

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...

The Magic 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

The Magic 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 2011

1

First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollinsPublishers 2011

Copyright © Trisha Ashley 2011

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: 978-1-84756-116-9

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

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

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.



MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC® C007454

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

The Magic of Christmas is loosely based on one of my earlier novels, *Sweet Nothings*, with the addition of a lot of new material. I felt there was so much more to say about the village of Middlemoss and all the characters who live there, especially Lizzy and her friends in the Christmas Pudding Circle, the annual Boxing Day Mystery Play and the vanishing squirrels!

For my son, Robin Ashley,
with love.

Prologue: December 2005, Winter of Discontent

The venue for the last Middlemoss Christmas Pudding Circle meeting of the year (which was usually more of an excuse for a party) had been switched to Perseverance Cottage because Lizzy's thirteen-year-old son had come down with what she'd thought was flu and she wanted to keep an eye on him.

Later, looking back on the events of that day, it seemed to Lizzy that one minute she'd been sitting at the big pine table in her kitchen, wearing a paper hat and happily debating the rival merits of fondant icing over royal with the other four members of the CPC, and the next she was frantically snatching at the card listing the symptoms of meningitis, which she kept pinned to her notice board, and shouting to Annie, her best friend, to ring for an ambulance.

At the hospital, Jasper changed frighteningly fast from a big, gruff teenager to a pale, sick child, and Lizzy tried urgently to contact her husband, Tom, who was away on one of his alleged business trips. But as usual he didn't answer his mobile and was nowhere to be found, so all she could do

was leave messages in the usual places . . . and several unusual ones.

The hospital radio was softly warbling on about decking the halls with boughs of holly, but Lizzy, filled with a volatile mixture of desperate maternal fear and anger, wanted to deck her selfish, unreliable husband.

It was just as well that Annie was such a tower of strength in an emergency! During that first long day while Lizzy anxiously waited for the antibiotics to kick in, her friend popped in and out between jobs for the pet-sitting agency she ran, visited Perseverance Cottage to feed the poultry and let out Lizzy's dog, and reassured Tom's elderly relatives up at the Hall that she would keep them updated with every change in Jasper's condition.

Then in the evening she returned to the hospital and she and Lizzy spent the long night watches sitting together while Jasper slept, reminiscing in hushed voices about when they first met and became best friends at boarding school. Lizzy had begun spending the holidays with Annie's family in the vicarage at Middlemoss, where she was quickly absorbed into the Vane household, much to the relief of the elderly bachelor uncle who was her guardian – and it was also in Middlemoss that she'd met Tom and Nick Pharamond, cousins who were often farmed out with relatives up at the Hall in the school holidays.

Nick was the eldest: quiet, serious and appearing to prefer the company of the cook at Pharamond Hall to anyone else's. Tom, who was really only nominally a Pharamond, his mother having married into the family, was the opposite: mercurial, charming and gregarious, though he'd had a quick temper and a sharp tongue, even then . . .

Nick was the first to fly the nest. Having inherited the Pharamond cooking gene in spades, it wasn't a huge surprise to anyone except his staid stockbroker father when he took off around the world at eighteen, tastebuds and recipe notebook at the ready. Now he was chief cookery writer for a leading Sunday newspaper and author of numerous books and articles, while Tom, in contrast, had dropped out of university and gravitated down to the part of Cornwall where many of his more useless friends had also ended up.

When he set eyes on Lizzy again after a long interval, it was across a buffet table at a large party in London, where he was a guest, and where she and Annie, who'd done a French cookery course after school, were helping with the catering. He fell suddenly in love with her, a passion that also embraced her rose-tinted dreams of a self-sufficient existence in the country.

Somehow she'd forgotten about his dark good looks, his overwhelming charm and his quirky sense of humour . . . Before she'd had time to think – or to remember his quick temper, occasional sarcasms and how short-lived his enthusiasms had been in the past – he'd swept her off her feet, into a registry office and down to the isolated hovel he was renting in Cornwall.

