

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Twelve Days of Christmas

Written by Trisha Ashley

Published by Avon

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

TRISHA ASHLEY

Twelve Days of Christmas

AVON

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

AVON

A division of HarperCollinsPublishers
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2010

First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollinsPublishers 2010

Copyright © Trisha Ashley 2010

Trisha Ashley asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-1-84756-115-2

Set in Minion by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



FSC is a non-profit international organisation established to promote the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and ecological needs of present and future generations.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Pauline Sheridan for both her expert advice on Arab horses and the excellent recipe for warm horse mash; and also Carol Weatherill for a little light goat husbandry, especially the toast and treacle!

For my good friends and fellow 500 Club members, Leah Fleming and Elizabeth Gill, with love.

Prologue: The Ghost of Christmas Past

Even though it was barely December, the hospital ward had been decked out with a tiny tree and moulded plastic wall decorations depicting a fat Santa, with bunchy bright scarlet cheeks and dark, almond-shaped eyes. He was offering what looked like a stick of dynamite to Rudolf the very red-nosed reindeer, but I expect you need explosive power to deliver all those presents in one single night.

My defence strategy for the last few years has been to ignore Christmas, shutting the door on memories too painful to deal with; but now, sitting day after day by the bed in which Gran dwindled like snow in summer, there seemed to be no escape.

Gran, who brought me up, would not have approved of all these festive trappings. Not only was she born a Strange Baptist, but had also married a minister in that particularly austere (and now almost extinct) offshoot of the faith. They didn't do Christmas in the way everyone else did – with gifts, gluttony and excess, so as a child, I was always secretly envious of my schoolfriends.

But then I got married and went overboard on the whole idea. Alan egged me on – he never lost touch with his inner child, which is probably why he was such a brilliant primary school teacher. Anyway, he loved the whole thing, excess, gluttony and all.

So I baked and iced spiced gingerbread stars to hang on the

tree, which was always the biggest one we could drag home from the garden centre, together with gay red and white striped candy canes, tiny foil crackers and twinkling fairy lights. Together we constructed miles of paper chains to festoon the ceilings, hung mistletoe (though we never needed an excuse to kiss) and made each other stockings full of odd surprises.

After the first year we decided to forgo a full traditional turkey dinner with all the trimmings in favour of roast duck with home-made bottled Morello cherry sauce, which was to become my signature dish. (I was sous-chef in a local restaurant at the time.) We made our own traditions, blending the old with the new, as I suppose most families do . . .

And we were so *nearly* a family: about to move to a tiny hamlet just outside Merchester, a perfect country setting for the two children (or maybe three, if Alan got his way) that would arrive at neatly-spaced intervals . . .

At this juncture in my thoughts, a trolley rattled sharply somewhere behind the flowered curtains that enclosed the bed, jerking me back to the here and now: I could even hear a faint, tinny rendering of ‘The Twelve Days of Christmas’ seeming to seep like a seasonal miasma from the walls.

Perhaps Gran could too, for suddenly her clear, light grey eyes, so like my own, opened wide with an expression of delighted surprise that had nothing to do with either my presence or the home-made pot custard I’d brought to tempt her appetite, the nutmeg-sprinkled top browned just the way she liked it.

‘*Ned? Ned Martland?*’ she whispered, staring at someone only she could see.

I’d never seen her look so lit-up and alive as she did at that moment, which was ironic considering those were her last words – and the words themselves were a bit of a puzzle, since my grandfather’s name had been Joseph Bowman!

So who the hell was Ned Martland? If it *had* been Martland, of course, and not Cartland, Hartland, or something similar. But

no, I was pretty sure it was Martland – and he'd obviously meant a lot to her at some time. This was fairly amazing: had my grave and deeply reserved grandmother, who had been not so much buttoned up as zipped tightly shut and with a padlock thrust through the fastener for good measure, been keeping a romantic secret all these years? Had she lived her life without the man she truly loved by her side, just as I was living mine?

Perhaps there's a family curse, which would account for why, after Alan's death, she kept going on about the sins of the fathers being visited on the next generations – though actually, as I pointed out to her, that would have meant me rather than my husband. But if there *is* a family curse it looks set to end with me, because I'm the end of the line, the wrong side of thirty-five, and with my fruit in imminent danger of withering on the vine.

