



THE  
**SOLSTICE**  
BLADE



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## 1 PROLOGUE

The ancient horseman laughed with feral glee as the lightning bolt hit him. The current surged through his body shaking his bones just as it had done a thousand times before. Screwing up his wind-burned face, he urged his mount forward through the storm, oblivious to the driving rain that soaked through the scorched, tattered rags that had once been his clothes.

Far below, between the scudding shredded remnants of rain-clouds, movement on the ground drew his eye.

With a well practiced deftness at odds with his apparent age, he twisted his horse's cracked leather reins around his hand and, bracing himself against the saddle with his legs, he leaned precariously outwards into thin air. Looking down towards the distant earth, dark and forbidding under the cover of the storm, he glimpsed his quarry.

Several hundred feet below, a terrified woman scrambled

and slipped over the granite boulders that were strewn across the barren uplands of Bodmin Moor. Still wearing her traditional bal maiden's outfit after a day spent working at the surface of one of the local copper mines, she was easy to spot from the air. Her white gook, the protective bonnet that female mine workers used to cover their heads and shoulders, stood out clearly against the drab greens and greys of the moor.

With the slightest tensing of his knees, the rider guided his horse into a steep dive.

Sensing that she had been seen, Chastity Trewartha risked a panicked glance upwards over her shoulder. Behind her, against a backdrop of boiling black storm-clouds, a host of horsemen accompanied by a pack of baying hounds poured down out of the sky towards her in a scene from a nightmare. With an ear-splitting crack, like the pillars of heaven collapsing, another bolt of lightning arced out of the clouds into the lead rider's corroded crown and exploded out through the tip of his sword seeking an exit to earth. For a moment, in the intense illumination of the lightning bolt, time appeared to stand still and everything was frozen in place: The wild excitement in the man's eyes as the electricity blasted through him; his horse's rain-sodden mane whipping through the air before him; the tendrils and filaments of blue-white light that danced around his sword blade as the current passed through - all these things were burned into Chastity's memory. In a split second it was over, time regained its usual pace, and the hoard screamed earthward.

Chastity ran on in blind panic, terror clouded her reasoning, but reason had no place in this situation. Instead, it drove her forward in a flow-state outside of her conscious control. Driven by fear Chastity vaulted effortlessly over boulders

that ordinarily she would have had trouble even clambering over. Decisions as to which was the quickest and safest route around the many rain filled pits were instantly made, and were acted on without hesitation.

Despite this however, she knew that they were gaining on her. Then, with a rush of relief, she saw her salvation; in the distance, misted and blurred by the rain, she could make out the familiar dark, looming mass of a mine engine. Incongruously, given her current situation, she noticed for the first time how the buildings, with their high narrow engine houses, and long tapering chimneys looked like giant hands with one finger pointing at the sky, a warning that had almost come too late for her.

With renewed energy fuelled by the hope of escape, Chastity raced to the shelter of the mine engine, but within a few steps her clothing, that served her so well during her working day, protecting her from the excess of the weather, conspired against her. Her heavy skirt and apron, waterlogged from the downpour, clung to her legs and snagged on low gorse bushes making each step more laborious than the last.

The sound of Chastity's heartbeat pounded in her ears with the exertion of her escape, and each gasping breath rasped painfully through her throat, as she closed the gap between herself and the safety of the building. But as she drew nearer the rhythmic thumping of her pulse was rapidly overwhelmed by a deep rumbling that she could feel through the earth beneath her feet. Chastity recognised the familiar tattoo of hoofbeats; her pursuers were on the ground. The shaking of the earth increased until suddenly she found herself flanked on either side by the lead hounds of the spectral hunt. Rather than attacking, the dogs kept pace with her, howling and barking with the excitement of

the chase, and were joined as they ran by more and more of their kind. Behind her, she could hear the unearthly whoops and calls of the riders as they gained on her. In desperation, Chastity ripped off her sodden gook, and flung it at one of the hounds. The animal yelped in surprise, and veered away, but was instantly replaced. Unfortunately, the action was enough to take her attention away from the ground for just long enough for her to miss her footing and fall forward. At the last moment, she brought her hands up to protect her face from the imminent impact with a rough granite Boulder. She need not have bothered, for she never hit the ground: With a sickening lurch, the earth tilted beneath her and fell away and she was carried up into the storm.