'Marry in haste, repent at leisure,' she said to Annie, as Jasper stirred restlessly in his hospital bed. 'You tried your best to warn me not to rush into it.'

'You fell in love and so did Tom: there was no stopping you,' Annie said. 'Besides, you were addicted to all those books about living in Cornish cottages, with donkeys and daffodils and stuff.'

'True,' Lizzy agreed wryly, 'and it *was* blissful that first

summer – until the reality of living in a dank, dilapidated cottage in winter with a newborn baby set in, especially after Tom started vanishing for days on end without telling me when and where he was going.’

‘He was worse after Jasper was born, wasn’t he? I think he resented not being the centre of attention,’ Annie said.

‘He still does, though how you can be jealous of your own son, goodness knows! Anyway, it was like living with a handsome but unreliable tomcat . . . and nothing much has changed, has it?’ Lizzy asked bitterly.

‘Perhaps not, but at least *two* good things came out of your marriage,’ Annie pointed out, being a resolutely glass-half-full person: ‘Jasper and your books about life in Perseverance Cottage.’

‘True, and it was thanks to your telling Roly how cold and damp the cottage was, after you visited us, that he offered us a house on the estate rent free, so that actually makes *three* good things.’

‘Oh, yes – and it was *marvellous* when you came back to Middlemoss to live,’ Annie agreed fervently. ‘I’d missed you so much!’

Her voice had risen slightly and Jasper woke up and grumpily demanded why they were muttering over him like two witches. Then he complained that the dim light hurt his eyes, and a nurse appeared and firmly ushered them out of the room for a while.

The following morning it was clear that the antibiotics were working. Great-uncle Roly visited Jasper in the afternoon and by evening he was so obviously on the mend that Lizzy managed to persuade Annie, who’d brought sandwiches and

a flask of soup ready to share a second night's vigil with her, to go home instead and get some sleep.

Lizzy herself intended spending a second night there, of course: by Jasper's bedside when allowed, or in the stark waiting room, with its grey plastic-covered chairs and stained brown cord carpet.

It was in the latter room that Tom's cousin Nick Pharamond found her, having driven non-stop halfway across Europe since Roly had given him the news about Jasper. His brow was furrowed with added frown lines from tiredness, and the dark stubble and rumpled black hair didn't do much to lighten his usual taciturn expression. Lizzy always imagined that Jane Eyre's Mr Rochester would have been *exactly* like Nick, but she was still both delighted and relieved to see him because, unlike Tom, you could *always* rely on him to turn up in an emergency.

Although she wasn't normally a weepy sort of person, she instantly burst into tears all over his broad chest, while he patted her back in a strangely soothing way. Then he made her drink the hot soup Annie had left and eat a sandwich she didn't want: he was forceful as well as reliable.

The only downside to his presence during the rest of that long night was that Lizzy became so spaced out with shock and exhaustion that something unstoppable took over her mouth. She could hear her own voice droning on and on for hours, telling Nick a whole lot of really personal stuff about the last few years that she'd only previously confided to Annie, like how bad relations had become between her and Tom, especially since she found out about his latest affair.

'I don't know who this one is, but she's been having a

really bad influence on him. He's played away before, of course, but it was never *serious*. He says it's *my* fault anyway, for being so wrapped up in the cottage, the garden and Jasper – and perhaps it is.'

'That's totally ridiculous, Lizzy: of course it isn't your fault!' Nick said. 'He should grow up!'

Filled with gratitude at his understanding, she'd fished out a petrol receipt from the bottom of her handbag and on the back of it feverishly scribbled down her cherished recipe for mashed potato fudge, a creation she'd first invented while trying to cook up some comfort from limited ingredients down in Cornwall (and which was much later to be christened Spudge by Jasper).

In return Nick, who was normally pretty tight-lipped on anything personal, divulged that Leila (his wife) refused all his suggestions that they both cut down their working hours to spend more time together, so they seemed to be seeing less and less of each other. This was *really* letting his guard down, so the night-watch effect must have been getting to him, too.

