, Sally had slipped off her shoes and was padding around the sitting room, examining Imogen's drawings and paintings from every angle.

Bursting with the news, Imogen told her friend about Storybook Cottage.

"Wow, that's it, then," said Sally. "It's the country life for you from now on. How are you looking forward to sticking on your Crocs so you can wade through the manure to feed the chickens every day? It'll be a far cry from playing eeny, meeny, miney, mo with the Wimbledon wine bars every lunchtime."

"I don't," said Imogen. "I may not have an actual job, but I work very hard on my pictures and designs when I'm at home. I don't often take time for lunch anyway."

As she spoke, she was wrestling awkwardly with a bottle of champagne and a tea towel. "Nigel just phoned to say he is coming home to celebrate. I thought we'd get a head start."

"Good thinking," said Sally, "but I'll make myself scarce when he gets here, don't worry. Don't want to get in the way of any celebratory couple stuff, do I?" Sally gave a theatrical shudder.

"You wouldn't be in the way," Imogen replied, flushing slightly.

"No?" Sally threw her an incredulous look. "I can't see our Nigel up for a *ménage à trois* somehow." She pretended to consider. "Well, maybe I can, but not with me, I don't

flatter myself . . . Anyway, surely the whole deal about the rambling country house is to keep you barefoot and pregnant. You might as well crack on."

"I don't think that's 'the whole deal,' no," protested Imogen. "There's no hurry with the baby thing, is there?" She was definitely not going to admit to saying the same to Nigel a little too often recently.

"Not getting second thoughts, I hope, my love?"

"No-o . . ." said Imogen. "Well, not about the move to the country. You know I adore the idea. It's going to be such a good social media story, it could really launch my stuff. I've set up a new Insta account. I've called it @Storybook_Ending because it felt weird using my name, and—well—I want to feature this children's book I'm working on. I've got followers already . . ."

"Ha! @Storybook_Ending, eh?" said Sally knowingly. "Is this what it is? This move to the country? Your 'happy ever after'?"

"Maybe," said Imogen, alert to the possibility she was being mocked. Was it wrong to want a happy ending? "You will come to visit me, won't you?" she added. It sounded like a plea.

"Try and stop me," said Sally, giving her a searching look and then turning her attention to the pictures.

"I love the ones with the cat. It's Tango, isn't it? He'll be insisting on having his own agent."

By THE TIME they had eaten lunch and nearly finished the champagne, Sally had enthused over Imogen's sketches for her children's book and was looking regretfully at her

watch. "Sadly, I can't leave the office unattended too much longer, or it'll be carnage."

It suddenly struck Imogen it had been nearly two hours since Nigel had called to say he was coming home.

"Funny that Nigel isn't here yet," she said.

"He probably decided to stop off and get you a huge celebratory present. Either that or he got delayed showing off to all his colleagues about his great big expensive house . . . and his beautiful, clever, surrendered wife," she added, naughtily.

The doorbell rang.

"Speak of the devil?" queried Sally.

"That'll be him. He's probably lost his key again," said Imogen, relieved.

"I'll let him in on my way out." Sally gave Imogen a brief hug and headed for the door.

COMING OUT OF the kitchen, having dumped the lunch plates in the dishwasher, Imogen was surprised to see Sally in the doorway again. "What have you forgotten?"

Sally didn't speak. She walked unsteadily into the room, holding out her arms. Imogen was shocked to see her friend's face was waxy and white, as if she were about to faint. Then she caught sight of a policeman and policewoman coming through the door, and her heart thudded violently in her chest.

"Imo," said Sally, reaching out and grasping Imogen's hands, "I'm s-so sorry."

NIGEL'S PARENTS WERE quick to take over the organization of the funeral. "Nigel's wife? She's an artist . . ." she could al-

ways imagine them telling their friends. “Pretty girl, but—well, *you* know—you’ve got to let them make their own mistakes, haven’t you?”

They made a gesture at keeping Imogen in the picture, but the consultation was peremptory; she was informed of the guest list, the catering arrangements for the post-funeral reception, and the announcement in the *Times*. All that was left was to contact their few mutual friends and acknowledge the messages of sympathy.

The service was held at the crematorium next to the gasworks. Perfectly manicured grass dotted with memorial plaques and plastic flowers surrounded the one-story building. Nigel had not been remotely religious, Imogen knew—except where propriety demanded it—so the context seemed fittingly godless. He would have wanted a bit more drama, she thought, or at least a little more gravitas than the suburban dispatching of souls as the priest chanted singsong through the shortest of services necessary to preserve decorum.

She should have reckoned on his family to provide the entertainment.

“My darling boy!”

A wail broke through Imogen’s reverie as the coffin began to jerk toward the curtained furnace. She turned to see Nigel’s mother swaying, handkerchief clutched to her cheek.

Imogen watched with interest, to see if she was going to throw herself after the coffin, but instead—having made her point—the older woman sank dramatically back onto the pew to be fanned and patted consolingly by her acolytes.

What a pity, thought Imogen.

