

A Bright Christmas

Story by Wilke Durand

Logline:

Divorced father with authority problems and a touch of Tourette's, witnesses the abduction of his ex-wife upon marrying a dodgy aristocrat. His precocious youngest leads the way in their quest to find her mother and reunite the Bright family for Christmas, but some loony mobsters get in the way.

Concept:

The general concept is one of heightened reality. The mood of the film, the colours, music and clothing are all a little larger than life: realistic, but overblown and glamorous.

Genre: Family/ Christmas / Comedy / Action / Romance

Shared lead:

A shared lead is envisaged, whereby the father, mother and youngest child have lead roles and undergo the greatest character development.

The mother is kept captive by two comic characters for most of the film and her character development during her imprisonment mirrors that of the father. The father's development also mirrors his daughter's: while he matures from child to adult, his daughter becomes, rightfully, a child again.

Family: This is a film about a family in peril over the Christmas period. As with most family films, central to the plot is a family reuniting.

Wish Fulfilment:

Sammie, the youngest daughter, has only one Christmas wish: to share Christmas dinner with her parents and siblings all together again, just like old times.

Comedy Characters:

The characters who really develop during the film, namely the three leads, will be the most realistic and relatable characters in the film. The other characters are intended to be more archetypal and to provide comic relief. The humour will work at various levels:

- Slapstick elements to appeal to younger children

- Verbal jokes for adults
- Action scenes (involving humour) will appeal to older children.

Happy Ending:

Of course the comic moments will be interspersed with more touching scenes, but even as we wipe away a tear or two, we are hoping for a happy ending. Because this is what families come to see at Christmas: a feel-good movie, involving wish-fulfilment and a lovely dose of humour.

CHARACTERS

THE BRIGHT FAMILY

Cicero Bright (39) –

This little boy, locked up in a grown man's body, is a reluctant and useless father to Sammie, Tabitha and Oscar. His general lack of diplomacy and brutal honesty borders on Tourette's syndrome when alcohol is involved, to the horror and embarrassment of his children and high society parents-in-law. Since being separated from Jemima and released from the obligations of fatherhood, Cicero believes he has found ultimate freedom, both as a person and as an artist. But when Jemima is abducted and everything he holds dear is suddenly in jeopardy, it's time to shelve the self-indulgence and focus on what really matters.

Samantha Bright (9)

Samantha, known as Sammie, is far too clever and eloquent for her age. With her child's logic and wise words, she is like an adult in a child's body. But even while she enjoys the respect her wisdom and maturity have earned her, she secretly longs to be cherished as a normal child.

Tabitha Bright (15)

Tabitha sees her mother's imminent marriage to Charles Ogilvy-Napier-Mann as her chance to salvage her image at school. At last, she has the chance to become the Meghan Markle of Hertfordshire. She'll be taking Charles' surname as soon as possible because, with a double-barrelled number like that one, it'll gain her free entry to no end of polo matches and society functions. Maybe she'll even find her very own Prince (or, if that's aiming too high, a Viscount). After all, these days looks get you everywhere...

Oscar Bright (13)

In order to survive in the murderous environment of senior school, Oscar has cultured a look that makes Marilyn Manson look ordinary. He's not the kind of classmate that you'd choose for a friend, or invite to a birthday party, and that suits

Oscar just fine. He goes out of his way to avoid contact with other members of his species.

THE SILVERMAN-SMYTHE FAMILY

Jemima Silverman-Smythe (39) -

Cicero Bright's ex-wife and a doormat incarnated. Her own lack of identity even shocks her - happy to take on the colour of the wallpaper if it helps her to fit in and do what is expected of her. For years, Jemima had longed for Cicero to change for the better, but he never did, so when he asked for a divorce she was relieved as well as sad. Her parents were pleasantly surprised and already had their eye on a replacement for Cicero: Charles Ogilivy-Napier-Mann, a little older perhaps, but stinking rich. Jemima made a rational decision largely to keep other people happy: she would become a trophy wife, exchanging her surname and father's business contacts for a life of luxury.

Abductors Veronica & Reggie

Ronnie

After Jemima's abduction and during her imprisonment, she develops a close bond with her captors Reggie and Ronnie. Ronnie, a sweet young woman, who comes from the East End of London is dying to lose her accent to please her lover and man of her dreams; Pookie. Ronnie is fascinated with Jemima's hot potatoe English and her good manners. If only she could learn to speak this way, than her Pookie could finally introduce her to his friends and posh family.

Reggie

Poor Reggie is addicted to plastic surgery and bodybuilding and like Jemima, is trying to find himself. During nocturnal Oprah-like therapy sessions they help each other to become better versions of themselves. As a result, Jemima becomes grateful that these lost, yet kind misfits have abducted her; her life will never be the same again, and for the better. She'll no longer be the doormat, or suffer to appease her parents. Jemima is reborn!

LAVENDER SILVERMAN-SMYTHE (65)

Lavender – Lav for short – is a prototype of the female upper classes. Striding across the moors with her dogs, working in all weathers on the garden, walking the hills with sandwiches and a Thermos stuffed in a rucksack and keeping a stiff upper lip at all times. She's richer than Croesus - not even her husband Rupert knows how much wealth she has - but she lives as though she's on the poverty line. The reality is that Lav is too stingy to pay for anything, but too posh to let that be known. She prefers to be thought of as unworldly. "Goodness me, is that really the cost of things these days?" she'll be often heard to say. She's even known as "Goodness, how much?" in

the corridors of the stately home where they live. When her daughter Jemima finally decides to marry in Charles a man with money AND status, Lav almost falls on her bare knees to thank God. Money and position – it's almost too good to be true.

