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Winter Magic

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The Snow Dragon



Abi Elphinstone

There was nothing unusual or especially exciting about Whistlethrop. It was an ordinary English town. A string of shops and restaurants lined the High Street and behind them back roads filtered out into rows of red-brick houses, semi-detached gardens and a park with swings and a slide. The town had a church, too, with a steeple that towered above the slated roofs and a graveyard ringed with yew trees. And to most people who lived there, this was all that Whistlethrop was.

But to Phoebe, who peered at things more closely, the town was a very different place. She knew that there was a badger sett in the woods beyond the park; she knew that when almost everyone was asleep and the street lamps glowed bright, an old lady hobbled out of her house and then sat on a bench in her garden to watch the moon; she knew that if you listened hard enough you could hear the

weathervane creaking on top of the church spire. She also knew, though she wished she didn't, that the vicar practised yoga without his robes (or indeed his trousers, shirt, socks or pants) in his bathroom on Wednesday nights. And Phoebe knew all of this because she watched, every evening, from the skylight window of an attic in *Griselda Bone's Home for Strays*.

She leaned forward onto the balls of her feet, and the tower of books below her wobbled. Then she clung tighter to the skylight and nudged it open, because she knew that although it was dangerous to stand on top of forty-three encyclopedias, it was also extremely important. She pushed her elbows through the gap in the window, rested her chin on her hands and let her blue eyes grow large and round.

It was Christmas Eve, and from her perch on the outskirts of town, Phoebe could see that Whistlethorp was covered in a thick layer of snow. It was the first snow of the winter and it had come silently in the night – the way magic often does – but unlike the shadows and the moonbeams and the stars, this magic had stayed until morning. It had covered her ordinary world and transformed it into a glittering white kingdom, and as Phoebe looked upon it, her body tingled. The snow felt like a promise somehow, a pledge that today might be different from all the other days and that possibly, *just possibly*, there might be even more magic waiting for her.

She ran her eyes along the rooftops. They were coated white and pricked here and there by the feet of tiny birds – the

redwings, jays and fieldfares Phoebe often left titbits of food for. Pavements glistened in the early morning sun, unspoiled by trampling feet, and the countryside beyond the town – fields, hedgerows and copses of woodland – spread out like ripples of milk beneath the clear blue sky.

A holly wreath had been fixed to the door of the church across the street and just as Phoebe was craning her neck to look at the tinsel strewn along the windowsills of the house beside it, two boys clutching sledges hurtled out of the front door in hats and scarves. Phoebe watched as they scooped up handfuls of snow and flung them at each other, then she sighed.

She wanted to rush out and join them, but *Griselda Bone's Home for Strays* wasn't the kind of place you could easily leave. A high stone wall encircled the grounds, locking in the patch of gravel in front of the house, the kennels to the sides and the neglected garden at the back, and tall iron gates barred the way in and out. Once you were in, you were very firmly in. Until Miracle Day, that was . . . Because at *Griselda Bone's Home for Strays* the strays weren't actually dogs – they were children – and the home was, in fact, an orphanage.

Once a month, Griselda opened the gates of the orphanage to parents hoping to adopt a child and they spent the day helping the orphans in lessons and talking to them over meals. For some reason Griselda dished out muffins instead of punishments on those days, and she even remembered to turn on the central heating so that Phoebe didn't have to

wear three vests under her shirt. And at the end of the day, after the parents had left and Griselda had turned the central heating off, the orphans were summoned to the hall and told whether a family wanted to adopt them. A few weeks later, once the paperwork was complete, the child could leave the orphanage with their new family and *that* day – that marvellous day filled with longing – was Miracle Day. Only it never seemed to happen to Phoebe.

Griselda had a habit of forgetting to introduce her to the visiting parents and the only times she really seemed to acknowledge Phoebe was when she tripped over her in the corridor – and even then she seemed confused as to who on earth Phoebe was. And it was events like these that made Phoebe wonder whether she might in fact be invisible to Griselda, a thought that was both tremendously exciting and deeply troubling. But after thinking long and hard about the situation, Phoebe had come to the lamentable conclusion that she was not invisible. She was merely forgettable. Like an umbrella on a bus, or house keys when you're in a rush. And while many of Phoebe's friends had been adopted, Phoebe herself had almost given up hope of her Miracle Day ever arriving. After all, what would be the point of adopting someone you were likely to forget about before breakfast?