'Do you think everything will be all right with me and Tom once Jasper's off to university in a few years and I'm not so tied to Middlemoss and the school run?' she asked Nick, optimistically. 'I could even go with him on some of his business trips to Cornwall.'

'I honestly don't know, Lizzy, but it won't be your fault if it isn't,' Nick said, and gave her a big, wonderfully comforting hug.

Then something made her look up and over his shoulder she caught sight of Tom standing in the doorway staring at them.

‘Oh, Tom, where have you *been?*’ she cried, releasing herself from Nick’s arms. ‘Still, never mind – you’re here now, that’s the main thing.’

Tom ignored her, instead demanding suspiciously of Nick, ‘What are *you* doing here, that’s what I want to know?’

He was still looking from one to the other of them as if he’d had an extremely odd idea, which it emerged later he had – one that would finally turn what had already become a very sour-sweet cocktail of a marriage into a poisoned chalice.

But at the time, all Lizzy registered was that his first words were not an urgent enquiry about his only child and, in one split second, not only did the last vestiges of her love for Tom entirely vanish, but they took even the exasperated tolerance of the previous years with them, so there was absolutely no hope of resuscitating their marriage.

If Tom had ever possessed the core of feckless sweetness she’d believed in, then some wicked Snow Queen had blown on his heart and frozen it to solid ice.

Chapter 1: Old Prune

Here in Middlemoss Christmas preparations start very early – in mid-August, in fact, when the five members of the Christmas Pudding Circle bulk-order the ingredients for mincemeat and cakes from a nearby wholefood cooperative. Once that has arrived and been divided up between us, things slowly start to rev up again. It always reminds me of a bobsleigh race: one minute we're all pushing ideas to and fro to loosen the runners and then the next we've jumped on board and are hurtling, faster and faster, towards Christmas!

The Perseverance Chronicles: A Life in Recipes

The members of the Christmas Pudding Circle were sitting round my long, scrubbed-pine kitchen table for the first meeting of the year. It was a hot, mid-August morning, so the door was open onto the sunlit cobbled courtyard in order to let some cooling air (and the occasional brazen hen) into the room.

I poured iced home-made lemonade into tumblers, then passed round the dish of macaroons, thinking how lovely it was to have all my friends together again. Apart from my

very best friend Annie Vane, there was Marian Potter who ran the Middlemoss Post Office, Faye Sykes from Old Barn Farm and Miss Pym, the infants' schoolteacher. The latter is a tall, upright woman with iron-grey hair in a neat chignon, who commands such respect that she's never addressed by her Christian name of Geraldine, even by her friends.

'Oh, I do miss our CPC meetings after Christmas each year,' Annie said, beaming, her round freckled face framed in an unbecoming pudding-bowl bob of coppery hair. 'I know we see each other all the time, but it isn't the same.'

'I was just thinking the same thing,' I agreed. 'And it doesn't matter that it's midsummer either, because I still get a tingle down my spine at the thought that we've started counting down to Christmas.'

'I suppose we are in a way, but it's more advance planning, isn't it?' Faye said.

'Yes, and we'd better get on with it,' Marian said, flicking open a notebook and writing in the date, for she organises the CPC just as she, together with her husband Clive, run most of the events around Middlemoss. As usual, she was bristling with energy right down to the roots of her spiky silver hair. 'First up, are there any changes to the list of ingredients for Miss Pym to order?'

'I still have last year's list on my computer, so it will be easy to tweak it before I email it off,' Miss Pym said, helping herself to more lemonade. An ice-cube cracked with a noise like a miniature iceberg calving from a glacier.

But there was not much to tweak, for of course we mostly make the same things every year: mince pies, Christmas cakes and puddings. We need large quantities too, for as well as

baking for our own families, we also make lots of small cakes for the local Senior Citizens Christmas Hampers, which are annually distributed by Marian and the rest of the Mosses Women's Institute.

'Who has got the six small cake tins for the hamper Christmas cakes?' asked Annie.

'Me,' I said.