Her mother-in-law had made no secret, during her depressingly frequent visits to the flat, that Imogen had failed badly in her responsibilities as the perfect wife. Her sins, she was informed, were many and varied, ranging from failing to iron his underpants to giving him frozen pizza for supper.

Nigel had never once defended her either, she remembered.

AFTER THE FUNERAL they all piled back to Nigel and Imogen's flat, where Imogen planted herself inconspicuously—she hoped—against the drawing room wall. She had borrowed a chic little black dress from Sally. "An LBD, darling, you can't go wrong!" But as Sally was a good six inches taller and Imogen hadn't been eating much, the effect was more like a child dressing up in its mother's clothes. She desperately wished Sally was there. She could have done with an ally, but Sally had been the first to admit she and Nigel had not been close, and the two women agreed it would have been a little hypocritical of her to attend.

Clutching a glass of warm white wine to her chest, she watched the throng of guests milling around the room and spilling out onto the roof terrace. She had enjoyed making the garden. It had been a wasteland of broken chairs and rusting barbecues when she first knew it. Despite Nigel joking about her killing plants on sight, the little terrace had flourished, and she had cherished every leaf. It was the one part of his flat she had been allowed to put her stamp on since she and Tango had moved in with him two years before.

Noise levels rose steadily after the first half hour. With most guests onto their second or third glass of wine, tongues had loosened, and raucous anecdotes were following one from the other, punctuated with explosions of laughter.

The ebb and flow of sound lulled Imogen into a near trance. She felt like one of the nodding dogs in the backs of cars, smiling politely as Nigel's relatives, friends, and work colleagues paraded before her, each with an expression of regret and a memory to relate. She was pretending to listen to a dusty old aunt plowing through endless tales of Nigel's childhood misdemeanors—he was really quite evil, apparently—when she spotted Richard Spencer, his boss at the law firm. He was pointing straight at her for the benefit of an elderly man that Imogen didn't recognize. As she idly wondered who he was, Richard spoke emphatically into the ear of the older man, who screwed up his face in the way of someone who is deaf and denies it.

"... not the one I remember," she heard the elderly man say, too loudly. "Pretty little thing, mind you, but I assumed his wife was that blonde ... we saw having lunch in ..." She struggled to hear the next bit and then the other noise in the room momentarily dropped a little: "... seemed a bit embarrassed about her, now you mention it ..." was the last Imogen heard as Richard hurried him away with a—was it a guilty look in her direction?

The next minute a clawlike hand gripped her upper arm. Resisting the temptation to yank herself free, Imogen regarded Nigel's mother with pity. She was a bitter and complaining woman who took the loss of her only son as the

final insult after her beleaguered husband had escaped her by dying three years before.

"He was worth ten of his father, you know," was her opening declaration. "You'll go and find someone else soon enough, I'll be bound. But me? I've nothing to live for now." She snuffled, choked into temporary silence by the drama of the picture she had drawn for herself. "I hope you never know the agony a parent feels when a child dies before them," she continued, her eyes boring into Imogen's.

Probably right, thought Imogen as she patted the woman's arm helplessly. No chance at all if I fail to have any children—and it's not looking good at the moment.

LATER, WHEN THE drink was drunk, the food gone, and the guests beginning to think about Tube journeys home, supper, and the relief of removing too-tight shoes, Imogen turned to see Richard Spencer at her elbow.

"Imogen! What a terrible thing this all is," he boomed. "Nigel will be sorely missed at Brandon and Spencer, I don't need to tell you. He was destined for a great future with us, you know. A partnership, I'm sure of it."

"Thank you, Richard. I know he would have appreciated hearing you say that."

"If there is anything we can do, my dear. Anything at all? If you need financial assistance . . . ?" He raised his eyebrows.

"I'll be fine," she said, hoping it was true. "Oh, except I think the paperwork for the house purchase is still in the office. I don't suppose it could be sent, could it?"

"That's certainly something we can take on for you. Tell

your estate agent to ask for me personally and think no more of it. Anything else?"

"Just one more thing—who was that older gentleman I saw you talking to earlier?"

"Do you mean old Winterton? He's a long-ago-retired partner. He met Nigel a few times through work functions, that's all."

"Only that I couldn't help overhearing him . . . something about a blonde? He thought he had met me before?"

Richard flushed, reluctant to meet Imogen's eye. "Oh, you don't want to listen to anything he bangs on about, although he's pretty good for a chap in his eighties, I suppose. He gets things mixed up, and he's as deaf as a post, which doesn't exactly help."

A sickening, heavy lump settled in the pit of Imogen's stomach.

Richard was lying.

She didn't blame him. He had always been avuncular and had flirted harmlessly with her at dinner parties, but she was realistic enough to know that men stuck together in his world. Betraying a male confidence or—dare she even think it—an indiscretion, would be anathema to him. Swallowing hard, she gave him a wan smile and pecked him on the cheek. "Thanks for coming, Richard. I know Nigel would have appreciated such a good turnout from the company."

"Not at all, my dear girl," he said, bolting with obvious relief.