RUPERT SILVERMAN-SMYTHE (70)

Rupert is a true English gentleman, modest and unassuming. He is as sophisticated as he is business-like, yet naïve when it comes to human interactions. He is himself so incorruptible that he would never suspect anyone of underhand motives. When he meets the charming Charles Ogilvy-Napier-Mann at a drinks party on his estate and learns of their families' ancient connections he recognises at once an ideal husband for his recently divorced daughter, Jemima.

CHARLES OGILVY-NAPIER-MANN (48)

Charles is an extremely charming man. An extremely successful real-estate mogul, he is widely admired for his excellent business instincts and deft transactions. Man, woman, child – everybody loves Charles. He gives generously to charity and is always ready to help those in need or less fortunate than himself. But what nobody knows is that Charles is a pathological liar and conman who can go to a bank without a penny and persuade it to help him buy a castle. He also suffers from more than a touch of megalomania. To cover his losses, Charles dips his hand in organised crime – laundering their money under the guise of complex real estate developments. He has so many properties these days that he almost believes himself to be the billionaire that he isn't. But then the crooks arrive with their heavies and their pistols and he needs to start paying them back. By the time he meets Rupert, Charles has barely a cent to his name. Suddenly, through marriage to Jemima, he spies a way out.

NICK (60)

This homeless chess champion bears more than a passing resemblance to Santa Claus. Sammy finds his ability to apparently see into the future tremendously appealing and secretly she believes that Nick is the real Father Christmas. She takes Nick, who is often pretty incoherent, completely seriously. Then Cicero discovers that the mysterious, cryptic statements that Nick makes aren't always as daft as they seem. There's a lot of nonsense in between, so it's a question of separating the wheat from the chaff, reckons Nick. He was once a respectable man with a great chess career. But even when he played against the greats on Earth there were moments where he confused delusions and reality. When his wife died, something snapped and he was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. He never dared to have another relationship and ended up on the streets, where he challenges supermarket customers to chess games.

ELVIE (60)

Has lived and worked all her adult life as a housekeeper for the Silverman-Smythes. She is the conscience of her miserly employer, Lavender, and doesn't hesitate to tell

her the truth to her face. Her blunt honesty creates comical situations. She absolutely loathes Charles and does nothing to hide it. Elvie has never been in love, and never intends to be. She's far too bad tempered and grumpy, she reckons. But then that homeless chess player Nick wanders into her life and sweeps her off her feet...

OUTLINE:

The wedding

CICERO BRIGHT pretends to be enormously relieved when his ex-wife (and mother to his three children) announces her engagement to CHARLES OGILVY-NAPIER-MANN, an extremely successful property developer.

The abduction

When JEMIMA is abducted on her wedding day, Cicero is, to his surprise, inconsolable and is overcome by the urge to save his wife and reunite his broken family.

Too late for daddy Cicero

The only person with any respect left for Cicero is his nine-year-old daughter SAMMIE, because this fatherly display of love and concern has come far too late for his two older children and snobbish parents-in-law, members of the wealthy SILVERMAN-SMYTHE dynasty. Given his debauched and neglectful behaviour in the past, they don't trust Cicero for one moment to save Jemima and swiftly, supported by her new husband, reject his plans.

Cicero mans up.

CICERO slinks away and wallows in self-pity, finding refuge in alcohol back at his studio. When SAMMIE makes a suspicious discovery at her new stepfather's house, she calls Cicero but he's too sloshed to help her. The little girl investigates alone and in the process ends up in a life-threatening situation. After a night-long search, Cicero finds his daughter at last in a terrible state, saved by a clairvoyant, homeless old gentlemen, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Father Christmas....

Epiphany

In a rare moment of clarity, this incoherent visionary, Nick, convinces Cicero to reclaim his role as a father and do everything necessary to save Jemima. Cicero has a cunning plan to expose his rival, Charles Ogilvy-Napier-Mann, but faces heavy resistance from his two teenage children, both of whom have their own reasons for keeping their father out of their lives. But by trial and error, Cicero manages to restore trust in his abilities as a father and mobilises the whole family in unmasking a master swindler.

Unexpe~~x~~ted threat

What Cicero doesn't know, but we do, is that, while his rival Charles has everything to do with the abduction, the real threat comes from a violent criminal known as 'The Ear'. This heavy guy (with unfortunate ears like World Cup handles and very low self-esteem) has been laundering money through Charles Ogilvy-Napier-Mann, and has recently discovered that that charlatan has been using it for himself. In desperation, Charles engineered his marriage to, and subsequent abduction of, Jemima, daughter of the wealthy SILVERMAN-SMYTHES, in order to pay back The Ear the money he'd stolen from him, or else....

Reunited but not quite

The Ear is keen to ensure that he gets his hands on the ransom money, so he follows Charles closely. And because the Bright's are also following Charles, they unwittingly get under The Ear's feet, and – along with Charles taken to the same location where Jemima is being held captive.