## 2 RAIN

Misty rain blew in sheets across the dark, deserted car park, as the wind moaned and whistled through the open cattle sheds along its southern perimeter. Here and there, isolated street lights valiantly tried to shine through the drizzle, but merely succeeded in highlighting each new pulse of rain that blew into their lonely cones of light. With every gust, visibility was reduced to just a few tens of yards. In the distance the smudged grey suggestion of three approaching figures was lost to view as yet another veil of rain blew in. Once it had lashed through and moved on to rattle the battered metal fence panels of the cattle pens, the figures resolved into the form of three teenagers.

The three brothers looked sullen and bored as they meandered slowly across the expanse of tarmac that served on different days of the week as either a car park or a cattle market in the small market town of Liskeard. Their heads hung low and they dragged their feet through the puddles. Their rain soaked hair was plastered to their foreheads, the

clumped, wet strands serving as conduits for little rivulets of icy water that ran across their faces, and down inside the collars of their jackets. One of the three tutted loudly and angrily swiped a stream of rainwater away with the back of his hand.

“I hate Christmas!” he said. “I don’t know why we’re even bothering to go out shopping, especially in this weather. It’s not like we are going to find any decent presents in this town anyway!”

“That’s because Liam didn’t bother to sort anything out until the last minute,” said Travis to Evan, the first of the brothers to have spoken, “as usual!”

“That’s right,” replied Liam, the target of Travis’s last remark, “blame me again - you always do! This just happens to be the only day we’ve had when Mum and Dad haven’t been around.”

“Well you didn’t have to wait until they went to the theatre,” countered Travis. “You could have come into town on any day you wanted.”

“Whatever,” replied Liam, feigning disinterest. “But it’s not my fault it’s raining, it would’ve been raining no matter what day I had chosen!”

“True,” agreed Evan, recognising that their shared irritation about the weather could be a good way of ending the developing argument before it really got started. “It does nothing but rain here, and there’s nothing to do, just like the rest of Cornwall. I mean come on! We’re only days away from Christmas, shouldn’t it at least be snowing or something?”

Of the three brothers, Liam and Travis were the two most inclined to disagree and argue. Even on those occasions where one was in agreement with the other, or was impressed with something the other had done, they were unlikely to ever admit to it. It wasn't that they disliked each other, in many ways they were very close, it was just that if any of the three were going to clash over anything, it was a good bet it would be Travis and Liam. There was no reason that was obvious to anyone else as to why this should be the case, but, it had always been that way, and Evan generally found himself left in the role of peacemaker.

Another gust of wind whistled in and thrummed around the metal sign that welcomed visitors to the car park in both English and Cornish. Icy rain lashed against the brothers' backs, and instinctively, they hunched their shoulders, attempting to expose as little of their bodies as possible to the cold and wet.

"Come on you two," said Evan in defiance of the weather, "let's just get these last few presents bought, and then we can go home and get back to playing computer games."

Twisting ribbons of rain raced past, chasing one another across the surface of the car park and Liam, Evan and Travis reluctantly followed them in the direction of the town centre.

It was getting late in the day to be out shopping, and the weak winter sun, already obscured by a blanket of low grey rain clouds, had long since set, as the three teenagers walked dejectedly towards the main shopping street. Despite the grand facades of the many imposing buildings constructed during the copper mining boom of the 1800s, the town was quiet at the best of times, almost as if it never quite

recovered from the decline that followed. On this particular day any other prospective shoppers had long since been driven back to their homes by the relentless rain. The occasional car hissing past along the wet road was pretty much all the company they had. The rain continued as they made their way through the town, blurring and streaking the Christmas lights that were strung across the roads and wound around the town's Christmas tree that stood by the fountain. Due to its location close to one of the town's seating areas, and therefore one of the main hang-outs for the local youth, only the top two thirds of the tree were decorated. Over the years, this had proved to be a workable compromise between having no lights on the tree at all, and having to replace broken and missing bulbs on the lower limbs on a daily basis.

The brothers' moods did not improve as they half-heartedly drifted from one shop to another in search of Christmas presents for their family and friends. Eventually they reached the Christmas tree, its branches whipping back and forth in the wind as the suspended coloured lights bobbed and swung precariously below.

"Let's go down Fore Steet," suggested Travis, "It's the only road we haven't tried yet."

They crossed over the deserted main road, and headed down the steep hill past the town museum and clock tower until they reached the junction with Fore Street, a pedestrianised row of shops that headed back in the general direction of home, and which represented the final stage of their journey.

They rounded the corner and began to make their way past a little arcade of shops on their right. The first few shops were set back from the road, and separated from it by a

covered walkway which was accessed via a series of archways. To reach any of the shops one had to first walk through one of the arches into the covered area, and then cross the walkway to the shop door. The brothers could have chosen to use the walkway and shelter from the rain for a few seconds, but they were so wet already it did not seem worth it.

