

# **THREE DAYS IN THE SNOW**

by Ina Bhattar

Sample translated by Alexandra Roesch



Inspirational Novel, 176 pages

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## **Foreword**

People often say, at the end of their lives, that things might have been easier if only they'd known then what they know now. But in truth, I think it's the other way round: what we grown-ups really need is to remember – really remember – what it felt like to be a child. That, at least, is what I came to understand one snowy weekend, somewhere in the middle of nowhere. And that understanding came down to one very special person.

Sometimes I think about going back to that little house by the lake. About finding Sophie. Making her a cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows and telling her just how much our encounter changed my life. But I don't know if I'll ever find her again, so I've decided to write everything down. Maybe there's someone out there who feels as stuck and mixed-up as I once did. Someone without a Sophie to help them see what truly matters. If so, perhaps these words will offer a little hope. And who knows — maybe one day a girl called Sophie will stand in front of me, with this little book in her hands, smiling because she did what we all hope to do: she made a difference.

## Snow Angel

When I met Sophie for the first time, I wasn't in a good place. In fact, I'd been in such a bad state that, three nights earlier, I'd ended up in tears, lying on the dark grey bathmat in my bathroom. And the strangest part? There wasn't even a proper reason, at least not from the outside looking in. Supposedly my life was, as people often insisted, brilliant. Other people envied my life and it must have seemed pretty perfect to everyone except me. And the voice in my head, which never stopped criticising everything I did and everything that happened to me. From morning till night, and especially in the early hours, it would pipe up, explaining exactly what I should have done differently, or better. It would tell me how clueless I was, how impossible my plans were, how nothing I wanted was going to work out.

Now I was standing at the window of a little wooden house I'd rented for a three-day escape. I stared out at the leaden lake and the sleet, blown sideways by the wind, which was pelting the glass, and thought how much the world out there mirrored the one inside me – both drained of all colour. Everything outside looked washed out, blurred, as though someone had sucked all the vibrancy from it and left nothing but outlines.

I turned away from the window and glanced around the large sitting room. As my eyes moved across the carefully chosen furniture, a flicker of contentment stirred in me, and I thought of a word I'd been hearing more and more lately: *hyggelig*. My colleague Kirsten, from a small town in Denmark, found the word irritating and overhyped. I'd laughed and agreed with her, but quietly, I longed for that feeling it described. That elusive sense of warmth and ease that has no true equivalent in my language. I looked over at the glass-fronted cabinet of pale grained wood, the white crockery inside. The long table, the bench by the

window, the huge bookcase, the fireplace. The beige sofa. The soft, sand-coloured rug, lying in front of it like a sleeping golden retriever. Everything here seemed to belong — calm, safe, settled.

My own life, by contrast, felt like the exact opposite. I often had the sense I was never in the right place and certainly never at the right time. As though I was constantly running late, never quite present, always needing to move on. Mornings meant rushing out of the flat and into the office, and once there, dashing from one meeting room to the next, or on back-to-back video calls. After work there was the gym, the supermarket, evening events, dinners, drinks. Even on the days I worked from home, I'd shuffle straight from bed to desk, still in my pyjamas, coffee in hand, responding to messages and eating cereal while scanning the morning press summary ahead of our team meeting. I'd spend the rest of the day trying to ignore the laundry basket overflowing in the corner, the stack of unopened post, and the general chaos creeping in from all sides. By the evening, I'd be so shattered from the endless stream of appointments, lined up in my calendar like pearls on a string, that I barely had energy left for anything but sinking into the sofa and losing myself in a box set. Something that would carry me off to another world for a little while. To tell the truth, my life couldn't have been less *hyggelig*.

But that was the point of this weekend — to switch off, slow down, refill the tank. No deadlines, no emails, no obligations. Just a few days entirely to myself, drifting wherever the mood took me. It had sounded lovely when I'd booked it. Now, though, even in this cosy little house, the whole idea felt... less charming. Should I have spent the time finally tackling the mess at home? Sorting my taxes? Writing the Christmas cards? And why had I come here on my own? Why hadn't I asked a friend along?

