

THE BATTLE
OF THE
BOOKSHOPS

Also by Poppy Alexander

Storybook Ending

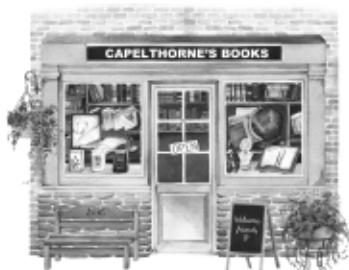
The 12 Days of Christmas

The Littlest Library

25 Days 'til Christmas

THE BATTLE OF THE BOOKSHOPS

A Novel



Poppy Alexander



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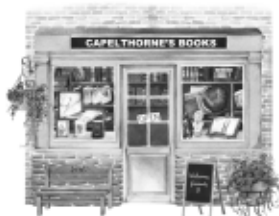
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For Caroline and Anthony



CHAPTER 1

Technically, her boss hadn't sacked her.

Saying "Be back at your desk by eight o'clock sharp on Monday or don't come back at all" was miles—okay, inches—away from "You're fired," so why did Jules's stomach flip over every time she replayed the conversation in her mind? She could see Caroline's bloodred talons tapping impatiently on her vast oak desk, her raised, impeccably shaped eyebrow condemning Jules's request to leave an hour early on Friday to the category of heinous crimes equivalent to genocide. Fine, maybe not genocide, but it was definitely on a par with daring to deliver an unacceptably lukewarm flat white to Caroline's office first thing in the morning, even if it *was* because she had picked up Caroline's dry cleaning on the way.

No, the sad reality was that editorial director Caroline Farquarson, of the small and venerable independent publishing house Farquarson and Trimble, was not an issuer of empty threats. There would be a queue of eager hopefuls keen to step into Jules's shoes if she dared to do just one more thing to disappoint her exacting employer. Leaving early on the Friday before the London Book Fair was pretty disappointing. Jules saw that.

But work—her career, if you could call it that—didn't matter now. What mattered was making it onto the last train of the day, out of Paddington toward the little Devon seaside town of Portneath. Even if it meant taking nothing with her but her work bag with a laptop, a dowdy brown cardigan, the last quarter inch of a dark red lipstick that didn't really suit her, and—thankful for small mercies—a spare toothbrush. She had little else, not even a pair of underpants. There had been no time for a return to her dispiriting digs: the smallest bedroom in a shared Zone Four terraced house with a tiny kitchen and one bathroom for the five of them. It had never become somewhere she had thought of as home.

Home was Portneath.

Jules dug out her phone and revisited that electrifying text from her mother:

Need urgent help with Aunt Flo. Life and death. Hurry before it's too late.

And then, yet again, Jules scrolled through all her unheeded and increasingly panicked replies. Her last text—also unanswered—confirmed she was on her way, ETA midnight or thereabouts. Clearly her mother had lost her phone or turned it off, or—horrifying thought—was so embroiled in her darling aunt Flo's final moments she had left it in some Devonshire ambulance. At the thought of getting there too late, at the thought of losing Aunt Flo—technically Great-Aunt Flo, and the nearest thing to a grandmother that Jules had ever had . . .

Jules dashed away a tear and then sat with both hands pressed to her face to stem the anguish. She could see her wan reflection in the rain-streaked glass of the train window, the darkness outside forcing her to observe her lank second-day red hair bobbed to the shoulder, a snub nose and round face making her appear younger

than her years, alabaster-pale skin that freckled rather than tanned, to her great frustration, and the remains of the post-box-red lipstick that she slicked on many hours ago in an attempt to appear sophisticated. Huge green eyes completed the childlike look that infuriated her as she hurtled toward thirty, however many times Aunt Flo told her being asked for proof of age would start to feel like a compliment soon enough.

Turning away from the window, she yawned and shivered.