When they were about halfway past the arcade, Travis suddenly stopped and looked behind him. "Wait, did you hear that?" he asked the other two.

"Hear what?" replied Liam.

"Footsteps," said Travis.

"Nope," said Liam, "there's no one around. It was probably just our footsteps you heard echoing through the arches."

"I don't think so, it sounded more like a child, you know like quick little steps."

"No one else would be stupid enough to be out in this weather," said Liam. "You're hearing things, there's no one there. Come on, let's just get finished and get home, I'm fed up with this."

Liam and Evan started walking along Fore Street again, and had almost reached the far end of the arcade when Evan noticed that Travis had not moved since they stopped.

"Come on Trav!" called Evan.

Travis did not react, and continued standing in the rain staring straight ahead.

“Travis!” Evan called again more loudly than last time.

“What?” said Travis looking around him in confusion for a moment, and then continued: “Oh, right, sorry, I was just thinking,” before starting to walk forwards again to join his brothers.

“Well I hope it was about something good,” replied Liam irritably, “cos we’ve got nothing better to do than stand around in the rain waiting for you.”

“Stop moaning Liam,” Travis said, “you’re soaked through already, it isn’t going to make you any wetter.”

After a few more yards though, Travis had started to slow down again, and eventually stopped moving completely in front of a scruffy looking second-hand shop.

“Liam,” called Evan smiling, nodding towards Travis, “have you seen this?”

Liam turned around to look at Travis, who was by now facing the window of the shop but gazing forward as if in a trance, even the cold rain running down inside the collar of his jacket didn’t appear to be bothering him.

“Oi!” shouted Evan, “Wake up will you? What’s the matter with you anyway?”

Travis blinked once or twice, and looked around him as if unsure for a moment of where he was.

“I’m not sure,” replied Travis eventually, “I feel really weird though, it’s like I almost fell asleep standing up. I remember

thinking I heard footsteps, and the next thing I knew I was standing here. No wait, I was imagining how this street would look if it was snowing, but now, oh I don't know, it's gone now."

"Sounds like when we all got flu last year," said Evan. "I remember getting a bit delirious then. You've probably been out in the cold too long."

"Yeah, maybe," conceded Travis, who was now feeling a bit more like himself, and had found something to focus his attention on. "Hang on a second," he said to the others, looking into the window of the shop and craning his neck left and right trying to peer round the various stacked up items on display. "I just want to have a quick look in here before we go home."

"You won't find any magic gear in there!" said Liam dismissively. "It's just an old junk shop, and anyway you never practice your tricks anymore, so there's no point in looking, is there?"

"I'm not looking for magic stuff actually!" replied Travis, offended. "And for your information, I don't need to practice it all the time, you never forget it."

Travis had developed an interest in conjuring from quite a young age, but as he had grown older, and the opinions of his friends began to have more importance to him than those of his family, he had started to feel slightly uncomfortable and embarrassed about it. Now, despite still secretly harbouring an interest, he played it down to the point that the only people likely to mention it anymore were his brothers

"Well why don't you go in and look?" suggested Evan, "We

can start walking home, and you can catch us up when you're finished."

"No, wait for me," said Travis, "I'll only be a couple of minutes."

Evan and Liam reluctantly turned around and squelched back towards the old shop, their sodden clothing coming into chilled and unwelcome contact with the skin of their legs as they walked. Evan stopped in the pool of yellow light on the wet flagstones outside the battered door to the shop, and pushed it open. A wave of warmth broke over them as the door swung inward, and quickly drained out into the cold night. The bell above the door dinged as they pushed through and stood dripping just inside. A trail of water drops, rapidly soaking into the worn wooden floorboards, led to Travis who was standing over at an old dresser in a far corner of the shop, rummaging through the various items piled up on its heavily laden shelves. Liam and Evan looked at each other. Liam rolled his eyes and shook his head, introducing the cold wet fabric of his soaking shirt collar to the back of his neck. It was going to be a long wait.

"I knew we should have carried on home," grumbled Evan. "It's not like it's far, he could have walked back on his own!"

By this time they were all feeling pretty fed up.

"I've just about had enough of this Christmas already," said Liam. "It's not like it used to be when we were little; it was so exciting, and we used to get fantastic presents. It kind of feels all dull and 'meh' nowadays."