'I'll put you down to bake the first batch then,' Marian said, scribbling that down, then she handed out the CPC meetings rota. We're supposed to take it in turns to host it in our homes but I don't know why she bothers, because after the first one it always goes completely haywire for one reason or another.

The important business of the meeting concluded, I got out some coffee granita I'd made. It never tastes quite as perfect as I hope it will, but they were all very kind about it. Then the conversation turned to frozen desserts in general and we discussed the possibility of concocting a brandy butter ice cream to go with Christmas pudding. I think Faye started that one: she makes a lot of ice cream for her farm shop.

Writing the CPC meeting up later for the *Chronicles*, I added a note to include the recipe for the brandy butter ice cream to that chapter if one of us came up with something good, and then laid my pen down on the kitchen table with a sigh, thinking that it was just as well I had the Christmas Pudding Circle to write about.

Although my readers loved the mix of domestic disaster, horticultural endeavour and recipes in my *Perseverance Chronicle* books, I could hardly include bulletins on the way

the last, frayed knots of my failed marriage were so speedily unravelling, which was the subject most on my mind of late. I had become not so much a wife, as landlady to a surly, sarcastic and antisocial lodger.

The first *Perseverance Chronicle* was written in a desperate bid to make some money soon after we were married, influenced by all the old cosy, self-sufficiency-in-a-Cornish-cottage books that I had loved before the reality set in. Mine were a little darker, including such unromantic elements as the joys of outside toilets when heavily pregnant in winter and having an Inconstant Gardener for a husband.

It was accepted by a publisher and when we moved back to Lancashire I simply renamed the new cottage after the old and carried on – and so, luckily, did those readers who had bought the first book.

My self-imposed quota of four daily handwritten pages completed (which Jasper would type up later on the laptop computer Unks bought him, for extra pocket money), I closed the fat A4 writing pad and turned to my postcard album, as to an old friend. This was an impressively weighty tome containing all the cards sent to me over the years by Nick stuck in picture-side down, since interesting recipes were scribbled onto every bit of space on the back in tiny, spiky handwriting.

He still sent them, though I hadn't seen very much of him in person, other than the occasional Sunday lunch up at Pharamond Hall, since the time Jasper was ill in hospital. And actually I was *profoundly* grateful about that, what with having poured my heart out to him in that embarrassing way, not to mention Tom suddenly getting the wrong idea when he arrived and found Nick comforting me . . .

And speak of the devil, just as I found the card I wanted, a dark shape suddenly blocked the open doorway to the yard and Tom's voice said, 'Reading your love letters?'

He was quite mad – that or the demon weed and too much alcohol had pickled his brain over the years! The album was always on the kitchen bookshelf for anyone to read, so he knew there was nothing personal about the cards – unless he thought that addressing them to 'The Queen of Puddings' was lover-like, rather than a sarcastic reference to one of my major preoccupations.

Mind you, Tom was not much of a reader, though luckily that meant he had never, to my knowledge, even opened one of my *Perseverance Chronicles*.

'No, Tom, I'm looking for a particular marzipan *petit four* recipe for the Christmas Pudding Circle to try,' I said patiently. 'The only love letters I've got are a couple of short notes from you, and they're so old the ink's faded.'

'So you say, but I don't find you poring over them all the time, like you do over Nick's precious postcards,' he said, going to wash his hands at the kitchen sink.

I dished out some of the casserole that was simmering gently on the stove and put it on a tray, together with a chunk of home-made bread, since he now preferred to take all his meals alone in the sitting room in front of his giant TV. Jasper and I had the old set in the kitchen and tended to leave him in sole possession.

He picked up the bowl of stew now and stared into it like a sibylline oracle, but the only message he was likely to read was 'Eat this or go hungry.'

'What are these black things, decayed sheep's eyeballs?'

'Prunes. It's Moroccan lamb tagine.'

From his expression you would have thought I'd offered him a dish of lightly seasoned bat entrails.

'And I suppose *Nick* gave you the recipe. What else has he given you lately?' he said, with a wealth of unpleasant innuendo. 'Don't think I haven't noticed that your son looks more like him every day!'