I've had too much time to think about that lately, too.

I've no idea what Alan's last words were, if any, because I was still asleep when he went for his early morning jog round the local park before work. When I woke up and went downstairs there was no sign of him and it was all worryingly Marie Celeste. The radio was spilling out some inane Christmas pop song to the empty kitchen and his bag, with its burden of marked exercise books, was on the floor by the door. A used mug and plate and a Tupperware box of sandwiches lay on the table and the kettle was barely warm.

As I stood there, puzzled and feeling the first stirring of unease, the police arrived to break the news that there had been an accident and Alan would never be coming home.

'Don't be silly,' I heard my voice telling them crisply, 'I'm doing duck with some of my bottled Morello cherry sauce for Christmas dinner – it's his favourite.'

Then, for the first and only time in my life, I fainted.

* * *

Alan had been trying to rescue a dog that had fallen through the ice on the boating lake. How stupid was that? I mean, if a *dog* fell through, then even a slightly built man like Alan would, too. The dog was evidently *not* a retriever, for it swam through the broken ice created by Alan's fall, scrambled out and ran off.

I was so furious with Alan that at the funeral I positively *hurled* the single red rose someone had handed me into the grave, screaming, '*What were you thinking of, dimwit?*'

And then I slipped on the snowy brink and nearly followed it in, though that was entirely due to the large shot of brandy my friend Laura, who was also Alan's sister, insisted we both drink before we set out. Luckily her husband, Dan, was on my other side and yanked me back at the last minute and then Gran walked around the grave from where she had been standing among a small cluster of elderly Strange Baptist friends and took a firm grip of my other arm, like a wardress.

But by then I was a spent force: grief, fury and guilt (the guilt because I had refused to take up jogging with him) seemed to blend so seamlessly that I didn't know where one ended and another began.

He'd left me on my own, closing the door on the future we had all planned out. How *could* he? I always thought we were yin and yang, two halves of the same person, soulmates destined to stay together forever throughout eternity – if so, I'd have a few choice things to say when I finally caught up with him.

My coping strategy had been to close the door on Alan in return, only allowing my grief full rein on the anniversary of his death in late December and shutting myself away from all reminders of the joyous seasonal festivities he had taught me to love during the all-too-brief years of our marriage.

There's even less reason to celebrate Christmas now . . .
Christmas? Bah, humbug!

Chapter 1: Pregnant Pause

Since Gran had been slipping quietly away from me for years, her death wasn't that much of a shock, to be honest. That was just as well, because I had to dash straight off to one of my house-sitting jobs right after her austere Strange Baptist funeral, though finding her journals in the small tin trunk in which she kept her treasures just before I left was a *very* poignant moment . . .

When I'd locked up her little sliver of a terraced house in Merchester (not that there was anything in it worth stealing) I'd taken the trunk home with me: the key was on her keyring with the rest. I already had some idea of what was in it from glimpses caught over the years – postcards of Blackpool, where my grandparents spent their Wakes Week holiday every year, my annual school photographs, certificates and that kind of thing – layers going back in time.

I'd only opened it meaning to add her narrow gold wedding band, but then had lifted up a few of the layers to see what was underneath – and right at the bottom was a thin bundle of small, cheap, school exercise books marked 'Esther Rowan', bound together with withered elastic bands. Opening the first, I found a kind of spasmodic journal about her nursing experiences starting towards the end of the war, since the first entry was dated October 1944, though it began by looking back at earlier experiences:

I'd started working as a nursing auxiliary at fifteen, which meant that when war broke out at least I wasn't sent to do hard, dirty work in the munitions factory, like many Merchester girls.

I thought how young they started work back then – and, reading the following entry, how stoical she was:

Tom, my childhood sweetheart, enlisted in the navy straight away, though I begged him to wait until he was called up. Sure enough, he was killed almost immediately, to the great grief of myself and his poor, widowed father. After this, I resolved to put all girlish thoughts of love and marriage behind me and threw myself into my nursing duties . . .

That last line struck me as being much like the way I'd moved house and thrown myself into a new job right after Alan died: only somehow in my case it didn't seem stoical, more a denial of those wonderful years we had together.