"Come on Travis!" called Evan grumpily. "This Christmas is officially lame! Let's get out of here."

“You know, lads,” began a new voice that had unexpectedly joined the conversation, causing the three to jump, “you really should be a little careful about what you say at this time of year.”

Evan glanced at Liam and rolled his eyes again, carefully out of sight of the elderly shopkeeper whom they had now identified as the source of the voice, as if to say: “Here we go, more advice we don't need from adults!”

“And why would that be?” said Liam, a little more rudely than he intended. The shopkeeper seemed to realise that he hadn't meant to sound as disrespectful as he did, and carried on:

“You do know that tonight is the Winter Solstice don't you?” asked the shopkeeper with a note of concern in his voice.

“No,” replied Evan, “why? What's the Winter Solstice?”

“It's the turning point of the year,” said the old man. “The deepest part of winter, and the longest night of the year. Some people say that it's a time of increased supernatural activity. That's why you should be careful what you say. In our world, words are just words, but in the world of the supernatural, they could be a magic incantation or a binding contract. Who knows?”

Seeing that his customers were starting to feel a little uneasy, he changed his tone.

”But, if you think about it, if it's the longest night of the year, then obviously, from then on the days must start to

lengthen again; so it's also the point when the light starts to return. That's why there have historically been so many celebrations and festivals at this time of year".

"You mean like Christmas?" said Liam.

"Well yes, but that's just one of the mid-winter celebrations, it goes back a lot further than what we now think of as Christmas," he said. "There have been festivals to mark the Winter Solstice for thousands of years. Actually, they say that the tradition of giving Christmas presents dates right back to the Roman festival of Saturnalia."

"Saturnalia?" queried Evan, the name sounded very close to that of the planet Saturn, and astronomy was a subject that was beginning to interest him more and more. "What was Saturnalia?"

"Well, as far as I know," began the shopkeeper, "it was a solstice celebration in Roman times. It was filled with the usual drunkenness and partying, but what made Saturnalia different was that it was a time when all the normal rules were reversed. The servants would become the masters, and the nobility would wait on their former subjects. The whole celebration was presided over by the Lord of Misrule, who would be responsible for ensuring that these rules were followed, and that everyone had a good time. But there were lots of other winter festivals throughout Northern Europe and Britain and they go back way beyond the Romans."

"Anyway," he continued, gesturing towards a wall of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on one side of the shop, "I've got lots of books on the subject of midwinter rituals and celebrations. You should really take a look, you never know when you might need information like that."

The combination of the shopkeeper's serious tone, the atmosphere of the old junk shop, and the strange feeling he had experienced outside was making Travis feel quite uncomfortable. However, despite this, he soon resumed his searching at the back of the shop, while Evan walked over to the bookshelves for a closer look. "Well," he reasoned to himself, "you can't be too careful can you?" He quickly scanned the cliff face of books. They mostly appeared to be very old, bound in faded leather in dull reds, greens, and browns, and had titles like "Midwinter Rituals of Pagan Britain", "A Guide to the Winter Solstice.", and "The Winter Solstice For Dummies". There was even a very old battered academic-looking volume entitled "A Study of Ancient Solstice Magic."

Liam however, did not seem to be as worried about the man's warnings as his brothers and replied: "Well, thanks for the information, but I don't think we need to worry about anything supernatural happening in Liskeard. Nothing ever happens here."

At that moment, Travis emerged from the pile of objects he was rummaging through at the back of the shop. "Whoa!" he exclaimed, cradling a small silver object in his hands as he turned around. "This would make a great present!" He walked over to the counter, placed an ornate paper knife on its surface, and asked the shopkeeper: "How much is this please?"

"Ah, now that looks like something special. You, my friend, have a good eye!" said the shopkeeper, smiling at Travis.

"Really?" said Travis excitedly. "It looks pretty old. Do you know when was it made?"

“No idea,” replied the shopkeeper smiling. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen it before, although that’s nothing unusual in this shop, especially with my memory!”

Evan and Liam, with their interest now aroused by what the shopkeeper had just said, crowded around Travis at the counter, eager for a closer look at the paper knife. It appeared to be old, but still bright silver, with intricate carving on the handle that almost seemed to twist and coil around the handle as it caught the light. Travis picked up the knife again and examined it closely. On one side a design of interlocking snowflakes adorned the handle and flowed down onto the blade in a sinusoidal wave, occasionally casting little spiralling eddies off to one side or the other, the flakes gradually thinning out and reducing in number until they finally ran out about a third of the way down the blade. The metal on this side of the knife was highly polished, and the light flashed off it as Travis moved it around. He turned the knife over in his hand. The metal on the other side was finished differently; it was slightly dull, so that the blade itself looked as though it had been frozen, and when he angled it against the light, he could just make out the impossibly intricate meshing of frost ferns covering the whole of both the handle and the blade. Just like real frost ferns that he had seen on his morning paper-round covering the windows and bonnets of parked cars, these had been carved so that each fern was both distinct from its neighbours whilst at the same time flowing seamlessly into them.