The train had emptied steadily as the hours went by, and by the time it pulled in at Portneath station, Jules was the only one left in her carriage. She stepped down onto the platform, stiff as an old lady, shuffling along to the exit behind a single figure, a tall, broad-shouldered, raven-haired man with an easy, loping walk that was indefinably familiar.

By the time Jules had persuaded the automatic barrier to accept her ticket and spring her reluctantly from the station's grasp, the man was bent over, talking through the open window of the lone cab at the taxi stand of an otherwise deserted station forecourt.

Damn. Terry the Taxi was her only way home, and now this man was snaffling him. Sods law, he was going miles. Jules sighed heavily. The sound made the man turn toward her, and her sigh turned into a gulp.

Roman Montbeau.

It had to have been nearly thirteen years. Jules felt her pale face flush, remembering the last time she had seen him, standing with his rich, aristocratic mates at the village dance, hands in pockets, leaning against the wall and observing the scene with an insouciance laced with scorn. He had been laughing, she remembered. Laughing at her. And with good reason, which had made it no less humiliating at the time.

She dismissed the memory with a little shake of her head and

realized he was gazing at her, a lazy smile curling one side of his mouth.

"What?" she snapped.

"I said 'care for a ride?'"

At least he didn't seem to recognize her. Of course, he didn't. Why would he remember that fleeting moment, all those years ago? Also, why would he remember *her*, an awkward sixteen-year-old, wearing her first grown-up dress, a bottle-green silk off-the-shoulder number that was too long and too old for her? In fact, why would he *ever* have noticed her, despite their years growing up in Middlemass—together, but worlds apart?

Jules drew her coat around her against the chill and stepped back to avoid a large, freezing puddle inches from her feet. "I'll wait, thanks," she said stiffly, looking away.

"I don't recommend that," shouted Terry from the car, leaning over onto the passenger seat to look up at her. "It's the pub pickups after this, and then the nightclubs. I'm booked solid till two a.m. easy . . . It's Friday night, innit, my love."

"You heard the man," Roman told her, holding open the rear car door and giving her a little bow. "I'd throw my coat over that puddle and everything," he went on, "only I've just had it dry-cleaned, so do you mind if I don't? Where are you off to anyhow?"

He really didn't recognize her, Jules told herself with relief. "Middlemass," she muttered, avoiding eye contact.

"Perfect. Me too. Want to narrow it down at all?"

"Outside the pub will be fine," she snapped. She wasn't going to give him her address if she could help it. Thankfully Terry was in no danger of knowing it either—she had barely been home in eleven years.

Skirting around Roman and his open door, clutching her handbag to her chest, she climbed in the front passenger seat instead, shooting Terry a look of thanks while trying to simultaneously

freeze Roman's overfamiliarity with a blank stare. It was a challenging maneuver. She probably just looked a bit insane.

Sizing up his two passengers, the taxi driver sighed and shook his head, as if perplexed—and perennially disappointed—by the ways of man. “Righty-o,” he said, starting up the engine.

Settled in the car with the heating on full blast, Jules's shivering eased in the welcome warmth. They were out of the little town now, sweeping through narrow lanes, the headlights lighting up the hedgerows rising high on either side.

Jules stared straight ahead, uncomfortably aware of Roman sitting behind, imagining his arctic-blue eyes boring into the back of her head. But then, why would he, a Montbeau—a family who considered themselves masters of their own tiny Devonshire universe—be giving her, a frumpy nobody and a mere Capelthorne, more than a passing thought? No, this easy charm with a hint of mockery? It was his default setting. She knew that because she remembered him and his cronies all too well. They were always obnoxiously confident, and that night was no different. They had been standing together—the usual crowd with their expensively casual Jack Wills and Abercrombie clothes—drinking beer from the bottle and taking the piss. They invariably had Marlboro Reds dangling from their bottom lips too, eyes narrowed against the smoke, at that time—years ago—when smoking was still badass as opposed to full-on stupid. At the epicenter of the cool clique was always Roman, invariably flanked by his sidekick, Gabriel, and the handsome Irish brothers Finn and Ciaran. All of them just as hopelessly unattainable as the film stars she and her friends adored, but it had been Roman, she remembered—not the Toms Hiddleston or Hardy—who had been her most hopelessly unrealistic teenage crush.