Jemima saves the day

As her captivity progressed, Jemima formed close friendships with her two odd captors. During nightly Oprah Winfrey-style sessions, all three of them have undergone personality transformations and bonded accordingly. Jemima, for example, now possesses a decisiveness she'd never had before, and, in addition possesses a trump card that soon surprises her friends and foe alike, allowing her family to escape. To this day, Jemima continues to firmly deny that drugs such as XTC or LSD were involved in this change of character.

Free at last

After a terrifying chase, and a terrible final confrontation with The Ear, Cicero saves the day. And so Sammie's wish comes true, with her father's reputation restored and the whole family sitting down to enjoy a festive Bright Christmas dinner together. As to whether her parents will get back together, we don't know. But Sammie and her clairvoyant friend Nick are convinced.

STORY

*** The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred.

Early morning. A stately home squats widely and grandly in glistening snow. From a point in its pillared façade we spot something red emerging. It is the nine-year-old SAMMIE BRIGHT, dressed in a Father Christmas costume. She lits the sash of her bedroom window and cautiously lowers a leg towards a downpipe in order to

clamber down. Every now and then she sticks her head inside to continue a fractious exchange with her mother.

JEMIMA SILVERMAN-SMYTHE, dressed in a bridal gown, stands in the corridor begging Sammie, through a locked door, to please, please exchange her Santa Claus suit for the party dress they'd specially picked out.

Everything in the bedroom of nine-year-old Sammie Bright breathes Christmas. Her curtains are closed against the daylight, Christmas music spirals out of her mobile phone, fairy lights twinkle on the Christmas tree. Sammie obviously has shut out reality with determination. Today might be the day of her mother's wedding to Charles Ogilvy-Napier, but Sammie hasn't the slightest intention of taking part. Sammie has only one wish, and that's for a traditional family Christmas dinner, starring her parents as a reunited couple. Sadly for Sammie, the likelihood of this is slim because these days her father, Cicero, is barely on speaking terms with his ex-wife and is only allowed to see his children under the supervision of a responsible adult.

Her mother can hammer on her door for as long she wants, but there's no way Sammie is wearing that party dress. Instead, the Father Christmas costume she found in the attic is her chosen attire; it's her lucky outfit and she firmly believes that, for as long as she wears it, her mother's second marriage won't go ahead. Sadly for Sammie, the likelihood of this is slim, her mother tells her cautiously, because these days she and her father are barely on speaking terms. But Sammie cries, that she is convinced that her father still loves her mother and than he wants nothing more than to have the whole family together again. Jemima tries to calm Sammie down and gently reminds her that it was her father who decided to leave *them*. He can't be a husband or a daddy any more because ... and here Sammie finishes off her mother's sentence with a sob ... because he... "*can no longer function in that artificial institution called marriage*".

Sammie, ducking her head back in through the window one last time, shouts that she wants nothing to do with her mother's impending marriage. before starting her slide down the drainpipe. As she descends, we catch glimpses of different members of the Bright family.

Sammie peeps through the window and as her mother enters her sister TABITHA's room, she overhears the conversation. While Jemima is dashing back and forth, beside herself with nerves, to help TABITHA with her outfit, she utters her concern about Sammie not wanting to get into her party clothes.

Tabitha Bright is mortified by her little sister's behaviour. That child has no idea how lucky she is to have a mother who's marrying an Ogilvy-Napier! Tabitha, who's

always considered her chaotic, feckless father a total loser, is simply delighted with her new, rich almost-stepfather. At last she has the chance to become the Megan Markle of Hampstead!

She's been fantasising for months about the lavish Sweet Sixteen party she'll be having, and which he'll be paying for. The finer details are still a secret, but a limousine and helicopter will definitely feature, because Charles had told her that "the sky's the limit" ... There's no way she's going to let Sammie or Oscar jeopardise her future - because her antisocial brother's behaviour has been worse than Sammie's, if that was even possible. Tabitha's weird family drives her nuts, to the extent that she wonders if she was adopted. And even if she isn't, some days she'd gladly give herself up for adoption. Sammie can bear it no longer and slides away - past the bedroom of her brother...

OSCAR BRIGHT, dressed from top to toe in black, is totally absorbed in his computer. In order to survive the murderous environment of high school, Oscar has reinvented himself: Marilyn Manson would look plain in comparison. Rings and piercings seem to adorn every conceivable part of Oscar's body, tattoos snake out of his collar and sleeves, and the only colours he wears are black or combat. In short, he's gone for the high-school-shooter look. In reality, though, Oscar - deep down - is scared of everything and everyone, and goes to great lengths to avoid other people, preferring to spend days in his room, glued to his computer.

Just as Sammie is about to knock on his window, Jemima appears in the doorway, trailing Tabitha in her wake. Sammie quickly ducks out of sight and listens with disgust as Tabitha orders Oscar to change out of his 'high-school-shooter gear' for just one day and put on a decent suit. And could he try to be slightly less weird on this special occasion?

Crossly, Sammie slides further down the drainpipe, past the drawing room, where her mother's new groom, CHARLES OGILVY-NAPIER-MANN, dressed in a tailcoat and accessorised with top hat and buttonhole, chats pleasantly with LAVENDER and RUPERT SILVERMAN-SMYTHE, his intended's parents.