I crouched down and carefully opened the front of the wood-burning stove and stacked some logs from the neatly arranged pile, which

smelled faintly of the forest, and tried to get a fire going. It wasn't nearly as easy as it looked, not for a city girl like me. Several times the twigs caught briefly, then fizzled out. I nearly burnt my fingers on a match. At one point, I opened the stove too soon and got a face full of smoke, which triggered a coughing fit.

Eventually, I managed it. I tore a few pages from an old magazine, scrunched them into balls, wedged them under the kindling, and finally coaxed the flames to catch on the bigger logs.

Back at the window, I saw that the wet sleet had turned to soft, full snowflakes, fluttering down in earnest. It was the kind of snow that made you think of fairy tales — as if Frau Holle had gone into a frenzy with her featherbeds, or some particularly zealous Goldmarie was on the job. I looked up at the sky, which was speckled white, first with curiosity, then surprise — I couldn't remember the last time it had snowed this hard — and then, uneasily, with concern. I didn't know the area. The house was remote. Even without snow, the road had been rough, and now it might become impassable. My suitcase, still packed, stood by the fire. Should I put it back in the car and drive home?

It was Friday afternoon. I imagined it all going wrong, being snowed in, cut off, missing the big Monday meeting with the board members. The heating might break down. I might slip and hurt myself. No one would know. Why hadn't I gone somewhere else — to the coast, or to see a friend? There it was again, the voice.

No one in my life knew about it. They didn't know I fought every night to fall asleep, or that getting out of bed each morning felt like climbing a mountain. No one knew about my sobbing while I lay on the bathmat, either. Instead, they envied me, with my beautiful flat in one of the city's most sought-after neighbourhoods, my job running the press office at a major firm, the freedom to do whatever I pleased. The world was my oyster. Aside from the usual winter colds and the odd tension

headache, I'd never been seriously ill. I already earned more than my mum had in her final year before retirement. I had the best friends anyone could wish for. Two of them even lived nearby, and whenever I left work at a decent hour and didn't want to be alone, I could spend the evening with Katrin and her family and a giant pizza, or curled up at Isa's for a film night.

If people thought I had *any* right to be unhappy, it was only because I was in my mid-thirties and still hadn't met *the one*.

But that wasn't the real problem. That wasn't the reason for the hollow feeling I woke up with each morning, or the urge to hit snooze again and again. That wasn't why life had lost its colour and slipped into this grey monotony. It had crept in slowly, so gradually I hadn't noticed. I blamed the voice. The one that kept me up at night. The carousel of thoughts looping endlessly through my head like a tacky rollercoaster at a rundown amusement park.

I stayed at the window, watching as the world outside blanketed itself in fresh snow, the transformation unfolding as if in fast-forward. Just as I was thinking – again – that coming out here alone had been a mistake, just as I tugged my scarf tighter around my shoulders and wondered whether the snow would ever stop, I saw her. A small figure in red, waddling determinedly through the snow like a tiny Michelin man, following the path along the lake that passed right by my house. She stopped just short of the fence, glanced around as if searching for something, then plonked herself down in the clearing between three fir trees in a meadow now buried in snow. No one else was in sight.

I hurried to open the window. It stuck, creaked, and a heap of snow fell from the sill. The figure, a child, looked up at me.

"Hello!" I called, a little too loud. "Are you lost?"

"No," the child replied, calm and certain. Then she looked back down at the patch of snow beside her, as if she were missing something important.

"Do you need help?"

She blinked up at me, puzzled, as if the question didn't make sense.

"No," she said again, serene as ever.

"I just thought," I said, "because you're on your own, and it's snowing so much. And you sat down..."

Now a smile spread across her little face beneath the thick blue hat, and she said:

"Oh. I sat down because I want to make a snow angel. I'm just choosing the best spot."

I couldn't help but laugh. "A snow angel?"

"Of course!" she beamed. "It's fun! Come and make one too!"

"Thanks, but I don't think so," I said.