So, it had been idiotic of her to want to impress him. A pang of her exquisitely painful teen longing returned as she revisited

that agonizing moment, making her heart beat faster and her face color up. She had held herself aloof as she walked past them, returning from the loo—so hopelessly overdressed next to their hoodies and their jeans, just the right shade of blue. If only she could have shored up her fragile sixteen-year-old ego with a moment of objectification from them. Even a wolf whistle would have been validating. Instead, there had been that hateful burst of laughter and then another as Freya—darling loyal Freya—pointed urgently at her foot, and she looked down to see the length of toilet paper stuck to her heel. You could have fried burgers on her flaming cheeks. She had sat frozen for several minutes and then—in defeat—gone home to cry hot tears of mortification. For months, even years, that incident had caused her face to flush scarlet at every recollection. It had at least been a blessing that Roman left Portneath shortly after, heading off, she had heard, to his fancy Ivy League school in the United States. Because that was what young men from the Montbeau family did.

And now he was back. Great. Because she needed extra complications like a hole in the head, and nothing good ever came of a Capelthorne having anything to do with a Montbeau.

AFTER AN ENDLESS time that would have been only ten minutes, they pulled up outside the pub. Pushing her last ten-pound note into Terry's hand—determined not to be indebted to the enemy for the fare—Jules clambered out. The car swept away, the arc of the headlights briefly illuminating the whitewashed facade of the Middlemass Arms, now closed and shuttered for the night. In a moment, Jules was left shivering and alone in the dark. Even the very few village streetlamps were off now, meaning it must be well past midnight. She suddenly had a thought that her mother may not even be at home. *Of course!* Jules realized. She would be wherever Aunt Flo was breathing her last, perhaps even in Portneath

Hospital—in the little town Jules had just left—and now she had organized to have herself dropped several miles away in her home village of Middlemass instead. Idiot. It was Roman's fault. At the sight of him every sensible thought had dropped right out of her head.

Darn it, why couldn't her mother answer her phone? Setting off down the narrow, rutted lane that led to her mother's cottage—her childhood home—Jules could only hope the spare key would still be under the stone frog by the doorstep. Draining the last few drops of battery power on her phone, she used its flashlight to illuminate her path, night creatures skittering away from the narrow beam and rustling noisily into the safety of the dark.

Jules breathed a sigh of relief as she approached the little cottage, set sideways on the dusty lane, with its low, thatched eaves and whitewashed cob exterior. Even several feet away, she could see the glow of lamplight in the low, lattice-paned window. Peering in, she saw the fire was lit in the grate against the chill of the March night, and the lamp by the plump, shabby yellow sofa was on. Despite these encouraging signs, the room was, nonetheless, empty of human life. She picked her way down the flagged path to the back door, the one that everyone used—Jules couldn't remember the front door being opened in the twenty-five years her mother had rented the place. That was nearly her whole life . . . Gamekeeper's Cottage was the only home she remembered.

Looking through the window by the back door, Jules saw, with a flood of relief, none other than Aunt Flo herself. Clearly reports of her near death had been exaggerated. The old woman was sitting in the rocking chair in front of the Aga stove, one leg, in a plaster cast, propped on a hard wooden chair.

"Aunt Flo!" Jules exclaimed as she tried the door, which was so unexpectedly unlocked, Jules burst dramatically into the room, nearly falling. "I thought you were on your deathbed." She dropped

her handbag on the floor and went over to give the older woman a hug, breathing in her comfortingly familiar scent of geraniums and roses.