Sammie jumps onto her bike and we follow the little red figure through the winter landscape.

In a chaotic studio, a sweaty and glassy-eyed CICERO BRIGHT puts the finishing touches to an enormous canvas. Scattered around him are wedding photos showing a very young Cicero with an equally young bride, whom we recognise as Sammie's mother, Jemima. Cicero, who has clearly worked through the night, applies a final daub of scarlet paint in a flourish of booze and creativity. The painting is finished and it is stunning. He takes a step backwards, squints critically at the canvas and

applies the neck of a bottle to his lips in satisfaction, drinking until it's empty. Then he lies down on the floor, arms outstretched, closes his eyes and falls into a deep sleep, his mouth agape.

The bridal party is ready to depart, but Sammie is nowhere to be found. Jemima is beside herself and in desperation calls Cicero, her ex, to see if he knows where Sammie could be.

Awoken rudely from a drink-induced coma, Cicero is in no mood to be disturbed and growls down the phone that Sammie isn't with him. But when he cautiously opens one bloodshot eye, he spies in the gloom something red sitting on the end of his bed, wearing a pointed hat. Jemima, pushed for time, begs her ex to bring her youngest daughter back to her, in time for the wedding. Sweating through his hangover, Cicero reluctantly agrees (with more than a little sarcasm) to drive Sammie over to Jemima's 'dream wedding'.

On their way to the church, Cicero and Sammie run out of petrol and have to push Cicero's knackered old car the rest of the way. As they huff and puff, Sammie takes the opportunity to lecture her father. He needs to do *something* to prevent the marriage. Surely he still loves Jemima, at least a little bit? And doesn't he love Oscar and Tabitha a little too? And her? Does he really prefer living apart from them? Cicero listens, then explains that his little Bright family is better off without him – he's simply not cut out for fatherhood or family life. He and Jemima had tried marriage for fifteen years and it just made everyone mad or sad. Jemima's new husband is richer, smarter, kinder and more successful than Cicero is or ever could be. It's better this way. But Sammie's not convinced. She's seen it in films, the part where before the 'yes-word' the wedding guests are asked if anyone has any objections. That's the moment when Cicero needs to stand up and declare: *We - my daughter Sammie and I – object: we want to keep our mother for ourselves!* It's almost as if Sammie is the parent, when she enquires earnestly of her father: *Is that agreed? Do you understand what you now need to do?*

Sammie and her father are greeted outside the church by an anxious Jemima. Against the stunning winter background, Jemima dazzles in her wedding dress. Her beauty strikes Cicero like a thunderbolt; it's clear to see that her new man makes her happy. His melancholy eyes lock onto hers and for a moment it looks as though he'll take her into his arms, but the real Jemima breaks rudely into his fantasy...

What on earth took you so long? ... Ran out of petrol? ... I just can't believe this ...My parents will...oh C! Why???? Force of habit overtakes the two exes and they start squabbling just like old times. Jemima blames Cicero for not telling her that Sammie was with him. Cicero asks how he was supposed to know Sammie was there given that he was asleep at the time. *Asleep in the day? Why?* Because he'd been working the

whole night. *Working on what for God's sake?* demands Jemima. *Not on those paintings for the Serpentine Gallery, I'm sure, because those are no longer wanted. You lost all chance of a decent artist's income after you pissed all over those paintings in front of the Committee!* Now it's Cicero's turn to explode: *Those stuffed shirts were asking for more yellow in the paintings. A little more yellow. So I damn well gave them more yellow!* And why does there have to be a post-mortem of this peeing incident at every opportunity? That's why he left her, so he doesn't have to go through this any more. He has never been able to live up to Jemima's high expectations and clearly never will.

As this exchange goes on, Jemima absent-mindedly wipes some breakfast remnants off Sammie's chin, then does the same with her ex-husband, who then gives her an involuntary compliment on her beautiful wedding gown. The divorced spouses soften as they think back to their own marriage all those years ago, when they both looked ridiculous. They laugh as they remember how together they'd made her wedding dress. Jemima had lain on the floor while Cicero traced her contours, and together they'd stitched the resulting rag by hand. With fondness, Jemima hands Cicero an olive branch by inviting him to join the wedding reception. All along, Sammie has been listening to this exchange in raptures – this quarrel is just like how things used to be, and a seed of hope has been planted.

The wedding ceremony is excruciating for Sammie. She sits on the edge of her chair, exchanging meaningful looks with her father to remind him of his important task. But when the question of objections is raised, her father stays silent, sadness and resignation etched on his face. Sammie jumps up and cries: *Haven't you forgotten something? Aren't you going to object?* The congregation starts laughing, but Sammie – who hates not being taken seriously – leaves the church sobbing, and the offending marriage goes ahead without her.

During the wedding reception, an angry Sammie stomps up to her father to remind him that it's still not too late to take action. Thanks to the limitless champagne, Cicero is already well on his way embarrassing himself, and it comes as no surprise when he announces that he wants to make a speech. It begins well, and he seems keen to tell everyone how much he still loves Jemima. But then he loses his way and his affectionate speech turns into a rant against the institution of marriage in general and his marriage to Jemima in particular. The assembled guests are mortified, and Sammie barely knows where to look. The spectacle reaches its climax when Cicero tells Jemima that she's now made the perfect choice: although her new man is deadly dull and Cicero wouldn't want to be found dead next to him, that fact that he's super successful and rich will make his in-laws extremely happy ...