“How much do you want for it?” asked Travis, pulling his last five pound note out of his wallet.

The shop keeper picked up the knife and examined it through a jeweller’s loupe. “It really is quite lovely; excellent craftsmanship,” he muttered to himself as he turned the

knife backwards and forwards in front of his eyes.

Travis was beginning to worry that if the shopkeeper kept this up much longer he would decide he didn't want to sell it after all.

"Well," he declared, "it's certainly very old, and extremely well made. I don't know how they would have produced something of this quality back when it was made." Suddenly the old man seemed to make up his mind. He stood upright, and placed his jeweller's loupe back down on the counter with a click. "No," he said abruptly, and Travis's heart sank. The more the shopkeeper enthused about the knife, the more he had wanted it. "No," repeated the man, "I couldn't possibly let this go for anything less than five pounds."

Travis could not give the man his money quickly enough. The shopkeeper wrapped up the knife in tissue paper, and placed it in a brown paper bag.

"There you are!" he said. "Take care of it, and I hope it makes a good Christmas present."

The brothers thanked him and made their way out through the shop door and back into the wet Cornish night. Just as the door was closing, the shopkeeper called out to them:

"Turn the sign round on the door will you?" He looked down at his wristwatch and tapped the dial. "I think my watch is running slowly again. It's been doing it all afternoon, and I've lost count of the number of times I've had to reset it today. I thought the weather keeping everyone at home, but I expect that even without the rain they would have gone home ages ago. They probably didn't even think that the shop would still be open."

“No problem,” said Travis, stepping back inside and flipping the cardboard sign in the door window round. From the outside it now read: “Closed - Gone to the Beach” Travis smiled at the irony and stepped outside into the cold winter rain again.

“Merry Christmas!” The shopkeeper called out. “And don’t forget what I told you: be careful what you say around this time of year!”

“Merry Christmas!” they called back to him over the sound of the shop bell chiming as the door slammed shut on its spring.

“Come on,” said Liam pulling his jacket tighter around him as the night air chilled his damp clothes again. “Let’s get home, It feels like it’s getting colder.”

### 3 SNOW

After arriving back at their house, the brothers had dried themselves off and dressed in warm comfortable clothes. The only remaining outward sign of their journey through the rain was the pile of wet shoes and clothing that had been discarded in a sodden heap on the floor of the hallway in front of washing machine.

Liam, Evan and Travis laid out their meagre collection of recently purchased Christmas presents on the living-room floor. The few other gifts that they had managed to acquire in the preceding weeks were added to the small pile.

“Doesn’t look like much does it?” said Liam despondently to no one in particular.

“Because it isn't much,” replied Evan. “You really need to stop leaving everything to the last minute.”

“Alright, don't you start as well. I thought moaning at me

was supposed to be Travis's job.”

Travis glanced over at Liam, but resisted the temptation to react to his comment.

Present wrapping was another job that none of them were particularly fond of, so Liam was surprised to find a feeling of mild excitement building inside him. He assumed that the mysterious assertions of the shop keeper in the second-hand shop were contributing to his mounting anticipation. The sound of the rain lashing against the living room windows with each new gust of wind, and the soft glow from the fairy lights wrapped around the garland draped across the mantelpiece added to the sensation. Whatever the cause, it felt very similar to how he used to feel as a child when Christmas was approaching.

“Why don't we put some carols on?” said Liam unexpectedly, “Dad's always going on about how it makes him feel Christmassy.”

“What's got into you all of a sudden?” asked Travis.

“Yeah,” added Evan with a smile, “Who are you and what have you done with Liam? You know, that moaning, grunting adolescent we've all come to know and love.”

Despite his comments, Evan too had been feeling an increasing sense of anticipation and pulled his mobile phone from his pocket. He tapped and swiped at the touch screen for a few moments, and soon located a playlist of Christmas music online, which he began to broadcast through the phone's speaker. Soon they found themselves humming along to the familiar tunes that had not quite yet lost the power to transport them back to the Christmases of their childhoods. By now all three had begun to fully enter

into the spirit of the occasion and were laughing, joking, and good naturedly jostling each other for the sticking tape and scissors.