And then the voice was back, reminding me I didn't have waterproof trousers, or proper boots. If I got wet, I'd definitely catch a cold. Then I'd miss the Monday meeting with the board, and we wouldn't finalise the communication strategy for next year. I managed a tight smile.

"Well... have fun," I said.

And with that, I shut the window.

## Hot Coffee

The filter coffee machine gurgled and dripped like a leaky tap. I wandered over to the hob in the small, wood-panelled kitchen to warm some milk. It felt like a galley on a ship: pots, a pasta strainer, a ceramic jug, and other bits of kitchenware hung from the ceiling on hooks, as though they might be at risk if they were on shelves in rough seas. There were just two rings, a sink, and a little stretch of counter beneath a window with criss-crossed panes. Outside, snow-covered trees stood quietly. A nuthatch hopped down one of the trunks, pecking at the snow, searching for something to eat. The only bird that can run down a tree, my grandad always used to say. I'd found that endlessly fascinating as a child.

When the coffee was ready, I took my cup and sat down on the bench by the living room window. I took a big sip, burnt my tongue, and couldn't help glancing again and again at the child outside. It was hard to guess her age – probably primary school.

I watched as she lay there in total concentration, moving as though making a snow angel weren't just a game but some deeply meaningful task. She was entirely immersed — not just in the snow, but in the moment itself, in the glittering flakes all around, in the steady sweep of her arms and legs. I tried to remember the last time I'd been equally absorbed in something.

I thought about my daily routine, everything I did at work and in my spare time. And I realised that I hadn't really lost myself in anything for a long, long while. Instead, I was always checking the time and always discovering I was late for something.

I had to dig far back in my memory until I landed on a blank sheet of paper, as white as the snow resting on the windowsill. When I was a



child and used to draw, or later write stories, I could reach it, that special state. Minutes, even hours would fly by, and the world would fall away completely. That white sheet had felt like a promise – a space just for my ideas, for everything I wanted to express. It had been my best friend.

But lately, I barely wrote at all. As a team lead, my job now was to manage others, present information, make strategic plans. The very thing that had got me into this well-paid role in communications – my knack for clarity, my ability to explain complex things simply, to shape stories in a way that reached and moved people – had pulled me further and further away from it the higher I climbed.

And it wasn't just me. When I thought about my friends, it was the same story. My neighbour Seyda had studied medicine to help people recover quickly – or better still, avoid illness altogether. Now, she was drowning in admin at her paediatric practice, buried in paperwork and billing codes. My old school friend Alex had gone into care work because he wanted to support the elderly, but in the care home his workload was so brutal he barely had time for more than a kind word in passing. Katrin had become a primary school teacher because she wanted to help children learn, but she'd realised even during teacher training how little freedom there was, how impossible it was to reach every pupil, given all the boxes she had to tick.

The child disappeared from view for a while, and I assumed she'd gone home. But then she reappeared. When I moved to the window with my coffee, I saw her carefully rolling a large snowball across the field. She did it with such care, as if the snow weren't just frozen water, but powdered sugar, and as if the snowball were made of soft marzipan.

I reached for my phone and resisted the urge to open my emails. Instead, I tapped the music app. My favourite singer's voice came through, gentle and familiar, accompanied by soft guitar. I took another

sip of my coffee, cautiously, with a bit of a slurp to protect my tongue, not that anyone was around to hear me.

And then, as if by muscle memory, my thumb opened the email app anyway. How hard could it be to go half a day without knowing what messages had come in? Most of them were pointless, yet they still demanded my attention, even if just long enough to delete them. Just as I was about to lock the screen again, I spotted one that *might* be important. It was from Karsten, our Head of Marketing — he'd sent me notes for the board meeting a few days earlier. The subject line said: *Additional Note*.

I didn't open it. Instead, I got annoyed with myself for even looking. As if checking my inbox were some vital act of survival. As if the phone weren't a phone at all, but some magic device that could grant every wish. And really how urgent could a message called *Additional Note* possibly be? But now, of course, it was stuck in my head.

