

The Christmas Window



~ a magical short story by ~
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Chapter One

Everybody dreams of a white Christmas – whether they admit it or not.

No matter how unmoved they are by twinkling lights adorning every shop window and tree in the High Street; no matter how many times they complain about adverts shown relentlessly from mid-October; no matter how much they whinge about Christmas shopping – hidden carefully away within the seemingly sensible heart of every grown-up is a tiny, wide-eyed child, longing to see streets and houses, gardens and hills covered in a thick blanket of white.

Without realising it, they pay slightly more attention to the nightly weather forecasts, quietly hoping for news of snow on the way. They pass stacks of brightly coloured plastic sledges stacked up outside supermarkets and feel a tiny tug of hope deep within them. They write their Christmas cards, pausing for the smallest moment to gaze longingly at the snow scenes gracing each one. And *every time* the word SNOW is mentioned – in conversations, on television shows and even in classic Christmas songs piped into faceless shopping malls – the little secret child's excited heart, hidden inside every adult, begins to skip like a baby reindeer.

They don't like driving in the snow. They hate negotiating slippery, slush-covered pavements outside their homes or on the school run. They *loathe* the endless queues of slow-moving traffic when unexpected blizzards thwart the best efforts of the gritting lorries and everything freezes solid. There is nothing *practical* about snow. In fact, listening to their vociferous complaints in public, you would think that the absolute worst thing that could happen at Christmas would be if it *snowed*.

And yet, the *thought* of rising early on Christmas Day and throwing open your bedroom curtains to reveal a snowy white world outside is where the magic truly lies. Thoughts of rolling great creaking balls of snow around your back garden to make the biggest snowman ever, or lying on your back making Snow Angels, or waging a full-scale war on your friends in a massive snowball fight, make grown-ups ache to be ten again, keeping the magic of snow alive in their hearts forever. It is the *thought* of snow and the memories

of snowy days gone by that encompass everything magical about being a child in winter.

And if snow should fall on Christmas Day itself – that would be the most magical happening of all...

So it is that *everyone* – young, old or somewhere in-between – waits, watches and secretly dreams about seeing a white Christmas this year.

Everyone, that is, except Lottie Fairweather.

From her earliest childhood, Lottie always hated snow. Snow on TV and in films was okay, snow on Christmas cards was fine – but snow in real life, however pretty it was and however magical it appeared to everyone around her, was something she detested with a passion. While her friends, family and seemingly the whole world revelled in the newly-fallen white stuff with unrestrained glee, Lottie stayed resolutely indoors wherever possible and, on the unfortunate occasions when she was dragged outside to join them she would stand in hunched protest, wrapped up in far too many layers, as snowballs flew around her.

Every winter, Lottie dreaded the appearance of snow symbols on the weather forecasts, her heart sinking as office conversations turned to excited expectations of imminent blizzards approaching from the north.

It wasn't that she hadn't tried. For years she waited for the magic everyone else felt to catch her, too. But it never happened. It was just another thing to set her apart from her friends. Snow united people who loved it, but was an insurmountable white barrier to those who didn't.

On a chilly December Tuesday, ten days before Christmas, Lottie sat at her desk, trying not to listen to the excited chatter of her colleagues as they discussed new reports of imminent snow. With no other conversation in the office that she could enter into, she let out a huge sigh and returned to her paperwork.

Invoices. *Ugh*. Throughout the year *Dillinger & Co.* seemed to produce the largest piles of remittances in the entire Western Hemisphere and at Christmas that doubled. And even though Lottie had stressed most vehemently at her interview that she *didn't* want to handle invoices and accounts – and in spite of fervent assurances from her employer that neither would be required of her – the responsibility for the dreaded bits of paper

ultimately fell into her overflowing in-tray. While her workmates gabbled on, ignoring incoming calls and bulging in-trays on their own desks, Lottie juggled answering the office phone with the never-ending reams of invoices – new, old and positively prehistoric – lurking stubbornly underneath piles of papers on her desk.

Needing distraction, she looked up from her work and gazed around the small, strip-lit office, hoping for something to catch her eye and lift her spirits from the endless Tuesday tedium. Immediately, the office decorations caught her attention and produced the desired effect. In an attempt to inject some Christmas cheer into their workplace, the *Dillinger & Co.* staff had pooled their spare change last Friday lunchtime and raided the Pound Shop in the High Street for cheap and cheerful decorations. Their efforts had not been in vain: the overall colour scheme for the office was no longer limited to several dirty shades of grey and muddy brown. Now, the battered grey filing cabinets whose drawers never quite managed to close were bedecked with sparkly lengths of red and green tinsel and crowned by corporate Christmas cards arranged attractively on top; while brightly-coloured, foil-and-tissue paper bells and stars dangled from long lengths of white office string, drawing-pinned to the dingy grey polystyrene ceiling tiles.