I knew Gran had eventually gone on to marry the father of her childhood sweetheart – she had said to me once that they had felt they could be a comfort and support to one another – so where this Ned Martland came in was anyone's guess! I was starting to think I must have imagined the whole thing . . .

Gran seemed to have filled the ensuing pages with a moralising mini-sermon on the evils of war, so I put the journals back in the trunk again, to read on my return.

I spent a week in Devon, looking after a cottage for one of my regular clients, along with two budgerigars called Marilyn and Monroe, Yoda the Yorkshire terrier and six nameless hens.

It was very soothing and allowed me the space to get a lot of things straight in my mind – and also to make one large and potentially life-changing decision – before coming back home

braced and ready to sort out Gran's house, which belonged to a church charity. They were pressing me to clear it out and hand back the keys, so I expect they had a huge waiting list of homeless and desperate clergy widows.

I had a week before my next Homebodies assignment, which I was sure would be more than adequate. And I was quite right, because I'd almost finished and was starting to look forward to escaping to the remote Highland house-sit which would safely take me over Christmas and into New Year, when it was suddenly cancelled.

Ellen, the old schoolfriend (or so she calls herself – Laura and I remember things a little differently) who runs the Homebodies agency, tried to persuade me to cook for a Christmas house-party instead, but she did it with little hope.

'I don't know why she even bothered asking,' I said to Laura, who had popped in to help me sort out the last of Gran's belongings. Well, I say *help*, but since she was heavily pregnant with her fourth baby she was mostly making tea and talking a lot. She's blonde, pretty and petite (my exact opposite), and carried the baby in a small, neat bump under a long, clingy tunic top the same shade of blue as her eyes.

'She asked because you're a brilliant cook and it pays so much better than the house-sitting,' she replied, putting two fresh mugs of tea down on the coffee table. 'Plus, she has all the tact of a bulldozer.'

'But she knows I need a rest from the cooking in winter and I don't do Christmas. I like to get away somewhere remote where no-one knows me and pretend it isn't happening.'

Laura sank down next to me on Gran's hideously uncomfortable cottage sofa. 'She probably hoped you'd got over it a bit and changed your mind – you've been widowed as long as you were married, now. We all still miss Alan dreadfully, especially at this time of year,' she added gently. 'He was the best brother anyone could ever have. But he wouldn't want us to grieve forever, Holly.'

‘I know, and you can’t say I haven’t picked up the pieces and got on with my life,’ I said, though I didn’t add that even after eight years the grief was still mixed fairly equally with anger. ‘But Christmas and the anniversary of the accident always bring things back and I’d much rather spend it quietly on my own.’

‘I expect Ellen’s forgotten that you weren’t brought up to celebrate Christmas in the same way as everyone else, too.’

Laura and I go way back to infant school, so she understands my slightly strange upbringing, but Ellen only came on the scene later, at the comprehensive (and though she denies it now, she tagged on to the group of girls who bullied me because of my height).

‘No, the Strange Baptists think the trappings of the season are all pagan manifestations of man’s fall from spiritual grace – though Gran could play a mean Christmas hymn on the harmonium.’

Laura looked at the space opposite, where the instrument had always stood against the magnolia blown-vinyl wallpaper. ‘I don’t know how you managed to fit that harmonium into your tiny cottage, I bet it weighed a ton even though it wasn’t very big.’

‘It did, but I was determined to have it because it was Gran’s pride and joy – the only time she seemed happy was when she was playing it. It *just* fitted into the space under the stairs.’

I hadn’t kept a lot, otherwise: the pink satin eiderdown that had covered my narrow bed as a child and two austere cross-stitch samplers sewn by my great-grandmother. One said, ‘Strange are the ways of the Lord’ and the other, ‘That He may do His work, His strange work’. That was about it.

What was left was a motley collection of cheap utility furniture, battered enamel and aluminium saucepans and the like, which were being collected by a house clearance firm.

The house had been immaculate, apart from a little dust, and Gran had never been a hoarder, so there hadn’t been that much

to sort out. Her clothes had already been packed and collected by a local charity and all that was left now to put in my car was a cardboard box of neatly filed household papers.