I tried to steer my thoughts back to the present. It was like one of those experiments — you leave a bowl of jelly babies in a room full of toddlers, ask them not to touch, and walk away. My work thoughts cackled with glee, made rude gestures, and sprawled across my brain. And then the voice piped up. Of course it did. It insisted the email probably contained something *essential*, something I absolutely had to include in Monday's presentation. That I wasn't properly prepared. That I'd fall flat on my face in front of the CEO. My pulse began to race. My breath shortened. My hands got clammy. There was a rushing in my ears.

"Do you know how many decisions that woman makes in a day?" the voice said. "Everything needs to be perfect. Clear. Spot on. And the budget increase? Forget it. No chance."

I tried harder to bat the thoughts away and forced a smile. I'd learned in a personal development workshop that smiling wasn't just a result

of happiness, it could actually trigger happiness. But it only worked up to a point. At least, that was what it was like for me.

I wondered if other people had a voice like this in their heads, one that relentlessly tore everything down. Mine was a tough nut. Not easily reasoned with.

I looked back through the window. The snowball was now as tall as the child herself, and she was running around it with such wild energy that only the difference in colour let you tell them apart. Eventually, I gave in. I put down my empty mug, pulled on my coat and boots and headed out.

## Snowicorn

"Have you got a carrot?" the child asked, as I reached her, as casually as if she'd asked the time.

"A carrot?" I echoed, shaking my head. "No, sorry. But maybe we can find something else for the nose!"

"What nose?" she replied, looking genuinely confused.

"The snowman's nose," I said, gesturing at the snowball.

"That's not a snowman!" she cried, scandalised, waving away the idea like it was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard. "The carrot's for the horn!"

"The horn?" I said, thrown.

"For the *snowicorn*, obviously!"

I stepped closer and smiled, nodding as though I were completely on board. Her eyes sparkled, and her cheeks glowed red, almost as bright as her padded snowsuit.

"I'm Hannah, by the way."

"I'm Sophie," she replied, with a certainty that showed straight away that Sophie already knew exactly who she was. I envied her, her confidence, her spark, the unwavering clarity in her voice.

"I'm Hannah," I repeated, trying to match her tone, but it came out with the faintest waver, as if I wasn't quite sure of the name myself.

"I know," Sophie said, giving me a curious look.

"Where are your parents?" I asked.

"They had something to do. But they'll be back by the time I finish playing."

I glanced around, trying not to look uneasy. "And where do you live?"

"Not far," she said vaguely, pointing nowhere in particular. "Will you help me with the *snowicorn*?"

She looked up at me with wide, expectant eyes.

I hesitated, glancing down at my suede boots – waterproof or not, they were probably not ideal for this much snow. And it was colder than I'd

expected. But then I looked back at Sophie and said, "All right. Why not?"

"Thanks!" she beamed, already back in the zone. "Okay, this one goes at the front," she said, pointing at the big snowball. "Now we need a smaller one to go behind it – these two will make up the body, and then one more for the head."

And so the two of us rolled fat white snowballs up and down the slope, laughing in the cold air. Eventually they reached the right size, and together we shaped them into something that, with a little imagination, looked a bit like a horse sitting down. Sophie sculpted a tail from snow, while I worked on the mouth and the mane. All we were missing now was the horn.

"You know what would look amazing?" I said. Sophie looked up, curious. "What?"

"An icicle. For the horn."

"Oh yes!" she cried, as if I'd just proposed the best idea in the history of ideas. "And I know where to find one! Come on!"

And off she dashed, heading for the lake. I followed, trudging behind her through the deep snow, struggling to keep up. She stopped at an old boathouse, scanned the surroundings, and pointed upwards. From the edge of the roof, long glassy icicles hung, glittering in the winter light. I reached up on tiptoe, broke off the biggest one I could find, handed it to her, and we made our way back, determined to turn our *snowhorse* into a proper *snowicorn*.

Sophie placed the icicle carefully on top of the head, her movements precise.

"This is so much fun!" she said. "Next time we'll build a *snowgosaurus*."

"Or a *snowlephant*," I replied. We both burst out laughing, tickled by our nonsense inventions and the sight of our half-mythical creation. With gloved hands, we patted and smoothed the snow, adding little flourishes here and there. And Sophie was right, it *was* fun. Ridiculously so.