Lottie sighed again. At least her love of decorations hadn't left her.

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Chapter Two

The office decorations had not gone unnoticed by the two bosses of *Dillinger & Co*, provoking drastically different reactions. George Dillinger, Managing Director of the small baking firm, could not resist a smile when he first saw them, unlike his business partner Malcolm King, Operations Manager (unofficially known as *Mr. Scrooge* by the staff), who detested the display and would have ripped down every last strand of metallic garish junk himself, had it not been for the express wishes of George to let them stay.

‘If it were up to me, all outward associations with the time of year would be *banned*,’ he snarled to George, gripping his bone china coffee mug so strongly that it threatened to break under the strain.

‘Malcolm, it’s *Christmas*. We have to allow the staff the opportunity to enjoy the festive season,’ smiled George, offering Malcolm a mince pie.

Malcolm declined, crossing his arms as a non-festive shield against the onslaught of tinsel. ‘It distracts them from their work.’

George frowned, ‘It does not. For heaven’s sake, Malcolm, give them a break. They have precious little time to enjoy the holidays as it is. The least we can do is allow them some fun once a year.’

Malcolm snorted and turned away.

George Dillinger *adored* Christmas. His earliest memories were of twinkling fairy lights, the scent of towering real Christmas trees and satsumas; of impatient waits for Father Christmas; of reaching into his stocking and discovering a pile of gaudily-wrapped presents, ripping them open with breathless glee. As he grew up, his affection for the season only grew, an excited passion he passed on to his own children and, just recently, his first grandchild. Christmases in the Dillinger household were extravagant affairs, every inch of the home decorated with lights, garlands, baubles and candles, while tables groaned beneath the weight of edible delights. As the days passed in December, George would become increasingly impatient for the Christmas holiday, when he could escape the bind of business for the noise and activity, warmth and fun of his family celebrations.

Malcolm King, on the other hand, abhorred the season and everything associated with it. A sour-faced man with a cynical view of life, he painfully endured each Christmas with his wife and three grown-up sons. The King family could truly be described as *distant*, even though no son lived more than ten miles away from his parents' rambling pile. The house, residence of the Kings since the sixteenth century, was old, grand and morbidly depressing. Even on bright, warm summer days, it loomed, cold and uninviting, over anyone unlucky enough to approach it. Malcolm hated the lackadaisical attitude that pervaded *Dillinger & Co.*'s staff throughout December, their thoughts more inclined to parties and shopping than the essential, day-to-day business tasks. More than anything in the whole world, Malcolm loved order. Everything done in the correct manner. Had George given him *carte blanche* to run the office in his own way, Malcolm would have prohibited any mention of Christmas and its assembled fripperies until the very last day of work, *after* 4.30pm – an hour after he left the office for the holidays. At least then he wouldn't have to endure the enforced cheeriness in person. He had remarked as much to his wife, Muriel, over dinner not long ago.

'They take advantage of you, those people,' Muriel had sympathised. 'Any excuse to waste company time.'

'George is such a soft touch,' Malcolm sneered. 'He's too willing to let the staff run riot. He needs to take a firm hand with them, let things happen in the proper order, stop the needless chatting in the office and have everyone respond only to their designated next-in-line.'

'He needs to *retire*,' Muriel answered knowingly, patting her husband's bony hand. 'Soon. And let a *better man* run the company.'

Malcolm smiled even now, although in reality the closest thing to a smile he could manage was a hideous gurning grimace, which on anyone else would have given just cause for calling an ambulance.

George observed his business partner with amused curiosity. 'Happy thoughts?' he enquired.

'Something like that,' Malcolm replied. 'I'll go and rally the troops.'

Lottie was slowly losing the will to live – so much so that even an office conversation about new reports of snow provided a welcome relief from the drudgery of invoices.

‘So it’s definitely heading this way?’

‘Looks like it. They reckon it could be here overnight.’

Lottie shivered. ‘Great.’

‘Hey L, look at it this way – you get a day off work if you’re snowed in,’ Charlie grinned.

He had a point. Lottie found herself smiling back. ‘Now that *would* be something worth looking forward to.’