“Oi Liam!” called Evan. “Pass the scissors over will you?”

The scissors had already changed hands a few times, and with this most recent interruption to his wrapping schedule, Liam turned and asked Travis: “Actually, can I borrow that letter opener you bought earlier? I bet it would do just as well as scissors for cutting this wrapping paper to size.”

Travis took the paper knife out of its brown paper bag, unwrapped the layers of tissue paper that enveloped it, and passed it over.

“Ok,” he said, “but be careful with it, I don't want it broken before it's even wrapped.”

They then they returned to their wrapping activities once more. Liam found that if he folded the wrapping paper first and then ran his fingernail across the fold, the old paper knife would cut a perfectly straight line if he was careful. Slicing through the paper in this way was actually quite a satisfying experience, and he quickly became engrossed. Soon he had finished, and sat back contentedly to look at the intriguing, if modest, pile of presents that he had just wrapped, marvelling at just how different he now felt compared to his bad mood of earlier in the evening. The warm glow of excitement and anticipation that he was feeling was much more like how Christmas used to feel when he was younger. As far as Liam was concerned it was much more like how it ought to feel every year.

“You know,” he said to both of his brothers at once, “It's weird, but I actually feel pretty excited about Christmas

now.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Travis. “It’s strange isn’t it? I started to feel it when we were in that junk shop earlier. You don’t think that’s got anything to do with it do you? I mean after what that old guy was saying about mid-winter festivals and all that.”

“Nah!” said Evan. “How could it? It’s just because Christmas is getting close and we are all in here listening to carols in the warm away from the rain.”

“Well actually that’s another thing,” said Travis.

“What’s another thing?” asked Liam.

“The rain,” replied Travis.

“What rain?” said Liam.

“Exactly!” continued his brother mysteriously. “I can’t hear it any more, can you?”

Evan cocked his head to one side to listen. He could no longer hear the intermittent lashing of the raindrops against the window either. But what was more interesting still, was that the dark clouds just visible through the living room windows seemed to have taken on a curious yellowish-grey cast. The absence of the sound of rain hammering against the windows was only part of the story; now that they stopped to listen, it was actually unusually quiet, almost quiet enough for...

“You don’t think...” began Evan, but the others were way ahead of him and were already on their feet heading for the

window.

“Snow!” said Travis with an almost child-like joy arriving at the window first. “It’s snowing, I don’t believe it, it’s Cornwall, and it’s snowing!”

Travis quickly unlocked the back door and ran out into the garden, amazed at the covering of snow that had accumulated in the short time they had been in the house wrapping presents.

As he followed his brother out on to the snow covered patio just outside the back door, Liam realised that he still had hold of the paper knife, and he turned back to the house to put it safely on the coffee table until they returned. He didn't want to risk losing it outside so soon after Travis had bought it, he could just imagine Travis’s reaction, he would never hear the end of it.

As he turned to take the paper-knife back inside, Liam found that as he gazed into the gently drifting flakes, they seemed to close in around him, softly cocooning him away from the rest of the world. Slightly mesmerised by the motion of the snow, he found it surprisingly easy to become fixated on a single snowflake. Strange, that. Amongst all the snow he was able to pick out an individual flake so easily. As he looked, it appeared to him whichever snowflake he focussed on was not falling like those around it, but danced around as if on the end of an invisible string, tugged by an unseen hand. As he concentrated on it, it seemed to dance further and further away from him luring him deeper into the strangely inviting tunnel of white. Even though in one part of his mind he was well aware that his feet were still on the ground, on some other level he felt as though he was drifting along with the snow, following the dancing flake into the tunnel. The temptation to mentally

follow the snowflake was quite strong, and Liam would have done so had it not been for a soft tap that he felt against his back. He pushed the distraction to the back of his mind, and tried ignore it, but it happened again a little more forcefully than before. This time it was harder to ignore and his attention was drawn away. As he mentally withdrew, the entrancing snowflake followed him back. He found that very strange, and was considering investigating it a little more when a third much harder thud hit him on his shoulder, showering snow across the side of his face. Evan and Travis laughed at the direct hit they had scored with their third snowball. Liam smiled at the attack, and brushed the snow from his face. Still slightly disorientated, for a moment he was unsure that he had ever actually returned inside, but the paper knife was gone from his hand, so he scooped up a handful of snow from the patio, hurled it in the direction of his two brothers and ran out into the garden to rejoin them.