Cicero storms out of the reception venue, Sammie runs after him and gives him a huge hug. What he'd said about Ogilvy-Napier was spot on, but his passionate words had cost him Jemima, and Sammie is bitterly disappointed. With pain in his

heart, Cicero watches his youngest daughter return to the party, because even Sammie seems to realise he's a loser. Cold to the bone and cursing, he pushes his useless old motorcycle back along the snow-covered driveway. Soon, the newlyweds' bridal car approaches, and he ducks quickly behind a hedge to avoid further humiliation. Now that he's alone and unobserved, Cicero allows the tears to fall as the woman of his dreams drives radiantly out of his life.

But then he sees in the distance, through a haze of tears, the bridal car rammed by a delivery van. Two masked figures throw open the doors of the van and jump out. As Cicero starts running towards the car, Jemima is dragged out of it. He runs even faster when he sees her thrown into the back of the van.

Charles Ogilvy-Napier sees Cicero running towards him, jumps out of the car and drops to his knees. He begs the kidnappers not to kill him, or to make it swift and painless if they do. One of the kidnappers looks at Charles in confusion and swiftly drops his weapon to the ground. But then he spots Cicero and starts shouting in panic some obligatory kidnap phrases. Things like: *don't call the police/wait for our orders/if you want to see your wife alive again you'd better... etc.* Cicero spots the weapon fall on the ground, but a fraction of a second later the kidnapper grabs it before jumping into the van that, with squealing tyres, skids away over the snow and out of sight.

Jemima's parents, Rupert and Lavender SILVERMAN-SMYTHE and children are devastated by the kidnapping and astonished by the bizarre circumstances in which it occurred. Charles has received a note from the kidnappers, demanding a ransom of three million pounds for Jemima's safe release. Sammie clings to her father: he's big and strong and must save her mother! But Charles describes to the family Cicero's cowardly reaction during the kidnapping. He does his best not to sound accusatory, but struggles to hide his resentment, blinking back tears. Why didn't Cicero run towards them? Charles himself was looking death in the face and couldn't do a thing. Cicero had the chance to save Jemima, but he didn't use it. Why not? With subtle cunning, Charles manages to implicate Cicero in the abduction: Cicero has no standards; the weapon was lying on the ground but Cicero never attempted to seize it; everything happened in a split second... With Cicero's wounding speech still fresh in their minds, Rupert and Lavender subject him to an accusatory cross-examination. They can think of plenty of occasions when their son-in-law played a less than golden starring role and don't hesitate to bring them up now. This, together with Charles' baseless accusations, ignites blind fury in Cicero, who demands that they involve the police right away. Charles remarks how clever this is of Cicero, because he knows that this is the one thing they can't do. They need to wait for further instructions from the kidnappers and, if they want to see Jemima alive again, must on no account involve the police.

When Sammie suggests going home with her father, her grandparents won't hear of it. *That is simply not possible, Sammie ... his studio is no place for children ... there's no gas or electricity ... and the judge said ... stay with those who love you, Sammie ...*

Charles brings an end to this exchange by leading Cicero firmly to the door, and then outside. He's surprisingly friendly, digging in his pockets to give Cicero some petrol money. Cicero calms down and apologises to Charles for his behaviour: he has of course enormous admiration for Charles and his achievements, and Cicero recognises his failures as a husband and father. He has proven today, once again, that his family is better off without him. Sammie cannot believe her ears and turns her back on him, the weak traitor. As Cicero walks away, his tail between his legs, Sammie is inconsolable, and her disappointment breaks Cicero's heart.

So the children stay with their grandparents and brand new stepfather, and Charles plays the role of caring father with aplomb. He does his very best to please the Bright children and even seems to understand that Sammie needs her father at this difficult time, inviting Cicero to spend as much time with them as possible. Cicero sees in Charles the sort of father figure he should have been to them, but never could be. Charles is mature, caring, successful, responsible to the core. The fact that he's nothing like this man eats away at him, and at Sammie even more.

Jemima is being held hostage by two uncommon hostage takers. Initially, she is terrified, but soon she understands that the woman and the man who detained her are not professional kidnappers, but due to unfortunate circumstances landed in the abduction industry. The female kidnapper, Ronnie tries to come across as very dangerous, but immediately refutes it by constantly apologizing for the inconvenience she is causing. She obviously acts on behalf of her dominant lover, because in every sentence the lady affectionately refers with heavy South London accent to her lover 'Pookie'Pookie wants us to do this, Pookie wants us to ... Pookie said this ... Pookie said so.

Ronnie's colleague abductor, who is called 'Pumpie', looks like Schwarzenegger in the old days. But behind this dangerous appearance an extremely uncertain boy appears to be hiding. He has been depressed since his 40th birthday and out of fear - now that he has passed the 40 - no longer to be found attractive by the men, he has developed a bizarre hobby: what started with a harmless fitness addiction has degenerated into an addiction to plastic surgery. To Jemima's disgust, the kidnapper shows the beautifully healed scars of his tummy tuck at any unwelcome moment or forces her to feel the implants in his calves, biceps and buttocks. Now he goes for a full hair transplant, but then they have to transport forty thousand hairs from his buttocks to his head. Forty thousand hairs from the buttocks to the crown ... that costs money ... a lot of money.