‘OK, people! I need everyone’s attention, please.’

The assembled staff members turned to face Malcolm as he assumed centre-stage in the office. ‘Now, as you know, it’s almost the time of the year I like to call *unnecessary* – but we are *not there yet*. We still have an entire week of trading before you all disappear at the company’s expense and I want to make sure that everyone here remembers the importance of working hard right up until the break. You will have plenty of time *after you leave here* on the 21st for time-wasting and frivolous talk. While you are here, we need everyone to be firing on all cylinders. I hope I make myself clear. That’s all. Thank you for your time.’ He unleashed a self-satisfied grimace on the defenceless staff members and left the office with a flourish. His assembled staff exchanged grim looks and drifted unenthusiastically back to their desks.

That night, the snow came.

Huge soft flakes fell, adorning the houses, parks, roads and gardens of the City. Under silent skies the ground surrendered to a thick blanket of white, disappearing beneath wintry drifts. Traffic ground to a snail’s pace and the streets emptied as people retreated home to watch the tumbling snowflakes from the comfort of their armchairs.

Lottie felt her heart sink as she caught sight of the blizzard through the gap in between her kitchen curtains. She couldn’t escape a feeling of heavy loneliness that accompanied each new snowfall – something that only grew with the passing years. It was now more than just a lack of connection with the ones who revelled in the white stuff; it was confirmation of another year alone.

Closing the curtains, she pulled her mother’s old shawl tighter round

her shoulders and took her mug of cocoa to bed. Alone in her room, she turned off the bedside lamp and lay, wide awake, in the darkness, unable to stem the tide of tears any longer.

* * * *

Chapter Three

'Wake up!'

It was still dark when Lottie awoke with a start. She blinked, disoriented, her senses on high alert.

'Wake up!'

The voice was a tiny whisper, barely audible but definitely *there*. Lottie was fully awake now, her heart thudding fast, not daring to move.

Get a grip, she told herself, you're dreaming.

She made her gaze travel around the darkened bedroom. Nothing. The bright red display on her radio alarm read 2:47. Lottie let out a weary sigh and stared back at the ceiling. The last thing she needed was a bad night's sleep. Even if the snow was bad enough to keep her home from work she still had a hundred and one things she needed to do before Christmas. A day off was just an opportunity tackle the pre-festive season jobs on her list. She dragged her head and shoulders up off the bed, grabbed her pillows and attempted to pummel them back to softness. It didn't work. They were old and lumpy at the best of times: tonight they felt like they were stuffed with rocks. Admitting defeat, she flopped back, closed her eyes and willed her too-awake brain to sleep again.

'Wake up!'

Her eyes snapped open. 'Who said that?'

Silence.

With cry of frustration, Lottie switched on the bedside lamp and sat up...

...to find herself face to face with a young man at the end of her bed.

He raised a hand and closed his fingers, as if plucking an invisible object from the air. Terrified, Lottie opened her mouth to scream but her voice was nowhere to be found.

'Sorry,' said the man, nodding at his clenched hand, 'I thought you might do that and it's really not the best idea. I'd hate to wake your neighbours.'

Lottie's eyes widened as she mouthed exactly what she thought.

‘Good job I’m rubbish at lip-reading, eh?’ he winked, his smile not unpleasant. ‘Still, I get the gist. Here, have it back.’ Opening his fingers he threw something unseen in Lottie’s direction.

‘How the – what on earth did you just do?’

‘Made sure you didn’t wake the street.’

‘Didn’t wake the—? Who *the hell* do you think you are? How dare you come into my room and—’ Her voice disappeared again as the man sighed and clapped his hands together. Eyes aflame with unbridled fury, Lottie mouthed, **GIVE IT BACK!**

The young man shook his head and folded his arms. ‘Nope.’

GIVE IT BACK, YOU B...

‘Temper temper,’ he grinned. ‘Most unladylike language, I must say.’

I SAID, GIVE IT BACK.

‘I know exactly what you said, Lottie Fairweather. The question is – do you *deserve* to have it back? Judging by your colourful choice of vocabulary, I’d say you’ve yet to prove yourself worthy of it.’

Lottie glared at him for a long time.

‘Oh, very *good*,’ he grinned, ‘very impressive Paddington stare you have there. Still, it isn’t exactly moving things along and we don’t have much time.’

Panic rising, Lottie pulled the duvet protectively up to her chin.