'Oh, for God's sake, don't start on that again!' I snapped, adding recklessly, 'You know very well why Jasper looks like Nick, just as *you* look like Great-uncle Roly: your mother must have been having an affair with Leo Pharamond while she was still married to her first husband! Why don't you ask her?'

It was certainly obvious to everyone else, since those slaty purple-grey eyes and raven-black hair marked out all the Pharamonds instantly. But Tom went livid and hissed like a Mafia villain in a bad film, 'Never *ever* malign my mother's name again like that – do you hear me?'

Then he followed this up by hurling the plate of hot casserole at the wall with enormous force, shattering it and sending fragments of bowl and spatters of food everywhere. He'd never been physically violent (I wouldn't have stood for it for one second) so I don't think he was particularly aiming at *me*, but a substantial chunk of green-glazed Denby pottery hit my cheekbone and fell at my feet.

It was a shock, though, and I stood there transfixed and staring at him, one hand to my face, in a silence broken only by the occasional slither and plop of a descending prune. Suddenly finding myself released from thrall, I turned and walked out of the door, dabbing lamb tagine off my face with the hem of my pale green T-shirt as I went, then headed towards the village.

I must have looked a mess, but luckily it was early evening and few people were about, for the Pied Piper of TV dinners had called them all away, using the theme tune of the popular soap series *Cotton Common* as lure.

I didn't have far to go for refuge. Annie's father used to be the vicar here, but now that he and his wife are alleviating the boredom of retirement by doing VSO work in Africa, Annie has a tiny Victorian red-brick terraced cottage in the main street of Middlemoss.

'Lizzy!' she exclaimed, looking horrified at discovering me stained and splattered on her doorstep. 'Is that dried blood on your face and T-shirt? What on earth has happened?'

'I think it's only prune juice and gravy, actually,' I reassured her, touching my cheek cautiously. 'A bit of plate *did* hit me, but it must have had a round edge.'

'Plate?' she repeated blankly, drawing me in and closing the front door.

'Yes, one of those lovely green Denby soup bowls we had as a wedding present from your parents.'

'Look, come into the kitchen and I'll clean you up with warm water and lint while you tell me all about it,' she said soothingly.

The lint sounded very *Gone With the Wind* – but then, she has all the Girl Guide badges and I don't suppose the First Aid one has changed for years. So I followed her in and sank down on the nearest rush-bottomed chair, my legs suddenly going wobbly. Trinity (Trinny, for short), Annie's three-legged mutt, regarded me lambently from her basket, tail thumping.

‘There’s nothing much to tell, really,’ I said. ‘Tom flew into one of his rages and lobbed his dinner at the wall.’

‘Oh, Lizzy!’

‘I said something that made him angry and he just totally lost it this time. I don’t think he was actually aiming at me, though it’s hard to tell since he’s such a rotten shot and – ouch!’ I added, as she dabbed my face with the warm, damp lint.

‘The skin isn’t cut, but I think you might get a bruise on your cheek,’ she said, wringing the cloth out. ‘I could put some arnica ointment on it.’

‘I don’t think I could live with that smell so close to my nose, Annie,’ I said dubiously, but her next suggestion, that we break out the bottle of Remy Martin, which she keeps in stock because her father always swore by it in times of crisis, met with a better reception.

‘I think you really ought to leave Tom right away, Lizzy,’ Annie suggested worriedly. ‘He’s been so increasingly horrible to you that it’s practically verbal abuse – and now *this!*’

‘I’m just glad Jasper wasn’t there,’ I said, topping my glass up and feeling much better. ‘He’s gone straight from the archaeological dig to a friend’s house, and won’t be back till about ten.’

‘His exam results should be here any time now, shouldn’t they?’

‘Yes, only a couple more days.’ I sipped my brandy and sighed. ‘Even though I’ll miss him, it’ll be such a relief to have him safely off to university in October, because I live in dread that Tom will suddenly tell him to his face that he doesn’t think he’s really his son. That would be even

more hurtful than ignoring him, the way he's been doing the last couple of years.'