Charles receives a videomessage of a captive Jemima, in which the three million pounds ransom is mentioned. When he shows this video to Rupert and Lavender they are distressed by their daughter's dishevelled and distressed appearance. But Lavender literally falls off her chair in horror when Charles begs *her* to pay her daughter's ransom: he explains that he cannot raise such a large sum of money because, to his great shame, he is completely over-leveraged. Although she's richer than Croesus (even Rupert doesn't know how wealthy she is), she far prefers to live frugally. For example, their faithful housekeeper Elvira (who has lived with them since the day she was jilted at the altar and who has sworn never to lose her heart to a man again) still has to ask Lavender for her salary every month. And when Lavender needed 'a man who can' to help in the garden and around the house, she almost fainted when she heard what he would cost.

The truth is that Lavender is stingy, but is too concerned with appearances to let that be known. She prefers to give the impression of naivety, that she's a little divorced from reality. *Goodness me - that seems so expensive!* she is often heard to say. In fact Elvira's nickname for her is 'Goodness How Much?', so you can imagine how appalled she is to discover she might lose three million just to get her daughter back. She declares that she now wants to involve the police, because giving away that amount of money to a bunch of strangers is unthinkable. Inadvertently, she starts thinking aloud: *You bastards ... taking my child is one thing, but to go after my money is quite another ...* She quickly corrects herself: *I mean, those bastards can take my money but they'd better give me back my child. Of course, that's what I meant - the stress is getting to me.*

Charles convinces Lavender that the police need to stay out of things - it's too dangerous for Jemima otherwise. Cicero is also stunned that Charles can't raise the ransom amount and expresses his surprise to the family. But Rupert and Lavender shut him down, urging him to grow up, stop acting like the jealous ex and give up trying to divide a family that's in enough turmoil as it is. They will pay the ransom and that will be the end of it. Sammie, meanwhile, has had enough of living with her stepfather and wants to move in with her father, but her grandparents will hear none of it. They threaten legal action if Cicero tries to take Sammie away. Cicero leaves his former in-laws' house dejected.

Even though she doesn't want to, Sammie returns home to Charles' house to join her brother and sister. But on her way she makes a strange discovery in the glove compartment of his car. It's a heavy bunch of keys with a different name and address on each key. Charles is furious when he discovers her with the keys, snatching them from her and returning them to their hiding place. Later, he's overly affectionate, like a cat and Sammie knows that something is up. She tells Cicero, but he dismisses her suspicions. Granny and Grandpa are right, he says, they must both learn to trust Charles and focus instead on getting Jemima back, safe and sound. Sammie feels let

down by Cicero and tries to enlist Oscar: he can help her track down the women whose names are on those keys. Sammie's convinced her brother has the heart of a hero, but however persuasive his little sister is, Oscar is simply too fearful to call in unannounced on strangers. Disappointed by yet another family member, Sammie takes the initiative and goes alone to the addresses on the keys. One by one she discovers a series of women who know Charles, and have the same thing in common: whether he's broken their hearts or into their bank accounts, he's mistreated them all.

One night, when Charles is away from home, Sammie breaks into his study. This time she's managed to persuade Oscar to help her, and together they break into his computer and inbox. They discover all sorts of strange and cryptic messages, which seem to have something to do with Jemima's abduction. In her excitement, Sammie calls her father in the middle of the night to tell him, but he sleepily growls at her to go straight back to bed. He refuses to take her seriously and, if he's honest, Oscar is relieved to hear someone else tell her this. All this sneaking about isn't good for his nerves, and he thinks Sammie is taking her conspiracy theories too far. As her options dwindle, Sammie attempts to enlist Tabitha in her campaign, but she gets mad when she hears about Sammie's snooping. To punish her, Tabitha locks Sammie in her bedroom for the rest of the night.

But little Sammie is nothing if persistent, and she escapes from the house via the drainpipe outside her bedroom window. She jumps on her bike and cycles in the dark through Hampstead Heath, looking for her friend Nick, the old tramp who was once a champion chess player (before he became 'confused') but these days now bears more than a passing resemblance to a grubby Father Christmas. Of course, Sammie is far too old to still believe in Santa, but when she finds Nick she can't help asking him to grant her some wishes. *Of course*, Nick assures her. *Nobody is who they say they are*, declares Sammie with great dramatic effect, *even Father Christmas has me guessing*. As tears roll down her cheeks, Sammie wishes that her mother was safely home, that they could all be together as a family again, that her sister Tabitha would just be herself and that her brother Oscar would be happy once again... She falls asleep, safe and warm in the arms of her very own Father Christmas.

Tabitha calls Cicero in panic. Sammie has vanished again and Charles is unreachable. Is Sammie with Cicero? Cicero assures Tabitha that he'll get Sammie home safely. Tabitha laughs heartily: since when has her father ensured that everything turns out okay? Since roughly never. Cicero wisely postpones this potential confrontation until further notice. His priority is finding Sammie – has Tabitha any idea where else she could be? Maybe she's with that old tramp she's been talking about for weeks?? He knows she goes off to chat to him regularly. Eventually, Cicero tracks Sammie down to a damp corner of Hampstead Heath, and takes both her and Nick to his home to

dry out and warm up. As they steam in his apartment, Cicero makes a solemn promise to Sammie to take her concerns about Charles seriously.