I found myself wondering when I'd last enjoyed something this much. Or really, whether fun featured in my life at all. Most of what I did, I did because...well, it's what you do. Because other people did it. Because it was expected.

I worked for the money. For structure. To have an answer ready when someone asked, "And what do you do?" I went to the gym so I'd look good in my skinny jeans and my new knit dress. I had business lunches to build my network and stay in the loop. I went to bars and clubs in the hope of meeting someone and if I'm honest, also because Isa was relentless with her "How are you going to fall in love if you never leave the sofa?" argument. But the truth was, none of it brought me any real joy. And if it did, it was purely accidental, a side-effect, never the goal.

I stopped for a moment. The snow had stopped falling, though I hadn't noticed. Sophie stood beside me, beaming at our handiwork. Our *snowicorn* was magnificent!

The fact that I had so little joy in my life suddenly struck me as faintly ridiculous, especially given that I wasn't a medieval peasant. Or worse, someone stuck in the year 536, which was apparently, according to historians, the worst year in human history. I could believe it. A massive volcanic eruption, months of darkness, brutal cold. Definitely a lot worse than the life of a modern woman in a big city in the early 21st century who was free to choose her own path.

Only now did I realise how wet my trousers were from kneeling in the snow. My feet were freezing. My socks were soaked through.

"You know what?" I said to Sophie. "I think I will make a snow angel after all."

I hesitated for just a moment, then lay back on the snow, already too wet to care, and swept my arms and legs out, again and again, until the imprint resembled an angel. I got up slowly. Sophie studied our

outlines with the reverence of an archaeologist at a dig site. Then, without warning, she asked,

“Do you have any hot chocolate?”

Strictly speaking, I didn’t drink hot chocolate. Only coffee. But when I’d shopped for this weekend, I’d thrown a tin of cocoa into the trolley, the fancy kind, with a label that promised something indulgent, something that whisked you off to a snowy chalet in the Swiss Alps: white chocolate.

“Something like that,” I said.

And with that, Sophie headed off to the house, pushed open the door, and disappeared inside.

## White Chocolate

Not long after, we sat at the little living room table, as content as two people can be after an afternoon spent in the snow, cupping our warm, fragrant mugs, steam curling up between us. Sophie's almond-shaped eyes were bright, and her hair had gone wavy beneath her hat and from the heat of the fire. For a moment, she looked like a younger version of myself sitting at the kitchen table, drawing, a mug of hot cocoa close by.

Our wet clothes, Sophie's red snowsuit, our shoes, my jeans, hung over the back of a chair near the fireplace, where the flames burned softly. I'd put a few more logs on, pulled on a pair of soft leggings and found warm socks for both of us.

The room had grown properly cosy now, and when we paused, we could hear the fire crackling. It smelled of warm milk, wood, and just a hint of smoke – enough to be comforting, even a little festive. The scent was just right for the little house, this afternoon, the lake, the snow. It all belonged.

"Have you got any marshmallows?" Sophie asked, after carefully taking a few loud, slurpy sips of her white hot chocolate.

"Er, no," I said, laughing. You just never knew what she'd come out with next.

"Why not?" She looked at me incredulously as though marshmallows were a basic household staple, like tea or a plug socket.

"I always have marshmallows in my cocoa," she said.

"Really? Isn't that way too sweet?"

"Not at all! It's delicious! Especially the pink ones."

I shook my head. Sophie pondered this for a moment.

"Do you have any paper and pencils, then?" she asked.

I went over to my bag and pulled out the coloured pencils I used for marking up books – mostly non-fiction these days. For this weekend,



I'd brought one about time management. Then I took out my notebook and ran my fingers across its cover, turquoise linen, with a white-flowered tree printed on the front. The moment I had spotted it in a little bookshop near home a few weeks earlier, I'd loved it. I hadn't written a single word in it. I hesitated, then carefully tore out the first page, a creamy white sheet, slightly textured, and handed it to Sophie.

"Do you want to draw something?"