'I don't know what's got into Tom,' Annie said sadly. 'He always had so much charm . . . as long as he got his own way.'

'He still does charm everyone else. I'm sure no one would believe me if I told them what he's really like at home.'

'True, but he's so used to me being around, he's let the mask slip sometimes, so I've seen it for myself,' Annie said. 'He was all right with Jasper for the first few years, though, wasn't he?'

'Well, he didn't take a lot of notice of him, but he was OK. But he started to turn colder towards me even before he got this strange idea that I had a fling with Nick, so I think whoever he's been having an affair with since then has had a really bad effect on his character.'

'You *did* have a fling with Nick,' Annie pointed out fairly.

'Oh, come on, Annie! I was way too young and anyway, it only lasted about a fortnight before he told me he was going abroad for a year because he wasn't changing his life-plans for *my* sake. I didn't see him after that until the day I got married to Tom and he turned up then with Leila in tow – do you remember?'

'Gosh, yes. She was so scarily chic, in a Parisian sort of way, that she made me feel like a country bumpkin – she still does! But I thought it was nice of Nick to make the effort, even though he and Tom had grown apart over the years. They never had a lot in common, did they?'

'I think the main problem was that Tom always felt jealous of Nick, since Nick was a real Pharamond and Roly's

grandson, whereas *he* was just a Pharamond because his mother had married one. Allegedly,' I added darkly.

'It's odd how things turn out,' mused Annie, putting away the bowl of water and tossing the lint into the kitchen bin. 'You always had much more in common with Nick than with Tom.'

'How on earth can you say that, when we argue all the time?' I demanded incredulously. 'The only thing Nick and I have ever had in common is a love of food, even if mine is much less *cordon bleu*.'

Though of course it is true that food has played an important part in both our families. The search for a good meal in the wrong part of a foreign city was the downfall of my diplomat parents and would be the downfall of my figure, too, were I ever to stop moving long enough for the fat to settle.

As to the Pharamonds, the gene for cooking was introduced into the family by a Victorian heir who married the plebeian but wealthy heiress Bessie Martin, only to die of a surfeit of home-cooked love some forty years later, with a fond smile on his lips and a biscuit empire to hand on to his offspring.

'You and Nick have both got short tempers and you love Middlemoss more than anywhere else on earth,' Annie said. 'And of course *I* know that Jasper *is* Tom's son, but it's unfortunate that he's looking more and more like Nick with every passing year.'

'Well, yes, that's what Tom said earlier, so I reminded him about the rumours that his mother had an affair with Leo Pharamond before her first husband was killed, and that's what started the argument off! He always flies into

a complete rage if I say anything against his sainted mother.'

'It's quite a coincidence that Leo Pharamond and her first husband were both not only racing drivers but killed in car crashes,' Annie said, 'though there did seem to be a lot of fatal crashes in the early days.'

'Someone told me they called her the Black Widow after Leo died, so it's not surprising her third husband gave it up and whisked her off back to Argentina,' I said.

Tom's mother had started a whole new life out there, but her firstborn was packed off to boarding school and farmed out at Pharamond Hall in the holidays. That made us both orphans in a way, which had once seemed to make a bond . . .

Annie said, 'Tom's hardly seen his mother over the years, has he?'

'No, or his half-siblings. He blames it all on his stepfather, of course, and won't hear a word against her. Come to that, I've only met her a couple of times and we can't be said to have bonded.'

'You'd think she'd at least be interested in her grandson – Jasper's such a lovely boy,' Annie said fondly.

'I used to send her his school photos, but since I never got any response, I gave up. In fact, with all this rejection, it's wonderful that poor Jasper isn't bitter and twisted, too!'

'Oh, he's much too sensible and he knows *we* all love him: me, Roly, even Mimi.'

I considered Unks' unmarried sister, Mimi, who is not at all maternal and whose passions are reserved for the walled garden she tends behind the Hall. 'You're right, she *does* seem to like him, despite his not being any form of plant life.'