

The invitation

The following Christmas tale, by local writer **Pippa Kelly**, is a warning to the social climbers of SW11. For in this winter hot-house of rivalries and fast-growing egos, nothing is ever quite what it seems ...

Lucy's invitations were carefully lined up on the mantelpiece. There were smart ones, which she didn't like anyone to handle, funny ones and even a couple of handmade ones. And then, there was that one.

Every now and then Lucy picked it up and examined it closely. She could hardly believe it. Of course, she always had lots of invitations – more than her friends, which gave her great satisfaction – but this one was different. She knew that some people – unkind people (specifically, dad) – thought her life was one big social whirl. This wasn't true, of course. Many of her diary appointments were, said mum, who was on her side, “educational, sporting or life enhancing”.

She belonged, for example, to a local drama set. The group, a mixed bunch and all with a tale to tell, met on Tuesdays in the church hall off Bolingbroke Grove. She

liked Chris, the drama coach. He didn't talk down to them, as one or two of them had. His girlfriend, Becky, was gorgeous, and wore fabulous clothes. Yesterday, she'd been wearing a purple cardigan To Die For. It was all Lucy could do to stop herself running her fingers along its velvet trim.

Every Friday, she and mum went for a girlie lunch in the Northcote Road. Last week they'd been to Buona Sera, a favourite haunt, and she'd spilt tomato sauce all down the broderie anglaise top she'd borrowed from her sister. Mum, who cared about such things, was very annoyed; Lucy was more relaxed. Life was too short to worry about a piece of clothing, even if it had come from Jigsaw (and wasn't hers.)

In her heart, Lucy knew that her carefree life would soon be over. She'd like to put that moment off for as long as possible. Mum agreed with her, but dad was more pushy.

Lucy had always been a little fearful of her father. She can scarcely have been out of nappies when he had lost his temper because she'd toddled into a can of paint he was using to freshen up the windows. She could still see the smooth whiteness spreading silently over the wooden floor, just like sugar icing over a buttery-brown cookie. It was magical and quite irresistible. She'd dabbed her two-year-old finger in it. Dad had shouted and made her go to her room. The next day, he was still angry.

He was like that, dad. Hot-tempered and far less forgiving than mum. With Beth, of course, he was different. Elizabeth was everything her younger sister wasn't: careful, thoughtful, responsible. In dad's eyes, Beth could do no wrong. To be honest, that was why the invitation had been so special.

The Marsdens, described in mum's favourite newspaper as “London's premier

media couple” (whatever that meant), had invited Lucy – not Beth, not even Beth and Lucy, but LUCY! – to their son's birthday party at their smart Clapham home. It was fancy dress, with a fairytale theme. Lucy went into a whirl of excitement. Who to be? What to wear? Should she be dazzling Snow White? Or a sadly beautiful Cinderella?

Even dad was impressed when she told him. In fact, he hadn't believed her, which was typical. But mum confirmed that yes, her younger daughter had indeed been invited to the best party of the winter season. “They were at the same nursery for a while, of course,” she'd said to dad, as if this might explain it.

As the day approached, dad began asking more and more questions about it. Finally – Lucy had replayed this moment over and over in her mind, it gave her such satisfaction – he asked whether he

could drive her there. Lucy loved every minute. She was conscious of a different tone in dad's voice. He was talking to her as he talked to Beth, treating her with respect, listening to what she had to say.

They located the house and managed, with difficulty, to find a parking space on crowded Abbeville Road. “I'll just come in and meet Joshua's parents, shall I?” dad asked, and Lucy hadn't the heart to say no.

But before they could knock on the door, Prince Charming came flying out to greet them. “Hey – Snow White! Come and see everyone – Goldilocks is here... and Puss in Boots.” He took her by the hand and pulled her inside, leaving her father standing, redundant, on the front step. Entering the house, Lucy gasped with delight. She'd stepped into the pages of a fairytale book. To her right was an enchanted snowy forest, with a Cheshire Cat grinning from a tangle of branches. Through french windows, swan

boats floated on a turquoise lake.

It was magical... a mysterious land of mists and illusions, where anything could happen and nothing was quite what it seemed. “Mum! Look who's here,” Prince Charming tugged at Lucy's sleeve. The Ice Queen detached herself from a group and came towards them.

“How adorable!” The shimmering figure bent to take a closer look. “I'm enchanted to meet you, Snow White.”

“She's really Beth,” said Prince Charming. “From the class above me.”

“No I'm not!” cried Lucy, feeling the blood rush to her face. “I'm –”

“Snow White. Aren't you poppet?” interrupted the Ice Queen, kneeling down and giving her a hug.

Lucy thought for a moment, and in a flash of mature understanding, nodded her head. Then she broke free from the queen's embrace and ran off, laughing, to find the seven dwarves.