She nodded. And with the kind of focus only children seem to manage, she quickly began sketching a house, a tree, and a lake. I cleared the table while she worked, scribbled away rhythmically with blue, yellow, and red pencils.

"What's it going to be?" I asked, stacking the magazines I'd brought along for the weekend onto the cabinet.

"It's snowing," she said, happily.

"I think it stopped a while ago," I said, glancing outside.

"I mean in my picture," she clarified.

I looked at the drawing, puzzled. "Is it snowing...in colour?"

"Of course it is," she said. "Or have you ever seen white snow?"

I gave her a look, amused, sceptical, and sat down beside her.

"On white paper?" Sophie added, handing me the picture when she was done. "It's for you. I'm giving it to you."

"Oh! Thank you."

I studied the drawing more closely, took a sip of my chocolate, and felt a slow warmth settle inside me. A memory stirred, one of thousands buried somewhere in the archives of my mind, long since filed away beneath everything that felt more pressing. But now it was back. I saw it clearly: a picture I had drawn as a child. A soft, snowy landscape, gently hilly, with a slightly lopsided ochre-coloured house puffing smoke from its chimney. A snow-covered pine tree, and a large snowman with a black top hat, a carrot nose, and a mouth made of neat, dark dots. Later, when that picture hung in our kitchen, I remember thinking the mouth looked a bit sinister. Huge flakes fell from a navy-blue sky. I'd used nearly an entire tube of white paint to

create them and had topped it off proudly with my brand-new glitter set. A Christmas gift that year.

It wasn't just a child's dream. It had been real. In the winters of my childhood, it really had snowed like that – thick, bright, magical. Back then, it would've been unthinkable to me that snow might one day feel rare, even surreal. A relic from a time that no longer existed.

In the city where I lived now, winter meant only that the days were short and the weather grim. Cold, grey, inconvenient. And since I spent most of my time in heated buildings, I barely noticed it at all. The snow I remembered, powdery and crisp, or heavy and sticky, but always white, had been replaced by brown slush that clung to pavements and ruined shoes.

"Will you write the date on it?" Sophie asked suddenly, pulling me out of my reverie. "So you remember when it's from."

"Of course," I said. "I'll write December and the year."

Sophie nodded, pleased, and then frowned slightly as I reached for the black pencil.

"Not in black! December is blue!"

So I wrote it in blue, with the same pencil Sophie had just used to dot her colourful snow.

She smiled, satisfied. Then, just as suddenly, she stood up, wriggled back into her snowsuit and boots, and opened the door. A sharp gust of cold air rushed in.

"I've got to go now," she said, matter-of-factly. "Thanks for the white cocoa, it was really yummy!"

And before I could say anything else, she was already gone, darting round the corner, hurrying down the little path, faster than I could call after her. Dusk was falling.

"Sophie, wait, do you want me to walk you home?" I called.

But she had already vanished, her red snowsuit disappearing into the  
fading light.  
From somewhere down the path came her voice, faint and breezy:  
“Oh, don’t be silly!”

I sat back at the table, thoughtful, looking out at the lake. December is blue. And just thinking about the way she’d said it, so firm, so certain, brought tears to my eyes. Because once upon a time, December hadn’t been black for me either. And neither had any of the other months. Or the numbers. Or the days of the week. Three was bright red. March was pink with white spots. Wednesday was a rich mustard yellow.

For years, I’d believed that was just how the world was. Three wasn’t just a number, it was red. As intrinsically red as its shape or the fact that one and one make two. It couldn’t not be red. Until, slowly, the adults in my life began to look at me blankly. They didn’t get it. The other kids thought it was weird. And one time, as a teenager, a girl told me it was “a bit mental.”

So I tried to see three the way everyone else seemed to, as just a number. Nothing more. Because more than anything, I wanted to fit in. I wanted to be normal.

And little by little, the colours and patterns that had once clung so vividly to my months and days and numbers began to fade. If I really focused, if I really concentrated, they were still there. Just as they’d always been. But they didn’t come as quickly. Not like they used to.

I’d done it. I’d managed to become normal.

[END OF SAMPLE]