A look of pure horror washed across the intruder’s face. ‘Gracious me, no! I don’t mean *that kind* of thing. I am a *gentleman*, madam!’

ARE YOU? mouthed Lottie.

‘Yes,’ he answered, opening his hands in surrender and inadvertently releasing Lottie’s voice, which uttered several unprintable comments as it winged its way across the bedspread back to its owner.

‘—and if you think you can just break into my house, unannounced, uninvited—’

‘Oh no!’ The young man clamped a hand to his brow. ‘I forgot to introduce myself! How unforgivably rude of me. It’s just that time is decidedly not on our side and I need your help to get back.’

His expression was so pathetic that for a moment Lottie forgot her anger. ‘Get back where?’

His eyes were a picture of sadness. ‘Home.’

She eyed him suspiciously. ‘You need money to get home?’

‘No. I have money.’

‘You want to steal my car?’

‘Absolutely *not* – I refute the very suggestion.’

‘Then I – I don’t understand...’

He sighed. ‘My name is Philip Inklestein – Pip to all that know me. I somehow stepped out of my time and now I need to get back. Urgently, in fact. There’s a rather beautiful lady who’s due to get married and I need to *be* there, if you understand my meaning.’

‘You stepped out of your *time*?’

‘Yes.’

Lottie leant slowly back against her pillows and stared at Pip. Her anger forgotten, she took a better look at him. His tall, slender frame was dressed almost entirely in black, except for a pure white cravat tied around his neck, fastened with an elaborate gold and diamond pin that sparkled in the light of her bedside lamp as his chest rose and fell. Over a black collarless shirt and waistcoat, he wore a long black velvet tailcoat that had obviously seen better days; its hems and cuffs faded and frayed by the passage of time. His hair almost reached his shoulders, falling in glossy chestnut-hued curls that framed his porcelain features. He looked no more than thirty years old; a subtle hint of creases just visible at the outer corners of his eyes and a small frown line between his eyebrows the only indication of his age. His eyes were earnest in their survey of her – dark as a roasted coffee bean and bright in the half-light of her bedroom. Far from being threatening, the lost expression within them belied the truth.

‘How did you get into my house?’

‘I thought myself in.’ Seeing her expression he added, ‘It’s complicated. You’ll just have to take my word for it.’

‘Right. So why me?’

‘They told me you were the only one who could help.’

‘Who told you?’

‘They did.’

‘Who’s *they*?’

Pip sighed again. 'We really don't have time to go into it. And you probably wouldn't believe me if I told you. All you need to know is that I need your help to get home.' He reached into his waistcoat pocket, produced a faded gold fob watch and studied its cracked glass face. 'And time is extremely short. Will you help me, Lottie Fairweather?'

'How – how do you know my name?'

'You ask a lot of questions,' Pip frowned.

'Oh, pardon me – I'm sorry for wanting to know who the stranger sitting on the end of my bed is. How rude of me! Never mind the fact that I don't know who's been talking to you about me, and I'm not sure whether to believe this story of yours or not... Forget the small detail of you breaking into my house and waking me up in the middle of the night...'

'Early morning, actually,' Pip ventured.

'*Whatever*,' Lottie stormed.

'I need to get home.'

'And where is home, exactly?'

Pip's chocolate eyes misted slightly. 'Quite close, I believe. But a million miles from this place. I have to get back. I – I don't belong here.'

There was something so vulnerable in his voice that Lottie completely forgot her consternation. 'What do you want me to do?'

A broad grin flashed across Pip's pale face. 'Well *first* you need to get dressed, young lady. I'd suggest something warm. Go out in those pyjamas and you'll catch your death.'

'S-sorry? Did you say *out*?'

'Yes. We have to hurry.'

'But it's *snowing*.'

'I know. Wonderful, isn't it?'

Lottie shivered. 'I hate snow.'

'Hmm, they said you'd say that. Bit of a shame I made the jump at winter then, but completely unavoidable, I'm afraid. Righty-ho, what are you waiting for? Warm clothes, spit-spot!'

'Who are you, Mary flippin' Poppins?' Lottie muttered as she grabbed her jeans and sweater and headed into her bathroom to change.

* * * *

Chapter Four

Even as they stepped out into the bitter night air, Lottie couldn't explain why she was helping her uninvited guest. The truth was, she didn't know. But the way he'd spoken about *home* struck a chord within her. Nobody deserved to be kept from home if that was where they wanted to be.

