

A VERY IMPORTANT MISSION

The toy shop on Mistletoe Street was crowded and noisy.

There were exactly twelve minutes left before it was supposed to close for the holidays, but people were still shuffling in through the door hoping to pick up just one last present for a special someone, or to gawp at all the jolly toys sitting smartly on the shelves and admire the enormous doll's house in the window.

One person not looking at any of that was Oliver. His mum and dad owned the shop. He had been helping them all day – fetching and carrying and generally being very busy indeed. But now he quickly ducked out from under the counter where he'd been wrapping parcels.

He flung his scarf around his neck and wiggled his way through the crowds and out into the busy high street.

He was on a VERY important mission.

It was late afternoon, the moon was already up and snow had started to fall. Hundreds of snowflakes twirled through the air like ballerinas before landing daintily on the blanket of snow that had fallen over the past few days.

Oliver crunched down the street. He rushed past the bakery and the butcher's shop, sidestepped customers spilling out of the general store and the cheesemongers and swerved neatly around the ladies bustling out of the shop that sold fancy hats and ribbons. The entire night fizzed with Christmassy excitement.

On the corner of the street a brass band was standing in the cold, filling the evening air with a jazzy parpy rendition of Oliver's favourite Christmas song. He stopped and listened for a moment before remembering his mission.

He weaved his way around the final knot of shoppers (their arms piled high with boxes and bags) and stopped in front of a bright red letterbox. He rummaged in his pockets. They were full, as usual, with all the Extremely Important Things you need to have on your person when you are eight years old:





- A couple of paperclips (twisted open into wiggly strips of metal).
- Some string tangled up into several useless knots.
- The stub of a blunt pencil.
- Fluff.
- And a dry wrinkled old conker collected in October.

All of this was Vital.

Eventually Oliver found what he was actually looking for – an envelope. It wasn't too badly crumpled and he'd written the address on the front in his very best handwriting. He'd left it a bit late to send but he crossed his fingers and hoped it would get where it needed to go in time. He was just about to put it in the slot on the letterbox when someone called his name.

'Oliver! Oliver?'

It was his mum. She was standing in the doorway of their shop, waving at him. 'Hurry up! I need your help wrapping these last few teddy bears!' she cried. 'And it's much too cold to be outside without your coat on!'

'Coming!' called Oliver, waving back.

He quickly popped his letter in the box and scurried back down the street into the busy shop.

Now whether Oliver's envelope got caught up in the chilly breeze or was found by a shimmer of winter magic that was fizzing about that night nobody knows, but the letter didn't stay in the letterbox for long. When no one was looking it slid back out and danced through the air and down the street, floating along between the snowflakes.