The pile of books beneath Phoebe swayed suddenly and she clung to the roof. Then there was a scratching sound followed by a yap.

'Stop distracting me, Herbert,' Phoebe hissed.

There was another yap and the encyclopedias swerved to the left. Phoebe peered down into the cramped attic. Objects had been piled up against the sloping eaves and dusty walls: boxes containing hand-drawn maps, trunks full of fir cones, feathers and owl pellets, and glass bottles stuffed with marbles and ancient coins that Phoebe had dug up in the garden. But a space had been made in the middle of the clutter for a wicker basket plumped with cushions. And inside that was a chestnut sausage dog wagging its tail.

Phoebe rolled her eyes. 'Up you come, then. It's a good morning for looking.'

The sausage dog clambered up the tower of encyclopedias – one paw on Einstein's ear, another smack in the middle of Alaska – until he reached the top and nuzzled against Phoebe's jeans. She lifted Herbert up, squeezed him through the skylight and set him between her arms.

'Snow, Herb. Isn't it brilliant?'

Herbert eyed the slanting roof then shivered. He was only really interested in two things: cuddles from Phoebe and, despite his little legs, dancing.

'Jack's Miracle Day today,' Phoebe said, trying her best to smile.

She thought back to the beginning of the month, when Griselda had told Jack somebody wanted to take him home. Phoebe remembered how happy she had been for him, how she had hugged him even though there was a strange little lump in her throat. And then later that same evening, when

she was alone in her cold, empty dormitory, the lump had grown bigger and she had burrowed beneath her sheets and cried. Because with Jack gone, she knew that she would be the only child left in the orphanage.

Phoebe looked at the orphanage gates wistfully. ‘In a few hours, Jack’ll be part of a real family, Herb – with a mum and a dad and maybe brothers and sisters, too.’

Herbert snuggled into Phoebe’s hair, which was long and blonde and a mixture of very big curls and even bigger knots, but Phoebe liked it that way because she could store small, useful objects inside the tangles. Today, there was a paperclip, a pencil, a reel of thread and four cranberries she’d pinched from the kitchen.

Phoebe stroked Herbert’s velvet ears. ‘It’s just you and me now.’

There was a crash from somewhere further down the orphanage, then a woman’s voice, low and gravelly, shouting something fierce.

‘And *them*,’ Phoebe muttered.

She twisted her head round to the gates in front of the house to see a car had pulled up on the road outside. A man and a woman were talking and laughing on the pavement with a young boy and though Phoebe smiled, she couldn’t help wishing that Miracle Days might start happening *to* her rather than around her.

‘I know it’s against the rules,’ Phoebe whispered after a while, ‘and I know we’re planning on staying out of Griselda’s

way so that we can spend the day together tomorrow and not get dragged into the Christmas Hunt ...'

Herbert shuddered at the mention of the Christmas Hunt, an annual event that saw Griselda and her pit bull terrier, Slobber, chasing the children through the orphanage until Slobber found the juicy bones they were forced to clutch.

'... but if we're quick, we'll have time to wave Jack off *and* hurry back up here before Griselda finds us.'

Herbert gazed down into the attic until his eyes rested on the branch he and Phoebe had dragged up from the garden and decorated with tinfoil stars. It wasn't much of a Christmas tree, both of them knew that, but it was a start. And it was their secret. Phoebe scrambled out onto the slated roof with Herbert in her arms and the sausage dog let out a feeble little moan.

Whistlethorp was awake now: a man was shuffling along the pavement towards the newsagent's, a woman was hanging a string of fairy lights above her door and a whole family were making snow angels in their garden. Crouched low to the slates, Phoebe set Herbert down, slipped a hand into her hair and pulled out the cranberries she'd smuggled from the kitchen the night before. She laid them in the snow.