Pip was a good foot taller than her and she struggled to keep up with his long, lithe strides though the freshly fallen snow, leaving at least four of her footprints to each one of his. All around them the cars, hedges, houses and roads sparkled in the light from streetlamps overhead, while light pollution from the city painted snow-heavy clouds in the night sky above an unearthly orange-black.

'Where are we going?'

'We have to find the right window,' Pip called over his shoulder, his black coat tails flying behind him.

'Which window?'

'The right one.'

'That's not exactly helpful, Pip,' Lottie grumbled, scurrying like a breathless terrier in his wake.

'Trust me, Lottie. It'll all make sense very soon.'

They turned a corner by a bus station, its white fluorescent strip lighting stinging their eyes as they passed the deserted bays, before heading towards the main shopping area of the city. Darkened shops lining the street appeared to stretch away into infinity, each one a dormant world waiting for the dawn of a new day. As they sped past estate agent offices, chemist stores, clothes shops and supermarkets, Lottie made a guess at how many windows the city held. How would they find the right one?

The city centre was famed for the narrow Medieval streets at its centre, near the magnificent cathedral, which drew visitors from all over the world every summer. Half-timbered black and white buildings crowded at impossible angles over cobbled streets, with dark alleys leading to tiny courtyards nestled between the shops and houses. It was into the smallest of these – known as Star Court – that Pip led Lottie. They followed a thin beam

of light across the snow until they came to a halt outside the lit window of a small shop at the very end of the courtyard. Lottie's heart pounded urgently in her chest as the effects of their cross-city race stole her breath and flushed her cheeks. As she peered into the window, huge flakes of snow began to fall – the clouds above finally releasing their cargo on the silent world below.

Pip placed a black-gloved hand against the windowpane and closed his eyes. 'This is the place, I can feel it.'

The shop window displayed a cheery homemade winter scene. Cotton wool snow lined the window; twinkle lights hung from the ceiling; silver foil stars, threaded on white string, were suspended in haphazard vertical lines across the window and an illuminated dolls house bathed the entire scene in a welcoming glow. As she looked closer, Lottie could see a roaring fire through the open front door of the small house.

'Can you hear the singing?' Pip breathed, a wistful smile across his lips. 'Singing?'

When he looked down at her, Pip's eyes were alive. 'Just listen.'

Pressing her face up to the icy glass, Lottie listened.

And suddenly, there it was – the sound of joyous voices welcoming in the season.

'That's fantastic – I wonder how they do it?'

Pip didn't reply, his breath fogging the cold glass as his chest rose and fell beneath his velvet coat.

Lottie saw the sadness in his smile and remembered the reason for their being in the courtyard. 'So what do we do now?'

Pip's expression clouded. 'I – I'm afraid this is where improvisation is required. I've tried thinking myself back – but I'm just not strong enough.'

'You said you were told I could help you – what did they say I could do?'

'There's the rub: they didn't specify. All they said was that the answer lay deep within your memories.'

What?

Lottie punched her hands deep in her coat pockets. 'Oh well *that's* helpful. How am I supposed to use my memories up to help you? Or work out which memory you need?'

‘I’m sorry. I don’t know.’

The snow was falling faster now, each flake larger, more determined and icier as they stung Lottie’s cheeks.

‘And now it’s flippin’ snowing again! This is hopeless. I can’t believe I’m doing this. I’m freezing cold, standing in the middle of the city with someone I’ve only just met and I have no idea what to do. Brilliant.’

Pip pulled the gold watch from his waistcoat pocket and held its face towards the window to read the time. ‘One minute left.’ He closed his eyes. ‘It appears we are too late.’

Lottie stared at the young man, so utterly out of his own time and lost in hers. His shoulders sagged as his fingers closed around the watch. He seemed to be accepting defeat.

Indignation fired into life within Lottie, burning where the falling snow froze.

‘No,’ she said, stamping her boots in the snow. ‘We still have time.’

* * * *

Chapter Five

Tears shimmered in Pip's eyes when he stared at Lottie.

'Lovely lady, I can't thank you enough...'

'Tell me what I have to do.'

'There's only one thing I can think of. I don't know how it might affect you...'

'Let's do it.'

'It might hurt you.'

'I'm willing to risk it.'

'Lottie, I don't think...'

'Pip, you need to get home. Someone said I could help you. So let's try.'

Pip let out a sigh, his breath rising in silver curls into the freezing air.

'You are remarkable, Lottie Fairweather. Here – take my hand.' His gloved fingers were warm and strong as they linked with hers. 'Now *think*. Dig deeply within your memories. Think *home*.'