Straightening, Jules looked down at her aunt. It was not just the plaster cast on her leg that was unusual; Flo had one arm in plaster to the elbow too, and her normally neat gray bun was rushed and clumsy, with stray tufts of hair sticking up at all angles.

"What on earth have you done to yourself?"

"Ugh, too boring for words," said Flo, waving her unbroken arm dismissively. "Clumsiness. Gravity. But never mind me—how are *you*, my darling girl?"

"Fine, fine," said Jules impatiently, dragging another of the wooden dining chairs noisily across the earthenware-tiled floor nearer to her aunt and plonking herself down in relief. It had been a seriously long day. "Mum was texting that I should rush down here before it was too late. 'Life and death,' she said . . ."

"Ha! You know what your mother's like," explained Flo, rolling her eyes, "always the drama queen."

"*You're* the drama queen," retorted Jules's mum, Maggie, appearing from the darkness of the hallway. "You're here," she observed, stating the obvious, as mother and daughter gave each other a dead-eyed duty hug, arms stiff, bodies a decorous three inches apart.

"I'm here because you told me to come," said Jules with a note of accusation. "You said Aunt Flo was nearly dead."

"Never mind her. *I'm* nearly dead from all the running around," Maggie complained, holding the back of her hand to her forehead in a performative attitude of exhaustion. "I've been working my fingers to the bone, cooking, cleaning . . ."

Jules looked pointedly at the remains of supper on the kitchen table, two plates smeared with the remnants of baked beans on toast. It wasn't exactly *Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons*. There *was*

evidence, though, that supper had been accompanied by at least a couple of glasses of red wine each.

Maggie picked up the bottle from the table and waggled it experimentally. "I'll just get another one of these," she said vaguely, wandering back toward the hallway. "I expect you could do with a drink after your journey . . ."

"No thanks," Jules started telling the disappearing figure, but Flo, reaching to grab Jules's wrist, stopped her protestations in their tracks.

"Your mother's driving me insane," she hissed. "You've got to get me out of here before we kill each other."

"How?" protested Jules in a whisper. "I don't even have a car."

"Bus, taxi, whatever—I need you to help me," Flo went on, her eyes imploring. "The bookshop's been shut for a week while I've been stuck here being alternately patronized and neglected by your mother. She says she's been going in to feed Merlin, but I'm not sure I believe her. She's always hated that cat. Plus, I can't afford to miss out on the Easter holiday trade. If I don't get the shop open soon, it won't open at all. Ever."

"Surely not?" Jules asserted soothingly. This must be her great-aunt taking her own opportunity to be dramatic. Things couldn't be that bad, could they?

"Things *are* that bad," insisted Aunt Flo, as if Jules had spoken her thoughts aloud. "Never worse . . . and here I am, stuck . . . I'm not getting these blasted casts taken off for at least another five weeks, and they say my leg is going to take months to recover. It's a disaster. Look," she pleaded, "just get me back to the shop and we'll work it out from there."

"I'll go down there first thing tomorrow and see what's what," promised Jules, resting her hand on Flo's good arm comfortingly. "But with three flights of stairs up to the flat, I honestly don't see how you are going to manage."

The specter of not being back at her desk by eight in the morning on Monday floated before her eyes. How on earth was she going to sort out this mess in a single weekend?

A thought seemed to strike Maggie as she came back into the room with her prize: another bottle of red wine. "How did you get here from the station?" she queried.

"Taxi. I'd have asked you for a lift if you'd been answering your phone," said Jules accusingly, seeing her mother's phone, dark and lifeless, on top of a pile of junk mail on the end of the kitchen table.

"Too busy. Forgot to charge it," her mother admitted without remorse.

In the face of interrogation, Jules revealed, in dispassionate tones, how Roman had insisted on sharing the one taxi and how, in extremis, she had been forced to agree.

"How *could* you?" Maggie exclaimed, clutching the bottle of wine to her chest in outrage. "Now we are indebted to the Montbeaus, of all the ghastly people. *God*, what a nightmare."