'Important to feed the waxwings, even if we're in a rush.'

Phoebe smoothed her duffle coat beneath her bottom then sat on it, and after scooping up Herbert and clasping him to her chest, she pushed off and slid down the roof towards the fire escape.

They skidded along, snow spurting around them and loose tiles shaking free, before coming to an abrupt halt as Phoebe's trainers hit the gutter. Herbert shook the snow from his fur and cocked one ear. Car doors were closing; Jack was almost off. Phoebe swung her body onto the metal rungs of the ladder that scaled the side of the orphanage, then with Herbert tucked under one arm, she hurried on down.

'Try to see this as an adventure, Herb.'

Herbert's head clanged against a rung and he groaned then Phoebe jumped off the ladder and they raced past the row of dog kennels, ducking low to avoid being seen from Griselda's study, before swinging round to the front of the orphanage. The car was pulling away now but Jack was looking over his shoulder, his brown hair flicked across his eyes, as if he was searching for something or someone. Phoebe waved through the gates and her friend's eyes lit up as he wound down his window.

'I'll miss you!' he shouted. 'And I'll write!'

Then the car slipped off down the street and Phoebe was left standing beside Herbert before the tall dark gates. She'd never received a letter before, but the thought of an envelope with her name on, and words inside it that were meant just for her, made her smile.

She glanced at the orphanage motto engraved into the wall next to the gates – *He Who Bites Hardest Usually Wins* – and then there was a low and very long growl, as if it was trying to make a point. Phoebe's skin crawled with dread as

Herbert scurried behind her legs, and with a sinking heart, she turned around.

A black pit bull terrier stood on the gravel before the front door. Its squat legs and hunched shoulders framed a big square head, two narrow eyes and a spiked dog collar while ropes of saliva hung from its muzzle.

There was another growl, but it came from behind the pit bull terrier and this time there were words attached to it. ‘Slobber! Where have you got to?’

A woman appeared in the doorway suddenly: short and stocky, with shoulders that almost gobbled up her neck, hands that curled into large fists and dark hair pulled so tightly into a bun that it flattened her ears to her head. Had she not been squeezed into a pinstripe trouser suit she might have passed for a pit bull terrier herself. She held a briefcase to her chest, like some sort of protective shield, and at the sight of it Phoebe shuddered.

Griselda flicked the briefcase open and drew out a clipboard. ‘I thought we had disposed of the last of the orphans, Slobber, but it appears there is still somebody left on the register.’ She began to read: ‘*Girl with hair as white as snowdrops and eyes as large and round as puddles.* What an absolutely ridiculous description. Who is this?’

Phoebe was used to reintroducing herself to Griselda whenever they crossed paths – and realizing there was no getting out of this situation, she took a small step forward. ‘Me, miss.’

The Wishing Book



Piers Torday

Let me tell you a story about this thing which happened when I was a little girl, and you can decide if I am lying or not.

I was just ten years old when my grandmother gave me a present for Christmas that would change my life for ever.

At the time, I had two grannies: Granny Bike and Granny Car.

Granny Car was my stepmother Christine's mummy, and she was super rich, because she had invented Skinny Pop – the amazing fizzy drink, which made you thinner and thinner. I didn't like Skinny Pop, because I didn't think I needed to be any thinner, and also, it tasted of nail polish.

Christine always told me to be on my best behaviour when Granny Car came to visit.

Granny Car liked to arrive in her chauffeur-driven Bentley, and her driver Godfrey would take off his coat and

put it down on the front path so her feet didn't have to touch the ground we lived on.

'Frightfully common!' sniffed Granny Car, as she trampled his jacket into the mud.

Granny Car thought that about lots of things. Like my name, Ethel. 'Frightfully common!' she said. Or my dad, because he worked for the local council and hadn't invented a global soft-drink sensation. 'Frightfully common!' My school, because we didn't wear the same hats and skirts she used to wear when she was little. And my pet goldfish, Silver – because he wasn't a poodle dog. 'Frightfully, awfully, vulgarly, obscenely, hopelessly COMMON!' she squawked.