Meanwhile, Jemima and her captors are getting along surprisingly well. During their nightly Oprah-esque conversations, the three of them have concluded that they're suffering from low self-esteem. Ronnie has a double-barrelled boyfriend who actually finds her rather common and beneath him. For years, she's been trying to adopt a nice posh accent, but those Essex vowels of hers just keep slipping out. Her man has told her he wants to put the brakes on their relationship until Ronnie (he prefers to call her by her full name, Veronica) fits more comfortably into his social circles. Ronnie understands that, because she knows she's rather common and her manners need some work. Jemima's heart goes out to poor Ronnie, who is clearly blinded by love, and tells her earnestly that nobody should expect her to be anything but herself. Jemima tells Ronnie about her own marriage that collapsed a year ago. And about the man she's just married, who is completely different from her ex. Ronnie remarks that it seems as though Jemima is still a little in love with Cicero, and is she right in thinking that she's chosen this new guy mainly to keep Mummy and Daddy happy? Jemima strenuously denies both outrageous suggestions.

At last, Cicero decides it's time for him to shape up. He seeks out his former client at the Serpentine Gallery and apologises for the pee incident. What can he do to make up for it? He'll happily give his client as much yellow paint in his paintings as he could wish for! This yields a handsome commission for Cicero and things start to look up for him. Next he needs to convince his parents-in-law that his children should come to live with him. They are his children and, in the absence of Jemima, nobody can care better for them than he can. Sammie and Oscar are delighted at the prospect of moving in with Cicero, but Tabitha is totally against it. Charles is now her father. She's even thinking of taking his (double-barrelled) name. A name that will enhance her chances of mingling with the Royal Family. Because that's what she wants above all: to marry a prince. If Kate Middleton or Meghan Markle can do it, so can she. Cicero reminds Tabitha that she is, and always will be, a Bright, and that she should be proud of that. For a moment he wonders if he actually said that out loud. But this new positive energy suits him. He resolves to do everything possible to prove to Tabitha that, firstly, her new stepfather is no good and, secondly, her real father isn't the loser she thinks he is.

Initially, Cicero is a little unsure of his new role as father and hero. But Sammie gently shows him the way and secretly he starts to enjoy his new status as an involved and caring father. Family relationships are redefined as his house slowly transforms from a messy student-style flat to a cosy home from which he and his children can prepare their offensive against Charles. Sammie, Oscar and their father make a formidable team and friends and foes alike are surprised by his ingenious plans to expose Charles. Oscar, the techy in the family, diligently executes his father's

instructions. He mounts cameras and listening devices in Charles' house, breaks into Charles' computer, where he finds some pretty incriminating information. They're pleased that they still have someone 'on the inside' in the shape of Tabitha, who's still living with Charles. The challenge, though, is convincing her to join their side...

Charles' credibility starts to crumble. Investigative journalist Mark Williams-Thomas receives an 'anonymous' tip-off that Charles has been laundering money from organised crime via his real estate empire. And the henchmen of the legendary criminal LUHRMAN, alias 'The Ear', are snapping at Charles' heels about the money he owes them. With his customary candor, thrusting a microphone in his face, Mark bombards Charles with questions. He comments on the absence of Charles' new bride, mentioning rumours of her possible abduction. Mark is puzzled that Charles isn't showing more interest in tracking down Jemima and her abductors. Charles states to the camera that he has no idea what reporter Mark Williams-Thomas is talking about, and anyway how can somebody who's not been reported missing be the victim of a kidnapping?

Cicero confronts Tabitha with the incriminating evidence that they've uncovered against Charles and she decides, albeit with some reluctance, to give her father a second chance. She agrees to continue to live with Charles for the time being and, every day, to lodge a bug discreetly in his clothing so that they can track his movements.

Meanwhile, Granny and Grandpa have arranged to release sufficient funds to buy their daughter's release from captivity. Cicero makes a last-minute bid to convince them that Charles is behind Jemima's disappearance: he has an ingenious plan to trap Charles and prove to everyone that he is the crook behind her kidnapping. Making full use of his artistic skills, Cicero recreates an impressively convincing bank interior. Sammie's homeless friend Nick will play the director of this fake bank and Eliva, his in-law's trusted housekeeper, will receive him. Jim will draw on his technical expertise and play a trick on Charles, whereby it appears that the ransom money has arrived in his bank account, even though it will be returned straight away to Lavender's account. Then, using the cameras installed in Charles' car, they will be able to see where he goes with the money; Cicero suspects he will just disappear. Lavender, who cannot bear to part with money (and is quite interested too in the return of her daughter) is all ears. She had never suspected that her former son-in-law would be capable of conceiving, and executing, such a master plan.

Rupert and Nick play their respective roles with verve. Elvira, who plays her role brilliantly as the bank director's secretary (and with a convincing German accent), spits in Charles' coffee and whispers 'in character' to Nick that this is his just dessert for all those times he'd never even looked at her when he visited the Bright family. Eagerly, Charles watches the six-figure sum disappear from Lavender's bank account

to his, before claiming that he now needs to drive to a pre-arranged location to prove to the kidnappers that the ransom money is in his account and to secure Jemima's release before he pays it over.