"Now who's the drama queen?" muttered Jules, and then, louder: "I wouldn't worry, I paid my share. And anyhow, he clearly didn't have a clue who I was."

WELL, WELL, WELL, thought Roman. *Of all the railway stations in all the world . . .*

He smiled at the memory of her, as he slipped past the grand facade of the main family house, which rose up, full of elegant Georgian consequence, at the head of the circular gravel drive. His destination was not the heavy oak door between the pillars of the colonnaded porch, but a small, freestanding stone building just a few yards farther on. Once the family's private chapel but now long deconsecrated, he was grateful to have returned from the frenetic pace of New York City to the serenity of his own space.

Also, he found it easier to love his family when he saw less of them. He had not wanted to come home. It was not his father's demands but his mother's tears that had persuaded him. He could withstand anything but that. Anyhow, he reminded himself, his father had been right, much as it pained him to admit it. His mother and his loyal friends *were* missing him, and he them, if he was honest. Plus, it was time to accept the responsibility of taking up the business reins and preparing to become head of the family one day. Not just "the family" but the Montbeaus. The name behind generations of power and influence in this little corner of Devon. So . . . no pressure.

The layout of the chapel was simple: a large, vaulted flagstone space downstairs, with the kitchen up two steps at one end and a long wooden dining table hammered together from scaffolding planks across the middle of the room. There was a seating area at the far end, with a thick Persian rug, glowing lamps, and fat feather cushions on a matching pair of sofas placed on either side of a woodburning stove. This part of the space was made more intimate by its low timber ceiling, created by the sleeping platform above. Reached by a cast-iron spiral staircase, this space—once the organ loft—was now furnished with little other than a vast bed up on a dais and overlooked the living room below. A walk-in wardrobe and a spacious shower room tucked away behind a false wall completed the accommodation—perfect for one person, or perhaps even a love nest for two.

Roman had supervised the last details of the refurbishment himself, and now his sole focus was using business skills, honed in the States, to turn around his family's diminishing fortunes. And work was a welcome distraction too. It helped him forget just how much he had left behind in New York, just how much freedom he had lost by being compelled to return.

But business was the last thing on his mind this evening as he lounged in front of the wood burner, eyes gazing through and beyond the flames. Nursing half an inch of smoky scotch whisky in his hand, he let his mind wander, and it knew exactly where it wanted to go . . . to that evening—what?—twelve years ago? More? There he was, messing around with his mates, taking the mickey out of the provincial dance in the village hall, drinking beer, watching the girls parading by, eager for his attention . . . And then he had seen her, walking past, aloof and angelic—ignoring him and his idiot friends—with her fox-red hair piled high and creamy-white shoulders spilling out of that shiny green dress with its tight bodice and its full, swirly skirt. She had looked at odds with the rest of the girls in their figure-hugging jeans and false eyelashes—and *so* much more beautiful, even with that toilet roll trailing from her foot. No, she had been different. And he had been enthralled.

Of course, she was a Capelthorne, so it was a hard no. Obviously.

Strange how memories of that night were still so vivid, though. He had had wild thoughts, then, about going over to her, striking up a conversation, and he had wondered over the years what might have happened if he had. But, by the time he had mustered the resolve, she had disappeared. He left for university in the States the following week, and now, all these years later, he was back, and so, it seemed, was she.

What were the chances?

But then he sighed. It might seem to an outsider—to a sappy romantic—that their stars were aligned . . . but he knew better. No, the sight of her again this evening may have been beguiling, may even have seemed like fate, but business was his priority now. Business—and family—came first. Liaisons with members of the Capelthorne family, however tempting, were contrary to his objectives.

He drank deep, the peaty spirit warming him.

And, in any case, when she realized what he had done, when he revealed his latest project, the enmity would intensify beyond anything yet seen in the history of the two sparring families over the last two hundred years . . .

It would be war.