‘I think I’m just about finished here,’ I said, taking a biscuit from the packet Laura had brought, though Garibaldi are not actually my favourite – a bit too crushed-fly looking. ‘So, are you going to call this baby Garibaldi, then?’

Now, this was not such a daft question as you might suppose, since during her last pregnancy Laura had been addicted to Mars bars and she had called her baby boy Mars. He should thank his lucky stars it hadn’t been Twix or Flake.

She giggled. ‘No way! But if it’s a girl we might call it Holly after you, even though it will be a very early spring, rather than a Christmas, baby.’

I hated my name (my late mother’s choice), but I was quite touched. ‘I suppose it *would* be better than Garibaldi,’ I conceded, ‘especially for a girl.’

I took a sip of the pale, fragrant tea, which was the Earl Grey that Laura had brought with her, rather than the Yorkshire tea that Gran had always made strong enough to stand a spoon in. ‘The van will be here any minute, so we’ve just got the box of papers to stick in my car and we’re done. The meter reader came while you were in the kitchen, so I expect the electricity will be turned off any minute now, too.’

As if on cue, the dim bulb in its mottled glass shade went out and left us in the gathering shadows of a December afternoon.

“*Lead kindly light, amid the encircling gloom,*” I sang sepulchrally.

‘You know a hymn for every occasion.’

‘So would you, if you’d been brought up by a Strange Baptist.’

‘Still, it’s just as well you’d finished sorting out,’ Laura said. ‘She wasn’t a great hoarder, your gran, was she?’

‘No, apart from the few mementoes in that tin trunk I took home – and I’ve been reading a bit more in that sort of diary I

told you I'd found. Some of it is fascinating, but you have to wade through lots of Victorian-sounding moralising in between.'

'You could skip those bits?' she suggested.

'I thought about it, then decided I wanted to read it all, because I never felt I really knew her and it might give me some insight into what made her tick.'

'She was certainly very reserved and austere,' Laura agreed, looking round the sparsely furnished room, '*and* frugal: but that was probably her upbringing.'

'Yes, if ever I wanted to buy her a present, she always said she had everything she needed. She could never resist Yardley's lavender soap, though, but that was about as tempted by the lures of the flesh as she ever got.'

'She was very proud of you, having your own house and career.'

'I suppose she was, though she would have preferred me to train to be a teacher, like you and Alan – she didn't consider cooking much above skivvying. And when I left the restaurant and signed up to Homebodies instead, she thought cooking for large house-parties in the summer and looking after people's properties and pets in the winter was just like going into service.'

'It's worked very well though, hasn't it? You get paid so much for the summer jobs that you can take the poorly paid home-sitting ones in the winter.'

'They're more for a change of scene and a rest, so staying rent free in someone else's house suits me fine: I get to see a different bit of the country and they get their house and pets taken care of, so they can enjoy their hols without any worries.'

'But now your next home-sitting job has fallen through, you could spend Christmas Day with us, couldn't you?' she suggested. 'We're going over to Mum and Dad's for dinner and Mum is always saying she hardly sees you any more.'

'Oh no, I *couldn't!*' I said with more haste than tact.

'It would be better than staying home alone – *and* I've just

invited my cousin Sam to stay. His divorce has been finalised and he's at a loose end. You got on so well when you met in the summer and went on that date.'

'Laura, that wasn't a date, we just both wanted to see the same film. And he's at least a foot shorter than me.'

'That's a gross exaggeration – a couple of inches, at most! Anyway, he said he liked a woman who knew her own mind and the way you wore your hair made him think of Nefertiti.'

'Did he?' I said doubtfully. My hair is black, thick and straight and I keep it in a sort of long, smooth bob that curves forwards at the sides like wings. 'I expect he was just being kind. Not many men want to go out with someone taller than themselves.'

'They might if you ever gave them the chance, Holly!'

'There's no point: I met my Mr Right and I don't believe in second-best.' Alan had found me beautiful, too, though I had found it hard to believe him at first after all that school bullying about my height and my very untrendy clothes . . .

'It doesn't have to be second-best – I know you and Alan loved each other, but no-one would blame you, least of all me, if you fell in love with someone else now. Alan would be the last man to want you to mourn him forever.'