Ronnie, Reggie and Jemima are in the middle of a real therapy session. Reggie, sobbing, finishes off his sorry story of plastic surgery addiction with a bold declaration that he is going to stop with these operations. If he's going bald, he'll stay bald – although maybe he'll think about a scalp lift. Then it's Ronnie's turn and she makes a truly shocking admission: her 'Pookie' is, in fact, Charles! She knows that Charles is bad news, but she cannot bring herself to leave him. She has a long way to go: she wants to leave him but she can't.

The family follow Charles at a discreet distance. Tabitha has proved herself very effective at bugging Charles' car and preparing the cameras and we watch live as Charles heads – unsurprisingly – towards London Heathrow Airport. Oscar's on the backseat, his laptop on his lap, between Sammie, Rupert and Lav, all of whom are gripped by the action as it unfolds on his screen. Tabitha is sitting up front with her father, all of their previous hostilities not only suspended but seemingly forgotten. There's even a moment when she calls him 'Daddy'...

Charles receives a call from his PA: his ticket to South America is in his mailbox. They watch and listen to him calling the 'kidnappers', telling them that he's still waiting for the money, even while he whistles off to the airport.

Cicero speeds up to Charles' car and forces him to pull over. Charles attempts to escape, but Cicero steps on the gas and catches up with him. Charles is glowing with fury. Just as they're attempting to bundle him into their car, a huge black Rolls Royce races towards them, tyres squealing. A rear window glides downwards, a huge ear becomes visible, and the click of pistols is suddenly audible. Everyone stops in their tracks, staring with terror into the eyes of The Ear, who gestures at Charles to get into the car. Then he demands the same of the Bright family ...

It's night and everyone is transported to the location where Jemima is being held captive. They discover her there bound and gagged. Alone. Her captors are nowhere to be seen. Jemima was only expecting to see Charles, so is stunned to see her whole family enter her cell. It seems that Charles is under pressure from these heavies, having crossed their boss, The Ear. In order to secure the three million pounds he's stolen from The Ear, Charles had to stage Jemima's kidnapping. But because he's often acted as a police informer and fears for his life, he couldn't resist the temptation to flee the country with the money.

And so Sammie's wish has come true, albeit in not quite the way she'd envisaged: her whole family is together again. *And it's not even Christmas yet!* Sammie can't believe her luck to find herself sandwiched in a hug with both her mother and father.

Jemima watches tenderly as she sees Sammie crawl into Cicero's lap for a cuddle. All at once, she's no longer this worldly-wise little girl, who teaches her father to be the adult, but a nine-year-old behaving exactly as she should behave.

The Ear doesn't like to break up the party, but can the Bright family please get over all this soppiness? That three million needs to be transferred to his foreign account within the hour or there'll be trouble. Rupert calls home and is on the point of asking Nick and Elvira to transfer the money, when it becomes clear that The Ear isn't keen on letting his witnesses go free. In fact, it looks as though they'll all soon be swimming with the fishes.

Thank goodness Jemima has a couple of trump cards: Ronnie and Reggie. They've been lying in wait for Charles, and have come up with an ingenious escape plan. Cicero is generous enough to liberate Charles from The Ear too, and allows him to escape with them. After a thrilling nocturnal chase through the ancient streets of the City of London, Cicero proves himself to be a true hero and they all escape The Ear.

Once everyone is safely home, Jemima is pleasantly surprised to see how comfortable and homely her ex's apartment has become. Each child has their own area, there is food on the table, the atmosphere is warm and loving. And Cicero tells her he'll look after the children for as long as she wants, if she just wants to rest and recover at her parents' house. Jemima is dumbstruck.

The whole family gathers for Christmas dinner at Granny & Grandpa's that year, including Nick and Elvira, and Cicero is treated with great respect by Rupert and Lavender. We don't yet know how things will be between Jemima and Cicero, but we hope their future together is 'Bright' and so far the signs are good. For Sammie, who never gave up hope, once glance at her parents together is enough to confirm that the deal is done. *Mark my words, she whispers to Nick, there'll be kissing on New Year's Eve!*

The End

...Okay then....just a couple of glimpses at the future and then it's really the end:

'Cicero and Sammie are invited to attend any number of talk shows, and even Mark Williams-Thomas is full of admiration for their ingenuity and crime-fighting. Thanks to his new celebrity status, Cicero becomes the host of the television series ' Crime Fighters ' .

'Jemima co-writes (in collaboration with her kidnappers who are currently serving time at Her Majesty's pleasure) a book about her experience "Stockholm Syndrome: Fact or Fiction?"

'Reggie writes regularly from prison to a balding celebrity, who in solidarity with his new penfriend decides to give up hair implants and become bald naturally'

'Tabitha gets her own reality TV series: 'Little Big Bitch; Living a Life in Luxury' and thus fulfils her life's ambition.'

'Charles is convicted for his role in Jemima's kidnapping, but gets a reduced sentence if he agrees to help the police build a huge case against The Ear. He's currently living in a safe house under 24-hour police protection.'

'Elvira, the Bright's faithful servant, has said 'yes' to homeless Emiel (who is no longer homeless) and is, for the first time in her life, happy with a man.'

'Lavender goes into therapy in an attempt to overcome her stinginess. It won't work'

'Grandpa Rupert continues to believe in the goodness of humankind'