SHE SAT BLANKLY through the inquest at the civic offices, an ugly gray sixties building with a warren of small, airless

rooms, brown carpeted and mean. Several witnesses gave their reports of a reckless motorcycle rider weaving in and out of rush hour traffic and then plowing at full speed into the side of a van turning right. He had always loved his motorbike, reveling in avoiding traffic queues on his two wheels. As a note of pure farce, Imogen learned, the van's contents had been scattered all over the road from the force of the collision. Traffic had had to be held up for nearly an hour while police cleared away the boxes of novelty condoms.

"Wow," SALLY SAID when Imogen met up with her later at Julio's, over flat whites and avocado on toast. "Fancy being killed by a condom. With all this talk about safe sex, I think you ought to launch a campaign to let everyone know they can be lethal in the wrong hands."

"Seriously?" Imogen blurted in a rare moment of exasperation with her friend. She knew Sally and Nigel were enemies, but was there anything Sally wouldn't joke about?

"Imo—I'm so sorry." Sally was instantly contrite. "I don't know what makes me say things like that."

"Are you okay?" Imogen asked, stifling her indignation on noticing Sally looked strained. Her face was gaunt, and she was fiddling with her hair constantly.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine," Sally replied, waving her hand. "Come on, I don't want to dump my problems on you, of all people. Not now."

She knew better than to push. Sally would tell her when she was ready.

THE NEXT DAY there was an embarrassed letter from the estate agency dealing with the house sale: . . . *so sorry for your loss . . . our deepest condolences . . . awaiting your further instructions* . . . The look of relief on the face of the smooth-scrubbed agent was obvious when she went into the office and confirmed the sale of their Wimbledon flat and the house purchase should carry on.

She was uncertain about the move, but she also yearned to escape from the flat and from the city that sweated and reeked in the grimy summer heat. In any case, Nigel dying was so seismic, Imogen thought she had nothing else to lose in changing every other aspect of her life while she was at it. There was simply no conceivable way things could be any worse than they already were. Not that she was idealizing the past. Their marriage had been far from perfect—wasn't everyone's?—but the move to the country together had been a shared dream. Maybe—in Nigel's memory—she should try and live the dream for him. For them both.

The reading of the will was the final hurdle and did nothing to dispel her feeling that her whole life had been transformed into a bad soap opera. Arriving at the solicitor's offices, she was relieved to see only her sister-in-law, Anne, was present. Nigel's mother had excused herself, claiming exhaustion brought on by the heat and the strain. Imogen sat, hands folded in lap, as the elderly solicitor applied himself to explaining the contents of the will.

"It is fortunate that my late client saw the wisdom of preparing a will, you know, especially given that his . . . er . . . demise was so tragically unexpected."

The solicitor continued with a sigh, "Of course there are

the formalities of probate to be observed. However, the terms of the will are broadly as follows. Nigel Hewitt—that is, the deceased,” he clarified unnecessarily, “leaves the sum of his estate to his wife, Imogen Hewitt, with the standard provision for offspring, of which I understand there are none?” He regarded Imogen over the top of his wire-rimmed glasses.

“No,” she confirmed, clearing her throat. “No children.”

“I see,” he continued briskly. “Anyway, the value of the estate is straightforward. There are a couple of small investment policies, and a ‘death in service’ benefit payable from his firm equivalent to a year’s salary. In addition to these, there is simply the matter of the properties. It would appear that the sale of a flat in Wimbledon had been agreed and contracts exchanged. In addition, the purchase of a property known as Storybook Cottage in Middlemass, Devon, had also been agreed, with funds from the flat sale and the provision of a substantial mortgage loan.

“This is an interesting situation,” he droned, in a tone that suggested it was the most boring thing he had ever heard. “The contracts, being exchanged but not completed before the death, are arguably no longer enforceable. In addition, the purchase can no longer depend on the mortgage loan that was granted to your husband alone and is not transferable.”

Imogen, feeling her eyelids droop, struggled to stay awake. She suddenly realized he was looking at her, waiting to deliver his big moment, and wanted her full attention.

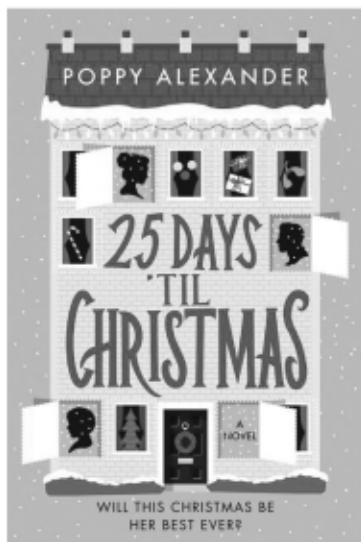
“However,” he said, brightening considerably, and planting both hands firmly on the desk in front of him, “it ap-

pears a life assurance policy set up to cover the mortgage debt is valid given that it was set to begin on exchange of contracts rather than on completion, as one might, perhaps, have thought.

“Therefore, my dear,” he continued, positively avuncular now, “as your husband’s death occurred a full hour after the official exchange of contracts, the life assurance company is obliged to pay out. This means that, providing the sale of the Wimbledon property proceeds as planned, with the consequent release of equity, Storybook Cottage is yours absolutely, without debt or encumbrance.”

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