'I'm not still mourning, I've moved on. It's just . . .' I paused, trying to sum up how I felt. 'It's just that what we had was so perfect that I know I'm not going to find that again.'

'But *was* it so perfect? Is any marriage ever that?' she asked. 'And have you ever thought that you weren't actually married for long enough for the gilt to wear off the gingerbread?'

I looked at her, startled. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, you *were* very happy, but even the best relationships change over time: their little ways start to irritate you and you have to learn a bit of give and take. Alan wasn't perfect and neither are you: none of us are. Look at me and Dan, for instance. *He* can't understand why I need forty-six pairs of shoes and *I*

hate coming second in his life to rugby – but we still love each other.’

‘Apart from our work, the only thing Alan and I didn’t do together was the running – we shared everything else.’

‘But one or both of you might have felt that was a bit claustrophobic eventually. Alan was a dreamer too – and he dreamed of writing. You couldn’t do that together.’

‘Well, I didn’t stop him,’ I said defensively. ‘In fact, I encouraged him, though the teaching took up a lot of his time and energy. And I was going to write a house-party cookbook, so we *did* share that interest too, in a way.’

‘Oh yes – I’d forgotten about the cookbook. You haven’t mentioned it for ages.’

‘It’s nearly finished, just one more section to go.’

That was the one dealing with catering for a Christmas house-party, which I had been putting off.

‘I do realise the dynamics of the relationship would have changed when we had children, Laura, but we had it all planned. I wish now we hadn’t waited so long, though.’

‘There you are, then,’ she said triumphantly, ‘if you find someone else, it’s not too late to start a family – look at me!’

‘Funnily enough I was thinking about that in Devon, and I decided that although I don’t want another man, I *do* want a baby before it’s too late. So I thought I’d try artificial insemination. What do you think?’

She stared at me from startled, long-lashed blue eyes. ‘Really? Well, I suppose you *could*,’ she conceded reluctantly after a minute. ‘But wouldn’t you prefer to try the natural way first?’

‘No,’ I said simply. ‘I want the baby to be just mine.’

‘How would you manage financially? Have you thought it through?’

‘I own the cottage,’ I pointed out, because I’d paid off the mortgage on our terraced house with the insurance money after Alan died, then moved out to an even smaller cottage in the

countryside between Ormskirk and Merchester. ‘And I thought I could finish off the cookery book and maybe start doing party catering from home.’

‘I’m not sure you’ve seen all the pitfalls of going it alone with a small child, but I know what you’re like when you’ve made your mind up,’ she said resignedly. Then she brightened and added, ‘But I could help you and it would be lovely to be able to see more of you.’

‘Yes, that would be great and I’ll be counting on you for advice if I get pregnant.’

‘I must say, you’ve really surprised me, though.’

‘I surprised myself, but something Gran said right at the end made me realise I ought to go out there and get what I want, before it’s too late.’

‘You mean when she said some man’s name you’d never heard of?’

I nodded. ‘It was the way she said it – and she could see him, too. I’d never seen her smile like that, so she must have loved and lost him, whoever he was – and perhaps her journal will tell me that eventually. Her face went all soft, and I could see how beautiful she must have been when she was young.’

‘Just like you, with the same black hair and light grey eyes.’

‘Laura, you can’t say *I’m* beautiful! I mean, apart from being the size of a maypole, I’ve got a big, beaky nose.’

‘You’re striking, and your nose isn’t beaky, it’s only got the tiniest hint of a curve in it,’ she said loyally. ‘Sam’s right, you do look like that bust of Nefertiti you see in photographs . . . though your hair is a bit more Cleopatra.’

I was flattered but unconvinced. Gran’s skin had been peaches and cream and mine was heading towards a warm olive so that I look Mediterranean apart from my light eyes. Gran’s mother’s family came from Liverpool originally, so I daresay I have some foreign sailor in my ancestry to thank for my colouring – and maybe my height, which has been the bane of my existence.

‘I quite liked Sam, because at least he didn’t talk to my boobs, like a lot of men do,’ I conceded and then immediately regretted it, because she said eagerly, ‘So you *will* come to us, if only for Christmas dinner? I promise not to push you together, but it would give you a chance to get to know him a bit and—’

My phone emitted a strangled snatch of Mozart and I grabbed it. Saved by the muzak.