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Opening extract from

# The Best Christmas Present in the World

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Published by

**Egmont Books Ltd an imprint of Egmont Children's Books**

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First published in this edition in Great Britain 2004
This edition published in 2013 by Egmont UK Limited
The Yellow Building, 1 Nicholas Road, London W11 4AN

www.egmont.co.uk

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ISBN 978 1 4052 1518 3

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

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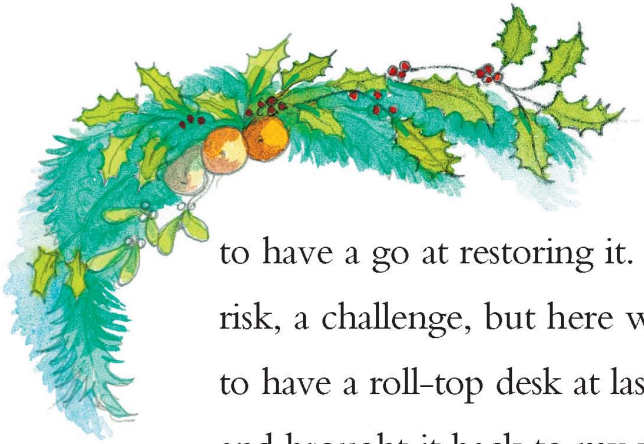
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To all those on both sides who
took part in the Christmas
truce of 1914.



I spotted it in a junk shop in Bridport, a roll-top desk. The man said it was early nineteenth century, and oak. I had been looking for a desk like this for years, but never found one I could afford. This one was in bad condition, the roll top in several pieces, one leg clumsily mended, scorch marks all down one side.

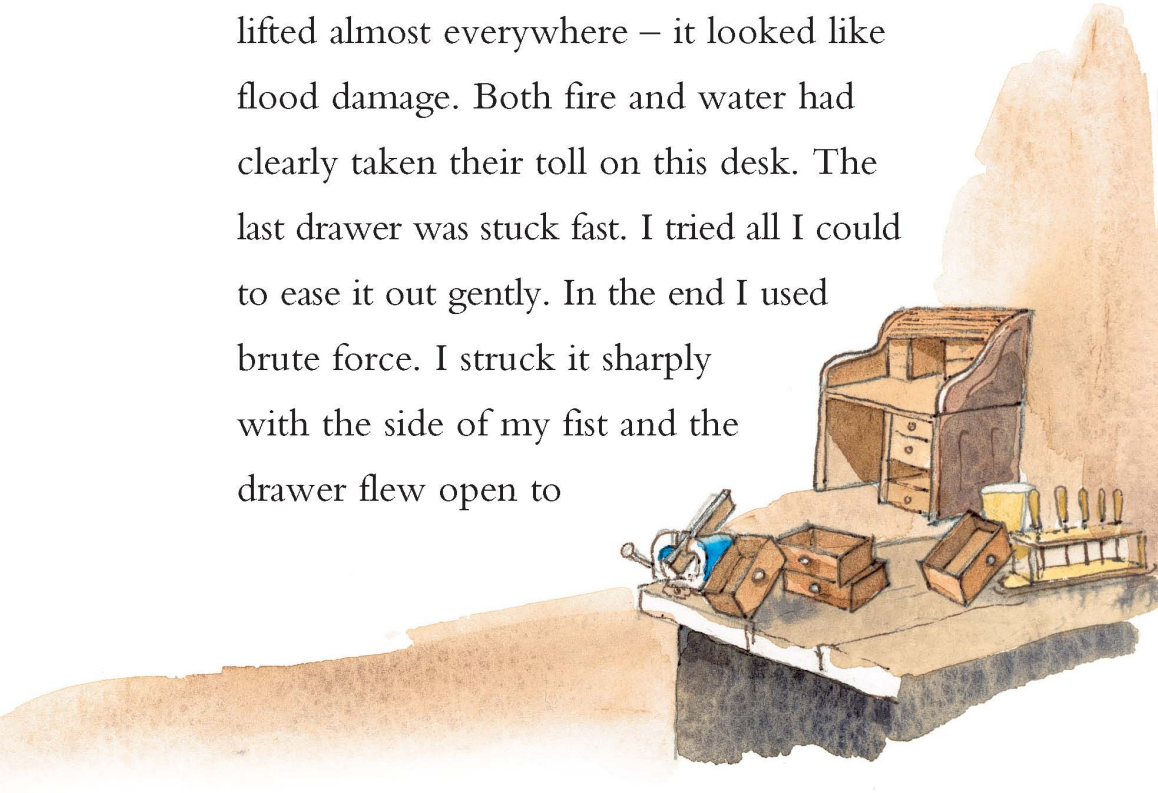
It was going for very little money, and I reckoned I was just about capable enough



to have a go at restoring it. It would be a risk, a challenge, but here was my chance to have a roll-top desk at last. I paid the man and brought it back to my workroom at the back of the garage. I began work on it on Christmas Eve, mostly because the house was resonating with overexcited relatives and I wanted some peace and quiet.

I removed the roll top completely and pulled out the drawers. Each one of them

confirmed that this would be a bigger job than I had first thought. The veneer had lifted almost everywhere – it looked like flood damage. Both fire and water had clearly taken their toll on this desk. The last drawer was stuck fast. I tried all I could to ease it out gently. In the end I used brute force. I struck it sharply with the side of my fist and the drawer flew open to



reveal a shallow space underneath, a secret drawer. There was something in there. I reached in and took out a small black tin box. Taped to the top of it was a piece of lined note paper, and written on it in shaky handwriting:

'Jim's last letter, received 25th January 1915. To be buried



with me when the time comes.'

I knew as I did it that it was wrong of me to open the box, but curiosity got the better of my scruples. It usually does.

Inside the box there was an envelope. The address read: 'Mrs Jim Macpherson, 12 Copper Beeches, Bridport, Dorset'. I took out the letter and unfolded it. It was written in pencil and dated at the top 26th December 1914.