Lottie screwed her watery eyes tight and thought as hard as she could. *Home*. Home for Lottie had come to mean a place of arguments and tension, somewhere she visited only when necessary. She had no desire to go there – not for Christmas, not ever. It was only a sense of duty that dragged her back to the family home where her mother now lived alone.

'Well?'

'Nothing.'

'There must be something?'

Lottie opened her eyes. 'I'm thinking of home. What more can I do? Home isn't a happy place for me now. I—'

'That's it!' Pip exclaimed, squeezing her hand and placing his other palm flat against the leaded windowpanes. 'Go back to when you were happy. Far back. As far into the past as you can go.'

Lottie closed her eyes again and focused hard. Memories swirled around her mind like early morning mist from winter fields, tossing and turning snippets of memories as if flicking backwards through a photograph album, before coming to rest on a single, warm scene – a Christmas Eve when

her parents were still happy. She couldn't hear the voices, but she sensed the excitement and the bursts of laughter coming from the young family of her recollection: her sister, a toddler of no more than two years old, gazing happily at the flames from the coal fire, while Lottie and her father built towers of building blocks, knocking them over to the delight of her mother, who knelt, camera poised, taking picture after picture of her beloved family...

'It's working!' Pip yelled. 'Keep going!'

Lottie felt the freezing wind gust and begin to lash her hair around her face. Opening her eyes for a moment, she saw the windowpanes undulating like ripples in a pond from a thrown pebble. She closed her eyes quickly, bringing the happy scene back into view. As she took time to notice the surroundings of the room, sense the smell of a real Christmas tree and see the white snowflakes falling past the window, she felt her whole body lurching forward, a sound of creaking, splintering ice filling her ears, rising in a crescendo until it numbed her senses.

'Hold on!' Pip shouted, his voice almost drowned out by the shrill screech of shattering glass around them. Suddenly, they were falling; tumbling headfirst through spinning, twisting spirals of light as white-hot electric pulses crackled around them. Lottie gripped Pip's hand, fearful of being ripped apart from him by the force of their descent.

'Don't let me go!' she screamed.

'I have you!'

Sound assaulted her ears, jet-engine-shrill as the world around her shuddered and tumbled away to pure white...

Then, silence.

As softly as a floating feather, Lottie felt her body coming to rest on firm ground. Opening her eyes she caught her breath as she found herself in a snow-covered landscape, sparkling magnificently in the early morning sun. It was *breathtaking*. Deep within her heart she felt a skip, a long-forgotten pulse of pure excitement she hadn't experienced since she was a tiny child.

'Where are we?'

Pip appeared above her and helped her to her feet. 'Home, Lottie.'

‘It’s beautiful,’ she smiled, still dizzy from the fall, as she gazed across the gently undulating hills towards the small village in the valley below.

‘I’m so glad you like it.’ He took both her hands in his and drew them up to his lips. ‘So you’ll stay?’

‘Sorry?’

Pip’s smile was warmer than a cashmere blanket. ‘Stay here – with me.’

‘But this is your home, not mine.’

‘It could be yours, too.’

Lottie pulled her hands away and stepped back. ‘What? No! I can’t just *leave* everything. And I hardly know you...’

‘You know me enough. You helped me return.’

‘But – but your wedding?’

‘*Our* wedding, Lottie.’

‘What? We’re not getting married – you haven’t asked me...’

‘Oh gracious, how remiss of me,’ Pip replied, falling to one knee in the powdery snow and producing a small red velvet covered box from his pocket. ‘Marry me, Lottie Fairweather. Let me take you away from all the loneliness and drudgery and *invoices*...’

Lottie’s head spun with a million jumbled thoughts as she fought to make sense of it all. ‘I don’t understand...’

‘Look around you – look at the beauty of the snow.’

‘I hate snow...’ Lottie began and stopped. The snow was beautiful – it was as if she were viewing it for the first time. She felt no cold, no hatred of being outside here. Instead a warm, bright hope burned. It was a feeling of *home*, of belonging. She felt completely safe, completely loved. Like nothing else mattered...

‘At least stay for a while,’ Pip said, rising slowly, powdered snow falling from the patch on his right knee.

‘I suppose I could, for a while.’ She hesitated. ‘But no promises.’

Pip smiled and gently took her hand. ‘No promises.’

Together they began to walk towards the village in the valley, two figures gradually shrinking from view as gentle snowflakes began to fall.

THE END