The only person in our entire family Granny Car didn't think was common was her daughter, Christine.

'My princess,' she used to purr. 'My golden duchess, my peach, my prize,' she cooed. 'Why did you have to marry into such an embarrassingly common family?'

(That is another story, but it has quite a lot to do with my real mum dying when I was little, my dad being quite lonely and something called a holiday romance.)

And every Christmas, Granny Car always brought us lots of presents.

Lots and lots.

They were always wrapped in glittering gold paper, tied up with silk ribbon in frilly bows. There were always loads of boxes, which Godfrey struggled to carry from the car. The

pile always made Silver's eyes pop out of his head when he saw it stashed under the tree.

And the presents were always, always, never anything we wanted.

Like last year – Lycra jogging bottoms for Dad, who hated running or exercise of any kind other than walking in the park and whistling, which he did a lot. 'Frightfully slimming!' said Granny Car.

The latest mobile phone for Christine, covered in so many diamonds that she had to keep it in a safe. 'Frightfully smart!' said Granny Car.

And a designer dress for me. WHEN SHE KNEW I HATED DRESSES. 'Frightfully pretty!' said Granny Car.

Silver always hid in his toy plastic cave whenever Granny Car visited. But he reappeared as soon as he heard a certain noise coming up our path.

Squeak! Squeak!

That was the noise Granny Bike's ancient bicycle made as she wheeled it along. It was an old-fashioned cycle with wonky handlebars and a basket tied on with string.

Dad told me that it had been his granny's bike before it had been his mum's and before that, it had been her mum's bike, and before that . . . well, that didn't matter, it was such a long time ago. But Granny Bike looked like she might have been around even longer than that.

She was tiny and wrinkled. Her pale skin looked like it was made of paper, or the material wasps built their nests

out of. And she had a crooked nose, with whiskers on her crooked chin.

She also never spoke.

Granny Bike had got seriously ill once and the doctors had to take out her tongue. This was before I was born. I had never heard her speak.

I didn't mind.

She always had a nice, big, lopsided smile for me, and a twinkle in her ancient eyes.

Granny Bike wasn't super rich. She hadn't invented Skinny Pop. I never was quite sure what Granny Bike did. She didn't live in a big mansion like Granny Car. She lived in a little tumbledown cottage on the outskirts of town, and was either always cooking something that bubbled in a pot or growing strange-smelling herbs in her garden.

When I asked Dad what she did, he would mutter, 'It doesn't matter, and anyway, she's retired now.'

Christine always shuddered when Granny Bike visited. She said she smelled of dishcloths and old cheese, which wasn't true, she didn't. If anything, she smelled of bonfires and autumn leaves, which were two of my favourite smells.

Now on this Christmas Day, Christine decided to be meaner to her than ever before.

'I don't want her dragging that filthy old bike in and stinking up the place,' she said between gulps of a special seasonal Skinny Pop, which tasted of Christmas pudding

and grown-up chocolates. 'If you want to go and see her, why don't you visit her on Boxing Day? Or the day after? You can take her my present.'

Christine held up the tiniest bottle of perfume you'd ever seen. 'Mummy's latest,' she said admiringly. 'Eau d'Skinny Pop. You spray it on anything – your skin, furniture, old ladies – and they smell like a sticky, fizzy drink for a whole week.'

'That's kind, dear,' said my dad, from his favourite chair, where he was busy reading his favourite book, *The Birds of Britain*. 'We'll do that.'

I knew Dad loved Granny Bike as much as me. But I wished he would stand up for her once in a while.

The snow had been falling all morning, and I wanted to go outside and play in the park with the other children in our street. A few of my friends were pressing their faces against our window, wrapped up in woolly hats and gloves, making funny expressions, until Christine shooed them away.

'You'll catch your death, or worse, if you go out and play in that filthy park!' she said. 'Just imagine how much dog mess there is out there under the snow.'

I said there were plenty of other things I would prefer to imagine.

Then Christine went red and grabbed the golden necklace around her throat, which she always did when she was upset, and called for my dad. 'Stewart!' she yelled. 'Your daughter seems to have forgotten what day it is.'